

THE MEANING OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS' PRESENCE FOR STUDENTS EXPERIENCING ACADEMIC ANXIETY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY IN CENTRAL LOMBOK VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS

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Article Information

Received : December 5, 2025

Revised : December 15, 2025

Accepted : December 18, 2025

Abstract

Academic anxiety is a common emotional challenge among vocational students who face dual academic and vocational demands, often resulting in decreased motivation, impaired concentration, and lower academic performance. School counselors play a crucial role in supporting students experiencing academic anxiety, yet limited research has examined how students themselves interpret the presence of school counselors in this context. This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences and perceived meaning of the presence of guidance and counseling (BK) teachers among students with academic anxiety in three private vocational schools in Central Lombok, Indonesia. Using purposive sampling, data were collected from 10 students identified with moderate to high academic anxiety, three school counselors, and two homeroom teachers through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. Data were analyzed using the phenomenological procedures of Miles and Huberman, involving coding, thematic categorization, comparison of experiences, and theoretical integration. Four major themes emerged: (1) school counselors as an emotional safe space, (2) providers of academic coping strategies, (3) motivators who enhance students' confidence, and (4) mediators connecting students, teachers, and parents. These findings highlight that the presence of school counselors extends beyond administrative functions and is deeply experienced as emotional, motivational, and relational support. The study underscores the critical role of counselor-student interpersonal relationships in reducing academic anxiety, particularly within vocational school settings. Implications include the need for strengthened counseling programs, proactive interventions, and enhanced counselor training to better address academic anxiety and foster student resilience.

Keywords: : *academic anxiety, vocational schools, students*

Introduction

Academic anxiety is an emotional condition characterized by feelings of tension, worry, and fear associated with learning processes and academic demands (Cassady & Johnson, 2002; Putwain, 2007; Zeidner, 2014). This condition may emerge when students face examinations, complex assignments, or heavy curricular workloads (Putwain & Daly, 2014; Von der Embse et al., 2018; Pekrun, 2021). If left unaddressed, academic anxiety can lead to decreased learning motivation, impaired concentration, and declining academic achievement (Eum & Rice, 2011; Owens et al., 2012; Pekrun et al., 2017). In the context of vocational high schools, the dual burden of academic requirements and vocational skill demands further increases students' vulnerability to academic anxiety (Jannah & Sutoyo, 2018; Rahmawati, 2020; Fitriani et al., 2022).

In line with these conditions, school counselors (Guidance and Counseling teachers; BK teachers) play a crucial role in assisting students in managing academic anxiety through individual counseling, group counseling, and preventive interventions (Corey, 2016; Yusuf & Nurihsan, 2018; Gibson & Mitchell, 2019). The presence of BK teachers in schools serves not only as service providers but also as figures who offer a sense of safety, emotional support, and coping strategies tailored to students' needs (Amelia, 2021; Hasanah & Fauzi, 2022). Nevertheless, the meaning and significance of BK teachers' presence may be perceived differently by each student, depending on their personal experiences and psychological conditions (Sugiyanto & Sutoyo, 2017; Nisa, 2020).

Academic anxiety is closely associated with negative emotional states arising from pressure during the learning process and from academic demands perceived as excessive. This anxiety is marked by feelings of worry, tension, and fear that can disrupt learning focus and reduce students' academic performance. Furthermore, academic anxiety may adversely affect students' learning motivation, mental health, and social relationships within the school environment. When adequate psychological support is unavailable, academic anxiety can also become a barrier to the development of students' potential. Within the educational context, BK teachers play an essential role as companions for students experiencing academic anxiety. They not only provide individual or group counseling services but also create a safe and supportive environment that enables students to express the problems they encounter. The presence of BK teachers in schools is therefore expected to help students identify the sources of their anxiety, regulate their emotions, and develop effective problem-solving strategies.

Students who receive guidance and support from BK teachers are expected to develop better coping skills for managing academic pressure, enhance their self-confidence, and cultivate positive attitudes toward learning. With appropriate interventions and support, students who initially experience academic anxiety may adapt more effectively to school demands. Thus, the role of BK teachers extends beyond providing solutions; they function as partners in students' self-development processes, enabling them to face both academic and non-academic challenges.

Unfortunately, the strategic role of BK teachers in assisting students to overcome academic anxiety is not yet optimally manifested in many schools in Indonesia. This condition is partly due to the fact that some BK teachers have not fully implemented counseling approaches that align with students' emotional needs (Amelia, 2021; Hasanah & Fauzi, 2022). As a result, the management of students' academic anxiety tends to remain generic and fails to address the root causes of their difficulties (Sugiyanto & Sutoyo, 2017; Nisa, 2020). Ideally, the presence of BK teachers in schools should not be limited to providing short-term solutions but should also equip students with emotional regulation skills and strategies for coping with academic pressure. One such essential skill is self-regulation in dealing with academic challenges.

