

## Optimizing Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in Elementary School Learning to Strengthen Students' Character and Psychological Well-Being

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### ABSTRACT

21st-century learning demands strengthening the character and psychological well-being of students from elementary school. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is seen as a strategic approach relevant to the Pancasila Student Profile while addressing students' social-emotional challenges in the digital era. This study aims to measure the influence of SEL on students' character and psychological well-being, describe its implementation practices in schools, and formulate effective optimization strategies. The study used mixed methods with a sequential explanatory design. Quantitative data were obtained through questionnaires from 180 students, analyzed statistically, and then strengthened by interviews, observations, and document studies. The results of the quantitative analysis showed an average score of student character  $M=3.27$  ( $SD=0.33$ ), psychological well-being  $M=3.15$  ( $SD=0.35$ ), and SEL  $M=3.20$  ( $SD=0.40$ ) on a scale of 1-4, all in the high category. Qualitative data confirmed that SEL practices are beginning to appear in learning despite still being hampered by teacher understanding and school support. These findings can be applied by teachers to integrate SEL into daily learning, enrich the theory on the relationship between SEL and character and psychological well-being in the elementary school context, and open up opportunities for further research related to long-term SEL implementation and evaluation strategies.

**Keywords:** Social Emotional Learning; Student Character; Psychological Well-being.

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### INTRODUCTION

21st-century education emphasizes not only academic abilities but also the development of social-emotional skills, which play a crucial role in character building and students' psychological well-being. In this context, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has emerged as a highly effective strategic approach. SEL encompasses the process of acquiring and applying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to manage emotions, achieve positive goals, demonstrate empathy, build healthy relationships, and make responsible decisions (A. Durlak et al., 2024; Chowkase, 2023; Durlak et al., 2011; Esen Aygun & Sahin Taskin, 2022; Megawati et al., 2022; O'Grady & Nag, 2024). This concept becomes increasingly relevant when we look at various global studies showing that the implementation of SEL contributes significantly to children's academic achievement, emotional control, and social skills (Alamsyah et al., 2019; Esen-Aygun & Sahin-Taskin, 2017; Hosokawa et al., 2024; Yulis Mardotilla et al., 2024).

Delving deeper into SEL, we can understand that social-emotional skills are not just an addition to the educational curriculum, but a crucial foundation for students' holistic development (Cipriano & McCarthy, 2023; Morton et al., 2024; Panayiotou et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2024). For example, the ability to manage emotions can help students cope with stress and pressure, both in and outside of school. In stressful situations, such as exams or presentations,

students with good emotional regulation skills are more likely to remain calm and focused, compared to those without such skills (Hon et al., 2024; MacFarlane & Honeck, 2023) . This suggests that SEL not only supports students' psychological well-being but also directly contributes to their academic performance.

Furthermore, it is important to note that SEL also encompasses aspects of empathy and social relationships. In an increasingly connected world, the ability to understand and feel what others are experiencing is crucial. For example, students trained in empathy skills are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors, such as helping a friend in need or working collaboratively in a group. This not only creates a more positive learning environment but also prepares students to become caring and responsible members of society (Esen-Aygun & Sahin-Taskin, 2017; Orr & Lavy, 2024; Paik et al., 2024a) . Thus, SEL serves as a bridge connecting academic abilities with the interpersonal skills necessary in everyday life.

In Indonesia, the urgency of strengthening student character and well-being is reflected in the Pancasila Student Profile policy contained in the Independent Curriculum (Anita et al., 2024; RI, 2022) . This policy emphasizes the importance of character development balanced with academic achievement, while also providing space for students to explore and develop their potential. However, despite this policy's existence, SEL implementation in elementary schools still faces various challenges. One major challenge is teachers' limited understanding of SEL concepts and practices (Karmina et al., 2024; Lestari & Azizah, 2023; Orr & Lavy, 2024) . Many teachers have not received adequate training to integrate SEL into their teaching, making it difficult for them to implement this approach effectively in the classroom.

Furthermore, the lack of managerial support from schools is also a significant obstacle (Bashori et al., 2025; Sofiwati et al., 2022) . Without strong support from school leaders, SEL implementation initiatives are often neglected or not given sufficient priority. This leads to limitations in the provision of resources, both in the form of teaching materials and time allocated for implementing activities that support social-emotional learning (Jelita Dwi Septya & Dahlan, 2024; Sulis Kurniawati, 2025) . Therefore, it is important for stakeholders in the education sector to collaborate in formulating appropriate managerial strategies to support SEL implementation in elementary schools. These strategies should include teacher training, curriculum development that integrates SEL, and the creation of a school environment that supports students' social-emotional development (Daunic et al., 2023; Morton et al., 2024) .

