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Identifying the Components of a Social Skills Curriculum with a Game-Based Approach in the Upper Elementary Level

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The aim of this study was to identify the components of a game-based social skills curriculum tailored for upper elementary education using a research synthesis approach grounded in Klein's curriculum model.

Methods and Materials: This research employed a qualitative research synthesis method based on analogical reasoning and Klein's curriculum framework to extract and categorize curricular elements. The research corpus included 218 peer-reviewed articles and theses published between 2015 and 2025, both domestic and international, selected through purposive sampling until theoretical saturation was achieved. Inclusion criteria focused on studies with qualitative or qualitatively interpretable findings related to social skills instruction and game-based pedagogy. Data were analyzed thematically, and extracted components were organized into seven main curriculum elements: objectives, content, teaching-learning strategies, instructional activities, resources and tools, evaluation, and learning environment.

Findings: The findings revealed a multidimensional framework for a game-based social skills curriculum. The objectives encompassed personal, interpersonal, emotional, and cognitive skill development, alongside innovation and employment readiness. Content included psychological, philosophical, and pedagogical foundations, while teaching strategies emphasized cooperative, reflective, and experiential learning through structured gameplay. Instructional activities highlighted curriculum planning and multimodal engagement. Resources involved both physical and digital infrastructures, including social media and interactive platforms. Evaluation addressed behavioral, emotional, and motivational assessment criteria. The learning environment included both physical and virtual spaces designed to support inclusive and dynamic social learning experiences.

Conclusion: By synthesizing diverse theoretical and empirical foundations, the proposed curriculum model provides educators and policymakers with a practical, evidence-informed structure for integrating social-emotional learning into formal education through play.

Keywords: Social skills curriculum, game-based approach, upper elementary level.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the evolution of educational paradigms has underscored the importance of developing students' social-emotional skills alongside cognitive competencies. The upper elementary years are especially critical for cultivating social skills that support interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, cooperation, and civic responsibility. Among the innovative strategies introduced to foster such competencies, the game-based approach has attracted growing attention due to its capacity to engage learners experientially and developmentally in both individual and group contexts. As education systems increasingly emphasize student-centered and active learning, the integration of play into formal curricula is no longer considered supplementary but essential for achieving holistic educational goals (Kampourtzis, 2018; Wyborn et al., 2018).

Social skills, broadly defined, refer to the set of learned behaviors that enable individuals to interact effectively and appropriately with others in diverse social contexts. These include verbal and non-verbal communication, empathy, cooperation, conflict resolution, and respect for social norms. Research has shown that social skills can be enhanced through educational interventions when such interventions are structured, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive (Fathi Rezaei et al., 2020; Hosseini Thabet et al., 2019). One of the most promising methods for delivering these interventions is through structured gameplay, which offers a naturalistic, motivational, and emotionally safe context for practicing social behaviors (Çağır & Şahin, 2020; Karaman et al., 2022).

The intersection of play and education has deep theoretical roots in developmental psychology and pedagogy. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, for example, underscores the role of social interaction in learning and the capacity of guided play to mediate higher-order thinking and self-regulation. Empirical studies confirm that games—particularly those designed with instructional objectives—can significantly improve students' social, emotional, and behavioral competencies (Fatourechi, 2024; Shah Mohammadi, 2022). In the context of elementary education, games can provide structured opportunities for children to learn empathy, express emotions constructively, resolve conflicts, and participate in cooperative activities—skills that are foundational for positive school climate and academic success (Azizi Farsan et al., 2022; Babaei et al., 2022).

The incorporation of game-based methods in the design and implementation of social skills curricula responds to the need for dynamic, multimodal learning environments that resonate with the developmental profile of young learners. Traditional didactic methods often fall short in addressing the affective and relational domains of child development. In contrast, play-based learning provides a scaffolded experience through which children can explore roles, practice interactions, and receive immediate feedback in an engaging manner (Hill et al., 2021; Johannes, 2024). In this sense, game-based learning is not only pedagogically sound but also culturally resonant, as children across societies naturally engage with games as a primary mode of learning and socialization (Hanghøj et al., 2018).

