

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The reason I decided to do this study is that I admire the teacher that teach in such a school, as it is really hard to do that, and when I was young, people used to call me having Autism as well and bully me.

General schools and special needs schools (*Sekolah Luar Biasa/SLB*) differ fundamentally in their instructional contexts, particularly in relation to students' social-emotional development. In general education settings, most students possess age-appropriate communication skills and emotional regulation abilities, allowing Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) to be implemented through group discussions, verbal reflection, and collaborative activities. Teachers in these settings typically integrate SEL as a complementary component alongside academic instruction, and it is hard to do so when it comes to the special needs school.

In contrast, special needs schools serve students with diverse disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, emotional and behavioral disorders, and hearing impairments. These conditions significantly affect students' ability to recognize emotions, interpret social cues, and engage in interpersonal interactions. As a result, SEL in SLB settings requires more individualized, structured, and experiential approaches, often relying on visual supports, repetition, and consistent emotional scaffolding.

Within this context, teachers in special needs schools assume expanded roles that go beyond instructional delivery, and from what they were taught during their time in school for teacher. They act as emotional regulators, social mediators, and continuous emotional supports for their students. Consequently, the implementation of SEL in SLBs involves greater emotional labor and professional adaptation compared to general schools. These contextual differences indicate that SEL practices in special needs education cannot simply replicate models used in general education. Instead, they must be understood through the lived experiences of teachers who navigate these unique challenges daily. This underscores the importance of examining teachers' professional knowledge and transformative learning processes in implementing SEL within special needs school contexts.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has gained international recognition as a framework that supports not only academic development but also students' ability to regulate emotions, build positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), SEL is an evidence-based approach that strengthens students' social and emotional competencies, leading to improved learning outcomes and long-term life success (*Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2020).*

In Indonesia, the importance of SEL has gained increasing recognition within recent national education reforms. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology introduced the Profil Pelajar Pancasila as part of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasizes competencies such as collaboration, critical thinking, empathy, and resilience that closely align with SEL principles. Recent policy directions also encourage *pembelajaran mendalam*, a learning approach that promotes reflective, inquiry-based, and socially grounded engagement

(Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia. (2022). *Profil Pelajar Pancasila dan implementasinya dalam Kurikulum Merdeka*. Jakarta: Kemendikbudristek.) While general schools are gradually integrating these SEL-related competencies, special needs schools (*Sekolah Luar Biasa or SLB*) face unique challenges due to diverse disability profiles, limited resources, and the need for individualized instructional strategies. These conditions implement SEL in SLBs more complexly compared to mainstream settings.

Teachers in special needs schools frequently confront situations where students struggle with emotional regulation, social interaction, and communication (*Antia et al., 2011*). For example, students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may face difficulties in understanding social cues, while students with hearing impairments may find it hard to express emotions verbally. In such contexts, SEL becomes not only a supportive tool but a necessity for enabling participation in both academic and social life.

Despite these realities, research on SEL in Indonesian special needs schools remains *limited* (*Rahmawati, 2018; Kurniawati, 2020; Setiawan & Wahyuni, 2021*). Most studies examine SEL in general education settings or focus primarily on student outcomes rather than teacher practices (*Lestari, 2020; Putri, 2021*). This creates a clear gap in understanding how teachers develop their professional knowledge of SEL and how they adapt SEL practices to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (1991) offers a useful framework to analyze these processes. It suggests that adults experience growth when they encounter disorienting dilemmas, engage in critical reflection, and adopt new perspectives. For teachers, such transformative learning is often triggered by challenges in practice, leading them to rethink their assumptions and reframe their approaches.

This study situates itself within this gap: to explore how teachers in special needs schools in Indonesia narrate their experiences with SEL, and how their professional knowledge evolves through transformative processes.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Although SEL is widely acknowledged as beneficial, its practical integration in Indonesian special needs classrooms is still underexplored. Teachers face multiple dilemmas: limited training in SEL, lack of resources, inconsistent parental involvement, and unique student needs that require individualized approaches. Without sufficient knowledge and support, SEL implementation risks becoming inconsistent or superficial.

1.3 Research questions

Main Research Question

- How do teachers narrate their experiences with implementing social-emotional learning in special needs school settings?

Sub-questions

1. What challenges do teachers describe in their day-to-day implementation of SEL in special needs classrooms?

2. What strategies do teachers employ to take on those challenges
3. In what ways do these transformative processes reflect Mezirow's stages of transformative learning?

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, which explains how adults change their professional beliefs and practices through critical reflection and experience. Mezirow argues that adult learning is not just about acquiring new information; it is about reframing deeply held assumptions when confronted with situations that no longer fit old ways of thinking. Transformation is triggered by "disorienting dilemmas," followed by reflection, dialogue, experimentation, and eventual adoption of new perspectives.

In the context of teaching Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in special needs schools, transformative learning is highly relevant. Teachers in SLBs constantly face emotionally charged situations: behavioral outbursts, communication barriers, student regressions, and inconsistent support from home. These are classic disorienting dilemmas, moments when established strategies stop working. When teachers confront these moments, they are pushed to question their assumptions, seek new approaches, and adapt their roles.

