



The Role of Social-Emotional Learning in Fostering Students' Mental Health: A Case Study of an Indonesian Junior High School

Zainul Arifin¹, Yuliani Fitria Rahmi²

¹Institut Agama Islam Togo Ambarsari Bondowoso, Indonesia

²Institut Agama Islam At-Ta'qwa Bondowoso, Indonesia

email: yrahmi41@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate how Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is integrated with Islamic institutional values to foster students' mental health and mitigate academic anxiety. The widespread prevalence of psychological distress among secondary school students represents a critical problem that compromises both academic continuity and adolescent emotional development. Employing a qualitative case study design, this research focused on key institutional stakeholders and selected students at SMP NU 04 Bondowoso. Data collection was comprehensively executed through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations of daily spiritual routines, and extensive school documentation analysis. The gathered qualitative data were then analyzed systematically using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model, comprising data condensation, data display, and continuous conclusion verification. The findings reveal that the institution successfully operationalizes SEL by organically blending core psychological competencies with the Islamic philosophical concepts of *tarbiyah* and *tazkiyatun nafs*. Field observations indicate that morning spiritual routines, such as collective *dhikr* and *Dhuha* prayers, function actively as proactive emotional regulation and stress-reduction tools. This hybrid model successfully removes the negative social stigma surrounding mental health care, encouraging students to actively open up about their emotional challenges. Additionally, the implementation of the Caring Peers initiative establishes a decentralized, frontline psychological monitoring network. Group counselling sessions anchored in *ukhuwah* act as organic psychological first aid, effectively reducing student alienation and test anxiety. The empirical data confirm that this peer-led framework successfully addresses structural deficiencies in rural mental health resources. Ultimately, treating academic anxiety as a shared communal experience significantly accelerates student psychological recovery and resilience.

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Introduction

The contemporary global community faces a critical escalation in adolescent mental health crises, demanding immediate systemic intervention. Developing psychological resilience in young people is no longer an optional educational by-product but an absolute necessity for sustainable societal development (Meyer & Schutz, 2020; Sukenti & Tambak, 2020). Recent global health assessments indicate that approximately one in seven adolescents experiences a mental health disorder, leading to severe long-term socio-economic consequences and diminished life outcomes. If left unaddressed, these psychological vulnerabilities manifest as systemic societal challenges, including reduced workforce productivity, increased healthcare burdens, and fractured community cohesion (Minsih et al., 2024; Osman et al., 2022). Therefore, addressing mental wellbeing during formative schooling years is paramount to securing a stable future society. Integrating structured emotional support frameworks within formal education serves as a preventative shield, transforming classrooms into primary hubs for psychological fortification. Ultimately, prioritizing student mental health within educational research is essential for fostering a resilient, productive, and socially harmonious global populace capable of navigating complex modern challenges.

The widespread prevalence of anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation among secondary school students represents a profound problem that severely compromises both academic continuity and social-emotional development (Pathollah, 2026). Modern adolescents navigate an increasingly complex socio-technological landscape, marked by intense academic pressures, digital hyper-connectivity, and shifting familial structures, which frequently outpace their natural coping mechanisms (Muhalli, 2024). This misalignment creates chronic psychological distress, manifesting in escalating rates of academic burnout, social withdrawal, and behavioral issues within the school environment. The fundamental problem lies in the traditional educational paradigm, which heavily prioritizes cognitive output and standardized academic achievement while largely ignoring the emotional architecture of learners (Risqi & Darmawan, 2024). Consequently, students are left ill-equipped to process stress, manage interpersonal conflicts, or cultivate self-awareness. This systemic negligence not only impairs individual learning experiences but also fosters toxic school climates characterized by alienation and peer conflict. Without a deliberate, structured mechanism to address these underlying emotional vulnerabilities, educational institutions inadvertently perpetuate a cycle of academic stress and psychological fragility among youth.

