



Navigating Social Skills in Elementary School: Children's Peer Interactions in the Digital Age

Budiansyah^{*1} , Ilham Arya Susanto² , Elita Aidillah³ 

^{1,2} Elementary School Education Teacher, Sriwijaya University, Indonesia

³ Sociology Program, Sriwijaya University, Indonesia

*Correspondence Author: budiansyah@fkip.unsri.ac.id

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Abstract: Digital technology is increasingly reshaping children's socialization, and peer relationships now extend across both physical and virtual spaces. While previous studies have examined online behavior and digital literacy, there is a limited understanding of how elementary school children develop and negotiate social skills in these hybrid environments. Grounded in post-positivist philosophy, this qualitative case study investigates how children navigate digitally mediated peer interactions in two elementary schools in Palembang, Indonesia. The study involved 42 students, 12 teachers, and 15 parents. Collected data through semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and digital artifact analysis, and examined using thematic analysis. The findings reveal the emergence of digital empathy as a hybrid competence integrating emotional responses across online and offline settings. Digitally active students exhibited stronger collaborative problem-solving but tended to marginalize less active peers, while teachers' guidance in digital social interactions remained inconsistent. The study recommends integrating digital citizenship with social-emotional learning and strengthening teacher professional development. Future research should adopt longitudinal and cross-socioeconomic approaches to examine the evolution of digital social competencies and their impact on learning practices.

Keywords: Social Skills; Peer Interaction; Digital Empathy; Elementary Education; Resilience and Adaptation.

Abstrak: Teknologi digital semakin mengubah cara anak-anak bersosialisasi, dan hubungan antar teman sebaya kini meluas ke ruang fisik maupun virtual. Meskipun studi sebelumnya telah meneliti perilaku online dan literasi digital, pemahaman tentang bagaimana anak-anak sekolah dasar mengembangkan dan menegosiasikan keterampilan sosial dalam lingkungan hibrida ini masih terbatas. Berlandaskan filsafat post-positivis, studi kasus kualitatif ini menyelidiki bagaimana anak-anak menavigasi interaksi antar teman sebaya yang dimediasi secara digital di dua sekolah dasar di Palembang, Indonesia. Studi ini melibatkan 42 siswa, 12 guru, dan 15 orang tua. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi partisipan, dan analisis artefak digital, serta dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Temuan menunjukkan munculnya empati digital sebagai kompetensi hibrida yang mengintegrasikan respons emosional di lingkungan online dan offline. Siswa yang

aktif secara digital menunjukkan kemampuan pemecahan masalah kolaboratif yang lebih kuat, namun cenderung mengucilkan teman sebaya yang kurang aktif, sementara bimbingan guru dalam interaksi sosial digital tetap tidak konsisten. Studi ini merekomendasikan integrasi kewarganegaraan digital dengan pembelajaran sosial-emosional dan penguatan pengembangan profesional guru. Penelitian masa depan sebaiknya mengadopsi pendekatan longitudinal dan lintas-ekonomi untuk mengkaji evolusi kompetensi sosial digital dan dampaknya terhadap praktik pembelajaran.

Kata Kunci: Keterampilan Sosial; Interaksi Sesama; Empati Digital; Pendidikan Dasar; Ketahanan dan Adaptasi.

Introduction

Education in the era of globalization, influenced by the Industrial Revolution, is characterized by the use of digital technology in the learning process, often referred to as a cyber system. This system enables continuous teaching and learning activities to occur without being limited by space or time. Various sophisticated innovations continue to be created, accelerating the pace of change and development in our times (Suharyono, 2021). It is undeniable that technology has become an integral part of human life, facilitating various activities and responsibilities. Technology plays a crucial role in various sectors of life, including the economy, society, health, and, in particular, the field of education. In the world of education, technological advances have brought significant changes in the way educators and learners interact and manage the learning process. Technology serves not only as a tool but also as a means of transformation, enabling the teaching and learning process to occur more effectively, interactively, and flexibly. Digital technology enables educators to tailor learning activities to individual needs, broaden access to diverse learning resources, and design more meaningful and contextual learning experiences that align with contemporary demands.

The digital age has profoundly altered the social landscape for children, presenting both unprecedented opportunities and challenges for peer interaction in elementary school. As digital devices become ubiquitous in educational settings, children navigate complex social dynamics that blend face-to-face communication with online engagement. Social skills are culturally mediated behaviors directed towards goals that allow children to navigate interpersonal interactions effectively. In other words, according to (Fauziah et al., 2025), social competence is the ability to understand oneself, empathize with others, and recognize their behavior. The initial stage of formal education for children is primary school, which provides children with basic skills for personal development, involvement in society, citizenship, and humanity, as well as preparing them for further education (Besi & Sakellariou, 2019).

Efforts to create quality learning are crucial in enhancing human resources to achieve the goals of national education. As stated in Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, education has a function to develop abilities and form a dignified character and civilization of the nation, thereby shaping the nation's life. Additionally, education aims to help students realize their potential, becoming individuals who believe in and revere God Almighty. It fosters the development of noble character, good health, knowledge, creativity, independence, and responsible citizenship, ultimately contributing to social development.