Curriculum scholars have argued that the design of educational programs must go beyond content delivery and include intentional structures for social interaction, emotional learning, and ethical development. Within this framework, games serve as both content and method. They represent not only what students learn but how they learn it—through participation, dialogue, negotiation, and decision-making (Khaksar et al., 2021; Mizani et al., 2021). For example, cooperative board games can help students practice turn-taking and team strategies, while role-playing games provide contexts for empathy and perspective-taking (Nasiri, 2023). The key lies in purposeful design, where games are aligned with curriculum goals, scaffolded for developmental appropriateness, and supported by reflective teaching practices.

Game-based social skills education also aligns with global educational priorities such as inclusivity, equity, and 21st-century competencies. The use of diverse game formats—including traditional, digital, and hybrid models—can address varied learning styles and socio-cultural contexts. Moreover, these games can be adapted for students with learning differences, including those with autism spectrum conditions, to support their integration into social settings and improve behavioral outcomes (Amouei & Abdollahzadeh, 2021; Hosseinzadeh et al., 2022). Studies demonstrate that play interventions significantly improve communication, cooperation, and emotional understanding in neurodiverse learners, suggesting a wide applicability of this approach (Falcon, 2023).

Another advantage of this model is its compatibility with cross-curricular goals, particularly in social studies education. By integrating social skills training into the content of social studies, educators can reinforce both cognitive and affective learning outcomes. Games that

involve historical simulations, civic decision-making, or community problem-solving allow students to practice social behaviors in contexts that reflect real-world challenges (Karaman et al., 2022; Valizadeh, 2022). This integrative approach enhances relevance and deepens engagement, making learning both meaningful and transformative.

Despite the documented benefits, challenges remain in the systematic implementation of game-based curricula. One significant issue is the absence of comprehensive curricular models that specify the components, processes, and outcomes of social skills instruction through games. While several studies have explored specific game formats or isolated interventions, few have offered a synthesized curriculum model applicable across educational contexts (Mahdavi Nasab et al., 2021; Moradi & Norouzi, 2016). This gap underscores the need for structured curricular planning that integrates instructional goals, content design, pedagogical strategies, resource deployment, and evaluation mechanisms tailored to game-based methodologies (Fatourechi, 2024; Mancha & Ahmad, 2016).

Moreover, teacher preparedness and instructional design play a crucial role in the success of game-based social skills education. Research indicates that when educators are equipped with theoretical knowledge and practical strategies in play-based pedagogy, the impact on students' engagement and learning outcomes is significantly enhanced (Arga et al., 2020; Saadatmand & Gholampour, 2020). Professional development programs must therefore prioritize the cultivation of skills in educational game design, classroom management during play, and integration of assessment tools to monitor social development.

The implementation context also matters. The design of physical and digital learning environments must support interaction, collaboration, and sensory engagement. Classrooms should be flexible, inclusive, and equipped with materials that promote imaginative and cooperative play. Digital platforms, when used, must be developmentally appropriate, interactive, and culturally responsive (Hill et al., 2021; Nasiri, 2023). The physical and virtual learning environments must collectively work to reduce barriers to participation, support diverse learners, and promote the free expression of emotions and ideas.

Finally, rigorous evaluation models are necessary to assess the effectiveness of game-based curricula in achieving social development goals. Current research emphasizes the need for both qualitative and quantitative measures to capture behavioral change, emotional

awareness, peer relations, and classroom climate (Falcon, 2023; Fathi Rezaei et al., 2020). Such evaluations not only validate program efficacy but also guide the refinement of instructional practices, material development, and policy design.

Given these considerations, the current study seeks to fill the existing gap by identifying the key components of a social skills curriculum designed around a game-based approach for upper elementary students.

2. Methods and Materials

Given that the nature of this study is the identification of the components of a game-based social skills curriculum in the upper elementary level, the present research is classified as fundamental-applied in terms of purpose. In order to identify the components of a curriculum model for social skills with a game-based approach in Iran's upper elementary education, the research synthesis method was employed based on a deductive model and guided by Klein's curriculum framework. Since more than 200 credible and relevant studies related to the topic were available, the research synthesis method was deemed appropriate. The rationale for selecting Klein's model as the foundational basis of the proposed framework lies in the fact that it is recognized as one of the most effective and comprehensive models concerning curriculum elements.

The research domain comprised all relevant domestic and international articles and theses addressing social skills with a game-based approach in elementary education over the past ten years (2015–2025). The sampling method was purposive and continued until theoretical data saturation was achieved. In purposive sampling, the review of articles and theses proceeds until the extracted data are deemed sufficient to meet the research objectives.