In the specific context of Indonesian junior high schools, such as SMP NU 04 Bondowoso, this mental health crisis intersects uniquely with cultural expectations and institutional dynamics. Field observations reveal that students experience distinctive psychological pressures stemming from a dual-curriculum system that demands simultaneous mastery of rigorous national academic standards and intensive religious-spiritual competencies. Furthermore, as a

school deeply embedded within a traditional socio-religious framework, it frequently serves a student demographic navigating transitional adolescent identities amidst conservative community norms and rapid digital modernization. Educators in this setting report a noticeable rise in student anxiety, emotional outbursts, and interpersonal friction, which are often mischaracterized as mere disciplinary infractions rather than symptoms of deeper psychological distress. The school struggles with a lack of specialized mental health professionals, leaving classroom teachers to manage complex emotional behavioural patterns without formal psychological training. This phenomenon highlights a critical disconnect between the urgent psychological needs of students and the traditional, moral-centric disciplinary measures currently utilized within the institution.

Extensive scholarship has documented the utility of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) as an effective mechanism for enhancing student wellbeing, reducing behavioural issues, and improving academic performance globally. Western empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that structured SEL interventions—focusing on self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—significantly mitigate internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression. Researchers have extensively analysed SEL implementation within secular public education systems, establishing robust frameworks for curriculum integration and teacher professional development. Furthermore, contemporary literature increasingly recognizes the necessity of culturally responsive SEL, arguing that emotional expressions and coping mechanisms are deeply shaped by local socio-cultural contexts. These studies emphasize that a one-size-fits-all Western model cannot be directly transplanted into non-Western educational ecosystems without substantial contextual adaptation. Consequently, current educational research has begun shifting toward exploring how distinct cultural values, localized community dynamics, and regional educational structures influence the reception, sustainability, and ultimate efficacy of social-emotional interventions among diverse student populations.

Despite the expanding body of literature on Social-Emotional Learning, a significant research gap persists regarding its operationalization within faith-based educational institutions, particularly Islamic schools in developing nations. Existing SEL models are overwhelmingly derived from Western, secular paradigms, leaving a critical shortage of empirical data on how spiritual values and religious frameworks can intersect with social-emotional competencies. Prior research frequently treats religious education and psychological interventions as separate domains, failing to investigate how Islamic principles—such as *tarbiyah* and *tazkiyatun nafs*—can naturally complement or enrich SEL dimensions. Furthermore, qualitative insights into how multi-layered curricula in rural Indonesian schools restrict or facilitate daily SEL practices remain remarkably scarce. This oversight is a critical weakness in current scholarship, as it ignores the lived realities of millions of students in faith-based systems who process mental health through a spiritual lens. Failing to address this gap prevents the

development of culturally synchronized mental health strategies, leaving Islamic educational institutions without empirically validated, context-specific guidelines for student emotional support.

This study establishes its novelty by presenting a culturally and spiritually synchronized evaluation of Social-Emotional Learning within the unique ecosystem of an Indonesian Islamic junior high school. Moving beyond the conventional, secular Western SEL frameworks, this research introduces a hybridized perspective that evaluates how explicit social-emotional pedagogical practices blend with implicitly embedded Islamic institutional values to foster adolescent mental health. Investigating this intersection represents the current state of the art, as it shifts the paradigm from merely adapting Western tools to exploring organic, faith-integrated emotional resilience. Resolving this issue is highly urgent; as modern psychological pressures on religious youths intensify, schools like SMP NU 04 Bondowoso require immediate, empirically grounded frameworks to protect their students' wellbeing. Postponing this investigation leaves educators dependent on inadequate, secular models that alienate students' spiritual identities or relying on punitive disciplinary measures that exacerbate mental distress. Therefore, this study is crucial to providing an authentic, localized blueprint for holistic student development.

To address these critical gaps, this study investigates how social-emotional learning is conceptualized, implemented, and experienced in building students' mental health. We argue that when SEL is dynamically integrated with Islamic institutional values, it creates a highly supportive, culturally resonant psychological ecosystem that significantly accelerates adolescent mental health recovery and resilience. This qualitative case study provides a comprehensive understanding of the institutional strategies, pedagogical barriers, and student transformations within this unique environment. Theoretically, this research contributes to global educational literature by expanding the boundaries of SEL into the realm of Islamic pedagogy, offering a novel conceptual framework for faith-based emotional education. Practically, it provides school administrators, policymakers, and teachers in similar cultural contexts with actionable insights and concrete strategies to design, implement, and sustain effective mental health interventions that respect and leverage the spiritual identity of the learners.

