

BRINGING ISLAMIC HISTORY TO LIFE: ROLE-PLAYING FOR HISTORICAL EMPATHY AMONG MADRASAH STUDENTS IN BUNGO

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Abstrak

Pembelajaran Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam (SKI) di madrasah masih banyak bertumpu pada hafalan kronologis sehingga dimensi afektifnya terabaikan dan empati sejarah siswa sulit berkembang. Penelitian ini menganalisis penerapan bermain peran untuk menghidupkan sejarah Islam dan menumbuhkan empati sejarah siswa kelas VIII MTs El Mahira, Kabupaten Bungo, Jambi. Penelitian Tindakan Kelas model Kemmis dan McTaggart dilaksanakan dalam dua siklus pada 30 siswa (15 laki-laki dan 15 perempuan) pada semester ganjil tahun ajaran 2025/2026. Data observasi, wawancara dengan enam siswa yang dipilih secara purposif, rubrik empati sejarah tiga indikator, dan dokumentasi dianalisis dengan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña serta ditriangulasi. Sebelum tindakan, 80% siswa berada pada kategori rendah dan menilai tokoh masa lalu dengan standar masa kini. Bermain peran berbasis naskah pada Siklus I meningkatkan antusiasme tetapi belum membangun empati. Bermain peran berbasis inkuiri tentang Perang Badar pada Siklus II menaikkan skor rata-rata pengenalan konteks dari 55 menjadi 82, perspektif pengambilan keputusan dari 48 menjadi 78, dan perhatian afektif dari 40 menjadi 85, dengan ketuntasan klasikal 86%. Skor merupakan rerata kelas pada skala rubrik 0–100, dan ketuntasan klasikal adalah persentase siswa yang mencapai kriteria ketuntasan minimal (70). Bermain peran yang bertumpu pada sumber sejarah yang sahih, perancah bertahap, dan bimbingan guru yang menjaga adab menggeser siswa dari presentisme menuju pemahaman kontekstual dan kepedulian historis.

Kata kunci: Empati Sejarah, Bermain Peran, Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam, Penelitian Tindakan Kelas, Madrasah

Abstract

Islamic Cultural History (Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam, SKI) in Indonesian madrasahs is still largely taught through chronological memorisation, which neglects its affective dimension and hinders students' historical empathy. This study examined how role-playing was implemented to bring Islamic history to life and to foster historical empathy among eighth-grade students at MTs El Mahira, Bungo Regency, Jambi. A two-cycle classroom action research design based on the Kemmis and McTaggart model involved 30 students (15 boys and 15 girls) in the 2025/2026 odd semester. Data from observation, interviews with six purposively selected students, a three-indicator historical empathy rubric, and documentation were analysed with the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model and triangulated. Before the action, 80% of the students were in the low category and judged past actors by present-day standards. Scripted role-play in Cycle I raised enthusiasm but not empathy. Inquiry-based role-play on the Battle of Badr in Cycle II raised mean scores for contextual recognition from 55 to 82, decision-making perspective from 48 to 78, and affective care from 40 to 85, with 86% classical mastery. Scores are class means on the rubric's 0–100 scale, and classical mastery is the percentage of students who reached the minimum mastery criterion of 70. Role-playing grounded in valid sources, graduated scaffolding, and reverent teacher guidance moves students from presentism towards contextual understanding and historical care.

Keywords: Historical Empathy, Role-Playing, Islamic Cultural History, Classroom Action Research, Madrasah

Introduction

Islamic Cultural History (*Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam*, SKI) is a core subject of the Indonesian madrasah curriculum with both an intellectual and a moral mandate: it passes on

knowledge of past events and transmits the values of Islamic civilisation so that they shape learners' character and religious identity (Munawir et al., 2023; Yunita et al., 2022). Its content and orientation have repeatedly been reshaped by state policy (Rofik et al., 2023), yet in classrooms SKI is still often taught textually and monotonously, centred on dates, names, and sequences of events, while teachers spend much of the lesson explaining content to passive students (Maruhawa et al., 2024; Munawir et al., 2024). Such teaching runs against the view that history education should cultivate ways of thinking about the past rather than the storage of facts (Wineburg, 2018).

This problem was clearly visible at MTs El Mahira, an Islamic junior secondary school in Bungo Regency, Jambi Province. A preliminary study and initial observation of eighth-grade students revealed that 75% of them regarded SKI as boring and "far from their lives". Students could state the year of the Battle of Badr or the conquest of Mecca (*Fathu Makkah*), but could not explain why these events mattered or what emotional and spiritual weight the struggles of the people involved carried. Expressive storytelling has raised enthusiasm and recall in another madrasah in the same regency (Baili et al., 2025), but remembering is not the same as understanding the past from within. The difficulty at MTs El Mahira is better described as a failure to develop historical empathy. The diagnostic test administered in the pre-cycle provided classroom evidence of this problem: only 20% of the students reached the "good" category of historical empathy, 80% remained in the "low" category, and their responses repeatedly judged the Prophet's decisions by present-day standards, for instance by asking why he did not "just attack straight away".

Historical empathy is the cognitive and affective capacity to understand historical actors within the context of their own time and place, without necessarily endorsing their actions, together with the capacity to care about the human struggles of the past (Endacott & Brooks, 2018; Retz, 2018). Endacott and Brooks (2018) describe it as a process of historical contextualisation, perspective taking, and affective connection, and Karn (2023) extends it into a cognitive-affective theory with five elements: evidence, imagination, perspectives, ethics, and care. A recent scoping review shows that most studies now treat historical empathy as both affective and cognitive, with contextual reasoning, perspective taking, engagement, presentism, and identity as its main influences (Harnes, 2025). In practice the concept is far from settled. Indonesian social studies teachers often confuse it with sympathy (Aderoben & Darmawan, 2024), and history education students tend to display a "truncated", mainly cognitive form of empathy (Husna et al., 2021). In SKI, this capacity matters because Islamic history is rich in sacrifice, strategy, and faith, which students can internalise only when they are able to sense the situations faced by the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions. In this study, historical empathy is distinguished from students' general interest in the lesson and from momentary emotional engagement during an activity. Interest and enthusiasm describe students' relation to the learning activity, whereas historical empathy describes a reasoned understanding of historical actors that rests on evidence about their context and perspectives. A class may therefore enjoy a role-play and still judge the past by present-day standards; an emotional response counts as the affective component of historical empathy only when it is anchored in contextual knowledge and in the actors' own reasons (Endacott & Brooks, 2018; Karn, 2023). For this reason, enthusiasm was recorded through observation but was not treated as an indicator of empathy in the rubric.