In the research synthesis method, the sample size is determined based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. For the present study, the following criteria were considered for inclusion:

1. Academic articles and theses published in domestic and international journals that addressed social skills and game-based approaches in educational settings.
2. Given that the research synthesis method relies exclusively on qualitative data, studies using qualitative methods—such as observation, interviews, systematic reviews, and library-based approaches—as well as quantitative survey,

experimental, and correlational studies that yielded qualitative results were examined.

3. Studies were required to provide sufficient data and assumptions aligned with the research objectives; therefore, only studies presenting findings on social skills with a game-based approach relevant to the research goals were selected.
4. Research that underwent expert peer review and was published either in full-text online format or as complete print publications.

Following extensive searches and in accordance with the inclusion criteria, 218 studies were identified. Naturally, a number of these articles and theses were found to be unsuitable for the final analysis. Based on the exclusion criteria, they were removed from the study. The exclusion criteria for this study were as follows:

1. Academic articles and theses whose findings were not related to the research objectives.
2. Studies that were not conducted at the elementary level.
3. Articles and theses that merely described social skills in the elementary curriculum without implementing experimental methods or presenting conclusive results.

3. Findings and Results

The present study aimed to identify and categorize the components of a game-based social skills curriculum for upper elementary students, using a qualitative research synthesis based on Klein's curriculum model. Through a targeted and saturated review of 218 relevant studies published between 2015 and 2025, the core components of the curriculum were extracted and structured into distinct educational elements. These elements were then classified into seven overarching categories: objectives, content, teaching-learning strategies, instructional activities, resources and tools, evaluation, and learning environments. The following section presents the results related to the first of these elements: curriculum objectives.

The curriculum objectives in a game-based social skills framework focus on nurturing personal, interpersonal, cognitive, and emotional capabilities that are foundational for social competence and lifelong learning. The table below summarizes the hierarchy of main components, subcomponents, and microcomponents identified under this domain.

Table 1

Curriculum Objectives Components in a Game-Based Social Skills Curriculum

Main Component	Subcomponent	Microcomponent
Individual Skills	Self-management	Self-awareness
	Interpersonal Skills	Personal Development
		Mental Health and Hygiene
		Classroom Behavior and Ethics
	Problem-Solving Skills	Decision-Making Skills
Learning Development	Scientific and Imaginative Activities	Thinking Skills
		Skill Application Process
	Multiple Intelligences and Life Skills	—
		Development of Various Intelligences
	Inclusive Learning	Life Skills Development
Innovation	Special Skills Education	—
	Language and Literacy Development	Teaching and Learning
		Entrepreneurship and Skill Training
		Game Education
		Vocabulary Expansion
Employment	Educational Policy Quality	Game Education
		—
	Innovation and Creativity	—
Social Skills Development	Income Generation	—
	Industry Interaction	—
	Social Relationships	Social Skills
Challenge Management	Emotion Regulation	Peer Relationships
		Emotional Skills
	Challenge Management	Emotional Expression
		Coping with Emotional Challenges

As the table illustrates, individual skills are emphasized as foundational objectives, focusing on self-management,

self-awareness, and the cultivation of personal growth. These competencies form the basis for students' ability to

regulate behavior, build confidence, and develop internal motivation. The subcomponent of interpersonal skills underscores the importance of mental health and classroom ethics in facilitating cooperative learning environments.

Problem-solving skills include decision-making and cognitive flexibility, helping students to think critically, solve conflicts, and apply their learning in real-world scenarios. Scientific and imaginative activities are included as a distinct domain, allowing students to explore abstract thinking, creativity, and storytelling through play. Meanwhile, the development of multiple intelligences and life skills enables the curriculum to address diverse learner profiles and foster competencies such as emotional intelligence, kinesthetic awareness, and interpersonal communication.

The learning development component incorporates inclusive pedagogical practices and structured education in entrepreneurship and gaming strategies, as well as literacy enhancement through vocabulary-building and language games. The innovation and employment domains ensure alignment with forward-thinking educational policies and real-world preparedness, through attention to creativity, income generation, and collaboration with industries.

Finally, social skills development is central to the game-based approach. This includes fostering effective peer relationships, regulating emotional expression, and managing social challenges. These skills are directly targeted through purposeful game activities and structured scenarios that simulate real-life social dynamics. The objectives identified provide a roadmap for constructing a curriculum that is both developmentally appropriate and practically relevant in preparing students for social success.

