Integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in Indonesian Elementary Schools: Literature Review

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Abstract
Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) at the elementary education level is important for supporting the development of students' social and emotional skills. This study aims to explore the strategies and challenges of integrating SEL into thematic learning in elementary schools. This study uses a qualitative approach through a literature review, which includes an analysis of various studies related to the application of SEL. The results show that the integration of SEL not only improves students' social and emotional skills but also contributes to academic success. However, challenges such as time constraints, teacher readiness, and stakeholder support remain obstacles to its implementation. This study emphasizes the importance of developing comprehensive education policies and continuous training for teachers to ensure the effectiveness of SEL implementation. Thus, social-emotional learning is expected to strengthen students' character and prepare them to face future challenges.

Keywords:
Social-Emotional Learning; Primary Education; Thematic Integration; Social Skills; Elementary Schools

A. INTRODUCTION

Learning is a process that involves social interaction, active participation, and interpersonal relationships between students and teachers. The learning process includes academic aspects as well as the development of students' social and emotional skills. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a crucial component of primary education. SEL can help students develop social skills (Kusnendi et al., 2025), emotional awareness (Roth & Erbacher, 2021) self-management(van de Sande et al., 2019). According to Mahoney et al. (2020), social skills, emotional awareness, and self-management are very important in preparing students to face various challenges in life. The CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) framework emphasizes that these five core SEL competencies contribute significantly to students' academic success, psychological well-being, and social adjustment. (Martinez-Yarza et al., 2023). This shows that SEL is important to be provided to students at the elementary education level.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has a significant impact on improving children's social and emotional aspects. Research by Jones et al., (2017) Shows an impact on social skills and emotional awareness in elementary school students. Meanwhile, according to Rica et al., (2023) The effectiveness of SEL programs can be improved through measurement instruments on achievement indicators. Students with special needs require adequate analysis to reduce gaps and adjustments to each individual's background. (Lee et al., 2024). SEL learning that takes into account the needs and characteristics of each student can encourage more effective and significant achievement.

Various studies on SEL research have been conducted, particularly at the elementary school level. Research on the implementation of SEL (Agustin, 2017; Ibanga et al., 2024; Miranda et al., 2024; Septya et al., 2024; van de Sande et al., 2019) Suggests that the application of social-emotional learning is very important and must be developed to prepare students to interact with a wider environment. Social and emotional learning needs to be instilled in school learning as a provision for students to face future challenges, such as violence, trauma, abuse, and so on. Therefore, this study was conducted as a literature review to summarize various studies on the application of social-emotional learning to the learning outcomes of elementary school students. This review focuses on social-emotional learning, which is expected to provide an in-depth and comprehensive overview of social-emotional learning.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) promotes good learning for the future. The application of SEL in Indonesia is limited because there is still a lack of understanding about it. In addition, comprehensive and contextual measurement instruments for social-emotional skills for elementary school students are still rare, with many measurement tools only targeting problematic behavior rather than the development of competencies as a whole. (Nakajima et al., 2019). Research specifically examining the integration of SEL in thematic learning is also very limited, as most studies focus on SEL programs in general, rather than their application in integrated cross-subject thematic models.