Active pedagogies that involve students intellectually and emotionally appear well suited to this purpose. A meta-analysis found a large positive effect of role-play teaching compared with control conditions (Fu & Li, 2025). In history and social studies, creative drama developed seventh graders' historical empathy (Çopur et al., 2023), a role-playing model improved upper-secondary students' historical empathy (Astuti et al., 2025), and sociodrama has been proposed as a low-cost way to build empathy when teaching national history (Utami & Kurniawan, 2025). In Islamic education, role-play and sociodrama have been linked to better SKI achievement and motivation (Mutmainna et al., 2023; Ratna, 2023; Tanjung & Ridho, 2024), to the resolution of learning problems in SKI (Fuaddah et al., 2023), to improved understanding of SKI content (Nurhayati et al., 2026), and to character formation in young learners (Irlina et al., 2025; Sayyi & Afandi, 2026).

Three gaps nevertheless remain. Most role-play studies in SKI report achievement, activity, or motivation and rarely operationalise historical empathy with its cognitive and affective dimensions; a recent exception describes role-play based on historical empathy in a primary madrasah but does not trace change across cycles (Mumtazah et al., 2026). The literature also seldom examines how the design of the role-play itself, a ready-made script or an inquiry task grounded in historical sources, conditions whether empathy emerges. Finally, evidence from semi-rural madrasahs is scarce, although teachers there often struggle to vary their methods within limited time and resources (Azizah et al., 2025). Recent Indonesian studies of historical empathy have relied mainly on questionnaires, visual media, or quasi-experimental comparisons in general history classes (Astuti et al., 2025; Na'im & Triyanto, 2026), whereas studies of role-play in SKI have measured achievement or motivation rather than empathy (Mutmainna et al., 2023; Ratna, 2023; Tanjung & Ridho, 2024). At the same time, research on teachers and history education students shows that historical empathy is still often equated with sympathy or reduced to its cognitive side (Aderoben & Darmawan, 2024; Husna et al., 2021). There is therefore little classroom evidence on how the design of role-play shapes both components of historical empathy in SKI, a subject in which students' reverence for sacred figures may lead either to uncritical admiration or to presentist judgement.

This article therefore analyses how role-playing was implemented to bring Islamic history to life and how it fostered historical empathy among eighth-grade students at MTs El Mahira Bungo. Three questions guided the study: how role-playing was implemented and refined across two cycles of classroom action research; how students' historical empathy, in terms of contextual recognition, decision-making perspective, and affective care, developed across the cycles; and which challenges arose in a semi-rural madrasah and how they were addressed. The unit of analysis is one eighth-grade class of 30 students studying the Prophet's da'wah strategy in the Medina period and the Battle of Badr. The article first describes the research method, then presents and discusses the results, and closes with conclusions and directions for future research.

Research Method

This study used a qualitative approach with a classroom action research (*Penelitian Tindakan Kelas*, PTK) design based on the Kemmis and McTaggart model, in which each cycle consists of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Action research was chosen because the study sought to solve a practical problem in a real classroom while generating pedagogical knowledge that teachers can use (Efron & Ravid, 2019; Mertler, 2019). In this tradition,

practitioners study and improve their own practice through systematic cycles of action and reflection, and the knowledge produced is judged by how well it explains and improves that practice (McNiff, 2016). The cyclical structure suited this aim: the reflection at the end of one cycle informs the plan of the next, so that the intervention is revised on the basis of evidence collected in the classroom rather than fixed in advance. Studies of teachers working with the Kemmis and McTaggart spiral have also shown that movement between the phases is often iterative and non-linear, and that this ongoing reflection is precisely what makes the design productive for improving practice (Rabgay & Kidman, 2023). The validity of the design therefore rests on the explicit link between each reflection and the subsequent action, on the use of several kinds of data for the same phenomenon, and on the documentation of every step so that the reasoning behind each revision can be followed.

The study was conducted at MTs El Mahira in Bungo Regency, Jambi Province. The school was selected because madrasahs in this area have strong Islamic potential and a pesantren-like religious culture, but they still face constraints arising from conventional, lecture-based teaching methods. The research took place in the 2025/2026 odd semester and focused on the topic "The Da'wah Strategy of the Prophet in the Medina Period and the Battle of Badr". The subjects were the 30 students of one eighth-grade class, consisting of 15 boys and 15 girls. In keeping with the collaborative character of classroom action research, the lessons were conducted by the SKI teacher, and observation, interviews, and documentation were carried out alongside the teaching so that the reflection at the end of each cycle could draw on what had been seen and heard in class.

The procedure began with a pre-cycle stage in which the existing lecture-based SKI lessons were observed and a diagnostic test was administered to establish students' initial level of historical empathy. The intervention was then implemented in two cycles, as shown in Figure 1. In Cycle I, basic role-playing was applied: students were divided into groups to play the roles of historical figures, namely the Prophet, Abu Bakr, Umar ibn al-Khattab, and figures of the Quraysh, on the basis of the textbook. The scenario in this cycle was the Treaty of Hudaibiyah, and the groups played the Prophet, Suhayl ibn Amr as the envoy of the Quraysh, and the Companions who were dissatisfied with the terms of the agreement. In Cycle II, the role-play was revised in light of the reflection on Cycle I and was redesigned as an inquiry-based activity. Students received primary-source material, namely translated excerpts of the *sirah nabawiyyah* and contextual Qur'anic exegesis, together with a worksheet on the strategic dilemma of the Battle of Badr. They examined the psychological and social context of the figures before simulating a consultative council (*majlis shura*) between the Prophet and Abu Bakr.

