

Schools As Emotional Safe Spaces: Micro-Strategies Of Teacher Intervention In Preventing Public Health Crises

Intan Juniarmi¹, Rosmaria², Denny Aulia Rachmawati³

Universitas Jambi, Indonesia¹, Universitas Islam Negeri Sulthan Thaha Jambi, Indonesia², Universitas Doktor Husni Ingratubun Papua, Indonesia³

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Abstract

The increasing prevalence of mental health disorders among students has become a structural crisis in the education system, especially in Indonesia which still focuses solely on academic achievement. This study aims to conceptually examine the strategic role of schools and teachers in building an emotional safe space through a micro-intervention approach and the integration of social-emotional dimensions into education policies. Using a descriptive qualitative method with literature studies as the main technique, data were collected from various scientific sources and education policies in the last five years, then analyzed using a thematic content analysis approach. The results of the study indicate that schools that ignore emotional well-being tend to worsen students' psychological distress, while teacher micro-interventions such as emotional validation and restorative approaches have proven effective in increasing mental resilience. Lack of teacher training and the absence of psychosocial intervention standards in the curriculum are major obstacles. This study recommends the need for education policy reform that places Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) as a core competency, as well as strengthening synergy between sectors in supporting students' mental health. Thus, schools can function as emotional safe havens that protect and empower the younger generation in facing current and future psychosocial challenges

Keywords: Mental Health-Student; Micro-Intervention; Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

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✉ Corresponding author

Email Address : intanjuniarmi@gmail.com

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Introduction

The increasing prevalence of mental health disorders among students is no longer just an individual symptom, but has developed into a structural issue in the education system. The WHO report (2022) revealed that around 14% of adolescents globally experience mental disorders, with anxiety disorders and depression as the most dominant diagnoses. In Indonesia, data from the Basic Health Research (Riskesdas) and the Indonesian Nutritional Status Survey (SSGI) also reinforce this finding, with a significant increase in cases of adolescent depression after the COVID-19 pandemic. This phenomenon is exacerbated by an education ecosystem that tends to emphasize cognitive achievement and academic achievement without being balanced by adequate space for recovery and emotional management. In other words, schools,



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which should be a safe zone for children's psychosocial development, often become a source of emotional stress and exclusion.

When the emotional dimension of students is ignored in educational practices, the mental health crisis that occurs is not only the responsibility of the health sector, but also a systemic failure of educational institutions in protecting student welfare. Layered pressures such as demands for high grades, competitive social relations, stigma against failure, and teachers' inability to recognize signs of emotional distress are latent triggers for the emergence of psychological disorders. In a study by Ramadanti et al (2024), students who felt their school environment was an emotionally supportive place had a much lower risk of mental disorders than those who felt alienated and misunderstood by their teachers. Therefore, it is important to reposition schools as emotionally safe spaces by facilitating interactions based on empathy, emotional recognition, and a holistic psychopedagogical approach.

The role of teachers in supporting students' mental health cannot be reduced to mere instructional functions. Teachers are relational figures who are in a strategic position to read, respond, and intervene micro-intervening in students' daily emotional dynamics. These micro-interventions, such as acknowledging students' emotions, providing a safe space for dialogue, and responding to behavior with a restorative approach, serve as a kind of "initial filter" before psychological disorders develop into crises. Khairani's (2025) research shows that teachers with high social-emotional competence are able to create a classroom climate full of empathy and trust, which has a direct impact on reducing students' stress levels and increasing learning engagement. In the Indonesian context, this approach is very crucial given the limited access to professional counseling services in most schools, especially in rural areas. Thus, teachers are not only teachers, but also protective agents who can form a healing-centered school culture.

However, the effectiveness of teacher micro-intervention strategies is highly dependent on reflective awareness and adequate institutional support. Without ongoing training in emotional literacy, developmental psychology, and restorative approaches, teachers tend to use repressive discipline strategies and ignore the emotional roots of student behavior. This is in line with Astifionita's (2024) criticism that education that ignores the dimension of care (ethic of care) will only produce affectively cold and dry pedagogical relations. This is where the urgency of integrating social-emotional training in teacher professional development programs lies, so that they not only have academic knowledge, but also sensitivity to children's psychological vulnerabilities. If teachers are equipped with a micro-intervention framework based on empathy, they will be better able to detect early symptoms of mental distress and provide contextual, humane, and transformative support.

