



EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES OF JUNIOR SECONDARY STUDENTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING

Nurul Ainulhaq Tiara Putra¹, Jamil Suprihatiningrum², Nurbaeti³

^{1,2} Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Indonesia

³ Politeknik Negeri Ujung Pandang, Sulawesi Selatan, Indonesia

Email: 24204011005@student.uin-suka.ac.id¹, jamil.suprihatiningrum@uin-suka.ac.id²,
nurbaeti.ibnoer02@gmail.com³

Corresponding Author : Nurul Ainulhaq Tiara Putra

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ABSTRACT

Early adolescence represents a critical developmental period marked by rapid biological, psychological, and social changes that significantly influence emotional functioning. This study aims to explore the dynamics of emotional development among junior secondary school students and to identify the internal and external factors shaping these dynamics within a specific school context. Employing a qualitative case study design, this research was conducted at a public junior secondary school in Gowa Regency, Indonesia. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews with students, guidance and counseling teachers, homeroom teachers, and parents, as well as document analysis. Thematic analysis was applied using an interactive data analysis model and interpreted through Erikson's psychosocial development framework. The findings reveal that students experience highly fluctuating emotional states characterized by impulsivity, emotional reactivity, and difficulties in self-regulation. Internally, emotional instability is strongly associated with identity confusion and limited emotion regulation skills. Externally, insufficient family emotional support and challenging peer interactions further exacerbate students' emotional vulnerability. Although guidance and counseling services are available, emotional support practices remain largely reactive rather than preventive. This study contributes to the global literature by providing a contextualized understanding of adolescent emotional development in a Global South public school setting, highlighting the importance of holistic, school-based emotional support systems that integrate counseling, pedagogy, and family involvement.

Introduction

Early adolescence, generally defined as the developmental period between ages 12 and 15, is a critical transition marked by profound biological, psychological, and social changes (Sawyer et al., 2018; Steinberg, 2017). During this stage, junior secondary school students experience rapid physical maturation, heightened emotional sensitivity, and expanding social expectations, while their capacities for self-regulation and emotional control are still emerging (Crone & Dahl, 2012; Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2014). This developmental imbalance leaves early adolescents particularly vulnerable, making emotional development one of the most dynamic and fragile aspects of their overall growth (Arnett, 2015).

Empirical studies consistently show that emotional development in early adolescence is characterized by emotional volatility, heightened reactivity, and fluctuating affective states (Silvers, 2016; McLaughlin et al., 2019). Hormonal changes associated with puberty interact with cognitive immaturity and escalating academic and social demands, often resulting in impulsive emotional responses and difficulties with emotion regulation (Somerville et al., 2010; Gross, 2015). At the same time, adolescents begin to engage more actively in identity exploration, negotiating questions related to self-concept, social recognition, and belonging within peer groups (Erikson, 1968; Schwartz et al., 2015). This identity formation process frequently generates emotional confusion, interpersonal tension, and internal conflict, which may manifest as aggression, withdrawal, or academic disengagement (Nashon et al., 2025; Nurmila et al., 2025).

A growing body of research underscores the central role of emotional regulation in shaping adolescents' engagement in learning and social adjustment. Students who struggle to regulate their emotions effectively are more likely to experience reduced motivation, difficulty concentrating, problematic peer relationships, and heightened vulnerability to psychological distress (Rueger et al., 2016; Mizan & Uce, 2025). Longitudinal evidence further suggests that persistent emotional dysregulation during early adolescence may have long-term consequences for psychosocial well-being and behavioral adjustment (Lansford et al., 2018; McRae & Gross, 2020). These findings reinforce the view that emotional development is not a peripheral concern but a foundational dimension of students' educational experiences.

International scholarship has substantially advanced understanding of adolescent emotional development by emphasizing the interplay between individual capacities and social environments. Studies show that peer relationships, teacher–student interactions, and school climate significantly influence adolescents' emotional well-being and behavioral outcomes (Wentzel, 2017; Wang & Degol, 2016). From a developmental perspective, emotional challenges in early adolescence are shaped by the interaction between neurobiological maturation and contextual factors such as family support and school norms (Crone & Fuligni, 2020; Lansford et al., 2018). These findings provide a strong theoretical foundation for examining emotional development in school settings.

