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Life Skills Counseling within Local Culture-Based Schools Improves Muslim Students' Self-Acceptance

Syahril¹, Sitti Riadil Janna², Bau Ratu³, Kushan Indika Rathnasekara⁴

¹ Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Bone, Indonesia

² Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar, Indonesia

³ Universitas Tadulako, Indonesia

⁴ University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

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Corresponding Author:

Syahril, Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Bone, Indonesia

Email: syahril@iain-bone.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Many Muslim students in Southeast Asia struggle with self-acceptance, especially around body image with adverse implications for well-being. This study evaluated a culturally attuned life-skills counseling program in an Islamic higher-education setting. Using a quasi-experimental nonequivalent pretest–posttest control design at the State Islamic Institute (IAIN) Bone, Indonesia, 24 undergraduates with low self-acceptance were assigned to experiment group and control group. The intervention followed the DASIE sequence and integrated bibliotherapy and self-talk framed by Islamic virtues (*muhāsabah*, *shukr*, *riḍā*) and local norms (*adab*, *musyawarah*). Self-acceptance was measured with the Husna & Fatonah scale ($\alpha=.961$). Mann–Whitney analysis showed a significant post-intervention advantage for the counseling group ($p=.001$) with a large effect, indicating educationally meaningful gains. Mechanisms likely included identification with culturally relevant narratives and practice of faith-consistent self-evaluation. Findings support embedding faith-aligned, skills-based counseling within guidance services and training counselors in religiously attuned cognitive-behavioral methods across Islamic and local culture-based schools. Interpretation is qualified by a small, single-site, quasi-experimental design. Future multi-site randomized studies with longitudinal follow-up should test durability and examine mediators (e.g., self-compassion, perceived unconditional positive regard) and moderators (e.g., gender, socioeconomic status, religious commitment).

Keywords: Adolescents; Life Skills Counseling; Muslim Students

ABSTRAK

Banyak mahasiswa Muslim di Asia Tenggara menghadapi kesulitan penerimaan diri, terutama terkait citra tubuh yang berdampak negatif pada kesejahteraan. Studi ini mengevaluasi program konseling keterampilan hidup yang peka budaya di lingkungan pendidikan tinggi Islam. Dengan desain kuasi-eksperimen *nonequivalent pretest-posttest control* di IAIN Bone, Indonesia, 24 mahasiswa dengan penerimaan diri rendah dibagi ke kelompok eksperimen dan kontrol. Intervensi mengikuti urutan DASIE dan mengintegrasikan biblioterapi serta swabicara yang dibingkai nilai-nilai Islam (*muḥāsabah, shukr, riḍā*) dan norma lokal (adab, musyawarah). Penerimaan diri diukur menggunakan skala Husna & Fatonah ($\alpha=0,961$). Analisis *Mann-Whitney* menunjukkan keunggulan pascaintervensi yang signifikan bagi kelompok konseling ($p=0,001$) dengan efek besar, menandakan peningkatan bermakna secara edukasional. Mekanisme yang mungkin meliputi identifikasi dengan narasi relevan secara budaya dan praktik evaluasi diri yang selaras iman. Temuan mendukung integrasi konseling berbasis keterampilan yang selaras nilai agama dalam layanan bimbingan serta pelatihan konselor pada metode kognitif-perilaku yang peka religius di sekolah berbasis budaya lokal dan institusi Islam. Interpretasi dibatasi oleh desain kuasi-eksperimen, satu lokasi, dan sampel kecil. Studi acak multi-situs dengan tindak lanjut longitudinal diperlukan untuk menguji ketahanan efek serta mediator (misal: belas kasihan diri, penerimaan positif tanpa syarat) dan moderator (misal: gender, status sosial-ekonomi, komitmen keagamaan).

Kata kunci: Konseling Kecakapan Hidup; Mahasiswa Muslim; Remaja

INTRODUCTION

Self-acceptance is widely recognized as a core component of psychological well-being and an essential developmental task for university students transitioning into adulthood. It refers to an individual's ability to acknowledge personal strengths and weaknesses realistically, integrate past experiences, and maintain a balanced, compassionate view of oneself (Conley et al., 2018; Riboldi et al., 2023). Students with healthy self-acceptance typically sustain a coherent sense of identity, exhibit greater emotional resilience, and navigate academic and interpersonal challenges more effectively

(Klainin-Yobas et al., 2021; Lo et al., 2021). Conversely, low self-acceptance is associated with negative self-evaluation, feelings of inferiority, shame, social withdrawal, and reduced academic persistence (Arsandaux et al., 2019; Saleh et al., 2017), indicating that many students require structured support to develop stable psychological grounding during their university years.