In understanding social development in children, there are three interrelated dimensions. First, *the Theory of Mind* (ToM) is to find the ability to associate mental states (beliefs, intentions) with oneself and others (Armstrong-Carter et al., 2021). With ToM, children begin to realize that each individual has different thoughts and

perspectives, which is the basis for the ability to empathize and understand social behavior. Second, Social Information Processing (SIP) is discovering how children encode social cues, interpret the intentions of others, and generate response strategies (Strauß & Bondü, 2022). This process requires understanding the thoughts and emotions of others, which is at the core of ToM. In other words, ToM becomes the foundation for the initial stage in processing social information. Then, *Emotional Intelligence* (EI) plays a role in regulating how children respond emotionally to the processed social information they receive. Children with high emotional intelligence (EI) tend to be able to manage their emotions healthily, for example by coping with frustration, anxiety, or anger without expressing it through behavior that is detrimental to themselves or others (Fauziah et al., 2025). This ability plays a crucial role in developing strong character, as children learn to take responsibility for their actions and respect the feelings of others.

Furthermore, strong social skills enable children to interact effectively with peers, teachers, and community members. Children with high emotional intelligence tend to find it easier to work together in groups, share with others, and resolve conflicts positively and constructively. EI helps children express empathy and avoid impulsive reactions that can damage social relationships. Thus, children's social-emotional development is the result of a dynamic interaction between the ability to understand the mind (ToM), interpret social situations (SIP), and manage emotions (EI). The three work together to develop social competencies that are essential for children's success in interacting, cooperating, and adapting in social and educational environments. Children's social skills develop through several interconnected and mutually reinforcing aspects.

Empathy encompasses two main components: the affective aspect, which involves the ability to feel and share emotions with others, and the cognitive aspect, which involves the ability to understand another person's perspective, thoughts, or feelings (Eisenberg et al., 2024). These two aspects form the basis for children to respond to social situations with sensitivity and care. Prosocial behavior is essential in reducing egoistic and self-centered tendencies while fostering positive relationships with peers, coworkers, and close others. Demonstrating empathy toward others' needs and offering support during difficult times not only benefits the person receiving help but also enhances the emotional well-being of the one providing it (Petruța & Stănculescu, 2025). These behaviors foster positive social relationships and contribute to the creation of an inclusive school environment. Communication skills are another important element of social interaction, encompassing the ability to express oneself verbally and nonverbally, actively listen, and resolve conflict constructively. These skills enable children to negotiate differences, express feelings, and maintain harmonious relationships with others. Finally, self-regulation plays a role in helping children manage their emotional impulses and behaviors during social interactions. Children who can control their impulses, restrain adverse reactions, and adjust their responses to social situations will find it easier to build stable and adaptive social relationships (Spencer et al., 2023). Social skills are a crucial aspect of development and have a lasting impact on various ecological systems in children's lives. Several studies show that a lack of social skills can trigger various psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, use cell phones and other forms of media in large numbers, resulting in chronic sleep loss, which has a negative influence on cognitive ability, school performance, and socio-emotional functioning (Khalaf et al., 2023; Zahra et al., 2025).

On the other hand, positive interactions with peers play a crucial role in the development of children's self-concept and social identity (Takahashi et al., 2023),

while good social competence has been shown to foster friendships and reduce the risk of victimization (Fenesy & Lee, 2022). Children exhibiting well-developed social competencies typically establish more robust relationships with educators and demonstrate greater engagement within their educational environment (A'yun et al., 2024). Prosocial behavior plays a significant role in shaping students' long-term development. Children who demonstrate prosocial tendencies early in life are more likely to build positive social relationships, develop strong cooperative abilities, and grow into empathetic and responsible members of society (Syamsudin & Hadi, 2025). Hence, identifying and understanding the factors that contribute to prosocial behavior is essential, particularly within the context of elementary education.

Contemporary developmental theories assert that social skills are not static abilities, but instead can be formed and improved through targeted interventions (Gee, 2021). However, As the digital landscape continues to expand rapidly and evolve into an increasingly intricate and multifaceted environment, it introduces a wide range of emerging challenges that not only transform but also complicate the ways in which children engage in, experience, and internalize essential social learning processes shaping how they understand relationships, communication, and social norms in both online and offline contexts (Sagala et al., 2024). In addition, factors that influence students' social abilities include mental capacity, emotions, intelligence and maturity, student conditions, age and gender, student interaction with the environment, family, socio-economic conditions and parents' work and parents' education (Malanua et al., 2023). Therefore, understanding social skills in the context of modern ecology is essential to design an adaptive and inclusive educational strategy for all children.

This study adopts a post-positivist paradigm, emphasizing both the measurement of children's social behavior and a deep understanding of how they construct, interpret, and apply social skills within digital interaction contexts. According to Dulal (2025), the post-positivist paradigm rests on the belief that while an objective reality exists, researchers can only approach and interpret it imperfectly rather than fully comprehend it.

Ontologically, it assumes that reality is independent of human perception, yet our comprehension of it is always limited. Epistemologically, knowledge is viewed as objective but inherently imperfect, implying that research findings are provisional and subject to revision. From an axiological standpoint, post-positivist researchers strive for neutrality while recognizing that absolute objectivity is ultimately impossible to achieve. In this study, this view enables researchers to interpret children's experiences more reflectively, taking into account the environmental, cultural, and technological factors that influence their interactions. In addition, the post-positivist paradigm emphasizes that scientific knowledge is tentative and open to revision, so that researchers play the role of observers who are aware of their subjectivity. This approach aligns with the study's objectives, which aim to explore the meaning and social dynamics that emerge in the peer interactions of elementary school children, rather than simply testing the causal relationships between variables. Thus, the post-positivist paradigm provides the appropriate epistemological framework for understanding children's social reality in depth, while remaining systematic and verified through qualitative validity procedures, such as triangulation and *member checking*.