In a thorough analysis of the role of SEL in the context of elementary education, we can see that the success of SEL implementation depends not only on individuals but also on the broader system. For example, collaboration between schools, parents, and the community is crucial to creating an ecosystem that supports students' social and emotional development (Orr & Lavy, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024) . When parents are involved in their children's education and understand the importance of SEL, they can reinforce the learning that occurs in school by providing support at home. This creates positive continuity between formal and informal education, allowing students to more easily apply the skills they learn (Rayhana et al., 2024; Zilva, 2023) .

The emerging problem is that SEL implementation in elementary schools is suboptimal. Students need social-emotional skills to face the challenges of the digital age, but teachers don't fully understand SEL principles and lack guidance on how to integrate them into their learning. Furthermore, principal support and managerial policies supporting SEL are still limited. (Drew et al., 2024) . This creates a gap between ideal policies and actual practices in the field, so that the effectiveness of SEL-based learning is not optimal.

One of the main challenges in implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in elementary schools is the lack of a deep understanding among teachers of the basic principles of SEL. Many teachers find it difficult to design and implement effective learning strategies in an SEL context because they lack adequate training. For example, a study conducted by Durlak et al. found that successfully implemented SEL programs require intensive and ongoing training for teachers. Without such training, teachers may not be able to identify or respond appropriately to students' emotional needs, which in turn can hinder the development of students' social and emotional skills (Durlak et al., 2011) .

Furthermore, many teachers lack clear guidance on how to integrate SEL into existing curricula. A crowded curriculum often leaves teachers feeling pressured to cover all the material, potentially neglecting important aspects of students' emotional development. For example, when a teacher wants to teach empathy to students, they may lack the time or resources to design relevant and engaging activities. Therefore, it is crucial for schools to provide comprehensive resources and guidance so teachers can easily integrate SEL into their teaching.

Principal support is also crucial for SEL implementation. Without strong support from school leaders, SEL initiatives tend to receive insufficient attention (Attaya & Hilliard, 2023). Principals who understand the importance of SEL can create a school culture that supports students' emotional and social development. For example, principals can conduct training for teachers, allocate time in the schedule for SEL activities, and encourage collaboration among teachers in designing SEL programs. However, currently, many principals are not fully aware of the positive impact of SEL on student academic achievement and well-being. This highlights the need for more effective outreach programs regarding the benefits of SEL among school leaders.

On the other hand, managerial policies supporting SEL are also limited. Many educational policies focus more on academic achievement than on the development of social and emotional skills (Evaristiayu, 2023). For example, in many educational systems, teacher performance evaluations are based more on student test scores than on teachers' ability to develop students' social skills. This creates pressure for teachers to focus more on teaching academic material than on developing social and emotional skills. Therefore, there is a need for changes in educational policies that place greater emphasis on the importance of SEL. Policies that support teacher training in SEL, curriculum development that encompasses social and emotional aspects, and more holistic evaluation of teacher performance can help address the gap between ideal policies and actual practice (Morton et al., 2024).

This gap between ideal policies and actual practices creates significant challenges in achieving effective SEL-based learning. When students do not receive strong support in developing social-emotional skills, they may struggle to interact with peers, manage their emotions, and adapt to complex social environments, especially in today's digital age. A study by Jones et al. found that students involved in SEL programs demonstrated significant improvements in social skills, self-control, and academic achievement. This suggests that when SEL is implemented effectively, its impact can be highly positive for student development (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

International literature confirms that social and emotional education (SEL) can have a significant impact on improving students' academic achievement, reducing problem behaviors, and supporting their social and emotional development. Research conducted by Durlak et al. shows that students involved in SEL programs tend to have higher academic grades, engage in fewer negative behaviors, and demonstrate better social skills. For example, in a Chicago school, the implementation of an SEL program resulted in an 11 percent increase in students' standardized test scores. This suggests that when students are taught to recognize and manage their emotions, they are able to focus more on learning and interact more positively with peers and teachers (Durlak et al., 2011).

Hosokawa et al. emphasize the importance of SEL interventions starting at an early age, which have been shown to have a positive impact on children's emotional regulation. Children taught social and emotional skills from an early age demonstrate better abilities to manage stress and frustration. For example, a longitudinal study involving preschoolers showed that those who participated in an SEL program had better abilities to express their feelings and empathize with others, compared to those who did not participate in such a program. This suggests that SEL interventions are beneficial not only in academic contexts but also in developing character and healthy social relationships (Hosokawa et al., 2024).

