

# Analyzing the role of social emotional learning principles in cultivating tolerance among elementary school

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## Abstract

Intolerance is a crucial issue that threatens social cohesion, especially in primary education environments, which is the foundation for character building. This study aims to analyze in depth the role of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) principles on the formation of students' attitudes of tolerance in elementary schools. The research approach used was a mixed methods approach with a sequential explanatory design. Quantitative data was collected through questionnaires distributed to 125 students, while qualitative data was obtained through focus group discussions (FGD) involving seven teachers. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to capture the level of SEL competency achievement, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of SEL contribution. The research findings indicate variations in the achievement of SEL competencies; social awareness and self-awareness competencies are in the moderate category, while responsible decision-making competencies are in the low category. Further thematic analysis reveals four main contributions of SEL practices to tolerance, namely: (1) as a conflict management strategy, (2) internalized through the hidden curriculum, (3) formed through a habit-forming mechanism, and (4) facing pedagogical structural challenges. The implications of the research are in the form of a comprehensive SEL principles integration model, covering three fundamental aspects: strengthening teacher capacity, integrating.

## Introduction

Contemporary global society is faced with the reality of increasingly complex diversity. On the one hand, intercultural connections open up opportunities for mutual enrichment, but on the other, the potential for horizontal conflict triggered by issues of identity, differences in belief, and perception is increasing. In the Indonesian context, this challenge is crucial, especially in shaping the next generation capable of peaceful coexistence. Intolerance, which often manifests in the form of bullying, hate speech, and discrimination in various sectors (Pradana et al. 2024), demonstrates the urgency of increasing the instillation of values of tolerance from an early age (Ihsan et al. 2025). Formal education, particularly at the elementary school level, plays a strategic role as the primary foundation in the formation of individual character and values. Various data reveal that intolerance and violence are still prevalent, particularly in the education sector. According to data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) and the Indonesian Education Monitoring Network (JPPI), there has been a drastic increase in cases of violence in educational settings, from 285 in 2023 to 573 in 2024. As found in the study, (Maryam & Fatmawati 2024) (Sidik et al. 2024) 31% of these cases were bullying. Meanwhile, in 2025, this data is supported by (Anggito & Sartono 2022; Muhimmah et al. 2025) of the 1,052 cases of child rights violations, 26% involved

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elementary school students. Overall, this data indicates that the educational environment is still not entirely safe for students.

Previous research on efforts to foster tolerance in educational settings has generally been dominated by cognitive-informative approaches. These studies have largely focused on multicultural education and Pancasila education, which aim to build conceptual understanding of diversity and human rights (Banks 2021; Cohen, 2023; Retnasari et al. 2024; Spannring et al. 2023). Other approaches highlight the role of Pancasila Education in instilling democratic values and human rights. This approach assumes that increased knowledge about differences will linearly foster tolerant attitudes. However, there remains a gap between students' knowledge of tolerance and their actual behavior in the field (Amilleanda 2022; Nuryadi et al. 2022). This indicates an area that has not been adequately explored the role of Social and Emotional Learning as the affective foundation for the internalization of tolerance values. Although empathy, emotion regulation, and relational skills are crucial in determining an individual's response to differences, these SEL components are rarely positioned as core variables in school tolerance development strategies. Therefore, this study specifically highlights the gap between cognitive and socio-emotional approaches by examining how the integration of SEL can bridge the gap between "knowing" tolerance and "being" tolerant.

