



Exploring Ecological School-Based Group Counselling for Migrant Adolescents' Mental Health in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia

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Abstract

Migrant adolescents in school settings often face emotional, social, and academic challenges related to adaptation and future uncertainty. This study examines how an ecological school-based group counselling program implemented at Sekolah Indonesia Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia, contributes to participants' reported experiences of resilience and adaptive coping among migrant adolescents. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the study involved 25 migrant students aged 15–17 years who were purposively selected based on indications of emotional, academic, and psychosocial difficulties identified during the school needs assessment process. The intervention consisted of a single counselling session delivered concurrently to four parallel groups of students. Data were collected through session documentation, facilitator observations, and student reflective notes, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed three main themes: (1) emotional regulation and expression, where students developed greater awareness and control over their emotions; (2) peer connectedness and social support, reflected in reduced feelings of isolation and increased sense of belonging; and (3) future orientation and adaptive coping, indicated by improved problem-solving skills and more constructive perspectives toward life challenges. These findings suggest positive changes in participants' psychosocial well-being, particularly in emotional stability, social connectedness, and adaptive coping. The novelty of this study lies in its application of an ecological group counselling framework within a migrant school context, integrating individual, peer, and systemic dimensions of intervention, which remains underexplored in previous research predominantly focused on individual counselling approaches. Future implementation should focus on developing standardized ecological group counselling modules, strengthening teacher capacity in psychosocial support, and scaling up school-based mental health programs through policy integration to better serve migrant student populations.

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescent mental health has become an increasingly critical global concern, particularly within educational settings where young individuals spend a substantial portion of their developmental years. A growing body of research indicates a significant rise in psychological distress among adolescents, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress, which adversely affect

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academic performance, social relationships, and overall well-being (H. Lin et al., 2025; Y. Lin et al., 2024; Subramaniam et al., 2025; World Health Organization, 2025). In Indonesia, recent national data show that approximately one in three adolescents aged 10–17 years experience mental health problems, with about 5.5% meeting criteria for a diagnosable mental disorder, most commonly anxiety (3.7%) and depression (1%)—yet only a small proportion access formal mental health services, underscoring a substantial treatment gap in school-aged populations (Center for Reproductive Health, 2022). Parallel concerns emerge in Malaysia, where adolescent depression has been estimated at around 18%, prompting a National Strategic Plan for Mental Health 2020–2025 that explicitly targets a reduction in youth depression, while recent youth mental health indices highlight elevated psychological distress among subgroups such as girls, younger adolescents, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Sahril et al., 2025; Singh et al., 2023). Existing evidence highlights the need for accessible, school-based, and contextually relevant mental health support systems that address adolescent mental health needs, including psychological symptoms and associated social determinants of well-being (Center for Reproductive Health et al., 2022).

Schools are uniquely positioned to address adolescent mental health due to their continuous contact with students and their role in shaping developmental experiences (Brown et al., 2025; Cavioni et al., 2021; Diggs et al., 2025; Ford et al., 2021; Suppiej et al., 2025; Symeou et al., 2020). Schools are especially important for migrant adolescents because they are often the primary setting where mental health difficulties are first noticed, support is offered, and a sense of safety and belonging can be fostered in the host society. As such, school-based mental health interventions have gained increasing attention as practical and scalable approaches for early identification and support. Among these, group counseling has emerged as a widely used intervention due to its efficiency in reaching multiple students while fostering peer interaction, emotional expression, and shared understanding (Asadi & Mede, 2024; Borsch et al., 2023; Melero et al., 2021; Niles et al., 2025; Nuraeni et al., 2025; Shechtman, 2025). Empirical evidence suggests that group counseling can effectively reduce psychological distress and improve coping skills and social functioning among adolescents (Asadi & Mede, 2024; H. Lin et al., 2025).

Despite the growing evidence supporting school-based interventions, important limitations remain. Much of the existing research has been conducted in relatively stable and homogeneous populations, primarily in high-income countries. This raises concerns regarding the applicability of such findings to more complex and vulnerable contexts. In particular, many studies conceptualize adolescent mental health primarily in terms of individual cognitive and emotional processes, thereby placing less emphasis on the broader contextual and structural factors that shape students' experiences (Hayes et al., 2025; Ride et al., 2025; Schäfer et al., 2025).

Recent systematic reviews indicate that adolescent mental health is strongly influenced by ecological stressors, including family instability, socioeconomic hardship, and limited access to mental health services, particularly in low and middle income contexts (Cai et al., 2025; Grande et al., 2023). These findings suggest that psychological distress cannot be fully understood through an individualistic lens alone, but rather requires a broader perspective that considers the interaction between individual vulnerabilities and environmental conditions (American Psychological Association & Presidential Task Force on Immigration, 2012; Anisman et al., 2024; Cáceres-Titos et al., 2025; Fahrudin et al., 2024; Hameed et al., 2018; Kim & Park, 2024; Rose-Clarke & Fellmeth, 2023).

This issue becomes more complex in migrant and transnational contexts, where adolescents often face additional challenges related to cultural adjustment, economic uncertainty, and family disruption (Andrade et al., 2023; Bennett et al., 2024; Habash, 2026; Jain et al., 2026; Kasic, 2025; Pieh et al., 2022; Rose-Clarke & Fellmeth, 2023; Schwartz et al., 2025; Shekriladze & Javakhishvili, 2024; Slobodin et al., 2018; Winkens et al., 2023). Research has consistently shown that children and adolescents from migrant or displaced backgrounds are at higher risk of experiencing mental health problems due to cumulative exposure to adversity and barriers to social integration (Blackmore et al., 2020; Fazel et al., 2012; Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). These challenges highlight the importance of developing mental health interventions that are sensitive to contextual and structural realities.