The role of schools as a preventive ecosystem in the context of public health cannot be separated from their social function as institutions that shape the mindset, behavior, and value systems of the younger generation. In the promotive-preventive approach adopted by public health policies, education is not only an instrument for transferring knowledge, but also a field for early intervention in detecting and preventing health disorders, especially in the mental and emotional realms. When schools are consciously formed as spaces that support psychological well-being by creating a safe, inclusive, and responsive climate to student vulnerabilities, schools have great potential to prevent a broader mental health crisis. According to Misri et al (2025), social-emotional learning programs integrated into the curriculum have been shown to significantly reduce the risk of deviant behavior and improve mental health. This means that if

psychosocial interventions are developed early in the school environment, schools can function as agents of community protection, not just academic vehicles.

However, the reality on the ground shows that most schools in Indonesia are still trapped in a bureaucratic paradigm and narrow academic orientation that ignores aspects of students' psychological well-being. This weakens the function of schools as preventive nodes against public health crises. Many education policies have not explicitly integrated mental health into the structure and culture of schools, even counseling services often only play a normative and administrative role. In conditions like this, teachers and educators do not have adequate space and capacity to carry out their promotive-preventive roles optimally. In fact, UNESCO (2021) emphasizes that an education system that is adaptive to mental health can be a main pillar in creating a resilient society post-pandemic and facing collective crises in the future. Therefore, a reform of the education paradigm is needed that positions schools as a space for emotional empowerment, where micro-interventions are carried out not because of an emergency, but because of an awareness of the importance of a balance between cognitive development and students' mental resilience in shaping public health in general.

The imbalance between students' emotional needs and the curriculum orientation that is still dominated by cognitive achievement creates a vacuum in the education system that has a direct impact on students' mental health. When the affective dimension is not systemically accommodated, education loses one of its essential foundations: character building and emotional resilience. This is reflected in a learning approach that tends to be one-way, competitive, and results-oriented, without sufficient space for self-reflection, empathy, or emotional dialogue. As criticized by Curren et al (2024), education that focuses too much on learnification, namely solely teaching skills and knowledge, has forgotten the role of education in forming morally and affectively whole subjects. In this context, micro-strategies of teacher intervention are present as practical solutions that allow for emotional connections and recognition of student subjectivity in the classroom, which if consciously institutionalized in the curriculum structure, have the potential to become systemic mechanisms to prevent psychosocial dysfunction.

However, the implementation of this approach requires institutional support and a broader paradigm shift. It is not enough if emotional interventions are only personal initiatives of teachers; they must be recognized as an integral part of pedagogical practice that has the same value as academic teaching. In this regard, a reformulation of national education policies is needed that recognizes the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) as a core competency in the curriculum, as has been implemented in a number of countries such as Finland and Canada. The results of the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020) study showed that the integration of SEL in the curriculum can increase academic performance by 11%, as well as significantly reduce anxiety, depression, and deviant behavior. Therefore, a systemic and emotional approach is not only a pedagogical choice, but a strategic need in creating education that is adaptive to the complexities of the times. Without this kind of structural intervention, schools will continue to fail to be a space of recovery and protection, and will actually worsen the mental health crisis that has now become a global public health issue.

Methodology

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a literature study method (library research) as the main technique in collecting and analyzing data. This approach was chosen because it is in accordance with the objectives of the study which focuses on conceptual exploration and analysis of the role of schools and teachers in building emotional safe spaces and micro-intervention strategies in the context of preventing students' mental health crises. Literature studies allow researchers to explore the depth of ideas from various relevant and up-to-date scientific sources, both in the form of indexed journal articles, reports from international institutions (WHO, UNESCO, UNICEF), academic books, and education policy documents.

