

## Exploring Junior High School Students' Experiences of Academic Stress Management Through Board Game-Based Coaching

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### Abstract

**Background:** Academic stress and fear of failure are common challenges among junior high school students and may affect emotional well-being and learning engagement. Board game-based coaching may provide a reflective space to help students understand and manage these challenges. **Objective:** This study explored students' experiences in managing academic stress and fear of failure through coaching using the board game Perjalanan Menuju Ketenangan. **Method:** An exploratory qualitative design was conducted with 30 eighth-grade students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through observations, reflection activities, open discussions, and student testimonies during two group coaching sessions. The data were analyzed thematically using the character strengths of hope and self-regulation as analytical lenses. **Results:** Two main themes emerged: hope and self-regulation. Participants reported greater confidence in facing academic challenges, improved emotional awareness, and more adaptive coping strategies. **Conclusion:** The findings suggest that board game-based coaching may provide a meaningful reflective space for students to explore academic stress and fear of failure.

**Keywords:** Academic stress, fear of failure, coaching, board game, hope, self-regulation

### Abstrak

**Latar Belakang:** Stres akademik dan ketakutan akan kegagalan merupakan tantangan yang umum dialami siswa sekolah menengah pertama dan dapat memengaruhi kesejahteraan emosional serta keterlibatan belajar. Coaching berbasis board game berpotensi menyediakan ruang reflektif untuk membantu siswa memahami dan menghadapi tantangan tersebut. **Tujuan:** Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi pengalaman siswa dalam menghadapi stres akademik dan ketakutan akan kegagalan melalui coaching menggunakan board game Perjalanan Menuju Ketenangan. **Metode:** Penelitian menggunakan desain kualitatif eksploratif dengan melibatkan 30 siswa kelas VIII yang dipilih secara purposive. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, refleksi, diskusi terbuka, dan testimoni siswa selama dua sesi coaching kelompok, kemudian dianalisis secara tematik menggunakan kekuatan karakter hope dan self-regulation sebagai lensa analisis. **Hasil:** Analisis menghasilkan dua tema utama, yaitu hope dan self-regulation. Partisipan melaporkan peningkatan keyakinan dalam menghadapi tantangan akademik, kesadaran emosi yang lebih baik, serta strategi koping yang lebih adaptif. **Kesimpulan:** Temuan menunjukkan bahwa coaching berbasis board game dapat menyediakan ruang reflektif yang bermakna bagi siswa.

**Kata Kunci:** Stres akademik, rasa takut gagal, coaching, board game, hope, self-regulation

## Introduction

Academic pressure during early adolescence has become an increasingly important concern in educational and mental health research. Academic pressure refers to a condition in which academic demands, including schoolwork, expectations from teachers and parents, and competition among peers, exceed students' perceived capacity to cope effectively. Research has shown that academic pressure is associated with academic anxiety, reduced self-efficacy, and academic burnout among adolescents. Within Lazarus and Folkman's stress and coping framework, adolescents' responses to academic pressure depend on how they appraise stressful situations and the coping resources available to them (Gao, 2023). Consequently, academic pressure is not merely an academic issue but also involves emotional regulation and adaptive coping skills that are particularly important during early adolescence.

The issue is especially relevant in Indonesia, where a large proportion of adolescents are enrolled in formal education. The Gross Enrollment Rate for junior high schools reached 92.21% in 2024, indicating that millions of students are exposed to academic demands daily (Andina, 2025). At the same time, evidence suggests that mental health concerns among Indonesian adolescents are increasing. Findings from the Indonesia National Adolescent Mental Health Survey revealed that one in three adolescents experienced mental health problems within the previous year (Nuryana et al., 2025). Despite the preference for school-based support services, only a small proportion of adolescents with mental health difficulties access available services (Salma, 2022). This situation highlights the importance of developing accessible psychological support interventions within schools, particularly at the junior high school level, where students are undergoing significant biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional transitions.

Among school-based interventions, coaching has emerged as a promising approach because it emphasizes self-reflection, goal setting, and personal development. However, research examining coaching as a strategy for addressing academic pressure among junior high school students remains limited (Saab et al., 2020). In parallel, recent studies have reported positive outcomes from game-based approaches in strengthening coping skills, resilience, and social-emotional competencies among adolescents (Fan & Hui, 2025; Liverman et al., 2025). Nevertheless, most existing interventions rely on digital games, while the potential of non-digital games, particularly board games, remains underexplored.

In Indonesia, board games have increasingly been utilized within guidance and counseling services to enhance student engagement. Previous studies have demonstrated their potential to promote self-discipline and character development, and to reduce academic procrastination among junior high school students (Hariyadi et al., 2022). Despite these promising findings, most studies have focused on media development or effectiveness testing rather than exploring students' lived experiences. Furthermore, coaching principles have rarely been integrated into board game interventions, and academic pressure has seldom been examined as the primary focus of inquiry.

These limitations reveal an important research gap. To date, no study has specifically investigated how junior high school students experience managing academic pressure through a board game-based coaching process, particularly within the Indonesian context. Existing research has largely overlooked the integration of coaching and board games as a unified intervention, relied predominantly on quantitative outcome measures, and paid limited attention to students' subjective experiences. Consequently, little is known about how students perceive, interpret, and internalize such an intervention in relation to managing academic pressure.

