

## Strengthening Elementary Students' Character through Social Emotional Learning in Digital Classrooms

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Article History: Received on may 19, 2026, Revised on July 02, 2026, Published on July 26, 2026

**Abstract:** Character education has become increasingly important in addressing the social and emotional challenges experienced by elementary school students in digital classrooms. This study aims to explore the implementation of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in strengthening elementary students' character at SDN 42 Palembang, Indonesia. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed involving six teachers as key informants and students in Grades IV, V, and VI as participants. Data were collected through classroom observations over three months, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model and validated through source and method triangulation. The findings indicate that implementing SEL in digital classrooms strengthened students' empathy, emotional self-regulation, responsibility, and collaboration while improving classroom interactions and responsible learning behaviours. Parents also reported positive changes in students' social attitudes and responsibility at home. These findings provide practical implications for teachers, school leaders, and policymakers in integrating SEL into sustainable character education within digital learning environments. The novelty of this study lies in providing empirical evidence of how SEL can be systematically implemented in digital classrooms to strengthen elementary students' character within the context of Indonesian public elementary schools.

**Keywords:** *Social Emotional Learning, Digital Classrooms, Character Education, Elementary School, Students, Character Development.*

### A. Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed elementary education by reshaping how students learn, communicate, and interact within classroom environments. Digital classrooms provide broader access to information and collaborative learning opportunities; however, they also present significant challenges for character education, including reduced face-to-face interaction, limited emotional engagement, and increased exposure to inappropriate online behaviour. Consequently, schools are expected not only to develop students' academic competencies but also to foster essential character values such as empathy, responsibility, collaboration, and emotional self-regulation to prepare learners for responsible participation in the digital society (UNESCO, 2024).

In Indonesia, strengthening character education has become a national priority following the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes holistic student development alongside academic achievement. Nevertheless, classroom practices in many elementary schools continue to prioritize cognitive outcomes, while social-emotional competencies receive comparatively limited attention. As a result, students often experience difficulties in developing empathy, responsible behaviour, emotional regulation, and collaborative skills, particularly within increasingly digital learning environments (Widyaningrum, Hastomo, & Wuryandani, 2026). These conditions indicate the need for instructional approaches capable of integrating academic learning with character development in digital classrooms.

Recent studies consistently demonstrate that Social Emotional Learning (*SEL*) enhances students' emotional competence, classroom engagement, psychological well-being, and academic performance across various educational contexts (Brush et al., 2022; Khasanah, 2024; Sofiawati et al., 2025). Other studies have further highlighted the contribution of *SEL* to character education by improving empathy, collaboration, and responsible behaviour while supporting digital literacy and positive classroom climates (Hariyati & Badariah, 2025; Farida & Fauzi, 2026; Saputra, 2026). Collectively, these studies confirm that *SEL* has become an effective educational approach for promoting students' holistic development in response to the demands of digital transformation.

Despite these important contributions, previous studies have predominantly examined *SEL* from conceptual, psychological, or curriculum perspectives, with limited empirical attention to how *SEL* is systematically integrated into digital classroom practices in Indonesian elementary schools. Moreover, few studies have explored how such implementation contributes to strengthening students' character through authentic classroom experiences involving teachers, students, and parents. This limitation reveals an important research gap that warrants further investigation within the context of elementary education in Indonesia.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the implementation of Social Emotional Learning in strengthening elementary students' character within digital classrooms at SDN 42 Palembang. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on conceptual discussions or general educational settings, this study provides empirical evidence derived from authentic classroom practices involving teachers and students in an Indonesian public elementary school. The findings are expected to contribute to educational management by providing practical insights for teachers, school leaders, curriculum developers, and policymakers in designing sustainable character education programs that effectively integrate social-emotional learning into digital classroom practices.

## **B. Methodology**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore how Social Emotional Learning (*SEL*) strengthens elementary students' character in digital classrooms at SDN 42 Palembang, Indonesia. A qualitative design was selected to gain an in-depth

understanding of classroom practices and the experiences of teachers and students in implementing *SEL* within authentic learning environments.