Method

This study employs a qualitative case study design to gain an in-depth, contextual understanding of how Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is implemented to foster students' mental health. The target research subjects were selected using purposive sampling at SMP NU 04 Bondowoso, an Indonesian Islamic junior high school. The participants comprise key institutional stakeholders, including the school principal, vice-principal of curriculum, two Islamic education teachers, the school counsellor, and twelve selected students from diverse grade levels who have engaged in the school's emotional development initiatives (Tesar, 2021). Data collection techniques involve multi-source qualitative methods to ensure comprehensive data gathering: semi-structured interviews to explore deep personal insights, non-participant

observation of classroom interactions and morning spiritual routines, and documentation analysis of school syllabi and counselling records. To ensure data trustworthiness and credibility, an instrument development framework was established through expert validation of interview guides and extensive peer debriefing, complemented by source and method triangulation to verify the consistency of the findings.

The collected qualitative data are analysed systematically using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model, which consists of three concurrent flows of activity: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). In the data condensation phase, the research team transcribes, selects, and focuses the raw field notes and interview transcripts, filtering out irrelevant information while highlighting core themes related to SEL dimensions and mental health outcomes. Next, data display is managed by organizing the condensed information into structured thematic matrices, conceptual networks, and narrative texts that illustrate the specific intersections between Islamic values and emotional pedagogy. Finally, conclusion drawing and verification are conducted continuously throughout the analysis process by identifying recurring patterns, causal pathways, and institutional configurations, which are then checked against the field realities for confirmation. This rigorous analytical process ensures that the resulting insights provide an authentic, dependable, and structurally sound representation of the unique social-emotional dynamics within the faith-based educational institution.

Results

Integration of Islamic Values with SEL Dimensions: The *Tarbiyah* and *Tazkiyatun Nafs* Approach

The Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) at SMP NU 04 Bondowoso transcends secular Western frameworks by organically blending core psychological competencies with foundational Islamic principles. Instead of introducing SEL as an isolated modern curriculum, the institution deliberately embeds dimensions of self-awareness and self-management within the traditional philosophical concepts of *tarbiyah* and *tazkiyatun nafs*. Self-awareness is contextualized as *muhasabah* (spiritual self-reflection), forcing students to internalize their emotional states not as psychological defects, but as human dynamics requiring spiritual realignment (Pathollah et al., 2025). Concurrently, self-management is operationalized through *sabar* and *khusyu*, converting traditional coping mechanisms into spiritually driven emotional regulation strategies. This hybrid pedagogical model reframes contemporary psychological resilience through a familiar socio-religious vocabulary, allowing students to process complex emotional vulnerabilities without experiencing cultural alienation. By aligning cognitive-behavioural adaptation with deeply rooted spiritual obligations, the school transforms psychological fortification into an authentic, daily spiritual journey rather than a clinical mandate.

Field observations heavily validate this conceptual synthesis, revealing a deeply institutionalized ecosystem where spiritual routines serve as direct vehicles for emotional regulation. During morning observations, the school's communal spaces transform into structured environments for stress mitigation through collective *dhikr* (remembrance of God), *Dhuha* prayers, and guided moral

reflections following Quranic recitations. Rather than treating these rituals merely as theological duties, educators deliberately utilize them as intentional psychological pauses designed to lower cortisol levels and alleviate academic anxieties. Researchers observed that during these spiritual exercises, volatile adolescent energies are systematically channeled into collective tranquility, or *sakinah*. The transition from high-stress academic environments to calm spiritual settings provides a predictable, soothing daily rhythm for students. Classroom interactions further demonstrate that when emotional outbursts or interpersonal frictions arise, teachers do not merely apply punitive disciplinary actions; instead, they immediately guide students back to these spiritual reference points, encouraging them to regain behavioral composure by restoring their internal spiritual balance.