To address this gap, the present study aims to explore junior high school students' experiences of managing academic pressure through a board game-based coaching intervention. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how students experience and interpret academic pressure, how they engage with the coaching process, and what changes they perceive in their ability to manage academic demands following participation. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of coaching and game-based approaches in school counseling and to provide practical recommendations for designing more engaging, contextually relevant psychological support services for Indonesian junior high school students.

## Method

His study employed an exploratory qualitative approach to understand the subjective experiences of junior high school students in managing academic stress and fear of failure through a board game-based

coaching intervention implemented within the *Perjalanan Menuju Ketenangan* (Journey Toward Calmness) program. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to explore the meanings, processes, and psychological dynamics experienced by participants in depth within their natural contexts, while capturing rich and contextualized personal reflections (2023). The purpose of this study was not to examine causal relationships or to generate statistical generalizations, but rather to understand how students perceive academic pressure, experience failure, and develop self-management strategies throughout the coaching process. Accordingly, the study focused on exploring participants' lived experiences and the changes they perceived during the intervention.

The coaching program consisted of two group sessions over three days (Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday). Each session lasted approximately 90–120 minutes and was facilitated by the coaching team, which had received prior training in using the board game and reflective facilitation techniques. The intervention consisted of four main stages: (1) ice-breaking activities and the establishment of group agreements, (2) exploration of academic experiences through the board game, (3) guided reflection using coaching questions, and (4) meaning-making and the development of personal follow-up action plans. Throughout these stages, students were given opportunities to reflect on their academic experiences, discuss challenges they encountered, and identify strategies to manage academic stress and fear of failure.

*Perjalanan Menuju Ketenangan* board game served as the primary intervention medium. The game was independently developed by the researchers and has received Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) protection. The game included a game board, player tokens, reflection cards, challenge cards, and individual reflection worksheets to facilitate participants' exploration of their experiences. During gameplay, students responded to various scenarios and reflective prompts related to academic pressure, experiences of failure, future aspirations, and self-management strategies. The interactions that emerged throughout gameplay and reflective discussions constituted the primary source of data for the study.

In this study, the researchers served both as program designers and facilitators throughout the coaching process. This dual role provided an in-depth understanding of the intervention's objectives and mechanisms while also requiring researchers to maintain reflexivity during the research process. Reflexivity is considered an important aspect of qualitative inquiry because it enables researchers to critically examine how their perspectives and positions may influence data collection and interpretation (Finlay, 2002). To minimize interpretive bias, field notes were systematically recorded, and observations were discussed with members of the implementation team after each coaching session. This reflective process was undertaken to facilitate a more critical understanding of the data and to consider multiple interpretations arising from participants' experiences.

The participants consisted of 30 eighth-grade students selected through purposive sampling. Participant selection was based on their willingness to participate in the entire coaching program conducted at the school. The study was implemented with the school administration's approval and under teacher supervision throughout the activities. Prior to participation, students received information about the program's purpose, implementation procedures, and assurances of confidentiality. All participant identities were anonymized during data analysis and reporting to protect confidentiality and privacy in accordance with ethical research principles.

Data were collected through participant observation, written reflection activities, student testimonials, and post-test evaluations, which were used as descriptive supporting data. Observations were conducted throughout the coaching program to document participant engagement, emotional responses, and behavioral developments that emerged during the activities. Written reflections and testimonials were utilized to gain a deeper understanding of students' subjective experiences in coping with academic stress and fear of failure. The post-test consisted of an evaluation form designed to assess students' understanding of academic stress, fear of failure, and self-management strategies following participation in the coaching program. The post-test data were used solely to provide a descriptive overview of participants' learning outcomes and were not intended to statistically evaluate the intervention's effectiveness.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes data familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production. The analysis involved repeated readings of observation records, written reflections, and student testimonials to identify patterns of experience relevant to the research

objectives. Emerging themes were subsequently grouped according to their meanings and relationships to students' experiences of managing academic stress and fear of failure. The analysis focused on recurring patterns that emerged across participants' accounts throughout the coaching process. Through this analytical process, two overarching themes emerged as dominant in participants' experiences: hope and self-regulation. These themes subsequently served as the primary framework for interpreting the study findings.

### **Participant**

The participants in this study consisted of 30 eighth-grade students who participated in the *Perjalanan Menuju Ketenangan* (Journey Toward Calmness) board game-based coaching program. The sample included 14 male and 16 female students, aged 13 to 15. Participants were selected purposively to obtain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences in coping with academic stress and fear of failure. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research to identify information-rich participants who can provide meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Campbell et al., 2020).

The selection process began with preliminary interviews and discussions with the school counseling teacher and school administrators to identify student groups perceived as experiencing relatively high academic demands. Based on the information obtained, one class was selected because it was characterized by strong achievement expectations, relatively higher academic performance compared to other classes at the same grade level, and learning dynamics that had the potential to generate academic pressure among students. Consequently, this class was considered an appropriate context for exploring students' experiences of academic stress and fear of failure in greater depth.