The second major component of the game-based social skills curriculum is content, which forms the foundational knowledge and conceptual frameworks required to support the development of social competencies in learners. In this curriculum model, content is not limited to subject matter but extends to the psychological, philosophical, and contextual structures that underpin meaningful and developmentally appropriate learning. This content ensures the alignment of learning materials with students' emotional, cognitive, and social realities. The following table presents the categorized structure of curriculum content, showing the main components, subcomponents, and microcomponents.

Table 2

Curriculum Content Components in a Game-Based Social Skills Curriculum

Main Component	Subcomponent	Microcomponent
Theoretical Frameworks and Concepts	Educational Principles and Frameworks	Rule-Following Principles of Social Education
	Psychological Concepts and Interventions	Emotional and Psychological Environments Application of Psychological Models Intervention Frameworks
	Philosophical Foundations	Ontological Concepts Cultural Concepts Psychological Concepts
	Learning Conditions	Learning Styles Special Social Conditions

As presented in the table, the theoretical frameworks and concepts element serves as the conceptual backbone of the curriculum. The subcomponent of educational principles and frameworks includes content that helps students internalize social norms and behavioral rules, such as rule-following and principles of social education. These microcomponents lay the groundwork for promoting responsibility, cooperation, and respect in social interactions.

The psychological concepts and interventions subcomponent incorporates emotionally responsive learning environments and the use of psychological theories in

instructional design. This includes integrating elements such as emotional safety, self-regulation strategies, and psychological well-being into game scenarios, making social learning more engaging and therapeutic.

The philosophical foundations address broader themes of cultural and psychological identity, supporting students in understanding diversity, self-concept, and shared values through meaningful play. These are reinforced through culturally embedded game content and reflective storytelling. Lastly, the learning conditions subcomponent ensures that teaching materials align with individual learning

styles and the sociocultural realities of students, thereby increasing accessibility and engagement.

The third curriculum element identified in the study is teaching and learning strategies, which encompasses the structured pedagogical approaches through which social skills are explicitly taught, modeled, and reinforced. In a game-based curriculum, these strategies must be both

interactive and responsive, promoting active participation, social engagement, and the internalization of social behaviors. The following table outlines the layered structure of these strategies, highlighting the pedagogical dimensions used to facilitate social skills development through gameplay.

Table 3

Teaching and Learning Strategies Components in a Game-Based Social Skills Curriculum

Main Component	Subcomponent	Microcomponent
Social Skills Instruction	Enhancing Social Competencies	Social Competencies
		Development of Social Interactions
	Managing Social Challenges	Social Isolation
	Teaching Social Participation Rules	Observing Social Order
		Social Interactions and Group Cooperation

As seen in the table, the social skills instruction component includes several critical pedagogical dimensions designed to foster students' behavioral growth in social contexts. The subcomponent of enhancing social competencies focuses on building foundational interpersonal skills, such as initiating and maintaining conversations, interpreting social cues, and expressing empathy. These competencies are cultivated through game formats that simulate real-life social scenarios in an engaging, low-risk environment.

Managing social challenges addresses obstacles that learners may face in peer settings, including feelings of exclusion, miscommunication, or behavioral inhibition. Here, strategies such as cooperative games and role-playing are used to help students navigate situations involving social isolation, encouraging them to build confidence and inclusion skills.

The subcomponent teaching social participation rules introduces students to the norms, structures, and ethics of group interaction. This includes promoting behaviors such as turn-taking, following shared rules, and respecting group

agreements—skills that are seamlessly embedded in the mechanics of well-designed educational games.

Finally, the focus on group cooperation within this component reinforces the collaborative nature of social functioning. Games requiring teamwork, joint problem-solving, and shared objectives help foster meaningful interactions, emotional regulation, and mutual support among students. Through these strategies, teaching and learning become more than a transmission of content—they evolve into transformative experiences of active, relational growth.

The fourth curriculum element identified in the study is instructional activities, which refers to the planned and structured learning experiences implemented to support the development of social competencies through play. These activities operationalize the curriculum by translating objectives and strategies into hands-on, participatory experiences that engage learners emotionally, socially, and cognitively. The table below presents the key components of instructional activities within the game-based social skills curriculum.