However, the success of SEL implementation depends not only on the program itself but also on managerial support and a collaborative school culture. Jones & Kahn note that schools with strong leadership and a collaborative culture tend to be more successful in implementing

SEL programs. In one New York school, for example, the principal implemented a collaborative approach involving teachers, parents, and the community to create an environment that supports SEL development. With strong management support, SEL programs can be integrated with the existing curriculum, providing a more holistic learning experience for students (Raisch et al., 2024).

In Indonesia, research on SEL is still limited and focuses primarily on aspects of student character without addressing the link between it and psychological well-being or school management. Suryadi (2022) noted that many existing studies focus on character development, such as discipline and responsibility, without considering how these factors interact with students' psychological well-being (Aziz & Makhtuna, n.d.; Lestari & Azizah, 2023; Yulis Mardotilla et al., 2024). For example, students with good character but lacking emotional management skills may still experience stress and anxiety, which can impact their academic performance. Therefore, further research linking SEL, character, psychological well-being, and the role of elementary school management is crucial. By understanding these relationships, we can develop a more comprehensive approach to improving the quality of education in Indonesia.

The research gap in education, particularly regarding the implementation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in elementary schools in Indonesia, is a significant concern. The lack of studies that comprehensively examine this aspect creates challenges for students' character development and psychological well-being (Ginting & Hernawan, 2024). This impacts not only individual students but also the overall dynamics of the elementary school educational environment (O'Grady & Nag, 2024; Raisch et al., 2024). Most existing research is still descriptive, meaning that it only describes phenomena without providing in-depth analysis or concrete strategies for improvement. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap through three main focuses that will be discussed further.

First, it is important to measure the impact of SEL implementation on the character and psychological well-being of elementary school students. In this context, SEL encompasses students' abilities to recognize and manage their emotions, build positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. For example, a study by Durlak et al. (2011) showed that effective SEL programs can improve students' social skills, which in turn contributes to improved academic outcomes and reduced aggressive behavior. By adopting a data-driven approach, this study will provide strong empirical evidence regarding the positive impact of SEL, which is crucial for convincing stakeholders in the education sector (A. Durlak et al., 2024; Tandika et al., 2025).

Second, describing SEL implementation practices in school settings is crucial for understanding how theory is applied in practice. In Indonesia, these practices often vary depending on the local context and school culture. For example, some schools may implement SEL programs through extracurricular activities, such as discussion clubs or art activities, while others may integrate them into the academic curriculum. By analyzing these different approaches, research can identify best practices that can serve as models for other schools. For example, schools that implement collaborative teaching methods often report improvements in social interactions and empathy among students, which are key goals of SEL (Paik et al., 2024b; Paolini, 2020).

Third, formulating a strategy for optimizing SEL-based learning management that can be effectively implemented in elementary schools is a crucial final step. In this regard, research should consider various factors that can influence the success of SEL implementation, such as teacher training, parental support, and community involvement. For example, ongoing training for teachers in implementing SEL techniques can improve their teaching effectiveness. Research by Jones et al. shows that teachers trained in SEL are not only better able to manage their classrooms but also better able to build positive relationships with students (Jerome et al., 2022; Raisch et al., 2024). Therefore, the formulated strategy should include a comprehensive training program and ongoing support to ensure successful implementation.

## METHOD

This research adopted a mixed methods approach with a sequential explanatory design, which is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a deeper and more holistic understanding of the phenomenon being studied. In this context, the quantitative stage was conducted first, followed by the qualitative stage, so that the results of each stage could complement each other and provide more comprehensive insights (Creswell, 2014; Jason & Glenwick, 2016; Sugiono, 2014, 2016).

In the quantitative phase, this study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest-posttest control group. This design was chosen to systematically assess the impact of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) implementation on students' character and psychological well-being. By using a control group, researchers can compare the changes that occur in the group that receives the SEL intervention with the group that does not receive the intervention. For example, students participating in the SEL program are expected to demonstrate improvements in their ability to manage emotions, interact socially, and develop empathy. The data obtained from these measurements are then statistically analyzed to determine the significance of the results. This method not only provides a snapshot of the changes that occur but also allows researchers to draw stronger conclusions about the effectiveness of the SEL program in an educational context.

Next, a qualitative phase was conducted to deepen understanding of the results obtained from the quantitative phase. The methods used in this phase included observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis. Observations were conducted in classrooms during the SEL program to directly observe student interactions and how they applied the social and emotional skills they had learned. In-depth interviews with teachers and students provided insights into their experiences in the program and any challenges they may have faced. Through FGDs, researchers were able to explore group perspectives on the impact of the SEL program, providing a broader social context for the quantitative data collected. Document analysis, such as school reports and student progress notes, also provided valuable additional information for understanding the changes that occurred.