This study aims to examine the relationship between Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and tolerance among elementary school students. Existing literature has largely discussed SEL in the context of improving academic achievement and self-regulation (Anjarwati et al. 2024) and tolerance as part of normative citizenship education. However, specifically, studies such as those by (Levin & Segev 2023) tend to foster tolerance through a cognitive-informative approach or the indoctrination of moral values without integrating emotional competencies and interpersonal skills, which are core to the SEL framework. This approach neglects the affective and relational dimensions, such as how students manage emotions when facing differences, empathize with other perspectives, or actively build cross-group relationships. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study not only measures the correlation between the implementation of five core SEL competencies and tolerance levels but also explores the subjective process of internalizing these values in everyday interactions at school, thus addressing a gap that has not been empirically explored by previous research. More specifically, the objectives of this study are to (1) identify opportunities and challenges for implementing SEL principles in elementary schools; (2) explore how learning processes that integrate SEL principles contribute to the formation of students' understanding and tolerant behavior; and (3) formulate an effective model for integrating SEL principles to foster tolerance in elementary education environments.

## Methods

This study employed a mixed methods approach with a sequential explanatory design to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of Social and Emotional Learning principles in developing tolerance in elementary school students (Creswell et al. 2007). Social and Emotional Learning principles in fostering tolerance in elementary school students. This design was implemented in two stages. The initial stage of the research involved collecting and analyzing quantitative data to measure the level of SEL principles implementation and students' tolerance levels. The second stage was the collection and analysis of qualitative data aimed at explaining, deepening, and interpreting the quantitative findings, particularly regarding the process of internalizing SEL values in the school environment.

The population in this study includes all fourth-grade students and teachers in elementary schools throughout Sleman District, Yogyakarta. To obtain in-depth and comprehensive data, this study combines quantitative and qualitative approaches through the application of different sampling techniques. During the quantitative data collection phase, 125 students were selected using simple random sampling from several schools within the Sariharjo Cluster. Meanwhile, for qualitative data, this study involved seven teachers, comprising classroom teachers and Pancasila Education teachers. Teachers were selected using purposive sampling based on the criteria of having at least three years of teaching experience and being actively involved in student character development activities. The decision to involve teachers as qualitative participants was based on their central role as facilitators and direct observers of students' social-emotional learning processes in the classroom (Patton, 2002).

Data collection in this study was conducted using several techniques to ensure triangulation and data depth (Milles et al. 1994). First, a Likert-scale questionnaire was distributed to 125 students to measure two main variables: (1) students' perceptions of the implementation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) principles at school, and (2) students' levels of tolerance. Second, qualitative data were collected through Focus Group Discussions involving seven selected teachers. The discussions were facilitated by the researcher using a semi-structured guide that explored teachers' perceptions regarding the implementation of SEL, strategies for fostering tolerance, and challenges faced in the field. Each FGD session was recorded using an audio recorder after obtaining consent from all participants.

The questionnaire was developed based on the SEL theoretical framework from CASEL and UNESCO's tolerance indicators, consisting of 13 items across five main variables: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship-Building Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making. Content validity was tested through expert judgment by two experts in Character Education and Child Development Psychology, who assessed the alignment of the items with the indicators as well as the clarity of the language for fourth-grade elementary school students. The results of the reliability test using JASP software are presented in the following table.

**Table 1.** Frequentist Scale Reliability Statistics

Estimate	McDonald's $\omega$
Point estimate	0.712
95% CI lower bound	0.652
95% CI upper bound	0.769

*Note.* The following item correlated negatively with the scale: Q14.

Next, quantitative data analysis was performed using JASP statistical software version 0.18.3.0. The analysis began with descriptive statistics to provide an overview of the SEL principles implementation scores and student tolerance levels, presented in the form of averages. Next, qualitative data analysis was obtained from FGD transcripts which were analyzed thematically with the help of ATLAS.ti software. The analysis process followed the recommended steps, (Braun & Clark 2022) including: (1) open coding, in which the researcher reads the data repeatedly and codes the sections relevant to the research focus; (2) axial coding, which involves grouping codes into broader categories based on conceptual relationships; and (3) selective coding, which involves formulating the main themes that emerge from the data. To ensure data validity, methodological triangulation was conducted by comparing data from the FGDs with data.