Numerous studies on the role of school counselors in helping students address psychological problems have been conducted in various countries. International research, particularly in the United States (Putwain & Daly, 2014; Von der Embse et al., 2018) and Australia (Owens et al., 2012), demonstrates that structured counseling interventions can significantly reduce students' academic anxiety. In Indonesia, research on BK teachers has generally focused on service strategies to enhance learning motivation (Yusuf & Nurihsan, 2018; Amelia, 2021) or on the prevention of deviant behavior (Hasanah & Fauzi, 2022). However, studies that specifically examine the meaning of BK teachers' presence from the perspective of students experiencing academic anxiety remain limited. Such research is essential, as it can provide deeper insights into students' perceptions and lived experiences, thereby serving as a foundation for developing more contextual and responsive guidance services. Moreover, the findings can serve as a reference for schools

and BK teachers in designing appropriate intervention strategies that align with students' psychological needs. Therefore, this study aims to describe the experiences of students with academic anxiety in their interactions with BK teachers, to explore the meaning of BK teachers' presence for students, and to identify factors that influence students' perceptions of BK teachers' roles in addressing academic anxiety.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach, aiming to provide an in-depth description of students' lived experiences of academic anxiety and their interpretations of the presence of school counselors (Guidance and Counseling teachers; BK teachers) in vocational high schools in Central Lombok. Accordingly, the research participants consisted of students identified as experiencing academic anxiety based on information provided by BK teachers and homeroom teachers, as well as BK teachers who were directly involved in providing counseling support.

The study was conducted in three private vocational high schools in Central Lombok Regency: SMKS Anak Bangsa Praya Tengah, SMKS Tastura Az Zikra Praya Barat, and SMKS Nurul Huda Pringgarata. The selection of these schools was based on several methodological considerations: (1) the availability of active guidance and counseling services, as all three schools employed BK teachers who implemented structured individual and group counseling programs; (2) the diversity of students' socio-economic backgrounds, which may influence the nature and intensity of academic anxiety experiences; (3) the accessibility of the research sites, allowing the researcher to conduct intensive and sustained data collection; and (4) the relevance of the vocational context, as private vocational high school students face distinctive academic and vocational demands that align with the focus of this study.

The selection of research sites and participants employed purposive sampling, whereby schools were intentionally chosen because they met criteria relevant to the objectives of this phenomenological inquiry. The scope of the study was deliberately limited to describing students' subjective experiences and perceptions of the presence of BK teachers. Consequently, this study did not examine the direct effects of BK teachers' presence on students' academic achievement or other psychological variables.

Consistent with phenomenological research traditions, data collection primarily involved in-depth interviews with minimal to moderate structure. Interviews were conducted with students experiencing academic anxiety, BK teachers, and homeroom teachers in order to obtain more comprehensive and multi-perspective insights. Participants were selected purposively, taking into account the diversity of students' backgrounds and varying levels of academic anxiety. In addition to interviews, data were collected through non-participant observation of student-BK teacher interactions within the school setting, as well as document analysis of relevant student counseling records. Data collection was carried out over a three-month period, from February to April 2025.

Data analysis followed the phenomenological analysis procedures adapted from Miles and Huberman (1994), consisting of six stages. The first stage involved data coding, in which interview transcripts and observational notes were repeatedly reviewed and labeled with keywords or phrases representing salient information. The second stage focused on rewriting and deeply reflecting on the data, whereby all labeled raw data were identified and organized into coherent narratives, accompanied by the researcher's reflective notes, emerging ideas, and insights. The third stage involved sorting the data based on content and informational patterns, with interview and observation records arranged according to emerging thematic categories. The fourth stage entailed identifying similarities and differences in participants' experiences to capture both consistent and unique patterns of meaning. The fifth stage involved generating analytical generalizations

by grouping data into more concise and structured units of analysis. The sixth and final stage consisted of linking the generalized findings to relevant theories and previous research to enhance the academic significance and interpretive depth of the results.

To ensure data credibility, this study applied source triangulation involving students, BK teachers, and homeroom teachers, as well as member checking with participants to verify the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations. All stages of the research were conducted in accordance with ethical research principles, including obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring the confidentiality of their identities.