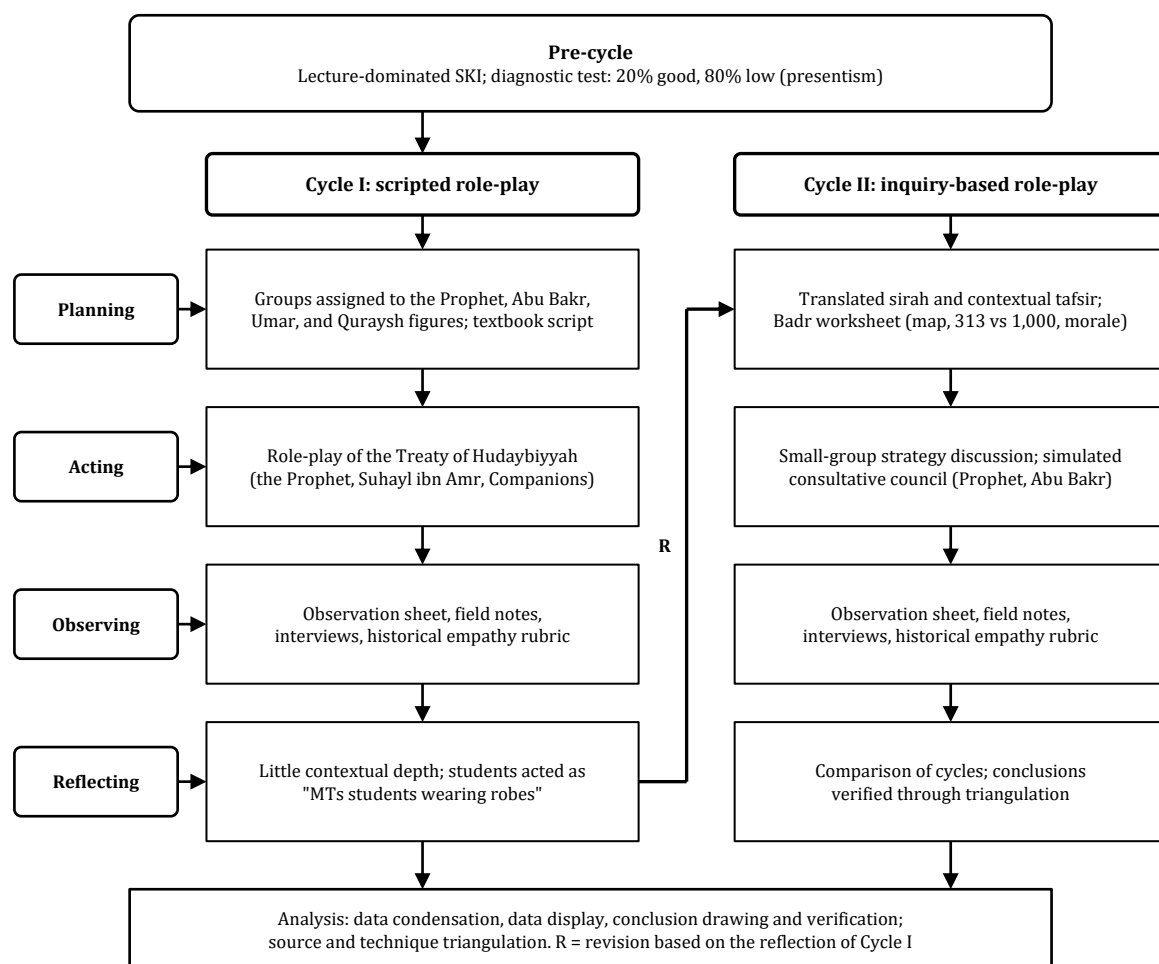


Figure 1. Classroom Action Research Design In Two Cycles (Kemmis And McTaggart Model)

Source: Research procedure of the present study.

Figure 1 summarises the logic of the two cycles. The left-hand column follows the four phases of the Kemmis and McTaggart model in each cycle, while the boxes on the right record the concrete decisions taken at each phase. The arrow from the reflection of Cycle I to the planning of Cycle II marks the key revision of the study: the shift from a scripted role-play based on the textbook to an inquiry-based role-play grounded in historical sources. Reading the figure from top to bottom shows how a diagnosis of rote learning and presentism in the pre-cycle led to a first, partly unsuccessful action, and how the explanation of that partial failure shaped the design of the second action.

The four phases of each cycle were carried out as follows. In the planning phase of Cycle I, a lesson plan on the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, a role-play script adapted from the textbook, the observation sheet, and the historical empathy rubric were prepared. In the acting phase, the groups performed the script in front of the class. In the observing phase, students' engagement and the emotional quality of their enactment were recorded with the observation sheet and field notes, and each student's contribution was scored with the rubric. In the reflecting phase, it was concluded that the role-play had raised enthusiasm but not empathy, because the students lacked contextual understanding and were inhibited by shyness. These findings led to three revisions for Cycle II: the ready-made script was replaced by an inquiry worksheet and source excerpts, so that students had to reconstruct the actors' reasoning from evidence; preparation in small groups with guiding contextual questions was added as scaffolding before the class presentation; and the teacher took on the role of director to keep the enactment of the

Prophet and his Companions within the bounds of *adab*. Cycle II followed the same four phases with the revised plan and the same observation sheet and rubric, and its reflection examined the extent to which the students had reached the minimum mastery criterion of 70. Each cycle consisted of two to three meetings.

Four techniques were used to collect data, as summarised in Table 1. Observation focused on students' engagement during role-play and used an observation sheet of lesson implementation. Interviews were conducted with six students selected purposively to explore their feelings about, and understanding of, the figures they played. A performance assessment used an adapted historical empathy rubric with three indicators: (a) contextual recognition, (b) decision-making perspective, and (c) affective care. These indicators correspond closely to the three components of historical contextualisation, perspective taking, and affective connection in the model of Endacott and Brooks (2018). Documentation consisted of photographs of the activities, field notes, and students' work.