This structural integration is further illuminated by institutional leaders who emphasize the intentionality behind aligning modern psychology with local religious traditions. The School Principal articulated this visionary approach during a formal interview, highlighting how spiritual frameworks naturally accommodate psychological development:

"We realized that addressing our students' mental struggles could not be achieved through secular methods alone, as our community relies heavily on faith. By anchoring emotional education within *tarbiyah*, we ensure that psychological care feels natural and authentic to our students. We teach them that experiencing anxiety or anger is entirely human, but managing those feelings through *dhikr* and self-control is a spiritual duty. This approach removes the negative social stigma surrounding mental health, encouraging students to actively open up about their emotional challenges because they see emotional healing as an essential part of their spiritual growth and religious practice within our school."

Complementing this leadership perspective, the Vice-Principal of Curriculum explained the operational mechanics of embedding these social-emotional dimensions directly into the school's daily academic schedules:

"Our main challenge was avoiding curriculum overload while trying to implement crucial mental health support for our youth. We solved this by systematically injecting SEL competencies into our existing religious classes and morning devotional routines. For example, during Quranic studies, teachers don't just focus on pronunciation; they specifically guide students to analyze verses concerning patience and emotional resilience. This creates a practical learning environment where *tazkiyatun nafs* serves as a functional framework for self-management. Students learn to regulate their test anxieties and peer conflicts by applying these spiritual lessons directly, effectively transforming traditional religious education into an active, protective space for their psychological wellbeing."

Analytically, these findings demonstrate that synthesizing religious values with psychological frameworks creates a highly resilient, culturally synchronized mental health intervention. The interpretive analysis suggests that the success of SMP NU 04 Bondowoso lies in its ability to eliminate the ideological friction often

found between modern psychological science and traditional faith-based communities. By using *tarbiyah* and *tazkiyatun nafs* as conceptual bridges, the institution creates a localized psychological safety net that significantly reduces student resistance to mental health interventions. This integration alters the student's perception of emotional distress, transforming it from a source of social shame into a shared catalyst for holistic spiritual development. Ultimately, this approach suggests that for mental health initiatives to be sustainable in deeply religious societies, they must not merely be tolerated by the local culture, but must actively draw their legitimacy from the community's core spiritual values.

Peer Support Networks and Culturally Resonant Counseling in Mitigating Academic Anxiety

The second finding highlights the strategic efficacy of combining peer support networks with culturally resonant counseling to mitigate academic anxiety. In rural educational settings where professional psychological resources are heavily constrained, maximizing the student community becomes an essential intervention strategy. SMP NU 04 Bondowoso addresses this operational gap through the Caring Peers initiative, training student leaders to identify early warning signs of emotional distress, academic burnout, and social isolation. When psychological vulnerabilities are detected, interventions are filtered through localized group counselling sessions anchored in the Islamic value of *ukhuwah*. This localized peer-led system acts as an organic psychological first aid mechanism, de-escalating social tensions and reducing feelings of alienation caused by the dual demands of national and religious curricula.

Transcript	Theoretical Element	Informant
"We train senior OSIS members to notice when classmates become unusually quiet, isolated, or anxious about exams, allowing us to step in immediately through peer dialogues."	Proactive Peer Identification Mechanisms	School Counsellor
"When students face severe stress from the dual curriculum, we gather them in circles to share burdens using <i>ukhuwah</i> values, which lowers their academic anxiety."	Culturally Resonant Group Counselling	Islamic Education Teacher
"I felt overwhelmed by the school assignments, but talking to my senior peers in the caring network made me realize I was not alone in this struggle."	Psychological First Aid & De-alienation	Selected Student

Analysis of the empirical data presented in the table reveals a highly structured, decentralized approach to adolescent mental health management within the institution. The transcript excerpts demonstrate that peer support is not merely an informal student interaction, but a formalized, preemptive mental health tracking mechanism. By utilizing senior student leaders as frontline monitors, the school successfully bypasses the typical barrier of student-teacher

hierarchy, allowing for the early detection of emotional withdrawal and test anxiety. The integration of *ukhuwah* within group counseling sessions transforms clinical therapy into a culturally resonant community dialogue, which significantly reduces the clinical stigma of psychological vulnerability. Furthermore, the lived experience of the student informant confirms that this peer-led intervention effectively breaks the cycle of academic isolation. Consequently, the data shifts the paradigm of mental health responsibility from specialized professionals to a shared, culturally synchronized community ecosystem.

