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Story writing as educational therapy: A study of experiential learning model in reducing anxiety of elementary school students

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Abstract

This study explored the effectiveness of experiential learning-based story writing in reducing anxiety among primary school students, particularly in a pesantren environment. This model provides opportunities for students to express their emotions and experiences in a structured manner, thus helping them manage their anxiety more effectively. This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design involving 47 elementary school students from two pesantrens in Ponorogo. Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, observations, and anxiety measurement scales, both before and after the writing intervention. Data were analyzed using thematic methods to identify patterns of students' emotional changes. The results showed that writing stories helped students significantly reduce anxiety. The anxiety scale data showed a decrease in students with high anxiety levels from 70% to 35%, whereas the number of students with low anxiety increased from 10% to 40%. In addition, the expression of emotions through writing allows students to understand and manage their feelings better. This research provides a new contribution to the use of experiential learning based on story writing as an anxiety management strategy in pesantrens, which have focused more on academic and religious aspects. The results of this study are useful for educators, educational psychologists, and pesantren managers in designing learning programs that better support students' emotional well-being.

Keywords: Anxiety, Experiential learning, Pesantren, Story writing.

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1. Introduction

Anxiety is a psychological problem often experienced by primary school students that can hinder their learning, social, and emotional development. Academic pressure and social problems with peers are the main causes of anxiety [1]. If left untreated, anxiety can develop into a more serious disorder, hindering students' understanding of the material and their adaptation to the school environment.

Experiential learning is an effective approach to managing anxiety. This methodology assists children in fostering social and emotional intelligence through practical experiences relevant to daily life. The stage in experiential learning [2] from practical experience, reflecting, making concepts, and optimizing learning outcomes. According to the constructivist learning [3], social interaction in learning is important. The goal is to manage anxiety and improve students' knowledge and skills with guidance and support from others. The experiential learning model is an effective approach to managing anxiety. With this methodology, students' social and emotional intelligence is obtained from practical experiences that are concrete and relevant to daily life.

Experiential learning, based on experiential theory, is an educational concept that is strengthened by socio-cultural interaction [2]. According to the education association, the experience-based method is the right strategy for reflection to improve knowledge and skills so that they can be directly felt by the community [4]. Experience is a key element in the learning process that is carried out consistently in accordance with cognitive learning theory and behaviorism [5]. The stages in this method are that students experience directly, make observations, reflect, connect with concepts and theories, and are able to implement them in daily life [6]. This method serves to increase students' understanding, critical thinking skills, and active participation in learning. This method has a narrative composition that reduces stress and anxiety in students. In this approach, students can observe their personal experiences in an organized and constructive manner [7]. This method is in accordance with Gestalt psychology [8] which states that writing as a means of knowing and understanding the outside world holistically begins with analyzing certain components in detail. This has an impact on narrative composition as a means of self-expression and introspection, helping students control their emotions and improve their psychological well-being.

Story writing is a basic skill that plays an important role for elementary school students. These skills involve stages where they are asked to learn from experience according to clarity in the learning objectives [9]. Story writing skills can support the development of literacy because students can express their ideas and imagination through written language. By writing stories, students' emotions can be controlled in a more structured way [10]. Although many studies have discussed the benefits of writing for children, this study specifically examined the application of the experiential teaching model to elementary school students in Islamic boarding schools. This approach has a unique educational environment and characteristics because it has the potential to enhance student interaction and support cognitive and emotional development. In the context of education, several factors cause anxiety in students, including academic pressure, the influence of the social environment, and an unstable psychological state [11]. Academic pressure rises due to excessive demands, assignments, and evaluations that aggravate students' situations [12]. The influence of the social environment caused by unhealthy social interactions, such as bullying and high expectations of parents for their children, can worsen anxiety levels. An unstable psychological state can be observed through a lack of confidence and difficulty in managing emotions, which leads to an increase in students' anxiety.

