

Beyond Teacher Burnout: Implementing Circle Time as an Adaptive Strategy for Social-Emotional Growth and Collaborative School Culture

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DOI : <http://doi.org/10.33650/al-tanzim.v10i3.13638>

Received: 12 December 2025

Revised: 12 March 2026

Accepted: 25 April 2026

Abstract:

Teachers' social and emotional competence (SEC) is a crucial factor in improving the quality of education. However, it still faces challenges such as stress, limited collaboration, and a lack of reflective practice. This study aims to analyse the implementation of Circle Time as a managerial strategy to strengthen teachers' SEC and its implications for organisational culture in madrasas. This study used a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Data analysis was conducted using an interactive model, which included collection, reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results showed that Circle Time was implemented through planning, implementation, and evaluation stages. Needs-based participatory planning increased the program's relevance, while reflective practice during the implementation stage enhanced teachers' self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and professional interaction. Evaluation through observation and self- and peer assessments supported continuous improvement. This study contributes by offering Circle Time as an adaptive strategy to strengthen teachers' SEC and build a collaborative school culture. This study implies that Circle Time can be widely applied to develop teachers' social and emotional competence, encourage reflective practice, and build a collaborative school culture.

Keywords: *Circle Time, Teacher Competence, Organizational Culture*

Abstrak:

Kompetensi sosial dan emosional guru (SEC) merupakan faktor penting dalam peningkatan kualitas pendidikan, namun masih dihadapkan pada tantangan seperti stres, keterbatasan kolaborasi, dan kurangnya praktik reflektif. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis implementasi Circle Time sebagai strategi manajerial untuk memperkuat SEC guru serta implikasinya terhadap budaya organisasi di madrasah. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan model interaktif, yang meliputi pengumpulan, reduksi, penyajian, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Circle Time diimplementasikan melalui tahap perencanaan, pelaksanaan, dan evaluasi. Perencanaan partisipatif berbasis kebutuhan meningkatkan relevansi program, sedangkan praktik reflektif pada tahap pelaksanaan meningkatkan kesadaran diri, regulasi emosi, empati, dan interaksi profesional guru. Evaluasi melalui observasi serta penilaian diri dan sejawat mendukung perbaikan berkelanjutan. Penelitian ini berkontribusi dengan menawarkan Circle Time sebagai strategi adaptif dalam memperkuat SEC guru dan membangun budaya sekolah kolaboratif. Penelitian ini memberikan implikasi bahwa Circle Time dapat

diterapkan secara luas untuk mengembangkan kompetensi sosial-emosi guru, mendorong praktik reflektif, serta membangun budaya sekolah yang kolaboratif.

Kunci: *Circle Time, Kompetensi Sosial dan Emosional, Manajemen Sekolah*

Please cite this article in APA style as:

Rochman, C., Nyoman, N. A., & Prayito, M. (2026). Beyond Teacher Burnout: Implementing Circle Time as an Adaptive Strategy for Social-Emotional Growth and Collaborative School Culture. *Al-Tanzim: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 10(2), 736-748.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of education at the primary school level is not only shaped by the curriculum and infrastructure but also by leadership, organizational culture, and teachers' social and emotional competence (SEC). As schools strive for continuous improvement, addressing teachers' emotional well-being becomes increasingly important. Research indicates that teacher well-being directly influences instructional effectiveness and student achievement (Collie, 2021; Wang & Degol, 2020). Educational institutions that nurture teachers' SEC contribute to a positive school climate, which, in turn, enhances both academic outcomes and overall teacher satisfaction (Day et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding and fostering teachers' emotional competencies is critical to improving educational quality and sustainability in schools, especially in challenging contexts such as madrasahs, where the emotional and relational aspects of teaching remain underdeveloped.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of the SEC, Indonesian madrasahs face persistent challenges, including teacher stress, emotional burnout, and limited collaboration. Teachers often struggle to manage emotions, cope with workplace pressures, and maintain effective professional relationships, which can hinder overall educational quality. This issue is compounded by a lack of structured managerial strategies to develop the SEC within madrasah contexts. While there is significant focus on student-centered Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs, teachers' emotional competence remains an underexplored area of research, particularly in the Islamic primary school setting. The challenges highlighted underscore the need for comprehensive approaches to strengthen teachers' SEC and foster a supportive, collaborative school culture.

