



CHALLENGES OF STUDENT LEARNING PROBLEMS IN THE DIGITAL ERA: A SCHOOL COUNSELOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Students' learning problems in schools are issues that require serious attention from all stakeholders, particularly school counselors. Various factors contribute to the learning difficulties experienced by students today. Changes in curriculum, educational systems, and technological developments have significantly influenced the nature of students' learning problems. In addition, challenges in other domains such as personal, social, and even career-related aspects also affect students' academic functioning. These learning problems consistently appear every year, making them recurring challenges that school counselors must address in their service delivery, both now and in the future. Drawing from the experiences of school counselors in managing and providing services related to students' learning difficulties, this study focuses on exploring the challenges of learning problems faced by junior high school students from the counselors' perspectives. A qualitative research method with a phenomenological design was employed, involving school counselors with more than five years of professional experience. The data obtained were then analyzed in depth to answer the central research question regarding the challenges of student learning problems in the digital era. The findings indicate that in the current digital era, the primary underlying factor contributing to students' learning problems is low learning motivation. This condition is influenced by excessive use of social media and online games. Another contributing factor is students' perception that learning is unimportant, along with the belief that studying is a boring activity. These issues highlight the need for serious attention from all relevant parties, as low learning motivation among students must be addressed as a priority.

Keywords: : *problematic learning; learning motivation; junior high school; digital era; school counselor*

Introduction

Education is a fundamental component in developing high-quality human resources (Mardhiyah, Aldriani, Chitta, & Zulfikar, 2021). Students serve as central subjects whose success is measured not only by academic achievement but also by holistic development encompassing personal, social, and career domains. However, students' educational journeys are often marked by various challenges that manifest as complex learning problems influenced by both internal and external factors (Fitriani, Rohmah, Deniarti, Nurikhsan, & Rosadi, 2024; Tondang et al., 2025). Within the school context, counselors or Guidance and Counseling (BK) teachers play a frontline role in helping students navigate these complexities (Saputra, Wahyu, & Rahman, 2022). As educational demands evolve, school counselors are increasingly expected not only to address students' difficulties directly but also to proactively design preventive and developmental guidance programs (Panjaitan, Adira, & Lesmana, 2025).

Historically, the literature indicates that learning problems commonly addressed by counselors revolve around concentration difficulties, low intrinsic motivation, and the influence of family or peer-related issues (Løhre, Vedul-Kjelsås, & Østerlie, 2021; Reba et al., 2024; Singh, 2016). However, these challenges have become increasingly intertwined with rapid technological development in the digital era. Learning difficulties among junior high school students today exhibit far greater complexity, where internal and external factors constantly interact with one another. Internally, the main challenges include diminishing learning motivation and the erosion of academic grit defined as the ability to persist through difficulties to achieve long-term goals (Chitrakar & Nisanth, 2023; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). Consequently, students show signs of giving up more easily and struggling to maintain focus.

One of the major determinants of learning difficulties is the pervasive use of digital devices and social media, which offer highly stimulating and more appealing alternatives to academic tasks (Lakilaki et al., 2025). Numerous studies have confirmed that excessive device and social media use leads to decreased attention span, disrupted sleep quality, and ultimately hinders students' academic performance (Asif & Kazi, 2024; Sari, Oktavia, & Nurwinda, 2025). Additionally, digital parenting styles in the current era also play a decisive role; overly permissive approaches to gadget usage or overly restrictive parenting without digital literacy can equally contribute to learning problems (Fijriani, 2025). The expanding scope of peer interactions into online environments further shapes students' norms and priorities, where social validation is often valued more highly than academic achievement (Wentzel & Muenks, 2016).

These challenges are compounded by systemic factors, particularly the demand to adapt to curriculum changes. Recent curriculum reforms, such as the Merdeka Curriculum, emphasize student-centered learning, autonomy, and project-based development (Majid & Hasan, 2020). While pedagogically ideal, this approach can be psychologically taxing for students whose motivation, attention, and academic grit have already been weakened by digital influences. The mismatch between curriculum expectations and students' internal readiness creates a significant challenge for counselors in the field.

Failure to address these complex learning problems may lead to serious consequences. The most visible short-term effect is declining academic performance (Zhao, 2018). However, the long-term impacts are far more concerning. Psychologically, students face a heightened risk of developing academic anxiety, learned helplessness, and even depression (Carstens, Mallon, Bataineh, & Al-Bataineh, 2021; Zhang & Ma, 2023). These conditions directly impede students' learning development, affecting not only their current academic success but also threatening the foundation of their psychological well-being and future career prospects.