## Results

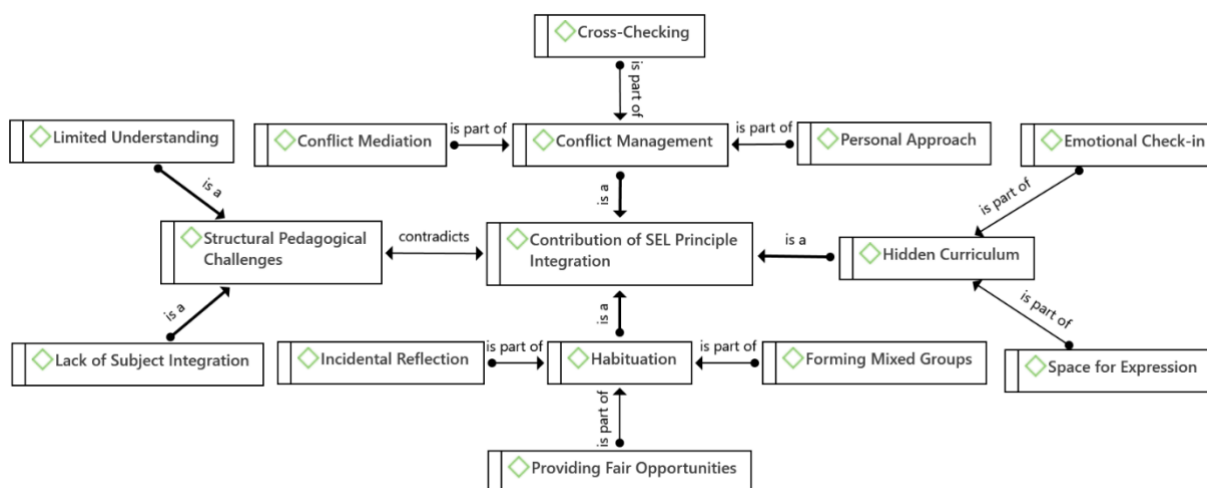
The research results are presented in two main sections according to the approach used: quantitative data from the questionnaire and qualitative data from the Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Based on the quantitative data analysis conducted, this identification was obtained through measuring the five core competencies of Social Emotional Learning (SEL). The analysis results show variations in the level of achievement for each competency. The following is a complete description of the average score and category for each statement item in each SEL competency as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Recommendations for Integration Models of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Principles

SEL Competencies	Statement Items	Average	Category
Self-Awareness	I am able to mention my strengths.	3.33	Currently
	I don't feel confident expressing my opinion	2.36	Currently
	I am able to complete difficult tasks.	3.13	Currently
Self-Management	I can wait my turn patiently.	3.35	Currently
	I'm afraid to ask for help.	1.94	Low
	I dare to admit my mistakes.	3.36	Currently
	I have learned to manage emotions.	3.29	Currently
	I help friends who are sad/in trouble.	3.53	Currently
Social Awareness	The teacher invites a discussion about respecting differences.	3.62	Currently
	I like to be friends with anyone.	3.51	Currently
Relationship Skills	I listen to different opinions of friends.	3.32	Currently
	Friends often disturb during learning.	2.92	Currently
Responsible Decision-Making	I think about the consequences before acting.	1.66	Low

\*Note: Category: Low (1.00 - 2.33), Medium (2.34 - 3.66), High (3.67 - 5.00)

The data in the table above reveals variations in achievement levels across the five SEL competencies. Social awareness and self-awareness were noted as having the greatest development opportunities. Meanwhile, the most fundamental challenge was seen in responsible decision-making, which fell into the low category, particularly in the indicator of the ability to consider consequences before acting. Thematic analysis of Focus Group Discussion (FGD) data revealed how learning processes integrated with SEL principles contribute to the formation of students' understanding and tolerant behavior. Based on the analysis, these contributions were identified in four main interrelated themes, namely (1) Conflict Management, (2) Hidden Curriculum, (3) Habituation, and (4) Structural Pedagogical Challenges.



