

Integrating Gamification and SEL to Strengthen Elementary Students' Character in Indonesia

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Abstract

Gamification and SEL are effective strategies in strengthening children's character through the active role of teachers and continuous school support. This study explores the role of teachers and school support in implementing gamification and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) as strategies to strengthen students' character at the elementary education level in Indonesia. This qualitative study collected data through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving several teachers and students engaged in innovative learning practices. The findings indicate that teachers' competencies, including the ability to adapt the curriculum, apply various learning strategies, and establish effective communication, are considered crucial factors in the implementation of gamification and SEL in the classroom. Teachers who received practical and continuous training tended to be more confident and successful in managing game-based learning and developing students' social-emotional skills. In addition, institutional support through clear school policies and active parental involvement proved to contribute positively to the success of learning. This study emphasises the importance of collaboration between teachers, schools, and communities in creating a dynamic and inclusive learning environment that not only promotes academic achievement but also shapes students' resilient and adaptive character. The results of this study are expected to serve as a reference in formulating policies that support educational innovation in Indonesia.

Keywords: Learning transformation, Character development, Gamification, Social Emotional Learning (SEL).

Introduction

Basic education plays a crucial role as the foundation in shaping character and developing children's potential comprehensively. At this stage, children not only need cognitive learning but also social, emotional, and moral values education 2024 ; Tinnes-Vigne et al., 2025) . However, the Asia-Pacific Survey (NEQMAP) revealed that 95% of countries conduct national assessments that focus on curricular knowledge, while only around 5% measure non-cognitive abilities such as character or social-emotional skills.(Ho, Lee, Sum, Wang, & Bangkok, 2020) . Research findings reinforce this phenomenon from Ningsih, (2022) and Cahya et al, (2024) , which indicates that elementary schools in Indonesia still prioritise academic achievement, while the development of character and social-emotional skills has not been systematically managed. This situation has the potential to hinder the achievement of Indonesia's national education goals, which emphasise a balance between intellectual, emotional, and social intelligence (Rohmah & Sayuti, n.d.).

Social changes and technological developments in the 21st century demand more innovative, adaptive learning models that touch on students' affective aspects.(Kabudi, Pappas, & Olsen, 2021) . Various global frameworks, such as *the Partnership for 21st Century Learning* (P21) and *the OECD Future of Education*, emphasise the importance of developing 21st-century skills, including responsibility, empathy, collaboration, and ethical decision-making.(Development, 2025) . Therefore, a pedagogical approach that integrates academic achievement with character building is needed.

Two transformative approaches gaining increasing attention are gamification and social-emotional learning (SEL). Gamification, which involves the application of game elements such as points, levels, challenges, and rewards, has been proven to enhance motivation, engagement, and the meaningfulness of learning. (Gorai, 2024 ; Jun & Lucas, 2024) . Meanwhile, SEL emphasises the development of self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, responsibility, and social skills.(Bracho Mosquera et al., 2024) . The integration of both is believed not only to enhance the quality of the learning process but also to contribute to the formation of a well-rounded character in children.

Research on gamification, SEL, and character education has shown rapid development, although it is often conducted separately. Research integrating all three in the context of elementary schools, particularly in Indonesia, remains limited. Most studies have focused on aspects of motivation and academic achievement, as seen in the findings of Alsadoon (2023) and Dichev & Dicheva, so the contribution of gamification and SEL to

character development in children has not been extensively explored. On the other hand, studies on character education in elementary schools generally emphasise participatory activities in the classroom.(De Laet et al., 2015), as well as collaboration (Mills et al., 2014; Antara et al., 2024), families, teachers (Christina Turner et al, 2024) and the community (Afrianti et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) approach has proven effective in strengthening social skills. (Durlak et al, 2011), empathy(Steve, 2020), and emotional regulation (Sri Sulis Kurniawati, 2025). Despite the findings of the above studies, the integration of gamification and SEL as an innovative strategy for strengthening children's character remains under-researched. Therefore, this study offers a novel approach by combining gamification and SEL to create a learning experience in elementary schools that not only fosters academic motivation but also strengthens children's character dimensions.