Data collection was conducted through a systematic review of literature published in the last five years (2020–2025), focusing on themes such as social-emotional learning (SEL), micro-intervention strategies, student psychosocial well-being, ethics of care in pedagogy, and the role of schools in the public health system. The analysis technique used was thematic content analysis, which aims to identify narrative patterns, key concepts, and relationships between concepts in the literature sources reviewed. This procedure was carried out in three stages: (1) searching and selecting sources with strict inclusion criteria; (2) thematic categorization according to the focus of the study; and (3) critical synthesis of literature findings to build a comprehensive theoretical argument. The validity of the study was strengthened through source triangulation and peer review, to ensure the reliability and relevance of the data used. Thus, this study not only aims to explain the phenomenon descriptively, but also offers critical reflection on the theoretical and practical implications of the study results.

Result and Discussion

1. Schools as Emotional Ecosystems: Repositioning Social Functions in Preventing Mental Health Crisis

In the modern educational landscape, the understanding of schools has undergone a paradigm shift: from instructional institutions that focus on academic achievement to learning communities that also support the emotional health of students. This is in line with the theory of affective education developed by Krathwohl et al. (1964), which places the affective domain as one of the main pillars in the formation of character and student well-being. This domain includes the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions, as well as build empathy and healthy interpersonal relationships. Schools, with all their social apparatus (teachers, students, physical environment and policies), have great potential to become vulnerable spaces or safe spaces for the psychological development of children and adolescents.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of human development supports this argument by showing that microsystem environments such as schools play a direct role in shaping an individual's behavior, attitudes, and emotional states. When schools create a climate that is stressful, overly competitive, or unresponsive to students' emotional needs, the risk of mental health disorders increases significantly. Conversely, when schools build a supportive culture, open communication, and a responsive and inclusive social support system, they become protective agents that strengthen students' mental resilience (Miftakhuddin & Harianto, 2020).

In the public health approach, promotive and preventive strategies in education have been proven to be more effective and sustainable than curative approaches. Darmayasa et al (2025),

emphasized that the systematic implementation of the SEL (Social Emotional Learning) program in the school curriculum can improve emotional regulation skills, reduce risky behavior, and improve academic achievement simultaneously. In Indonesia itself, research by Scharpf et al (2021) showed that students who study in schools with well-being-oriented policies show lower levels of anxiety and more stable academic performance than schools that are entirely oriented towards cognitive achievement.

Furthermore, the whole-school mental health framework approach recommended by WHO and UNESCO emphasizes that all components of the school, principals, teachers, staff, and parents, must be actively involved in building a healthy emotional climate. This includes teacher training in social-emotional competencies, involving students in decision-making, and providing a safe space to express stress and negative emotions (Khairunnisya, 2025). However, a major challenge lies in the unequal understanding and capacity of teachers in detecting and responding to mild emotional disturbances preventively. Research by Suryani et al. (2020) noted that only 27% of teachers in junior high schools in Indonesia felt confident enough to handle students' mental health issues directly.

The implications of these facts require a repositioning of the social function of schools: from mere academic institutions to supportive communities that act as emotional safe havens for students. This repositioning requires a more assertive policy integration at the institutional and national levels, such as the development of emotional well-being indicators in the evaluation of educational quality, increasing the capacity of teachers in emotional literacy, and strengthening the function of counselors and psychosocial services in schools. These efforts are not only psychologically important, but also educationally strategic: students who feel emotionally safe have higher learning motivation, stronger engagement, and stronger resilience in facing life's pressures.

Thus, schools are no longer just places to transfer knowledge, but become arenas where emotional empowerment, social empathy, and psychological balance are developed from an early age, an essential requirement for building a generation that is not only cognitively intelligent, but also mentally healthy and socially resilient.