In practice, many teachers in madrasahs continue to face emotional and professional challenges that impede their ability to engage in reflective practices, collaborate effectively, and regulate their emotions. These issues are evident in the prevalence of stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion among teachers. While madrasahs emphasize values such as empathy, responsibility, and community, these principles are not always reflected in teachers' day-to-day professional interactions. Despite the importance of emotional competence for teachers' well-being and effectiveness, many madrasah teachers lack the tools and strategies to manage their emotional landscape. This gap creates a barrier to creating a positive organizational culture and fostering meaningful teacher collaboration.

Research on leadership and emotional competence in schools has expanded in recent years, with a growing focus on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and its impact on teachers (Jennings et al., 2021; Cipriano et al., 2023). Participatory and transformational leadership approaches have been shown to improve teacher commitment, professional collaboration, and school climate (Hallinger & Wang,

2020; Leithwood et al., 2020). However, much of this research focuses on student outcomes, with limited attention given to teachers' emotional and relational development. While SEL frameworks have been widely implemented to enhance student competencies, less attention has been paid to adapting these frameworks for teacher professional development, particularly in madrasah contexts. Thus, there is a need for more focused research on strategies that develop teachers' SEC and improve school culture.

Existing literature on teacher SEC emphasizes the importance of integrating emotional competencies into professional development programs (Savina et al., 2025; Roeser et al., 2022). However, few studies have explored the use of structured managerial strategies, such as Circle Time, to strengthen SEC in Islamic educational settings. Most research has either focused on SEL for students or used general approaches without considering the unique cultural and organizational characteristics of madrasahs. Studies that do address teacher SEC in Islamic contexts have primarily been descriptive and lack a systematic, managerial approach. This research gap highlights the need for further empirical investigations into the use of participatory, reflective practices, such as Circle Time, as a managerial strategy to enhance teachers' emotional regulation, empathy, and collaboration in madrasah settings.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on Circle Time as a managerial strategy specifically designed to enhance teachers' social and emotional competence within the unique context of an Indonesian Islamic primary school. While SEL programs are commonly implemented in general education settings, their application in madrasahs remains underexplored. The integration of emotional competencies into teacher professional development in madrasah settings is a critical area that requires further research. By introducing Circle Time as a structured, participatory, reflective practice, this study aims to address a gap in the literature on effective, context-specific approaches to developing SEC among teachers in Islamic primary schools. The findings of this research could offer practical insights for improving teacher well-being and fostering a collaborative, adaptive school culture.

This study seeks to address the research problem of how Circle Time can be implemented as a managerial strategy to strengthen teachers' social and emotional competence in Indonesian Islamic primary schools. The research argues that Circle Time, when adapted as a systematic managerial practice, can provide a structured framework for teachers to engage in reflective dialogue, enhance emotional regulation, and build stronger professional relationships. By focusing on the specific context of madrasahs, this study contributes to educational management scholarship by offering a context-sensitive approach to teacher SEC development. The findings are expected to have practical implications for improving teacher well-being, instructional effectiveness, and overall school climate in madrasahs, fostering a more collaborative and reflective educational environment.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to obtain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of Circle Time in enhancing teachers' Social

and Emotional Competence (SEC) at MI Ma'arif Kalianget, Wonosobo District, Wonosobo Regency. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to explore meanings, experiences, and social processes in a natural setting rather than to test hypotheses or measure variables quantitatively. This approach enables researchers to understand phenomena holistically from participants' perspectives and through the dynamics of social interaction (Sugiyono, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Methodologically, a case study design was employed because the research examined a specific program within a bounded time and place, allowing for contextual and comprehensive exploration (Yin, 2023; Merriam & Tisdell, 2020).