In educational research, considerable attention has focused on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs as structured interventions to enhance students' emotional regulation, empathy, and social competence (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Meta-analytic evidence indicates that SEL interventions can improve students' emotional skills and academic outcomes when implemented systematically (Domitrovich et al., 2017). However, much of this literature relies on quantitative designs and outcome-oriented evaluations, offering limited insight into how students experience emotional challenges in their everyday school lives. As a result, the subjective emotional dynamics of adolescents and the social processes through which emotions are negotiated in school contexts remain underexplored (Jones et al., 2019).

Moreover, most existing studies on adolescent emotional development have been conducted in high-income countries with relatively well-resourced educational and psychosocial support systems. Global policy reports from the OECD (2021) and UNESCO (2023) emphasize holistic approaches to students' emotional well-being but also acknowledge significant gaps in empirical evidence from developing countries, particularly regarding school-based emotional support under constrained institutional conditions. This imbalance raises concerns about the transferability of dominant theoretical models and intervention frameworks to diverse sociocultural contexts.

Methodologically, international research remains limited in its integration of multiple educational actors within a single analytical framework. Many studies focus primarily on students' self-reports or on program effectiveness, without adequately incorporating the perspectives of teachers, school counselors, and families, who play crucial roles in shaping adolescents' emotional experiences (Wentzel, 2017). Ecological developmental theory emphasizes that emotional development emerges through layered interactions between individuals and their immediate and broader environments, including family, school, and community contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Capturing these interactions requires qualitative approaches that are sensitive to context and lived experience.

These limitations have direct implications for school practice, particularly in guidance and counseling. Schools serve not only as sites of academic instruction but also as primary social environments where adolescents learn to express emotions, manage conflict, and build interpersonal relationships (Wang et al., 2020). Nevertheless, empirical evidence indicates that guidance and counseling services in many school systems remain largely reactive, focusing on disciplinary issues or acute behavioral problems rather than preventive and developmental emotional support (Putri et al., 2023; Wahidah & Latipah, 2021). Such approaches risk overlooking early emotional difficulties that may escalate if left unaddressed.

In the Indonesian context, public junior secondary schools typically serve students from diverse social, economic, and cultural backgrounds, generating complex emotional and relational dynamics. Preliminary observations and informal discussions with educators at a public junior secondary school in Gowa Regency revealed pronounced emotional fluctuations among students, including aggressive behavior, social withdrawal, and difficulty managing interpersonal conflict. Similar patterns have been documented in Indonesian studies highlighting the influence of family communication, peer relations, and school climate on adolescents' emotional well-being (Latipah, 2017; Rohmatillah et al., 2024). These emotional challenges affect not only peer relationships but also classroom climate and teachers' capacity to facilitate effective learning.

Taken together, the existing literature reveals a clear research gap regarding the need for contextually grounded, in-depth qualitative studies that explore the emotional challenges of junior secondary students in developing country settings. There remains limited empirical work that captures adolescents' lived emotional experiences while integrating the perspectives of teachers, school counselors, and families within a holistic framework. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing scholarship in educational psychology and guidance and counseling, as well as for informing more responsive school-based emotional support practices. By providing an in-depth qualitative account of students' emotional challenges within a public junior secondary school, this study contributes to the guidance and counseling literature by offering contextually grounded insights that inform preventive and developmental school-based emotional support practices.

This study offers a distinct theoretical contribution by advancing a contextually grounded model of adolescent emotional development that integrates identity formation, emotion