This study focuses on an in-depth examination of the strategies and challenges of integrating SEL into thematic learning in elementary schools, highlighting the role of teachers and the local context as key factors for success, and also discusses the obstacles and challenges of thematic and SEL integration. This research is important and urgent because the integration of SEL in thematic learning has the potential to strengthen the contextual character development and 21st-century skills of elementary school students. In addition, the results of this study can provide practical recommendations for teachers and policymakers to design thematic learning that is more effective and responsive to students' social-emotional needs.
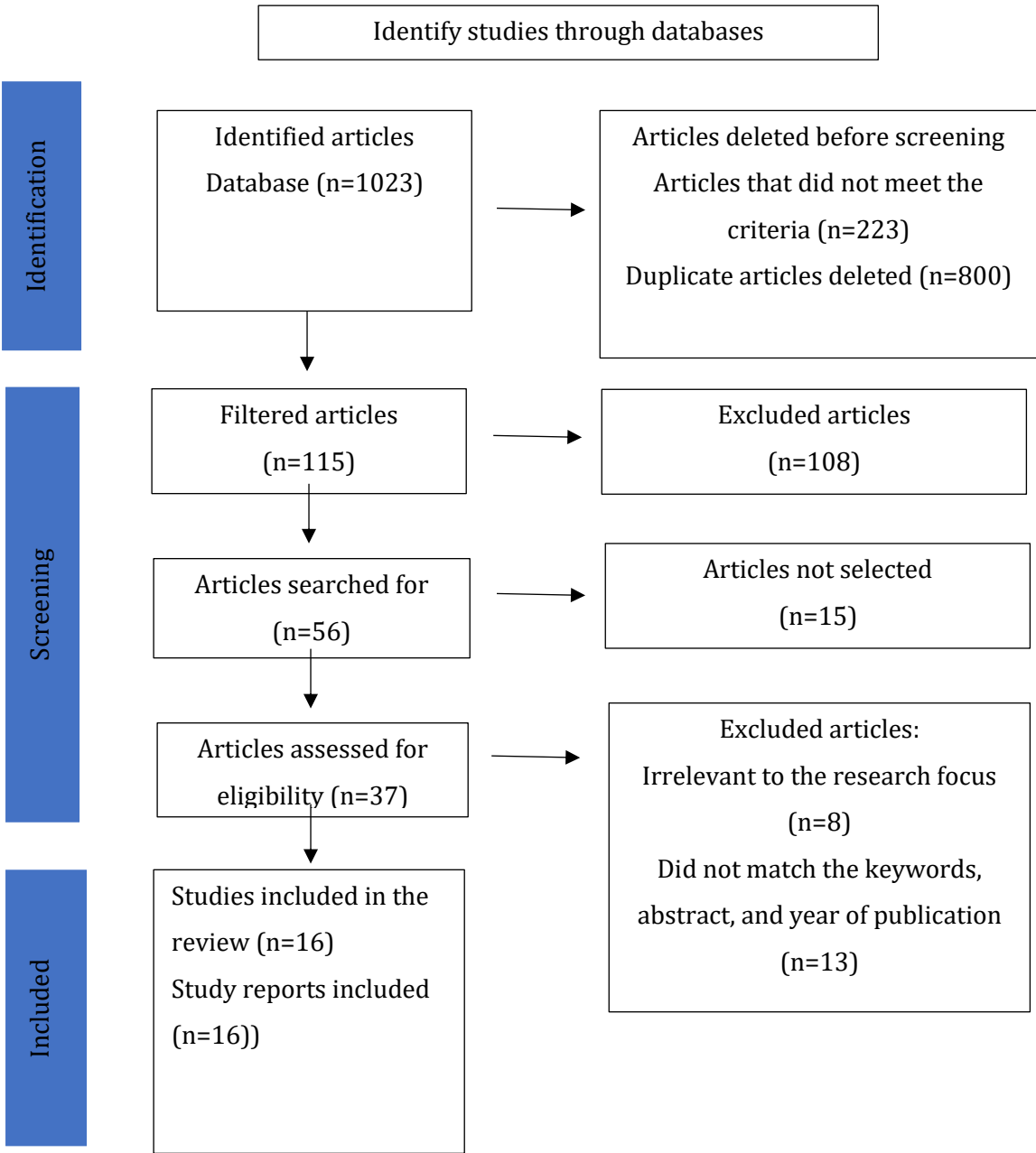
B. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature review method. This method was chosen to systematically collect, evaluate, and synthesize various relevant research findings on social-emotional learning in elementary schools. Through this approach, the researcher aims to build a deep understanding of the integration of social-emotional learning in elementary schools based on existing empirical evidence. The research process began by focusing on the research questions, which covered three main aspects: how thematic and SEL are related, how thematic and SEL are integrated in models and strategies, and what the obstacles and challenges to thematic and SEL integration are. The literature search process uses academic databases such as Publish or Perish, Google Scholar, Eric, and Garuda.