**Figure 1.** Contribution of SEL Principles Integration

Based on the analysis of the identified themes, conflict management emerged as the most concrete contribution. Teachers responsively used moments of conflict between students as a means of SEL learning, as expressed by one informant.

*“As a form of social emotional learning, usually if there is a conflict, I try to call them one by one to ask and resolve the problems they are facing.” (R2)*

The second is the hidden curriculum, where SEL values and tolerance are taught indirectly through teacher responses to spontaneous situations. As explained by respondents

“I’ll take the example of when there was a commotion outside the classroom, I used it as a reflection for the children to provide an understanding of self-improvement and self-control.” (R4)

Third, habituation through classroom routines has proven effective. Simple practices like checking in with students' emotional states form the foundation of self-awareness. Despite these good practices, structural pedagogical challenges emerged as a fourth significant theme. Teachers acknowledged that SEL implementation has been spontaneous and not based on a comprehensive understanding, thus hampering its effectiveness. This was acknowledged by informants.

*“I have never received training or practice on social emotional learning, so I don't really understand it yet.” (R7)*

*“We actually also have an emotional zone, using feeling sticks and “how do you feel” posters, usually we do this when we enter the classroom and when we go home from school.” (R2)*

Based on a synthesis of competency principles and a thematic analysis of SEL contributions, an effective model for integrating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) principles to foster tolerance in elementary education settings was formulated. This model is designed to address challenges while optimizing existing potential and is structured into three main aspects, as outlined in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Recommendations for the Integration Model of Social Emotional Learning Principles

No	Aspect	Description	Quotation
1.	Strengthening Teacher Capacity	a. SEL understanding provision b. SEL training	“Actually, we as teachers also need guidance and training to design activities that explicitly target specific SEL competencies, but so far we have only implemented them spontaneously without any clear guidance.” (R1)
2.	Integration of Contextual Approaches	a. Morning meeting b. Check-in/Check-out c. Daily reflection d. Integration in subjects	“Every day, usually in the morning before lessons, I always ask how the children are, are they enthusiastic or not?” (R2)  “I think it’s important to self-reflect on what you like and dislike about learning/teachers, as it can provide a deeper understanding of how we assess other people’s perspectives and opinions.” (R5)  “Actually, we also have an emotional zone, using sticks and “how do you feel” posters, usually we do this when we enter the classroom and when we go home from school.” (R6)
3.	Active Learning Methods	a. Simulation/ Roleplay b. Game-Based Learning c. Real Action Project d. Animated Video	“Sometimes what is done is linking activities with Pancasila Education material, for example, such as deliberations to practice decision-making.” (R1)  “Maybe this is a simulation game, because it can also be an attraction for children to learn too” (R7)

This model offers a comprehensive approach that focuses not only on students but also on strengthening the capacity of teachers as primary facilitators. The combination of strengthening teachers' theoretical foundations, creating an environment rich in SEL practices, and utilizing relevant methods is expected to address the challenge of low responsible decision-making competency and significantly foster tolerant behavior in the school environment and focuses on three main aspects: (1) strengthening teacher

capacity through ongoing training, (2) integrating contextual approaches through classroom routines such as morning meetings and daily reflections, and (3) implementing active learning methods such as simulations and collaborative projects that specifically target strengthening responsible decision-making skills.

**Table 4.** Summary of Findings, Challenges, and SEL Integration Models for Fostering Tolerance

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Findings/Components</b>	<b>Key Challenges</b>
SEL Competencies	Social awareness, self-awareness, and responsible decision making	Low competence in responsible decision making
SEL Contributions	Conflict management, hidden curriculum, habit formation	The gap between feelings and actual actions
Integration Models	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Teacher empowerment</li> <li>2. Contextual approach</li> <li>3. Active learning methods</li> </ol>	Spontaneous implementation without a comprehensive understanding on the part of the teacher

## Discussion

### Opportunities and Challenges of Social Emotional Competence Principles

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data in this study provides a comprehensive picture of the landscape of students' social-emotional learning. Quantitatively, an analysis of the five core competencies of social emotional learning from the CASEL framework reveals significant variations in mastery. Specifically, Table 1 highlights striking disparities. The competencies of social awareness and self-awareness are on a fairly solid foundation, with average scores above 3.29. Conversely, the competency of responsible decision-making is at the lowest point, at only 1.66 Low Category.