SDN 1 Karanganyar, Pamekasan Regency, is an elementary school that has begun implementing an interactive learning approach with an emphasis on character education. This condition makes the school unique as a research location because it opens up space to examine how gamification and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) can be integrated into basic learning. Additionally, the school provides a real-world context for understanding the various challenges teachers face when implementing both approaches simultaneously.

This study aims to analyse in depth the implementation of gamification and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) integration in learning at SDN 1 Karanganyar. The main focus is on how these two approaches can contribute to strengthening students' character, particularly in terms of responsibility, honesty, cooperation, empathy, and independence. In addition, this study also examines the challenges faced by teachers in the integration process, both in terms of pedagogical readiness, availability of resources, and institutional support from the school. Thus, this study not only tests the theoretical relevance of the transformative learning model based on gamification and SEL but also provides practical contributions to the development of character learning strategies in elementary schools.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design, as described by(Yin, 2015) . The selection of case studies was based on the need for an in-depth exploration of gamification-based learning practices and *Social Emotional Learning* (SEL) in a real-world context, namely, character development among elementary school students. The research design used is *a single case embedded design*, where the focus of the research is directed

at one school, namely SDN 1 Karanganyar, Pamekasan, involving several units of analysis consisting of teachers, students, the principal, and parents.

Research participants were determined through *purposive sampling*, considering their direct involvement in the learning process. Teachers teaching in grades IV and V were selected as the primary implementers of the learning innovation. The principal was involved as the policy maker and program coordinator. Students were chosen diversely based on different backgrounds to obtain a comprehensive picture of their experiences. Meanwhile, parents were included to complement the perspective from the family environment. The number of participants was not determined from the outset but followed the principle of *data saturation*, which is the point at which the collected data is considered rich enough and no longer yields significant new information.

Research data was obtained through three main techniques. First, participatory observation was conducted to record gamification-based learning practices and SEL in the classroom directly. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, students, principals, and parents to explore their experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding the implementation of learning. Third, a documentation study was conducted by examining various documents such as Lesson Implementation Plans (RPP), teacher journals, character assessment sheets, and photos and videos capturing learning activities.

Data analysis followed the strategy developed by (Yin, 2015). The initial stage involved *pattern matching*, which compared empirical findings with the established theoretical framework to identify patterns of consistency. The next stage was *explanation building*, aimed at constructing explanations regarding the mechanisms of gamification and SEL implementation and their impact on student character development. Cross-unit analysis was then conducted to compare data obtained from various units of study, namely teachers, students, school principals, and parents, to identify both consistency and variation in their experiences.

To maintain the credibility of the research, several data validity strategies were used. Triangulation was carried out using both data sources and collection techniques. Member checks were given to participants so that they could verify the researchers' interpretations. An audit trail was compiled to ensure the transparency of the analysis process and facilitate the tracing of the research. The researcher also spent a considerable amount of time at the research site to gain a deeper understanding of the context. In addition, the *chain of evidence*

principle was applied so that each finding could be traced logically from the research questions to the conclusions.

As a *single case study*, this research's results are not intended for statistical generalisation. The intended generalisation is analytical, contributing to the enrichment of theoretical understanding while offering practical implications for the development of learning innovations in elementary schools.

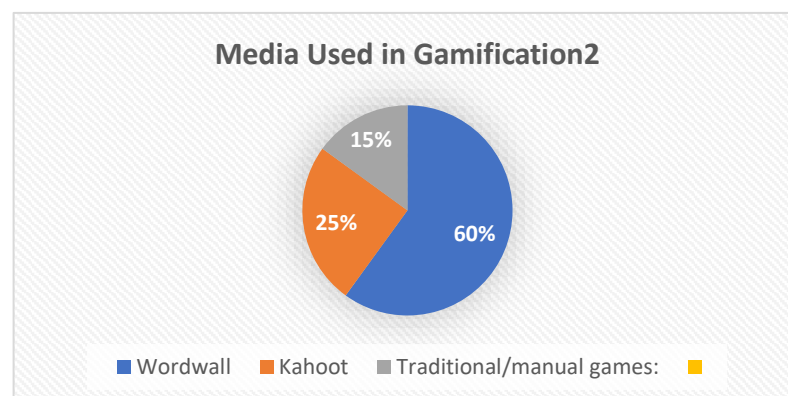
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

This study produced several key findings related to the relationship between resilient character and the integration of gamification, interactive learning, and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). These findings include the skills required and the effectiveness of gamification implementation in the learning process.