Based on several previous research results, studies have shown that the use of digital tools in the learning process, particularly in social skills, can improve collaborative skills. Globally, the Finnish education system is renowned for integrating a "digital citizenship" curriculum that fosters empathy and conflict resolution through the use

of gamified learning platforms. Digital empathy and emotional intelligence play important roles in reducing social media addiction, loneliness, and feelings of despair. Social media often encourages people to display idealized versions of themselves, which can hinder genuine connections and exacerbate feelings of isolation. In contrast, when individuals practice digital empathy, they help foster a more compassionate and supportive online environment (Reshma Prasai, 2025). In the U.S., 58% of educators report an increase in *cyberbullying* migrating to physical conflict (Gee, 2021). Urban schools are adopting educational technology for peer collaboration, while rural areas face infrastructure gaps. In India, the educational gap between rural and urban areas, particularly in terms of access, skills, and learning opportunities, remains significant. Although numerous ICT-based initiatives have been implemented to broaden educational access in rural areas, most have failed to significantly improve student learning outcomes due to enduring social, economic, political, and psychological barriers, as well as the persistent digital isolation of rural communities (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2021). Overall, the study's results confirm that social skills in the digital era are not merely individual problems, but rather the result of interactions between educational, social, and structural factors. Therefore, efforts to develop children's social competence should be accompanied by inclusive digital education policies, ensuring that every child, regardless of their geographical and socio-economic background, has the same opportunity to learn to interact empathetically, ethically, and collaboratively in the digital space.

Meanwhile, in Indonesia, Indonesia's culture of collectivism (*gotong royong*) contrasts with individualistic digital behavior. Research indicates that children in urban areas prioritize online popularity over community cooperation, thereby eroding traditional social norms (Sandriani, 2025). However, mobile penetration (73%) allows for coworker interaction through social media, creating an unregulated "digital playground." *The Merdeka Learning curriculum* includes basic digital literacy but lacks explicit integration of social skills. Educators can pursue future opportunities related to the program through grassroots initiatives such as *Digital Child*, which trains teachers to manage conflicts in both online and offline settings; however, they continue to face challenges in scaling up these efforts.

Traditionally, educators and parents have developed children's social skills through face-to-face peer interactions, allowing them to learn cooperation, conflict resolution, and empathy (Gee, 2021). Social media use and the "Fear of Missing Out" phenomenon have a significant impact on children's emotional well-being in the digital age. Excessive exposure to social media can lead to anxiety, low self-esteem, and social pressure, which can impact children's emotional development. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the relationship between social media use, the "Fear of Missing Out" phenomenon, and emotional well-being is crucial for designing educational strategies, parental guidance, and policies that support healthy and balanced digital media use, thereby protecting children's well-being in an increasingly complex digital environment (Mujazi et al., 2025). On the one hand, digital spaces can enrich collaborative skills through multiplayer online games and interaction-based learning applications. Most existing studies focus more on the risks of digital spaces such as cyberbullying and exposure to harmful content rather than exploring their potential to support the development of children's social skills (Plowman, 2016). In addition, there is still a gap in understanding how local cultural values, such as politeness and communication ethics, play a role in shaping children's digital socialization processes. Teachers' perspectives are often overlooked, despite their crucial role as primary mediators in guiding children's social interactions in both virtual and real-world settings.

The results of initial observations at SD Negeri 4 Palembang indicate that students frequently imitate behaviors and characters from social media, including those from cartoon films and online content. This imitation phenomenon occurs consciously or unconsciously, even including behavior that is not appropriate for their age, so it needs to be studied more deeply. This research aims to address the gaps in understanding how the digital environment influences the acquisition of social skills in primary education, particularly in the context of peer relationships. In particular, this research aims to develop theoretical innovation through the proposal of *Combination Socialization Theory* a conceptual framework that explains how children integrate online and offline social competencies in their daily interactions, Explaining the concept of digital empathy as a contextual social skill that goes beyond just kindness in online spaces, but also demands the ability to translate the meaning of empathy among physical spaces and digital, Presenting contextual originality by being the first study to analyze the *cultural-digital interface* in Indonesia, namely how the collectivist values of Indonesian society interact and even collide with more individualistic digital behavior, Identify a unique phenomenon called "contextual whipping", which is the tug-of-war dynamics between cultural norms and digital practices that affect the social development of Indonesian children, Encourage A paradigm shift from the concept of "digital literacy" to "digital fluency", which emphasizes the importance of mastering adaptive social skills across physical and virtual environments. This research makes a theoretical contribution by expanding the understanding of the integration between traditional and digital socialization in the context of Indonesian culture, as well as practical contributions for educators and policymakers in designing social learning strategies relevant to children's lives in the digital space.