Within this context, schools play a critical role not only as educational institutions but also as accessible environments for delivering mental health support. School-based systems have been increasingly recognized as essential components of broader mental health care frameworks for

children and adolescents, particularly in settings where access to professional services is limited (Richter et al., 2022; Sanyata et al., 2024; Weist et al., 2023; Weist & Albus, 2004). This perspective emphasizes the need to understand schools as integrated environments that can support both academic and psychosocial development.

In relation to intervention approaches, group counseling offers unique advantages that extend beyond individual therapeutic techniques. In addition to facilitating emotional expression and cognitive reflection, group counseling creates opportunities for peer support, shared experiences, and the development of interpersonal skills (Asadi & Mede, 2024; Borsch et al., 2023; Melero et al., 2021; Niles et al., 2025; Nuraeni et al., 2025; Shechtman, 2025). These processes are particularly relevant during adolescence, a developmental stage characterized by strong peer influence and the need for social belonging. However, existing literature has not sufficiently explored how group counseling functions within contexts where students experience shared structural challenges, such as those found in migrant communities.

This gap is especially salient in Indonesian Overseas Schools (Sekolah Indonesia Luar Negeri), which serve students from Indonesian migrant families. The Indonesian School in Kota Kinabalu is a unique educational setting, with most students from Indonesian migrant worker families facing various social, economic, and cultural adaptation challenges in their daily lives. In this context, students face not only the normative developmental tasks of adolescence but also the pressures associated with transnational living, future uncertainty, family circumstances, and limited access to psychological and educational support. Within this context, many students contend with economic hardship, family-related stress, and uncertainty about their future, all of which shape their psychological experiences and vulnerability to distress. In response to these conditions, the present study offers a contextualized analysis of the implementation of group counseling in Sekolah Indonesia Kota Kinabalu. Instead of focusing on effectiveness within a controlled experimental design, the study examines the psychological themes that emerge during counseling sessions and explores how group processes operate as a form of support within a complex ecological environment. This study also considers the common factors perspective (Wampold & Imel, 2015) which emphasizes that the effectiveness of psychological interventions can be influenced by the quality of interpersonal relationships during the intervention process.

The study makes three primary contributions. First, it provides empirical insight into adolescent mental health in an underrepresented population, namely Indonesian students in overseas school settings. Second, it advances a contextual perspective by illuminating how individual and structural factors intersect in shaping psychological distress. Third, it informs the development of school-based mental health practices by positioning group counseling as a support mechanism that addresses both emotional difficulties and developmental challenges. Guided by these aims, the study seeks to identify key psychological and contextual challenges experienced by high school students in Sekolah Indonesia Kota Kinabalu, to describe the design and implementation of a contextually adapted group counseling program, and to analyze the implications of these findings for strengthening school-based mental health services in comparable transnational educational settings.

Literature Review

Adolescent Development and Mental Health in Educational Contexts

Adolescence represents a critical developmental period characterized by rapid biological, cognitive, and socioemotional changes. During this stage, individuals undergo identity exploration, increased autonomy, and heightened sensitivity to social evaluation. These developmental processes often coincide with increased vulnerability to psychological distress, particularly in the presence of academic pressure, peer dynamics, and uncertainty about the future. Empirical studies have consistently shown that symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress frequently emerge during adolescence and can have long-term implications for well-being and life outcomes (Grande et al., 2023; Santrock, 2024).

Within educational settings, schools function as primary social environments that influence adolescents' emotional and psychological development. Beyond their academic role, schools provide opportunities for social interaction, identity formation, and the development of coping mechanisms. However, they can also become sources of stress due to academic demands, social comparison, and performance expectations. As a result, the school context serves as both a risk and protective factor

in adolescent mental health, depending on the availability of support systems and the quality of psychosocial environments.

Recent research emphasizes that adolescent mental health cannot be fully understood without considering contextual and structural influences. In particular, studies conducted across diverse, economically constrained settings highlight the roles of family instability, socioeconomic adversity, and limited access to support services in shaping psychological outcomes (Cai et al., 2025; Jokinen et al., 2026). These findings underscore the importance of adopting a broader ecological perspective when examining adolescent well-being, especially in contexts that extend beyond conventional school environments.

Group Counselling in School Settings

Group counselling has emerged as a central component of school-based mental health services. Compared to individual counselling, group approaches offer unique advantages, including opportunities for peer interaction, shared experiences, and collective problem-solving. These features are particularly relevant during adolescence, a developmental stage characterized by strong peer influence and a heightened need for social belonging.

Empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of group counseling in reducing psychological distress and enhancing coping skills among adolescents. Meta-analytic findings indicate that group interventions can produce meaningful improvements in mental health outcomes and academic functioning, particularly when implemented in small groups with structured facilitation (Asadi & Mede, 2024; H. Lin et al., 2025). In addition to measurable outcomes, group counseling provides a space for students to normalize their experiences, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and stigma.

From a theoretical perspective, the effectiveness of group counseling is closely linked to key therapeutic mechanisms such as universality, interpersonal learning, group cohesion, and emotional expression. These processes enable participants to gain insight into their own experiences while learning from others, thereby facilitating both cognitive and emotional change (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020). Importantly, these mechanisms extend beyond individual-level intervention by fostering relational support systems within the group.