regulation, and relational dynamics within a Global South schooling context. Unlike dominant frameworks that conceptualize emotional development primarily as an individual psychological process, the findings of this study demonstrate that emotional instability in early adolescence is deeply relational and socially mediated, particularly within collectivistic cultural settings such as Indonesia. By empirically illustrating how identity confusion is expressed through emotional reactivity and shaped by peer recognition and family emotional climate, this study extends Eriksonian theory beyond its individualistic orientation toward a more interactional and culturally sensitive perspective. Furthermore, the study contributes a novel conceptual insight by positioning emotional challenges not merely as developmental risks, but as emergent outcomes of dynamic interactions between internal developmental processes and structurally constrained school support systems. In doing so, it proposes a more integrated and context-responsive framework for understanding adolescent emotional development, particularly in underrepresented public-school environments in developing countries.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore the emotional challenges experienced by junior secondary students in a public-school context and to examine the internal and external factors that shape these challenges. In addition, the study seeks to analyze the role of schools, particularly teachers and guidance and counseling services, in supporting students' emotional development. The following research questions guide the study: (1) How do junior secondary students experience emotional challenges in their school context? (2) What internal and external factors influence students' emotional development? and (3) How do schools, particularly guidance and counseling services, respond to and support students' emotional development?

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to obtain an in-depth, contextualized understanding of the emotional challenges experienced by junior secondary school students. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate when the aim is to explore meanings, processes, and lived experiences from participants' perspectives within their natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A case study design was selected because it allows for a holistic, detailed examination of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). In this study, the case was defined as students' emotional development experiences within a single public junior secondary school, examined through multiple sources of evidence.

The primary participants were eighth-grade students enrolled in a public junior secondary school in Gowa Regency, Indonesia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015). Selection criteria included students' willingness to communicate openly, variation in emotional experiences, and active involvement in classroom learning and peer interactions. To strengthen the depth and credibility of the analysis, additional informants were included, consisting of guidance and counseling teachers, homeroom teachers, and selected parents. The inclusion of multiple participant groups enabled triangulation of perspectives and facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of students' emotional challenges across school and family contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To provide greater transparency regarding the research context and participant characteristics, this study involved a total of 15 participants consisting of 10 students, 1 guidance and counseling teacher, 1 homeroom teacher, and 3 parents. The student participants were aged between 13 and 14 years and were enrolled in the eighth grade. They were selected to represent diverse emotional experiences, academic engagement levels, and social interaction patterns.

In terms of socio-economic background, participants generally came from lower- to middle-income families, reflecting the typical demographic composition of public junior secondary schools in Gowa Regency. Parental occupations varied, including informal sector workers, small-scale entrepreneurs, and civil servants. This diversity allowed the study to capture a range of emotional experiences shaped by different family and social contexts. Detailed participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1. Table Participat Profile

No	Initial Name	Participant Code	Role	Age	Grade	Gender	Socio-Economic Background	Notes
1.	AKH	S1	Student	14	VIII	M	Middle	Leadership Tendencies
2.	AJR	S2	Student	14	VIII	M	Low	Emotionally Sensitive
3.	AI	S3	Student	13	VIII	F	Low-Middle	Socially Active
4.	ARP	S4	Student	14	VIII	F	Middle	Introverted
5.	MAZA	S5	Student	13	VIII	M	Low-Middle	Frequent Peer Conflict
6.	CDD	S6	Student	14	VIII	F	Low	High Academic Achiever
7.	IR	S7	Student	13	VIII	M	Low-Middle	Easily Distracted
8.	NAA	S8	Student	13	VIII	F	Middle	Active in class
9.	RRR	S9	Student	14	VIII	F	Low	Emotional Reactive
10.	NKAR	S10	Student	14	VIII	F	Middle	Quiet/Withdrawn
11.	WR	HT1	Homeroom Teacher	-	-	M	-	Homeroom Teacher
12.	AK	C1	Counselor	-	-	F	-	Guidance Counselor
13.	D	P1	Parents	-	-	F	Low	Parent of S2
14.	Z	P2	Parents	-	-	F	Middle	Parent of S8
15.	AA	P3	Parents	-	-	M	Low-Middle	Parent of S5

Data collection involved three primary methods: participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation took place during classroom instruction and school activities to capture students' emotional expressions, behavioral responses, and patterns of social interaction in situ. Semi-structured interviews explored students' subjective emotional experiences, perceived emotional conflicts, and strategies for managing emotions in both school and home environments. Interviews with teachers and parents focused on emotional support practices, interaction patterns, and institutional responses to students' emotional needs. Relevant documents, including counseling records, student development reports, and available reflective notes, were examined to

supplement and corroborate observational and interview data. The use of multiple data sources is a key feature of rigorous case study research (Yin, 2018).

