

# The effectiveness of the RESPECT training model as a counseling intervention for enhancing college students' social skills

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### Abstract

College students' social skills have declined significantly in the digital era, affecting their ability to communicate, build interpersonal relationships, and meet academic and career demands. A preliminary survey of 518 students at IKIP Siliwangi indicated that social skills remained at a moderate level, with social facilitation, social problem-solving, and communication identified as priority areas for development. However, existing interventions lack contextual relevance and have yet to systematically integrate experiential simulation with structured reflective processes. This study therefore examined the effectiveness of RESPECT Training a reflection and simulation-based counseling intervention in developing college students' social skills. A mixed-methods approach with an embedded experimental design was employed, involving 40 third-semester students with low or very low social skills assigned to an experimental group ( $n = 20$ ) and a control group ( $n = 20$ ). Data were collected using a validated Social Skills Scale (101 items;  $\alpha = .94$ ) and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Given a non-normal data distribution (Shapiro–Wilk:  $W = 0.91$ ,  $p = .03$ ), quantitative data were analyzed using the Mann–Whitney U test, while qualitative data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Results showed that RESPECT Training significantly improved social skills in the experimental group ( $p = .02$ ;  $d = 0.75$ , moderate effect), whereas the control group showed no significant change ( $p = .18$ ;  $d = 0.21$ ). Significant gains were observed across all six social skill dimensions ( $p < .05$ ). IPA identified four experiential themes emerging reflective awareness, expanding social self-efficacy, adaptive emotional regulation, and deepening empathic engagement which converged with and explained the quantitative findings. These findings suggest that RESPECT Training represents an effective simulation-based, reflective counseling intervention for enhancing college students' social skills and contributes to advancing guidance and counseling practices in higher education within Indonesia's collectivist cultural context.

## Introduction

Social skills constitute a fundamental set of competencies that enable individuals to communicate effectively, build meaningful interpersonal relationships, and adapt to diverse social environments. In higher education, these competencies are closely linked to academic achievement, psychological well-being, and long-term career readiness (Gresham & Elliott, 2008). However, the rapid proliferation of digital technology has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of social interaction among college students, creating a paradox in which increasing technological connectivity is accompanied by declining direct interpersonal engagement. Students increasingly prefer digital-mediated communication over face-to-face interaction, resulting in growing social awkwardness and reduced competence in authentic social contexts (Liu & Lin, 2024).

Empirical evidence consistently documents the declining quality of social-emotional skills among college students in the digital era. Research has demonstrated that excessive online social interaction is associated with poorer interpersonal communication skills and reduced empathy (Xie et al., 2024). A large-scale study of first-year college students found significant declines in social-emotional competencies following periods of digitally mediated learning, with students reporting increased loneliness and emotional distance from peers despite heightened online connectivity (Cerutti et al., 2024). In the Indonesian higher education context specifically, similar patterns are evident: students frequently struggle with effective communication, low participation in academic discussions, and interpersonal conflict that cannot be resolved through direct dialogue. A preliminary survey of 518 students at IKIP Siliwangi confirmed that social skills remained at a moderate level overall, with social facilitation, social problem-solving, and communication identified as the dimensions most in need of development.

The consequences of social skills deficits among college students are wide-ranging and serious. Students with low social skills face heightened risk of social anxiety, depression, academic disengagement, and withdrawal from campus life (Nader Pilehroud et al., 2021; Alsubaie, 2023). Beyond individual well-being, these deficits have structural implications: employers consistently identify social competencies including communication, teamwork, conflict resolution, and emotional intelligence among the most critical attributes for graduate employability (Nugroho et al., 2024). In teacher education institutions such as IKIP Siliwangi, where graduates are expected to model and nurture social-emotional development in future learners, the stakes are particularly high. The failure to develop adequate social skills during the college years not only impairs personal development but risks producing educators who are ill-equipped to build the relational foundations essential for effective teaching.

Various interventions have been designed to address social skills deficits in higher education, including social skills training (SST), group counseling, humanistic approaches, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), and psychoeducation programs (Affouneh et al., 2021; Bortolatto et al., 2022). While these approaches have demonstrated value in specific contexts, a comprehensive analysis of existing models reveals several persistent limitations. Most interventions adopt a deficit-based approach, diagnosing weaknesses and applying standardized remediation without accounting for individual differences in learning styles, background, and social needs (Dunn et al., 2020). Many programs are also of limited duration, insufficient for the deep internalization of social behaviors required for sustainable change. Critically, the majority of conventional approaches fail to ensure transfer of learned skills to authentic social contexts, creating a persistent gap between structured training environments and the complexity of real-life social situations (Baker, 2013; Bellack et al., 2004). Furthermore, existing interventions tend to treat reflection as incidental rather than as a systematic mechanism for processing and consolidating experiential learning.

