



## **Social-Emotional Learning: A Proposal for Further Research in the Context of Indonesian Christian Schools**

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### ***Abstract***

*Despite significant investment in Indonesia's education sector, learning outcomes continue to show persistent challenges. The "Freedom to Learn" movement was introduced to promote student-centered learning incorporating Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) to foster students' holistic development. SEL aims to enhance academic performance and essential life skills, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship-building, and responsible decision-making. However, research into the application of SEL in Christian schools in Indonesia is limited and requires further investigation. This study explores teachers' perceptions of SEL in Christian education, focusing on its alignment with Biblical values and faith-based teaching. The research employed qualitative methods, using surveys and semi-structured interviews with thirteen kindergarten teachers from three Christian schools in Jabodetabek. The findings indicate that while teachers acknowledge the significance of SEL, there is a gap in the understanding and application of SEL from biblical perspectives. Teachers need structured training and available resources to support the effective implementation of SEL based on a biblical Christian worldview using the curriculum that they have to apply. Further research needs to be done with all school stakeholders to uncover holistic perceptions, challenges, and implementation of teaching SEL from a biblical perspective. Structured professional development programs need to be planned to equip Christian educators with the understanding of SEL, the implementation, and examples to teach SEL with a biblical perspective, ensuring a holistic development education.*

**Keywords:** *Social-Emotional Learning; Christian Education; Holistic Development; Teacher Development; Biblical Perspective*

## INTRODUCTION

The Rise Indonesia Program, which is managed by the SMERU Research Institute in Indonesia, is doing large-scale research which one of the projects concluding that students are progressing but not learning.<sup>1</sup> Even though the students are moving up one grade level, they are unable to master some competencies that they should have mastered at a lower grade level. The findings indicate a decline in learning level as the students move up to higher grades. This phenomenon highlights the urgency in improving students' learning, focusing on academic aspects, and addressing the importance of flourishing students' social and emotional aspects. As part of the "Freedom to Learn" curriculum, the government initiated the implementation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in teaching to enhance students' academic improvement.<sup>2</sup> SEL assists students in cultivating their social and emotional knowledge, skills, and

attitudes, which include their intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies.<sup>3</sup> The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as below:

The process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.<sup>4</sup>

Research mostly in the US finds that incorporating SEL will develop students' academic performances and long-term success.<sup>5</sup> It is not enough for students to learn academic content; SEL is necessary to nurture students holistically. When students lack social and emotional competencies, they become less connected to school, and students' low level of connection negatively impacts their academic achievement, behavior, and health.<sup>6</sup> Schools need to intentionally

<sup>1</sup> Luhur Bima, "Naik kelas tapi tak belajar: penelitian ungkap 3 capaian buruk terkait pendidikan di Indonesia sejak tahun 2000," Program Rise Indonesia, *Blog*, last modified August 17, 2021, accessed December 8, 2021, <https://rise.smeru.or.id/id/blog/naik-kelas-tapi-tak-belajar-penelitian-ungkap-3-capaian-buruk-terkait-pendidikan-di-indonesia>.

<sup>2</sup> Administrator, "Pembelajaran Sosial Emosional (PSE) Kurikulum Merdeka Disekolah," News, *Sudut Edu Official*, accessed April 12, 2025, <https://www.sudutedu.com/2022/12/pembelajaran-sosial-emosional-pse.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph L. Mahoney, Joseph A. Durlak, and Roger P. Weissberg, "An Update on Social and

Emotional Learning Outcome Research," *Phi Delta Kappan* 100, no. 4 (December 2018): 18–23.

<sup>4</sup> Casel, "CASEL'S SEL Framework," CASEL, last modified October 2020, accessed December 11, 2021, <https://casel.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/CASEL-SEL-Framework-11.2020.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph A. Durlak, Roger P. Weissberg, and Allison B. Dymnicki, "The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions," *Child Development* 82, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 405–432.