Within this broader picture, empirical evidence suggests that many Muslim university students in Indonesia continue to struggle with accepting their bodies, personal histories, emotional fluctuations, and past adversities. Cohen (2019), for example, found that students commonly expressed dissatisfaction with their physical appearance and aspired to be slimmer, more attractive, or more capable. Interviews with several students at IAIN Bone likewise revealed difficulties in accepting physical conditions or integrating painful experiences such as bereavement. These challenges often manifest in discouragement, shame, lowered self-confidence, anxiety, and interpersonal difficulties (Burrell et al., 2020; Oosterhoff et al., 2018). Within an academic setting, such vulnerabilities can diminish motivation, impair concentration, and disrupt persistence on long-term goals, which makes self-acceptance particularly crucial for university student development.

The importance of self-acceptance among Muslim students is further intensified by the moral, spiritual, and cultural frameworks in which they are embedded. Islamic teachings emphasize balanced self-regard, integrating humility with gratitude (*shukr*), contentment (*ridā*), reflective self-assessment (*muḥāsabah*), and the aspiration toward excellence (*iḥsān*) (Mahfud et al., 2025; Rothman & Coyle, 2020; Wahab et al., 2022). From this perspective, self-acceptance is not equivalent to passive resignation but involves the recognition of fitrah (innate human disposition), acknowledgment of imperfections, and commitment to self-improvement in alignment with divine guidance. The Qur'anic framework discourages both despair and arrogance and instead advocates a reflective, hopeful, and purposeful understanding of oneself. These theological principles suggest that promoting self-acceptance among Muslim students involves cultivating both psychological insight and spiritual maturity.

In line with these considerations, Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia, such as IAIN, UIN, and STAIN, are uniquely positioned to integrate academic, spiritual, and psychosocial formation. These environments shape students' personal expectations in

terms of ethics, identity, and behavior and provide structured counseling services intended to address academic, emotional, social, and religious challenges (Cornish et al., 2017; Giesler, 2022). At the same time, counseling interventions in these settings must be aligned with Islamic values and local Southeast Asian cultural norms. Students may hesitate to disclose personal problems because they fear burdening others, violating norms of politeness, or disrupting group harmony, especially within collectivist cultures characterized by high-context communication and strong respect for authority (Kapetanovic et al., 2020). These tendencies can complicate help-seeking and contribute to unresolved issues related to self-worth and emotional regulation.

Against this contextual backdrop, research on counseling in Islamic university settings shows a variety of approaches used to strengthen emotional well-being, including rational emotive behavior therapy (Anggraeny & Ardani, 2023), narrative counseling (Hilman, 2025), reality therapy (Wahyuningtyas, 2024), logotherapy (Anggoro et al., 2024), self-disclosure exercises (Rianti et al., 2023), and self-compassion training (Kotera & Gordon, 2021). These studies demonstrate the potential of counseling interventions to support Muslim students. Many programs, however, remain reactive and problem-focused rather than developmental, leaving a gap for interventions that proactively strengthen enduring capacities such as self-awareness, emotion regulation, and self-acceptance.

In response to this gap, life skills counseling offers a structured, preventive, and developmental framework aimed at equipping students with essential personal, social, and emotional competencies that support effective functioning and psychological resilience (Kirchhoff and Keller, 2021; Shek et al., 2020; Syahril & Janna, 2023). Nelson-Jones & Palmer (2015) conceptualized the DASIE sequence (Develop, Assess, State, Intervention, and Emphasize) as a systematic approach to teaching practical skills such as emotional awareness, cognitive restructuring, communication, decision-making, and constructive self-talk. These skills are designed to strengthen students' capacity to evaluate themselves realistically, regulate emotions, manage stress, interact assertively yet respectfully, and engage in purposeful action.

Viewed from the perspective of Islamic education, life skills counseling aligns closely with the aims of Islamic higher education, which emphasize the development of moral character (*akhlak*), intellectual growth, self-discipline, and social responsibility. Concepts

such as *muḥāsabah* (self-reflection), *tawakkul* (trust in God), *ṣabr* (patience), and *isti'ānah* (seeking help) map naturally onto counseling skills such as self-monitoring, reframing, goal setting, and help-seeking (Khaizaran & Ghufuran, 2025; Widhigdo et al., 2025). This alignment suggests that life skills counseling may be particularly effective for Muslim university students because it strengthens both emotional competencies and spiritual virtues.