These quantitative findings are supported by qualitative data indicating that indicators such as "willingness to help friends" and "openness in making friends" reflect the presence of empathy and adequate self-understanding among students. This is consistent with Piaget's theory of moral development, which states that elementary school-aged children begin to be able to interact socially while taking others' perspectives into account (Habsy et al. 2023; Pakpahan & Saragih 2022). This capacity is fundamental capital in fostering a tolerant attitude, considering that tolerance is rooted in the ability to understand and appreciate differences (Banks, 2020; Muh Hambali & Atim 2024).

On the other hand, the primary gap was found in responsible decision-making competencies. The lowest score on the "considering consequences before acting" indicator average 1.66 confirms that although students possess the capacity for empathy, they still face obstacles in integrating ethical considerations and the anticipation of long-term consequences into their actual behavior. This finding aligns with Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which places elementary school-aged children in the concrete operational stage, where abstract thinking about future impacts has not yet fully developed (Purnomo & Hartono 2024; Santrock 2018). This lack of competence has the potential to become a major obstacle to the internalization of the value of tolerance, given that tolerant behavior requires self-control and careful consideration of the impact of one's actions on others.

### The Contribution of SEL Practices in Shaping Tolerant Behavior

Further analysis of the two datasets explains how tolerant behavior can develop despite challenges posed by low levels of responsible decision-making competence. Quantitative data show that although this competence is low, two other social-emotional competencies social awareness and relationship skills fall into the "Moderate" category scores 3.32–3.53. Students' capacity to "help a sad friend" and "listen to differing opinions" serves as important social capital for the development of tolerance. Meanwhile, a thematic analysis of the focus group discussions revealed that the contribution of social and emotional learning to tolerance occurs through a complex and interconnected process, identified in four main themes. First, conflict management as the most concrete contribution. This approach not only resolves short-term issues but also teaches negotiation skills, empathy, and perspective-taking which are at the core

of relationship skills. By listening to each party involved in the conflict, teachers facilitate students' understanding of different perspectives, which directly fosters tolerance (Espelage et al. 2022; Palmquist et al. 2025; Wardani et al. 2025). Second, hidden curriculum. SEL values and tolerance are taught indirectly through teachers' responses to spontaneous situations, such as using "noise outside the classroom" as a basis for reflection on self-control. This demonstrates that the classroom climate and teachers' role modeling play a crucial role in shaping students' character, even more so than explicit instruction (Pradana & Sundawa, 2023; Shengyao et al. 2024).

Furthermore, students also learn from how teachers interpret and respond to everyday realities. Third, habituation through classroom routines such as checking in on students' emotional states has been shown to be effective in building self-awareness. Practices such as checking in on students' emotional states have proven effective in fostering self-awareness. These practices help students identify and name their own feelings a crucial first step in self-emotional regulation (Collie 2022; Rahayu et al. 2023). Beyond the contributions mentioned above, there are structural and pedagogical challenges that can hinder the effectiveness of SEL. Teachers acknowledge that SEL practices to date have been spontaneous and not grounded in a comprehensive understanding due to a lack of training. These findings highlight the gap between existing best practices and the need for a more systematic and planned approach. This aligns with the view (Addzaky et al. 2025; Asrial et al. 2022; Yadati et al. 2024) that without a thorough understanding of the SEL framework, teachers may miss opportunities to intentionally target specific competencies, such as Responsible Decision-Making, which actually has the lowest scores.