Method

The study employs a qualitative case study approach aligned with post-positivist principles, recognizing that although objective realities exist, researchers can only approximate them through systematic investigation (Enworo, 2023). Researchers chose this approach to enable an in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena, specifically how children develop and apply social skills within digital contexts. Case studies provide a flexible methodological framework for examining phenomena contextually and holistically, exploring the relationships between children's behaviors, social environments, and digital experiences in real-world settings. In addition, this approach enables researchers to capture the subjective meanings and social dynamics that emerge from peer interactions, aligning with the research objectives of understanding social reality in a reflexive and contextual manner. Data were collected over a six-month period in two primary schools in Palembang (Grades 3-5) in diverse socioeconomic environments. Purposive sampling involved 42 children (ages 8–11 years), 12 teachers, and 15 parents. Children were selected to represent different levels of digital engagement, ranging from minimal device use to intensive use of digital devices.

Table 1. Demographics of research participants

Participant Categories	Quantity	Age Range / Length of Teaching / Role	Gender (L/P)	Digital Engagement Rate	Information
Children (Elementary students in grades 3-5)	42	8–11 years (Grades 3–5)	20 L / 22 P	Low (12), Medium (18), High (12)	Coming from two public schools in Palembang with diverse

						socioeconomic backgrounds
Teacher	12	5–18 years of teaching experience	2 L / 10 P	Medium High (4)	(8),	Teaching elementary and IPAS social studies subjects and having limited access to digital literacy training
Parents	15	29–46 years old	4 L / 11 P	Low Medium (6)	(9),	Most work in the informal sector; The majority use gadgets for basic communication

The researchers determined the level of digital engagement by triangulating three data sources: (1) direct observation of how frequently and for how long students used digital devices in the school environment, (2) teacher and parent reports describing children's digital media habits for both learning and entertainment, and (3) a short preliminary questionnaire assessing device ownership, types of online activities, and the intensity of children's digital interactions. This approach ensures the diversity of participants' characteristics and enriches the analysis of how the level of digital exposure affects the form and quality of children's social skills.

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, this study employed various *trustworthiness strategies* in accordance with the principles outlined by [Guba and Lincoln \(2021\)](#). By triangulating sources and methods, comparing data from interviews, observations, and digital artifacts to confirm the consistency of findings. *Member checking* is carried out by involving participants (teachers and children) in reviewing the initial interpretation to ensure it aligns with their experience. The triangulation method was employed through semi-structured interviews with children (n = 42), teachers (n = 12), and parents (n = 15), exploring their experiences with digital interaction. The method involved observing participants during breaks, class activities, and technology-integrated lessons (120 hours). Analysis conducted on digital artifacts related to children's online communications, including interactions within educational apps and monitored messaging platforms. This process does not focus on the child's personal content or privacy, but rather on communication patterns, forms of cooperation, and social expression that emerge in a safe digital context. Each data point is collected with the consent of parents and the school, and analyzed with the protection of the child's identity and comfort in mind.

This approach enables researchers to understand how children express empathy, collaboration, and conflict resolution in digital spaces without compromising their privacy. The thematic analysis follows the six-phase framework of [Braun and Clarke \(2021\)](#): 1) Data recognition through repeated immersion. 2) Initial coding of transcripts and field notes. 3) Generate themes from code "Digital Empathy", The Value of Politeness, Cross-platform interaction, Parent-teacher collaboration gap. 4) Review the theme of raw data. 5) Define and name themes. 6) Generate reports. During the initial coding stage, researchers identified segments of data that revealed the child's social behavior patterns in digital interactions. For example, a student's statement, such as "*I am sorry over chat because I am afraid to speak directly,*" is coded as "an expression of empathy through digital media." In contrast, when a child imitates the speaking style of a character from an online game, this behavior is categorized as "digital social imitation." The researchers manually conducted the coding process using thematic worksheets and maintained consistency in interpretation through collaborative discussions among the research team. This approach helps build themes that authentically and reflectively represent the child's

social experiences. The Journal of Reflexivity documents researchers' bias to improve accuracy.

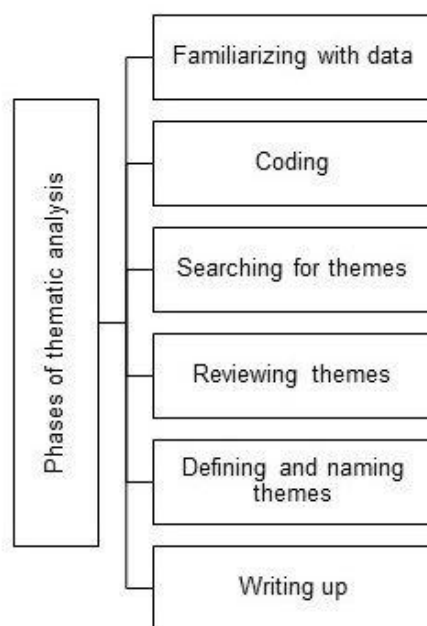


Figure 1. Thematic Analysis Framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021)

This research has several technical limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the six-month time constraint for data collection limits the opportunity to observe children's social dynamics over a more extended period, especially during seasonal changes in digital behavior. Second, potential observational bias may arise because the presence of researchers in the school environment can influence children's behavior. The researchers minimized these effects by conducting repeated observations and engaging in continuous field reflections. Third, the researchers limited access to children's personal online contexts for ethical and privacy reasons, analyzing only digital artifacts from interactions supervised by schools or parents. These limitations do not diminish the validity of the findings but suggest the need for further research with a longitudinal design and a more in-depth digital ethnographic approach.