A significant gap exists in the literature regarding interventions that systematically integrate reflective processes with experiential simulation for the purpose of developing social

skills in higher education. Simulation-based learning has been recognized as an effective approach across multiple professional education fields including social work, nursing, and business because it provides controlled yet authentic practice environments that reduce anxiety and build practical competence (Jefferies, 2024; Sheikh et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2021). Similarly, reflective learning offers a mechanism through which individuals critically evaluate their experiences, derive meaning from social interactions, and internalize adaptive behavioral strategies (Schön, 1983; Kolb, 2014). Despite the theoretical complementarity of these two approaches, studies that systematically combine structured reflection and simulation within a unified training model for college students' social skills remain scarce, particularly in the Indonesian higher education context. This gap is both methodological and practical: existing models neither operationalize the integration of reflection and simulation across all phases of the learning cycle, nor provide empirically validated evidence of their combined effectiveness.

To address this gap, RESPECT Training was developed as a reflective simulation-based training model that integrates seven core elements: Reflection, Experience, Sharing, Participation, Evaluation, Collaboration, and Transformation. Unlike conventional SST models, which may incorporate either experiential activities or reflective exercises in isolation, RESPECT Training embeds structured reflection within each phase of the experiential learning cycle, enabling participants to interpret, evaluate, and translate social experiences into adaptive behavioral change. This model is theoretically grounded in experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2014) and reflective practice (Schön, 1983), and is designed to be contextually responsive to the social and developmental needs of Indonesian college students in the emerging adulthood stage.

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of RESPECT Training in developing college students' social skills. Specifically, the study investigates whether RESPECT Training significantly improves students' social skills compared to a control group (Hypothesis 1), and whether significant improvements occur across all dimensions of social skills following the intervention (Hypothesis 2). The findings are expected to contribute empirical evidence for the development of guidance and counseling practices in higher education, and to offer a replicable, theoretically grounded training model for enhancing the social competence of college students in the digital era.

## Methods

### Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach using an embedded experimental design to examine the effectiveness of RESPECT Training in developing college students' social skills. This design enables the integration of quantitative and qualitative data within a single study while prioritizing one type as the primary source of evidence (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The mixed-methods approach was selected due to the multidimensional nature of social skills, which encompass cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects that cannot be adequately captured by a single-method design alone (Johnson et al., 2007).

The quantitative component served as the primary strand and adopted a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design (Campbell & Stanley, 2015). This approach enabled comparison between an experimental group receiving the RESPECT Training intervention and a control group without treatment, allowing assessment of the training's causal effects. Quantitative data were collected through pretest and posttest measurements using a validated social skills scale.

The qualitative component was embedded within the experimental framework as a secondary strand to support and deepen the interpretation of quantitative findings (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participatory observation during simulation sessions, and analysis of students' reflective

journals. This integration provided a more comprehensive evaluation of both the effectiveness and the experiential processes underlying the RESPECT Training.

### Participants

An initial screening survey was conducted involving 518 undergraduate students from the class of 2024 at IKIP Siliwangi, selected from a population of 1,168 students using one-stage cluster sampling. Fourteen classes were randomly selected across seven study programs: Community Education, English Language Education, Indonesian Language and Literature Education, Mathematics Education, Early Childhood Teacher Education, Primary School Teacher Education, and Guidance and Counseling. Using the Slovin formula ( $e = 0.05$ ), the minimum required sample was 298 students; the achieved sample of 518 exceeded this threshold, ensuring adequate statistical power.

Based on the screening results, students classified as having low or very low social skills were deemed eligible for participation in the intervention study. A total of 40 students met the inclusion criteria and were subsequently assigned to either the experimental group ( $n = 20$ ) or the control group ( $n = 20$ ). The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) enrollment in the third semester, (2) social skills scores categorized as low or very low based on the screening assessment, and (3) willingness to voluntarily participate in all training sessions. Participants who did not complete all phases of the intervention or the post-test assessment were excluded from the final analysis.

The decision to target third-semester students was based on prior research indicating that first-year undergraduates undergo significant social adjustment transitions that can affect the development of social skills (Arnett, 2000; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). All participants provided written informed consent prior to data collection, and the study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical approval. Key demographic characteristics of both groups are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Category	Experimental (n = 20)	Control (n = 20)	Total (n = 40)
Sex	Female	15 (75.0%)	9 (45.0%)	24 (60.0%)
	Male	5 (25.0%)	11 (55.0%)	16 (40.0%)
Age	18 years	8 (40.0%)	7 (35.0%)	15 (37.5%)
	19 years	8 (40.0%)	9 (45.0%)	17 (42.5%)
	20 years	4 (20.0%)	4 (20.0%)	8 (20.0%)
Study Program	BK (Guidance & Counseling)	8 (40.0%)	6 (30.0%)	14 (35.0%)
	PGSD (Primary Education)	5 (25.0%)	6 (30.0%)	11 (27.5%)
	PBSI (Indonesian Language)	3 (15.0%)	3 (15.0%)	6 (15.0%)
	PBI (English Language)	1 (5.0%)	2 (10.0%)	3 (7.5%)
	P.MAT (Mathematics)	1 (5.0%)	2 (10.0%)	3 (7.5%)
	PENMAS (Community Edu.)	1 (5.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)

Variable	Category	Experimental (n = 20)	Control (n = 20)	Total (n = 40)
	PAUD (Early Childhood Teacher Education)	1 (5.0%)	1 (5.0%)	2 (5.0%)

## Instruments

Data were collected using two instruments: a Social Skills Scale and semi-structured in-depth interview guidelines. Both instruments were selected for their relevance to the research objectives and adapted to fit the Indonesian higher education context.

