

Mini Research: The Role of Teachers in Building Social Character of Elementary School Students with Tendencies to Cliquism and Peer Exclusion at SD Negeri 3 Selo

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Article Info	Abstract
Keywords: Cliques, Exclusion, Social Character, Student Groups, Teacher's Role	This study aims to explore the teacher's role in shaping the social character of elementary students who tend to form exclusive peer groups (cliques), potentially leading to peer exclusion. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with a fifth-grade teacher at SD Negeri 3 Selo, supported by documentation. The findings reveal that while students naturally group based on shared interests, no exclusionary behavior occurred. The teacher played a central role using personal approaches, group learning, and empathy-building strategies to foster inclusivity. In conclusion, consistent teacher intervention guided student social dynamics away from forming negative exclusivity.

INTRODUCTION

Primary education is a crucial foundation for shaping a child's character and personality. At the elementary school stage (ages 6-12), students undergo rapid biological and psychological development, including in terms of social interaction. They begin to discover the world outside their families through the school environment and their peers. During this period, children also tend to form groups based on specific interests or similarities and frequently imitate peer behavior without critical filtering (Danim, 2013; Hurlock, 1980). Therefore, character education targeting social aspects is crucial to instill from an early age, enabling children to grow into responsible individuals who possess an inclusive attitude toward differences (Safitri, 2020; Omeri, 2015).

In classroom practice, students' social dynamics often reveal the formation of small groups based on shared hobbies, gender, or habits. Although this appears natural in a child's social development, it has the potential to breed exclusive attitudes or even the exclusion of students who differ from the majority group. Based on the results of interviews conducted with the fifth-grade teacher at SD Negeri 3 Selo, it was found that students indeed have a tendency to gather with peers who share similar hobbies for instance, boys playing football together, while girls tend to cluster while playing. However, despite these preferences, no indications of direct exclusion were found. Even when there was a new transfer student, classmates were able to accept them

quickly, demonstrating that an inclusive attitude has already grown within the classroom environment. Nevertheless, the teacher still observes that there are students who are initially shy or tend to withdraw from groups. In this regard, the teacher's role becomes highly vital in helping these students become more open and accepted by their social environment. The teacher utilizes various approaches, such as casual communication, group learning, and providing rewards as a form of motivation and appreciation for good social behavior. Furthermore, the teacher consistently instills values such as mutual respect, care, and empathy toward peers. This approach has proven capable of gradually altering student behavior, including reducing the habit of mocking or showing indifference toward different peers.

In an effort to cultivate a warm and inclusive classroom atmosphere, the teacher also applies social observation techniques such as sociometry to understand which students are dominant, quiet, leaders, or tend to isolate themselves. Through this mapping, the teacher can adopt the appropriate approach for each individual according to their social-emotional needs. This aligns with social development theories stating that positive early social experiences will influence a child's ability to establish interpersonal relationships in the future (Syamsu Yusuf, 2014; Elfi Yuliani Rocmah, 2011). This mini research aims to describe the role of teachers in building the social character of elementary school students who exhibit tendencies to form groups and exclude peers. Through this study, it is expected that effective strategies can be identified for implementation in elementary schools to create a harmonious classroom atmosphere and foster values of togetherness from an early age.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at describing in depth the role of teachers in building the social character of elementary school students who tend to form groups and potentially exclude peers. This approach was selected because it allows the researcher to understand social dynamics contextually and deeply within a real classroom environment. The research subject was a fifth-grade teacher at SD Negeri 3 Selo, Boyolali Regency, who was selected through purposive sampling due to having 17 years of teaching experience and direct involvement in students' character building. The focus of this study is on the strategies and approaches used by the teacher in creating an inclusive social environment, as well as how the teacher manages students who tend to isolate themselves or remain withdrawn in social interactions.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexible and in-depth information gathering, accompanied by photo and video documentation to strengthen data validity. The interview instrument was developed based on social character indicators such as empathy, cooperation, tolerance, and openness. The obtained data were analyzed using thematic analysis through the stages of data reduction, categorization of findings, and interpretation of meaning. This process follows the data analysis model by Miles and Huberman (2014), which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The results of this analysis were subsequently used to identify patterns in the teacher's strategies for building students' social character contextually and sustainably.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Findings from the interview with the fifth-grade teacher at SD Negeri 3 Selo indicate that the students' social character within the classroom environment exhibits dynamics that are natural yet well-managed. Students tend to form groups based on shared hobbies or play activities, such as boys who enjoy playing football together, while girls often cluster according to the games they are currently interested in. This group formation does not lead to exclusive attitudes or the exclusion of other students. Even students with different interests remain respected, despite not being part

of the dominant group, because the classroom atmosphere has been instilled with values of inclusivity from the beginning. This aligns with the background stating that elementary school-aged children are in an active phase of social development and frequently imitate the social behavior around them without critical judgment. However, through the reinforcement of values and habituation, students have proven capable of fostering attitudes of mutual acceptance.