Results and Discussion

Result

Phase 1: Introduction with Data

In the initial stage of data familiarization, the data recognition process involved 120 hours of student observations, 69 interview transcripts (comprising 42 children, 12 teachers, and 15 parents), and 84 digital artifacts, including *chat logs*, avatars, and online collaborative documents. This deep and repetitive engagement enables researchers to gain a holistic understanding of how children navigate and negotiate social boundaries between their physical and digital spaces.

Table 2. Summary of the data recognition process familiarization process

Data Type	Quantity / Duration	Activity Description	Purpose of Analysis
Student Observation	120 hours	Direct observation of children's interactions during break hours,	Understanding behavior and social role

		classroom activities, and technology-based lessons.	negotiation in a physical context
Interview Transcript	69 transcripts (42 children, 12 teachers, 15 parents)	In-depth conversations about children's social experiences in online and offline spaces	Exploring participants' perceptions, emotions, and reflections on digital interactions.
Digital Artifacts	84 items (chat log, avatar, collaborative document)	Content analysis of supervised digital interactions in online learning and communication applications	Trace the patterns of communication, cooperation, and social expression of children.
Initial Analysis Activities	-	Data recognition through reading, initial memo recording, and identification of meaning patterns	Discovering the early themes of social boundary negotiations in both physical and digital spaces.

Children exhibit a form of "combination socialization," which is the ability to adjust their social behavior based on the context of interaction. For example, they are more courageous in expressing their opinions or apologizing through digital messages. In contrast, in face-to-face situations, they tend to refrain from doing so in order to maintain group harmony. Repeated observations show that digital spaces function as "social safe zones", where children express emotions and collaborate without the pressure of the class hierarchy. However, the boundaries between online and offline interactions are often blurred; some children bring conflict from the digital space to school, while others mimic virtual expressions or communication styles in everyday conversations.

The researchers enhanced the validity of the findings by triangulating sources and methods, comparing observations with interview narratives, and analyzing digital artifacts. They also conducted member checking by inviting children and teachers to review and confirm the interpretation of each theme. At the same time, trial audits and reflections from researchers ensure the traceability of the analysis process. The combination of these procedures yielded findings that were not only methodologically credible but also authentically and contextually representative of the child's social reality.

Phase 2: Generating the Initial Code

In this phase, the researcher conducted inductive coding that resulted in 186 initial codes, including: "Emojis as a form of security", "Fights while playing games like punches on the playground", "Tablet users in group work", "Teachers do not understand our application", "Online kindness is not the same as offline kindness".

Stage 3: Finding the Theme

The next phase involves searching for themes by grouping code into four categories: digital-physical empathy hybrids, conflict spillover dynamics, collaborative technology hierarchies, and the lack of adult guidance.

Phase 4: Review the Theme

The theme is enhanced against coded extracts and complete datasets. The concept of "Collaborative Technology Hierarchy" was expanded to explain how access and control of digital devices create power dynamics among children. In practice, children who have more advanced devices or use technology more often become the center of

control in the group, while others tend to follow. This mechanism not only reflects the capabilities of technology but also shows how technology is a source of new social status among peers.

Meanwhile, the concept of "Adult Guidance Vacuum" is described in more detail as two forms of gaps: first, the gap in teachers' knowledge in understanding children's digital culture, and second, the inconsistency of parental supervision of children's online activities. These two factors create a void in children's social mentoring in the digital world, where they often have to navigate norms and risks independently. This approach emphasizes the importance of empathy and intergenerational collaboration in creating a more supportive digital environment for children's social development.

Phase 5: Defining & Naming the Theme

In this phase, defining and naming a theme with a final theme with definition, definition, and naming of the theme can be seen in the following table 1:

Table 3. Defining & Naming Themes

Theme	Definition	Illustrative Quotes
1. Digital Empathy as a Combination Skill	Children blend online/offline emotional expressions but struggle with context translation.	<i>"I sent her a sad emoji when she cried in class, but when I saw her later, I did not know what to say." (Me, age 9)</i>
2. The Value of Politeness	The digital conflicts that come from the insults of the game become treated in the physical space directly.	<i>"He called me a 'noob' on Roblox, so I pushed him on football. He started it!" (Af, age 10)</i>
3. Cross-platform interaction	Technology enables joint problem-solving.	<i>"Fast tablet kids always lead. I had an idea, but no one listened." (St, age 8)</i>
4. Parent-teacher collaboration gap	Inconsistent adult guidance due to digital literacy gaps and uncertainty of norms.	<i>"We teach block sharing, not screen sharing. The rules feel invisible." (Mrs. Rv, Teacher)</i>

According to Table 2 above, the first theme, "Digital Empathy as a Combination Skill," suggests that children are developing the ability to express and understand emotions across both online and offline environments. They use digital symbols, such as emojis or text messages, to convey empathy, but often struggle to translate those digital expressions into genuine interactions. A quote from a nine-year-old student, *"I sent him a sad emoji when he cried in class, but when I saw him later, I did not know what to say,"* illustrates the emotional distance between virtual empathy and face-to-face social responses. These findings confirm that digital empathy requires the combination of skills of connecting cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions in different contexts.

The second theme, "The Value of Politeness," illustrates how Indonesian cultural norms, including *manners* and *good manners*, influence children's social behavior in the digital space. However, when digital interactions contain elements of ridicule or insults, such as in online games, children often bring the conflict into the physical realm. The statement *"He called me a 'noob' on Roblox, so I pushed him in football"* illustrates how the tension between the value of decency and digital impulses can fuel conflicts that transcend contexts. This suggests that social-emotional learning should emphasize the application of interaction ethics in both virtual and real-world contexts.

