

Balancing Local Cultural Values and Global Character Education: A Systematic Review of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in Primary Schools

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Abstract

Globalization in the 21st century has brought global character values such as collaboration, critical thinking, and international insight to become increasingly dominant in education. However, this dominance often shifts local character values such as responsibility, discipline, social awareness, and empathy that have been the foundation of basic education in Indonesia. The imbalance between the two poses a challenge in forming a generation that has strong local character while being ready to compete globally. This article aims to systematically examine the role of the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) approach in bridging local and global character values at the elementary school level. The method used is the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of 18 scientific articles published between 2019 and 2024. The results of the study show that the implementation of SEL in the elementary school curriculum is able to develop global character values, such as cooperation, tolerance, and reflective thinking, without ignoring local cultural values such as mutual cooperation, responsibility, and respect for diversity. SEL that is community-based and integrated with local cultural values has proven effective in forming a balanced character of students. Thus, the implementation of SEL in elementary schools needs to be carried out contextually, respecting culture, and integrated into the learning process so that character education is comprehensive and relevant in facing global challenges.

Keywords: SEL, local character, global character, elementary school, character education

Introduction

The entry of the 21st century is marked by a very rapid pace of globalization. This process brings in various global character values, such as the ability to work together across cultures, critical thinking, and readiness to face the challenges of the international world (CASEL, 2020; Blewitt et al., 2021). Although these values are very important for forming students who are ready to become world citizens, their existence often clashes with local character values that have long been part of basic education in Indonesia. Local values such as responsibility, discipline, social concern, and empathy are still very relevant

for forming a strong personality rooted in one's own culture (Arif et al., 2021; Adiba, 2020). The tension between these two approaches shows the need for an educational model that can bridge local and global values in a balanced way and in accordance with the student's context.

In this case, the *Social Emotional Learning* (SEL) approach is seen as having great potential. SEL focuses on developing students' social and emotional abilities, including self-awareness, self-control, empathy, relationship building skills, and responsible decision-making skills (CASEL, 2020). Various studies have shown that proper implementation of SEL can help improve

students' positive behavior (Durlak et al., *in press*), build healthy interactions in the classroom (Lubaba & Alfiansyah, 2022), and reduce negative behavior and support academic success (Ninčević, 2024).

However, in the field, the implementation of SEL has not been fully integrated with local cultural values. Studies such as those conducted by Natanti et al. (2024) do show that social emotional learning in elementary schools can strengthen students' positive character. However, there have not been many studies that systematically evaluate how SEL can be a bridge between local character education and global values, especially at the elementary school level.

Based on this, this article aims to systematically review the literature that discusses the integration of SEL in the formation of elementary school students' characters. The main focus of this study is how SEL can support the harmonization of local cultural values and global characters. The results of this study are expected to be a reference in developing SEL implementation strategies that are not only relevant to global challenges, but also in accordance with the cultural environment in which students learn.

Literature Review

Character education and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) have been widely discussed as essential in preparing students for the 21st century. Globally, SEL is associated with better academic performance, emotional regulation, and pro-social behavior (Blewitt et al., 2020; Durlak et al., *in press*). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020) identifies five core SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, which align with global character goals. International studies also highlight that SEL strengthens teacher outcomes (Blewitt et al., 2020), fosters positive classroom climate (Slamet Lestari & Nur Azizah, 2023), and supports the development of 21st-century skills such as critical thinking and global responsibility (Paik et al., 2024; Skaar & Townsley, 2024).

In the Indonesian context, SEL shows higher effectiveness when adapted to cultural traditions. Research emphasizes embedding SEL in school culture (Esti Setiawati et al., 2023), integrating it into different subjects (Fildaniyah et al., 2024), and aligning it with the Pancasila Student Profile (Lubaba & Alfiansyah, 2022). Studies further demonstrate that SEL can cultivate responsibility and discipline among elementary students (Adiba, 2020), strengthen empathy and social awareness (Arif et al., 2021), and shape positive attitudes in lower-grade students (Natanti et al., 2024). SEL has also been shown to respond to the broader challenges of globalization by equipping students with resilience and cultural adaptability (Herlina et al., 2024; Sugiharto et al., 2024).