This study used several keywords such as "thematic," "social-emotional," and "elementary school" to find relevant articles. Then, the screening process was carried out in stages. The initial selection was based on the title and abstract, followed by a comprehensive review of articles that met the criteria. Articles included in the final analysis were publications from 2010 to 2025, written in Indonesian or English. Data extracted from each article included publication details such as the year of publication. The research focus of this article is the integration of social-emotional learning in elementary schools in Indonesia. The aspects of the literature review

examined were thematic learning and social-emotional learning. Google Docs was used to sort and organize the selected articles. This process ensured systematic data handling and avoided inconsistencies.

This information was then categorized into main themes according to the research focus, such as the integration of social and emotional learning, the relationship between thematic and SEL, thematic and SEL models and strategies, and the obstacles and challenges of thematic and SEL integration. The articles obtained were then analyzed. The researchers understand the data obtained, identify patterns, and discover themes through the data obtained by the researchers. The entire document selection and analysis process is visualized in the following flowchart.

Identify studies through databases

| Identification | Identified articles Database (n=1023) | → | Articles deleted before screening Articles that did not meet the criteria (n=223) Duplicate articles deleted (n=800) |

| Screening | Filtered articles (n=115) | → | Excluded articles (n=108) |

| | Articles searched for (n=56) | → | Articles not selected (n=15) |

| | Articles assessed for eligibility (n=37) | → | Excluded articles: Irrelevant to the research focus (n=8) Did not match the keywords, abstract, and year of publication (n=13) |

| Included | Studies included in the review (n=16) Study reports included (n=16)) | | |

C. RESULT & DISCUSSION

This section discusses the results of the literature review on the integration of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into thematic learning in Indonesian elementary schools. The reviewed

studies highlight how SEL supports students' emotional, social, and academic development while revealing challenges in implementation and teacher readiness.

Table 1. Research Findings on SEL in Indonesian Elementary Schools

No	Author / Year	Title	Research Findings
1	Khairunnisya, 2025	Pembelajaran Sosial Emosional : Konsep, Permasalahan, Solusi dan Gagasan Pengembangan di Sekolah Dasar	1. SEL plays a significant role in enhancing students' learning motivation, academic achievement, and social skills. 2. However, the current curriculum remains focused on academic achievement and pays limited attention to social and emotional aspects. This finding highlights the importance of developing these aspects for educational success.
2	Elvinasafira, 2025	Pembelajaran Sosial Emosional dalam Kurikulum Indonesia: Tinjauan Literatur dan Implikasinya	1. Social and emotional values (SEL) have been integrated into the Indonesian curriculum, particularly through the *Pancasila Student Profile* in the 2013 Curriculum and the *Merdeka Curriculum*. 2. Collaboration between schools, parents, and the health sector is essential to support SEL implementation. 3. Continuous teacher training is crucial to improving teachers' competence in applying SEL effectively.
3	Putri Ismaya et al., 2025	Analisis Pengaruh Kebiasaan Membaca Buku Dalam Mendukung Perkembangan Sosial Emosional Siswa Sekolah Dasar	1. Reading habits, particularly materials with social and emotional values, help students interact better with others by improving their understanding of characters and emotions—key components of social-emotional development. 2. Reading also aids students in managing stress and enhances their academic performance, contributing to their ability to overcome school-related challenges.
4	Rizka Malia Syafitri, 2022	Pengembangan Ensiklopedia : Seri Karakter Anak Bangsa Berbasis Social Emotional Learning Untuk Fase A Sekolah Dasar	The development of the *Character of the Nation's Children* Encyclopedia, based on SEL for Phase A, produced media that was proven valid and effective for learning. Material expert validation scored 4.36 (Highly Feasible), media expert validation scored 3.89 (Feasible), and user responses were positive. Effectiveness was indicated by an average gain score of 0.72 (High category).
5	Kelsey L. Kaspar & Susan L. Massey, 2023	Implementing Social-Emotional Learning in the Elementary Classroom	Effective SEL implementation improves academic performance, enhances school climate, and reduces student behavioral problems.
6	Eui Kyung Kim et al., 2024	Supporting Student Social Emotional Learning and Development	SEL contributes to students' long-term academic and personal success, summarizing seven contemporary studies providing empirical evidence on effective assessment tools (ASSIST) and efficient interventions (e.g., *Creating Compassion*, *Growth Mindset*). Future research is urged to expand sample diversity and ensure generalizability and sustainability of SEL outcomes across settings.
7	Nurvahana,	Strategi Efektif	This literature review identifies key strategies for