The Social Skills Scale was developed based on Wu's (2008) theoretical framework of social skills, which conceptualizes social skills as learnable and context-specific abilities encompassing six core dimensions: (1) communication, (2) interpersonal relationships, (3) self-management, (4) social problem-solving, (5) emotional skills, and (6) social facilitation. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), with reverse scoring applied to negatively worded items. Total scores were computed by summing all valid items, with higher scores reflecting greater social skills proficiency.

The initial instrument comprised 204 items across the six dimensions. Following two iterative rounds of validity and reliability testing using Rasch Model analysis, a final pool of 101 items was retained. In the first iteration, four items were removed due to misfit (items 115, 49, 1, and 13 failed to meet MNSQ, ZSTD, and Pt-Mean Correlation criteria simultaneously). A subsequent Differential Item Functioning (DIF) analysis by gender identified 99 additional biased items, reducing the pool to 101 items. In the second iteration, all remaining 101 items demonstrated satisfactory fit. The final instrument showed excellent psychometric properties: Cronbach's alpha = .94, person reliability = .93, and item reliability = .99. The instrument covered six dimensions and 47 indicators, with a total of 101 statements.

Semi-structured in-depth interview guidelines were developed to explore participants' subjective experiences during the RESPECT Training. The guidelines covered six thematic areas corresponding to the social skills dimensions: communication, interpersonal relationships, self-management, social problem-solving, emotional skills, and social facilitation. Each area included both pre-intervention and post-intervention questions to capture perceived changes. Example pre-intervention questions included: "How do you typically communicate with others in academic settings?" and "What challenges do you face when interacting with peers?" Example post-intervention questions included: "What changes have you noticed in your communication after the training?" and "Which training technique was most beneficial for your social interactions?" This flexible format allowed for deeper exploration of individual experiences and supported the interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2022).

## Procedure

The study was conducted in four sequential phases consistent with the embedded experimental design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Phase 1: Pre-experimental qualitative exploration. Semi-structured interviews and naturalistic observations of students' social interactions in academic settings were conducted prior to the intervention. This phase was used to identify priority areas for social skills development and to refine the content of the RESPECT Training to align with the specific needs of the target population.

Phase 2: Screening, baseline assessment, and group assignment. An initial social skills survey was administered to 518 students across 14 randomly selected classes. Students scoring

in the low or very low categories were identified. Those who met all inclusion criteria and provided informed consent were assigned to the experimental ( $n = 20$ ) or control group ( $n = 20$ ). A pretest using the validated Social Skills Scale was administered to both groups prior to the intervention.

**Phase 3: Intervention delivery.** The experimental group received RESPECT Training across nine structured sessions, each lasting approximately 50 minutes and facilitated by trained lecturers from the Guidance and Counseling Department. Facilitators received preparatory training across two sessions covering the theoretical foundations of reflective training, the six social skills dimensions, and the eight-step reflective learning sequence. The training addressed six domains of social skills through thematic modules: social facilitation (two sessions), social problem-solving (two sessions), communication (two sessions), self-management (one session), emotional intelligence (one session), and interpersonal relationships (one session).

Each training session followed a four-phase reflective learning cycle: (1) Preparation and Reflective Orientation introducing knowing-in-action concepts and building self-awareness (10 minutes); (2) Reflection-in-Action practicing “thinking on feet” through guided experimentation and simulation (15 minutes); (3) Reflection-on-Action implementing systematic reflective frameworks and reflective journaling (15 minutes); and (4) Integration and Sustained Development engaging in collaborative peer reflection and critical analysis (10 minutes).

Techniques employed included social simulation, role-playing, video recording with self-analysis, reflective journaling (using a structured framework: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan), peer learning, and peer feedback. The control group did not receive any structured intervention during the study period. To support intervention fidelity, all sessions were delivered using standardized training modules and facilitator guides.

**Phase 4: Post-experimental data collection and integration.** Upon completion of the training, a posttest was administered to both groups using the same Social Skills Scale. Post-intervention interviews were conducted with experimental group participants to explore their reflective experiences, perceived changes, and learning outcomes. Observational data and reflective journals collected throughout the intervention were also analyzed at this stage. Quantitative and qualitative data were subsequently integrated at the interpretation stage to provide a comprehensive account of the training's effectiveness.

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative techniques appropriate to the embedded mixed-methods design. All analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 26) for quantitative data and manual thematic procedures for qualitative data.

Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize the distribution of social skills scores in both groups at pretest and posttest, including means, standard deviations, and score ranges. Prior to inferential analysis, the assumption of normality was evaluated using the Shapiro–Wilk test, which is recommended for small sample sizes (Razali & Wah, 2011). The results indicated that the data were not normally distributed in both groups ( $W = 0.91$ ,  $p = .03$ ), thereby justifying the use of non-parametric statistical methods.

Group differences in social skills outcomes were examined using the Mann–Whitney U test, both at the overall scale level and across individual dimensions. This test is appropriate for comparing two independent groups when the data are non-normally distributed or measured on ordinal or non-interval scales (Field, 2018). Statistical significance was determined at  $p < .05$  based on the Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) criterion.

Effect size was calculated using Cohen's  $d$  based on the standardized mean difference between pretest and posttest scores, applying the formula  $D = (M_1 - M_2) / S_p$ , where  $M_1$  is the posttest mean,  $M_2$  is the pretest mean, and  $S_p$  is the pooled standard deviation. Effect sizes

were interpreted using the following criteria: 0–0.20 (weak effect), 0.21–0.50 (small effect), 0.51–1.00 (moderate effect), and > 1.00 (large effect) (Cohen, 1988; Kraft, 2020).

Qualitative data from interviews, observational notes, and reflective journals were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2022). IPA was selected for its focus on understanding how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences, which aligned with the study's aim to explore participants' subjective engagement with the training. The analysis proceeded through six stages: (1) verbatim transcription and data preparation; (2) repeated reading and initial noting; (3) line-by-line coding to identify experiential units of meaning; (4) development of emergent themes; (5) cross-participant analysis to identify convergent and divergent patterns; and (6) construction of an interpretative narrative integrating key themes with supporting participant quotations. To ensure rigour and trustworthiness, member checking and peer debriefing were employed throughout the analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated at the interpretation stage following the embedded design framework (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Qualitative themes were used to explain, extend, and contextualize the quantitative results, providing a comprehensive understanding of both the statistical significance and the experiential mechanisms of RESPECT Training.

## Results

An initial survey involving 518 undergraduate students at IKIP Siliwangi identified that the majority of students (44.02%) fell in the moderate category of social skills (mean = 350.31), while 27.98% were categorized as low or very low. Based on these screening results, 40 students who met the inclusion criteria specifically those with low or very low social skills scores were selected and assigned to either the experimental group ( $n = 20$ ) or the control group ( $n = 20$ ). Pretest scores indicated comparable initial conditions between both groups, with the experimental group scoring between 279 and 333 and the control group scoring between 279 and 325.

Across the six dimensions assessed at screening, interpersonal relationships recorded the highest mean score (77.52), while social facilitation registered the lowest (30.53). The four remaining dimensions emotional skills (70.87), self-management (69.98), communication (53.10), and social problem-solving (48.30) each fell within the moderate range. Distributions by sex indicated that female students (mean = 352.05) scored slightly higher than male students (mean = 343.06), with both groups remaining within the moderate category. Variation by study program and domicile was also observed, yet all subgroups remained in the moderate range, suggesting that differences in field of study and geographic background may modestly influence social skill profiles without producing categorical disparities.

Hypothesis 1: Overall Effectiveness of RESPECT Training. The Mann–Whitney U test was applied to compare the difference between pretest and posttest scores across the experimental and control groups. Results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Effectiveness of RESPECT Training in Developing Students' Social Skills

Group	<i>Pretest</i>	<i>Posttest</i>	<i>Effect Size</i>	Category	<i>p-value</i>	Significance
Experimental	6.268	6.560	0.75	Moderate effect	0.02	Significant
Control	6.059	6.116	0.21	Small effect	0.18	Not significant

The experimental group demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in social skills following the RESPECT Training ( $p = .02$ ), with a moderate effect size ( $d = 0.75$ ). Posttest scores in the experimental group ranged from 289 to 356, compared to a pretest range

of 279 to 333. Individual-level gains varied from 8 to 24 score points, with the greatest improvement observed for one participant (24 points) and the smallest for three participants (8 points each). The control group showed a slight, non-significant increase ( $p = .18$ ) with a small effect size ( $d = 0.21$ ), with posttest scores ranging from 270 to 331. Some participants in the control group showed marginal score decreases, indicating the absence of systematic improvement in the untreated condition.