School counselors serve as frontline practitioners who observe, diagnose, and attempt to intervene in these issues daily. Their lived experiences offer authentic insights that cannot be fully captured through quantitative surveys. Although numerous studies have examined the impact of digital devices or learning methods, qualitative research that seeks to understand the essence of these challenges from counselors' perspectives remains limited. Employing a phenomenological approach, this study aims to explore and deeply understand the meaning of school counselors' lived experiences in addressing junior high school students' learning problems in the digital era. Understanding their perspectives is essential for advancing the field of Guidance and Counseling and for formulating more responsive, relevant, and effective counseling policies and service programs.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore the challenges of learning problems faced by junior high school students from the perspectives of school counselors. This approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of counselors' lived experiences, allowing for rich, detailed, and nuanced descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation (Williams, 2021). Phenomenology is particularly appropriate for this study because it seeks to uncover the "essence" of shared experiences in this case, the professional experiences of school counselors in addressing students' learning problems in the digital era (Norlyk, Martinsen, Dreyer, & Haahr, 2023). This aligns with the aim of the study, which is to deeply explore counselors' experiences in managing learning difficulties encountered by students.

The study was conducted with school counselors in Malang using purposive sampling, a strategy that is essential in qualitative research because it ensures that participants are information-rich and experienced in the challenges investigated (Stolz, 2023). The criteria for participant selection included: (1) being a junior high school counselor with at least a bachelor's degree in Guidance and Counseling; (2) holding professional certification; and (3) having a minimum of five years of counseling experience. A total of five school counselors were interviewed based on the research needs. Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their anonymity was maintained throughout the research process to safeguard their privacy and encourage open and honest sharing of experiences.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant. The interviews were designed to be flexible, allowing the exploration of emerging themes while ensuring that the main research questions were addressed. The interview guide was developed based on the study objectives and consisted of open-ended questions regarding participants' experiences with students' learning problems, the impact of the digital era, and the challenges and strategies they employed. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission. Detailed field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations, providing an additional layer of data for analysis (Dodgson, 2023). All interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure data integrity and facilitate thorough analysis.

Data were analyzed using phenomenological analysis following the steps outlined by Bonyandi (2023). This involved a systematic process of epoche and bracketing to set aside researchers' preconceptions. First, verbatim transcripts were read repeatedly to gain a holistic understanding of each participant's experience. Significant statements or excerpts directly related to the research questions were identified. These statements were then clustered into meaning units and transformed into textual and structural descriptions (Lichtman, 2013). Finally, the textual and structural descriptions were synthesized into a composite description that captured the core themes and essence of the phenomenon.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were implemented. Member checking was conducted by providing interview transcripts and preliminary findings to participants for review and validation (Ting, Goh, & Ong, 2024). This process helped confirm the accuracy of the data and the interpretation of emerging themes. Additionally, peer debriefing was performed by consulting with colleagues experienced in qualitative research to review the analytic process and findings. This external review helped minimize researcher bias and enhanced the rigor of the study. The final findings are presented clearly and convincingly, supported by direct quotations from participants to provide authentic voices and strengthen the themes that emerged from the analysis.

Result and Discussion

Low Learning Motivation as the Primary Factor in Students' Learning Problems

Low learning motivation emerged as the central issue underlying the learning problems identified in this study. This condition is characterized by students' loss of enthusiasm, interest, and intrinsic drive to engage in learning activities. The absence of internal motivation directly affects their academic performance and overall educational outcomes, positioning motivation as a key determinant of students' learning success.

The decline in motivation results from a cumulative interaction of various interrelated factors. These include a lack of interest in reading, which leads to shallow comprehension of learning materials, and difficulties in understanding academic content that often generate feelings of frustration. This situation is further exacerbated by external factors, such as insufficient guidance from teachers leaving students feeling confused lack of appreciation that makes their efforts feel meaningless, and the absence of healthy competition that could otherwise encourage improvement. When students simultaneously encounter these challenges, their enthusiasm and desire to learn decrease significantly.

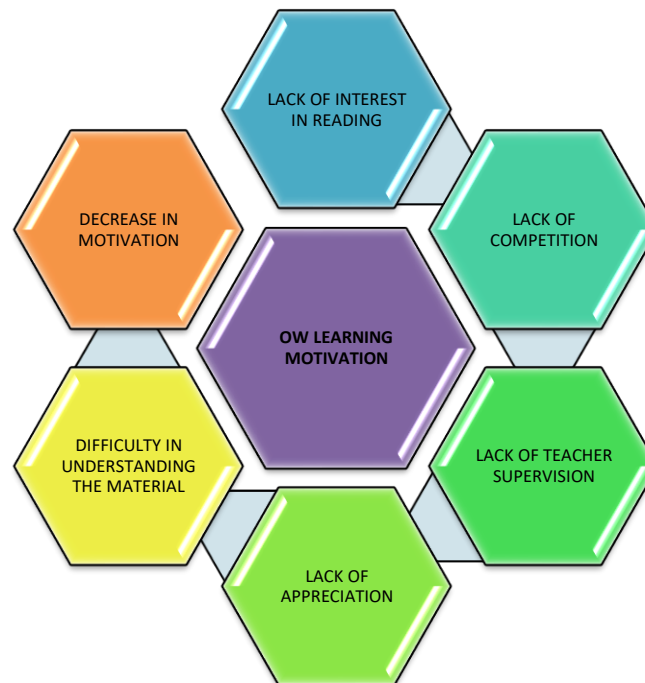


Figure 1. Dimensions of the Description of the Phenomenon of Student Learning Difficulties