Table 4

Instructional Activities Components in a Game-Based Social Skills Curriculum

Main Component	Subcomponent	Microcomponent
Instructional Planning and Design	Curriculum Planning	Curriculum Planning
	Learning Support Tools	Supplemental Learning Tools
	Foundational Learning Concepts	Understanding Learning Principles
	Dimensions of Learning Experiences	Varied Learning Dimensions

As seen in the table, the instructional planning and design component represents the systematic organization of

learning experiences. The subcomponent curriculum planning emphasizes alignment with overarching curriculum

goals, ensuring that game-based activities are developmentally appropriate, socially relevant, and effectively sequenced.

Learning support tools encompass the use of additional materials, technologies, and resources that facilitate engagement and concept reinforcement. These may include interactive digital games, visual aids, role-playing props, or storytelling prompts that support learners in connecting abstract social concepts with real-life behavior.

The subcomponent foundational learning concepts refers to the pedagogical underpinnings that guide activity design—principles such as scaffolding, experiential learning, and student-centered instruction. These are embedded within game-based tasks to promote sustained interest and incremental mastery of social skills.

Table 5

Resources and Tools Components in a Game-Based Social Skills Curriculum

Main Component	Subcomponent	Microcomponent
Educational Infrastructure and Technology	Communication Platforms	Social Tools Interactive Environments and Platforms
	Modern Infrastructure	Technological Infrastructure Alignment with Modern Standards
	Social Media	Social Media Platforms

As shown, the educational infrastructure and technology component covers the foundational systems required for delivering a digital or hybrid game-based learning experience. The communication platforms subcomponent includes tools and environments designed to facilitate interactive communication—both peer-to-peer and between students and instructors. These tools support collaboration, feedback, and discussion in both virtual and physical learning spaces.

Modern infrastructure refers to up-to-date technological environments that enable the integration of digital games, learning management systems, and gamified learning modules. The inclusion of technological infrastructure and alignment with modern standards ensures the curriculum is compatible with current and future educational innovations and accessible across various devices and platforms.

Table 6

Evaluation Components in a Game-Based Social Skills Curriculum

Main Component	Subcomponent	Microcomponent
Needs Assessment	Analysis of Goals and Values	Educational Goals Values and Ethics
	Evaluation of Convergence and Effectiveness	Game Engineering Analysis

Finally, dimensions of learning experiences ensures the curriculum accommodates various learning modalities and social contexts. This includes activities that range from peer collaboration and solo reflection to group competition, all of which offer diverse opportunities for practicing empathy, cooperation, and emotional regulation.

The fifth major component of the game-based social skills curriculum is resources and tools, which includes the technological, infrastructural, and media-related supports necessary for implementing the curriculum effectively. In modern educational environments, especially those integrating game-based learning, the availability and intelligent use of such resources significantly enhance the delivery and impact of instructional content. The table below outlines the hierarchical components of this domain.

Finally, the role of social media as a curriculum tool reflects the increasing importance of these platforms in students' daily lives. Properly guided, social media can be employed for educational purposes—such as digital storytelling, collaborative projects, and social skill modeling—thus extending learning beyond the classroom.

The sixth component of the game-based social skills curriculum is evaluation, which encompasses both formative and summative processes used to assess the effectiveness, relevance, and developmental impact of curriculum implementation. In the context of social skills education, evaluation is not limited to academic achievement but extends to behavioral, emotional, and interpersonal competencies that unfold in real-life contexts. The table below details the structured components of this domain.

Identification of Needs and Challenges

Dimensions of Convergence and Communicative Effectiveness
Psychological and Motivational States
Intrinsic Factors
Desired Behavioral and Attitudinal Changes
Diverse Student Needs
Learning Needs and Challenges
Barriers to Implementation

As seen in the table, needs assessment forms the foundation for curriculum evaluation. It includes the analysis of educational goals and values, ensuring alignment between instructional intentions and actual learner outcomes. This dual focus on cognitive and ethical dimensions reflects the program's broader developmental objectives.

The subcomponent of evaluation of convergence and effectiveness incorporates a systems-level review of how well the curriculum design, particularly its game-based components, fosters integration between learning goals and social outcomes. The game engineering analysis and communicative effectiveness indicators ensure that learning is not only engaging but also structurally sound and pedagogically valid.

The identification of needs and challenges subcomponent addresses dynamic learner differences and educational contexts. Microcomponents such as psychological states, motivational readiness, and behavioral change indicators provide a nuanced framework for understanding the learner experience. By recognizing barriers to implementation and varying student needs, the curriculum remains adaptable and inclusive.