Empirical studies provide additional support for the value of life skills interventions in higher education. Faqih (2023) demonstrated improvements in self-regulated learning, Rukaesih (2018) reported gains in interpersonal adjustment, and Syahril and Janna (2023) identified increases in psychological well-being following life skills training. These findings indicate that life skills-based programs can positively influence multiple aspects of student functioning. Bibliotherapy, which is often used as part of life skills counseling, allows students to engage with stories or texts that model coping strategies, normalize difficulties, and provide moral guidance (Apriliana & Setiawati, 2020; Dudi, 2017; Wells et al., 2024). Self-talk techniques help individuals identify and modify automatic negative thoughts and replace them with balanced and constructive internal dialogue (Mulawarman et al., 2024). These approaches have been found to enhance optimism, reduce self-criticism, and improve emotional regulation (Chitra & Karnan, 2017; Chen et al., 2017).

Despite these promising findings, research that specifically examines life skills counseling as a strategy to strengthen self-acceptance in Islamic higher education remains limited. Most prior studies focus on related constructs, such as self-regulated learning, adjustment, or general well-being, and do not directly assess whether a culturally grounded life skills counseling program can significantly improve self-acceptance among Muslim university students. This situation underscores the need for empirical evidence that integrates psychological skill-building with cultural and religious relevance.

The present study was designed to address this gap by examining the effectiveness of life skills counseling for enhancing self-acceptance among Muslim university students at IAIN Bone, Indonesia. The intervention integrates bibliotherapy and self-talk within the DASIE framework, with materials adapted from Islamic teachings and Southeast Asian Muslim cultural norms. By situating counseling within students' moral and cultural worldview, the program aims to strengthen self-awareness, foster constructive internal dialogue, and build a more balanced and compassionate understanding of the self. The

primary objective of this study is to determine whether life skills counseling can significantly improve students' self-acceptance compared with typical lecture-based activities in Islamic higher education.

METHODS

This study employed a quantitative quasi-experimental nonequivalent control group design with pretest and posttest measures (Krishnan, 2019). The design was selected because random assignment to groups was not feasible within the natural class organization of the university. Nevertheless, comparing an intervention group with a control group was still necessary to identify the effectiveness of life skills counseling. The research flow, including preparation, screening, sampling, intervention delivery, and posttest evaluation, is summarized in Figure 1.

The procedural stages followed the sequence outlined in Figure 1. The process began with a preparation stage in which the researchers obtained institutional approval, coordinated with academic and counseling units, and reviewed all intervention materials to ensure cultural and religious appropriateness. At this stage, session plans and bibliotherapy texts were finalized prior to implementation. After the preparation phase, the screening and participant selection stage was conducted by administering the self-acceptance scale to a larger pool of students to identify individuals with low self-acceptance scores. Based on these screening results, 24 eligible students were selected and assigned to the experimental and control groups, and their baseline pretest scores were documented. Once the sample was determined, pretest administration took place. All 24 selected students completed the self-acceptance scale under supervised conditions using standardized classroom procedures to ensure consistency in measurement. Following the pretest, the intervention phase was implemented. The experimental group participated in ten life skills counseling sessions that followed the DASIE sequence and integrated bibliotherapy and self-talk activities, while the control group attended lecture and discussion sessions that reflected typical instructional practices at the institution without exposure to structured skills training. After the intervention was completed for the experimental group and the comparison condition for the control group, both groups proceeded to the posttest stage. The same self-acceptance scale was administered under conditions that mirrored the pretest to minimize measurement

bias and ensure comparability. The final stage involved data coding and processing. All pretest and posttest scores were checked for completeness, coded, and entered into statistical analysis software. Data were processed according to the predetermined analysis plan to compare the outcomes of the life skills counseling intervention with those of the lecture and discussion condition.

The research was conducted at the State Islamic Institute (IAIN) Bone in Indonesia, which represents an Islamic higher education context where academic learning, religious values, and local cultural norms are integrated. This environment provides an appropriate setting for examining a counseling intervention aligned with Islamic principles and Southeast Asian Muslim student life. Participants consisted of 24 undergraduate students who were identified as having low self-acceptance scores based on an initial screening. Purposive sampling was used to select students who met the inclusion criteria. These 24 students were assigned into two intact groups, with 12 students in the experimental group and 12 students in the control group. All participants provided written informed consent and the study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines.