Hypothesis 2: Dimension-Level Improvements. To examine whether improvements occurred across all dimensions of social skills in the experimental group, Mann–Whitney U tests were conducted separately for each of the six dimensions. Results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Dimension-Level Effectiveness of RESPECT Training

Dimension	Pretest	Posttest	<i>p</i>	Significance
Communication	980	1,121	.018	Significant
Interpersonal Relationships	1,395	1,554	.010	Significant
Self-Management	1,252	1,378	.010	Significant
Social Problem-Solving	862	989	.019	Significant
Emotional Skills	1,260	1,420	.010	Significant
Social Facilitation	519	628	.020	Significant

Statistically significant improvements were observed across all six dimensions of social skills in the experimental group (all  $p < .05$ ). The largest absolute gains were recorded for interpersonal relationships ( $\Delta = 159$ ) and emotional skills ( $\Delta = 160$ ), while social facilitation, which began with the lowest pretest scores, also reached significance despite its comparatively smaller absolute change ( $\Delta = 109$ ). Communication and social problem-solving likewise showed significant improvement ( $\Delta = 141$  and  $\Delta = 127$ , respectively), as did self-management ( $\Delta = 126$ ). No consistent pattern of significant improvement was observed across dimensions in the control group.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of interview transcripts, reflective journals, and observational field notes identified four overarching themes describing participants' lived experiences during RESPECT Training. Table 4 presents the themes with illustrative quotations.

**Table 4.** Summary of Qualitative Themes and Representative Quotations (IPA Findings)

Theme	Description	Representative Quotation
Emerging Reflective Awareness	Participants developed heightened self-awareness about their social patterns through structured reflection, gaining recognition of previously unnoticed behavioral habits in communication and interaction.	<i>"After listening to the recording, I realized I speak too fast when nervous; I didn't know the message I wanted to deliver became unclear."</i> (SBN)
Expanding Social Self-Efficacy	Participants reported increased confidence in their ability to engage socially, including in previously avoided contexts such as leading group discussions or expressing opinions publicly.	<i>"I realized I actually can do it; all this time I chose to stay silent but actually I just hadn't tried."</i> (FF)
Adaptive Emotional Regulation	Through reflective journaling and simulation debriefing, participants	<i>"After writing the emotion diary for a week, I realized that I'm</i>

	identified personal emotional triggers and developed more deliberate, adaptive coping strategies in social situations.	<i>usually most irritable when I'm hungry or sleep-deprived, not because the problem is so heavy.</i> (ROS)
Deepening Empathic Engagement	Participants demonstrated growing capacity for perspective-taking and responsive listening, moving from solution-giving toward emotionally attuned, validating responses in interpersonal encounters.	<i>"Instead of immediately giving solutions when a friend shared their problem, I tried listening first and said 'that must feel really heavy.' They became more open."</i> (RNA)

The first theme, Emerging Reflective Awareness, captured a shift in participants' capacity for self-observation. Prior to the intervention, most participants reported limited awareness of their communication patterns. Simulation followed by structured debriefing particularly audio recording and playback enabled participants to identify habitual but previously unnoticed behaviors, such as excessive filler words, rapid speech when anxious, and interrupting peers. The second theme, Expanding Social Self-Efficacy, reflected participants' growing confidence to engage in social roles they had previously avoided, including group leadership and public contribution. Participants with very low baseline scores particularly noted a shift from passive observation to active participation during simulation exercises.

The third theme, Adaptive Emotional Regulation, described participants' development of more deliberate strategies for recognizing and managing emotional responses. Mood journaling and peer reflection enabled participants to identify situational and physiological triggers of negative emotional states and to rehearse adaptive coping responses within the safe environment of simulation. The fourth theme, Deepening Empathic Engagement, described a qualitative shift in participants' orientation toward others from advice-giving to active listening and emotional validation. This change was most consistently observed in the interpersonal relationships and emotional skills domains and aligned with the significant quantitative gains in those dimensions.

Quantitative outcomes and qualitative themes converged to provide a coherent account of the intervention's effects. The significant gains in interpersonal relationships and emotional skills in the experimental group corresponded with the qualitative themes of deepening empathic engagement and adaptive emotional regulation. The marked improvement in social facilitation the dimension with the lowest initial scores aligned with the qualitative evidence of expanding social self-efficacy, as participants who had previously reported reluctance to assume facilitating roles in groups demonstrated observable increases in initiating and sustaining group interaction. Meta-inferential analysis of individual trajectories, integrating pretest categories, effect sizes, and behavioral change patterns, revealed that effect sizes ranged from 0.36 to 1.25 across participants. Participants categorized as very low at baseline (n = 10) showed a consistent upward trajectory, while participants initially categorized as low (n = 10) displayed stable maintenance or consolidation of gains. This pattern indicates that RESPECT Training facilitated both active skill acquisition for participants with the greatest initial deficits and reinforcement of existing competencies among those with moderate initial limitations.

## Discussion

Despite growing recognition that social skills are foundational to academic engagement and professional readiness, research on structured interventions for university-level populations remains limited, particularly in non-Western educational contexts where collectivist cultural norms shape the expression and development of interpersonal competence (Taylor et al., 2021; Tomé-Fernández et al., 2024). Prior research has documented the

prevalence of social skill deficits among undergraduates and their consequences for academic participation, collaborative learning, and psychological well-being; however, evidence-based training programs targeting this population, as well as rigorous evaluations of their effectiveness, remain scarce (Soroa et al., 2025; Elliott et al., 2025).