Many theories discuss variables related to anxiety [13]. Based on cognitive assessment theory, anxiety arises when a person is under threat and lacks confidence, so they feel weak and unable to cope with the problem at hand [14]. This explanation suggests that students who experience academic barriers are more likely to have high levels of anxiety [15]. Based on Pasa, the theory of self-determination explains that a lack of perception of autonomy and learning competence can cause tension and anxiety in a person [16]. If students lack interaction with teachers during the learning process, their intrinsic motivation decreases, causing psychological pressure to increase. According to Festinger's social theory of comparative behavior, this lack of interaction can negatively impact students' motivation and psychological well-being [17]. Self-evaluation is often conducted by students themselves against their peers in social aspects and academic achievement. This can give rise to negative perceptions of oneself, which may cause anxiety and discomfort.

Several previous studies have corroborated the idea of student anxiety in learning research [18] states that stress due to high academic pressure can increase anxiety in students. This situation has a negative impact on student learning outcomes. Morava et al. [19] explain that students will lose control during learning when stress increases and consequently decreases motivation. Jiang and Ngien [20] indicate that excessive social interaction can lead to anxiety and a lack of self-confidence. Exploring the causes of anxiety enables teachers to develop appropriate learning strategies to promote mental health. Such strategies are more flexible, fostering a conducive atmosphere and positively impacting learning outcomes. In contemporary education, emotional and mental health are crucial, especially for adolescents who face strict environmental constraints, such as in pesantren-based institutions. The primary obstacle contributing to emotional and psychological problems among pesantren students is academic pressure, and strict pesantren regulations can further exacerbate anxiety and stress [21]. Strong mental health plays a crucial role in the academic and spiritual development of students in pesantren environments. Difficulties in controlling emotions can lead to psychological illnesses, such as increased anxiety and depression, which negatively affect social and academic interactions [22]. Unfortunately, some Islamic boarding schools prioritize cognitive and religious dimensions, thus ignoring students' emotional well-being.

Numerous studies indicate that anxiety in boarding school children impacts multiple facets of their lives. Li et al. [23] found that high academic anxiety can interfere with learning concentration and trigger emotional instability. In addition, Soha et al. [24] showed that a rigorous learning environment without adequate psychological support increases the risk of chronic stress in students. Another study by Ye et al. [25] stated that adolescents with intolerance of uncertainty are more

prone to experiencing excessive anxiety in a rule-filled environment. Meanwhile, Mega et al. [26] found that failure to manage emotions in a rigorous academic environment results in decreased self-confidence and motivation to learn. To overcome this challenge, teachers play an important role in helping students manage their emotions so that anxiety does not worsen [27]. One strategy that is effective in reducing anxiety is narrative writing, which helps students express their feelings in a reflective and structured manner. This strategy is in line with the theory of Suhartoyo and Fransiskus [28] and Beck on anxiety, which states that anxiety is the result of a complex interaction between cognitive and emotional processes. Thus, integrating self-expression-based approaches, such as writing, into the learning system can be an effective solution for supporting students' psychological well-being in pesantrens.

Writing stories provides a space for people to express their thoughts and feelings freely and honestly. This process helps them understand and manage their emotions, thereby reducing anxiety levels. According to various studies, writing plays a role in releasing negative emotions, reducing anxiety, and improving overall psychological well-being [29]. In addition, creative writing in education improves students' language skills, contributes to the development of their emotional intelligence, and helps students recognize, understand, and regulate emotions better, which ultimately has a positive impact on students' social interactions and mental well-being.

Rude et al. [30] showed that narrative-centered writing skills assist students in discovering and understanding their feelings, thereby reducing stress and anxiety. The writing process helps students self-reflect, process emotions, and structure their experiences in a more organized form. By formulating first-hand experiences into a more structured story, students can see problems from a different perspective, making it easier for them to understand and cope with their emotions. For students in pesantrens, writing experiential stories becomes a means of building emotional awareness, managing psychological stress, and reducing anxiety in facing academic and social challenges.

This research is urgent because the application of the *experiential learning* model in writing stories as a strategy to reduce anxiety in pesantrens has rarely been studied. To support students' emotional health, creative writing should be included in the pesantren curriculum as an approach that can help them express and manage their emotions more effectively. In addition, psychological counseling is also needed to help students deal with anxiety, but it has not been widely implemented in pesantrens [31]. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of *experiential learning-based* story writing in reducing the anxiety of pesantren students and filling a gap in the literature related to psychological interventions in faith-based education systems.