To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were employed in line with qualitative research standards. Source and method triangulation were employed to compare data from different participants and data-collection techniques. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to verify the accuracy and resonance of the findings with their experiences. These strategies align with the criteria of credibility and dependability as articulated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and are widely recognized as essential for enhancing the rigor of qualitative research.

Data analysis was conducted thematically using an iterative, reflexive process. The analysis involved data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, and refinement through constant comparison across data sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytical process was recursive rather than linear, allowing ongoing movement between data collection and interpretation, consistent with qualitative analytic principles (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In interpreting the findings, Erikson's psychosocial development theory, particularly the stage of *identity versus role confusion*, was used as an interpretive framework to situate students' emotional challenges within established developmental theory. Rather than functioning as a prescriptive model, this theoretical lens guided the analytical interpretation by linking empirical patterns to broader concepts of adolescent emotional development.

These additional references strengthen the theoretical grounding of this study by integrating international perspectives and Tarbiyah-based educational insights into the analysis of adolescent emotional development.

Results and Discussion

"The findings are organized into four major themes derived from the thematic analysis: (1) emotional volatility, (2) identity confusion and emotion regulation, (3) family emotional climate and peer influence, and (4) school response and counseling practices."

Emotional Volatility in Early Adolescence

The findings indicate that emotional development among junior secondary students is experienced as a highly dynamic and unstable process during early adolescence. Students described rapid emotional shifts, ranging from anger and frustration to sadness and anxiety, that emerged suddenly and were difficult to anticipate or control. These emotional fluctuations were not perceived as isolated incidents but as recurring experiences embedded in everyday school life.

One student explained this emotional unpredictability as follows:

"Sometimes I suddenly get angry at my friends because of tiny things. I know it's not important, but at that moment I feel like I really can't hold my emotions."

(Student, 13 years old)

Another student added:

"After it happens, I regret it. I think, 'Why did I react like that?' But when it happens, my emotions just come out."

(Student, 14 years old)

These accounts reveal a clear discrepancy between students' reflective awareness and their immediate emotional responses. Although students showed an emerging ability to evaluate their emotional reactions retrospectively, they reported limited capacity to regulate emotional arousal in real time. This pattern aligns with developmental scholars' description of a temporal gap between heightened socio-emotional reactivity and still-developing regulatory control

during early adolescence (Somerville et al., 2010; McLaughlin et al., 2019). Emotional intelligence and regulation are increasingly understood as outcomes of both psychological and socio-cultural processes, including educational and spiritual influences (Lubis, 2025).

Beyond observable emotional fluctuations, the findings further reveal a persistent sense of emotional vulnerability and unpredictability. Students frequently described their emotions as overwhelming and difficult to anticipate, particularly in socially evaluative situations. Observational data indicate that emotional outbursts often occurred in response to peer teasing, classroom competition, or perceived unfair treatment by teachers. This supports the interpretation that emotional instability during early adolescence is deeply relational rather than purely intrapsychic.

From a qualitative analytic perspective, these emotional reactions can be understood as adolescents' attempts to reconcile heightened emotional sensitivity with still-developing self-regulatory capacities. Although students showed emerging reflective awareness, they lacked practical strategies to modulate emotional arousal in the moment. International research also indicates that adolescents' emotional experiences are susceptible to social evaluation and interpersonal feedback, especially in peer-dense environments such as schools (Wentzel, 2017).

Importantly, emotional volatility had tangible consequences for students' engagement in learning and social interaction. Teachers observed that emotionally dysregulated students struggled to concentrate in class and were more prone to interpersonal conflict.

"When their emotions go up, it's hard for them to focus. Even small teasing can turn into a big argument."

(Homeroom Teacher)

These findings reinforce global arguments that emotional development is a foundational dimension of students' educational experiences rather than a peripheral concern. Emotional challenges operate as personal, relational, and pedagogical issues that shape classroom climate, peer relationships, and learning engagement.