No	Author	Title	Findings
		2025 Mengintegrasikan Pembelajaran Sosial Emosional dalam Pembelajaran Abad Ke-21	integrating SEL in 21st-century education: thematic and project-based learning, fostering positive school culture, continuous teacher training, and the use of digital technology. It emphasizes the need for formative assessment to holistically measure SEL competencies and for comprehensive education policies to ensure sustainable SEL implementation.
8	Jelita Dwi Septya, 2024	The Role Of Social And Emotional Learning (SEL) In Growing The Social And Emotional Skills Of Primary School Students	1. Grade 2 students at Prestige Bilingual School already exhibit good social and emotional skills, though some need further improvement 2. The SEL program plays a vital role in fostering these social and emotional skills.
9	Amirah Al May Azizah & Maemonah, 2022	Penerapan Think Pair Share pada pembelajaran tematik: Analisis perkembangan sosial emosional siswa usia dasar	The encyclopedia-based media proved effective in improving students' understanding. Teacher assessments averaged 4.5 (Highly Feasible), and student responses were 90% positive.
10	Tri Cahyaning Tyas et al., 2024	Implementasi social emotional learning dalam muatan pembelajaran matematika materi pengukuran kelas IV disekolah dasar	The implementation of mathematics lessons integrated with SEL was carried out effectively through planning, implementation, and assessment stages. Teachers applied SEL using the CASEL framework through Explicit Instruction and Integration with Academic Learning, training all five SEL competencies through class activities such as expressing opinions, completing tasks on time, teamwork, and appreciation.
11	Elvianti Amri, 2025	Implementasi Pembelajaran Sosial Emosional Berdasarkan Kerangka CASEL di Sekolah Dasar	SEL implementation based on the CASEL framework was proven effective in enhancing empathy, self-management, and social relationship skills. It fostered a positive classroom climate and improved academic achievement (average increase of 11%), prosocial behavior, and reduced misconduct. However, challenges persist, particularly in under-resourced areas due to limited teacher training, scarce resources, and stigma that emotional learning is less important than academics.
12	Yulianto & Mushafanah, 2024	Implementasi Model Problem Based Learning Terintegrasi Social Emotional Learning Pada Pembelajaran Bahasa Indonesia	Integrating PBL and SEL in Grade IV Indonesian Language learning at SDN Sambirejo 02 Semarang showed positive outcomes. The model, addressing real-life issues like bullying through video analysis, fostered empathy, emotional regulation, and social responsibility. A significant correlation (0.55–0.78) was found between positive learning attitudes and cognitive achievement, proving that SEL-PBL integration enhances both social understanding and academic performance.
13	Pratiwi et al., 2024	Optimalisasi Pembentukan Karakter Siswa Sekolah Dasar Melalui Pembelajaran Social	SEL is a vital process that enables learners to effectively apply knowledge, attitudes, and social-emotional skills—essential for character development and coping with everyday challenges. Based on the CASEL framework.