Despite these strengths, existing research often conceptualizes group counseling primarily as a technique for modifying individual cognition and behavior. This focus may overlook the broader social and contextual functions of group processes, particularly in environments where students face shared structural challenges. As such, there is a need to expand the conceptualization of group counseling to include its role as a social support mechanism embedded within students' ecological contexts.

School-Based Mental Health Interventions

School-based mental health interventions have been widely recognized as effective strategies for addressing psychological distress among adolescents. Their accessibility, cost-effectiveness, and integration into students' daily environments make them particularly suitable for early intervention and prevention. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses indicate that such interventions can lead to significant reductions in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress, while also improving academic performance and social functioning (Cai et al., 2025; Grande et al., 2023).

However, the effectiveness of these interventions varies across contexts. Evidence suggests that outcomes are influenced by factors such as program design, cultural relevance, facilitator competence, and institutional support. In low- and middle-income contexts, school-based interventions often serve as primary mental health support systems due to limited access to professional services. This increases the importance of designing interventions that are context-sensitive and responsive to students' lived realities.

Contemporary approaches to school mental health emphasize the need for integrated systems that combine universal, selective, and targeted interventions. In this framework, schools are not only venues for delivering programs but also active systems that shape the effectiveness of interventions through policies, practices, and relational dynamics (Hoover et al., 2019). This perspective aligns with ecological models of development, which highlight the interconnectedness of individual and environmental factors.

Psychosocial Group Interventions for Anxiety, Depression, and Trauma

Psychosocial group interventions have been widely recognized as effective approaches for addressing common mental health problems among adolescents, particularly anxiety, depression, and trauma-related symptoms. These interventions typically integrate elements of emotional regulation, cognitive restructuring, social support, and psychoeducation, making them especially suitable for school-based settings where accessibility and scalability are essential.

Empirical evidence from systematic reviews and meta-analyses indicates that group-based psychosocial interventions can produce meaningful reductions in symptoms of anxiety and depression among children and adolescents. Such interventions are particularly effective when they incorporate structured sessions, active participation, and opportunities for peer interaction, which collectively enhance engagement and facilitate emotional expression (Cai et al., 2025; Jokinen et al., 2026). In addition, group formats allow participants to recognize shared experiences, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and fostering a sense of universality, which is a critical factor in therapeutic change.

In the context of trauma, psychosocial group interventions play a crucial role in providing a safe and supportive environment where adolescents can process distressing experiences. Trauma-related symptoms among adolescents are often associated with exposure to chronic stressors, including family conflict, economic hardship, and instability in living conditions. Group-based approaches can help normalize these experiences and promote adaptive coping strategies through collective reflection and mutual support. Research suggests that such interventions are particularly beneficial in settings where access to individual therapy is limited, as they offer a feasible alternative for reaching a larger number of individuals in need.

However, it is important to critically examine the assumption that psychosocial interventions alone are sufficient to address complex mental health challenges. Evidence suggests that while these interventions are effective in reducing symptoms, their impact is often moderate and influenced by contextual factors such as program quality, facilitator competence, and the broader social environment. This implies that psychosocial group interventions should not be viewed as standalone solutions, but rather as components within a broader system of mental health support.

In migrant and transnational contexts, the relevance of psychosocial group interventions becomes even more pronounced (Astuti et al., 2023; Bilgili & Erdal, 2025; Mardhatillah et al., 2025; Suci Hati & Wardani, 2019; Wardani et al., 2021). Adolescents in these settings often experience overlapping stressors related to cultural adaptation, socioeconomic challenges, and family dynamics. Group interventions can function not only as therapeutic spaces but also as platforms for building social connectedness and resilience. By facilitating shared understanding and collective coping, these interventions may help buffer the negative effects of structural stressors on mental health.

Despite their potential, there remains a lack of empirical research examining how psychosocial group interventions operate in specific contexts such as overseas schools serving migrant populations. This gap highlights the need for context-sensitive analyses that explore not only the outcomes but also the processes through which these interventions support adolescent well-being.

Mental Health in Migrant and Transnational Contexts

Adolescents in migrant and transnational contexts face unique challenges that set them apart from peers in more stable environments (Bilgili & Erdal, 2025; Schwartz et al., 2025). These challenges include cultural adjustment, identity negotiation, economic uncertainty, and disruptions in family structure (Bennett et al., 2024; Borsch et al., 2023; Jain et al., 2026; Rose-Clarke & Fellmeth, 2023; Shekriladze & Javakhishvili, 2024). Research has shown that exposure to such conditions increases the risk of psychological distress, particularly when combined with limited access to social and institutional support (Fazel et al., 2012; Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Wardani et al., 2021).

In addition to individual stressors, migrant adolescents often face systemic barriers that affect their educational and psychological experiences. These may include restricted access to healthcare, language barriers, and social marginalization. As a result, their mental health cannot be fully understood without considering the broader sociocultural and economic contexts in which they live.

Within this framework, schools play a critical role as accessible and stable environments that can provide both academic and psychosocial support. However, the extent to which school-based interventions effectively address the needs of migrant adolescents depends on their ability to

account for contextual complexity. Interventions that fail to incorporate these factors risk being misaligned with students' lived experiences and therefore less effective.

Profile of Sekolah Indonesia Kota Kinabalu (SIKK)

Sekolah Indonesia Kota Kinabalu is one of the Indonesian Overseas Schools established to provide educational services for children of Indonesian citizens living in Sabah, Malaysia. The school operates under the coordination of the Indonesian government and serves as an important institution in ensuring access to education for migrant communities.