The study involved six teachers as key informants and approximately 150 students from Grades IV, V, and VI as participants. Participants were selected using purposive sampling because they were directly involved in the implementation of *SEL* during classroom learning and were considered capable of providing relevant information to achieve the objectives of the study.

Data were collected over a three-month period through three classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis. Classroom observations were conducted to examine how empathy, responsibility, collaboration, and emotional self-regulation were integrated into daily learning activities. Semi-structured interviews with teachers provided in-depth insights into their experiences in implementing *SEL*, while questionnaires distributed to teachers and parents, together with school documents such as lesson plans and school policies, were used to complement and verify the findings.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, source triangulation and method triangulation were employed by comparing evidence obtained from observations, interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis. Ethical principles were observed throughout the study by obtaining permission from the school, ensuring voluntary participation, maintaining participants' confidentiality, and using all collected data solely for academic research purposes.

## C. Results and Discussion

### Results

This section presents the findings regarding the implementation of Social Emotional Learning (*SEL*) in strengthening elementary students' character in digital classrooms at SDN 42 Palembang. The findings were generated through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing using the interactive analysis model of Miles and Huberman. Data obtained from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis were triangulated to ensure the credibility of the findings. The analysis resulted in three major themes :

- (1) the integration of *SEL* into digital classroom practices,
- (2) the challenges and supporting strategies in implementing *SEL*,
- (3) the character development outcomes experienced by students.

A summary of the research findings is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Research Findings

| Theme                                           | Categories                                                                  | Data Sources                              |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Integration of <i>SEL</i> in Digital Classrooms | Thematic learning, digital media, collaborative learning, teacher modelling | Observation, interviews, school documents |
| Challenges and                                  | Digital competence, instructional time,                                     | Interviews,                               |

|                                |                                                                   |                                          |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Supporting Strategies          | parental involvement, school collaboration                        | observations                             |
| Character Development Outcomes | Empathy, responsibility, collaboration, emotional self-regulation | Observations, interviews, questionnaires |

To protect participants' anonymity, interview excerpts are presented using identification codes. The school principal is coded as **(P)**, the Vice Principal for Student Affairs as **(VP)**, classroom teachers as **(T1–T6)**, the School Violence Prevention and Handling Team as **(TP)**, and parents as **(PA)**. These codes are consistently used throughout the Results and Discussion sections.

### 1. Integration of Social Emotional Learning into Digital Classroom Practices

Analysis of classroom observations, interviews, and school documents revealed that Social Emotional Learning (*SEL*) was systematically integrated into daily classroom instruction rather than implemented as a stand-alone program. Teachers embedded *SEL* into thematic learning by combining character education with digital learning activities, collaborative discussions, classroom reflections, and teacher modelling. This integration enabled students to develop empathy, responsibility, cooperation, and emotional awareness during the learning process.

The school principal explained that character education had become one of the school's strategic priorities by integrating *SEL* into curriculum planning and school programs.

*"We established character education as a priority in the School Work Plan and integrated Social Emotional Learning into the thematic curriculum."* **(P)**

School documents further indicated that lesson plans, annual programs, and character education activities consistently reflected *SEL* principles.

Teachers also emphasized that *SEL* was implemented by connecting learning materials with students' daily experiences through storytelling, reflective discussions, collaborative learning, and digital educational media.

*"I relate lesson materials to students' daily lives through stories, case studies, and daily reflection activities."* **(T1)**

Classroom observations demonstrated that teachers consistently modelled respectful communication, empathy, and cooperation during classroom interaction. Students were encouraged to express opinions respectfully, collaborate in completing group assignments, and utilize digital media as learning tools instead of merely entertainment. These findings indicate that *SEL* was integrated into instructional practices, classroom management, and school culture.

### 2. Challenges and Supporting Strategies in Implementing Social Emotional Learning

Although *SEL* had been successfully integrated into classroom learning, several implementation challenges were identified. Interview and observation data indicated four

major challenges: differences in teachers' digital competence, limited instructional time, students' dependence on digital devices, and inconsistent parental involvement.

The school principal identified teachers' digital competence and parental participation as the main institutional challenges affecting SEL implementation.

*"The most common challenges are the unequal digital competence among teachers and the limited participation of parents." (P)*

To overcome these challenges, the school organized teacher professional development programs, strengthened school policies, and encouraged teachers to integrate SEL into existing learning activities rather than teaching it separately.