The study was conducted during the first semester of the 2025/2026 academic year, spanning six months from July to December 2025, encompassing preparation, data collection, analysis, and reporting. Research participants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in Circle Time implementation and their relevance to the development of teachers' SEC. The study involved ten informants: one principal, four classroom teachers, one subject teacher, one student, one member of the school committee, one administrative staff member, and one parent, ensuring balanced representation of perspectives on the implementation of Circle Time. Purposive sampling was intended to obtain rich, in-depth, and balanced data from multiple perspectives, consistent with qualitative research principles that emphasize information richness rather than sample size (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Yin, 2023).

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument (human instrument), determining the research focus, selecting participants, collecting and assessing data quality, conducting analysis, and drawing conclusions (Sugiyono, 2022; Lincoln & Guba, 2021). To support this role, supplementary instruments were used, including in-depth interview guidelines, participatory observation sheets, and documentation review protocols, all developed in line with the research focus and the conceptual framework of social and emotional competence. In-depth interviews explored participants' experiences regarding the planning, implementation, and evaluation of Circle Time. Participatory observation was conducted across eight sessions, held once a week with a duration of 60–90 minutes per session, focusing on communication patterns, emotional expression, and participant engagement using structured observation sheets and field notes. Documentation analysis examined written and visual evidence, such as meeting minutes, schedules, and reflection reports, to strengthen data validity. These techniques were combined through methodological triangulation to enhance credibility and consistency (Sugiyono, 2022; Lincoln & Guba, 2021; Tracy, 2020). The combination of these three techniques constituted methodological triangulation aimed at enhancing the credibility and consistency of findings (Sugiyono, 2022; Lincoln & Guba, 2021; Tracy, 2020).

The data comprised both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews and direct observation of Circle Time implementation. In contrast, secondary data were derived from official school documents related to the program and the development of teachers' SEC. Data

analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, consisting of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Sugiyono, 2022). The analytical process was conducted iteratively from the outset of data collection to enable continuous reflection and refinement of the research focus. Data reduction was carried out through a systematic coding process, including open coding to identify key concepts and axial coding to organize categories and relationships. Thematic analysis was then conducted to develop and interpret patterns related to the implementation of Circle Time and the development of teachers' social and emotional competence. The results were presented in the form of thematic narratives and matrices to support data interpretation. The reduced data were then presented in descriptive narratives, thematic matrices, and direct participant quotations to strengthen interpretation. Conclusions were drawn progressively and verified through cross-checking data sources to ensure consistency and validity (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020; Yin, 2023).

Data trustworthiness was ensured through the application of four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 2021). Credibility was established through triangulation of techniques and sources, as well as member checking, which reconfirmed interview results with participants. Transferability was achieved through rich, contextual descriptions of the madrasah setting and the Circle Time implementation process. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail documenting all research procedures systematically. Confirmability was ensured by organising and preserving raw data and by maintaining reflective field notes to minimise subjective bias (Tracy, 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Using this methodological approach, the study is expected to generate credible, contextually grounded findings that contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of teachers' social and emotional competence through the Circle Time approach.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings indicate that the implementation of Circle Time at MI Ma'arif Kalianget, Wonosobo District, Wonosobo Regency, was carried out systematically through integrated stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation embedded within the madrasah's culture. The program functions not merely as an internal communication forum, but as a reflective strategy to collectively and sustainably enhance teachers' Social and Emotional Competence (SEC).

Planning Stage

At the planning stage, the principal, together with the school development team, designed Circle Time as a regular, periodic dialogical forum. Planning was undertaken through coordination meetings addressing the objectives, discussion themes, schedule, and mechanisms for teacher participation. The primary focus was to create a safe space for teachers to share experiences, express instructional challenges, and reflect on pedagogical practices.

During this stage, the principal and school development team designed Circle Time as a regular dialogical forum through coordination meetings,

determining objectives, themes, schedules, and participation. The principal emphasised that Circle Time is “not merely a meeting, but a reflective forum” to foster emotional awareness and empathy, indicating its strategic role in strengthening teachers’ social and emotional competence. Teachers also reported collaborative planning and context-based discussion themes aligned with classroom needs, reflecting a participatory and responsive process. These findings are supported by documentation, such as meeting minutes and activity agendas, which confirm that Circle Time was formally integrated into the madrasah’s professional development program.