SIKK accommodates students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, most of whom come from families working in the informal or semi-formal sectors. These conditions often present unique challenges, including limited economic resources, unstable living arrangements, and restricted access to social services. As a result, students are not only required to meet academic demands but also navigate various psychosocial stressors that may influence their emotional and psychological well-being. In addition to its educational role, SIKK functions as a supportive environment where students can develop social connections and a sense of belonging. The school provides opportunities for students to engage in both academic and non-academic activities, which contribute to their overall development. However, given the complexity of students' backgrounds, there is an increasing need for structured mental health support systems within the school.

The presence of guidance and counseling services in SIKK represents an important step toward addressing students' psychosocial needs. Nevertheless, the limited availability of mental health professionals and resources poses challenges to delivering comprehensive, sustained interventions. In this context, group counseling emerges as a practical and scalable approach to support students' mental health within the constraints of the existing system. Understanding the profile of SIKK is essential for contextualizing the implementation of group counseling interventions. The unique characteristics of the student population and their lived experiences highlight the importance of adopting approaches that are sensitive to both individual and contextual factors.

Research Gap and Conceptual Positioning

Although existing literature provides substantial evidence for the effectiveness of school-based mental health interventions and group counselling, significant gaps remain. First, there is limited empirical research examining how these interventions operate within transnational educational settings, particularly those serving migrant communities. Second, much of the literature continues to emphasize individual-level mechanisms, with insufficient attention to the role of structural and ecological factors. Third, the potential of group counselling to function as a broader psychosocial support system, rather than solely a therapeutic technique, remains underexplored.

Addressing these gaps requires a shift toward a more contextualized and ecological understanding of school-based mental health interventions. In this regard, the present study positions group counseling not only as a method for reducing psychological distress but also as a mechanism for fostering social support, enhancing adaptive coping, and addressing developmental challenges within a complex transnational environment. By examining the implementation of group counseling in Sekolah Indonesia Kota Kinabalu, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how mental health interventions can be adapted to meet the needs of adolescents in migrant and diaspora contexts.

METHOD

Program Design

The community service program implemented at Sekolah Indonesia Kota Kinabalu was not merely designed as a series of counselling activities, but as a structured psychosocial intervention grounded in an ecological understanding of adolescent mental health. This design explicitly recognizes that students' psychological distress is shaped by the interaction between intrapersonal vulnerabilities and broader structural conditions, including family dynamics, socioeconomic constraints, and uncertainty regarding future opportunities.

Building upon this premise, the program positions group counseling as a mediating mechanism that operates between contextual stressors and students' psychological responses. Rather than

conceptualizing distress as an isolated individual problem, the program assumes that emotional difficulties such as anxiety, overthinking, and low motivation are adaptive responses to prolonged exposure to environmental pressures. The conceptual model underpinning this program can be articulated as follows:

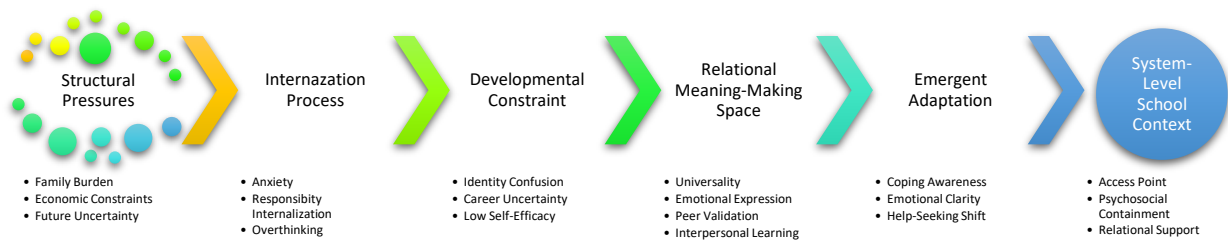


Figure 1. Ecological Meaning-Making Model of Adolescent Distress in Migrant School Context

In this study, the Ecological Meaning-Making Model of Adolescent Distress is proposed and used as a conceptual and analytical framework (Figure 1), rather than merely a theoretical description. The model is used to guide the implementation of the program and the analysis of students' experiences during group counselling sessions. The model conceptualizes adolescent psychological distress as a multi-layered process shaped by the interaction between structural pressures, internalization mechanisms, and developmental constraints, and it guides the organization and interpretation of the empirical findings. Within this framework, these processes are understood to give rise to cognitive-emotional overload and identity-related challenges, which are subsequently examined as they are mediated through relational meaning-making processes within group counseling. By applying the model analytically, the study traces how, through these processes, students begin to develop adaptive responses, including emotional awareness and help-seeking behavior. Importantly, the model foregrounds the school as a system-level context that surrounds and enables all stages of the process; rather than functioning as a neutral setting, the school is treated as an access point, a psychosocial containment space, and a relational support system. This systemic role is analytically central, as it shapes both the emergence of distress and the effectiveness of intervention processes, indicating that psychological outcomes are co-produced through the interaction between individual experiences and institutional environments.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore the implementation of a school-based group counselling program and examine students' psychological experiences in a naturalistic setting. This approach was selected to capture the complexity of lived experiences rather than to establish causal relationships.

Participants and Context

Participants in this study were 25 high school students at the Indonesian School in Kota Kinabalu, aged 15–17. Participants came from families of Indonesian migrant workers residing in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia. Participants were male and female students from several high school grades who were identified through a needs assessment process involving teachers and school counsellors. The recruitment process was purposive based on school observations and initial discussions with teachers and counselors regarding the students' psychosocial conditions. All participants participated voluntarily and obtained approval from the school and their guardians/parents in accordance with applicable ethical procedures.