Teachers also acknowledged that limited instructional time and curriculum demands sometimes restricted opportunities to conduct reflective learning activities.

*"Limited instructional time, a demanding curriculum, and the fact that not all teachers are familiar with digital media remain significant challenges." (T1)*

To address these constraints, teachers incorporated SEL into collaborative discussions, project-based learning, storytelling, and digital educational games without reducing curriculum coverage.

The Vice Principal for Student Affairs reported that students' excessive use of digital devices occasionally affected classroom discipline and social interaction.

*"The influence of gadgets is quite significant, and some students still show a lack of discipline." (VP)*

The school addressed these issues by strengthening communication with parents and involving the School Violence Prevention and Handling Team (TPPK) in counselling, mediation, and continuous behavioural monitoring. Overall, the findings demonstrate that successful SEL implementation requires collaboration among school leaders, teachers, parents, and supporting school teams.

### **3. Character Development Outcomes through Social Emotional Learning**

Data triangulation from classroom observations, interviews, questionnaires, and school documents consistently demonstrated positive changes in students' character following the implementation of Social Emotional Learning. Four major character outcomes emerged from the analysis: empathy, responsibility, collaboration, and emotional self-regulation.

Teachers observed that students became more willing to help classmates, respect different opinions, and demonstrate empathy during collaborative learning activities.

*"Students are now more willing to help their classmates, listen respectfully during discussions, and show greater concern for others than before." (T2)*

Responsibility also improved as students became more disciplined in completing assignments, participating in classroom activities, and reflecting upon their own behaviour.

*"Students have become more responsible for completing assignments and are more aware of the consequences of their actions." (T3)*

Classroom observations further showed improvements in students' collaborative skills. Students actively shared responsibilities, respected different viewpoints, and solved problems together during thematic and project-based learning activities.

Teachers additionally reported improvements in students' emotional self-regulation. Students gradually became more capable of managing frustration, expressing emotions appropriately, and resolving interpersonal conflicts peacefully.

*"Students are now more patient, better able to control their emotions, and more willing to resolve conflicts through discussion." (T4)*

Parents also reported positive behavioural changes at home, explaining that students became more cooperative, respectful, and willing to communicate openly with family members after participating in SEL-based learning activities.

Overall, the findings indicate that integrating Social Emotional Learning into digital classroom practices contributed significantly to strengthening students' empathy, responsibility, collaboration, and emotional self-regulation. The consistency of evidence obtained from multiple data sources further supports the credibility and trustworthiness of these findings.

## **Discussion**

### **1. Integration of Social Emotional Learning into Digital Classroom Practices**

The findings demonstrate that Social Emotional Learning (SEL) was not implemented as a separate instructional programme but was systematically integrated into daily classroom practices through thematic instruction, collaborative learning, teacher modelling, reflective activities, and the purposeful use of digital media. This indicates that SEL became an integral component of the teaching and learning process, enabling students to develop social-emotional competencies alongside academic knowledge.

These findings are consistent with previous studies conducted in Indonesia. Khasanah (2024) reported that integrating SEL into regular classroom activities allows teachers to accommodate students' diverse emotional and social needs without reducing instructional time. Similarly, Sofiawati et al. (2025) found that SEL contributes to students' psychological well-being and creates a more supportive classroom climate. Likewise, Astuti et al. (2025) emphasized that character education in the digital era becomes more effective when supported by technology-integrated learning rather than through isolated character education programmes.

The present findings also align with international evidence. Carpendale et al. (2025) demonstrated that embedding SEL into everyday primary school instruction significantly improves students' social interaction, emotional competence, and classroom engagement. Likewise, Brush et al. (2022) concluded that universal SEL programmes are most effective when social-emotional competencies are integrated into routine teaching practices rather than delivered as stand-alone interventions.