Based on observations and interviews with teachers and students, it was found that teachers at SDN 1 Karanganyar have begun to integrate elements of gamification into their daily learning activities. The components used include a point system, a leaderboard, group challenges, and symbolic rewards for students who demonstrate disciplined behaviour, cooperation, and perseverance in learning. For example, teachers use a star system to assess student participation in discussions and problem-solving, and provide awards such as "class titles" like *"Most Collaborative"* or *"Most Honest."*

The implementation of gamification has been proven to increase students' intrinsic motivation, especially in subjects that were previously considered difficult or boring. Teachers report that with this approach, students become more active and enthusiastic and show a higher level of interest in participating. This aligns with the theory proposed by Werbach and Hunter (2012) that gamification can enhance student engagement through psychological stimulation based on challenges and rewards Media Used in Gamification.



Data source: processed 2025

Based on observations and documentation of learning activities at SDN 1 Karanganyar, it was identified that teachers utilise various types of gamification media to enhance student engagement. These media are categorised into three main groups, with the proportion of usage displayed in a pie chart as follows:

a. Wordwall (60%)

Wordwall is the most frequently used medium by teachers in the gamification process. This application allows teachers to create various interactive games such as quizzes, Wheel of Fortune, crossword puzzles, and word matching. Wordwall is considered effective because it is easy to access and highly flexible for various subjects. Wordwall also allows for personalisation of materials according to student needs and provides immediate feedback to students (Rohmah & Sayuti, 2024).

b. Kahoot (25%)

Kahoot is mainly used for quiz-based learning evaluation with a competitive feel. Teachers use Kahoot in material review sessions or daily tests because students show high enthusiasm for quizzes accompanied by a timer, automatic scoring, and instant rankings. Kahoot's strength lies in its ability to spark healthy competition among students.

c. Traditional/Manual Games (15%)

In addition to digital media, teachers also utilise traditional games that have been modified for learning contexts. Examples include educational snakes and ladders, group puzzles, or word games. Although the percentage is small, this type of media still contributes to strengthening social interaction and teamwork among students, especially in offline learning or when digital facilities are limited.

The dominance of Wordwall indicates teachers' preference for media that is easy to customise and user-friendly. Meanwhile, Kahoot and manual games are maintained as variations in methods that ensure diversity in approaches and take into account the availability of facilities and infrastructure.

The implementation of gamification in learning at SDN 1 Karanganyar shows a significant increase in student participation in class. Quantitative data from observations of student activities indicate a rise in three main aspects: answering questions, asking questions to teachers, and completing tasks. The following is a comparison of student participation before and after the implementation of gamification:

Table 1 Changes in Classroom Participation Before and After Gamification (in % of active students)

Classroom Activities	Before Gamification	After Gamification
Answering Questions	52	78
Asking the Teacher	30	63
Completing Assignments	70	92

Data source: processed in 2025

This increase indicates that gamification can create a more interactive learning environment and encourage active student engagement. With a system of points, challenges, and symbolic rewards, students are motivated to be more courageous in expressing their opinions, asking questions, and completing tasks on time.

Integration of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in Character Building

The Social Emotional Learning (SEL) approach is implemented through reflective and collaborative activities in the classroom. Teachers set aside special time for sharing feelings, resolving conflicts between students, and practising emotional control. For example, before starting a lesson, students are asked to check their emotions using "mood cards". They are given space to express their feelings openly in a supportive and non-judgmental atmosphere. The following table presents quantitative results related to *the integration of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in character development* among students at SDN 1 Karanganyar:

Table 1: Integration of Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL Aspects	Number of Students Involved	Number of Students Demonstrating Positive Behaviour	Percentage
Self-Awareness	25	2	80
Self-Management	25	23 (reduction in emotional outbursts)	67% reduction
Social Awareness	25	22	88
Relationship Skills	25	19	76
Responsible Decision-Making	25	18	72

Data source: processed in 2025

Based on data collected in the field through observation of 25 students, it was found that the integration of *Social Emotional Learning (SEL)* contributes significantly to strengthening the character of students at SDN 1 Karanganyar. In terms of self-awareness, 20 students (80%) showed better ability to recognise and manage their emotions. They were able to identify their feelings and express them appropriately. Meanwhile, the self-management aspect showed significant results, with a 67% decrease in incidents of emotional outbursts such as excessive anger or crying, indicating an improvement in students' ability to control their impulses and adapt to their environment.