The experimental group received a life skills counseling program that followed the DASIE sequence introduced by Nelson-Jones & Palmer (2015). The program integrated bibliotherapy and self-talk techniques to enhance self-awareness, strengthen constructive internal dialogue, and support self-directed planning for personal growth. Sessions were adapted to reflect Islamic values such as patience, gratitude, reflection, and trust in God, ensuring cultural and theological relevance for Muslim university students. The counseling program consisted of ten structured group sessions. The Develop phase focused on rapport building and problem clarification. The Assess phase explored students' strengths and skill deficits related to self-acceptance. The State phase involved setting counseling goals and planning the intervention. The Intervention phase included skills practice using guided bibliotherapy materials and structured self-talk exercises. The Emphasize phase concluded each session with reflection, reinforcement of learning, and planning for continued application of skills outside the counseling room. Bibliotherapy activities involved reading and discussing selected texts containing campus-specific narratives, stories of perseverance, moral dilemmas, and Islamic values that model coping and self-reflection. Self-talk exercises helped students identify automatic negative thoughts, challenge irrational beliefs,

and practice balanced internal dialogue guided by psychological principles and Islamic moral teachings. The control group participated in lecture and discussion activities that represented typical instructional practices on campus. These activities addressed general student development topics but did not include structured life skills training, bibliotherapy, or self-talk exercises. The control condition therefore served as an active comparison that resembled usual educational processes without the mechanisms found in the experimental intervention.

Self-acceptance was measured using the scale developed by Fatonah and Husna (2020). The instrument includes four dimensions: physical acceptance, emotional acceptance, personality acceptance, and acceptance of personal weaknesses. Higher scores indicate more adaptive self-acceptance. The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency in this study, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.961. The instrument was administered at two time points, once as a pretest before any intervention was delivered and once as a posttest after the ten-session program.

Given the small sample size and nonequivalent group structure, posttest scores were analyzed using the Mann Whitney U nonparametric test (Thiel et al., 2024; Garrocho-Rangel et al., 2024). This test is suitable for comparing two independent groups when assumptions of normality are uncertain. Analyses examined whether the distribution of posttest scores differed significantly between students who received life skills counseling and those who did not. A two-tailed significance level of alpha equal to 0.05 was applied. Effect size estimates were calculated to provide additional interpretation of the practical significance of the findings.

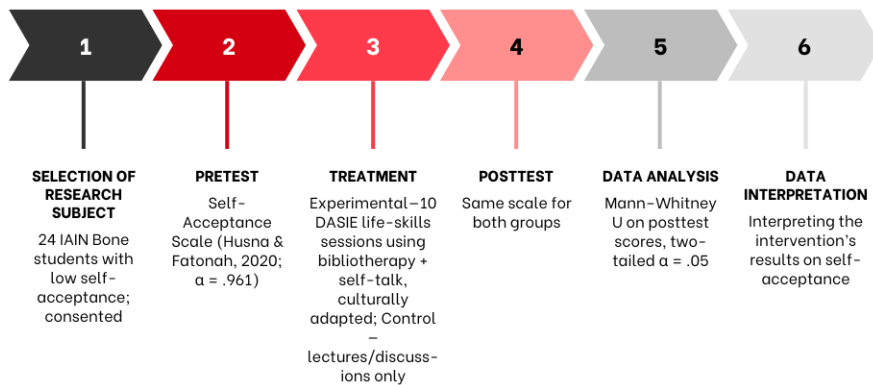


Figure 1. Research Flow

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The effectiveness of life skills counseling in improving self-acceptance was evaluated by comparing pretest and posttest scores between the experimental and control groups. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. At baseline, both groups demonstrated highly comparable levels of self-acceptance, with mean pretest scores of 123.91 in the experimental group and 124.50 in the control group. These similarities indicate that the two groups began the intervention period with equivalent initial conditions. Following the ten-session intervention, the experimental group showed a substantial increase in self-acceptance, reaching a mean posttest score of 156.08. This represents an improvement of 32.17 points, which translates to an approximate increase of 25.96 percent from baseline. In contrast, the control group exhibited only a modest increase of 1.33 points, resulting in a posttest mean of 125.83 or an approximate increase of 1.07 percent. These descriptive findings indicate that participants who received life skills counseling experienced marked improvement in self-acceptance while those who participated only in lecture and discussion activities did not show comparable gains.

To determine whether the observed differences were statistically significant, a Mann Whitney U test was conducted. The analysis yielded U equals 144.0, z equals 4.16, and p equals .001 (two tailed), indicating a significant difference between the experimental and control groups at posttest. The nonparametric effect size was r approximately 0.85, which is conventionally interpreted as very large. These results show that life skills counseling had a strong and statistically significant effect on students' self-acceptance in this Islamic higher education setting. The descriptive and inferential analyses together suggest that the program helped students evaluate themselves more realistically, recognize both strengths and weaknesses, and hold a more balanced sense of self-worth. The next section discusses these outcomes in relation to theoretical perspectives, cultural factors, and previous empirical studies.