The findings indicate that at the planning stage, Circle Time was designed as a regular dialogical forum enabling teachers to share experiences, express instructional challenges, and engage in pedagogical reflection. Coordination between the principal and the school development team ensured that objectives, discussion themes, schedules, and mechanisms for teacher participation were tailored to classroom needs, making the planning process participatory and contextually relevant. The principal emphasised that Circle Time is “not merely a meeting, but a reflective forum,” highlighting its role in enhancing teachers’ emotional awareness and empathy. Documentation, such as meeting minutes and activity agendas, confirms the formal integration of Circle Time into the professional development program, demonstrating that this strategy not only strengthens teachers’ social and emotional competence but also fosters a collaborative and responsive school culture while promoting sustained reflective practice.

Implementation Stage

Circle Time sessions were conducted in a dialogical and participatory atmosphere. Teachers sat in a circle to emphasise equality and openness in communication. Each session began with brief reflections on teaching experiences, followed by group discussions and the sharing of best practices. Observations revealed that teachers actively discussed emotional management when dealing with students, strategies for building empathy, and effective communication with colleagues and parents. The principal acted as a facilitator, guiding discussions without dominating them.

The implementation of Circle Time demonstrated significant improvements in teachers’ social and emotional competence, as reflected in both interview and observation data. Teachers reported that the circle format created a more open and supportive environment, as one teacher noted that it “feels different” and allows them to share emotional challenges in managing students, while another expressed feeling “more heard” compared to formal meetings. These experiences indicate enhanced relationship skills and a more collaborative professional climate. Furthermore, teachers reported increased self-awareness and self-management, such as greater ability to control emotions and to understand students’ backgrounds before reacting, as well as improved confidence in communicating with parents. These findings are consistent with observed changes in interaction patterns, in which previously formal, one-directional discussions evolved into open, dialogical exchanges characterised by mutual respect and active participation. Parents also confirmed these changes, noting that teachers

became more patient and communicative when discussing students' development. Overall, these findings demonstrate improvements across key SEC dimensions, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, which collectively contribute to a more reflective and collaborative madrasah culture.

During the implementation stage, Circle Time sessions were conducted in a dialogical, participatory environment, with teachers seated in a circle to emphasise equality and open communication. Each session began with brief reflections on teaching experiences, followed by group discussions and the sharing of best practices. Observations and interviews revealed that teachers actively addressed emotional management with students, fostered empathy, and communicated effectively with colleagues and parents. The principal facilitated discussions without dominating, creating a supportive and open space. Teachers reported enhanced self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, feeling "more heard" and able to share emotional challenges openly. Interaction patterns shifted from formal, one-directional exchanges to collaborative, dialogical discussions marked by mutual respect and active participation. Parents also noted that teachers became more patient and communicative. Overall, Circle Time significantly strengthened teachers' social and emotional competence, fostering a reflective, collaborative, and empathetic school culture.

Evaluation Stage

Program evaluation was conducted reflectively at the end of each Circle Time session. Teachers provided feedback regarding benefits and areas for improvement. Most teachers reported positive impacts on emotional well-being and work motivation. The program was also perceived to strengthen the madrasah's collaborative culture. However, several challenges were identified, including limited time due to dense teaching schedules and varying levels of teacher participation during the initial implementation phase.

The evaluation findings reveal that Circle Time contributes positively to strengthening teachers' social and emotional competence, although several challenges remain. Time constraints due to dense teaching schedules and the need for initial adaptation to reflective and participatory communication patterns were identified as the main inhibiting factors. Meanwhile, the success of the program was supported by strong principal leadership, an organizational culture open to innovation, support from the school committee, and a conducive working environment. Overall, Circle Time enhances not only teachers' individual emotional capacities but also the quality of professional interaction and the school climate, positioning it as a relevant collective reflective professional development strategy in the Islamic primary education context.