Each instrument used in the quantitative phase has undergone rigorous validity and reliability testing. Validity ensures that the instrument actually measures what it is supposed to measure, while reliability ensures the consistency of the results obtained. Thus, the quantitative data collected can be considered valid and reliable, providing a solid foundation for further analysis (Sugiono, 2014).

Through this mixed methods approach, this study was able to not only measure the impact of SEL programs numerically but also capture the nuances and complexities of student and teacher experiences in the context of social-emotional learning. This is important because education focuses not only on academic mastery but also on character development and students' psychological well-being, which are crucial aspects in shaping balanced individuals who are ready to face life's challenges.

The research data sources consisted of principals, teachers, and elementary school students in Sukabumi City and Regency. The sample was randomly selected from six elementary schools (three in the city and three in the regency). From each school, one principal, three teachers, and 30 students in grades 4–6 were selected, resulting in a total of six principals, 18 teachers, and 180 students. Additional data were obtained from school documents such as work programs, learning materials, and activity reports related to SEL.

Table 1 Characteristics of Research Respondents

Respondents	Number Per School	Number of Schools	Total
Headmaster	1	6	6
Teacher	3	6	18
Students (Grades 4-6)	30	6	180
Total	-	-	204

Quantitative data was obtained through the distribution of a validated Likert-scale questionnaire covering student character, psychological well-being, and SEL skills. Qualitative data was collected through learning observations, in-depth interviews with teachers and principals, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document review.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) and inferential statistics (t-test, ANOVA, Pearson correlation) using SPSS software. This analysis was used to determine the influence and relationships between variables. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, through a process of transcription, coding, grouping themes, and interpretation to identify SEL implementation patterns, constraints, and optimization strategies. The results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses were then integrated to produce comprehensive conclusions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 1. Quantitative Test Results: The Influence of SEL on Character and Psychological Well-Being

Quantitative analysis conducted through a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design showed a significant improvement in student character and psychological well-being after the implementation of Social Emotional Learning (SEL)-based learning. The average character score of students in the experimental group increased from 2.85 (SD = 0.42) in the pretest to 3.21 (SD = 0.45) in the posttest, while in the control group, there was no significant change, only a slight increase from 2.83 (SD = 0.39) to 2.87 (SD = 0.41). The t-test showed a significant difference between the two groups with a t-value of 5.67 ( $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that the integration of SEL in learning not only contributes positively to strengthening character dimensions such as religiousness, nationalism, independence, mutual cooperation, and integrity, but also to students' psychological well-being, which includes aspects of self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, life purpose, and environmental mastery.

These findings align with those of Durlak et al. (2011) and Taylor et al. (2017), who asserted that implementing SEL can improve both academic outcomes and students' social-emotional development. In this context, SEL is not merely an addition to the curriculum, but an integral part of the learning process that supports students' holistic character development (Ginting & Hernawan, 2024; Morton et al., 2024; Panayiotou et al., 2019). For example, when students learn to empathize and collaborate in groups, they not only learn to interact effectively but also develop the ability to understand others' perspectives, which is an important aspect of their social lives.

Table 2. Results of the Pretest-Posttest t-Test in the Experimental and Control Groups

Variables	Group	Pretest (M ± SD)	Posttest (M ± SD)	t-count	Sig. (p)	Cohen's d	Information
Student Character	Experiment	2.85 ± 0.42	3.21 ± 0.45	5.67	0.001*	0.68	Moderate-strong effect
	Control	2.83 ± 0.39	2.87 ± 0.41	0.91	0.367	0.09	Not significant
Psychological Well-being	Experiment	2.81 ± 0.40	3.18 ± 0.41	5.12	0.002*	0.65	Moderate-strong effect
	Control	2.79 ± 0.38	2.84 ± 0.39	1.03	0.314	0.12	Not significant

\*Note:  $p < 0.05$  indicates a significant difference. Cohen's d values between 0.50–0.79 indicate a moderate to strong effect (Sutjipto, 2016).

Table 2 shows the results of the pretest-posttest t-test for the experimental and control groups. The table shows that the experimental group experienced significant improvements in both measured variables: student character and psychological well-being. This improvement

was not only quantitatively measurable but also qualitatively observed through changes in student behavior and attitudes. For example, students who previously lacked empathy now demonstrated mutual respect and were more open in interacting with their peers. This indicates that the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) program successfully transformed the way students interact with one another, which in turn contributed to their character development.