<sup>6</sup> Margarita Panayiotou, Neil Humphrey, and Michael Wigelsworth, "An Empirical Basis for

nurture students not only for their cognitive advancement but also for their social and emotional development for holistic students' flourishing.

A meta-analysis of 213 studies involving 270,034 K-12 students immersed in school-based universal SEL finds that compared to controls, SEL participants exhibited (1) improvement in social-emotional skills, (2) attitudes about self, others, and school, (3) positive classroom behavior, and (4) an eleven percentile-point advantage on the standardized achievement test.<sup>7</sup> Further, it reduced the risk for failure in emotional distress and behavior problems. Another research shows that social and emotional competencies are significant for students' academic performance and life success.<sup>8</sup> Some researchers have argued that social, motivational, and affective attributes are among the most influential factors in student learning.<sup>9</sup>

In the Indonesian context, there are

very few studies about SEL,<sup>10</sup> which needs to be adjusted to the context of multicultural and religious culture in Indonesia. Almost no research has been done, especially for Christian schools; thus, it is very important to do it to ensure the implementation of SEL from the biblical Christian worldview.

The danger is that SEL can be a program for spiritual development without faith,<sup>11</sup> doing some activities to improve social and emotional competencies without relation to the Gospel. The secular culture challenges the formation of the authentic Christian faith. It diminishes God into a concept that does not have authority over humans. Their concept of God is the concept of good things that will help them to be their better selves, which Root describes as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD).<sup>12</sup> An approach that is characterized by moralism: "God wants me to be a good person," a therapeutic process, religion that makes me feel good, and then, deism: "God

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Linking Social and Emotional Learning to Academic Performance," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 56 (January 2019): 193–204.

<sup>7</sup> Durlak, Weissberg, and Dymnicki, "The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning."

<sup>8</sup> Carolyn MacCann et al., "Emotional Intelligence Predicts Academic Performance: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin* 146, no. 2 (2020): 150–186.

<sup>9</sup> Sina A. Huber and Tina Seidel, "Comparing Teacher and Student Perspectives on the Interplay of Cognitive and Motivational-Affective Student Characteristics," ed. David Uttal,

*PLOS ONE* 13, no. 8 (August 15, 2018): e0200609.

<sup>10</sup> Dini Rahmawati, "Supporting Students' Social-Emotional Learning in Indonesian Primary Schools" (Master's Thesis, University of Jyväskylä, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Mark A. Maddix, Jonathan H. Kim, and James Riley Jr Estep, *Understanding Faith Formation: Theological, Congregational, and Global Dimensions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2020). See Chapter 5.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).

is out there but does nothing to me.”<sup>13</sup> For Christian education, the danger of SEL is that the social and emotional development program can be framed as skills or techniques that students should learn to help them feel good without connection to God or addressing their sinful nature, which needs the gospel.

In implementing SEL programs, teachers’ beliefs and perceptions influence program delivery. Their beliefs, perceptions, and understanding of the SEL framework will affect how they conduct the program, the evaluation, and the outcomes.<sup>14</sup> Teachers’ persistence in implementing SEL depends on their beliefs regarding the Social Emotional Competencies (SEC) development, whether, according to them, it is significant for students’ success. They will implement SEL intentionally when they believe that SEC is as important as other competencies and skills development. Teachers’ beliefs and perceptions may moderate how the SEL program is implemented correctly according to the design to get the expected impact. Thus, Christian teachers need to develop a foundational understanding of

SEL and the purpose of it and why SEL needs to be incorporated as part of the learning processes. They need to recognize that cultivating social and emotional competencies is not just about skills development but also about addressing the core of the problem, which is human sinfulness that needs to be resolved. The SEL development program should not be learned only as a tool to help the students feel good about themselves without connection to God. In contrast, SEL should be founded on the Gospel, which transforms children from the heart, inside out, guiding them to improve their relationship with God, themselves, and others. As Christian teachers, this belief should shine through their beings in implementing the SEL programs. Christian teachers should view SEL as part of Christian spiritual formation.<sup>15</sup> The good news in Christ should be at the center of all SEL programs, and how the Gospel should be applied to students’ lives. Therefore, Christian teachers should cultivate a relationship of love as part of every classroom and school learning, where the class becomes a place for faith-nurturing

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<sup>13</sup> Terry Mattingly, “‘Mutant,’ ‘fake’ Christianity on Loose,” *GetReligion*, last modified September 7, 2010, accessed December 12, 2021, <https://www.getreligion.org/getreligion/2010/09/mutant-fake-christianity-on-loose>.