Participant recruitment involved coordinating with the school on the implementation of the coaching program. Following approval from the school administration, the researchers conducted an orientation session explaining the objectives, procedures, and activities involved in the program. The school counselor subsequently recommended a class aligned with the research focus, based on the students' academic characteristics and identified needs. All students within the selected class were invited to participate in the coaching activities and were included in the data collection process. Using a single class as the participant group enabled the researchers to observe participants' experiences and group dynamics consistently throughout the intervention.

The inclusion criteria comprised students who attended all coaching sessions and were willing to engage in reflection activities, group discussions, and complete evaluation instruments throughout the program. All participants completed the two group coaching sessions, allowing the researchers to collect continuous, comprehensive data on their experiences managing academic stress and fear of failure. The use of purposive sampling facilitated the collection of rich, contextually grounded, and relevant data, aligning with the exploratory nature of qualitative research. This approach is consistent with the qualitative research paradigm, which prioritizes depth of understanding over statistical generalization (Campbell et al., 2020). Therefore, participant selection was guided by contextual relevance and the potential contribution of participants to the research objectives.

This study was conducted in accordance with fundamental ethical principles, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the protection of participants' privacy. Prior to the commencement of the program, participants were provided with information regarding the objectives of the study, program procedures, anticipated benefits, and the use of collected data for academic purposes. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the activities and were informed that their participation was voluntary throughout the program. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the data during analysis and reporting. Furthermore, the activities were conducted with the school administration's approval and under teacher supervision to ensure participants' safety and well-being throughout the coaching process.

By implementing a carefully designed participant selection process and adhering to ethical research principles, this study sought to generate rich, in-depth data on students' experiences of managing academic stress and fear of failure through a *Perjalanan Menuju Ketenangan*-based coaching program. The resulting data were subsequently used to explore the development of the character strengths of hope and self-regulation that emerged throughout the intervention. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more participatory, contextually relevant psychological support approaches in school settings.

## Data Measurement

Data were collected through direct observation, field notes, documentation of the gameplay process, participant reflection activities, open-ended questions during coaching sessions, and pre-test and post-test assessments administered before and after the program implementation. Observations were conducted to record participants' engagement, emotional responses, interaction patterns, and group dynamics throughout the activities. Field notes and documentation served as supplementary sources of information to enrich the understanding of participants' experiences in managing academic stress and fear of failure. In addition, reflective activities and discussions conducted during the coaching sessions were used to explore participants' subjective experiences in greater depth.

The pre-test and post-test instruments were developed by the researchers based on the content delivered during the coaching program and the indicators of hope and self-regulation that constituted the primary focus of the intervention. The instruments consisted of a series of open-ended questions designed to assess participants' understanding of academic stress, fear of failure, resilience, expectations for success, and self-regulatory abilities in dealing with academic challenges. Examples of the questions included: "One way to prevent excessive academic stress is ...", "Why is fear of failure not always associated with negative outcomes?", and "What are the consequences of lacking resilience skills?" These questions were designed to assess participants' understanding of the key concepts addressed in the coaching program.

The pre-test and post-test responses were evaluated using a scoring rubric developed by the researchers based on the extent to which participants' answers aligned with the learning content and predetermined indicators. Each response was assigned a score according to its completeness, accuracy, and relevance to the concept being assessed. The scores were subsequently summed and converted to a scale ranging from 0 to 100 to facilitate interpretation. Higher scores indicated a greater level of understanding of academic stress, fear of failure, and the self-management strategies introduced during the coaching program. The pre-test and post-test results were used solely as descriptive data to provide an overview of changes in participants' understanding following the intervention and were not intended to statistically evaluate the program's effectiveness.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the pre-test and post-test results were not used as the sole source of information. Instead, they were integrated with observational data, field notes, participant reflections, and testimonials collected throughout the intervention. This triangulation process enabled the researchers to develop a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences during the Perjalanan Menuju Ketenangan board game-based coaching program. All data were subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of experience, changes in understanding, and the development of the character strengths of hope and self-regulation that emerged throughout the intervention process.

## Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns, categories, and themes. The process began with repeated readings of the data to understand the context and meaning of participants' experiences; relevant units of meaning were then coded and grouped into main themes such as academic stress, fear of failure, expectations, and self-regulation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was conducted inductively, with themes emerging from participants' experiences rather than a predetermined theoretical framework, and triangulated across field notes, student reflection transcripts, and board game documentation to ensure data credibility and consistency. Peer debriefing was conducted with colleagues to verify codes and themes, minimize subjective bias, and maintain transparency and accuracy of the analysis. The final results were used to understand how the Perjalanan Menuju Ketenangan board game-based coaching influenced academic stress management, fear of failure, and character building (hope and self-regulation), as well as to capture the complexity of students' experiences in their natural context.

## Result

### Partisipan Characteristics

This study involved 30 junior high school students aged 13-15 years, comprising 14 male and 16 female students. The majority of participants were 14 years old ( $n = 23$ ), with 4 participants aged 13 and 3 aged 15. These characteristics indicate that most participants were in early adolescence, a developmental stage characterized by increasing academic demands, social-emotional changes, and heightened sensitivity to evaluations from their surrounding environment. During this period, students commonly experience greater pressure related to academic achievement, parental expectations, and peer competition. Therefore, this group of participants was considered particularly relevant for exploring experiences of academic stress and fear of failure, as well as for understanding how they perceived and interpreted their participation in a board game-based coaching program.