Table 1. Data Collection Techniques, Instruments, and Focus

Technique	Instrument	Focus	Participants
Observation	Observation sheet of lesson implementation; field notes	Students' engagement and the emotional quality of their enactment during role-play	Whole class (30 students)
Interview	Interview guide	Students' feelings about, and understanding of, the figures they played	Six purposively selected students
Performance assessment	Adapted historical empathy rubric	(a) contextual recognition; (b) decision-making perspective; (c) affective care	Whole class, in each cycle
Documentation	Photographs, field notes, and students' work	Record of classroom activities and of the products of group inquiry	Whole class

Source: Research instruments of the present study.

Table 1 shows that each technique was matched to a specific aspect of the research questions. Observation and field notes captured the process of role-play and its visible emotional quality, the interviews captured students' own accounts of what they felt and understood, and the rubric provided a structured judgement of the three empathy indicators at the end of each cycle. Because historical empathy has both visible and internal components, no single technique could capture it fully. The combination therefore follows the recommendation of recent reviews that empathy should be examined through students' reasoning, their emotional engagement, and their products together (Harnes, 2025; Karn, 2023).

The choice of a performance rubric rather than a self-report questionnaire was deliberate. Quantitative studies of historical empathy have often relied on questionnaires, scales, or pre- and post-tests (Astuti et al., 2025; Na'im & Triyanto, 2026; Nemit-allah et al., 2026), which capture students' dispositions but reveal little about how they reason in a specific historical situation. A rubric applied to students' contributions in and after the role-play stays closer to the classroom activity and allows the teacher to see which component of empathy is lagging. Its limitation is that it depends on the judgement of the assessor, which is why its results were interpreted together with the observation and interview data rather than on their own.

The data were analysed with the interactive model of Miles et al. (2020), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Observation notes, interview transcripts, field notes, and student work were condensed by selecting and coding passages related to contextual understanding, perspective taking, presentist judgement, and emotional engagement. The condensed data were displayed in matrices that compared the pre-cycle, Cycle I, and Cycle II, and rubric scores were summarised as class means for each indicator and as the percentage of students who reached classical mastery. Conclusions were drawn by comparing patterns across cycles and were verified against the other data sources. Following common practice in qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018), the trustworthiness of the findings was established through source triangulation, which compared the accounts of different students with the observation records, and technique triangulation, which compared the results of observation, interviews, the rubric, and documentation for the same phenomenon.

To make the reported scores interpretable, the scoring procedure is specified as follows. Each student's contribution in and after the role-play was rated on each of the three indicators with the same rubric descriptors in both cycles, and the ratings were converted to a 0–100 scale. The score reported for each indicator is the class mean of the 30 students' converted scores. Classical mastery is the percentage of students whose overall historical empathy score reached the minimum mastery criterion (*Kriteria Ketuntasan Minimal*, KKM) of 70; in Cycle II, 86% of the students met this criterion. To keep the assessment consistent across cycles, all ratings were given by the teacher, and the same indicators, descriptors, and conversion were applied in both cycles.

Results and Discussion

Pre-Cycle Condition: Rote Knowledge and Presentism

Before the action, SKI lessons in the eighth-grade class at MTs El Mahira were dominated by lecturing. Students mainly copied dates and the names of historical figures into their notebooks. The diagnostic test showed that only 20% of the students demonstrated historical empathy in the "good" category, whereas the majority, 80%, were in the "low" category. Students in the low category tended to judge figures of the past by the moral standards of the twenty-first century, a tendency known as presentism, and did not grasp the complexity of the situations faced by Muslim figures at the time. Before the action, for example, students often criticised historical decisions with questions such as "Why didn't the Prophet just attack straight away?". These findings confirmed the initial diagnosis that students knew the facts of Islamic history but lacked the contextual and affective understanding that historical empathy requires.

Cycle I: Scripted Role-Playing

In Cycle I, the teacher asked students to role-play the negotiation of the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah. The students were divided into groups who played the Prophet, Suhayl ibn Amr as the envoy of the Quraysh, and the Companions who were dissatisfied with the treaty. Observation showed that the students were physically enthusiastic, but cognitively they merely read out the script provided by the teacher without engaging emotionally with the roles. When the group playing Umar ibn al-Khattab delivered its dialogue, the students laughed and looked awkward, and they did not convey the emotional tension that should have accompanied Umar's objection to the terms of the treaty. Students were also very shy and lacked confidence, a

pattern associated with the local culture and with habits of passive learning. The reflection at the end of the cycle concluded that the role-play had failed to build historical empathy because the students had not been equipped with a deep understanding of the context. In the words of the reflection, they performed as "MTs students wearing robes", not as "Companions of the Prophet whose faith was being tested".

Cycle II: Context- and Inquiry-Based Role-Playing

To address the weaknesses of Cycle I, the material in Cycle II was "The Strategic Dilemma of the Battle of Badr". The teacher no longer provided a finished script. Instead, students received a worksheet containing a topographic map of Badr, the numbers of the opposing forces (313 against 1,000), and a description of the psychological condition of the Muslims. They were asked to discuss and formulate a strategy, and then to simulate a consultative council between the Prophet and Abu Bakr. In this simulation, students had to argue why the Prophet chose to take up a position at the wells and to express how Abu Bakr might have felt at that moment. Before moving to the class presentation, students worked first in small groups with guiding contextual questions from the teacher.

Observation in Cycle II recorded a marked change. Students carried out small-scale research on desert conditions and on the psychology of warfare. During the simulation, the student who played Abu Bakr displayed a serious and respectful expression, and the dialogue that the groups produced was no longer memorised text but a representation of their own understanding of the tension of the situation. Students came to see that the Prophet's decisions at Badr were rational and fitted the geographical and social conditions of the time, in contrast to the presentist questions they had raised before the action. The shyness observed in Cycle I was also reduced once students had prepared arguments together in small groups.

Development of the Historical Empathy Indicators

The rubric results for the two cycles are presented in Table 2 and visualised in Figure 2.

Table 2. Mean historical empathy rubric scores in Cycle I and Cycle II

Indicator	Cycle I	Cycle II	Change
Contextual recognition	55	82	+27
Decision-making perspective	48	78	+30
Affective care	40	85	+45
Classical mastery	n.r.	86%	n.a.

Note: Change = Cycle II minus Cycle I; n.r. = not reported; n.a. = not applicable. Source: Historical empathy rubric data (2025).