The third theme, "Cross-Platform Interaction," highlights the dynamics of power and collaboration in the digital space. Children with better access to technology or higher digital skills tend to lead group activities, while children with limited access feel unheard. Quote: *"Fast tablet kids always take the lead. I have an idea, but no one is listening,"* pointing to the emergence of a collaborative technology hierarchy, where digital capabilities affect the social position in the learning group. This phenomenon highlights the digital participation inequality in Indonesia's basic education, which remains plagued by gaps in access to devices and internet connections.

The fourth theme, "The Parent-Teacher Collaboration Gap," highlights the synergy between teacher guidance and parental supervision in helping children navigate their digital social lives. Teachers often feel that they lack clear guidance on establishing online behavioral norms, while parents face challenges in digital literacy. A teacher quotes, *"We teach block sharing, not screen sharing. The rules feel invisible,"* describing the coaching vacuum in which the child must build their own social understanding. This reinforces the relevance of *Bioecological Systems Theory* (Bronfenbrenner) in explaining the importance of cross-system relationships (family, school, and digital environment) in children's social development. Overall, these four themes describe the socialization transition of Indonesian children in the digital era, where cultural norms, access to technology, and adult guidance interact in a complex manner to form new social skills that are cross-spatial and contextual.

Phase 6: Generating the Report

The next stage is to compile a report on the results, incorporating the findings and addressing the gaps.

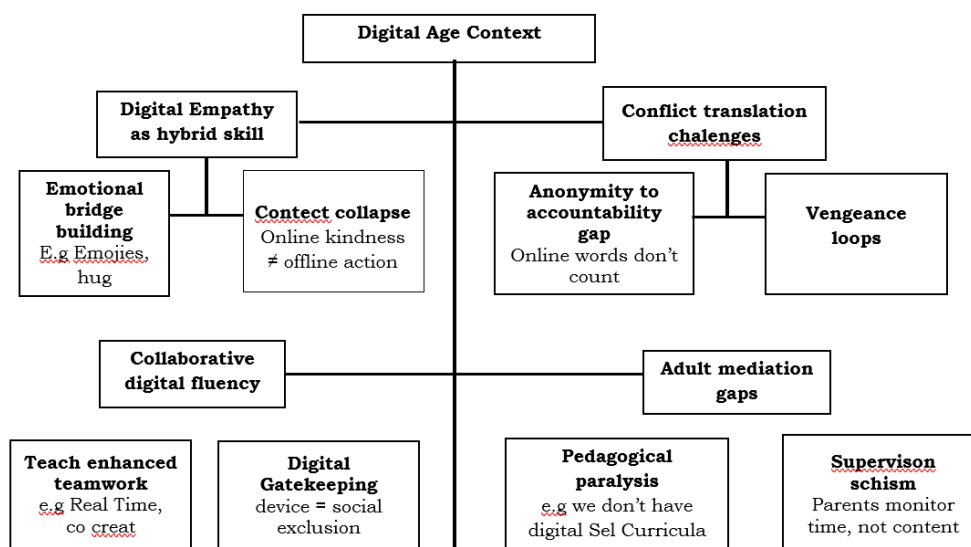


Figure 1. Thematic Gap Results

Detailed Theme Analysis

Theme 1: Digital empathy functions as a specific combination skill in children, characterized by its context-dependent nature. Observations confirm that while 78% effectively leverage digital tools like emojis and messages for direct emotional support online, these same children struggle to apply this empathy in offline settings. Only 23% initiated comforting interactions face-to-face without the demand or context provided by digital communication.

Theme 2: The research revealed significant challenges in translating digital conflict into tangible outcomes. Key findings include Theme 1: Digital Empathy as a

Combination Skill, which found that digital anonymity can fuel aggression in students. Specifically, 64% of insults occurred in game chats, and 67% of conflicts escalated into physical confrontations within 48 hours of the initial incident. Children struggled to align actions derived from digital media with real-world consequences, often justifying their actions with the excuse, *"It is just a game!"* even when they caused harm to others. Theme 2: The Value of Politeness. While digital devices can enhance asynchronous collaboration, checklists, which observe idea sharing by up to 40% compared to paper, create a new power imbalance. Within groups of students using devices, 71% of students engage in group activities and silence their peers. Theme 3: Cross-platform interaction reveals a critical lack of support. Specifically, 92% of teachers have not received training in digital conflict resolution, and 81% of parents focus solely on device time limits rather than the quality of interactions. Theme 4: Parent-teacher collaboration gap, Children receive mixed messages from teachers and parents, including *"My mom said 'behave well online', but my teacher said 'no cell phone use at school'"*. This finding highlights a gap between parental and school regulations that require alignment. Specifically, there is a need for a coordinated program that bridges these differing expectations.