**Table 1. Characteristics of Research Participants**

| Characteristic | Category        | Number |
|----------------|-----------------|--------|
| Gender         | Male            | 14     |
|                | Female          | 16     |
| Age            | 13 years        | 4      |
|                | 14 years        | 23     |
|                | 15 years        | 3      |
| Total          | 30 Participants |        |

### Overview of Participants' Experiences Following the Coaching Program

Analysis of observational data, participant reflections, activity documentation, and post-test results revealed several key themes that emerged following participation in the Perjalanan Menuju Ketenangan board game-based coaching program. These themes included emotional openness, the development of hope as a positive psychological characteristic, enhanced self-regulation skills, and the emergence of social support among participants throughout the coaching process. Although most participants demonstrated a basic understanding of academic stress prior to the intervention, reflection data indicated that they gained a deeper understanding of how to recognize, manage, and respond to academic pressures in more adaptive ways. Furthermore, participants showed an improved ability to reflect on their everyday academic experiences and challenges. These findings were subsequently organized and analyzed into several major themes, which are presented in the following sections.

### Theme 1: Emotional Openness and a Safe Space for Self-Expression

The board game-based coaching process gradually fostered participants' emotional openness. Initially, several students remained cautious and preferred listening before sharing their own experiences. However, as the sessions progressed, they began to disclose experiences related to academic workload, examination anxiety, and concerns about academic performance. The board game proved effective at creating a relaxed discussion atmosphere because the activity focused not solely on participants' problems but also on shared gameplay. As a result, students felt more comfortable speaking and responding to one another's experiences. This was reflected in ADN's statement that the activity was "something I really liked because it was not boring, and it could also be a place where we could share our complaints and concerns throughout our time in junior high school," while AHBH added that the activity was "fun because we could express how we all felt" and made participants feel "relieved after expressing" their feelings.

Emotional openness was also evident in the written reflections collected after the program. One participant stated that the coaching experience helped them "get to know myself better and understand what I feel when I am stressed," while another reported becoming "more confident in talking about the problems experienced at school." These statements indicate that the activity not only provided knowledge about academic stress but also encouraged students to more consciously recognize their emotional states. This process further demonstrates that games can function as an effective medium for facilitating emotional communication among adolescents. Thus, the board game-based coaching program successfully created a safe space that enabled students to express experiences that they had not always been able to share within the school environment. These findings confirm that game-based approaches have significant potential to support emotional openness and students' psychological well-being.

## Theme 2: Development of the Character Strength of Hope

Throughout the coaching process, students demonstrated a shift in their perspectives toward academic challenges. Initially, examinations, school assignments, and grade expectations were described as sources of pressure that were difficult to avoid. However, after participating in reflective discussions and game-based activities, students began to believe that academic difficulties could be managed through effort, appropriate strategies, and adequate support. This change was also reflected in participants' ability to identify more specific and realistic academic goals, such as improving study focus, reducing procrastination, and preparing more consistently for examinations. In addition to setting goals, students began discussing concrete steps to achieve them, indicating that the hope they developed was not merely a desire for success but was accompanied by more purposeful planning. A similar shift was evident in the way students interpreted failure. Experiences of receiving grades that did not meet expectations were no longer viewed solely in negative terms; instead, they were increasingly discussed as opportunities to identify more effective strategies for future improvement.

The development of hope was further reinforced through participants' written reflections following the program. One student wrote that the activity made them "more confident in facing examinations because now I know what I should do," while another participant stated that they had become "more convinced that grades can improve if I continue to make an effort." Another participant also reported feeling "more optimistic about school and less afraid of failure than before." Collectively, these statements reflect a consistent positive shift in participants' beliefs about their ability to cope with future academic challenges. These findings suggest that the board game-based coaching program successfully fostered hope that was not only effective but also accompanied by an increased sense of personal agency and a more constructive, action-oriented mindset.

**Table 2. Observed Behavioral Indicators of the Character Strength of Hope (Transcendence)**

| Charachter Strength | Observed Indicator                                             | Behavioral  | Observational Evidance                                                                                                            |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hope                | Demonstrates a belief that academic challenges can be overcome |             | Students shared experiences of successfully dealing with academic difficulties that had previously been perceived as challenging. |
| Hope                | Displays optimism regarding future academic outcomes           | optimism    | Students expressed a desire to improve their grades and feel better prepared for examinations.                                    |
| Hope                | Sets realistic learning goals                                  |             | Students identified goals such as improving study focus and reducing procrastination.                                             |
| Hope                | Continues to make efforts after experiencing failure           |             | Students shared experiences of recovering and persevering after receiving unsatisfactory academic results.                        |
| Hope                | Develops strategies                                            | alternative | Students reported using new learning methods, such as group discussions, creating summaries, and studying together with peers.    |