The final curriculum component is the learning environment, which encompasses the physical and virtual spaces in which social skills development through play occurs. This component addresses the importance of context in shaping learning experiences, particularly in terms of accessibility, engagement, and interaction. The table below summarizes the structure of this domain.

Table 7*Learning Environment Components in a Game-Based Social Skills Curriculum*

Main Component	Subcomponent	Microcomponent
Learning Environments	Physical Spaces	Physical Spaces
	Virtual Spaces	Virtual Spaces

As the table illustrates, the learning environment includes two essential subcomponents: physical and virtual settings. The physical environment encompasses traditional classroom layouts, playgrounds, and dedicated game-based learning zones designed to support group interaction, movement, and sensory engagement. These environments are critical for facilitating peer interactions, cooperative play, and kinesthetic learning.

In contrast, the virtual environment reflects the growing integration of digital learning platforms, especially in the post-pandemic era. This includes gamified educational apps, online collaborative tools, and immersive game simulations that replicate real-world social dynamics in a controlled setting. Virtual spaces enable differentiated instruction, provide inclusive access to learning, and allow for the integration of technology-driven feedback systems.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to identify and categorize the components of a game-based social skills curriculum appropriate for the upper elementary education level. Based on the synthesis of 218 qualified studies published between 2015 and 2025, the research employed Klein's curriculum model to extract seven core elements: objectives, content, teaching and learning strategies, instructional activities, resources and tools, evaluation, and learning environment. Each of these elements was further deconstructed into main components, subcomponents, and microcomponents to construct a comprehensive and developmentally appropriate curriculum framework.

The objectives component revealed that the curriculum must target a range of developmental domains, including individual skills (self-awareness, self-management), interpersonal competencies (peer relationships, classroom behavior), and higher-order cognitive abilities (decision-making, problem-solving). In addition, it encompassed broader educational goals such as emotional regulation,

innovation, employment readiness, and the development of multiple intelligences. These findings suggest that a game-based curriculum should not only address traditional social interaction but also prepare students for complex future roles.

The content component identified philosophical, psychological, and pedagogical foundations that inform the structure of curriculum materials. These included educational values, psychological readiness, social-emotional learning environments, and ontological and cultural frameworks. The goal was to ensure that learners encounter content that resonates with their lived experiences while promoting social, emotional, and ethical development.

In the teaching and learning strategies domain, the study emphasized the use of collaborative games, role-playing, and reflective tasks to enhance social participation, manage social challenges, and reinforce group cooperation. Instructional methods must be responsive to students' needs and create opportunities for authentic interaction.

The instructional activities component detailed the integration of lesson planning, supportive tools, and multidimensional learning experiences into the curriculum. It emphasized the importance of designing flexible, participatory, and learner-centered games aligned with developmental theories and emotional scaffolding.

The resources and tools domain highlighted the technological and infrastructural supports needed for effective curriculum implementation. This included the use of digital platforms, social media, and interactive technologies to facilitate game-based learning in both physical and virtual settings.

The evaluation component focused on needs assessment, behavioral outcomes, and learning challenges. It emphasized the importance of assessing educational effectiveness through both qualitative and quantitative indicators, addressing cognitive, emotional, and social growth.

Finally, the learning environment dimension underscored the significance of both physical and virtual spaces in shaping the experience of game-based learning. Effective curriculum delivery depends on safe, inclusive, and stimulating environments where students can engage with peers and content dynamically.

These findings align strongly with existing literature supporting the integration of game-based strategies into formal educational structures. For example, the emphasis on multi-dimensional objectives—ranging from personal development to employment readiness—is supported by the work of scholars who argue that play-based education is

instrumental in developing both cognitive and non-cognitive skills in children (Falcon, 2023; Mancha & Ahmad, 2016). The presence of multiple intelligences and emotional competencies in the objectives framework reflects a growing consensus in educational research that social-emotional learning must be embedded in early instruction (Nasiri, 2023; Shah Mohammadi, 2022).

The content-related findings are similarly aligned with established theory and practice. The incorporation of psychological and ontological concepts into curriculum design is supported by studies that highlight the role of internal motivation, emotional safety, and cultural identity in learning outcomes (Fani, 2018; Hanghøj et al., 2018). Kalmpourtzis (2018) emphasizes that meaningful educational games are grounded in real-life contexts and culturally responsive narratives, thereby validating the current study's attention to psychological and cultural subcomponents (Kalmpourtzis, 2018).