The novelty of this research lies in the application of the *experiential learning* model in story writing as a strategy to reduce students' anxiety in pesantren environments.

Although some studies have linked experiential learning to anxiety management in faith-based educational settings, most previous studies have addressed the benefits of writing for language and cognitive development. The discussion in this study is to write stories based on students' experiences in Islamic boarding schools, who tend to be under strict academic pressure and regulations. This study discusses how writing stories can be used as a means to reduce anxiety and control emotions. In managing anxiety, students can write stories based on their experiences and incorporate them into the education system. In addition, it can provide new knowledge and insights into designing a pesantren curriculum that is more conducive to mental health. This research also provides learning for future researchers about the importance of education-based psychological therapy that is in accordance with a learning system based on cultural and religious values.

Many studies have focused on the benefits of writing for cognitive development and its impact on linguistic aspects, while research related to writing experiential stories to lower anxiety in elementary school students in boarding schools is rarely conducted. This study offers a new perspective on the efficacy of creative writing as an emotional reflection technique for pesantren students under increasing scholastic and religious pressure. This research integrates these strategies into the learning system, provides practical solutions to manage students' anxiety, and offers ideas for developing a more beneficial curriculum for mental health. This study further advances the field of education-focused psychological interventions, particularly within the framework of culturally and religiously oriented learning systems.

This study investigates the efficacy of story writing as a method to improve emotional well-being and reduce anxiety among Islamic boarding school students. This study had three main objectives. Initially, it assessed the influence of writing activities on students' emotional well-being, especially self-expression and stress relief. Second, it aimed to evaluate changes in students' anxiety levels before and after the story-writing intervention to ensure the efficacy of this approach as an anxiety reduction strategy.

Third, to identify how students write stories based on their emotional experiences, particularly distressing experiences, by applying the *experiential learning* model to the context of learning in pesantren-based primary schools. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the design of learning approaches that are more inclusive and support students' psychological well-being in a pesantren environment.

This study contributes to the literature on emotion management through story writing using an *experiential learning* approach in the context of pesantren education. By highlighting how this method can be applied in an environment that emphasizes both academic and religious aspects, this study provides new insights for pesantren educators and managers in designing a more holistic learning program.

This method not only assists students in fostering academic skills but also improves their emotional well-being, which often does not receive adequate focus in the educational framework of Islamic boarding schools. This study presents prospects for further research on writing-based interventions in faith-based education and explores the adaptation of these tactics in other learning environments to improve students' psychological well-being.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Educational and Psychological Contexts in Pesantren

Islamic boarding schools play an important role in the framework of Indonesian education by combining Islamic principles, ethics, and contemporary educational paradigms. Unlike public schools, pesantren prioritize academic and religious education while fostering an atmosphere of discipline characterized by strict regulations that dictate students' daily routines [32]. This approach seeks to cultivate students' character and discipline; however, it simultaneously exerts a psychological influence on their emotional growth. Rusli and Saptandari [33] explained that pesantren arrangements can be a source of stress for students, especially for newcomers to the dormitory-based education system. Rigid regulations, strict academic schedules, and limited family involvement exacerbate emotional turmoil and anxiety, and students who are not accustomed to a controlled environment are likely to have difficulty adjusting, potentially increasing stress and emotional disturbances. However, for some students, the pesantren environment can also be a place that builds spirituality and character, provides emotional resilience, and helps them face life challenges.

Several relevant theories can be used to understand the impact of pesantren education on the psychology of students. The self-adjustment Theory by Di Leo and Muis [34] explains that individuals in a new environment will experience phases of confusion and emotional challenges until they finally accept and integrate with the environment. Students who are new to pesantren generally have difficulty adapting, and for those who cannot adjust well, constant pressure can trigger anxiety and prolonged stress. Furthermore, the Stress and Coping theory by Kalmanti et al. [35] states that stress arises when individuals feel that environmental demands exceed their resources.

Within the pesantren framework, students who experience scholastic and social difficulties without considerable assistance are vulnerable to increased mental pressure. Social Development Theory [36] explains that cognitive and emotional development are significantly shaped by social interaction. Positive relationships between students and the pesantren community can improve their ability to cope with emotional discomfort, whereas students who experience isolation are more prone to anxiety.