## Theme 3: Development of the Character Strength of Self-Regulation

Throughout the coaching program, students not only gained an understanding of academic stress but also reflected on how they responded to such pressures. Initially, many participants reported frequently feeling anxious, having difficulty concentrating, and becoming overwhelmed when faced with high academic demands. As the sessions progressed, students began to recognize the emotions that emerged in response to academic pressure, including anxiety, fear of failure, and frustration. Through group discussions, they came to

understand that these emotions were normal responses. Consequently, they recognized that the issue was not the presence of negative emotions themselves, but rather how those emotions were managed. This awareness encouraged participants to develop various adaptive strategies, such as creating more structured study schedules, limiting mobile phone use during study sessions, and breaking large assignments into smaller, more manageable tasks. Students also began to use healthier coping strategies, such as seeking help from friends when struggling to understand academic material or taking breaks when feeling excessively tired. These responses contrasted with their previous tendencies to avoid assignments or cope with anxiety in isolation. Collectively, these changes indicate meaningful development in students' ability to regulate their behavior and manage their learning environments more adaptively.

The development of self-regulation was further reinforced through participants' written reflections and testimonials following the program. One student wrote that they had "become more aware of how to deal with stress when assignments start to pile up," while another participant reported that the activity helped them "better understand how to control myself when I start to panic because of assignments or examinations." Another student stated that they felt "calmer when facing examinations because now I have ways to organize my studying." Similarly, LSP noted that they had "gained much more knowledge about this topic," while MAW stated that the activity had helped them "learn a lot about academic stress." Although the statements made by LSP and MAW may appear simple, both reflect an increased understanding of the sources of academic pressure, which represents an important foundation for the development of self-regulation. Students must first recognize and understand these pressures before they can effectively manage them. Overall, these findings suggest that the board game-based coaching program successfully encouraged students to develop greater emotional awareness and more constructive self-management strategies when dealing with academic stress.

**Table 3. Observed Behavioral Indicators of the Character Strength of Hope (Transcendence)**

| Charachter Strength | Observed Behavioral Indcator                                                                     | Observational Evidance                                                                                                               |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Self-Regulation     | Manages negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, stress, and frustration) when facing academic pressure | Students were able to identify the emotions they experienced and discuss ways of coping with them during reflection sessions.        |
| Self-Regulation     | Maintains focus while studying                                                                   | Several students reported efforts to reduce distractions and improve concentration during study activities.                          |
| Self-Regulation     | Delays immediate gratification in order to fulfill academic responsibilities                     | Students reported reducing leisure activities or limiting gadget use in order to complete school assignments.                        |
| Self-Regulation     | Develops and follows study schedules                                                             | Students began creating simple study plans in preparation for examinations and school assignments.                                   |
| Self-Regulation     | Uses healthy coping strategies                                                                   | Students mentioned talking with friends, taking breaks, writing reflections, and managing their time as ways of dealing with stress. |

Table 3 shows that various behavioral indicators associated with self-regulation emerged consistently throughout the program. Although the extent to which these behaviors appeared varied among participants, the overall pattern indicated an increased awareness of the importance of managing emotions, time, and study-related behaviors. These findings suggest that the coaching and reflection process provided students with

opportunities to explore different strategies to cope with academic pressure. Furthermore, the use of the board game helped students connect these concepts to their everyday lived experiences. As a result, self-regulation was understood not only as an abstract concept but also as a practical skill that could be applied in academic life.

#### **Theme 4: Peer Support and Group Dynamics**

Throughout the coaching program, interactions during gameplay and group discussions allowed students to listen to peers facing similar academic challenges. These shared experiences gradually fostered a stronger sense of mutual understanding among participants. Although some students were initially reluctant to respond to others' stories, the increasingly comfortable group atmosphere encouraged them to become more actively involved by offering comments, sharing similar experiences, and providing emotional support. Participants frequently encouraged one another when discussing experiences of low grades, overwhelming workloads, or exam-related fears. This finding is reflected in AHBH's statement that the activity allowed participants to "express how we all felt," indicating that students were not only talking about their own experiences but also learning to understand their peers' experiences. Through this process, students realized that academic pressure was not a problem they faced alone. This awareness helped reduce feelings of isolation while strengthening mutual support within the group. These findings suggest that learning during the program occurred not only at the individual level but also through meaningful social interactions among group members.

Positive group dynamics were further strengthened by the board game's role in fostering more open social interaction. This was reflected in AZG's statement that the activity was "fun because there were games in between the tasks, and I could also share a lot." The gameplay activities created a more relaxed atmosphere, allowing participants to develop closer relationships with one another. This increased sense of closeness subsequently supported deeper discussions regarding the academic experiences they encountered. Observational data showed that when students received positive responses from their peers, they were more willing to continue sharing their stories and reflections. This finding suggests that peer support played a direct role in creating a psychologically safe learning environment. These conditions indicate that positive group dynamics were not merely a supporting factor but rather an integral part of participants' experiences in managing academic stress and fear of failure. Therefore, the board game-based coaching program successfully optimized the power of peer social interaction as one of the key mechanisms of change within the intervention.