Table 1.

Self-Acceptance by Group (Pre- and Posttest) and Inferential Test

Group (n)	Pretest Mean	Posttest Mean	Δ (Post-Pre)	% Δ
Experimental (12)	123.91	156.08	+32.17	+25.96%
Control (12)	124.50	125.83	+1.33	+1.07%

Note. Mann-Whitney $U=144.0$, $z=4.16$, $p=0.001$ (two-tailed). Δ =Post-Pre; % Δ =percentage change

The present study demonstrates that life skills counseling produced a substantial and statistically significant improvement in Muslim students' self-acceptance within an Islamic higher education context in Indonesia. As shown in Table 1, the experimental group's posttest mean exceeded the control group's by 30.25 points, and the Mann–Whitney analysis yielded $U = 144.0$, $z = 4.16$, $p = 0.001$. In practical terms, the nonparametric effect size ($r \approx 0.85$) indicates a very large impact, suggesting that the intervention was not only statistically detectable but also educationally meaningful. When positioned alongside theoretical expectations that self-acceptance constitutes a core component of psychological well-being (Neff, 2003; 2023) and when understood through Rogers' humanistic proposition that warm, empathic, and nonjudgmental climates catalyze growth (Rogers, 1961), the observed gains appear coherent and theoretically grounded. Students who engaged in structured sessions that normalized human imperfection, strengthened self-evaluation skills, and cultivated constructive inner dialogue were better able to acknowledge strengths and limitations, thereby consolidating a more positive self-stance than peers who only participated in lecture and discussion sessions. To understand why such gains matter specifically for Muslim learners, the discussion next interprets self-acceptance through an Islamic moral and spiritual lens.

For Muslim students, self-acceptance is not reducible to secular self-esteem; it resonates with faith-informed constructs such as *riḍā* (contentment), *shukr* (gratitude), and *muḥāsabah* (reflective self-appraisal). Within this lens, accepting oneself does not mean resignation or permissiveness toward shortcomings. Rather, it signifies recognizing one's *fiṭrah* (innate disposition), acknowledging areas for correction, and committing to *iḥsān* (striving toward excellence) while trusting in divine wisdom. Qur'anic ethics encourage balanced self-regard, avoiding despair and arrogance alike, while sustaining hope for improvement through effort and reliance on God. This balance aligns with the aims of life skills counseling, which trains students to evaluate beliefs, emotions, and behaviors realistically and compassionately, then to set actionable goals. Theology and technique intersect here: structured self-talk resembles *muḥāsabah*; bibliotherapy can be curated with narratives that embody *tawakkul* (trust) and *isti'ānah* (seeking help), allowing cultural–religious meanings to scaffold cognitive-behavioral change (Thomas & Barbato, 2020; Zarrouq et al., 2021). Such alignment helps explain the large effects observed in Table 1, as

interventions that echo a learner's worldview often accelerate internalization and maintenance of change. Having situated self-acceptance theologically, the next step is to consider how Southeast Asian cultural norms shape the counseling context in which these meanings are practiced.

The Southeast Asian Muslim milieu is typically collectivist and high-context in communication, valuing harmonious relations and emphasizing *adab* (courteous conduct) and respect for authority figures such as lecturers, *ustadz*, and community leaders. Interventions succeed when they respect these norms and leverage communal assets. In the present program, small-group counseling created psychologically safe micro-communities where confession and reflection could occur without loss of face. Moreover, the counselor's stance, empathetic, nonjudgmental, and purposeful, mirrored the cultural expectations of a caring mentor who guides with wisdom (*hikmah*). This cultural congruence likely enhanced receptivity and practice adherence, thus amplifying outcomes recorded in Table 1. The literature on cultural adaptation underscores that when counseling methods are rendered in locally meaningful metaphors and ritual forms, they tend to produce larger effects and better retention (Hernández et al., 2020; Parra-Cardona et al., 2022). With this cultural congruence in view, it becomes important to examine the concrete change mechanisms, particularly bibliotherapy and self-talk, that operationalized such fit.