Inclusion criteria for this study included students aged 15–17 who exhibited signs of emotional distress, academic-related stress, and psychosocial challenges based on observations by teachers, counselors, and initial interviews with the students. In this study, emotional distress was operationalized as difficulties in regulating emotions, feelings of anxiety, irritability, social withdrawal, or decreased motivation to learn evident in daily school activities. Meanwhile, psychosocial challenges refer to various difficulties related to family circumstances, economic pressures, limited social support, and the challenges of adapting as adolescents from migrant

families. These conditions are identified by teachers and school counsellors through observations of student behavior, communication with teachers, and initial discussions prior to the intervention.

Group counseling is conducted in four small groups, each consisting of six to seven students. Each group is facilitated by a psychologist with experience in psychological intervention and adolescent mentoring. Each session lasts approximately 60 minutes. Prior to the program, all facilitators receive a briefing regarding the intervention's objectives, session structure, group counseling techniques used, and implementation procedures to maintain consistency and intervention fidelity across groups.

Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple qualitative sources to ensure depth and triangulation by counselling session transcripts and documentation, facilitator observational field notes, student reflective responses. All data were collected during and immediately after the implementation of group counseling sessions. Data were collected using three complementary sources to enhance triangulation and credibility. First, facilitators documented group counselling processes through structured observational field notes focusing on emotional expression, peer interaction, participation dynamics, and coping responses. Second, reflective written responses were collected from students at the end of each session using open-ended prompts to capture subjective experiences, perceived insights, and changes in emotional state. Third, session transcripts produced by the lead psychologist provided a verbatim record of group interactions, enabling detailed thematic analysis of language, relational dynamics, and meaning-making processes. Together, these three sources allowed for a comprehensive, multi-perspective account of students' psychosocial experiences throughout the intervention.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach following [Braun & Clarke \(2006\)](#) consisting of six stages: familiarization with data, initial code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. The data analyzed included group counseling notes, facilitator observations, and participants' written reflections on each session. All data was compiled and transcribed into documents to facilitate analysis. The coding process was conducted manually by four psychologists acting as counsellors in the program. Initially, each counsellors reviewed the notes of the group sessions they facilitated to identify participant responses, emotional experiences, academic-related stress, family-related concerns, coping responses, and peer support dynamics that emerged during the intervention. Codes with similar meanings were then grouped into initial themes. However, to maintain consistency in the analysis, all counselors held regular group discussions to compare coding results and agree on the main themes emerging from the entire group. Differences in interpretation were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. The final themes were selected based on the most consistent patterns of experiences that emerged and were relevant to the research focus on the mental health and psychosocial experiences of migrant youth.

Coding Framework

The analysis process was conducted by identifying responses, experiences, and issues that frequently emerged during group counseling sessions. Data from counselors' notes, observations, and participant reflections were reviewed to identify patterns of experiences related to emotional distress, academic-related stress, family-related concerns, socioeconomic pressure, peer support, and participants' coping experiences. Participant responses with similar meanings were then grouped into several main themes to help understand the psychosocial experiences of migrant youth during the counseling program. The grouping of themes was conducted through collaborative discussions among counselors to ensure consistent data interpretation. Several examples of participant responses and themes that emerged during the counseling sessions are also used to help explain the analysis process.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure methodological rigor, this study applied established qualitative criteria encompassing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was

enhanced through data triangulation across multiple sources and by identifying consistent patterns emerging across successive sessions. Dependability was supported by the systematic documentation of all procedures alongside the use of structured session formats that provided a stable framework for data collection and analysis. Confirmability was strengthened through cross-checking and regular discussions among counsellors during coding and theme development to minimize individual interpretation bias, and the minimization of researcher bias via ongoing reflective note-taking throughout the research process. Finally, transferability was facilitated by providing a thick description of the SIKK context together with a detailed account of participant characteristics, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings.

Procedures

To provide an overview of how these methodological procedures were operationalized in the field, the figure below presents the Program Implementation Procedures for Community Service:

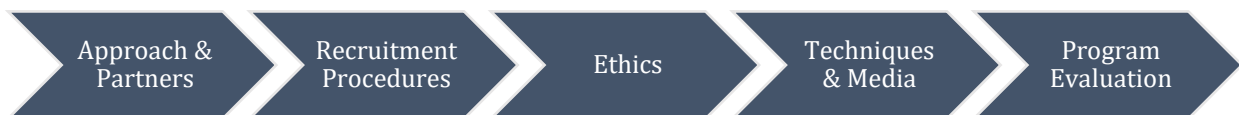


Figure 2. Program Implementation Procedures for Community Service

Figure 2 illustrates the community service program implementation procedures, the community service program was carried out through a collaborative partnership between the community service team from an Indonesian higher education institution/psychology organization and Sekolah Indonesia Kota Kinabalu (SIKK), represented by the school principal, guidance and counseling (BK) teachers, and other relevant staff. This collaboration reflects best practices emphasizing the integration of counselling within the school curriculum and the importance of a cooperative, context-sensitive approach. The initial phase involved online coordination to assess student needs, establish schedules, and clarify roles and responsibilities. The program primarily consisted of direct service delivery through structured group counselling sessions designed to address students' psychosocial challenges.