### **An Effective SEL Principles Integration Model for Cultivating Tolerance**

Based on a synthesis of student competency profiles quantitative and identified challenges and good practices, a comprehensive SEL integration model was formulated. This model is designed to address the need for competency improvement, particularly responsible decision-making, through three main aspects. First, strengthening teacher capacity which is the foundation for successful SEL implementation. This directly addresses the structural pedagogical challenges expressed by teachers (R1, R7). Providing teachers with ongoing SEL understanding and training is an absolute prerequisite. Teachers need not only to understand the five core SEL competencies but also to design activities that explicitly target them (Firozabad & Ghorbani 2022; Nuraeni et al. 2025). With strong capacity, teachers can transition from spontaneous implementation to intentional and measured implementation. Second, the integration of contextual approaches to create an inclusive environment. This aspect optimizes existing good practices and expands them into a more structured approach, including morning meetings and check-in/check-out, which can become a consistent daily routine to build self-awareness and social relationships (Gimbert et al. 2023; Vera 2023). In addition, daily reflection also provides space for students to develop responsible decision-making by evaluating the choices and consequences of actions taken throughout the day.

On the one hand, the need for SEL integration in subjects, such as deliberation practices in Pancasila Education subjects, provides an authentic context for practicing shared decision-making and respecting differences of opinion, which are the core of tolerance. Also, the application of active learning methods to build skills through experience (Kholifah et al. 2025; Tanjung et al. 2022). This aspect addresses the need to make SEL learning more engaging and has a direct impact on low competencies. As for the recommended methods for building SEL skills through, first, simulation/ roleplay and game-based learning provide opportunities for students to experience situations of conflict or differences in a safe environment. Students can experiment with various responses and see firsthand the consequences of their choices, which effectively trains responsible decision-making. (Freeland et al. 2022; Stoica 2025). Second, real-life action projects, such as cross-group collaborative projects, encourage students to apply SEL skills in broader social contexts, building empathy and cooperation. Finally, the use of animated videos can be an effective medium for modeling social skills and sparking discussion about the emotions and behavioral choices of the characters within them.

This three-pronged model offers a holistic approach that focuses not only on students but also on teachers as primary facilitators and the environment as the learning context. The combination of strengthening teachers' theoretical foundations, creating an environment rich in SEL practices, and utilizing active learning methods is expected to address the challenge of low responsible decision-making competencies and significantly foster tolerant behavior in the school environment. Consistent

implementation of this model will bridge the gap between established social awareness and responsible decision-making skills, thus producing a generation that is not only tolerant in attitude but also in action.

## Conclusion

It can be concluded that the principles of Social and Emotional Learning (SLE) play a significant but suboptimal role in fostering tolerance among elementary school students. Quantitative findings indicate variations in the mastery of the five core competencies of SLE. The competencies of social awareness and self-awareness are in the moderate category, which serve as a foundation for the growth of empathy and understanding of differences. However, the main challenge lies in the competency of responsible decision-making, which is in the low category. This indicates a mismatch between affective awareness and students' actual behavior. Qualitatively, the contribution of SLE to tolerance is realized through conflict management practices, hidden curriculum, and classroom habits. However, its effectiveness is hampered by structural challenges, such as spontaneous implementation without comprehensive understanding from teachers. To address these problems, this study formulates a comprehensive SLE integration model to foster tolerance. Based on the findings and the formulated social emotional learning approach integration, two practical recommendations are proposed. First, school principals and education offices need to provide ongoing PSE training and mentoring to ensure teachers have a comprehensive understanding, ensuring that implementation is not spontaneous but rather planned and measured. Second, teachers should consistently integrate contextual approaches such as daily reflection, deliberation and active methods such as role-playing, collaborative projects to cultivate responsible decision-making and bridge the gap between social awareness and authentic tolerant behavior.

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