The social awareness aspect recorded the highest achievement, at 88% (22 students), indicating that the majority of students were able to demonstrate empathy, understand others' feelings, and collaborate effectively in groups. Furthermore, in terms of relationship skills, 19 students (76%) showed improvement in building positive communication, resolving conflicts independently, and forming healthy and supportive friendships. Lastly, the aspect of responsible decision-making was achieved by 18 students (72%), reflected in their ability to make wise choices, complete tasks responsibly, and consistently follow classroom rules.

Overall, these data indicate that the learning approach integrating SEL is highly effective in supporting the development of students' character, particularly in terms of emotional, social, and positive behavioural development that is sustainable.

This approach has shown positive results in building self-awareness, empathy, and social problem-solving skills among students. One teacher reported that students who were previously often involved in conflicts began to show changes in the way they communicated and expressed their opinions more calmly and constructively. These findings were reinforced by interviews with parents, who reported an increase in their children's empathy and responsibility at home.

These results align with the CASEL (*Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning*) framework, which states that developing social and emotional skills in schools can strengthen character and improve long-term learning outcomes.

The Impact of Integrating Gamification and SEL on Student Character

The integration of gamification and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has proven to have a significant positive impact on student character development. Based on observations and quantitative data in the field, students showed simultaneous improvements in learning motivation, activity, and social-emotional skills.

Gamification encourages students to be more active in learning through a system of points, challenges, and rewards, which not only increases class participation but also trains discipline, cooperation, and responsibility. This is evident from the increase in the percentage of students who answered questions (from 52% to 78%), asked questions to teachers (from 30% to 63%), and completed assignments (from 70% to 92%). Students have become more confident in expressing their opinions and are able to complete tasks independently or in groups.

Meanwhile, the application of SEL principles plays a role in shaping self-awareness, emotional management skills, and responsible decision-making. Eighty per cent of students

showed improvement in self-awareness, 88% demonstrated high social awareness, and 76% were able to establish healthy interpersonal relationships. When gamification and SEL are combined in a single learning strategy, students are not only engaged cognitively but also affectively and socially.

Thus, the collaboration between gamification and SEL has created a more enjoyable, participatory, and holistic learning environment. Positive traits such as empathy, responsibility, resilience, and cooperation are increasingly developing in students, proving that learning innovations that touch on emotional and social aspects are highly relevant in character development in modern education. The integration of gamification and SEL significantly supports character development in students at SDN 1 Karanganyar. Data indicate that this approach not only impacts cognitive aspects but also fosters important values such as honesty, responsibility, cooperation, and tolerance. This is reflected in increased healthy social interaction within the classroom, the emergence of a culture of mutual respect, and students taking initiative to complete tasks without excessive prompting from teachers.

One student shared that they feel more motivated to learn because they feel valued when they complete challenges or demonstrate good behaviour. This indicates that positive character traits can be cultivated through an enjoyable and meaningful approach.

Discussion

The results of the study indicate that the integration of gamification and the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) approach in the learning process can have a significant impact on student participation and character development. The implementation of gamification has been proven to increase student engagement in classroom activities such as answering questions, asking teachers, and completing tasks. This aligns with the findings of "(Sudaryuni Kurnia, Sastromiharjo, Mulyati, & Damaianti, 2021), which states that gamification can create enjoyable and competitive learning experiences, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation in students.

The most commonly used media in the gamification process are Wordwall (60%), Kahoot (25%), and traditional/manual games (15%), indicating that a combination of digital technology and conventional approaches remains effective in capturing students' attention. According to the theory of enjoyable and challenging learning, "(Wardhana et al., 2024) Enjoyable and challenging learning increases students' cognitive engagement, which ultimately strengthens learning outcomes.