Student recruitment was facilitated by BK teachers, who identified participants based on their professional judgment of students requiring support. Prior to participation, facilitators provided detailed explanations regarding confidentiality and its boundaries, particularly in situations involving serious risk to self or others. Ethical principles of psychology, including confidentiality, respect for participants, and beneficence, are applied throughout the program. Activities are conducted with the permission of the school and the consent of the participants and their mentors. All participant information is kept confidential during the counselling process and during the documentation of the program. Due to time limitations, group counselling sessions employed targeted techniques, including guided group discussions and reflections, psychoeducation, cognitive identification and reframing of thoughts, and emotion regulation strategies such as relaxation exercises.

Program evaluation was conducted formatively, with brief reflective exercises at the end of each session that offered students the opportunity to share insights and personal experiences. In addition, qualitative assessments through short interviews with students and BK teachers provided valuable perspectives on meaningful changes that may not be captured through quantitative measures alone (Grande et al., 2023; Jokinen et al., 2026). This approach ensured that the program's impact was understood not only in procedural terms but also in the context of students' lived experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results of the activity indicated that participants experienced emotional distress related to academic-related stress, family pressure, and future uncertainty. These themes emerged consistently from group discussions, participant reflections, and counselor observations during the sessions. Several participant responses were also used to support the interpretation of the themes that

emerged during the counseling process. Rather than appearing as isolated emotional symptoms, students' experiences reflect a structured interaction between environmental pressures and internal meaning-making processes. Across themes, a consistent pattern emerges: distress is not random, but organized around three interrelated domains, namely structural pressures, developmental disruptions, and relational processing spaces. These domains interact dynamically, shaping how students experience, interpret, and cope with psychological challenges.

Distress as an Organized Response to Structural Pressure

The data indicate that what initially appears to be individual emotional distress is, in reality, a systematic response to prolonged exposure to structural pressures. During the counseling sessions, many participants reported overthinking, anxiety, and emotional instability related to academic issues, family circumstances, and concerns about the future. Some also expressed pressure to meet family expectations and confusion in planning for their futures. These findings recurred in participants' discussions and reflections throughout the sessions. Importantly, these cognitive-emotional experiences exhibit a recursive structure. Thoughts about academic performance trigger anxiety, which in turn amplifies overthinking, creating a cycle of cognitive-emotional overload. This pattern indicates that distress operates as a self-reinforcing system, rather than a collection of discrete symptoms. The data showed that participants' experiences of distress often occurred alongside academic pressure, family circumstances, and concerns about the future that they shared during the sessions. Instead, it suggests that emotional difficulties may function as adaptive responses to persistent environmental demands, aligning with ecological perspectives highlighted in previous research.

Family and Socioeconomic Context as Internalized Psychological Structures

A critical shift in interpretation emerges when examining family and socioeconomic factors. Rather than functioning as external stressors alone, these conditions appear to be internalized into students' psychological frameworks. Some students expressed that they felt their family's economic situation and their parents' expectations were a personal responsibility. This was evident in statements such as "I have to succeed because of my family's circumstances" and "I can't fail." Participants also described the pressure they felt from these situations, which subsequently influenced how they viewed themselves and their futures during the session.,

Developmental Disruption: Identity Formation Under Constraint

Some participants discussed difficulties in identifying their interests, personal strengths, and future plans. This emerged both through direct questions during counselling sessions regarding career plans and through spontaneous sharing of experiences. Participants reported feeling confused about choosing their educational or career path. This was often accompanied by feelings of insecurity in their abilities and limited information or guidance regarding future options.

4. Group Counseling as a Relational Space for Reconstructing Meaning

Group counseling provides a relational space for participants to share and understand each other's experiences. Data shows that changes that emerge during sessions are more evident in how participants interpret their experiences than simply in reducing emotional distress. Throughout the process, experiences such as universality, emotional expression, and peer validation help participants see that their experiences are shared by others. This reduces the tendency to blame themselves and helps participants understand their situations more broadly. In general, group counseling serves as a space for shared sharing and reflection, helping participants place personal experiences within a broader social context.

Emergence of Help-Seeking as a Developmental Shift

Another finding indicated an initial shift in participants' orientation toward mental health support. The initial hesitation and lack of prior exposure to counseling reflect both structural barriers and internalized stigma. However, participation in the group appears to initiate a shift toward openness and willingness to engage. This suggests that help-seeking behavior is not a static trait, but a developing capacity shaped by experience and context. In this sense, group counseling functions

not only as an intervention, but as a gateway process that introduces students to the possibility of seeking support.

System-Level Role of School as an Enabling and Containing Structure

The findings indicate that schools serve as a facilitating context for group counselling through the support provided by teachers and school counsellors during implementation. Data from participant reflections and facilitator observations also indicate that students' psychological experiences are influenced by their interactions within the school environment and the activities taking place within it. The data suggest that the effectiveness of group counseling cannot be fully understood without considering the institutional context in which it is embedded. For many students, the school represents the only accessible environment where psychological support is available. The absence of prior counseling experiences indicates that the school functions as a primary entry point into mental health support, particularly in a context where external services are limited. This positions the school not merely as a setting for intervention but as a gateway system that mediates access to care. In addition to its role as an access point, the school also serves as a psychosocial containment space, where students can express and process emotional experiences that may not be accommodated in other areas of their lives. The school's structured yet supportive environment fosters a sense of safety, facilitating participation in group counseling processes. In contexts where economic or social pressures may constrain family or community support, this containment function is particularly significant.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that the school contributes to the development of a relational support system, where peer interaction and guided facilitation create opportunities for connection and belonging. These relational dynamics extend beyond the counseling sessions themselves and are reinforced through the broader school environment, suggesting that the impact of the intervention is partially sustained by institutional context. Taken together, these roles suggest that the school functions as an enabling ecological system that shapes both the accessibility and effectiveness of mental health interventions. This expands the interpretation of group counseling outcomes by demonstrating that observed changes are not solely the result of group processes but are co-produced through the interaction between intervention mechanisms and institutional structures.