#### **Theme 5: Board Game as a Medium for Reflection and Learning**

The Perjalanan Menuju Ketenangan board game functioned not merely as a game but as a medium that helped students connect their academic experiences with various reflective situations through question cards, challenges, and group discussions integrated into the game mechanics. The game elements proved effective in reducing the tension that often arises when students are asked to discuss personal or emotional topics. As a result, participants who had initially been passive began to show more active participation because they did not feel they were being evaluated. This was reflected in ANA's testimony that the activity was "really fun and enjoyable," as well as AZG's statement that it was "fun because there were games in between the tasks, and I could also share a lot." These responses indicate that the board game successfully created an atmosphere that supported both emotional and social engagement among participants. In addition to increasing engagement, the board game facilitated experiential learning, in which students actively thought, discussed, made decisions, and reflected on the consequences of their choices. Consequently, the understanding they developed was deeper than what might be achieved through one-way instruction. Through this process, students not only gained new knowledge but also connected the concepts they learned to their everyday experiences, making the learning more contextual and meaningful.

Another important finding was that the board game helped students view academic pressure from a broader perspective. Prior to the program, some participants tended to perceive academic stress as entirely negative. However, through discussions during gameplay, they began to understand that academic pressure could serve as a source of motivation for growth when managed appropriately. This shift in perspective encouraged participants to discuss more adaptive strategies for addressing academic challenges, demonstrating that the board game served not only as entertainment but also as a medium for constructing new meanings about academic experiences. The game situations, which participants consistently connected to their real-life

academic experiences, were among the factors that deepened learning throughout the program. Overall, the combination of gameplay, reflection, and discussion successfully reduced communication barriers, increased participation, and facilitated the exploration of personal experiences related to academic stress and fear of failure. These findings suggest that game-based media can serve as a relevant and effective alternative approach in psychological support programs for adolescents.

### **Synthesis of Findings**

Analysis of observational data, participant reflections, activity documentation, testimonials, and other supporting data indicated that participants perceived their experience of participating in the *Perjalanan Menuju Ketenangan* board game-based coaching program as an experience that not only provided new knowledge but also created opportunities to better understand themselves and the academic experiences they encountered. Across the collected data, five major themes consistently emerged: emotional openness and the creation of a safe space for self-expression, the development of hope as a character strength, the development of self-regulation, the emergence of peer support through group dynamics, and the role of the board game as a medium for reflection and learning. These five themes were interconnected and collectively shaped a holistic learning experience for participants throughout the coaching process.

The theme of emotional openness showed that students needed a safe space to discuss the academic pressures they faced. Through gameplay activities and reflective discussions, participants were given opportunities to express feelings, experiences, and concerns they had not always communicated openly. This openness subsequently became the foundation for deeper reflection on the sources of academic stress and on ways to address them. At the same time, interactions throughout the program helped students realize that their experiences of academic pressure were not unique to them. This awareness contributed to mutual understanding among participants.

The themes of hope and self-regulation reflected the development of the two primary character strengths targeted by the coaching program. The data showed that students developed greater confidence in their ability to cope with academic challenges, established more realistic goals, and increasingly viewed failure as part of the learning process. In addition, students demonstrated greater awareness of their emotional experiences and began developing various strategies to manage academic pressure in more adaptive ways. These changes were evident in both observational data and participants' reflections following the completion of the program. The findings suggest that the coaching experience provided students with opportunities to develop psychological skills that are relevant to their academic lives.

Group dynamics and peer support emerged as important factors that strengthened this developmental process. Throughout the program, students learned not only from their own experiences but also from those of their peers. Interactions during gameplay and discussions enabled participants to receive emotional support, gain new perspectives, and discover strategies to apply when facing academic pressure. The presence of peers who shared similar experiences helped create a sense of safety and reduced feelings of isolation that may arise when students encounter academic difficulties. Consequently, the learning that occurred during the coaching process was both individual and social.

Overall, the findings indicate that the *Perjalanan Menuju Ketenangan* board game-based coaching program provided a reflective space in which students could explore experiences related to academic stress and fear of failure through a participatory, interactive, and experience-centered approach. Through the combination of gameplay, discussion, reflection, and group interaction, students were given opportunities to understand their academic experiences from a more constructive perspective. These findings provide a foundation for understanding how game-based media can be utilized as a tool for psychological support and character development among adolescents within educational settings. The following section discusses these findings in greater depth by relating them to relevant theoretical perspectives and previous research.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study indicate that students perceived the *Perjalanan Menuju Ketenangan* board game-based coaching program as an experience that helped them reflect on academic pressure, fear of failure, and strategies to cope with these challenges. During various reflection sessions, students described the game-based activities as providing a more comfortable space for sharing experiences compared to the formal learning

situations they typically encountered. These findings are consistent with previous studies demonstrating that academic pressure is one of the primary sources of stress during adolescence and is associated with increased psychological distress and difficulties in school adjustment (Kristensen et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022). This issue has become increasingly important given that adolescent mental health remains a growing global concern in the post-pandemic era, with numerous studies reporting heightened psychological vulnerability among school-aged populations (Kaman et al., 2024). Therefore, the experiences described by participants in this study provide insight into how students attempt to understand and manage the academic pressures they encounter in their daily lives.