<sup>14</sup> Inna N. Dolzhenko, “Social and Emotional Learning and Preservice Teacher Education: Assessing Preservice Teachers’ Knowledge, Beliefs, and Attitudes” (Thesis or

Dissertation, University of North Texas, 2017), accessed June 10, 2025, <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc101839/>.

<sup>15</sup> Kathy Frady, “Spiritual Formation Parallels to Social-Emotional Learning Curriculum: A Contextual Analysis of ‘Frog Street Curriculum,’” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 24 (October 9, 2019): 1–14.

communities.<sup>16</sup> Christian teachers must deliberately develop culture and routines that become classroom rituals for the holistic formation of students.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of social and emotional learning and competencies among kindergarten teachers in three Christian schools in Jakarta-Tangerang. While other countries have already implemented SEL as part of the learning processes, in Indonesia this is not yet mastered by teachers. As part of the effort for education reform in improving students' achievement, this study aims to address this gap by surveying thirteen Christian kindergarten teachers to understand their perceptions of social and emotional learning and competencies. Since social and emotional development is already an area that kindergarten teachers need to nurture and observe in their students, the insights gained from this study will inform further research and professional development programs for Christian educators. It needs structured input to ensure that SEL is effectively implemented from a Biblical Christian

worldview; thus, it will enhance the broader goal of educational reform and improve student achievement in Indonesia.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore teachers' perceptions of social-emotional learning (SEL) in Christian schools. A qualitative method was chosen to gain in-depth insights into how SEL is perceived and implemented in Christian schools.<sup>17</sup> The study sought to explore participants' experiences, perspectives, and challenges regarding SEL integration in faith-based education.<sup>18</sup> The research was conducted using surveys and semi-structured interviews to collect data from teachers actively engaged in Christian education.

The study involved 13 kindergarten teachers from three Christian schools in Jakarta-Tangerang. These participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that respondents had direct experience in early childhood education and familiarity with SEL concepts. Data collection was conducted through online surveys and semi-structured interviews.

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<sup>16</sup> David M. Csinos, Ivy Beckwith, and John H. Westerhoff III, *Children's Ministry in the Way of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th edition. (Los

Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Cheryl Patton, Natasha Webster, and JoAnne Moore-Dent, "The Integration of Spirituality and Transformational Leadership in Higher Education," *Journal of Instructional Research* 6 (2017): 35–41.

The surveys consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions to assess teachers' understanding, perceptions, and implementation of SEL in the classroom.

The surveys were designed to assess teachers' understanding and perceptions of SEL, followed by inquiries regarding the implementation of SEL. In the final section, participants were requested to evaluate the importance of skills and competencies for kindergarten children to acquire, utilizing a four-point Likert scale. Interviews with two chosen participants yielded insights into the implementation of SEL, the problems faced, and assistance received for the biblical integration.

The data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis, where responses from surveys were categorized into key