Bibliotherapy and self-talk were the two core techniques integrated into the life skills sequence. Bibliotherapy allowed students to encounter narratives, religious exemplars, local folklore, campus-relevant vignettes, that externalized dilemmas, modeled coping, and normalized struggle. When such texts are chosen carefully to reflect Islamic virtues and regional cultural narratives, they deliver more than information; they offer identification and moral imagination. Students can see reflections of their own doubts and aspirations in characters who practice *ṣabr* (patience) and *taubah* (repentance), then translate those virtues to campus life. Self-talk exercises, in turn, operationalize *muḥāsabah* by inviting students to monitor automatic appraisals, dispute self-judgment, and practice balanced affirmations grounded in reality and faith. This complements empirical findings that self-acceptance is linked to happiness, optimism, and decreased need for external validation (Chitra & Karnan, 2017; Szentagotai & David, 2013), as well as mental-health benefits (Chen et al., 2017). In short, the intervention's mechanisms map cleanly onto both psychological science and

Islamic moral psychology, helping explain durable gains. These mechanisms also resonate with prior life skills findings, inviting comparison with existing evidence on adjacent outcomes.

The pattern of results coheres with scholarship documenting positive outcomes of life skills counseling on adjacent constructs. Faqih (2023) observed improvements in self-regulated learning; Rukaesih (2018) reported gains in self-adjustment among college students; Syahril and Janna (2023) found enhanced psychological well-being. The present study extends that literature by focusing on self-acceptance, an upstream determinant of many adaptive outcomes. If students view themselves with compassion and realism, they are freer to self-regulate, adapt to stressors, and pursue purposeful goals. These orientations likely mediate improvements in academic persistence and social integration. The intragroup increase of 32.17 points in the experimental cohort comports with this pathway: students not only reappraised their worth and limitations but also internalized strategies for ongoing self-correction, thereby sustaining gains beyond episodic mood improvements. Because self-acceptance is multidimensional, the discussion now turns to the often neglected domain of physical self-acceptance on Muslim campuses.

Multiple strands of evidence support the claim that self-acceptance is pivotal for mental health and social functioning. Students who accept themselves are more capable of positive self-evaluation, aware of strengths and weaknesses, and better able to manage limitations (Putri, 2018). They nurture a more stable self-concept (Wiryosutomo et al., 2019), which translates into constructive engagement with peers and authorities (Wentzel et al., 2021). Conversely, low self-acceptance correlates with feelings of inferiority (Huang et al., 2020) and vulnerability to anger and depression (Casini et al., 2022). The present results align neatly with these patterns: when life skills counseling systematically trains students to evaluate themselves charitably and accurately, they report improved well-being (Syahril & Janna, 2023), better adjustment (Rukaesih, 2018), and greater readiness to take purposeful action. From an Islamic perspective, such outcomes are consonant with *nafs al-muṭma'innah* (a tranquil soul) and with the pursuit of *maṣlahah* (human flourishing) in education. To deepen this multidimensional view, we next address physical self-acceptance and the ethics that guide care for the body.

The data and earlier research suggest that accepting one's physical condition is a critical component of holistic self-acceptance (Rosida & Saputri, 2019). In campus settings, body-image pressures are real, even among students who dress modestly; online comparison can provoke dissatisfaction and shame. Islamic ethics can be mobilized here: the body is an trust (*amānah*) to be cared for, not idolized or despised. Life skills counseling framed body-related self-talk in terms of gratitude (*shukr*) for health and function, stewardship through healthy habits, and compassion for perceived imperfections. This theological framing helps move students away from punitive self-critique toward dignifying care, which is associated with better psychological well-being (Popov et al., 2020). The result is neither hedonism nor neglect but an ethic of *ihsān* toward the self that motivates responsible behavior. Attending to the body within this value framework also foregrounds the role of local cultural resources that counselors can mobilize to sustain these shifts.

Cultural resources in Indonesia and neighboring Southeast Asian contexts, such as communal solidarity (*gotong royong*), deliberative consensus (*musyawarah*), and respect for elders, can be harnessed within counseling to enhance acceptance and growth. For instance, peer-support elements during group sessions can be structured to reflect *musyawarah* etiquette: turn-taking, gentle advice (*nasehat*) delivered with *adab*, and collective problem-solving. Local proverbs and folktales may be employed in bibliotherapy to anchor abstract principles in familiar imagery, thereby strengthening transfer to daily life. Counselors who are sensitive to regional languages, humor, and honorifics lower social distance and preserve participants' dignity. These moves are not cosmetic; they enact Bronfenbrenner's ecological insight that behavior is shaped in nested contexts (family, school, community) and thus interventions should engage those layers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Tong & An, 2024). When the counseling room becomes a microcosm of supportive community norms, students feel "at home," and learning sticks. Harnessing these cultural resources coheres with a broader integrative theory of change, which we now articulate across humanistic, cognitive-behavioral, and Islamic moral psychology.