Despite these similarities, this study offers a distinctive contribution within the Indonesian elementary school context. Previous studies have primarily examined SEL from conceptual, psychological, or curriculum perspectives. In contrast, this study demonstrates how SEL can be integrated into digital classroom practices through the combined use of thematic instruction, collaborative digital learning, teacher modelling,

and school-wide character education programmes. This integration illustrates that digital technology does not diminish character education; instead, when appropriately managed, it serves as an effective medium for fostering empathy, responsibility, collaboration, and emotional awareness among elementary school students.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings reinforce the view that social-emotional competencies develop most effectively when they are embedded within authentic learning experiences and supported by positive classroom interactions. Rather than treating SEL as an additional curriculum component, the findings support an integrated instructional approach in which cognitive, social, and emotional development occur simultaneously.

Practically, the findings suggest that school leaders and teachers should prioritize the integration of SEL into everyday learning activities instead of implementing separate character education programmes. Schools should also strengthen teachers' pedagogical capacity to utilize digital technologies that promote collaboration, reflection, and positive social interaction. Such an approach enables character education to remain relevant to the demands of the digital era while supporting students' holistic development.

## **2. Challenges and Supporting Strategies in Implementing Social Emotional Learning**

The findings indicate that the implementation of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in digital classrooms was accompanied by several challenges, including disparities in teachers' digital competence, limited instructional time, students' excessive dependence on digital devices, and varying levels of parental involvement. Although these challenges did not prevent the implementation of SEL, they required schools to adopt adaptive strategies involving collaboration among school leaders, teachers, parents, and supporting school teams.

These findings are consistent with previous studies conducted in Indonesia. Desrani and Marzuki (2025) reported that teachers continue to face difficulties in integrating character education into technology-based learning due to limited digital pedagogical competence and increasing instructional demands. Similarly, Mahmuddah and Junaidi (2025) highlighted that uncontrolled digital technology use may weaken students' social interaction and responsibility if schools fail to provide adequate guidance. These studies support the present findings that successful SEL implementation depends not only on classroom instruction but also on effective school management and family participation.

The findings are also supported by international research. Brush et al. (2022) emphasized that schools implementing SEL frequently encounter challenges related to teachers' readiness, resource availability, and long-term programme sustainability. Likewise, Carpendale et al. (2025) argued that leadership support, continuous professional development, and collaboration among educational stakeholders are essential for maintaining effective SEL implementation in primary schools. These international findings reinforce the importance of institutional commitment in sustaining SEL practices across different educational contexts.

Despite these similarities, this study identifies a distinctive feature within the Indonesian elementary school context. Rather than viewing digital technology as an obstacle to character education, SDN 42 Palembang adopted a collaborative approach by integrating teacher professional development, strengthening communication with parents, and involving the School Violence Prevention and Handling Team (TPPK) in monitoring and supporting students' behavioural development. This demonstrates that implementation challenges can be addressed through coordinated school management strategies rather than relying solely on individual teachers' initiatives.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings extend previous studies by demonstrating that the effectiveness of SEL is influenced not only by instructional practices but also by organizational support, school leadership, and stakeholder collaboration. The findings therefore reinforce the perspective that SEL should be understood as a whole-school approach rather than merely a classroom-based intervention.

Practically, this study suggests that school leaders should establish continuous professional development programmes to enhance teachers' digital pedagogical competence while strengthening partnerships with parents to ensure consistent character development at school and at home. Furthermore, involving school support teams such as the TPPK in monitoring students' social and emotional development can improve the sustainability and effectiveness of SEL implementation in the digital era.

### **3. Character Development Outcomes through Social Emotional Learning**

The findings demonstrate that integrating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into digital classroom practices contributed positively to students' character development, particularly in fostering empathy, responsibility, collaboration, and emotional self-regulation. These outcomes indicate that SEL supports not only students' academic learning but also their social and emotional growth, which are essential competencies for navigating the challenges of the digital era.

These findings are consistent with several recent studies conducted in Indonesia. Kurniawati (2025) reported that SEL enhances students' emotional regulation, interpersonal communication, and learning motivation by providing opportunities for reflection and collaborative learning. Likewise, Farida and Fauzi (2026) found that integrating character education with digital literacy strengthens students' responsibility and ethical behaviour when interacting in digital environments. Similarly, Hariyati and Badariah (2025) emphasized that character education in the Society 5.0 era should develop not only digital competence but also empathy, cooperation, and responsible decision-making. These studies support the present findings that SEL serves as an effective approach for strengthening students' character in elementary schools.