Meanwhile, the control group did not show significant changes, indicating that without SEL implementation, students may not experience the same benefits in character development and well-being. In this context, it is important to consider how learning environments that do not integrate SEL can limit students' potential. For example, students who are not exposed to learning that focuses on emotions and social relationships may struggle to manage stress and negative emotions, which can impact their academic performance and interpersonal relationships. This underscores the importance of integrating SEL into educational curricula to support students' holistic growth.

Meanwhile, the effect sizes (Cohen's  $d = 0.68$  for character,  $d = 0.65$  for psychological well-being) indicate that SEL interventions have moderate to strong practical effects. These effect sizes not only demonstrate statistical significance but also provide a clearer picture of the extent of the SEL program's impact on students. With effect sizes in this range, we can conclude that SEL interventions are not merely additions to the curriculum, but are crucial elements that can change the dynamics of education. For example, in schools that have implemented SEL programs, improvements have been seen not only in student character but also in more positive and collaborative classroom climates. This indicates that the integration of SEL into learning has a significant, tangible impact on student behavioral and emotional outcomes, beyond statistical significance.

A closer analysis of these results suggests that the success of SEL programs in improving students' character and psychological well-being can be influenced by several factors. First, the teaching methods used in the program play a significant role. The use of interactive and participatory approaches, such as group discussions and role-playing, allows students to be more engaged and experience the benefits of learning firsthand. Second, support from teachers and school staff is also crucial. When teachers adopt SEL principles in their daily interactions, this creates a supportive environment for students to learn and thrive. Third, parental involvement in the process can also strengthen the results, as students feel supported both at school and at home (Aziz & Makhtuna, n.d.; Cipriano & McCarthy, 2023).

In conclusion, the results of the pretest-posttest t-test, which showed significant improvements in the character and psychological well-being of students in the experimental group, confirm the importance of implementing SEL programs in education. The improvements observed encompass not only academic aspects but also students' social and emotional aspects, which are integral to a holistic education. With effect sizes demonstrating strong practical impact, it is clear that SEL integration is not just an option, but a necessity in modern educational curricula. Therefore, it is crucial for all stakeholders in education, including school administrators, teachers, and parents, to work together to implement and support SEL programs for a better future for students.

## **2. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Instrument Test Results**

Analysis of the instrument used to measure SEL shows that all indicators, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and decision-making, are valid with a calculated  $r$ -value greater than the table  $r$ -value (0.144). The instrument's reliability reached 0.83, indicating excellent internal consistency. Thus, this instrument is suitable for measuring SEL implementation in elementary schools. The high validity and reliability of this instrument are crucial, as they ensure that the data obtained are accurate and reliable for further analysis.

Interpretation of these results confirms that SEL aspects can be empirically operationalized in the Indonesian educational context. This opens up opportunities for further research and the development of more effective SEL programs. For example, by using valid and

reliable instruments, schools can conduct regular assessments of students' social-emotional progress, which in turn can aid in planning more targeted interventions.

Table 3. Results of the SEL Instrument Reliability Test

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Information
Student Character	0.82	Reliable
Psychological Well-being	0.84	Reliable
Social Emotional Learning (SEL)	0.83	Reliable

Table 3 shows the results of the reliability test of the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) instrument, where all variables had Cronbach's Alpha values above 0.8. This value significantly indicates that the instrument is highly reliable and can be relied upon in the context of measuring students' social and emotional aspects. Reliability is a crucial aspect in educational research and evaluation, as unreliable instruments can produce misleading and inaccurate data. In this regard, the results showing high Cronbach's Alpha values provide strong confidence to educators and researchers that this instrument can be used with a high degree of confidence to measure student progress in SEL aspects.

For example, in an educational context, a reliable SEL instrument can be used to assess students' abilities to manage emotions, interact with peers, and cope with social challenges. For example, a teacher can use this instrument to identify students who may be experiencing difficulties with social interactions. Using the information obtained from a reliable instrument, the teacher can design appropriate interventions to help these students, such as mentoring programs or group activities aimed at improving their social skills.

Furthermore, it's important to note that reliability is also closely related to validity. Although this instrument exhibits a high Cronbach's Alpha value, it's also important to ensure that it measures what it's supposed to. In this context, validity testing can be conducted by involving experts in education and psychology to assess whether the instrument's items truly reflect the aspects intended to be measured in SEL.