The study's results can be read as a convergence of Rogers' humanistic theory (Rogers, 1961), Neff's self-compassion framework (Neff, 2003; 2023; Pusvitasari et al., 2024), and Islamic moral psychology. Humanistic principles provide the relational climate in which students risk honest appraisal; cognitive-behavioral micro-skills (self-talk, goal

setting) operationalize change; and Islamic virtues supply the meaning framework that legitimizes and sustains practice. This triangulation addresses a long-standing challenge in school counseling: how to ensure that methods are both evidence-informed and culturally legitimate. At Muslim Southeast Asian campuses, legitimacy is partly theological: students often ask whether techniques align with *tawhīd* (unity of God), *adab*, and communal values. By anchoring techniques in virtues familiar to Islamic discourse (for example *ṣabr* in the face of stress and *shukr* for progress), counselors lower resistance and enhance buy-in (Davis et al., 2017; Keshavarzi et al., 2025). In turn, adherence improves, which likely contributes to the large effect size observed. This integrated reading clarifies why the structured intervention excelled, and it also helps explain why the lecture and discussion control condition could not deliver comparable gains.

Lecture and discussion represent valuable pedagogical tools, but they are not designed to modify core self-schemas. Without guided practice in noticing automatic thoughts, disputing harsh self-judgment, and rehearsing compassionate appraisals, students may acquire conceptual knowledge without reorganizing internal dialogues. Moreover, lectures rarely offer the individualized feedback that helps students translate ideas into personal scripts. The minimal gain in the control group ($\approx 1.07\%$) suggests that the acquisition of abstract ideas about well-being, absent practice and support, may not shift enduring attitudes. By contrast, the DASIE sequence in life skills counseling provided progressive scaffolding from rapport to assessment, goal formulation, intervention, and evaluation, which is precisely the structure needed to rewrite the self-narrative. The difference captured in Table 1 can thus be understood as the added value of guided, culturally attuned skills training over didactic exposure alone. Understanding these differential effects sets the stage for linking self-acceptance to academic engagement and character education in Islamic institutions.

Self-acceptance is not only a mental-health indicator; it is also instrumental to academic engagement and character education. Students who view failures as opportunities for learning rather than global indictments of worth are more likely to persist in challenging tasks, seek help appropriately, and recover from setbacks. This is strongly consonant with Islamic conceptions of *taubah* (return after error) and the Prophet's model of gentle correction. A counseling curriculum that integrates life skills with character virtues, such as

amānah (responsibility), *istiqāmah* (steadfastness), and *husn al-ẓann* (charitable interpretation), creates conditions where students can both flourish emotionally and meet academic standards. The present findings, in tandem with evidence that life skills training improves self-regulated learning (Faqih, 2023), suggest that Islamic universities and local culture-based schools in Southeast Asia can position counseling as a backbone of holistic education (Hanafi et al., 2025; Wattanapisit et al., 2022). Yet no student changes in isolation, so the analysis must widen to the family, peer, and community ecologies that amplify or blunt counseling effects.

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory reminds us that students are nested in families and communities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Tong & An, 2024). In Southeast Asia, family expectations and religious communities exert strong motivational and normative influence. Counseling programs that invite family understanding, for example parent seminars on supportive feedback and mosque-based student circles emphasizing compassionate self-talk, can extend gains beyond the counseling room. Peer influence is equally potent: student organizations, including BEM and Islamic study circles, can adopt the language of self-acceptance and growth in mentoring. Such ecosystemic alignment normalizes healthier inner speech and reduces stigma around counseling, which may be particularly salient where seeking help is sometimes interpreted as weakness (Taylor et al., 2017). When peer leaders model reflective practice and compassionate accountability, students feel licensed to adopt similar habits. Within these ecologies, however, misconceptions about “acceptance” can still derail practice, making it vital to distinguish acceptance from fatalism.

A known concern in religious contexts is the misconception that “acceptance” equals passive fatalism. The present intervention intentionally framed self-acceptance as a starting point for improvement rather than an endpoint. Students were guided to distinguish *riḍā* (contentment with what cannot be changed) from *‘azm* (resolute intention) and *‘amal* (effort) toward what can be changed. This distinction is crucial for aligning counseling with Islamic teachings that honor human agency within divine decree. Cognitive exercises emphasized controllable targets, such as study schedules, social skills, and emotion regulation, and sought to transform guilt into repentance and action rather than rumination. This framing mitigates religious scruples that might otherwise dampen engagement and clarifies that acceptance fuels rather than disables striving (Klinge & Vliet, 2017; Supriatna

et al., 2021). Clarifying this distinction translates into concrete guidance for practitioners who design, supervise, and evaluate faith-integrated counseling.