To avoid redundancy and present the findings systematically, the results of Circle Time implementation across the stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Research Findings on Circle Time Implementation

No	Research Focus	Interview Findings	Observation Findings	Documentation Findings	Triangulation Results
1	Planning	Principal and teachers stated that Circle Time was designed as a routine reflective forum to enhance communication and strengthen SEC. Objectives, schedules, and themes were determined through coordination meetings.	Initial planning meetings involved the principal and teachers in a participatory atmosphere.	Meeting minutes, activity agendas, and the madrasah program calendar list Circle Time as a professional development program.	Data from interviews, observations, and documents consistently indicate systematic, structured, and program-integrated planning.
2	Implementation	Teachers reported sitting in a circle, beginning with reflection and sharing best practices. They felt more open and comfortable expressing feelings and challenges.	Teachers formed a circle; discussions were dialogical; the principal acted as facilitator; interactions were equal and reflective.	Attendance lists, teacher reflection notes, and photographic documentation were available.	Consistency across data sources confirms participatory implementation supporting SEC strengthening.
3	Evaluation	Teachers reported benefits for emotional regulation, interpersonal communication, and collaboration, with suggestions for time optimization.	Sessions concluded with collective reflection and open feedback.	Evaluation reports and reflection summaries were documented.	Triangulation indicates reflective and continuous evaluation contributing to increased self-awareness, empathy, and relational skills.

Based on Table 1, Circle Time was implemented consistently across stages and supported by alignment among data sources. Triangulation demonstrates that the program was not merely administratively planned but substantively and reflectively implemented. Consistency at the planning stage reflects structural commitment, while implementation and evaluation stages reveal a transformation toward more dialogical, empathetic, and collaborative professional interactions.

These findings indicate that Circle Time functions as a collective, reflective professional development mechanism that significantly strengthens teachers' social and emotional competence. The discussion section will further analyse these findings in relation to theoretical frameworks and previous research on teacher Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) development.

Discussion

The findings of this study on the implementation of Circle Time at MI Ma'arif Kalianget align with several key concepts in the management and educational leadership literature. Specifically, the systematic planning of Circle Time, based on needs analysis and participatory coordination, reflects the principles of effective management and organizational diagnosis. Classical management theory highlights that planning should be a structured process to address organizational goals and challenges (Paozi & Timi, 2024; Terry, 2020). This approach to Circle Time planning directly addresses teachers' psychosocial needs, aligning with research emphasising the importance of needs-based, context-specific planning in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs (Oliveira et al., 2021; Collie et al., 2025). However, this study extends existing literature by demonstrating how such planning not only addresses immediate needs but also strategically enhances teachers' emotional regulation, empathy, and collaboration. This suggests that participatory planning – where teachers actively contribute to setting themes and schedules – can significantly increase engagement, as opposed to top-down approaches, supporting findings from previous studies (Ahmad & Ismail, 2024; Lin et al., 2025).

The participatory nature of Circle Time planning also emphasises the concept of shared leadership, which is increasingly highlighted in modern management theory as a key driver of organisational commitment and professional growth (Kasperski et al., 2025; Hövel et al., 2025). This approach, in which teachers take ownership of the program's design, enhances collective commitment to the program and internalizes reflective practices (Oliveira et al., 2021; Anis et al., 2024). The involvement of teachers in planning aligns with the literature, which shows that shared leadership and participatory decision-making enhance the acceptance and effectiveness of professional development programs (Kasperski et al., 2025). However, this study makes a unique contribution by positioning teachers as active agents in developing their own social and emotional competence, challenging traditional roles in which teachers are often seen as mere implementers of SEL for students (Oktriani et al., 2025; Nina Oktarina & Kurniawati, 2025).