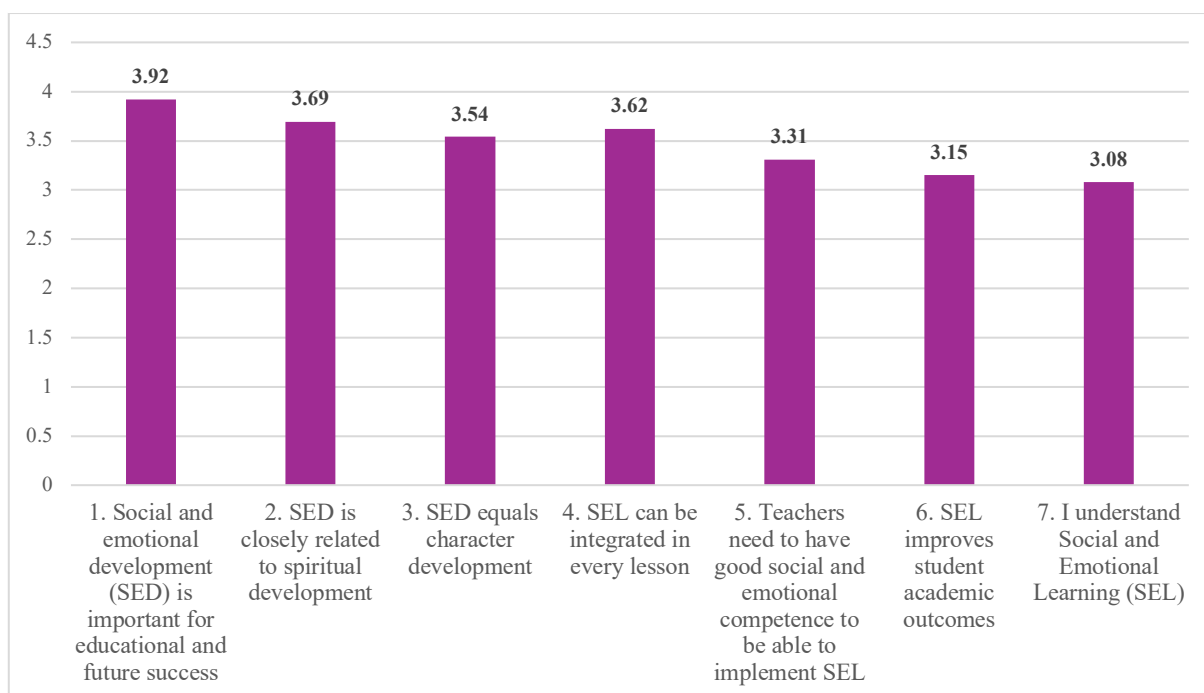
themes to identify common patterns in teachers' experiences. The qualitative data from interviews further enriched the findings, offering more detailed perspectives on the challenges and opportunities related to SEL implementation by Christian teachers.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

All the participants almost strongly agree (3.92) that social and emotional development is essential for students' educational and future success and that SEL can be integrated into every lesson (3.62) (see chart 1).

However, the participants are less confident in seeing that SEL improves student academic outcomes (3.15). Participants rated the lowest in their

*Chart 1. Teachers Knowledge & Perception of SEL*



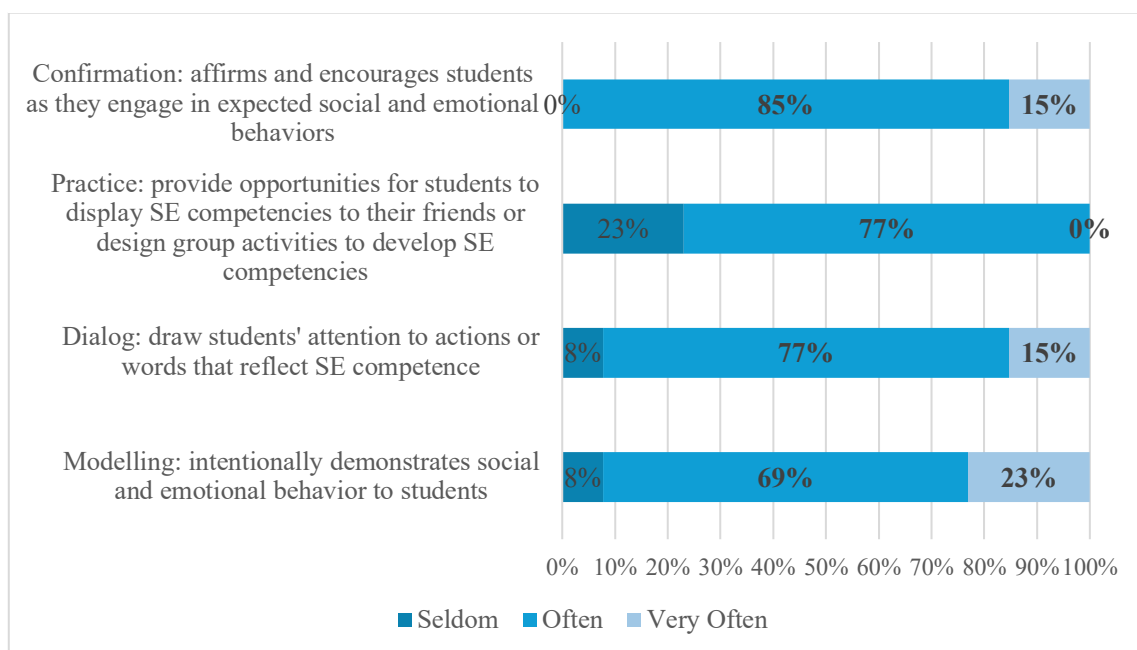
understanding of SEL (3.08). Principals stated that these teachers had never received specific professional development on SEL. They likely know social and emotional development because they must provide reports on student social and emotional development progress in the report card.