Table 2 shows that all three indicators rose from Cycle I to Cycle II. Contextual recognition increased from 55 to 82, decision-making perspective from 48 to 78, and affective care from 40 to 85, and classical mastery reached 86% in Cycle II. The pattern of change is as informative as its size. In Cycle I, affective care was the weakest indicator, which agrees with the observation that students read the script without emotional depth. In Cycle II, it became the strongest. This reversal suggests that the affective dimension did not grow from performance alone, since students had already performed in Cycle I. It grew once students had understood the circumstances that made the historical actors' feelings intelligible. The finding is consistent with studies in which structured encounters with historical perspectives, such as eyewitness testimony or creative drama built on content, increased students' empathic understanding

(Bartelds et al., 2023; Çopur et al., 2023), and with quasi-experimental evidence that role-playing improves historical empathy when it is embedded in a learning model (Astuti et al., 2025).

The means in Table 2 should be read as the average level of the class on each indicator rather than as the level of every student. A mean of 82 for contextual recognition, for example, shows that the class as a whole moved into the upper part of the 0–100 scale, but it does not show how many students remained at lower levels. Because the same indicators, descriptors, and scale were used in both cycles, the differences between the cycles reflect changes in students' performance against the same criteria, although they remain descriptive and were not tested inferentially.

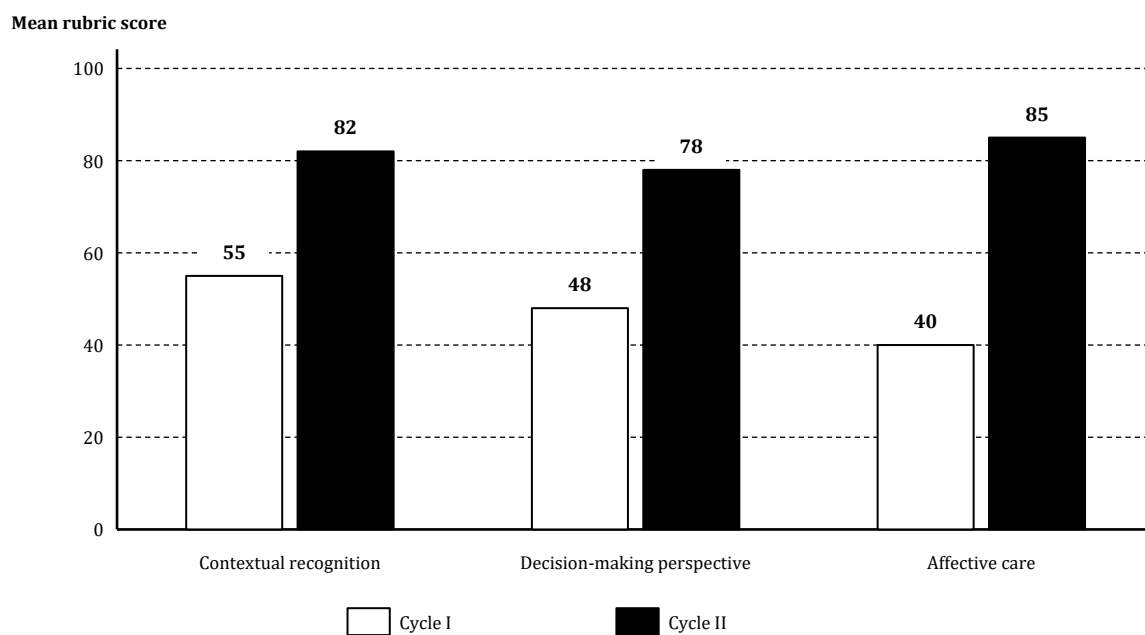


Figure 2. Mean historical empathy rubric scores by indicator in Cycle I and Cycle II

Source: Historical empathy rubric data (see Table 2).

Figure 2 makes the contrast between the cycles visible. The bars for Cycle I are uneven and descend from contextual recognition to affective care, whereas those for Cycle II are uniformly high, with affective care slightly above the two cognitive indicators. The largest gap between the paired bars appears for affective care. Read together with the observation data, the figure indicates that the redesign of the role-play strengthened the cognitive indicators and, through them, opened the way for the affective one. This profile differs from that of pre-service history teachers, whose cognitive empathy scores were higher than their affective ones (Carril-Merino et al., 2023). Part of the difference may lie in the fact that the students at MTs El Mahira enacted their roles in front of peers after inquiry, rather than only reading or reflecting individually.

Table 3. Observed changes in students' engagement with Islamic history across the stages of the study

Aspect	Pre-cycle	Cycle I	Cycle II
Learning activity	Lecture; students copy dates and names	Scripted role-play of the Treaty of Hdaybiyyah based on the textbook	Inquiry with a map of Badr, troop numbers (313 vs 1,000), and the Muslims' psychological condition; simulated consultative council
Judgement of historical figures	Presentism: past actors judged by present-day standards	Script read aloud without deepening the context	The Prophet's decisions understood as rational and fitting their geographical and social context
Emotional quality	SKI seen as boring and distant (75% in the preliminary study)	Laughter and awkwardness; no tension in Umar's objection	Serious and respectful expression; dialogue based on understanding, not memorisation
Confidence and participation	Passive note-taking	Physically enthusiastic but shy and lacking confidence	Small-group preparation before class presentation; shyness reduced
Level of historical empathy	20% good; 80% low (diagnostic test)	Mean rubric scores 40 to 55	Mean rubric scores 78 to 85; 86% classical mastery

Source: Observation, field notes, interviews, and rubric data (2025).

Table 3 brings together the qualitative evidence across the three stages. It shows a progression from passive note-taking and presentist judgement in the pre-cycle, through physical enthusiasm without emotional depth in Cycle I, to argument-based dialogue and respectful, serious enactment in Cycle II. The interviews add the students' own perspective on this shift. One student (S12) described the change in these words: "Usually when I read about the Battle of Badr, I just memorise the numbers 313 against 1,000. But when I played a Companion holding the banner, I felt afraid but also certain. I only now realise how heavy their struggle was, not only physically but mentally." The statement indicates movement from numbers stored as facts to an understanding of what those numbers meant for the people who lived through the event. It also shows the coexistence of cognitive and affective elements that recent theory treats as the core of historical empathy (Harnes, 2025; Karn, 2023).