Result and Discussion

This study involved 15 participants drawn from three private vocational high schools in Central Lombok Regency, namely SMKS Anak Bangsa Praya Tengah, SMKS Tastura Az Zikra Praya Barat, and SMKS Nurul Huda Pringgarata. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, as they exhibited moderate to high levels of academic anxiety based on measurements obtained through the Academic Anxiety Scale. In addition, one school counselor (Guidance and Counseling teacher; BK teacher) in Central Lombok served as a key informant.

The participants comprised 10 students experiencing academic anxiety, three BK teachers who functioned as key informants, and two homeroom teachers who served as supplementary informants. Students' levels of academic anxiety were identified through the Academic Anxiety Scale and further corroborated by preliminary interviews conducted by the BK teachers.

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Participants by School Location

Participant Code	School	Gender	Grade Level	Level of Academic Anxiety	Primary Background Issue
S1	SMKS Darul Falah Praya	Female	Grade XI	High	Fear of failing examinations and obtaining low grades
S2	SMKS Darul Falah Praya	Male	Grade XI	Moderate	Difficulty understanding mathematics content
S3	SMKS Darul Falah Praya	Female	Grade XII	High	Parental pressure to achieve top academic rank
S4	SMKS Muhammadiyah Praya Tengah	Male	Grade XII	Moderate	Poor time management and accumulated assignments
S5	SMKS Muhammadiyah Praya Tengah	Female	Grade XI	High	Negative past experience during class presentations
S6	SMKS Muhammadiyah Praya Tengah	Male	Grade XI	Moderate	Delayed adaptation to a new subject teacher
S7	SMKS Hikmah Praya Barat Daya	Female	Grade XI	High	Fear of speaking in front of the class
S8	SMKS Hikmah Praya Barat Daya	Female	Grade XI	Moderate	Difficulty understanding vocational (productive) subjects
S9	SMKS Hikmah Praya Barat Daya	Female	Grade XII	High	Pressure related to vocational competency certification examinations
S10	SMKS Hikmah Praya Barat Daya	Male	Grade XI	Moderate	Difficulty maintaining focus during online learning

G-BK1	SMKS Darul Falah Praya	Female	–	–	School counselor with 8 years of professional experience
G-BK2	SMKS Muhammadiyah Praya Tengah	Female	–	–	School counselor with 5 years of professional experience
G-BK3	SMKS Hikmah Praya Barat Daya	Male	–	–	School counselor with 6 years of professional experience
WK1	SMKS Darul Falah Praya	Male	–	–	Homeroom teacher for Grade XI
WK2	SMKS Muhammadiyah Praya Tengah	Female	–	–	Homeroom teacher for Grade XII

The thematic analysis of the in-depth interview data yielded four overarching themes that illustrate the meaning of school counselors' (Guidance and Counseling teachers; BK teachers) presence for students experiencing academic anxiety.

Table 2. Themes and Descriptions of Research Findings

Main Theme	Description	Representative Participant Quotation
1. BK teacher as an emotional safe space	Students perceive BK teachers as providing a psychologically safe space in which they can share their concerns without fear of judgment.	"When I talk to the BK teacher, I feel relieved, because she does not immediately blame me." (S1)
2. Provider of academic coping strategies	BK teachers offer practical strategies such as time-management techniques, effective study methods, and cognitive strategies to manage negative thoughts.	"The BK teacher suggested studying for 25 minutes and then resting for 5 minutes, and that really helped." (S4)
3. Enhancer of motivation and self-confidence	The presence of BK teachers strengthens students' motivation and fosters confidence in their own abilities.	"I used to be afraid of getting poor grades, but the BK teacher told me that I have potential." (S3)
4. Mediator between students, subject teachers, and parents	BK teachers act as intermediaries who communicate students' conditions and needs to teachers and parents in order to obtain appropriate support.	"She was the one who talked to my parents and explained that I needed a more relaxed study pace." (S5)

Based on the findings, the presence of school counselors (Guidance and Counseling teachers; BK teachers) in vocational high schools in Central Lombok holds a meaning that extends beyond administrative functions or disciplinary enforcement. BK teachers are perceived as providers of emotional support, consultants for academic strategies, and facilitators of communication among stakeholders. These findings are consistent with Carl Rogers' (1961) Person-Centered Counseling theory, which emphasizes the importance of warmth, empathy, and unconditional positive regard in establishing effective counseling relationships. Students experiencing academic anxiety require a sense of psychological safety prior to the implementation of academic interventions. Moreover, the role of BK teachers in providing coping strategies supports McCarthy's (2014) findings, which demonstrate that school counselors can effectively reduce learning-related anxiety through time-management skills training, relaxation techniques, and positive self-talk.