This gap is especially consequential in Indonesia, where the transition from secondary to higher education confronts students with institutional expectations that collectivist socialization may not fully prepare them to meet, and where the dominant academic culture has historically prioritized cognitive achievement over the development of interpersonal competence (Soerjoatmodjo, 2020; Rosmaladewi & Abduh, 2018). To address this gap, the present study developed and tested RESPECT Training, a simulation-based, reflective counseling intervention for Indonesian undergraduates at IKIP Siliwangi. Using a mixed-methods design integrating pre–posttest measures with interpretative phenomenological analysis, the findings demonstrate that RESPECT Training produced statistically significant, moderate effect-size improvements in overall social skills across all six assessed dimensions, while qualitative results revealed coherent mechanisms underlying these improvements.

The central finding of this study is that RESPECT Training produced a statistically significant improvement in the social skills of participants who initially scored in the low or very low range ( $p = .02$ ,  $d = 0.75$ ), while the untreated control group showed only a marginal, non-significant change ( $p = .18$ ,  $d = 0.21$ ). The effect size obtained for the experimental group is situated above commonly reported benchmarks in the social skill intervention literature. Beelmann and Lösel's (2006) meta-analysis of social skill training for youth populations reported mean effect sizes of  $d = 0.39$  at post-intervention and  $d = 0.28$  at follow-up, while Durlak et al.'s (2011) large-scale review of school-based social-emotional learning programs yielded an average effect size of  $d = 0.57$ . The present  $d = 0.75$  exceeds these figures and is attributable in part to the targeted composition of the sample participants were selected precisely because of initially low baseline scores and to the integration of simulation with structured reflection, a combination that recent meta-analytic work indicates produces larger and more durable gains than either component alone (Chen et al., 2021; Lewis & White, 2024). The negligible and statistically non-significant change in the control group rules out maturational confounds, confirming that improvements in the experimental group were intervention-specific rather than artifacts of repeated measurement or natural development.

The individual variability in effect sizes ( $d = 0.36$  to  $1.25$ ) further qualifies this overall finding in a theoretically informative way. Participants categorized as very low at baseline showed the most consistent upward trajectories, while those initially categorized as low displayed more moderate but stable gains. This pattern is consistent with floor-effect dynamics and aligns with social cognitive theory's prediction that individuals with the greatest initial deficits and therefore the highest potential for observational learning and behavioral rehearsal benefit most from structured experiential practice (Bandura, 2001). It also suggests that program design was appropriate for high-need participants without being insufficient for those with somewhat higher initial competence, an important practical consideration for implementation at scale. Interpreting these effect sizes in light of Lovakov and Agadullina's (2021) empirically derived benchmarks for social psychology research (small:  $d = 0.15$ ; medium:  $d = 0.36$ ; large:  $d = 0.65$ ), the present study's average effect size falls in the large range, reinforcing the practical significance of the observed improvements.

Significant improvements across all six dimensions communication, interpersonal relationships, self-management, social problem-solving, emotional skills, and social facilitation demonstrate that RESPECT Training produced a broad-spectrum rather than domain-specific effect. This breadth is theoretically meaningful because social skill dimensions are not functionally independent. Goleman's (2006) model of social intelligence holds that effective interpersonal functioning depends on the integration of emotional recognition, empathic responsiveness, and communicative flexibility, such that growth in one

domain tends to facilitate reinforcement in adjacent domains. The present data are consistent with this view: the two dimensions with the largest absolute gains emotional skills ( $\Delta = 160$ ) and interpersonal relationships ( $\Delta = 159$ ) are those most directly linked in the literature to the empathy and perspective-taking capacities that simulation-based debriefing is theorized to develop (Mayor Silva et al., 2023; Kanske et al., 2015). Rather than targeting isolated behavioral repertoires, RESPECT Training appears to have engaged an integrated developmental process.

The significant improvement in social facilitation is especially noteworthy, given that this dimension had the lowest pretest scores across the entire screening sample and the lowest absolute pretest total in the experimental group. Social facilitation defined as the capacity to create conducive interpersonal environments and to initiate and sustain constructive group interaction represents a higher-order competence that integrates communication, emotional regulation, and leadership readiness (Owens & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009; Shek & Leung, 2016). Its improvement from the lowest starting point suggests that RESPECT Training successfully scaffolded the development of a competency that was largely absent rather than merely reinforcing existing strengths. This finding directly addresses a structural weakness in the social skill profile of Indonesian undergraduates identified in the broader survey data: the cultural emphasis on interpersonal harmony and collectivist values (Chen & Huang, 2019; Liem, 2016) appears to support relational competencies while leaving initiative-dependent capacities precisely those required for leadership and collaborative facilitation underdeveloped. The program's success in this dimension is therefore not only statistically significant but carries substantial practical relevance for graduate employability.