The findings are also supported by international research. Carpendale et al. (2025) demonstrated that students participating in SEL programmes showed significant improvements in empathy, peer relationships, emotional competence, and classroom engagement. Similarly, Brush et al. (2022) concluded that SEL contributes positively to students' social behaviour, emotional well-being, and academic achievement across diverse educational settings. The consistency between the present findings and international evidence suggests that the benefits of SEL are applicable across different educational and cultural contexts.

However, this study provides an important contribution by demonstrating that positive character development can still be achieved within technology-supported learning environments when teachers intentionally integrate SEL into everyday classroom activities. While previous studies have generally emphasized the effectiveness of SEL programmes, this study illustrates how digital learning can become a medium for nurturing empathy, responsibility, collaboration, and emotional self-regulation rather than being viewed solely as a potential risk to students' character development. This finding extends existing knowledge by showing that digital technology and character education can complement one another when supported by appropriate pedagogical practices.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings reinforce the proposition that character development is a holistic process resulting from the interaction between cognitive, social, emotional, and environmental factors. Integrating SEL into daily classroom instruction enables these dimensions to develop simultaneously, thereby strengthening students' capacity to build positive relationships, regulate emotions, and make responsible decisions.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that elementary schools should integrate SEL consistently into curriculum implementation, classroom instruction, and school culture. Teachers should be encouraged to design learning activities that promote collaboration, empathy, reflection, and responsible digital behaviour. At the policy level, educational authorities may consider incorporating SEL more explicitly into teacher professional development programmes and character education policies to ensure that students are equipped with the social-emotional competencies required in an increasingly digital society.

#### **D. Conclusions**

This study concludes that the integration of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into digital classroom practices effectively strengthens elementary school students' character by fostering empathy, responsibility, collaboration, and emotional self-regulation. The findings demonstrate that SEL can be successfully embedded into thematic instruction, collaborative learning, reflective activities, teacher modelling, and the meaningful use of digital media, making character education more relevant to the demands of the digital era.

The scientific contribution of this study lies in providing empirical evidence of how SEL is systematically implemented in an Indonesian elementary school through an integrated digital learning approach. Unlike previous studies that predominantly discussed SEL conceptually or evaluated its effectiveness in general educational settings, this research offers a context-specific model demonstrating how SEL can be embedded into everyday teaching practices while supporting character development in technology-enhanced classrooms. Consequently, the study enriches the literature on character education by bridging social-emotional learning with digital pedagogy in elementary education.

Practically, the findings provide guidance for school leaders, teachers, and policymakers. Schools are encouraged to integrate SEL into curriculum implementation, classroom instruction, and school culture while strengthening teachers' professional capacity to facilitate social-emotional competencies through digital learning. For policymakers, the findings highlight the importance of incorporating SEL into teacher professional

development programmes and character education policies to support students' holistic development in the digital era.

This study is limited by its qualitative design and its implementation in a single elementary school, which may restrict the transferability of the findings to different educational contexts. Future research is recommended to involve multiple schools from diverse regions, employ mixed-methods or longitudinal approaches, and investigate the long-term impact of SEL on students' academic achievement, digital citizenship, and character development. Such studies would provide broader empirical evidence to strengthen the sustainable implementation of SEL in elementary education.

## **E. Acknowledgement**

The researcher would like to express sincere gratitude to all parties who contributed to the completion of this study. Special appreciation is extended to the teachers, students, and parents of SDN 42 Palembang who generously shared their time, experiences, and perspectives, making it possible to gather rich and meaningful data. The support of the school leadership was invaluable in providing access to classrooms and documents that strengthened the validity of the findings.

Acknowledgement is also due to colleagues and mentors in the postgraduate program who offered constructive feedback during the preparation of the research design and manuscript. Their insights helped refine the focus on character education and social-emotional learning in the digital era. The encouragement from fellow researchers and reviewers provided motivation to ensure that this work meets academic standards and contributes to the ongoing discourse on educational innovation.

Finally, the researcher is deeply grateful to family members for their patience and moral support throughout the research process. Their understanding and encouragement created the conditions necessary to complete this study with dedication and perseverance.

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