From Presentism to Contextualism

The first research question concerned how role-playing was implemented and refined. The results show that the decisive refinement was the move from a scripted role-play in Cycle I to an inquiry-based, context-rich role-play in Cycle II. Role-playing combined with inquiry succeeded in dismantling the students' presentist attitude. Before the action, students criticised the decisions of historical figures by present-day standards; after Cycle II, they recognised that the Prophet's decisions at Badr were rational and fitted the geography and social conditions of the time. This change is in line with the view that historical empathy requires students to suspend present-day moral judgement in order to understand the logic of the past (Endacott & Brooks, 2018; Retz, 2018). Harnes (2025) identifies presentism as one of the main influences

on students' historical empathy, and Silfver and Myyry (2022) show that students' reasoning about past actors is shaped by group distinctions and by the way present-day concerns are linked to past events. Role-playing made the students "live" in the logic of the past for the duration of the simulation, and the inquiry materials gave that logic concrete content: terrain, numbers, water sources, and morale.

The contrast between the two cycles also clarifies a point that is often left implicit in the literature on role-play. In Cycle I, the students already had roles, costumes, and a script, yet empathy did not appear. They were performing, but they were performing themselves. This observation supports the principle that historical empathy must be grounded in evidence rather than in unconstrained imagination (Endacott & Brooks, 2018; Karn, 2023), which implies that role-play in history should be a structured historical simulation based on valid sources, so that students act on historical evidence instead of inventing freely. It also helps to explain why meta-analytic evidence shows strong but variable effects of role-play (Fu & Li, 2025): the label "role-play" covers designs that differ greatly in how much historical understanding they demand. Studies that relate the use of primary sources, group projects, and reflective discussion to students' historical awareness (Bandarsyah et al., 2025) point in the same direction. In SKI, where students often approach sacred history with reverence but with little contextual knowledge, the inquiry stage seems to be the element that turns role-play from a performance into a form of historical reasoning. This reading is consistent with the long-standing argument that students learn history best when they investigate and interpret evidence instead of receiving finished narratives (Levstik & Barton, 2023; Wineburg, 2018). Work on simulations in social studies similarly holds that simulations become powerful only when they are purposeful, that is, when the experience is tied to clear learning aims and to reflection (Wright-Maley, 2019), and process drama practice stresses that a dramatic context has to be built carefully before students can work in role with commitment (Bowell & Heap, 2017).

Why, then, did scripted role-play raise enthusiasm without developing empathy, whereas inquiry-based role-play produced higher scores? Three explanations emerge from the data. First, the enthusiasm observed in Cycle I was largely interest generated by the novelty of performing, moving, and dressing up, which concerns the activity rather than the historical actors; as defined in the introduction, such interest is not historical empathy. Second, the script removed the need to reason: students' attention was directed to reading their lines in front of peers, so they had no evidence with which to reconstruct why Umar objected or why the Prophet accepted the terms of the treaty, and present-day assumptions filled this gap. Third, shyness and the fear of being laughed at turned attention towards the self, which is why the students were "performing themselves". In Cycle II, the inquiry worksheet supplied the evidence that the script had withheld, small-group preparation reduced the social risk of performing, and the requirement to argue for the Prophet's decision demanded perspective taking before enactment. This pattern is consistent with previous studies. Studies of role-play and sociodrama in SKI that reported gains in achievement and motivation (Mutmainna et al., 2023; Ratna, 2023; Tanjung & Ridho, 2024) resemble the enthusiasm of Cycle I, whereas studies in which drama or encounters with eyewitness accounts were built on historical content reported growth in empathic understanding (Bartelds et al., 2023; Çopur et al., 2023). Research on emotional rules in history classrooms also shows that the norms set by teachers shape how students express emotion about the past (Sheppard, 2023), which helps to explain why the teacher's directing role mattered in Cycle II. That the same students displayed both patterns in

succession suggests that the design of the role-play was an important factor, although the other influences discussed below cannot be ruled out.