Students' social behavior is also influenced by personality factors. The teacher identified that students who possess a sociable nature, are outgoing, and share common interests with the majority of their classmates are accepted into groups more quickly. Conversely, students who are quiet or lack self-confidence tend to isolate themselves initially. Nevertheless, the personal approach employed by the teacher such as engaging in casual conversation and asking about their preferences or games is able to help these students open up gradually. For instance, one student who was initially highly dependent on their parents, even when entering the classroom, is now able to mingle and demonstrate self-confidence in the learning process. This transformation demonstrates that the cultivation of social character is significantly determined by the teacher's active involvement in reading and responding to students' social-emotional needs on an individual basis.

Furthermore, leadership dynamics were also observed in the classroom. Several students display a dominant character and frequently lead groups; however, this does not arise from an authoritarian nature, but rather due to physical stature or the ability to organize their peers. This indicates that leadership roles among students can form naturally as long as they are directed toward social responsibility rather than control or exclusivity. The teacher observes this phenomenon and guides the students to ensure that the emerging leadership does not cause social disparity in the classroom. Regarding responses to differences, students generally demonstrate an inclusive attitude toward peers who differ in terms of academic ability, family background, or even when there is a transfer student. In one case, when a new transfer student from Semarang entered the class, the other students initially showed curiosity, but there was no rejection. Within a short period, the new student was accepted and mingled naturally. This shows that the habituation of empathy and the acceptance of differences have operated effectively within the classroom environment. The teacher reinforces this through group learning, case studies, and participatory approaches that enable students to learn from real experiences and direct social practices.

Concerning the tendency to imitate peer behavior, the teacher noted that elementary students tend to imitate minor things, such as trending toys or stationery, but no social influence leading to exclusion or exclusive behavior toward other students was found. This is important because the ages of 6–12 constitute a high imitation phase, and in this context, the teacher holds a strategic role to ensure that what is imitated is positive behavior. In the teacher's observation, peer influence persists but is not dominant enough to create negative social behavior that leads to discrimination. Regarding social grouping based on academic achievement, the interview results show that students lean toward grouping based on interests or shared activities rather than learning outcomes. Consequently, the classroom environment is relatively egalitarian and does not create a social gap between high-achieving students and others. This indicates that the social system formed in the classroom does not reinforce achievement-based exclusivity but rather focuses on personal comfort factors. Nonetheless, students who possess a more open character and socialize easily still tend to be accepted more rapidly into group interactions, which is a natural reflection of children's social dynamics.

The teacher consciously employs strategies and methods that promote the reinforcement of students' social values, such as a reward system that emphasizes not only academic results but also character aspects. For example, students who place in the top 10 receive rewards not solely for their grades, but also to motivate them to display positive attitudes toward their peers and environment. Through this system, the teacher has successfully built a healthy competitive spirit

while fostering empathy and social care. Such an approach aligns with the main objective of social character education: to nurture individuals capable of living together amidst differences.

When students are found displaying a lack of care toward different peers or isolating themselves, the teacher utilizes a direct approach through casual communication and awareness-raising rather than a punitive or high-pressure approach. The teacher emphasizes that all students are friends and must not differentiate among or disparage one another. This strategy has proven effective in preventing the formation of mocking or offensive behavior, such as what once occurred when students called each other by their parents' names a behavior that has now begun to disappear following guidance from the teacher and external socialization activities, such as from the police department. The teacher stated that the school also has a social character-building program encapsulated in the school's vision and mission, which integrates religious and social values into daily activities such as Dhuha prayers, reciting short surahs, and sharing activities like distributing takjil. These programs serve as a vehicle for the consistent internalization of character values, balancing socio-religious aspects equally.

Overall, the results of this study reaffirm that structured, personal, and sustainable teacher interventions are capable of guiding students to build a healthy, tolerant, and empathetic social character. This finding highlights a divergence from several previous research results that indicated tendencies of exclusion among elementary school students due to the influence of dominant groups. In the context of the fifth-grade classroom at SD Negeri 3 Selo, the success in building a positive social environment is inseparable from the teacher's active role in managing social dynamics from an early stage. Accordingly, the results of this study offer practical and theoretical contributions, demonstrating that strategies for building social character must be based on a relational approach rather than a merely instructional or academic one.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that teachers hold a central role in shaping the social character of elementary school students who tend to form groups and potentially exclude peers. Through strategies based on empathy, personal communication, collaborative learning, and reward systems, the teacher successfully cultivates an inclusive and supportive social environment. These findings advance the understanding that the formation of social character is effectively carried out contextually and sustainably from an early age. These results can be adopted into policies for strengthening character education in elementary schools. Future research is recommended to involve students as active subjects to explore social dynamics from their own perspectives.

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