Moreover, recent studies stress the importance of incorporating local cultural values into SEL practices. For instance, contextualization of SEL based on Indonesian culture helps internalize character values more effectively (Irawati Nuraeni et al., 2023), while innovative media such as Sukuraga demonstrate how traditional values can be integrated into modern pedagogy (Nurasiah et al., 2025). Similarly, the Merdeka Curriculum provides a flexible platform for embedding SEL holistically in elementary schools (Olida Diah Agustina et al., 2025). These insights suggest that SEL is most impactful when it bridges global competencies with values rooted in Indonesian identity.

Despite these promising findings, systematic evidence on how SEL can simultaneously serve as a bridge between local cultural values and global citizenship education remains limited. While several studies highlight its benefits ranging from academic achievement (Ninčević, 2024) to cultural preservation (Nurasiah et al., 2025) few explicitly evaluate its dual role in harmonizing local and global values at the elementary school level. This gap justifies the relevance of the present systematic review, which synthesizes insights from 18 recent studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of SEL's potential in balancing local character education with global citizenship demands.

Method

Setting and Participants

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to explore how Social Emotional Learning (SEL) can bridge local and global character values in elementary education. The review covered publications from 2019 to 2024, focusing on studies conducted at the elementary school level in both Indonesian and international contexts. A total of 18 peer-reviewed articles were selected as the primary dataset.

Data Collection

Articles were retrieved from reputable databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, and DOAJ. Keywords such as *social emotional learning*, *character education*, *local values*, *global citizenship*, *primary school*, and *21st-century skills* were applied. The inclusion criteria required that studies:

1. Specifically addressed SEL in elementary school,
2. Connected SEL with character education,
3. Discussed local cultural values or global competencies.

Exclusion criteria included opinion papers, studies limited to secondary or higher education, and works unrelated to SEL-character integration.

Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) was applied to identify recurring themes across the selected literature. The analysis focused on four main aspects:

1. Integration of local character values in SEL,
2. Culture-based learning strategies,
3. Challenges in combining local and global character values,
4. Policy implications for elementary education.

Synthesis

The findings from all 18 studies were narratively synthesized to address the main

research question: how can SEL serve as a bridge between local cultural values and global citizenship education? The synthesis process emphasized the relationships between SEL practices, students' cultural backgrounds, and the demands of globalization.

Result and Discussion

The systematic review of 18 selected articles reveals diverse perspectives on the implementation of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in elementary schools. Overall, the findings indicate that SEL contributes significantly to the formation of both local and global character values. Studies conducted in different contexts emphasize that SEL not only supports the development of 21st-century global competencies, such as critical thinking, collaboration, and intercultural understanding, but also strengthens local cultural values including empathy, responsibility, and *gotong royong*.

To provide a clearer overview, the synthesis of the 18 reviewed articles is presented in Table 1. This table summarizes the main focus, authors, and key findings of each study, allowing us to identify consistent patterns as well as contextual differences across research.

Several research results relevant to the topic *Balancing Local Cultural Values and Global Character Education: A Systematic Review of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in Primary Schools* are presented systematically in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Synthesis of Findings from 18 Reviewed Articles

Article Title	Writer	Key Findings
<i>Integrating Social and Emotional Learning into Elementary School Learning</i>	Irawati Nuraeni et al (2023)	Contextualization of SEL based on local culture makes it easier to understand students' character values.
<i>SEL Program as an Effort to Form Students' Responsible Character</i>	Adiba (2020)	SEL effectively builds responsibility through emotional regulation training.