Identity Confusion and Emotion Regulation

Further analysis indicates that students' emotional challenges were strongly shaped by internal developmental processes, particularly identity confusion and limited capacity for emotion regulation. Rather than emerging as separate phenomena, identity-related struggles and emotional reactivity were deeply intertwined in students' everyday experiences. Students' narratives suggested that emotional outbursts, withdrawal, or oppositional behavior often reflected underlying uncertainty about self-definition and social positioning within peer groups.

A guidance and counselling teacher described this condition as follows:

"Many students are starting to question who they are. They want to be recognized by their friends, but they don't know how to express themselves in positive ways. That confusion often turns into emotional reactions, either conflict or withdrawal."

(Guidance and Counselling Teacher)

This account illustrates that identity formation during early adolescence unfolds as an emotionally charged process rather than a purely cognitive task. In line with Erikson's stage of *identity versus role confusion*, identity exploration is the central developmental challenge of adolescence, and when this process is experienced as fragmented or unsupported, emotional instability is likely to intensify (Erikson, 1968; Nurmila et al., 2025).

Students' own narratives further illuminate how identity confusion was emotionally lived. One student explained:

"I don't want my friends to think I'm weak. So I try to act tough, but inside I feel confused and easily hurt." *(Student, 14 years old)*

This quotation suggests that identity work in this context was closely tied to emotional self-protection and peer evaluation. Rather than articulating identity struggles explicitly, students expressed identity-related tensions through emotional reactions that signaled vulnerability and uncertainty. While much of the international literature conceptualizes identity development as an individual psychological process (Schwartz et al., 2015), the present findings indicate that in a collectivistic social context, identity confusion is strongly mediated by relational dynamics, particularly peer recognition and group belonging.

Emotion regulation difficulties further compounded identity-related emotional challenges. Students frequently described responding impulsively in emotionally charged situations, followed by regret or self-blame.

“After I calm down, I feel sorry. I know I shouldn’t react like that, but at that moment I really don’t know how to stop myself.”

(Student, 13 years old)

This pattern reflects limited access to adaptive regulation strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal or emotional distancing, which typically develop gradually throughout adolescence (Gross, 2015). Without structured opportunities to learn and practice these strategies, students remain reliant on reactive emotional responses, reinforcing cycles of interpersonal conflict and emotional distress. These findings support theoretical perspectives that view emotion regulation as a socially learned, context-dependent process rather than a purely individual skill (Gross, 2015; Lasmanawati, 2021).

Family Emotional Climate and Peer Influence

Beyond internal developmental processes, students’ emotional experiences were significantly shaped by external relational contexts, particularly family emotional support and peer interactions within the school environment. Students who reported limited emotional communication at home had greater difficulty processing school-related stress and tended to internalize emotional distress rather than express it openly.

One student shared:

“My parents are always busy and rarely talk to me. When something happens at school, I keep it to myself. Over time, I feel angry inside, and sometimes I cry alone at home.”

(Student, 14 years old)

This narrative highlights the role of family emotional availability as a critical protective resource during early adolescence. In the absence of emotionally responsive communication, students lacked safe spaces to reflect on emotional experiences and develop adaptive coping strategies. Consistent with ecological developmental theory, the family emotional climate serves as a proximal system that shapes adolescents’ emotional learning and regulation capacities (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

International studies similarly demonstrate that supportive parent–child relationships are strong predictors of adolescents’ emotional well-being, whereas emotional distance within families increases vulnerability to stress and internalizing difficulties (Rueger et al., 2016; Latipah, 2017). The present findings reinforce this evidence by illustrating how family dynamics directly influence students’ emotional resilience in school settings.

Peer relationships interacted with family support to shape emotional outcomes. Students frequently described experiences of teasing, exclusion, or interpersonal conflict as emotionally distressing:

“Sometimes my friends joke too much. I laugh, but actually it hurts and makes me angry.”

(Student, 13 years old)

While positive peer connections served as protective factors, negative peer experiences significantly intensified emotional instability, particularly among students who lacked emotional support at home. This pattern suggests a cumulative risk process in which multiple relational stressors interact to amplify emotional vulnerability. These findings align with research indicating that emotional risk factors often operate synergistically rather than independently during adolescence (McLaughlin et al., 2019; Rohmatillah et al., 2024).