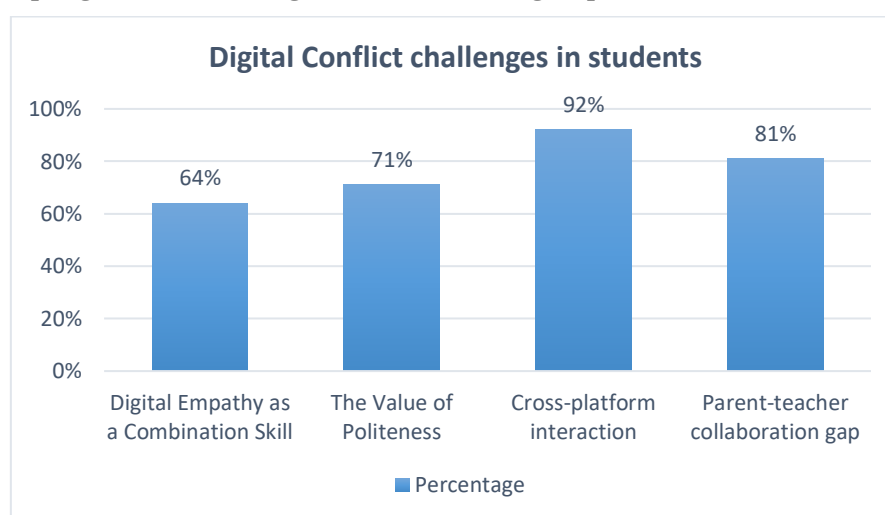


Figure 2. Graph Detailed Theme Analysis

The graph shows that digital conflict is a multi-dimensional issue, where empathy, social balance, adult guidance, and institutional support all intersections. The highest concern lies in the lack of systemic support and collaboration in 92% and 81%, which amplifies students' struggles to navigate digital interactions responsibly.

Discussion

Digital empathy is a combination of skills

Based on the findings, the children demonstrated a developed expression of empathy, incorporating both online and offline behaviors. For example, my (age 9) described comforting peers through a message after observing their suffering in class: "I sent her a happy emoji because I saw her sad, but then I talked to her during breaks." The teachers noted that while digital tools allow for direct emotional support, they sometimes dilute face-to-face comfort skills. The findings show that while 78% of children provide digital comfort to their peers by using emojis or supportive messages, only 23% initiate face-to-face comfort without digital support. This gap suggests that educators and researchers often view digital empathy as a context-dependent skill, rather than recognizing it as a transferable interpersonal ability that can apply across both online and offline interactions. Recent studies have also noted that children

compartmentalize empathy across modalities, with digital expression not automatically bridging embodied interactions (O'Reilly et al., 2025). research validating the Digital Communication Empathy Scale (DCES) indicates that while digital and offline empathy are moderately correlated, they represent distinct yet related skill sets with some differences in their underlying competencies (Collins et al., 2025). These findings suggest that developing empathy in the digital age is an integrated process that requires intentional support to bridge the gap between online and offline experiences. Recent progress in digital technology and the emergence of new digital ecosystems, particularly those driven by hyperconnectivity, social media platforms, and datafication, have heightened awareness of socio-emotional competencies and the cognitive dimensions of learning. These advancements, which integrate social and emotional learning with cutting-edge technological innovation, have fostered new learning models that place particular emphasis on cultivating empathy and interpersonal understanding (Erstad et al., 2024). Without such interventions, children may continue to rely on digital cues while lacking in the development of face-to-face empathy skills.

The Value of Politeness.

The value of courtesy gained in digital spaces often extends to physical spaces. Af (age 10) explained: "Someone called me 'stupid' in game chat, so I did not play with him in football." Observations reveal 67% of playground conflicts stem from online disagreements. Children often experience confusion in bridging the gap between the freedom of the digital world and the responsibility of the real world. In the online space, they feel freer to express themselves, sometimes even saying or acting without considering the consequences. However, when the consequences of digital interaction appear in the school environment, they often struggle to understand that online actions also have real social effects. In situations like these, the role of teachers becomes crucial as social mediators, helping children reflect on their behavior, understand the feelings of their friends, and cultivate empathy across various interaction spaces. This phenomenon reflects the principle of Hybrid Socialization Theory, which posits that the process of developing children's social skills occurs through the simultaneous integration of online and offline experiences. In this context, teachers not only play the role of academic educators, but also act as a bridge that connects the two social ecosystems of children, the digital world, which is flexible and anonymous, and the physical world, which is governed by social norms and accountability. When teachers help children interpret the meaning of digital interactions and relate them to absolute social values, they are essentially facilitating the formation of a comprehensive, contextual social identity, the core of the hybrid socialization process itself.

Cross-platform interactions

In this case, children are using digital tools for collaborative problem-solving. During the group project, students used tablets to create stories together, with one child noting: "We were able to add ideas faster, and everyone got a turn." However, teachers observed that dominant personalities often controlled digital tools, marginalizing more reserved peers. In this case, the importance of communication is evident among elementary school children. In the world of education, the learning process is most effective when communication and interaction between teachers and students occur frequently (Hasanah & Malik, 2020). Therefore, communication is crucial. It must take place as well as possible in the learning process, especially between teachers as educators and students as learners (Hadijah et al., 2024).

Parent-teacher collaboration gap.

Parents and teachers expressed uncertainty about guiding digital interactions. Rv (teacher) stated: "We teach sharing and respect, but the online rules feel different." Children often report inconsistent adult supervision, which can lead to challenges with self-regulation. Parents hold a crucial role in shaping a child's education, serving as the first educators who instill essential life values and guide children in developing positive social interactions with others (Ayub et al., 2024).