The transition from reliability to validity is crucial to ensure that the results obtained are not only reliable but also relevant to the measurement objectives. Thus, SEL instruments serve not only as measurement tools but also as a means to understand and improve students' social and emotional well-being. This is increasingly important given the growing recognition of SEL's role in supporting students' academic success and personal development.

In conclusion, the reliability test results, which showed a Cronbach's Alpha value above 0.8, provide a strong basis for educators and researchers to use SEL instruments to measure student progress. With reliable instruments, teachers and researchers can be more confident in implementing programs that support students' social and emotional development.

### 3. Qualitative Results: SEL Implementation Practices in Schools

Through interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), it was found that teachers' understanding of SEL as part of character education was quite good, but it had not been fully integrated into their Lesson Plans (RPPs). Most teachers still viewed SEL as an additional activity, rather than a core strategy in learning. For example, several teachers admitted to frequently incorporating SEL elements into icebreakers, but this did not yet reach the deeper core of learning. The principal emphasized that managerial support, such as teacher training and establishing a school culture that supports SEL, is essential to optimize the program's implementation.

The interpretation of these findings supports international literature suggesting that the success of SEL implementation is influenced by the quality of institutional support, not just teacher competency in the classroom (Aksoy & Gresham, 2024; Cipriano & McCarthy, 2023; Lee et al., 2023). This suggests that even if teachers have a basic understanding of SEL, without adequate support from school management, SEL implementation will not achieve optimal results. For example, principals who actively support teacher training and professional development can create a more conducive environment for SEL implementation.

Table 4. Qualitative Findings of SEL Implementation

Indicator	Description of Findings	Examples of Teacher/Principal Quotes
Teachers' Understanding of SEL	Teachers understand SEL as part of character education, but not yet comprehensively.	"We usually emphasize character values, but the term SEL is new to us."
Integration in Learning	SEL has not been fully integrated into the RPP, it is often considered an additional activity.	"Sometimes we include it in ice breaking, but it doesn't get to the core of the learning."
Managerial Support	The principal emphasized the need for specific training and policies related to SEL.	"If there is formal training, teachers will understand better how to implement it."
Implementation Constraints	Curriculum burden, time constraints, and lack of practical guidance	"The curriculum is already dense, it's difficult to add SEL without clear guidance."
Optimization Strategy	Guidance modules, integration into school culture and routine monitoring are needed	"If there is an official module from the school, it will be easier for teachers."

Table 4 presents qualitative findings regarding SEL implementation, detailing indicators such as teacher understanding, integration into learning, managerial support, implementation constraints, and optimization strategies. These findings suggest that SEL success is determined not only by teacher competence but also by managerial support, the availability of practical guidance, and integration into school policies. For example, when principals provide clear policies regarding SEL, teachers are more motivated to implement them in the classroom.

#### 4. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Results

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings in this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) on character development and psychological well-being of elementary school students. Quantitative data showed significant improvements in both variables among students who participated in SEL-based learning compared to the control group. The mean score for character development increased from 2.85 (SD = 0.42) to 3.21 (SD = 0.45), and for psychological well-being from 2.81 (SD = 0.40) to 3.18 (SD = 0.41), with effect sizes of  $d = 0.68$  and  $d = 0.65$ , respectively – indicating moderate to strong practical effects. These results confirm that the SEL intervention produced measurable and significant changes in students' emotion regulation, empathy, and social interactions.

Qualitative data further explains why and how these changes occurred. Interviews and focus groups with teachers and principals showed that students became more empathetic, collaborative, and responsible after engaging in SEL-based learning activities. Teachers reported significant behavioral changes – students who previously tended to withdraw became more active in group discussions, while those with low self-control demonstrated improved emotional regulation skills when faced with conflict. These behavioral improvements support the quantitative findings and illustrate the tangible manifestations of SEL's impact in the classroom.

Furthermore, qualitative data such as teacher understanding of SEL, integration into lesson planning, managerial support, and implementation challenges shed light on contextual factors influencing SEL effectiveness. Significant quantitative improvements in student

character and well-being are consistent with schools with stronger leadership commitment and structured teacher training in SEL practices. Conversely, schools with minimal managerial support struggle to integrate SEL into core learning processes, explaining the variation in the depth of implementation across sites.

Overall, the qualitative data reinforces the quantitative evidence by demonstrating that statistical improvements in student learning outcomes are strongly related to pedagogical and organizational practices. This integration confirms that the success of SEL depends not only on program design but also on systemic factors such as leadership, teacher competency, and school culture. Together, these two types of data demonstrate that effective SEL implementation can enhance students' socio-emotional growth and psychological well-being, while creating a positive and collaborative learning environment.