The mediating function of BK teachers is also particularly significant, as students experiencing academic anxiety often encounter difficulties in communicating their needs directly to subject teachers or parents. This mediating role minimizes potential conflicts and strengthens social support systems, as articulated in Social Support Theory (House, 1981). Overall, the findings of this study underscore the dual meaning of BK teachers'

presence: as psychological supporters and academic facilitators, both of which contribute to helping students manage academic anxiety and improve their learning performance.

These findings are consistent with those of Sari and Putri (2020), who reported that the proactive involvement of BK teachers in providing emotional support and learning skills training significantly reduced academic anxiety among senior high school students in Yogyakarta. Similarly, Kurniawan (2019) found that students with intensive access to counseling services exhibited higher levels of self-confidence and greater readiness to face examinations compared to those who rarely utilized such services. The present study also reinforces the perspective of Rohman and Fitriani (2021), who emphasized the distinctive complexity of BK teachers' roles within vocational education settings. In vocational high schools, BK teachers are required to address not only academic challenges but also vocational skill demands, which may generate compounded forms of anxiety. Consequently, intervention strategies must integrate psychological and pedagogical approaches in a balanced manner.

From a practical standpoint, these findings highlight the necessity of designing guidance and counseling programs in vocational high schools not merely as remedial mechanisms, but as sustainable preventive systems. Proactive approaches such as stress management skills classes, small-group mentoring, and regular collaboration between BK teachers and subject teachers may serve as effective strategies. The implication of this study is that the presence of BK teachers in vocational schools should not be viewed solely as compliance with educational regulations, but rather as a critical component that directly contributes to students' psychological well-being and academic success. When implemented optimally, this role may become a determining factor in creating a safe, supportive learning environment that fosters students' academic achievement.

In addition, the findings reveal that the role of BK teachers extends beyond the immediate reduction of academic anxiety and contributes to the long-term development of students' resilience. This result aligns with Suldo et al. (2014), who demonstrated that supportive counseling relationships enhance academic resilience, defined as students' ability to maintain academic performance despite high levels of academic pressure. In the context of vocational schools in Central Lombok, the support provided by BK teachers is particularly crucial, as students face dual challenges: general academic demands and intensive vocational skill requirements. This condition is consistent with the findings of Fallon and Pote (2020), who noted that vocational education students are vulnerable to dual stressors that may exacerbate academic anxiety in the absence of appropriate interventions.

The phenomenological approach employed in this study further reveals that students attribute greater meaning to the interpersonal aspects of BK teachers' presence rather than to administrative functions alone. Students reported feeling "heard" and "understood" before receiving practical strategies to address their academic difficulties. This mechanism corresponds with Bordin's (1979) Therapeutic Alliance theory, which posits that the effectiveness of counseling interventions is strongly influenced by the quality of the emotional bond between counselor and counselee.

Furthermore, the consistent and responsive presence of BK teachers functions as a buffer against academic stress. This finding supports the Buffering Hypothesis proposed by Cohen and Wills (1985), which suggests that social support can moderate the negative effects of stress on psychological well-being. In other words, although high academic demands persist, students with access to supportive BK teachers tend to experience less severe emotional distress. From a school policy perspective, these results indicate the need for continuous professional development for BK teachers, particularly in empathy-based counseling techniques and strength-based approaches. Such training would enable

counselors not only to address existing problems but also to strengthen students' positive capacities in coping with future academic challenges.

Overall, the findings of this study reinforce the strategic role of BK teachers in helping students manage academic anxiety and are strongly aligned with established theories and previous empirical research. The convergence between the present findings and earlier studies is summarized conceptually as follows:

Current Study Findings	Previous Scholars/Theories	Conceptual Alignment and Reinforcement
BK teachers function as emotional supporters rather than merely administrative personnel BK teachers assist students in developing coping strategies for academic anxiety	Rogers (1961) – Person-Centered Counseling McCarthy (2014)	Reinforces the importance of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and warm counselor–student relationships Supports evidence that school counselors effectively reduce academic anxiety through relaxation, time management, and positive self-talk
BK teachers act as communication mediators among students, teachers, and parents	House (1981) – Social Support Theory	Explains how mediated social support reduces conflict and enhances psychological safety
BK teachers contribute to the development of students' academic resilience	Suldo et al. (2014)	Strengthens evidence that supportive counseling enhances students' capacity to cope with academic pressure
BK teachers' support is crucial in vocational schools due to dual academic and vocational demands	Fallon & Pote (2020)	Confirms that vocational students face dual stressors requiring intensive counseling interventions
Interpersonal relationships are key to counseling effectiveness	Bordin (1979) – Therapeutic Alliance	Emphasizes that counselor–student relationship quality determines intervention success
BK teachers' support buffers the negative impact of academic stress	Cohen & Wills (1985) – Buffering Hypothesis	Demonstrates that social support mitigates the psychological impact of stress