Mezirow's core stages map directly onto SEL practice in special needs education:

- **Experiencing disorienting dilemmas:** The failure of a strategy, student regression, or breakdowns in communication.
- **Engaging in critical reflection:** Questioning assumptions about student behavior, emotional expression, and disability.
- **Exploring alternative approaches:** Seeking new tools, visual supports, structured routines, calming strategies, or peer advice.
- **Experimenting and adjusting practices:** Implementing new SEL techniques, observing student responses, and refining strategies.
- **Reintegrating new perspectives:** Incorporating effective SEL practices into daily routines and teachers' professional identities.

This framework helps explain how teachers develop SEL knowledge even without formal training. It provides a lens to trace their learning journeys: how they interpret challenges, make decisions, and transform their practice through ongoing reflection. In short, Mezirow's theory clarifies that teacher learning in SEL is not linear it is iterative, emotional, and deeply shaped by the realities of special needs classrooms

1.5 Definition of keywords

1. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL refers to the process of acquiring and applying skills for self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship building, and responsible decision-making. In this study, SEL is

viewed as a daily, integrated classroom practice, not a standalone program. It also requires reinforcement beyond school settings, as SEL development involves family and community collaboration (*Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning*. (2020).

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is an educational method that helps students to develop key emotional and social skills. It also includes five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. And through SEL, students can learn to understand and regulate their emotions, build positive relationships, handle challenges, and make thoughtful choices.

2. Special Needs Schools (SLB)

SLB refers to Indonesian schools specifically designed for students with disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, hearing impairments, visual impairments, and behavioral or emotional challenges (*Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi*, 2022).

A special needs school is a school for students with special needs, and can also be for children with unique circumstances

3. Teachers' Professional Knowledge

Teachers' professional knowledge refers to the set of competencies teachers draw upon in their daily practice, including experiential understanding, pedagogical strategies, classroom management, emotional awareness, and the ability to adapt instruction to student needs. *Shulman (1987)* explains that teacher knowledge is a blend of practical experience, pedagogical skills, and contextual judgment, all of which guide how teachers make decisions in the classroom. In this study, the concept focuses specifically on how teachers understand and operationalize SEL within special needs school settings.

A teacher's professional knowledge is the knowledge the teacher gains from teaching and learning for a long time, and it can help them adapt to some situations, and also teach other new teachers.

4. Transformative Learning

Transformative learning is an adult learning process in which individuals revise their assumptions and adopt new perspectives through critical reflection, experience, and dialogue (*Mezirow, 1991*). This study describes how teachers evolve in their SEL practice.

The journey of transformation that the teacher went through by reflecting on themselves and gaining more experience

5. Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach that collects and analyzes participants' stories to understand how they make sense of their experiences. It allows researchers to explore how individuals interpret personal and professional events over time (*Clandinin & Connelly, 2000*). In this study, it is used to capture how teachers reflect on their SEL journeys.

Narrative inquiry is a research method that is used to research things more personally by asking individuals who are related to the research.

6. Emotional Labor

Emotional labor refers to the effort individuals invest in managing their emotions to meet the expectations of their role (*Hochschild, 1983*). In education, it describes the psychological demands placed on teachers as they regulate their own emotions while responding to the emotional needs of students, especially in special needs settings.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is significant in several ways:

1. **For Teachers:** It provides insights into how teachers develop SEL knowledge through reflection and practice, offering strategies that may be adapted by others in similar contexts.
2. **For Schools:** Findings highlight institutional barriers and supports needed for effective SEL, guiding school leaders in policy and resource allocation.
3. **For Policymakers:** The study underscores the need for systemic support, such as training programs and parental involvement initiatives, to make SEL sustainable in special needs education.
4. **For Researchers:** It addresses a gap in the literature by focusing on teachers' transformative learning processes rather than solely on student outcomes, thereby broadening the discourse on SEL in Indonesia.

1.7 Organization of the thesis

This thesis is structured into five chapters to present the study in a clear and systematic manner.

Chapter 1 introduces the background of the study by highlighting the importance of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in special needs education. It outlines the research context, problem identification, research questions, objectives, significance of the study, scope and limitations, and the theoretical framework, with Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory serving as the main lens for understanding teachers' professional learning and emotional development in implementing SEL. Chapter 2 reviews relevant theories and empirical studies related to SEL in special needs and inclusive settings, teachers' professional knowledge, emotional labor in teaching, and Transformative Learning Theory. It also examines international and Indonesian studies to situate the research contextually and conceptually, and to identify research gaps that justify the present study. Chapter 3 explains the qualitative research design, including the research approach, participant selection, research setting, data collection methods, research instruments, and data analysis procedures using thematic analysis guided by Mezirow's stages of transformative learning, along with ethical considerations and strategies to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. Chapter 4 presents and discusses the findings derived from the thematic analysis of interview data, exploring teachers' experiences in implementing SEL, the challenges they encounter, the strategies they employ, and the emotional labor involved in their professional practice, which are interpreted through Transformative Learning Theory and connected to relevant literature. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the study by summarizing the key findings, addressing the research questions, discussing implications for teachers, schools, policymakers, and future research, acknowledging the study's limitations, and offering

recommendations for further research and practice in SEL within special needs education contexts.