The findings presented above collectively indicate that adolescents' psychological experiences are not fragmented or isolated phenomena, but are structured through interconnected processes involving structural pressures, internalization mechanisms, developmental challenges, and relational meaning-making. Each theme contributes to a broader pattern in which distress is continuously shaped, interpreted, and negotiated within students' lived realities. Table 1 systematically captures this integrative pattern, which provides a consolidated overview of how initial codes and themes evolve into higher-level theoretical constructs. Through this synthesis, the results extend beyond descriptive categorization toward a coherent conceptual understanding of adolescent distress as an ecological and meaning-driven process.

Table 1. Ecological Meaning-Making Model of Adolescent Distress

Analytical Layer	Themes	Subthemes / Codes	Theoretical Interpretation	Data Indicators (Examples)
Structural Context	Family and socioeconomic pressure	Financial instability, parental burden, limited support	External conditions that shape psychological demands	"have to help the family," "parents have many burdens"
	Future uncertainty	Fear of failure, limited opportunities	Anticipatory stress rooted in structural constraint	"afraid of failing," "do not know what they want to be"
Internalization Process	Cognitive-emotional overload	Overthinking, anxiety, mental exhaustion	Recursive distress loop driven by sustained pressure	"constantly thinking about it," "become anxious by myself"
	Responsibility internalization	Feeling obligated to support family	Transformation of external stress into internal burden	"if I fail, my family will suffer as well"
Developmental Disruption	Identity confusion	Lack of direction, unclear interests	Constrained identity formation	"confused about what to do next"

	Low self-efficacy	Self-doubt, fear of inadequacy	Reduced perceived agency	"I am not sure I can do it."
Relational Processing Space	Universality	Shared experiences	Normalization of distress	"I realized that I am not alone."
	Emotional expression	Sharing, release	Externalization of internal states	"I feel more relieved after talking about it."
	Peer validation	Feeling understood	Reconstruction of self-perception	"I feel understood by my friends."
	Interpersonal learning	Perspective-taking	Cognitive reframing	"I learned how my friends deal with it."
Emergent Adaptation	Coping awareness	New perspectives, emotional clarity	Early-stage adaptive regulation	"I feel calmer after the session."
	Help-seeking shift	Increased openness	Development of support-seeking behavior	"I am willing to share my problems."
System-Level Function	School as an access point	First exposure to counseling	Institutional gateway to mental health support	"This was my first time participating in counseling at school."

Discussion

The results of this study offer a nuanced and contextually informed comprehension of adolescent mental health in educational environments, especially within transnational and migrant contexts. While Ubaidah & Nur (2025) report that group-based reflective discussions can increase adolescents' awareness of their emotional and behavioral difficulties, their findings primarily emphasize changes in self-understanding during the intervention process. In comparison, the present study similarly indicates that group counselling provides a space for students to reflect on and articulate their experiences, and Agustini et al. (2025) found the importance of family mental health, particularly in shaping emotional well-being and perceived support. Consistent with this, the current findings show that family context is frequently mentioned by participants as part of their stress experience. Overall, the findings suggest that adolescents benefit from psychological support within the school context, particularly spaces that allow them to share experiences and reflect on their difficulties in a supportive environment. Consistent with the growing global concern regarding adolescent psychological distress, including anxiety, stress, and emotional instability (Grande et al., 2023; Jokinen et al., 2026). The results confirm that students experience significant emotional challenges. However, this study goes beyond confirming prevalence by demonstrating that individual-level explanations alone cannot adequately capture such distress. Instead, it emerges as a structured and meaningful response to complex ecological conditions.

This perspective directly addresses a critical limitation identified in previous literature, where adolescent mental health is often framed primarily in terms of cognitive and emotional dysfunctions, with less attention given to the broader contextual realities shaping these experiences (Cai et al., 2025; Rose-Clarke & Fellmeth, 2023). The present findings show that students' anxiety, overthinking, and emotional instability are not isolated symptoms but are deeply intertwined with family pressures, socioeconomic constraints, and uncertainty about future opportunities. In this sense, distress reflects not merely psychological vulnerability, but an adaptive response to sustained environmental demands.

The main findings of this study indicate that participants frequently described academic pressure, family expectations, and economic circumstances as directly related to their feelings and self-perceptions. This is evident in statements such as "have to succeed because of my family's circumstances" and "must not fail", demonstrating how external circumstances are understood as personal responsibility. These findings indicate that participants' psychological experiences cannot be separated from the social and family contexts they shared during counselling sessions. Family-related stress, particularly economic hardship and parental expectations, does not remain external to the individual but becomes translated into personal responsibility and pressure. This internalization process blurs the boundary between external reality and internal experience, suggesting that psychological distress is constructed through meaning-making processes shaped by lived conditions. This finding extends ecological perspectives on mental health by illustrating not only that context matters, but also how it becomes psychologically embedded.