Description of Factors Contributing to Low Learning Motivation

Based on the research findings, students' low learning motivation is influenced by various interconnected factors. These factors can be categorized into challenges originating from within the students themselves (internal factors) and challenges arising from their environment (external factors).

An in-depth analysis of the participants' experiences revealed that internal factors primarily revolve around cognitive and affective barriers in the learning process. The first participant reported that their motivation was hindered by a lack of interest in reading, caused by weak internal drive and difficulty maintaining focus. This aligns with the experience of the fourth participant, who stated that their motivation dropped significantly when they struggled to understand the learning materials a condition that led to feelings of frustration and a tendency to give up easily.

Statements related to students' motivation also indicated a decline caused by boredom with the learning process and an unhealthy competitive climate. The second participant noted that their motivation decreased due to boredom with monotonous teaching methods. Meanwhile, the third participant believed that low motivation stemmed from the absence of challenging competition, leaving them without encouragement to improve.

Based on the interview findings, it can be concluded that low learning motivation among students is a complex issue shaped by both internal and external factors. Internally, students face personal challenges such as lack of interest in reading, difficulty understanding learning materials, and boredom with repetitive teaching methods. These factors often trigger feelings of disappointment and helplessness, ultimately extinguishing their enthusiasm for further learning. Without a strong internal drive, external efforts to motivate students tend to have limited impact.

In addition to internal factors, external factors within the academic environment also play a significant role in diminishing students' motivation. The fifth participant expressed that their motivation was affected by insufficient academic guidance from teachers, noting a need for more direction and support in planning their studies. This was reinforced by the sixth participant, who felt demotivated due to a lack of appreciation for their efforts, leading to the perception that their hard work was not adequately recognized.

External factors within the learning environment such as unsupportive classroom conditions, inadequate guidance and recognition from teachers, and limited innovation in instructional methods were common concerns. Students felt that their efforts were undervalued and that they lacked clear guidance when facing academic difficulties. These issues were exacerbated by an unhealthy competitive atmosphere, which caused students to feel pressured rather than motivated to improve.

In-depth Analysis of Key Findings

The psychological dimension of low learning motivation experienced by participants stems from a series of complex activating events, both internal and external. The in-depth interviews indicate that while each participant encountered different triggers, there were identifiable similarities across their experiences. Collectively, these activating events generated negative emotions that hindered the learning process and impacted their academic behavior.

Table 1 Description of internal factors

	"I lack interest in reading due to a lack of self-motivation." NA/MLG/KMM /17
Internal: Lack of Interest in Reading	"I find it difficult to focus and get distracted by other things." NA/MLG/KMM /17
	"I feel bored with monotonous learning methods." NA/MLG/KMM /17

Learning problems include internal factors, particularly students' low interest in reading. These internal factors indicate that the primary triggers stem from cognitive and affective barriers. For the first informant, the activating events were a lack of interest in reading and difficulty maintaining focus both perceived as stemming from weak internal motivation. Similarly, another participant reported that their trigger involved difficulty understanding the learning material. This situation directly led to a series of psychological challenges, causing feelings of frustration and being overwhelmed.

Another internal trigger was boredom with learning methods that were perceived as monotonous, resulting in disengagement and a decline in enthusiasm. These contributing factors collectively gave rise to maladaptive emotional responses such as apathy and hopelessness. From a psychological perspective, the emergence of irrational

beliefs such as “I am not capable” or “learning is boring” was influenced by these triggering events. Such irrational beliefs manifest as negative emotions that disrupt students’ thinking patterns and significantly affect their academic behavior.

Table 2 Description of external factors

External: Lack of Competition and guidance	"I feel there's unhealthy competition between me and others." AJ/MLG/KP/17
	"I don't feel like I'm getting enough guidance." AJ/MLG/KP/17
	"There's a lack of appreciation for what I'm getting." AJ/MLG/KP/17

Interview findings revealed that Informant 2 highlighted several external factors indicating that the academic environment served as a trigger for learning difficulties. One of the key triggers was the lack of academic guidance from teachers, which left the participant feeling confused and unsupported. Additionally, the informant reported insufficient appreciation and recognition for their efforts and achievements, leading to the perception that their hard work was futile. The participant also faced challenges stemming from an unhealthy competitive environment that failed to provide positive encouragement for improvement. These difficulties generated feelings of distrust and disengagement toward the academic environment. Collectively, these external factors illustrate a learning atmosphere that lacks support, appreciation, and healthy competition conditions that indirectly contribute to the decline in students’ learning motivation.