Integration Strategy Thematic and SEL

Integration of Social Emotional Learning (SEL)into the thematic learning framework is recognized as an effective and sustainable strategy for developing students' competencies holistically, especially at the elementary school level (Murtiningsih, 2025). This approach ensures that social-emotional values are taught not as a separate subject, but as an intrinsic part of the daily learning process (Nurvahana, 2025). Based on a review of the literature, the following are the main models and strategies used to integrate SEL/PSE into thematic learning:

a. Curriculum Integration Strategy (Integrated SEL)

This strategy allows teachers to design holistic and contextual learning, where the physical, social, emotional, and mental development of students is viewed as an inseparable whole (Azizah & Maemonah, 2022). The integration of SEL in learning must be directly linked to daily learning activities to be effective, not just an additional program. In general, Cross-Disciplinary Integration is one of the most effective ways to incorporate SEL material into other curricula, such as literacy or mathematics, ensuring that SEL is applied throughout the day and taught regularly (Kaspar & Massey, 2022). Implemented in various subjects:

1) Bahasa Indonesia

Literacy classes can explore themes of empathy and perspective-taking through character analysis in stories (Dumbuya, 2023). Reading children's storybooks with social and emotional content plays a crucial role because it helps children gain an understanding of other people's feelings, manage their own emotions, and learn moral values. Activities like this strengthen self-awareness and social awareness competencies (Nurvahana, 2025).

2) Mathematics/Science

The integration of PSE values is carried out through a group work approach and collaborative problem solving. These activities train interpersonal skills and encourage the development of self-regulation skills, such as patience, focus, and emotional control when facing difficulties (Nurvahana, 2025). In a Science learning context, PSE integration is essential to help students develop critical thinking skills, communicate effectively, and work together with classmates. In addition, there is a significant correlation between managing socio-emotional conditions and student achievement, including in science learning (Ashdar, 2023)

3) Social Studies/Civics:

This subject is a very potent vehicle for shaping awareness of diversity, social justice, and social responsibility. Teachers can invite students to analyze real cases, evaluate the impact of individual decisions on groups or the environment, thereby strengthening ethical and responsible decision-making (Nurvahana, 2025). Civics education content, especially that which contains narratives about peaceful conflict resolution and cooperation building, is very much in line with the SEL approach. (Elvinasafira, 2025).

b. Learning Models in Thematic Integration

1) Think Pair Share Model

Think Pair Share is a cooperative learning model applied in thematic learning and designed to maximize students' social-emotional processes. SEL is a model that balances learning in cognitive and social-emotional aspects and can support success in students' social relationships (Azizah & Maemonah, 2022).

The Pair stage is where the teacher directs students to pair up (preferably randomly to encourage interaction) and discuss the topic. This stage helps students develop cooperation and create social interaction. The Share stage is when groups present the results of their discussions in front of the class. This stage is very important in optimizing social-emotional development because it can stimulate students' social enthusiasm and train them to communicate and have a spirit of social solidarity (Azizah & Maemonah, 2022)

2) Project-Based Learning (PjBL)

Project-based approach is highly suitable because it provides space for students to work in teams, solve real problems, and interact with various parties. In the Merdeka Curriculum, the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) strengthening project is designed as a platform

to instill values such as teamwork, critical thinking, and independence. This type of project is effective in building leadership, assertive communication, and social responsibility.

Challenges to Thematic Integration and SEL

The implementation of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in the thematic curriculum in elementary schools faces various barriers and challenges that have been identified by researchers. Some of the main challenges include time issues, teacher readiness, and resistance from stakeholders.

The implementation of SEL is often hampered by time constraints and a curriculum focus that emphasizes cognitive achievement. Kelsey Kaspar and Susan Massey reveal that teachers' main concern is the difficulty of finding time to incorporate SEL instruction into an already busy daily schedule. They explain that the elementary school curriculum is generally filled with literacy and mathematics lessons, so adding another component can feel burdensome for educators.

Furthermore, Kaspar and Massey note that opponents of SEL argue that more time should be focused on academic instruction rather than teaching social skills (soft skills). They worry that SEL will reduce valuable time for academic learning. This time constraint is considered one of the "potential barriers" that need to be considered in planning SEL implementation, along with financial considerations and support from stakeholders.