This study affirms that the presence of school counselors (Guidance and Counseling teachers; BK teachers) in vocational high schools in Central Lombok extends beyond administrative or disciplinary functions and serves as a vital source of emotional support for students experiencing academic anxiety. These findings are consistent with Carl Rogers' (1961) Person-Centered Counseling theory, which emphasizes empathy, warmth, and unconditional positive regard as foundational elements of effective counseling relationships. This reinforces the understanding that the success of counseling interventions is determined not only by the techniques employed but also by the quality of the counselor student relationship. In addition, the results demonstrate that BK teachers play an active role in equipping students with coping strategies, including time-management techniques, relaxation methods, and positive self-talk. These findings support McCarthy's (2014) assertion that school counselors can effectively reduce academic anxiety through the provision of practical, skills-based interventions. Accordingly, this study not only elucidates the meaning of BK teachers' presence but also highlights their concrete contributions to the development of students' adaptive skills.

From a mediating perspective, BK teachers function as critical liaisons among students, subject teachers, and parents. This role further substantiates House's (1981) Social Support Theory, which posits that adequate social support can reduce interpersonal conflict while enhancing students' psychological sense of safety. Within the vocational school context, this mediating function is particularly important, as students often experience difficulty articulating their concerns and needs directly. Moreover, the

findings indicate that the presence of BK teachers contributes to the development of students' academic resilience. This result aligns with the work of Suldo et al. (2014), who found that supportive counseling relationships enhance students' capacity to persevere under academic pressure. Thus, BK teachers not only assist students in managing situational academic anxiety but also foster long-term resilience.

Specifically within vocational education settings, the support provided by BK teachers becomes increasingly critical because vocational high school students face dual demands, namely academic requirements and intensive vocational skill development. This finding confirms the work of Fallon and Pote (2020), who emphasized that vocational students are exposed to dual stressors that necessitate more intensive and sustained counseling interventions. The present study also underscores that strong interpersonal relationships between BK teachers and students are a primary determinant of counseling effectiveness. This position reinforces Bordin's (1979) concept of the therapeutic alliance, which highlights trust, commitment, and shared goals as key factors influencing intervention outcomes. Finally, the findings demonstrate that BK teachers' support functions as a buffer against the negative effects of academic stress. This supports the Buffering Hypothesis proposed by Cohen and Wills (1985), which explains that social support can moderate the relationship between stress and psychological well-being. In other words, although academic demands remain high, students with access to consistent BK teacher support tend to experience reduced emotional burden.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the phenomenological study conducted in vocational high schools in Central Lombok, it can be concluded that the presence of school counselors (Guidance and Counseling teachers; BK teachers) holds substantial meaning for students experiencing academic anxiety. BK teachers are not only perceived as facilitators who assist students in understanding and addressing learning-related difficulties, but also as empathetic listeners, motivators, and sources of psychological safety in the face of academic pressure. Students reported that the presence of BK teachers helped them build self-confidence, reduce academic anxiety, and identify more effective learning strategies. Accordingly, BK teachers' presence is understood as a form of moral and emotional support that fosters students' optimism toward their academic achievement.

Furthermore, this study underscores that warm, open, and empathetic interpersonal relationships between BK teachers and students are a critical factor in alleviating academic anxiety. Thus, the meaning of BK teachers' presence extends beyond the formal function of counseling services to encompass roles as companions, sources of psychological reinforcement, and partners in students' educational journeys.

Based on the results of this study, several recommendations are proposed. First, for BK teachers, it is recommended that they continue to enhance the quality of counseling services, particularly in providing emotional support and effective strategies for managing academic anxiety. BK teachers should strive to remain accessible, empathetic, and capable of establishing warm, trust-based relationships with students.

Second, for school administrators, it is essential to provide full institutional support for guidance and counseling services. This support includes the provision of adequate facilities, such as comfortable and private counseling rooms, the development of preventive programs addressing academic anxiety, and continuous professional training for BK teachers to ensure their competencies evolve in line with students' psychological needs.

Third, for students, it is recommended that they adopt a more open and proactive attitude in communicating their academic concerns and emotional experiences to BK

teachers. Actively seeking counseling support may significantly assist students in managing academic anxiety and improving their academic performance.

Finally, for future researchers, this study may be further developed by expanding the participant pool or employing alternative methodological approaches. For example, quantitative or mixed-method designs could be used to measure levels of academic anxiety more systematically, thereby producing more comprehensive findings and broader contributions to educational research and practice.

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