The findings of this study indicate that the learning problems experienced by students stem primarily from low learning motivation. The internal factors identified such as lack of interest, difficulty understanding material, and learning fatigue align with various theories of learning motivation. According to Self-Determination Theory, intrinsic motivation develops when three basic psychological needs are fulfilled: competence (a sense of capability), autonomy (a sense of control), and relatedness (a sense of connection with others) (Sulistiana, Nugraha, & Sanusi, 2023; Utomo, Suminar, Hamidah, & Yulianto, 2019). The experiences of the first and fourth participants, who expressed frustration due to difficulty comprehending learning material, directly undermine the need for competence. When students feel incapable, their interest and internal drive to learn naturally decline. Furthermore, the boredom associated with monotonous teaching methods, as highlighted by the second participant, indicates an unmet need for autonomy, as students may not feel they have choice or involvement in the learning process (Armini, 2024; Labuem et al., 2021).

On the other hand, external factors identified in the study confirm the crucial role of the environment in shaping student motivation. Findings related to the lack of guidance and appreciation as experienced by the fifth and sixth participants are consistent with the concepts of scaffolding and reinforcement theory. Teacher guidance acts as scaffolding that helps students overcome difficulties, while appreciation functions as positive reinforcement that increases the likelihood of students repeating productive learning behaviors (Isrokatun, Hanifah, Maulana, & Anggita, 2019). When these external supports are absent, students feel unsupported and undervalued, ultimately extinguishing their motivation. The findings regarding an unhealthy competitive climate, as described by the third participant, are also supported by existing research showing that overly competitive learning environments can heighten anxiety and reduce intrinsic motivation, particularly for students who do not view themselves as academically strong.

Low Learning Motivation Contributes to Learning Difficulties

This study reinforces that low learning motivation is not a singular issue but rather a central factor that emerges from the accumulation of various internal and external challenges. This can be explained through Expectancy-Value Theory, which states that

motivation is shaped by two components: students' expectations of success in a task and the value they assign to that task (Tahmidatien & Krismanto, 2019). The findings suggest that both components are simultaneously compromised. Students' expectations of success decline sharply when they struggle to understand the material and lack adequate academic guidance (Nababan, Dirgantoro, Rahmadi, Listiani, & Sinaga, 2023). At the same time, the value of the learning task is diminished by monotonous methods, insufficient appreciation, and unhealthy competition (Azhar & Wahyudi, 2024).

When students no longer expect to succeed and no longer see value in what they are learning, overall motivation collapses. This condition goes beyond temporary laziness; it reflects a psychological disengagement from the academic process. Low motivation becomes a central factor because it acts as a bridge connecting underlying challenges (internal and external) with broader consequences such as decreased academic performance, increased stress, and potential mental health issues (Hidajat & Putri, 2024; Pertiwi & Sihotang, 2023). Therefore, addressing motivation is not merely about boosting enthusiasm it is a critical intervention for strengthening the foundation of student success.

This study has several limitations that warrant acknowledgment. As a qualitative study employing a phenomenological approach, the findings were drawn from the in-depth experiences of a small number of participants and thus cannot be generalized to the entire student population. However, the depth of the data provides rich contextual insights into the phenomenon of low learning motivation. The implications of this study are particularly significant for educational practitioners. For school counselors, the findings underscore the importance of adopting comprehensive service approaches not only focusing on individual interventions to enhance students' learning strategies but also advocating for systemic improvements within the school environment, such as more varied teaching methods and the establishment of a culture of appreciation.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the fundamental learning problem students' low learning motivation is a complex phenomenon that does not stand alone. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between internal factors, such as lack of personal interest and difficulties in comprehension, and external factors, including an unsupportive academic environment, limited appreciation, and insufficient guidance from teachers. These factors cumulatively create a cycle that diminishes students' enthusiasm for learning, reaffirming that motivation is a product of both personal conditions and the surrounding educational ecosystem. Therefore, it is recommended that educational institutions implement guidance approaches that not only focus on students' personal development but also actively improve the quality of teacher student interactions and foster a more supportive and appreciative learning climate.

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Author Contributions Statement

NMAS conceived the main idea and drafted the final version of the manuscript. MR and MKJ contributed to data collection, manuscript drafting, and data analysis. AYS served as the reviewer of the written manuscript. M supervised the overall research process and provided critical feedback on the manuscript draft, while MR also assisted in the data analysis process.

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