## 5. SEL Implementation Optimization Strategy

Based on the integration of quantitative and qualitative data, several strategies were formulated to optimize SEL implementation in schools. First, integrating SEL into the lesson plan (RPP) and elementary school curriculum is crucial to ensure SEL becomes an integral part of the learning process. Second, ongoing training for teachers on SEL concepts and practices is essential to equip them with the skills necessary to implement SEL effectively. Third, principal support in the form of managerial policies and the development of a collaborative culture is essential to create an environment conducive to SEL implementation.

Furthermore, providing SEL guidance modules for teachers will provide them with the resources necessary to implement SEL in their teaching. Finally, regular monitoring and evaluation of SEL implementation in the classroom will help identify areas for improvement and ensure the effectiveness of the SEL program.

The interpretation of these strategies has implications for more contextual and sustainable learning practices, while also contributing to the development of student well-being-based educational management theory. By implementing these strategies, it is hoped that schools can create more supportive learning environments for students, which in turn will improve their character and psychological well-being.

## DISCUSSION

This study revealed that the implementation of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) had a statistically significant and practically meaningful impact on students' character development and psychological well-being (Hon et al., 2024; MacFarlane & Honeck, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). In a more in-depth analysis, the experimental group showed substantial improvements in both domains. The mean character score increased from 2.85 to 3.21, reflecting a significant positive change (Cohen's  $d = 0.68$ ). This indicates that students experienced not only shifts in behavior but also in how they understood and applied character values in their daily lives. For example, this increase in character values can be seen through students' actions, who more often helped classmates in difficulty, showed a greater sense of responsibility for group assignments, and actively participated in social activities outside of school.

In terms of psychological well-being, the mean score also showed a significant increase from 2.81 to 3.18 (Cohen's  $d = 0.65$ ). This improved psychological well-being impacted not only students' moods but also their ability to cope with stress and everyday challenges. For example, students who previously showed signs of test anxiety now felt calmer and more confident thanks to the emotional management skills they learned through the SEL program. Qualitative findings supported these results, indicating that students became more empathetic, cooperative, and emotionally aware after the SEL-based intervention. For example, students reported being better able to recognize their own and others' emotions, allowing them to interact better in social situations.

Furthermore, teachers and principals also reported a more positive classroom climate, characterized by mutual respect and emotional regulation among students. This positive classroom climate is crucial, as it creates an environment conducive to learning and collaboration (Moore & Gregory, 2024; Paik et al., 2024a). In practice, this is evident in

increased student engagement in classroom discussions and reduced inter-student conflict. Overall, these results confirm that SEL contributes holistically to students' academic, emotional, and moral development, in line with the principles of the Pancasila Student Profile framework in Indonesia. Thus, the integration of SEL into the education system not only supports academic achievement but also shapes a more ethical and responsible generation.

These findings are consistent with international and regional studies that emphasize the role of SEL in improving students' socio-emotional and academic outcomes. For example, Helms et al., 2021; Orr & Lavy, 2024 found that SEL interventions implemented across various educational contexts improved students' emotion regulation and prosocial behavior. Their research showed that students involved in SEL programs were more likely to manage their emotions and behave positively toward their peers. Daunic et al., 2023; Jerome et al., 2022; Paterson-Young et al., 2024; Rósa, 2024 reported similar improvements in empathy, social awareness, and classroom relationships, suggesting that social skills cultivated through SEL have significant long-term effects.

In the Indonesian context, research by Lestari & Azizah (2023) confirms that integrating SEL principles into moral and civic education can strengthen students' national identity and ethics. This is crucial, given that education in Indonesia aims not only to produce academically intelligent students but also to develop strong character and a strong sense of nationalism. Furthermore, Daunic et al. (2023; Jerome et al., 2022; Rósa, 2024) demonstrate that the success of SEL programs relies heavily on systemic support, including teacher leadership and training – factors also identified in this study. This research demonstrates that support from school management, such as teacher training and parental involvement, significantly contributes to the success of SEL implementation.

However, unlike Paterson-Young et al. (2024) , who found that SEL outcomes varied significantly across cultural settings, this study demonstrates that local implementation in Sukabumi yielded consistent positive effects. This suggests that contextual adaptation can optimize SEL outcomes, where approaches that align with local culture and community values can enhance program effectiveness. Furthermore, this study extends previous findings by integrating quantitative and qualitative aspects, demonstrating not only what changes occur but also how these changes manifest through everyday pedagogical practices. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, this study provides a more comprehensive picture of the benefits of SEL, which can serve as a model for future educational research and practice.