2. Micro-Strategy of Teacher Intervention as Practice of Ethics of Care in the Classroom

In an educational context that increasingly demands performativity and academic achievement, attention to students' emotional well-being is often marginalized. In fact, pedagogical practices that pay attention to the affective dimension have proven crucial in building school connectedness and preventing burnout in students (OECD, 2021). This is where micro-strategies of teacher intervention have great significance. Interventions such as active listening, using supportive body language (eye contact, smiling, nodding), and providing verbal affirmation in non-formal situations such as when entering class or when students show initiative function as micro-care mechanisms that cumulatively form an emotionally safe classroom. From the perspective of ethics of care (Pratt & Calderon, 2024), these actions represent relational attentiveness, namely a form of care that is centered on meeting the emotional and existential needs of individuals in social relations.

Emotional validation is the most basic but powerful micro strategy. Teachers who are able to provide appropriate responses to students' emotions, for example by not immediately judging or imposing solutions, demonstrate an understanding of the emotional labor involved

in the learning process. This is reinforced by research by Lee et al (2025) which states that cognitive processes, such as decision-making and learning, are greatly influenced by emotional conditions. This means that students will not be optimal in learning if they feel unheard, ignored, or psychologically unsafe. In this case, teacher micro interventions can function as affective scaffolding, namely a form of emotional support that strengthens students' psychological resilience in dealing with academic and social pressures.

Furthermore, a restorative approach to conflict management as an alternative to a repressive disciplinary approach offers a mechanism for restoring more just social relationships and building trust. Processes such as restorative dialogue or circle time, although often considered small or informal, are able to create open and inclusive discussion spaces that allow students to admit mistakes, understand the impact of their behavior on others, and find solutions together. According to Zalukhu (2025), this approach not only resolves conflicts, but also strengthens the collective moral structure in the classroom as a learning community. In this case, the teacher acts as a moral facilitator and not just a rule enforcer.

Integration of Social-Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020) principles also provides a complementary framework. The five core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relational skills, and responsible decision-making can be honed not only through explicit curriculum, but also through teachers' everyday micro-practices. For example, when teachers provide feedback in a non-derogatory manner, or when they model cooperative conflict resolution, they are internalizing SEL values in students. Research by Fidiyillah et al (2024) shows that classroom environments rich in positive social-emotional interactions have a significant impact on increased learning engagement, decreased problem behavior, and increased student self-confidence.

Thus, micro-strategies of teacher intervention are not merely additional actions in pedagogical practice, but are key elements of caring education. In a world of education that is often dominated by the logic of efficiency and quantitative measurement, these practices remind us that education is truly a human relationship that nurtures each other. When teachers are able to provide care through continuous micro-actions, they are not only teaching, but also humanizing the learning process itself.

3. Systemic Implications: The Urgency of Integrating Emotional Approaches into Educational Policies and Curricula

An in-depth discussion of Systemic Implications: The Urgency of Integrating Emotional Approaches into Education Policy and Curriculum highlights how the social-emotional dimension has tended to be marginalized in the structure of education policy in Indonesia. One of the most fundamental obstacles is the lack of teacher training that specifically equips teachers with skills in assisting and managing students' emotions, especially at the elementary and secondary education levels. Teacher training is still very much oriented towards academic content and conventional pedagogy, without considering the psychosocial aspects of students which are crucial in creating a safe and inclusive learning climate. Research conducted by Acetylena & Sirojuddin (2025) shows that teachers who have high social-emotional competence are able to create more supportive classes, reduce student stress, and improve academic achievement. However, in Indonesia, there is no national standard that requires

teachers to master this approach, either in pre-service education or in continuous professional development.

Furthermore, the absence of psychosocial intervention standards in the national curriculum is evidence of the weak integrative vision between the education sector and children's mental health. The Merdeka Curriculum, for example, although it offers flexibility and differentiated learning, has not explicitly set social-emotional competencies as learning objectives that are measured and trained systematically. This is different from countries such as Finland which have implemented the Whole School Approach in social-emotional education, which involves not only teachers, but also counselors, parents, and communities in building children's psychological resilience (Murtiningsih, 2025). Canada, through the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) approach in several of its provinces, even integrates emotional and social relationship assessments as part of student progress reports. These international practices show that emotional integration in policy is not just an addition, but an essential element in responding to the increasingly complex mental health crisis of children and adolescents. Therefore, Indonesia needs a reform of its national education policy that makes emotional support not an incidental intervention, but the main foundation for character building and children's sustainable learning success.