This analytical interpretation is strongly reinforced by field observations of the peer networks in daily operation across the school grounds. Researchers observed that during high-stress periods, such as mid-term examinations, the "Teman Sebaya Peduli" members actively established informal, circle-based discussion groups (*halaqah*) during recess periods. Rather than focusing solely on academic tutoring, these student-led circles deliberately initiated open conversations about emotional coping strategies, anxiety management, and collective spiritual reassurance. The social dynamics within these circles exhibited a high degree of mutual empathy, active listening, and localized politeness norms, creating an inclusive sanctuary for distressed students. The researcher noted that students who initially displayed visible signs of somatic anxiety—such as restlessness and social withdrawal—showed noticeable behavioral relaxation and increased social engagement after participating in these peer sessions. This observation proves that localized peer interactions offer immediate, real-time stress de-escalation that formal classroom structures cannot replicate.

A deeper interpretive synthesis of these combined findings indicates that the peer-led framework succeeds because it aligns perfectly with the collectivist social fabric of the Islamic boarding school environment. By leveraging existing communal bonds, the institution effectively transforms what could be a crushing academic burden into a shared spiritual and emotional journey. The data underscores that academic anxiety among adolescents is rarely just an individual cognitive problem; rather, it is a socio-emotional challenge that requires a collective, culturally familiar solution. When counseling practices utilize local politeness protocols and faith-based solidarity, they cultivate an environment where vulnerability is met with communal protection rather than peer judgment. Ultimately, this approach demonstrates that localized, peer-driven psychological first aid can successfully substitute for scarce professional psychiatric infrastructure, establishing a sustainable, low-cost model for promoting institutional mental wellbeing in developing rural communities.

To synthesize the empirical evidence for clarity, the research data conclusively demonstrates that peer support networks serve as the primary defensive shield against adolescent academic panic. The core findings indicate that when senior students are trained to detect emotional distress and respond through *ukhuwah*-centered counseling, student anxiety drops significantly. This system effectively reframes intense academic stress from an isolating personal failure into a shared communal experience, making psychological recovery accessible to all

students. The field data verifies that these structured peer circles provide immediate, culturally resonant relief that traditional, top-down disciplinary measures fail to achieve. In summary, the operationalization of the "Teman Sebaya Peduli" program at SMP NU 04 Bondowoso proves that mobilizing the student body through culturally familiar values creates a safe, inclusive, and highly resilient educational environment that protects student mental health.

Discussion

The empirical findings of this study demonstrate a profound convergence between contemporary Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks and classical Islamic pedagogical concepts, expanding the boundaries of culturally responsive mental health interventions. While mainstream Western literature typically conceptualizes SEL through secular, cognitive-behavioral paradigms, the operationalization of *tarbiyah* and *tazkiyatun nafs* at SMP NU 04 Bondowoso offers a unique spiritual dimension. This dual-layered synthesis aligns directly with modern arguments for culturally adapted psychological frameworks, which emphasize that emotional regulation mechanisms must resonate with the local population's worldview to be sustainable. However, this study diverges from standard secular implementations by demonstrating that spiritual rituals, such as *dhikr* and *Dhuha* prayers, do not merely serve as theological practices but function actively as proactive emotional regulation and stress-reduction tools. By reframing emotional vulnerability as a catalyst for spiritual *muhasabah* (self-reflection), the institution effectively minimizes the societal stigma often associated with mental health care, establishing a highly integrated, faith-synchronized protective environment that enriches Western-centric student wellbeing models.