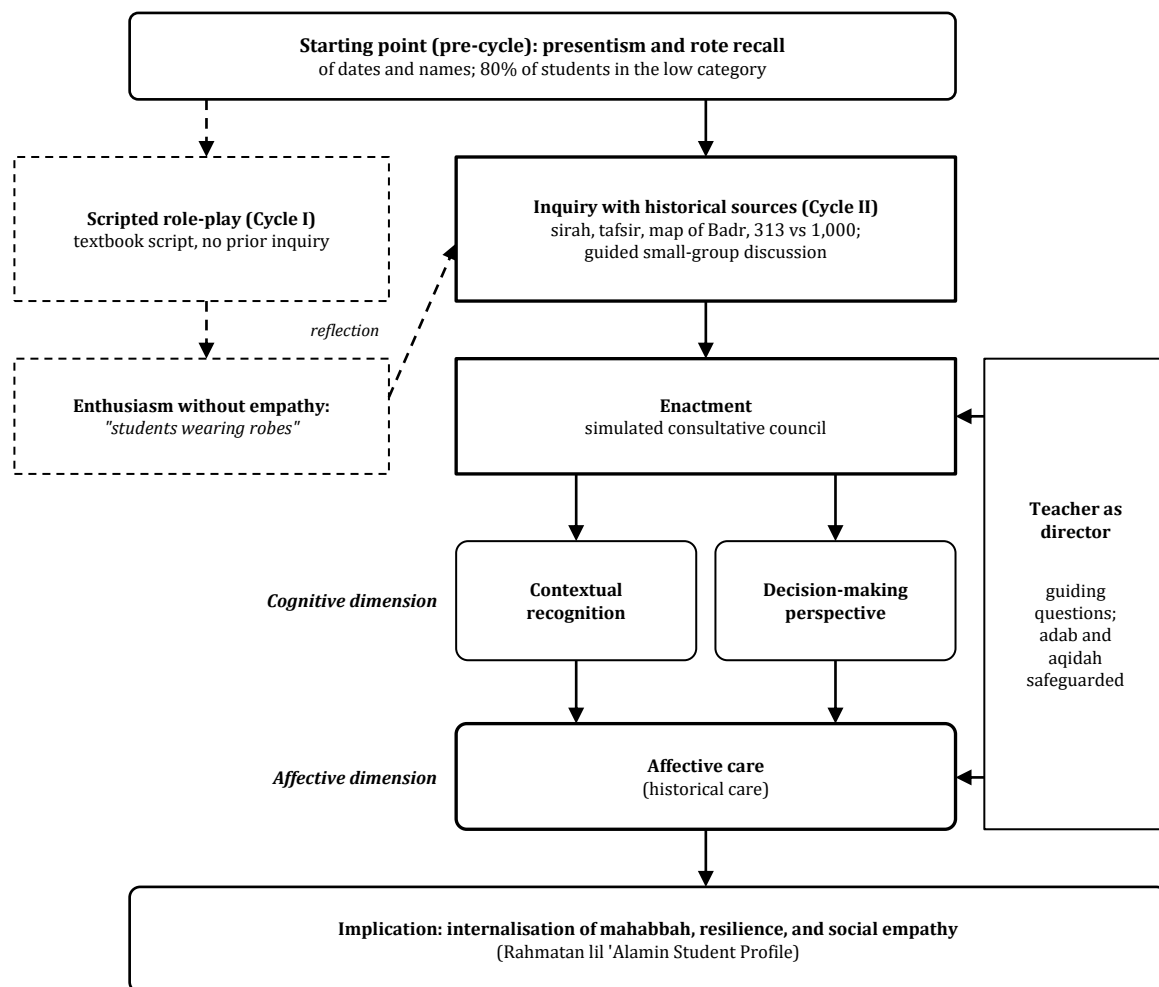


Figure 3. Conceptual model of inquiry-based role-playing for historical empathy in SKI
Source: Authors' synthesis of the findings.

Figure 3 summarises this mechanism as a conceptual model derived from the findings. The model begins with the presentist starting point documented in the pre-cycle and places inquiry with historical sources, together with guided small-group discussion, before enactment. Enactment then activates the two cognitive indicators (contextual recognition and decision-making perspective) and, building on them, the affective indicator of historical care. The box on the right represents the teacher's directing role, which guided the inquiry and kept the enactment and its emotional expression within the bounds of reverence. The outcome at the bottom of the figure, the internalisation of values such as love for the Prophet and his Companions (*mahabbah*), resilience, and social empathy, is presented as an implication drawn from the students' responses and the school culture, not as a separately measured result. The dashed path from scripted role-play represents Cycle I, in which enactment without context produced enthusiasm but not empathy.

The Affective Dimension: Reviving "Frozen" History

The second research question concerned how students' historical empathy developed. Islamic history is often presented as frozen text, and the role-play revived it mainly through its affective dimension. Student S12's account of feeling "afraid but also certain" while holding the

banner confirms the claim of Endacott and Brooks (2018) that historical empathy includes an affective connection, which Karn (2023) describes as care. When students connect emotionally with the suffering and struggle of Muslim figures, history ceases to be a dead object and becomes a source of spiritual inspiration. At MTs El Mahira, which has a pesantren-like culture, this affective dimension integrated easily with the value of *mahabbah* towards the Prophet and his Companions. This finding resonates with research showing that teachers' emotional framing of history lessons shapes the kind of engagement that students are able to develop (Sheppard, 2023), and with Indonesian studies that link historical empathy to character formation and to the values of tolerance and openness (Aderoben & Darmawan, 2023).

The size of the affective gain deserves comment, because affective change is often the hardest to achieve in technology- or content-focused interventions. In a study of a digital library-based learning management system using the TRINGO (*ngerti-ngrasa-nglakoni*) strategy with 45 Muhammadiyah educators, for example, gains in technological content knowledge were accompanied by only minimal change in the affective dimension (Sinaga et al., 2026). Motivational factors also matter: among university students, confidence in success predicted historical empathy more strongly than fear of failure (Nemt-allah et al., 2026). In the present study, the shift from shyness and awkward laughter in Cycle I to serious and respectful expression in Cycle II suggests that once students felt prepared, through inquiry and small-group rehearsal of arguments, they were more willing to invest emotionally in their roles. The affective dimension appears to depend on cognitive preparation and on a sense of competence, a relationship that the rubric results in Table 2 and the profile in Figure 2 both reflect.

It is instructive to compare these results with storytelling, the method most often proposed as an alternative to lecturing in SKI. In a madrasah in the same regency, expressive storytelling about Islamic figures drew students' attention, built emotional involvement, and helped them remember historical events (Baili et al., 2025). Storytelling and role-play thus share an affective entry point, but they place the student differently. In storytelling, the student listens to a narrative whose interpretation is already provided by the teller. In the inquiry-based role-play of Cycle II, the student had to reconstruct the reasons behind a decision from evidence and then defend it in the voice of a historical actor. This difference mirrors the distinction in the literature between empathy as emotional identification and empathy as the reconstruction of past perspectives (Harnes, 2025; Retz, 2018). The two methods can therefore be complementary: storytelling can supply the narrative frame and emotional interest, and inquiry-based role-play can turn that interest into perspective taking. A comparable combination of storytelling, role play, and peer tutoring supported the growth of empathy in a child-friendly madrasah (Sayyi & Afandi, 2026), and role-play based on historical empathy increased participation and understanding of Islamic historical events in a primary madrasah (Mumtazah et al., 2026).

Challenges and Solutions in a Semi-Rural Madrasah

The third research question concerned the challenges of implementing role-play in a semi-rural madrasah. One important finding was that, in Cycle I, students were very shy and lacked confidence, a pattern related to local culture and to habits of passive learning. The scaffolding provided by the teacher in Cycle II, namely guiding contextual questions and small-group discussion before the class presentation, helped students overcome this psychological barrier. This experience supports a graduated approach in which role-play moves from small groups to

whole-class presentation, and agrees with recommendations that anxiety in history lessons can become a learning resource when it is managed through clear emotional norms and gradual empathy-building (Fauzi & Yulianti, 2025). A similar obstacle of low student confidence was reported in a primary madrasah that used role-play based on historical empathy, where the teacher also had to respond creatively within limited class time (Mumtazah et al., 2026). The findings are also relevant to evidence that madrasah teachers struggle to vary their methods under time and resource constraints (Azizah et al., 2025): the redesign in Cycle II required no special equipment, only a worksheet, a map, and source excerpts.