Communication and social problem-solving improvements ( $\Delta = 141$  and  $\Delta = 127$ , respectively) are particularly salient in light of the baseline profile, where communication showed among the highest proportions of students in the low category. Communication deficits in this population are consistent with documented patterns in Indonesian higher education, where academic selection systems prioritize cognitive achievement without explicit attention to communicative competence, and where social anxiety and fear of negative evaluation tend to suppress voluntary participation (Ibna Seraj & Habil, 2021; Dauber & Spencer-Oatey, 2023). RESPECT Training's simulation component requiring participants to practice varied communicative roles and receive multisource feedback including audio and video recordings directly targeted this avoidance cycle by providing low-risk, high-repetition exposure to communicative situations. This mechanism is consistent with Bandura's (2001) account of efficacy-building through enactive mastery experiences and aligns with recent empirical evidence that behaviorally oriented communication training improves self-assessment accuracy and peer-rated performance (Engerer et al., 2016; Amir et al., 2024).

The four qualitative themes identified through interpretative phenomenological analysis Emerging Reflective Awareness, Expanding Social Self-Efficacy, Adaptive Emotional Regulation, and Deepening Empathic Engagement provide a coherent account of the psychological processes through which quantitative gains were produced. Each theme maps onto specific patterns in the dimension-level data, a convergence that strengthens confidence in the causal interpretation of the quantitative effects and illuminates the mechanisms that other training designs might seek to replicate or modify.

Emerging Reflective Awareness, characterized by participants' recognition of previously unnoticed behavioral habits through structured debriefing and recording playback, corresponds to the theoretical mechanism Schön (1987) termed reflection-on-action. The use of audio recordings proved particularly generative: participants reported discovering habitual patterns rapid speech when anxious, excessive filler words, interrupting peers that were invisible from inside the interaction itself. This mechanism aligns with research showing that video- and audio-based reflection significantly enhances behavioral self-assessment accuracy and promotes targeted behavioral adjustment (Boehnlein et al., 2024; Carter & Jones, 2023),

and it provides a plausible explanation for communication dimension gains that quantitative scores alone cannot fully capture. Recent work by Zhou et al. (2025) similarly confirms that reflective practice is a foundational element supporting student learning and professional development in higher education settings.

Expanding Social Self-Efficacy addresses a well-documented barrier in this population: the tendency to remain passive in contexts demanding social initiative, particularly among students with very low baseline scores. Participants described a qualitative shift from passive observation to active engagement, reframing prior silence as untested avoidance rather than inability. This phenomenology closely mirrors Bandura's (2001) account of the relationship between self-efficacy and behavioral engagement, in which enactive mastery within a safe environment builds the belief that competent performance is achievable, which in turn motivates subsequent approach behavior. The quantitative gain in social facilitation the dimension most dependent on individual initiative is consistent with this mechanism and would not be predicted by a model in which training effects operate solely through knowledge transfer.

Adaptive Emotional Regulation, described by participants as the identification of situational and physiological triggers through mood journaling and reflective exercises, maps directly onto the significant gain in emotional skills and provides a plausible mechanism for the associated improvement in self-management. Participants' accounts indicate that emotional regulation was improved not merely at a declarative level but through the development of functional coping strategies first applied in simulated situations and subsequently generalized to everyday interactions. This pattern is consistent with de Sousa and da Costa Padovani's (2021) finding that structured emotional regulation training produces substantial improvements in overall social competence, and with Sánchez-Álvarez et al.'s (2020) meta-analytic evidence linking regulation capacity to academic performance and subjective well-being. Importantly, López-Sánchez et al. (2024) found that academic coaching interventions in health education contexts produced significant improvements in self-perceived empathy and emotional intelligence, corroborating the cross-domain relevance of emotionally oriented training components.

Deepening Empathic Engagement the shift from advice-giving toward active listening and emotional validation is the qualitative theme most directly corresponding to the interpersonal relationships and emotional skills gains, the two dimensions with the largest absolute improvements. Participants described a reorientation from solution-focused responding to genuine perspective-taking, a progression that reflects the developmental trajectory from cognitive to more sophisticated affective empathy described by Davis (1994) and elaborated in more recent work by Spinrad and Eisenberg (2019). This qualitative change is difficult to detect through scale scores alone and represents an important contribution of the mixed-methods design: it reveals that score improvements reflect genuine changes in interpersonal orientation rather than surface-level behavioral compliance with training expectations. The finding also speaks directly to the empathy-expression gap identified in the broader survey phase—the discrepancy between students' empathic intentions and their capacity to enact those intentions in social encounters (Fernández-Martín et al., 2024; Kanske et al., 2015) and suggests that structured simulation provides the relational context in which that gap can be narrowed.

Interpreting these findings requires attention to the Indonesian cultural context in which the study was conducted. The baseline social skill profile with interpersonal relationships as the highest-scoring dimension and social facilitation as the lowest reflects a pattern consistent with collectivist cultural orientations (Liem, 2016; French et al., 2006): strong relational competencies embedded in communal norms of harmony and gotong royong coexist with limited development of the individual initiative that social facilitation requires. The fact that RESPECT Training produced significant gains in social facilitation a dimension tied to

individual agency and leadership suggests that simulation-based reflective practice can cultivate competencies that cultural contexts do not naturally reinforce, without requiring participants to abandon their cultural identity or relational orientation. This finding extends prior research by demonstrating that frameworks originally developed in Western professional training contexts (Schön, 1983; Kolb, 1984) can be productively adapted for Indonesian undergraduates when implementation is grounded in culturally familiar relational dynamics, consistent with the recommendations of Taylor et al. (2021) and Supriatna et al. (2024).