Shi et al. [37] Theory of Psychological Resilience emphasizes that individuals with emotional resilience can recover more quickly from life's stresses and challenges. In pesantren, spiritual principles and ethics play a significant role in fostering students' psychological resilience, enabling them to develop a constructive mindset for stress management. The Theory of Emotion Regulation by Matthews et al. [38] posits that an individual's ability to manage emotions influences their mental well-being. Students in boarding schools with effective emotion regulation skills are better equipped to handle academic and social pressures, whereas those who struggle with emotional regulation are at a higher risk of excessive worry.

An inclusive approach is crucial to help improve the mental health of Islamic boarding school adolescents by understanding their educational and psychological states. Pesantren can implement counseling programs to assist students in managing stress and anxiety. Additionally, affirmative social relations must be strengthened by building a nurturing educational atmosphere. Engaging in self-reflection through narrative composition or a personal journal can serve as an excellent method to assist students in understanding and regulating their emotions. Offering instruction in coping skills is essential to equip students to manage stress using more adaptive techniques. Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) can create a conducive educational atmosphere, which can encourage students' success in both academic and religious fields, while also leading to improvements in their mental and emotional health.

2.2. Anxiety in Students

Anxiety is a symptom experienced by individuals, caused by psychological and environmental factors. These factors can intensify a person's anxiety levels. In boarding schools, such as Islamic boarding schools, emotional anxiety tends to be higher than that faced by students in public schools. High demands, strict rules, and high discipline contribute to these conditions. Students are required to meet the skill standards set in Islamic boarding schools, which adds to their emotional anxiety. If not addressed promptly, this anxiety can impact students' personalities. The pressure to meet educational standards can worsen emotional anxiety, leading to decreased self-confidence, social isolation, and severe emotional disorders [39]. In the pesantren environment, social and spiritual communication are emphasized as an integral part of students' lives. This causes the emergence of anxiety, which, if not addressed, will impact students' mental health, which is worsening. With such pressure, students who are unable to master and adapt to the situation will experience stress and try to withdraw from the social environment. Schools based on religion as a standard for carrying out their learning need to pay significant attention to helping students manage stress. Mentoring techniques such as counseling and training practices in controlling emotions and adaptive learning processes can help improve students' psychology. With this technique, Islamic boarding schools need to create a learning environment that integrates students' academic success and mental health.

2.3. Writing Therapy and Emotional Expression

Writing therapy is a good approach to strengthen students' mental and emotional well-being [40]. This technique can enable individuals to manage their emotions deeply and help reduce internal anxiety, trauma, and a wide variety of emotional illnesses. Writing therapy can enable individuals to process unpleasant feelings, reconstruct difficulties from a wide variety of alternative views, and regain control of a state that is perceived as an emotional burden [41]. Previous studies have shown that documenting personal experiences can affect emotional states and reduce stressful conditions over time.

Previous research conducted by Suhr et al. [42] revealed that if individuals consistently write down their emotional experiences, they show a reduced state of despair, in addition to improving self-awareness and mental health. This process

requires deep contemplation of personal events and related emotions, allowing one to develop adaptive coping strategies in response to stress. In addition, writing therapy can be used as a better way to explore emotions and process stories related to individual experiences, thereby increasing self-understanding in a more general context [43]. In the field of education and personal development, writing therapy can be a useful tool for strengthening students' emotional health [44]. Writing can be used as a medium for self-expression and a form of reflective therapy, helping students cope with academic, social, and emotional stress. As a result, the application of writing therapy in educational settings, such as Islamic boarding schools, can bring significant benefits in helping students reduce anxiety and improve their emotional health.

2.4. The Role of Writing in Reducing Anxiety

The research conducted by Shen et al. [45] showed that active writing can help individuals reduce anxiety. Niles et al. [44] support this by revealing that writing can aid in the identification and articulation of emotions that are difficult to explain verbally. This technique helps in the release of emotions and self-reflection, allowing a person to better explore and manage their feelings. In a school setting, such as a boarding school, writing is a very effective tool for helping students manage the stress they face. Creating a narrative or personal note enables students to systematically process their emotions.