These findings highlight the interplay between social skills in digital contexts, where online and offline behaviors mutually influence each other. This is in line with the post-positivist assertion that reality is diverse and context-dependent (Creswell, 2014). The recognition of "digital empathy" as a unique and increasingly important skill reinforces (Plowman, 2016) argument that the rapid integration of technology into daily life is not only transforming how individuals interact and communicate but also creating entirely new developmental pathways that demand carefully designed and targeted pedagogical strategies to help learners adapt, respond ethically, and build meaningful social connections in digital environments. This phenomenon aligns with the *effects of online disinhibition* (Mistiani, 2024; Pratiwi & Hasanah, 2022; Purboningsih et al., 2025), where anonymity reduces social accountability. It also builds on recent evidence that digital conflict predicts offline relational aggression and emotional distress (Arpaci & Bahari, 2023).

Children's frequent rationalization of "It is just a game!" illustrates the developmental mismatch between digital behavior and its social consequences. The challenge of conflict translation reflects the broader social issue of digital accountability. Amidst globalization and technological advancements, the younger generation faces increasingly complex challenges. Interactions in the digital world and the increasing tendency toward social isolation can hinder the development of their social skills. Therefore, education focused on strengthening social skills is an urgent need. Character education also plays a crucial role in the modern education system, as it serves to shape a generation that not only excels academically but also possesses a strong personality and morals. Social skills, including the abilities to interact, communicate, and collaborate, form a crucial foundation of character education that nurtures individual growth and promotes a harmonious social life (Rahman et al., 2025). Future researchers should examine the long-term impacts of these findings across diverse educational and social contexts. In collaborative digital fluency, tablet-based projects increased idea sharing by 40% compared to paper assignments; however, in 71% of cases, the dominant student group monopolized the device, limiting peer participation. It highlights how digital tools can simultaneously democratize and reinforce inequality.

To reduce inequality, scaffolding strategies such as rotating device roles, split-screen interfaces, or embedded equity commands can redistribute agencies. More broadly, digital collaborative fluency must be reframed as a socio-technical competency that requires not only technical skills but also an awareness of power dynamics, group norms, and fair practices.

The results also reveal a critical "mentorship gap": 92% of teachers lack training in digital conflict mediation, while 81% of parents emphasize screen time constraints over the quality of interaction. Children often report inconsistent norms between their homes and schools, which can lead to confusion about what is considered acceptable behavior.

These findings are in line with recent research showing that parents still rely primarily on restrictive mediation like screen boundaries rather than active co-use or

reflective dialogue, despite evidence that active mediation predicts healthier digital outcomes, in other findings in Indonesian parents who participated in the study generally employed a mix of restrictive and enabling mediation strategies, such as limiting access and interactions, using technical controls, monitoring activities, providing interpretive guidance, supervising or co-using media, serving as role models, and enforcing social norms. While parents experienced varying levels of difficulty in applying these approaches, they generally believed that their mediation efforts supported their children in using social media more responsibly and adaptively (Mistiani, 2024; Pratiwi & Hasanah, 2022; Purboningsih et al., 2025). Misirli et al., (2025) research findings indicate that the widespread use of touchscreen media among children yields varying effects, depending on factors such as device type, content quality, adult involvement, and usage context. These results underscore the necessity for deliberate, guided, and contextually relevant application of touchscreen technology, as well as the importance of interactive engagement, teacher training, public education, and community-based initiatives in fostering meaningful digital experiences for children and families. To close this gap, professional development for teachers should emphasize digital socio-emotional learning and conflict resolution. At the same time, parent education programs should revolve around the quality of interaction rather than the quantity of screen time.

Additionally, aligning cross-contextual norms, such as the Digital Citizenship Charter, which covers both home and school environments, can reduce confusion and foster coherent expectations for children navigating both settings. The study reveals that children actively build a combination emotional ecology, in which digital and physical interactions constantly overlap. However, without intentional scaffolding, this ecology remains fragmented: empathy is often digital but not realized; conflicts escalate from online to offline; collaboration encourages both inclusion and exclusion; and adults lack the preparation to mediate effectively.

Conclusion

This study shows that the socialization of elementary school students, especially in the city of Palembang, in the digital era forms a "combination emotional ecology", which is a combination of physical and digital interaction in the development of social skills. Children are now learning to empathize, collaborate, and resolve conflicts not only in the classroom, but also through online platforms that are part of their daily lives. Digital empathy is emerging as a new skill that combines emotional and social dimensions, but is not yet fully integrated into face-to-face behavior. The value of politeness suggests that online arguments often continue in the real world, while collaborative digital fluency demonstrates that technology can strengthen cooperation, but also create inequalities in participation. Additionally, there is a lack of synergy between teachers and parents in guiding children's social interactions in the digital realm.

Theoretically, this research expands the application of *the Theory of Mind, Social Information Processing, and Bioecological Systems Theory* in the context of Indonesian education, while also introducing the concept of "hybrid socialization" as a new form of social learning that occurs in parallel in both physical and digital worlds. The implication is that education in Indonesia needs to integrate digital citizenship with social-emotional learning (SEL), as listed in the independent curriculum. The findings of this study can also serve as a basis for developing hybrid SEL frameworks in developing countries. Additionally, teachers require training in digital conflict mediation and the development of cross-cultural empathy. At the same time, parents need to shift their focus from screen time restrictions to actively engaging in their children's online activities. Collaboration between home, school, and the digital

environment is the key to fostering adaptive, empathetic, and characterful social skills in Indonesian children in the technological era.

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