The teacher's role changed accordingly. The SKI teacher at MTs El Mahira acted not only as a facilitator but also as a "director" who ensured that matters of creed (*aqidah*) were not compromised by excessive dramatisation. This role is specific to religious history. Portraying the Prophet and his Companions requires an etiquette (*adab*) of reverence that general models of historical empathy do not address, and the teacher's guidance kept the emotional engagement of the students within that boundary. Culturally responsive designs that draw on local contexts have shown large effects in other Indonesian settings, such as project-based learning in vocational schools (Ananta et al., 2026). In the present case, the pesantren-like culture of the school was an asset rather than an obstacle once the role-play was framed in terms that the students and teacher already valued.

Implications for Character and Teacher Preparation

Beyond the specific topic of Badr, learning SKI through role-play contributes directly to character formation. The source of this contribution lies in the experience of empathising with the struggles of the Prophet and his Companions. If students were to approach other episodes in the same way, such as the boycott in the valley of Abu Talib (Shi'b Abi Talib) or the tension of the Battle of Uhud, they would implicitly practise resilience and social empathy. Within the framework of the madrasah curriculum, this is a concrete expression of the Rahmatan lil 'Alamin Student Profile (*Profil Pelajar Rahmatan lil 'Alamin*), particularly in its dimensions of global diversity, through understanding historical conflict, and independence, through decision-making in simulation (Martanti et al., 2024; Sirait et al., 2024). A da'wah outreach programme in a pesantren similarly instilled honesty, responsibility, politeness, and compassion through students' direct involvement (Ummah et al., 2025), and research on child-friendly Islamic pedagogy has found that empathy grows through classroom methods such as storytelling and role play combined with school culture (Sayyi & Afandi, 2026). Islamic history becomes "alive" because it is felt and not merely memorised.

The findings also carry implications for teacher preparation. Teachers can hardly design empathy-oriented role-play if they equate historical empathy with sympathy, a confusion documented among junior secondary social studies teachers (Aderoben & Darmawan, 2024). The experience at MTs El Mahira points to three practical principles that could be included in professional development for SKI teachers. The first is to begin from a genuine dilemma that historical actors faced, such as the choice of position at Badr, rather than from a narrative to be re-enacted. The second is to give students access to the evidence that makes the actors' choices intelligible, in forms suited to junior secondary students, such as maps, figures, and short source excerpts. The third is to stage participation gradually, with small-group preparation before public performance, and to set clear norms for the respectful portrayal of the Prophet and his Companions. These principles are consistent with the pedagogical principles used to promote

students' understanding of empathy through eyewitnesses (Bartelds et al., 2023) and with calls to give historical empathy an explicit place in history curricula and teaching (Karn, 2023).

Theoretical Contribution and Limitations

Theoretically, the study refines models of historical empathy for the context of religious history education in two ways. First, it shows empirically that, in role-play, the affective component of historical empathy depended on prior contextual inquiry: the same students who performed without feeling in a scripted role-play displayed the strongest affective scores after inquiry. This supports the integrated cognitive-affective view of Endacott and Brooks (2018) and Karn (2023), and specifies a sequence for classroom design. Second, it adds a dimension of reverent engagement to the affective component: in SKI, care for historical actors is shaped by *mahabbah* and bounded by *adab*, so that the teacher's directing role becomes part of the pedagogy of empathy. Practically, the findings suggest that SKI teachers should move away from pure lecturing and design role-play scenarios grounded in valid historical sources. Some limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted in a single class, over two cycles, and on one specific topic, and the rubric results are reported as class means without inferential testing, so the findings indicate a direction of change rather than a generalisable effect. The interview evidence came from six students, and the long-term persistence of the changes was not examined. Moreover, the changes cannot be attributed exclusively to the redesign of the role-play. The two cycles dealt with different events, the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah and the Battle of Badr, which may differ in familiarity and dramatic appeal; by Cycle II, students had become more accustomed to role-play and to being assessed with the rubric; and the teacher's growing experience with the method, the novelty of the activity, and the presence of observers may also have contributed.

Conclusion

This study concludes that role-playing, implemented through a context- and inquiry-based approach, can be a promising strategy for bringing SKI to life and for fostering historical empathy among students of MTs El Mahira Bungo. Its main contribution lies in showing that the inquiry stage, in which students reconstruct the context and reasoning of historical actors from sources before enacting them, is what turned role-play from an enjoyable performance into a means of developing historical empathy. Across the two cycles, role-playing was refined from a scripted, textbook-based activity on the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, which raised enthusiasm but not empathy, into an inquiry-based simulation of the strategic dilemma of the Battle of Badr, in which students worked with maps, troop numbers, and source excerpts before enacting a consultative council. In this second form, students' historical empathy developed in both its cognitive and affective dimensions, as shown by the gains in contextual recognition, decision-making perspective, and affective care and by classical mastery in Cycle II, reflecting a shift from presentism and textual knowledge towards contextual understanding and historical care. The main challenge of this semi-rural madrasah, students' shyness and habits of passive learning, was overcome through graduated scaffolding from small groups to class presentation, while the teacher's role as director safeguarded reverence for Islamic figures. Role-playing is therefore more than a variation to relieve boredom; it is a pedagogical instrument that can move students from apathy towards historical care, and SKI teachers are encouraged to replace pure lecturing with role-play scenarios based on valid historical sources. These conclusions should be read in

light of the study's scope: the evidence comes from one class of 30 students in a single madrasah, the scores are descriptive class means, and the observed changes may also reflect the different topics of the two cycles, students' growing familiarity with role-play, and the novelty of the activity. They therefore indicate a direction of change rather than an effect attributable solely to the intervention. Future research should examine the long-term (longitudinal) effects of role-play in SKI on students' tolerance and resilience in daily life outside the classroom, extend the design to other topics and madrasahs, and complement classroom action research with designs that allow inferential comparison.

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