However, there has never been any special training on incorporating social and emotional learning. There also appears to be inconsistency in their

confirmation approach more often than other approaches, and practice is the approach, with 23% of them using it less often. The dialogue and modeling approaches have more or less similar results in terms of frequency of use for SEL.

However, when the participants were asked to give examples of approaches that they often used (see chart 3), 46% of the examples were related to confirmation, 31% were dialoguing with

Chart 2. SEL Implementation Methods



opinion about the influence of SEL on academic matters (statements no. 1 & 6). Perhaps they understand the importance of this but have not received complete information; thus, they are unsure about the effect of SEL.

Regarding the methods that they used (see chart 2), the participants used the

the students, 15% of the examples related to practice, and only 8% of the examples were about giving models to the students. It seems teachers need further professional development to implement SEL effectively. Reviewing the teachers' examples, it seems that they recognized SEL similarly to other subjects such as

Chart 4. Examples of Implementation Methods

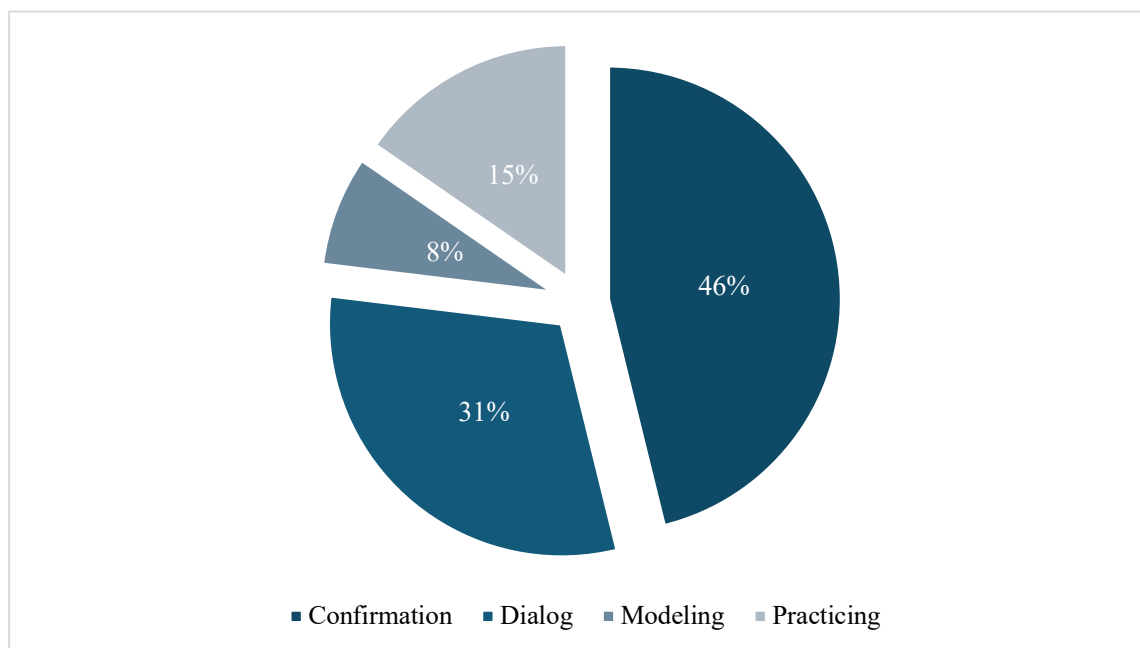
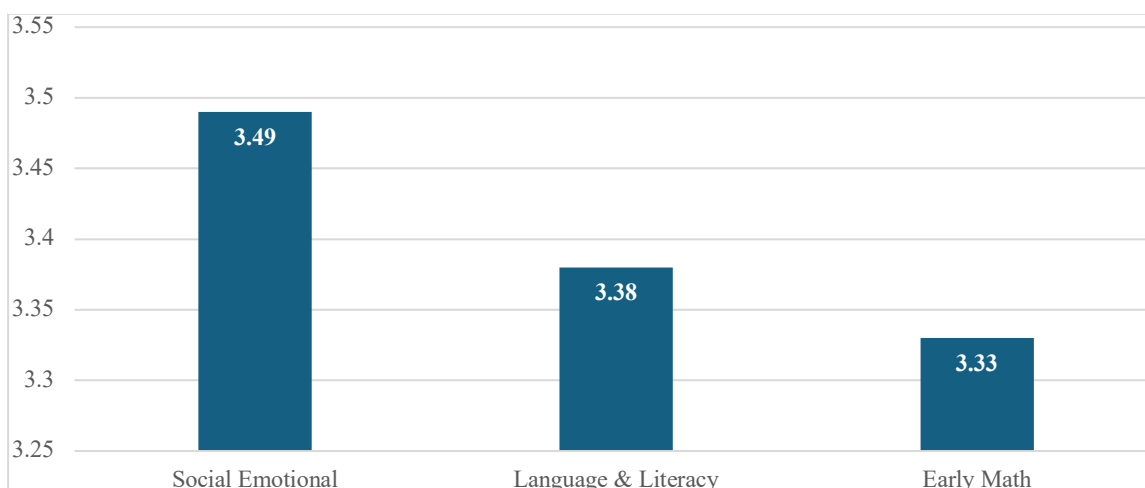


Chart 3. Subject Rating



literacy and spiritual development, doing some reading and worksheet activities, and confirming and encouraging students when they present the competencies.

In comparison, SEL competencies may be developed by encouraging positive relationships through conflict resolution, effective communication, and