In addition to increased participation, the study results also showed that the implementation of SEL in learning contributed to strengthening students' character. Character traits such as empathy, cooperation, responsibility, and self-awareness improved after the implementation of gamification-based learning programs and SEL. These results reinforce the theory of (Agustina, Nasution, Gunansyah, Mariana, & Puspita, 2025), which emphasises that SEL helps students develop interpersonal and intrapersonal skills essential for academic success and social life.

The integration of gamification and SEL produces a learning approach that is not only emotionally and visually engaging but also builds social values within students. (Sari & Alfiyan, 2023). When students feel motivated through game elements, they also learn to manage their emotions, work together in teams, and understand other people's perspectives. This addresses the needs of today's education, which focuses not only on cognitive aspects but also on holistic character development. (Carcelén-Fraile, 2025).

Thus, it can be concluded that the integration of gamification and SEL has great potential in strengthening students' character while increasing their active participation in the learning process. This study supports the view that innovative technology-based and value-based approaches can be effective strategies in addressing the challenges of 21st-century education.

This study also shows that the success of gamification and SEL integration greatly depends on the role of teachers as adaptive and reflective learning facilitators. Teachers not only play a role in designing visually appealing activities, but must also be able to link game elements to learning objectives and the social values that are to be formed. (Pridayanti, Andrasari, & Kurino, n.d.).

This aligns with the perspective of (Carcelén-Fraile, 2025) Sociocultural learning theory emphasises the importance of teachers as more knowledgeable others in creating scaffolding or learning support tailored to students' needs. Through gamification combined with SEL principles, teachers can create a collaborative learning environment that supports social-emotional development while remaining academically challenging.

Other research findings further support the conclusion that the integration of gamification and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has a significant impact on character development in students. For example, research conducted by (Adawiyah et al., 2024) Shows that gamification can increase engagement, intrinsic motivation, and collaboration among students in an interactive and meaningful learning environment. This indirectly sharpens

students' ability to work together, demonstrates resilience, and builds a sense of responsibility for their learning process.

Furthermore, a study conducted by (Sun, Xiao, & Nguyen, 2021) It states that implementing SEL in learning not only shapes students' moral character but also improves communication skills, empathy, and the ability to resolve conflicts constructively. When these learning strategies are combined with gamification elements such as reward systems, challenges, and learning missions, the results are more optimal because students are motivated to engage emotionally and socially. (Farhana & Cholimah, 2024) .

Research by Sari and Alfiyan (2023) in elementary schools shows that students involved in educational game-based learning with SEL values tend to have higher social awareness and self-control than the control group. This is due to learning experiences that stimulate empathy, tolerance, and responsibility through fun and meaningful interactions (Yao et al., 2021).

By combining these findings, it can be concluded that a gamification approach integrated with SEL principles has been proven to contribute positively to strengthening students' character. This approach not only makes learning enjoyable but also equips students with socially relevant values for the challenges of the 21st century, such as teamwork, leadership, and effective self-management. Therefore, the integration of these two approaches needs to be further developed and adapted to the context and needs of students at various educational levels.

Conclusion

This study has revealed the importance of integrating gamification, interactive learning, and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in building resilient character in students in Indonesia. Findings indicate that the necessary skills, appropriate training, and adequate support from schools and communities are key factors in creating a dynamic and effective learning environment.

Skills such as curriculum adaptation, implementation of diverse teaching strategies, and effective communication are essential for teachers to meet the diverse needs of students and facilitate the development of their resilient character. Training focused on real-world practices has proven to be more effective in improving teacher readiness than theoretical training. Additionally, support from school policies that encourage innovation and parental involvement has a significant impact on the success of implementing this approach.

Thus, to achieve holistic educational goals in Indonesia, collaborative efforts involving teachers, schools, and communities are necessary. Continuous professional development for teachers and policies that support the integration of gamification, interactivity, and SEL should be a priority in the education system. This study is expected to provide useful insights for stakeholders in formulating more effective strategies to support the development of resilient character in students, so that every individual can access quality education and achieve their full potential.

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