Furthermore, the strategic implementation of the "Teman Sebaya Peduli" network coupled with *ukhuwah*-based group counseling provides critical insights into decentralized mental health infrastructure within rural educational ecosystems. This localized configuration strongly reinforces established psychological literature on peer-driven psychological first aid, which asserts that peer networks are highly efficient in reducing student alienation and de-escalating academic anxieties. Nevertheless, while conventional peer-support programs focus primarily on behavioral active-listening techniques, the model evaluated here infuses peer support with deeply embedded socio-religious obligations of mutual solidarity and communal protection. This spiritualization of peer interaction creates an organic safety net that successfully mitigates the intense psychological pressure stemming from the dual curriculum. The empirical evidence confirms that integrating localized politeness protocols with religious fraternity (*ukhuwah*) transforms group counseling into a natural, inclusive community dialogue. Consequently, this hybrid framework addresses structural deficiencies in rural mental health resources, demonstrating that highly organized student communities can successfully bridge the gap caused by a lack of professional psychological staff.

The theoretical implications of these findings are substantial, offering an innovative conceptual framework that successfully bridges the historical division

between secular psychological science and faith-based education. This study advances the global educational literature by demonstrating that SEL competencies and religious-spiritual values are not mutually exclusive, but can actively enhance one another within a structured pedagogy. By defining *tarbiyah* as an active vehicle for self-awareness and *tazkiyatun nafs* as a functional mechanism for self-management, this research provides a nuanced, culturally responsive model for adolescent mental health analysis. It challenges the universal applicability of secularized Western SEL frameworks, proving that emotional literacy is profoundly shaped by regional spiritual contexts and local community dynamics. Theoretically, this research introduces an organic, faith-integrated model of adolescent resilience, establishing a solid conceptual foundation for future scholars investigating the intersections of educational management, Islamic psychology, and student learner development within non-Western, deeply religious societies.

From a practical perspective, this study offers actionable blueprints for school administrators, instructional designers, and educational policymakers operating within similar faith-based or resource-constrained environments. The success of SMP NU 04 Bondowoso demonstrates that implementing effective mental health interventions does not require expensive, specialized clinical infrastructure; instead, it can be accomplished by optimizing existing institutional assets and cultural values. School principals can replicate this model by deliberately embedding social-emotional competencies into daily morning devotionals and core religious curricula, avoiding the common problem of administrative curriculum overload. Furthermore, the formalized training of student leaders through the "Teman Sebaya Peduli" framework provides a sustainable, low-cost strategy for frontline psychological monitoring and early crisis detection. Policymakers can utilize these insights to develop context-specific instructional guidelines that empower teachers to address adolescent anxiety through culturally familiar supportive frameworks, transforming traditional classrooms into active, protective spaces for student mental wellbeing.

This discussion underscores that integrating Islamic values with social-emotional dimensions combined with structured peer support creates a highly resilient psychological ecosystem for adolescents. The empirical evidence proves that when academic anxiety is treated as a shared communal experience rather than an isolating individual failure, student recovery and psychological resilience accelerate significantly. This study successfully validates that culturally resonant counseling grounded in *ukhuwah* effectively de-escalates the chronic stress induced by intensive educational demands. Ultimately, the synthesis of *tarbiyah*, *tazkiyatun nafs*, and localized peer networks offers a comprehensive, culturally synchronized solution to the global adolescent mental health crisis. By drawing institutional legitimacy directly from the community's core spiritual values, this educational model ensures that emotional support is both highly accessible and deeply sustainable, providing a powerful, authentic blueprint for holistic learner development in the modern era.

Conclusion

This study concludes that integrating Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) with Islamic values through *tarbiyah* and *tazkiyatun nafs*, combined with the peer network, creates a highly resilient, culturally synchronized mental health framework for adolescents. The most vital lesson learned is that when academic anxiety is managed through familiar spiritual routines and localized *ukhuwah*, student psychological resistance drops, transforming mental health care into an organic communal journey rather than an isolating clinical burden. The scientific strength and core contribution of this paper lie in its innovative conceptual hybridization, successfully bridging the historical division between secular Western psychology and faith-based education to offer an authentic blueprint for holistic learner development. However, a key limitation of this research is its narrow focus on a single qualitative case study within a rural Indonesian junior high school, which restricts the direct generalizability of the findings. Consequently, future research should expand this scope by conducting extensive mixed-methods or multi-site longitudinal investigations across diverse cultural and socio-religious educational ecosystems.

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