In terms of pedagogical strategies, the study's findings reinforce the argument that active participation through cooperative and reflective play can foster empathy, self-regulation, and social responsibility in learners (Azizi Farsan et al., 2022; Babaei et al., 2022). Research conducted by Karaman et al. (2022) demonstrates that integrating educational games into social studies lessons significantly improves students' teamwork and communication skills (Karaman et al., 2022). Similarly, Mizani et al. (2021) confirm the effectiveness of entertainment-based learning in increasing engagement and social development in primary school settings (Mizani et al., 2021).

Instructional activities that promote structured planning, emotional responsiveness, and multiple learning modalities also echo the findings of prior work. For instance, the integration of collaborative and individualized tasks aligns with the design model proposed by Mahdavi Nasab et al. (2021), which promotes experiential and flexible learning through games (Mahdavi Nasab et al., 2021). Moreover, the importance of foundational learning concepts and differentiated tools has been highlighted in the literature as essential to supporting diverse learners (Khaksar et al., 2021).

In regard to resources and tools, the inclusion of modern infrastructure and virtual platforms confirms the observations made in previous research about the centrality of technology in game-based education. Hill et al. (2021) and Johannes (2024) both emphasize that digital games can significantly increase accessibility, engagement, and social competence among learners, especially when integrated into

well-designed learning management systems (Hill et al., 2021; Johannes, 2024). Social media, too, has been acknowledged as a valuable tool for fostering communication and collaboration, especially in hybrid and remote learning environments (Nasiri, 2023).

The evaluation framework proposed in this study also finds robust support in the literature. Evaluation through behavioral and emotional indicators, such as motivation, cooperation, and empathy, has been widely adopted in game-based learning assessments (Fathi Rezaei et al., 2020; Saadatmand & Gholampour, 2020). Studies by Fatourehchi (2024) and Falcon (2023) confirm that both qualitative and quantitative evaluations are necessary for capturing the complex learning processes involved in social-emotional growth (Falcon, 2023; Fatourehchi, 2024).

The role of the learning environment, as identified in this study, is also consistent with findings from Arga et al. (2020), who demonstrated that the use of traditional games in open or flexible spaces enhances students' ability to collaborate, express themselves, and navigate social contexts (Arga et al., 2020). Similarly, the contribution of virtual spaces to inclusive education is documented in the work of Hosseinzadeh et al. (2022), who argue that digital platforms support social integration and communication skills among children with autism (Hosseinzadeh et al., 2022).

Together, these alignments with existing literature confirm the validity and applicability of the curriculum model proposed in this study. By synthesizing diverse theoretical and empirical insights into a unified framework, the study provides a practical, evidence-based foundation for designing and implementing a game-based social skills curriculum that is both developmentally and pedagogically sound.

Despite its comprehensive approach, the study has several limitations. First, although the synthesis included a substantial number of sources, it may not fully represent all relevant studies published during the designated period, particularly those in non-English and non-Persian languages. Second, the methodology relied heavily on secondary data, which means the results depend on the accuracy, scope, and biases of previously published studies. Third, the proposed curriculum model has not yet been implemented or tested in real classroom settings, limiting the ability to assess its practical effectiveness and adaptability across diverse educational contexts.

Future research should aim to empirically test the proposed curriculum model through pilot programs in

various educational settings. Longitudinal studies could examine the long-term impact of game-based social skills instruction on students' emotional development, academic performance, and behavioral adjustment. Additionally, research can explore the differential effects of specific game types (e.g., cooperative vs. competitive, digital vs. physical) on diverse student populations, including those with special educational needs. It would also be valuable to develop culturally localized versions of the model to ensure responsiveness to different socio-educational contexts.

Practitioners implementing this curriculum should prioritize flexibility, allowing for adaptation based on student needs, classroom dynamics, and available resources. Teachers should receive targeted professional development on educational game design, classroom facilitation during play, and strategies for inclusive participation. Collaboration between curriculum developers, educational technologists, and mental health professionals is essential to ensure that the games are not only pedagogically effective but also emotionally safe and developmentally appropriate. Schools should invest in infrastructure and materials that support diverse play environments—both physical and digital—and institutional policies should encourage the integration of structured play into daily instruction as a core part of holistic education.

Authors' Contributions

This article is derived from the first author's doctoral dissertation. All authors significantly contributed to this study.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance of the research before the start of the interview and participated in the research with informed consent.

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