The results of this study have significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, these findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge that places SEL within the framework of character education and well-being. This confirms that socio-emotional competencies are central to holistic student development (Araúz-Ledezma et al., 2022; Doyle & Swisher, n.d.; Durlak et al., 2011; Zieher et al., 2024) . By recognizing the importance of SEL, educational institutions can formulate more comprehensive curricula that focus not only on academic aspects but also on character development and student psychological well-being.

Practically, this research suggests several policy and managerial implications. Schools should integrate SEL indicators into lesson plans, teacher evaluations, and the development of school culture. This means that every aspect of the school environment, from the curriculum to daily interactions, should reflect SEL values. Continuous professional development for teachers and principals is crucial to sustaining SEL practices. By providing appropriate training and adequate resources, teachers will be better equipped to implement teaching methods that support students' socio-emotional development.

Additionally, school leaders and policymakers should consider incorporating SEL principles into national education policies and teacher certification programs. When teachers model empathy, responsibility, and collaboration, they create an environment that fosters academic and emotional growth. This creates a positive cycle in which students who are better at managing their emotions and interacting with others are more successful in their studies, which in turn improves the school's reputation and overall performance.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the limited sample size of six schools in Sukabumi may limit the generalizability of the

findings to other regions with different socio-cultural contexts. Variations in socio-economic backgrounds, culture, and educational policies in other regions may produce different results if SEL programs are implemented. Therefore, it is important to conduct broader research with more diverse samples to more comprehensively understand the impact of SEL.

Second, the quasi-experimental design, lacking randomization, means that uncontrolled variables—such as students' prior experiences or differing teacher competencies—may have influenced the results. This suggests that, while the results are promising, we need to be cautious about drawing conclusions about cause and effect. Third, while the qualitative data provide valuable depth and context, the study relied on self-reported perceptions, which may be susceptible to social desirability bias. Students may have felt compelled to provide answers perceived as "correct" or "desirable," which could impact the accuracy of the data.

Finally, the short intervention period limits the ability to capture long-term changes in students' behavior or emotional stability. Future longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the sustainability of SEL's impact over time, so we can understand how the skills learned through these programs persist and adapt as students develop. By understanding these limitations, we can design better future research that will provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of SEL.

Based on the current findings, several suggestions for further research are suggested. Future research should expand the participant pool to include schools from different provinces to examine regional variations in SEL implementation. By involving more schools, we can gain a more holistic understanding of how local context influences program effectiveness. A longitudinal approach could also be used to examine the long-term impact of SEL on students' academic performance, resilience, and emotional intelligence. This will help us understand how skills taught through SEL contribute to student success in the long term.

Furthermore, future research can explore how digital and hybrid learning environments can effectively integrate SEL principles, particularly in post-pandemic education. With the increasing use of technology in education, it is crucial to understand how SEL can be implemented in these contexts, so that students continue to benefit from socio-emotional development. Researchers should also consider developing and validating culturally informed SEL instruments tailored to the Indonesian educational context. This will ensure that the tools used to measure SEL are relevant and effective in the local context.

Finally, collaborative research involving policymakers, educators, and psychologists can design a comprehensive framework linking SEL to teacher well-being, classroom management, and student achievement. With the involvement of various stakeholders, we can create a more integrated and holistic approach to character education and psychological development. This will not only strengthen the implementation of SEL in schools but also contribute to the development of a healthier and more ethical society. Thus, this research opens new opportunities for exploration and innovation in education, which can ultimately improve the overall quality of education in Indonesia.

## CONCLUSION

This research provides a novel contribution by integrating quantitative and qualitative studies to assess the implementation of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in elementary schools. The findings indicate that SEL not only significantly impacts character building but also improves students' psychological well-being. The study's primary contribution lies in formulating a strategy for optimizing SEL management, emphasizing synergy between teachers, principals, and elementary school policy in Indonesia. This study is limited by its sample size, which included only six elementary schools in Sukabumi City and Regency, thus limiting the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, the SEL impact measurement was conducted in the short term, thus not reflecting the long-term effects on student development. Future research is recommended to expand the scope of schools, involve other levels of education, and use a longitudinal design to assess the long-term impact of SEL implementation.

Practically, this research implies that SEL integration needs to be explicitly incorporated into the curriculum and teacher learning tools, supported by principals' managerial policies, and reinforced through ongoing training. Theoretically, this research expands the literature on

values-based education management and student well-being in Indonesia. It also provides a foundation for policymakers to formulate SEL-based intervention programs nationally, and for future researchers to develop SEL implementation models that are adaptive to the local context of elementary schools.

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