perspective-taking. Students need to be involved in different opportunities to exercise SEL competencies, more often in small groups, outdoor activities, and intentional lesson times, even during mealtimes or transitions between activities.<sup>19</sup>

When the participants were asked

<sup>19</sup> Siew Chin Ng and Rebecca Bull, "Facilitating Social Emotional Learning in

Kindergarten Classrooms: Situational Factors and Teachers' Strategies," *International Journal of*

to rate the competencies of the subjects, participants mostly rated all the competencies as essential, but only a few items were rated quite important. However, from the result, teachers view that children's mastery of the social and emotional competencies presented is considerably more important (see Chart 4).

From the interview with one of the teachers, in elaborating on developing the social-emotional competencies, the teacher explained that she used stickers to stimulate the competencies. Her rationale was, "*Because children love challenges, the more they are challenged, the more persistent they are. I used stickers to challenge them to complete the task well.*" According to her, most children love stickers; thus, they responded well to the challenge. Using stickers or external rewards is still a common practice in Indonesia. However, Christian teachers need to be aware not to drift to view the students as trainable objects. Even though extrinsic rewards can be used, Christian teachers cannot depend on them all the time; gradually, they need to discourage students from extrinsic rewards, give longer intervals for rewards, and finally stop giving the reward. Thus, Christian

teachers need to reflect and regularly review whether they have implemented practices based on the biblical perspectives.