One of the major themes that emerged was students' awareness of the sources of academic stress they experienced. Prior to participating in the coaching program, some students tended to perceive grades, examinations, and academic demands as threats that should be avoided. However, throughout the sessions, students began to identify various factors that triggered stress and recognize their effects on emotions and learning behaviors. These findings are consistent with those of Baratta et al. (2023), who suggested that stress often arises when individuals face uncertainty about personally significant outcomes. Within educational contexts, pressure to meet academic expectations may increase anxiety and negatively affect students' psychological well-being when not accompanied by adequate coping strategies.

The findings also revealed that the board game created a relatively safe space for students to express their personal experiences. Several students reported feeling more comfortable discussing academic difficulties when activities were conducted through gameplay and group discussions. One student stated, "It was fun because there were games in between the tasks, and I could also share a lot" (AZG), while another explained that the activity became a place to "share complaints and concerns throughout our time in junior high school" (ADN). These statements suggest that the game served as a communication facilitator, enabling students to express emotions more openly. Furthermore, supportive and non-judgmental environments have been shown to contribute to resilience development and more positive adjustment during adolescence (Azpiazu et al., 2024; Qi & Yang, 2024).

The development of hope emerged as one of the most important findings of this study. Based on observations and participant reflections, students began to demonstrate greater confidence that academic challenges could be addressed through sustained effort and appropriate strategies. Rather than focusing solely on the possibility of failure, they increasingly considered the steps necessary to achieve their academic goals. These findings are consistent with the concept of difficulty-as-improvement, which suggests that individuals can view difficulties as part of personal growth rather than as evidence of inability (Veronica X. Yan et al., 2023). In positive psychology, hope is recognized as a character strength that helps individuals maintain motivation in the face of obstacles (Yépez-Tito et al., 2022). Consequently, the changes observed in students' perspectives toward academic challenges may be understood as indicators of a more adaptive orientation toward learning.

Changes in hope were also reflected in students' ability to establish more realistic and specific goals, extending the more adaptive orientation described above. During reflection sessions, several students identified objectives such as improving study focus, reducing procrastination, and organizing study time more effectively. This process demonstrates an ability to connect current circumstances with desired future outcomes. Qin et al. (2022) found that character strengths function as protective factors that help adolescents cope with developmental challenges. Similar findings were reported by Baratta et al. (2023), who suggested that perceptions of control and the likelihood of success contribute to more adaptive responses when facing pressure. Thus, students' experiences in this study indicate that reflection facilitated through gameplay may help them construct a more positive and constructive perspective regarding their academic future.

In addition to hope, this study found evidence of self-regulation development among most participants. Students demonstrated increased awareness of the negative emotions that emerged when facing examinations, assignments, and other academic pressures. They also became able to identify strategies used to manage anxiety and stress. These findings are consistent with Raine et al. (2023), who identified coping skills as an important component of academic resilience. The ability to manage emotional responses to pressure enables students to maintain engagement in learning activities despite encountering various challenges. Therefore, the development of self-regulation observed in this study may be understood as part of a broader process of psychological adaptation.

Behavioral changes were also evident in students' study habits. Several participants reported beginning to create study schedules, reducing gadget use, and becoming more disciplined in completing school assignments. One student stated that after participating in the coaching program, they became "more able to control and understand myself when facing academic pressure." This statement reflects increased self-awareness related to the management of everyday behavior. Sirois et al. (2023) reported that procrastination is closely associated with stress and various negative consequences for well-being. Accordingly, the behavioral changes reported by students may be interpreted as efforts to reduce sources of stress that previously resulted from less adaptive study habits.

The findings regarding self-regulation are also consistent with the concept of academic buoyancy, which emphasizes students' capacity to recover from everyday academic setbacks (Putwain et al., 2023). In this study, students not only demonstrated the ability to identify problems but also began considering alternative solutions when facing learning difficulties. Several students reported trying new study methods, discussing problems with peers, or seeking help when they struggled to understand academic material. These strategies indicate active efforts to overcome obstacles rather than avoid them. Such abilities are important because they help students maintain academic engagement even under pressure or in the face of temporary failure.

The relationship between hope and self-regulation identified in this study is also noteworthy because it clarifies how the themes connect. These two character strengths appeared to complement one another in helping students cope with academic pressure. Hope provided direction and goals, whereas self-regulation enabled students to sustain behaviors that supported the achievement of those goals. This finding is consistent with studies suggesting that resilience develops through interactions among cognitive, emotional, and behavioral factors (Marquez et al., 2023; Perasso et al., 2023). Therefore, the changes observed among participants likely resulted not from a single psychological factor but from the interaction of multiple internal resources that developed throughout the coaching process.

From a resilience perspective, the findings indicate that students began developing more adaptive ways of interpreting academic pressure. Rather than focusing solely on the possibility of failure, they increasingly considered actions to overcome obstacles. These findings are consistent with Choi et al. (2023), who found that resilience can moderate the negative effects of academic stress on student adjustment. Antonio et al. (2024) likewise suggested that positive academic experiences contribute to the development of resilient learner identities during adolescence. Accordingly, the reflective experiences that emerged throughout the coaching process may be understood as one context that supports resilience development.