One of the major systemic issues in Indonesian education is the limited teacher training in the area of emotional support and mental health of students. Teachers are often only equipped with basic cognitive and pedagogical competencies without adequate social-emotional learning (SEL) dimensions, even though students' academic success is closely related to their emotional condition. Research by Julia et al (2025) shows that teachers' social-emotional skills are directly proportional to classroom management skills, student engagement, and a supportive learning climate. Without structured training on how to build empathy, manage conflict, and read students' emotional dynamics, teachers are vulnerable to ignoring symptoms of stress, anxiety, or trauma experienced by students, which ultimately have a negative impact on the learning process.

The next problem is the absence of psychosocial intervention standards in the national curriculum structure. Although the Independent Curriculum provides flexibility for character development and differentiated learning, there is no explicit competency map that directs educators to instill emotional skills such as self-regulation, social awareness, or the ability to build healthy relationships. This is in contrast to education policies in a number of developed countries such as Finland and Canada, which have made SEL a mandatory component of their national curriculum systems. In Finland, the Whole School Mental Health approach integrates emotional support into every aspect of the school, from the curriculum to relationships between staff. Meanwhile, in Canada, the application of SEL frameworks such as CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) is used as a reference in compiling cross-subject learning modules.

The absence of national standards on emotional support also shows the weak synergy between the education and health sectors. Currently, counseling services in schools are often administrative or only deal with disciplinary violations, rather than as a reflective space that promotes students' holistic mental well-being. In fact, collaboration between teachers, counselors, and mental health workers is key to creating an emotionally friendly education system. Sumianto et al (2024) emphasized that emotional interventions integrated into school policies have been shown to reduce violence rates, increase student attendance, and strengthen

relationships between individuals in the education community. In Indonesia, this cross-sector synergy is still weak, exacerbated by unintegrated inter-ministerial bureaucracy (for example between the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology and the Ministry of Health), so that emotional support often does not receive adequate resource allocation.

Therefore, a national education policy reform is needed that systematically recognizes the importance of the socio-emotional dimension in learning. Integration of emotional approaches into the curriculum and teacher training should no longer be optional, but should be a main pillar in a long-term education development strategy. This step is not only aimed at forming individuals who are intellectually intelligent, but also emotionally and socially resilient. The UNESCO report (2021) emphasizes that future education must focus on humanistic and transformative learning, with emotional well-being as the foundation for active participation in a complex society. In this context, Indonesia needs to review its curriculum structure, develop teacher competency standards that include emotional skills, and build inter-sectoral partnerships that support mental health in the school environment in a sustainable manner

Conclusion

In the contemporary education landscape, the urgency of integrating emotional approaches into policies and curricula is becoming increasingly apparent as awareness of the importance of students' mental health as a foundation for successful learning increases. Schools can no longer be viewed solely as academic institutions, but rather as complex and interconnected emotional ecosystems. Bronfenbrenner's theory asserts that schools as microsystems have a direct impact on children's psychological well-being. When the social-emotional dimension is neglected, schools have the potential to become stressors that disrupt the learning process. On the other hand, approaches such as Social Emotional Learning (SEL) have been empirically proven to increase students' learning engagement and mental resilience. However, in Indonesia, the integration of SEL into the curriculum is still minimal, both explicitly and structurally. Teacher training also still focuses on cognitive aspects without support for relevant affective skills. In fact, teachers who have social-emotional competencies are able to create supportive and psychologically safe classrooms. Countries such as Finland and Canada show that long-term educational success depends on a holistic approach that includes the emotional dimension as a core. The absence of national standards for psychosocial interventions indicates weak synergy between the education and mental health sectors. Therefore, policy reform is needed to ensure that the affective dimension is not merely a complement, but the main foundation in building civilized education. Without this systemic integration, efforts to create schools as emotional safe havens will always be sporadic and unsustainable.

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