For practitioners, several implications follow. First, assessment protocols should include culturally validated measures of self-acceptance and related constructs to monitor progress sensitively. Second, session materials should draw on Islamic texts, local proverbs, and campus-relevant scenarios to ensure resonance. Third, group norms should be taught explicitly in the vocabulary of *adab* to secure safety and honor. Fourth, counselors need training in integrating faith-consistent reframing with evidence-based techniques such as cognitive restructuring and behavioral activation. Fifth, monitoring and evaluation should capture not only symptom reduction but also gains in character virtues, social functioning, and academic persistence. Finally, collaboration with religious affairs offices, such as Campus Da'wah Organization, can facilitate referrals and co-curricular reinforcement, reducing fragmentation of student support (Osman et al., 2021; Tanhan & Francisco, 2019). To institutionalize these practitioner moves at scale, policy and curriculum alignment are the logical next considerations.

At the policy level, Islamic universities and local culture-based secondary schools in Southeast Asia can integrate life skills counseling into character-education curricula. Modules might include *muḥāsabah*-based self-talk, bibliotherapy with Islamic biographies, stress management anchored in dhikr and breathing practices, and social skills training framed as *adab* in disagreement. Institutional guidelines should encourage routine screening for self-acceptance and well-being, with clear referral pathways. Faculty development can prepare lecturers to reinforce counseling messages in classroom feedback. Partnerships with local religious leaders can ensure theological clarity and address concerns early. In resource-limited settings, peer-led models supervised by professional counselors may expand reach effectively (Shah et al., 2017; Storer & Torre, 2023). These steps align with national education goals that emphasize character, citizenship, and cultural rootedness (Depdiknas, 2003). Even with such alignment, the evidence base must grow, which is why the limitations and future research agenda warrant careful attention.

Several limitations circumscribe the interpretation of these findings. The sample was small and confined to one Islamic institute, which limits generalizability. The group-based modality and reliance on bibliotherapy and self-talk mean that effects cannot be cleanly

attributed to any single ingredient. The self-acceptance scale, while reliable, captures self-report and may be susceptible to social desirability bias, especially in collectivist contexts. Future research should replicate findings in diverse Islamic schools across Southeast Asia, including *pesantren*, *madrasah aliyah*, and local culture-based schools in Malaysia, Brunei, and Southern Thailand. Designs might include multi-site randomized trials, mixed-methods process evaluations, and longitudinal follow-up to test durability. Mediation analyses could examine whether gains in self-compassion and perceived unconditional positive regard mediate effects on self-acceptance. Moderation by gender, socioeconomic status, and degree of religious commitment would illuminate for whom and under what cultural conditions life skills counseling is most potent. Finally, qualitative studies involving students, parents, *ustadz*, and counselors could unpack how Islamic meanings are negotiated during counseling and how local customs shape receptivity.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the effectiveness of life skills counseling for enhancing self-acceptance among Muslim university students in an Islamic higher education institution in Indonesia. Using a quasi-experimental nonequivalent pretest–posttest control group design, the findings showed a substantial and statistically significant improvement in self-acceptance for students who participated in life skills counseling compared with peers who only attended lecture and discussion activities. The large effect size indicates that the intervention produced not only statistically detectable but also educationally meaningful change. Theoretically, the results support and extend humanistic and cognitive-behavioral perspectives by demonstrating that self-acceptance can be strengthened through structured skills training delivered in a culturally and religiously congruent format. The integration of bibliotherapy and self-talk within an Islamic moral framework, drawing on concepts such as *riḍā*, *shukr*, *muḥāsabah*, and *iḥsān*, illustrates how life skills counseling can be aligned with Islamic values without sacrificing psychological rigor. This contributes to the growing body of work on faith-informed counseling models in Muslim-majority contexts and highlights self-acceptance as an upstream determinant of broader well-being and adjustment in Islamic higher education. Practically, the findings suggest that Islamic universities and other Islamic higher education institutions in Southeast Asia can incorporate life skills

counseling as a core component of student support and character education. Counseling modules that combine culturally adapted bibliotherapy, structured self-talk, and group-based practice may help students relate to themselves more compassionately and realistically, thereby supporting their academic engagement and psychosocial functioning. At the same time, the study's limitations, particularly the small sample size, single-site setting, and reliance on self-report, indicate that conclusions should be drawn with caution. Future research should replicate and extend these findings across diverse Islamic educational settings, employ more robust designs and mixed-methods approaches, and investigate mediating and moderating processes to clarify for whom and under what conditions life skills counseling is most effective. Together, such efforts can strengthen the evidence base for contextually grounded and Islamically informed counseling interventions in Southeast Asia.

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