The findings also highlight the importance of social support in managing academic stress, adding a social dimension to the individual changes observed above. Throughout the sessions, students provided feedback, encouragement, and validation to one another regarding shared experiences. One participant reported that the activity made them feel "relieved after expressing my feelings yesterday" (AHBH). Such interactions suggest that coping processes occur not only at the individual level but are also influenced by the social environment in which students are embedded. Research by Azpiazu et al. (2024) and Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2023) has demonstrated that social support serves as an important protective factor in helping adolescents manage academic pressure. Therefore, the group dynamics that emerged during gameplay may have been one of the factors contributing to participants' positive experiences.

Within the context of school-based interventions, these findings reinforce existing literature highlighting the importance of resilience-building and mental health promotion programs for adolescents. Previous studies have demonstrated that school-based interventions can provide students with opportunities to develop coping skills, emotional regulation, and adaptive responses to academic pressure (Llistosella et al., 2024; Tasijawa & Siagian, 2022). Programs that integrate reflection, active participation, and character development have also been reported to support students' psychological well-being (Kennes et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the present study was not designed to test intervention effectiveness in the manner of an experimental study. Rather, its primary objective was to understand students' subjective experiences while participating in a board game-based coaching program.

The findings can also be interpreted through the framework of Character Strengths and Virtues, which identifies hope and self-regulation as character strengths that contribute to positive psychological adjustment. Qin et al. (2022) demonstrated that character strengths function as protective factors against

various behavioral problems among adolescents. Similarly, Yépez-Tito et al. (2022) found that positive character strengths are associated with higher levels of life satisfaction during adolescence. In the present study, both character strengths appeared to emerge through experiences of reflection, group discussion, and gameplay activities that enabled students to re-evaluate their academic experiences. Therefore, the board game may be understood as a medium that facilitates exploration of experiences and self-reflection rather than as an instrument that directly produces psychological change.

Despite providing valuable insights, this study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted with a single group of students within one school context, limiting the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Second, the exploratory qualitative design does not permit causal conclusions regarding the relationship between board game-based coaching and the observed changes among students. Third, some data were obtained through self-reflections and participant testimonials, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Furthermore, the researcher's close involvement in the intervention process may have influenced data interpretation, although reflexivity practices were employed throughout the study (Finlay, 2002; John W. Creswell, 2023). Therefore, the findings should be understood as descriptions of participants' experiences within a particular context.

Future research may consider employing more diverse designs to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the use of board games in educational settings. For example, studies could involve multiple schools, different age groups, or mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative data. Longer observation periods may also help determine the sustainability of changes experienced by students following program completion. Additionally, future research could explore how family, teacher, and school environmental factors interact with interventions to support student resilience (Qi & Yang, 2024). Such investigations would enrich our understanding of the factors that contribute to adolescent mental health and academic success.

Overall, this study demonstrates that students perceived the *Perjalanan Menuju Ketenangan* board game-based coaching program as an experience that offered opportunities for reflection, social support, and the exploration of coping strategies for academic pressure. The findings indicate developments in hope, self-regulation, and students' interpretations of failure within academic contexts. These results are consistent with research emphasizing the importance of resilience, social support, and character strengths in helping adolescents navigate developmental challenges (Kassis et al., 2024; Marquez et al., 2023). However, these findings should not be interpreted as evidence of causal intervention effectiveness but rather as an in-depth description of participants' experiences throughout the program. Thus, the primary contribution of this study lies in providing a contextualized understanding of how students interpret and manage academic stress and fear of failure through a locally developed game-based coaching approach.

## Conclusion

This study provides an overview of junior high school students' experiences in participating in the *Perjalanan Menuju Ketenangan* board game-based coaching program to understand and cope with academic stress and fear of failure. Based on observations, participant reflections, student testimonials, and thematic analysis, participants reported increased understanding of the sources of academic stress, ways to manage the emotions that arise from such stress, and strategies to use when facing academic pressure. Furthermore, the findings indicate that students began to reflect on the importance of the character strengths of hope and self-regulation in dealing with academic challenges, including setting more realistic goals, managing negative emotions, and maintaining motivation when encountering academic obstacles.

The findings also indicate that students perceived the use of a board game as a coaching medium as an engaging, participatory experience that provided a safe space for sharing personal experiences related to academic pressure. Through gameplay, group discussions, and guided reflection, students were given opportunities to explore their experiences more openly and learn from their peers' experiences. These findings suggest that a game-based approach may serve as a potential medium for supporting self-reflection and social-emotional learning among adolescents in educational settings.

Nevertheless, the findings of this study should be interpreted in light of several methodological limitations. The study was conducted with a single group of students within a single school context and involved a relatively small number of participants; therefore, the findings are not intended to be generalized.

In addition, much of the data was derived from observations and participants' subjective reports, which may be influenced by perceptual biases or a tendency to provide socially desirable responses. Furthermore, the exploratory qualitative design of the study does not permit conclusions regarding causal relationships or direct evaluations of intervention effectiveness.

Given these limitations, future research is recommended to involve more diverse participants, different school contexts, and longer observation periods in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of students' experiences in participating in game-based coaching programs. Future studies may also combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to further explore the development of hope, self-regulation, and academic resilience among adolescents. In this way, the present study is expected to make an initial contribution to the growing body of literature on game-based coaching as a medium for reflection and the development of students' psychological capacities to cope with academic challenges.

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