<i>Cultivating Socially Caring Characters in Elementary School Students</i>	Arif et al. (2021)	Collaborative-based SEL encourages students' social awareness and empathy.	<i>Ponašanje Učenika</i>		behavior and academic achievement.
<i>Does Curriculum-Based SEL Strengthen Teacher Outcomes?</i>	Blewitt et al. (2020)	SEL strengthens teacher outcomes and shapes 21st century competencies	<i>Cultural Values' Integration in Character Development</i>	Nurasiah et al. (2025)	Local values can be integrated into creative learning media such as Sukuraga
<i>What is SEL?</i>	CASEL (2020)	Five core domains of SEL support global character formation	<i>Implementation of SEL in the Merdeka Curriculum</i>	Olida Diah Agustina et al. (2025)	SEL supports flexible and holistic independent learning
<i>What We Know and Need to Find Out about SEL Programs</i>	Durlak et al. (in press)	SEL has a significant impact on prosocial behavior and academic achievement.	<i>A Global Community-Based Approach to SEL</i>	Paik et al. (2024)	A community approach is important to combine local and global values.
<i>Internalization of Character Values Through School Culture</i>	Esti Setiawati et al. (2023)	School culture becomes an effective medium for integrating character values	<i>Integrating SEL and Standards-Based Grading</i>	Skaar & Townsley (2024)	Alignment of assessment and SEL is necessary for effective character learning.
<i>PSE Literature Review in Science Subjects</i>	Fildaniyah et al. (2024)	SEL can be integrated across subjects for character building	<i>Implementation of SEL in Elementary School</i>	The Last Supper (2023)	SEL creates a classroom climate that supports students' emotional development.
<i>Educational Character in the Era of Globalization</i>	Herlina et al. (2024)	Character education must respond to global cultural challenges	<i>The Impact of Globalization on the Social and Cultural Development of Elementary School Students</i>	Sugiharto et al. (2024)	Globalization affects students' cultural identity, SEL can be a counterbalance
<i>Analysis of the Implementation of Pancasila Student Profiles</i>	Lubaba & Alfiansyah (2022)	SEL is in line with the Pancasila Student Profile in strengthening character			
<i>Analysis of the Influence of PSE on Student Characteristics</i>	Natanti et al. (2024)	SEL implementation in lower elementary school grades is effective in strengthening positive character			
<i>Utjecaj SEL na Uspjeh i</i>	Nincevic (2024)	SEL improves students' social			

According to Table 1, the SEL approach makes a major contribution in shaping students' character both locally and globally. Several international studies (e.g., Blewitt et al., Durlak et al., Paik et al.) emphasize that SEL implementation has been proven to encourage 21st-century competencies, including critical thinking, cross-cultural communication, and global responsibility.

In the Indonesian context (Irawati Nuraeni et al., Natanti et al., Adiba, and Sugiharto et al.), SEL demonstrates higher effectiveness when adapted to local culture. Values such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), responsibility, and politeness are more easily internalized when SEL strategies are linked to students' everyday lives and local traditions.

The synthesis also highlights the importance of integrating both local and global perspectives. SEL not only prepares students to adapt globally but also grounds them in local cultural wisdom. This duality is reinforced by the community- and culture-based approaches proposed by Paik et al. (2024), as well as the call for improved teacher training noted by Skaar and Townsley (2024) to ensure successful SEL implementation.

In summary, contextual and culture-based SEL practices show strong potential to bridge two streams of character education that remain a challenge in the era of globalization.

Conclusion

This systematic review confirms that the *Social Emotional Learning* (SEL) approach has an important role in shaping the character of students who are able to balance local values that are deeply rooted in the nation's culture and global values that are the demands of 21st century life. Through an analysis of 18 relevant scientific articles, it was found that SEL is not only able to develop global competencies such as cross-cultural collaboration, effective communication, and ethical decision-making, but can also simultaneously strengthen character based on local values, such as mutual cooperation, social responsibility, empathy, and respect for others.

In the context of basic education in Indonesia, the SEL approach shows great potential as a bridge between character education rooted in local wisdom and the need to prepare students to become resilient and competitive global citizens. The application of SEL contextualized with local cultural values has proven to be more effective in building understanding and appreciation of authentic character values. Students not only learn to recognize and manage their emotions, but are also invited to understand their role in the wider social and cultural environment, both locally and globally.

In addition, the results of the study also show that the integration of local and global values in learning through SEL does not have to be two contradictory things, but can strengthen each other if applied properly.

Global values can be combined with traditional values that are still relevant, resulting in a profile of students who are not only academically intelligent, but also emotionally mature, rooted in the noble values of their nation, and ready to face global challenges wisely.

Overall, the findings in this study reinforce the urgency to implement SEL more broadly, with an approach that is adaptive, inclusive, and oriented to the socio-cultural context in which students are located. This requires synergy between the development of educational policies, teacher capacity, and support from the school community and society. Without such efforts, character education will lose its essence and become irrelevant to the challenges faced by students today and in the future.

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