The survey data also revealed a significant challenge in academic identity formation among participants, consistent with Soerjoatmodjo's (2020) characterization of Indonesian students' academic identity as shaped by a complex and often uncertain developmental process. Gopalan et al. (2019) found that students experiencing lower institutional belonging showed diminished academic performance and mental health outcomes; the qualitative themes in this study suggest that RESPECT Training partially addressed this dynamic by creating a structured community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in which participants developed a shared social learning identity. This contextual grounding may be particularly important in Indonesia, where Sawitri and Creed's (2017) research demonstrates that family influence and collectivist values are significant determinants of students' career self-efficacy and aspirations, and where programs that engage cultural values rather than circumvent them are more likely to be sustained and scaled.

## Implications

Theoretically, this study provides empirical support for integrating Schön's (1983; 1987) reflective practice framework with Kolb's (1984; 2014) experiential learning cycle as a basis for social skill development in higher education. Prior applications of these frameworks have been predominantly confined to professional training in medicine, nursing, and social work (Jefferies, 2024; Maynard, 2021; Mayor Silva et al., 2023); the present findings extend their applicability to the broader undergraduate population in a non-Western institutional setting. The study also contributes to the growing literature on mixed-methods convergence in educational intervention research, demonstrating that interpretative phenomenological analysis can surface the mechanisms efficacy-building, reflective awareness, empathic reorientation that quantitative outcome measures index but do not explain. This methodological contribution supports the argument that effect size alone is an insufficient basis for understanding how social skill training works, a point increasingly recognized in the intervention science literature (Farmus et al., 2023; Stukas & Cumming, 2014).

Practically, the findings suggest that counseling and student affairs practitioners in Indonesian higher education have a structured, evidence-based option for addressing social skill deficits that adversely affect academic participation, collaborative learning, and professional preparation. The six-dimension framework provides actionable diagnostic information: programs can prioritize dimensions showing the largest deficits in their target population and calibrate intervention intensity accordingly. The program's particular effectiveness for very-low-baseline participants implies that early identification and targeted intervention rather than waiting for difficulties to manifest in academic withdrawal or professional unpreparedness is a viable and potentially cost-effective institutional strategy. Integration of RESPECT Training into first-year orientation programs or elective self-development courses would represent a relatively low-cost mechanism for addressing a deficit that the survey data suggest is widespread. The emphasis on cultural responsiveness in program design also offers a transferable model for institutions in other collectivist societies seeking to adapt Western-derived social skill curricula without sacrificing contextual relevance.

## Limitations and future directions

Several limitations constrain the conclusions that may be drawn from these findings. First, the use of the same social skill scale at screening and pretest may have introduced a testing effect, potentially inflating posttest scores in both groups. Second, selection based on voluntary participation limits generalizability; students willing to engage in social skill training may differ systematically from the broader low-social-skill population most in need of intervention. Third, the absence of a follow-up measurement leaves long-term maintenance of gains unknown an important gap given that social skill programs often show posttest gains that attenuate over time (Beelmann & Lösel, 2006). Fourth, the small sample size ( $n = 40$ ) constrains statistical power for subgroup analyses and makes the individual effect size range difficult to interpret with precision. Finally, the integration of quantitative and qualitative data, while strengthening the overall design, revealed asymmetries in the depth of findings across methods: quantitative data confirmed effectiveness statistically, while qualitative data more richly captured subjective experience, and a fully integrated account of social skill change dynamics remains a goal for future inquiry. Subsequent research should employ randomized assignment, delayed follow-up assessments, larger and more diverse samples, fidelity measures, and more comprehensive mixed-methods integration protocols to build on and qualify the present findings.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that RESPECT Training a simulation-based reflective intervention can produce significant and practically meaningful improvements in the social skills of Indonesian undergraduates with initially low competence, with effects extending across all six assessed dimensions. The convergence of quantitative outcomes with qualitative accounts of reflective awareness, efficacy growth, emotional regulation, and empathic deepening strengthens confidence in the validity and scope of these effects. Findings advance understanding of how reflective and experiential mechanisms combine to develop interpersonal competence in higher education contexts, provide an empirically supported model for practitioners and institutions seeking evidence-based approaches to social skill development, and demonstrate that culturally adapted versions of established Western training frameworks can produce meaningful gains among non-Western undergraduate populations.

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## Author Contribution Statement

SF contributed to the conceptualization of the study, research design, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript writing. AH and US were responsible for supervision, validation of the research framework, and critical revision of the manuscript. IF contributed to methodological refinement, data interpretation, and final review of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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