Schanche et al. [46] emphasize that writing activities can improve students' interpretation of their emotions, thereby reducing anxiety. This activity requires self-introspection, which allows an individual to reflect on their experiences and gain new meaning from the situation they are facing. Writing can be useful as a tool to increase personal emotional awareness and help students develop effective coping techniques. Additionally, writing can help reduce negative feelings by creating an individual's psychological space in the face of life's challenges. Niles et al. [44] state that students who consistently record their emotional experiences experience decreased anxiety and improved mental health.

Consequently, creative or expressive writing can serve as an effective method for reducing anxiety, especially among adolescents in faith-based educational settings, such as boarding schools, which impose significant academic and spiritual expectations. By implementing this method, educational institutions can help students better manage their emotional distress and create a psychologically healthier learning environment.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design. A case study was chosen because of the in-depth exploration of students' experiences in writing stories as a strategy to manage their anxiety. A case study emphasizes a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon of an individual [47]. This approach is in line with Kolb [2] theory of experiential learning, which emphasizes that learning occurs through cycles of direct experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application. Using a case study design, this research holistically understands how story writing helps students overcome their anxiety.

3.2. Participants and Sampling Design

This study involved 47 primary school students from two Madrasahs in Ponorogo, Indonesia. The sample consisted of 19 students from MI Pas Baitul Quran and 28 students from MI Al-Kautsar, grouped by their respective institutions. All participants were between the ages of 9 and 11, the main developmental phase for children's emotional and social growth. Sample selection was carried out using the purposive sampling method, which is a subject-selection methodology based on certain criteria relevant to the research objectives [48]. The 9-11-year age range was chosen because children are currently experiencing rapid cognitive and emotional growth, so their reactions to writing therapy can result in more consistent insights. According to Degges-White [49] idea of Psychosocial Development [49] children at this stage of development begin to build confidence and self-identity and learn to manage their emotions. Therefore, this age group is suitable for examining the impact of writing therapy on anxiety levels.

3.3. Research Procedures

Interventions, baseline and endpoint measures, and analysis of the effects of interventions on students' anxiety were all phases of this research.

1. Intervention: Experiential Learning Model in Story Writing

Students carried out experiential learning-based narrative writing for six weeks, and the implementation consisted of two sessions each week, lasting 90 minutes each. Each session consisted of four steps according to the experiential learning cycle [2].

- a. Concrete Experience: carried out by reading inspirational stories that touch on a variety of emotions, giving students their first experience.
 - b. Reflective Observation: Students are asked to reflect on their emotional experiences related to the stories they read.
 - c. Abstract Conceptualization: Students develop concepts to construct their own stories based on sad experiences.
 - d. Active Experiment: Students write and share their stories with their peers, then discuss how this approach helps them manage their anxiety so they can draw lessons from their experiences in this duplication.
- 2. Anxiety Measurement Instrument**

Before and after the intervention, students' anxiety levels were measured using the Child Anxiety Scale (CAS) developed by Ishikawa et al. [50]. This scale was used to assess changes in students' anxiety levels before and after the writing program.

3.4. Data Collection Instruments

This study used several data collection techniques to gain a more holistic understanding.

1. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Teachers and students were interviewed to understand how they perceived the impact of writing stories on their anxiety.
2. **Participatory Observation:** The researcher observed students' expressions and behavior during the writing session to see how they managed their emotions through writing.
3. **Reflective Journal-** Students were asked to write a reflective journal at the end of each session to document their feelings during the story-writing process.
4. **Anxiety Scale (CAS):** This scale was used to quantitatively measure changes in students' anxiety levels.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was conducted qualitatively and quantitatively to provide comprehensive results.

1. Qualitative Analysis

The data analysis technique used the theory proposed by Jaeger [51]. Interview transcripts, observations, and reflective journals were coded and categorized based on the main themes, such as the expression of emotions, behavioral changes, and students' self-understanding after writing the story. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns that illustrate how story writing helps students manage anxiety.

2. Quantitative Analysis: Descriptive Statistics Test

Data from the Child Anxiety Scale (CAS) were analyzed using descriptive statistics to compare children's anxiety levels before and after the intervention program. Decreased anxiety levels were evaluated to establish the effectiveness of the experiential learning-based writing therapy.