Another teacher also explained that she used "*the good*" and "*the bad*" terms to motivate students to do good. "*A child of God is good, but if you do not do good, you are not a child of God. A child of God has Jesus in their hearts, but if they do not do good, there is a monster in their hearts.*" Unconsciously, the teacher tries to motivate students with simple terms, but conceptually, it will not help students understand Jesus and the Gospel correctly.

From the surveys and interviews, these teachers understand the importance of SEL for the future academic development of students. However, the lack of professional development of SEL implementation causes teachers to be incapable of designing robust lessons to develop social-emotional competencies (SEC). Moreover, teachers need to understand SEL well to incorporate biblical principles and spiritual formation as part of the impartation of social-emotional competencies.<sup>20</sup>

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*Early Childhood* 50, no. 3 (November 2018): 335–352.

<sup>20</sup> Frady, "Spiritual Formation Parallels to Social-Emotional Learning Curriculum."

### Limitation and Further Development

All expected participants participated in this survey, sufficient to provide a preliminary analysis. As a pilot project, this study has provided an initial result. However, if more participants are included from several more schools, it might provide more robust and representative information about the picture of Christian teachers' perceptions. Survey responses reflect teachers' perceptions of their current practices but would be more substantial if compared to actual practices measured more objectively. Therefore, further research could involve classroom observations when teachers implement SEL in their teaching and learning activities.

The majority of SEL research is heavily American-centered;<sup>21</sup> however, to develop SEC, it needs to be adjusted to local cultural context. Thus, further research needs to be done in the Indonesian context to give appropriate contextual implementation for Indonesian settings, especially for Christian schools. Christian teachers need to understand the biblical foundation and gospel-centered implementation of SEL in the Indonesian

context, not only moralistic teaching based on universal values.<sup>22</sup>

Also, the school principals and all school stakeholders should be included in the research to provide a holistic picture of the issues. Incorporating SEL is not only the task of the teachers in the classroom, but it must be a systemic approach that requires the school policy for holistic formation of SEL in cooperation with families and community.<sup>23</sup> Including parents and the whole school community will help gain their perspectives and trigger participation to understand and learn more about SEL.

Further SEL research in Indonesia must inform the development of structured professional development for Christian teachers. It should inform the Teachers College that in preparing teachers, SEL concepts and implementation must be part of the curriculum. Next, during pre-service professional development, examples of SEL holistic implementation not only contain content understanding but also a formational learning approach, which is different from MTD.<sup>24</sup> Continuing professional development must be

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<sup>21</sup> Rahmawati, "Supporting Students' Social-Emotional Learning in Indonesian Primary Schools."

<sup>22</sup> Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*.

<sup>23</sup> J. L. Mahoney et al., "Systemic Social and Emotional Learning: Promoting Educational

Success for All Preschool to High School Students.," *The American psychologist* (2020), accessed June 9, 2025, <https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Famp0000701>.

<sup>24</sup> Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*.

planned to supervise and also review the involvement of the families and whole school communities to enhance the formational development of students.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this pilot study indicate that while social and emotional development is already the focus for the kindergarten teachers, there is a need for further professional development in understanding and implementing SEL. These findings also provide valuable initial insights for preparing Christian educators in implementing SEL from the biblical perspective to hinder a moralistic approach but truly from a gospel-centered approach. As a Christian educator, the area of SEL, which has not been explored so far, needs to be investigated further, which is appropriate to the Indonesian cultural context. The development of current educational methodologies for student growth often departs from an incomplete and unbiblical perspective. Here, Christian educators are challenged to continue to equip themselves and explore the developments of the times without losing the foundation in God, who is the Creator and sustainer of His people in the Indonesian context. It is a call to dig deeper

into this area and actively participate in building educational development for building the Kingdom of God in Indonesia.

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