Furthermore, the results highlight the intersection between structural pressures and developmental processes. Students reported significant difficulties in identity formation and career

direction, indicating a close link between distress and constrained developmental pathways. Consistent with developmental theories and empirical research on career adaptability (Santilli et al., 2020; Santrock, 2024), the ambiguity surrounding future objectives exacerbates anxiety and diminishes self-efficacy. However, this study adds an important layer by showing that such developmental challenges are not solely individual struggles, but are shaped by limited access to opportunities and resources. This suggests that identity formation in this context occurs under conditions of constraint, which intensifies psychological tension.

Within this complex landscape of structural and developmental challenges, group counseling emerges as a critical relational space that enables students to reinterpret their experiences. The findings indicate that the most significant impact of the intervention lies not merely in reducing symptoms, but in facilitating processes of shared understanding and meaning reconstruction. Mechanisms such as universality, emotional expression, and peer validation allow students to recognize that their struggles are not unique, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and self-blame. This aligns with established theories of group psychotherapy (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020), while also extending them by situating these processes within a shared context of structural adversity.

This study importantly challenges a common assumption within school-based mental health interventions: that specific techniques or structured program components primarily drive effectiveness. Previous studies have shown the advantages of group counseling (Asadi & Mede, 2024; H. Lin et al., 2025), but the current results indicate that its influence in this context is more accurately perceived as a relational and interpretive process. Drawing on the common factors perspective (Wampold & Imel, 2015), the effectiveness of the intervention appears to be rooted in the quality of interpersonal interactions, including empathy, trust, and the experience of being understood. This implies that the success of similar programs is highly contingent on facilitator competence and the ability to create psychologically safe group environments.

Another important insight concerns the role of schools as primary access points for mental health support. The finding that most students had not previously engaged with counseling services highlights a significant service gap, particularly in migrant communities where access to formal mental health systems is limited (Blackmore et al., 2020; Fazel et al., 2012). In this context, schools function not only as sites for intervention but as gateways to mental health care, reinforcing their importance within broader support systems (Weist et al., 2023). This underscores the need to conceptualize schools as integrated environments that support both academic and psychosocial development. At the same time, the findings invite a critical reflection on the scope and limitations of school-based interventions. Although group counseling provides meaningful support, it does not eliminate the structural conditions that give rise to distress. This aligns with evidence suggesting that the effects of psychosocial interventions are often moderate and context-dependent (Cai et al., 2025; Jokinen et al., 2026). Therefore, the role of group counseling should be understood as protective rather than curative, functioning to buffer the impact of ongoing stressors rather than resolve them entirely.

Building on these insights, this study proposes the Ecological Meaning-Making Model of Adolescent Distress as a conceptual framework that integrates the key findings. The model conceptualizes adolescent distress as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between structural pressures, internalization mechanisms, and developmental constraints. Within this process, group counseling serves as a relational space for meaning-making, enabling students to reinterpret their experiences and develop adaptive responses. This framework extends existing literature by bridging individual, relational, and structural dimensions of mental health, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how distress is experienced and managed in complex contexts. The theoretical implications of this study suggest that adolescent distress is best understood through an ecological perspective, emphasizing the interaction between structural factors, developmental processes, and internal experiences, and therefore cannot be explained solely in individual terms. Group counseling can also be understood as a relational space that helps participants make sense of and normalize their experiences through peer interactions, rather than simply as a symptom-reduction intervention. Furthermore, the process of identity development and future direction appears to be linked to socioeconomic conditions that limit participants' choices and opportunities, while the school serves not only as a site for intervention but also as the context in which distress and support emerge. Overall, these findings support the development of the Ecological

Meaning-Making Model of Adolescent Distress, which integrates structural, developmental, relational, and institutional dimensions into a more comprehensive framework. Practically, for the Indonesian School of Kota Kinabalu, the implications of this study emphasize strengthening collaboration between schools, parents, and related parties through a referral system, family involvement, and coordination with external services to support students' psychosocial needs.

LIMITATION

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged with transparency. The qualitative design allowed us to capture rich, nuanced experiences of students, but the findings may not be generalizable to other migrant schools or contexts. The intervention was implemented over a short period and lacked longitudinal follow-up, so the long-term effects on students' well-being and career adaptability remain unknown. This study has several limitations. Data derived from participant reflections and facilitator observations may contain subjectivity, although this was minimized through the use of multiple data sources and discussions among counsellors. Furthermore, the lack of long-term follow-up prevented the intervention's impact from being evaluated on an ongoing basis, even though meaningful psychological change generally requires ongoing engagement (Kendall & Peterman, 2015). This study was also conducted in a single school setting with a short intervention duration, so the findings cannot be generalized to other contexts findings.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that school-based group counselling can be a meaningful space for migrant youth to address a range of emotional, social, and academic challenges. Participants reported that the stress they experienced was related to family expectations, economic conditions, and future uncertainty, suggesting that these factors are interconnected. During group counseling sessions, participants reported opportunities to express emotions, share experiences with peers, and reflect on coping strategies. These findings suggest that group-based support can contribute to participants' understanding and management of their difficulties within the school context. This study emphasizes the importance of integrating structured and contextualized group programs into school mental health services. Future research is recommended to employ multi-site, longitudinal, and mixed-method designs to expand and strengthen the findings.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

LMIW contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data curation, formal analysis, and writing of the original draft, as well as supervision of the study. RF contributed to conceptualization, validation, project administration, and writing review and editing. KHR was involved in data curation, investigation, validation, and writing review and editing. SU contributed to methodology development, supervision, validation, and writing review and editing. MDAM contributed to conceptualization, provision of resources, validation, and writing review and editing.

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