Emotional intelligence and regulation are increasingly understood as outcomes of both psychological and socio-cultural processes, including educational and spiritual influences (Taufikin et al., 2025). Within the Tarbiyah perspective, emotional and moral development is closely integrated with educational and spiritual processes, highlighting the importance of holistic guidance in shaping students' behavior and emotional well-being (Saputra & Suhartini, 2025).

School Response and Counseling Practices

The findings further indicate that schools play a pivotal yet underutilized role in supporting students' emotional development. Although guidance and counseling services were formally available, emotional support practices remained largely reactive, addressing students' difficulties only after they escalated into behavioral or disciplinary issues.

A homeroom teacher reflected on this limitation:

“We know that students' emotions often go up and down, but teachers have limited time. Usually, we respond when a problem has already happened.”

(Homeroom Teacher)

This reactive orientation reflects a broader institutional tendency to prioritise behavioural management over emotional development. From a guidance and counselling perspective, such an approach constrains the preventive potential of school-based emotional support and risks overlooking early signs of emotional distress.

Guidance and counselling teachers similarly acknowledged that emotional guidance had not yet been systematically integrated into daily school practices:

“There is counselling, but not all students feel comfortable coming. Emotional guidance is still separate from everyday classroom activities.”

(Guidance and Counselling Teacher)

These findings align with international evidence indicating that school-based psychosocial services are often framed as responses to behavioral problems rather than as developmental and preventive systems (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). Global research on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) shows that when emotional development is embedded in routine pedagogical practices, students show improved emotional regulation and social competence (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2019).

Importantly, the present study highlights that strengthening emotional support in schools does not necessarily require extensive additional resources. Instead, it requires a paradigm shift in how emotional challenges are conceptualized, from individual problems requiring remediation to shared developmental responsibilities embedded in everyday school interactions. In resource-constrained public school settings, such a relational and preventive orientation may be particularly crucial for sustaining students' emotional well-being and fostering supportive learning environments.

Building on the findings, this study proposes a school-based preventive emotional support model that integrates guidance and counseling services into everyday pedagogical practices. The model consists of three interconnected components.

First, classroom-based emotional awareness activities are implemented by teachers through short reflective sessions, emotional check-ins, and guided discussions that help students recognize and express their emotions constructively.

Second, preventive counseling programs are designed and delivered by guidance and counseling teachers in the form of group guidance sessions focusing on emotion regulation strategies, peer relationship management, and identity development. These sessions are conducted regularly rather than only in response to behavioral problems.

Third, family engagement strategies are incorporated through periodic communication, parenting workshops, and collaborative problem-solving approaches to strengthen emotional support at home.

This integrated model emphasizes a shift from reactive to preventive and developmental approaches, positioning emotional support as a shared responsibility among teachers, counselors, and families.

As an illustration, a preventive counseling program may include a structured four-week intervention focusing on emotional development. Week one introduces emotional awareness and identification, week two focuses on emotion regulation strategies such as cognitive reappraisal and self-control techniques, week three addresses peer conflict resolution and communication skills, and week four facilitates identity reflection and self-concept development.

Such a program can be implemented in small groups to encourage student participation and emotional expression, thereby strengthening both individual competencies and peer support systems.

Conclusion

This study concludes that emotional challenges among junior secondary school students are characterized by three interrelated dimensions: emotional volatility, identity confusion, and the influence of family emotional climate. The findings reveal that emotional development in early adolescence is a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by the interaction between internal developmental factors and external relational environments. Emotional instability, impulsive reactions, and difficulties in emotion regulation are not merely individual psychological issues but are embedded within peer relationships, family dynamics, and everyday school interactions.

The study further shows that existing school practices remain predominantly reactive, limiting their effectiveness in supporting students' emotional development. In response, a shift toward preventive and integrated emotional support systems is necessary. The proposed school-based intervention model offers a practical framework by integrating classroom-based emotional learning, structured counseling programs, and family involvement, thereby strengthening students' emotional well-being in a more systematic and sustainable manner. These findings directly address the research objectives by explaining how emotional challenges are experienced and shaped within the school context.

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