The implementation of Circle Time also aligns with the actuating function in management theory, which involves directing and motivating organizational members to achieve their goals (Terry, 2020; Nurhikmah, 2024). In this case, the participatory and dialogical approach to Circle Time aligns with transformational leadership practices that emphasize emotional support and the development of teachers' social-emotional competence (Collie, 2021; Dreer, 2023; Kurrle, 2025). The findings of this study suggest that dialogic emotional reflection practices significantly enhance teachers' self-awareness, communication, and relationship skills, consistent with global research indicating that such practices improve emotional regulation and interpersonal interactions in educational settings (Collie et al., 2025; Lin et al., 2025). Notably, teachers in this study reported feeling more open and comfortable expressing their emotional challenges and receiving

stronger peer support than in formal meetings. These findings reflect the benefits of participatory leadership in creating a more supportive and collaborative professional climate, a shift from traditional hierarchical structures.

Additionally, the Voice-Choice-Ownership (VCO) strategy implemented during Circle Time highlights the importance of teacher autonomy and involvement in SEL development. This participatory approach has been shown to strengthen psychological safety within educational organizations, promoting emotional engagement and professional commitment (Kasperski et al., 2025; Anis et al., 2024). The findings from this study align with existing research suggesting that when teachers are given a voice in decision-making, their emotional engagement with the program increases, leading to better outcomes (Hövel et al., 2025; Collie et al., 2025). This participatory nature, coupled with reflective dialogue, sets this study apart from traditional teacher-training programs, which tend to be more formal and top-down. The results indicate that an internally developed, reflective community approach grounded in the madrasah's culture can be more effective than conventional interventions in fostering emotional competence.

In the evaluation phase, the study's use of self-assessment and peer feedback aligns with the concept of managerial supervision, which emphasizes performance measurement and corrective action (Terry, 2020; Sahlan, 2025). The establishment of emotional competence indicators as qualitative standards extends the application of outcome-based evaluation beyond academic performance, highlighting the importance of reflective practices in evaluating teachers' social and emotional development (Oliveira et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2025). The findings of this study demonstrate that reflective self-assessment and peer feedback are effective tools for enhancing teachers' emotional regulation and awareness, a finding well documented in educational research (Ahmad & Ismail, 2024; Nina Oktarina & Kurniawati, 2025). The principal's corrective actions, such as addressing time constraints, underscore the importance of adaptive supervision to sustain Circle Time. These findings contribute to educational management by showing that continuous reflection and adaptation are critical for maintaining a program's relevance and effectiveness.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the educational management literature by offering Circle Time as a reflective and participatory strategy that not only enhances teachers' social and emotional competence but also transforms organizational culture in madrasahs. The findings suggest that Circle Time can serve as an effective tool for cultivating a collaborative, reflective, and supportive work environment, in line with research on participatory leadership and SEL (Oliveira et al., 2021; Oktriani et al., 2025). In practice, this study provides valuable insights for educational institutions seeking sustainable ways to develop teachers' emotional competencies and to improve school culture. The study's implications extend beyond madrasahs, offering a model adaptable to other educational settings where teacher well-being and a collaborative culture are priorities for long-term institutional transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights a key finding: the systematic implementation of Circle Time at MI Ma'arif Kalianget, through participatory planning, reflective practices, and evaluation, effectively strengthens teachers' social and emotional competence (SEC). The research reveals that needs-based, collaborative planning combined with ongoing reflective dialogue enhances teachers' self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and interpersonal relationships. These changes not only improve individual emotional competence but also contribute to a more supportive and collaborative school culture. The study's key lesson is the value of an adaptive, participatory approach in fostering teachers' SEC, making Circle Time an effective model for professional development in Islamic primary schools.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the educational management literature by positioning teachers as active participants in their own SEC development and challenging traditional top-down approaches. Practically, it offers Circle Time as a sustainable strategy that can be adapted to other educational settings. However, the study's limitations include its focus on a single madrasah and its reliance on qualitative data, both of which limit generalizability. Future research should involve diverse settings and employ mixed-method approaches to validate and broaden these findings, further exploring the effectiveness of Circle Time across various educational contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors sincerely thank the Principal of MI Ma'arif Kalianget, teachers, students, parents, school committee members, and staff for their support and participation in data collection. Gratitude is also extended to academic mentors and colleagues for their guidance and constructive feedback, which significantly improved this manuscript.

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