Human factors, especially teacher readiness, are also crucial determinants that often pose obstacles to PSE integration. According to Ibanga et al., the effectiveness of SEL is highly dependent on the role of teachers as key facilitators in the classroom. However, research shows a gap in understanding how teacher-related factors influence program implementation and outcomes. Khairunnisya identified that many teachers have not received specific training on SEL, so they tend to focus more on cognitive aspects and lack understanding of how to integrate SEL into daily learning.

Putri and Yulianti also highlighted the lack of adequate training for teachers as a major challenge in PSE implementation in Indonesia, an issue also acknowledged by Nurhadi. Meanwhile, Collie and colleagues add that if educators are unaware of their own social-emotional competencies, the process of teaching these skills can become a source of stress. Therefore, Nurvahana concludes that teachers' lack of understanding of PSE concepts and practices, as well as the lack of supportive professional training, are significant obstacles to implementation.

Other challenges include fragmented program implementation, resource support, and evaluation accuracy. According to Kaspar and Massey, difficulties can arise in finding funds in the budget to support SEL implementation, including funds needed for curriculum, personnel, and professional development. In the context of evaluation, Ibanga and colleagues explain that the effectiveness of SEL programs is often compromised by a misalignment between program goals and outcome measures. They note that programs aimed at improving conflict resolution skills may be evaluated based on a reduction in disciplinary actions or increased class participation, which may not necessarily reflect concrete improvements in skills.

In Indonesia, Elvinasafira found that PSE implementation still faces challenges such as policy inconsistencies between national policy and implementation at the school level. She also noted regional disparities in educational resources, which affect access to teacher training, materials, and supporting policies.

Obtaining full support from the school community and society is also an obstacle. According to Kaspar and Massey, gaining support from stakeholders is important, but some parties refuse because they are concerned that SEL will take time away from academic learning. Zhao, in Kaspar and Massey's view, argues that SEL can be manipulative and attempts to shape students' personalities according to uniform expectations, thereby eliminating students' individuality. Meanwhile, Stringer notes concerns that social-emotional learning may influence students' future political views.

In the context of inclusivity, Cipriano and McCarthy point out that the field of SEL currently lacks knowledge about the impact of these programs on students from marginalized backgrounds. Ibanga and colleagues add that standardized SEL approaches may not be sufficient

to address this diversity, and English language learners, for example, require a more culturally sensitive SEL approach.

D. CONCLUSION

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) plays an important role in developing students' social and emotional skills at the elementary level because it can improve social interactions between students and teachers, as well as cognitive, psychomotor, and attitudinal competencies. SEL can also increase students' motivation to learn and improve their interpersonal relationships to face daily challenges. The implementation of SEL in learning still faces various challenges and obstacles. The obstacles to SEL in learning are time constraints, teacher readiness, and support from stakeholders. The curriculum emphasizes academic achievement and neglects social and emotional aspects. The integration of SEL into the thematic curriculum can provide a more holistic and contextual approach, supporting the development of student character and 21st-century skills.

Practical recommendations for teachers and policymakers include ongoing training, development of comprehensive measurement instruments, and collaboration between schools, parents, and communities. Strengthening social-emotional learning in elementary schools not only contributes to academic success but also to students' social and emotional well-being, preparing them to become well-rounded individuals capable of facing future challenges

Further research on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) should focus on several key areas to enhance its implementation and effectiveness in elementary education. Longitudinal studies can assess the long-term impacts of SEL on academic and emotional outcomes, while investigations into teacher training programs can identify the most effective methods for preparing educators. Developing comprehensive measurement tools tailored for elementary students will facilitate better assessment of social and emotional competencies. Additionally, exploring models of collaboration among schools, parents, and communities can enhance engagement and support for SEL initiatives. Research on innovative strategies for curriculum integration, qualitative studies on barriers to SEL implementation, and the role of technology in facilitating SEL will provide valuable insights. Collectively, these research efforts can inform practices and policies that strengthen SEL, ultimately promoting holistic student development.

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