4. Results

4.1. Analysis of Students' Emotional Changes

Based on research conducted at the research site, it was observed that story writing activities provide a space for children to express their feelings without fear of criticism. This technique helps individuals better understand and manage their emotions. Through reflection in writing, children begin to understand their experiences from a broader perspective, thereby becoming better equipped to cope with their emotional pain. These results imply that story writing functions not only as a means of self-expression but also as an effective strategy for supporting students' emotional well-being. Students' emotions changed significantly after six weeks of the narrative writing curriculum. They demonstrated an increased ability to identify and express their feelings more openly. Prior to the program, many students had difficulty articulating their feelings to others, including friends, teachers, and family. However, after the intervention, they felt more comfortable expressing emotions, especially negative ones such as sadness, anger, or anxiety, through writing. The following outlines the changes in students' emotions before and after story writing training.

Table 1.

Distribution of students' emotional changes before and after participating in the writing programme.

Emotions	Before the programme (%)	After programme (%)
Sadness	45	25
Restlessness	55	30
Happiness	20	60
Anger	35	15

The experiential learning-based story writing program had a positive impact on students' emotional well-being. The data showed a significant decrease in negative emotions such as sadness (45% to 25%), anxiety (55% to 30%), and anger (35% to 15%). In contrast, happiness increased from 20% to 60% in the same period. The decrease in sadness and anxiety suggests that writing helps students express their feelings more openly, reduces emotional distress, and increases their self-understanding. Reduced anger indicates that writing becomes a means of reflection, helping students manage their emotions more constructively. Increased happiness after the program reflects that writing serves as an effective medium of expression and a strategy for improving psychological well-being. By understanding and processing emotions through writing, students become more confident and ready to face the academic and social challenges of their everyday lives.

4.2. The Effect of Writing Stories on Student Anxiety

One of the main findings of this study was the reduction in students' anxiety levels. The results of surveys conducted before and after the program showed that the students experienced a significant reduction in anxiety. Prior to the program, most students reported moderate to high levels of anxiety related to academic activities and boarding school life. However, after the six-week writing course, their anxiety levels decreased steadily. The change in students' anxiety levels can be seen in the figure below, which was measured using a 5-point Likert scale. On this scale, a 1 indicates "not anxious," while a 5 indicates "very anxious."

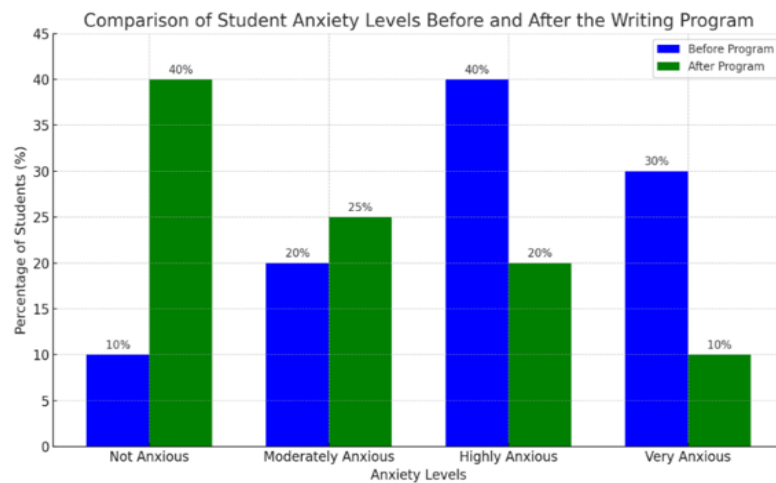


Figure 1.
Comparison of students' anxiety levels before and after the writing program.

The figure shows a significant decrease in students' anxiety levels after the story writing program. Before the program, 40% of the students were highly anxious and 30% were severely anxious; however, after the program, these numbers dropped to 10% and 20%, respectively. In contrast, the number of non-anxious students increased from 10% to 40%, demonstrating the positive effects of writing therapy. These results prove that story writing as an educational therapy is effective in reducing students' anxiety through emotional expression and self-reflection. The experiential learning model in this program can be a solution for educational institutions to support students' mental health.

4.3. Identified Themes

Based on thematic analysis, three main themes emerged after the students participated in the writing program: emotional development, anxiety reduction, and mindset change. Writing stories helps students transform negative emotions such as sadness and anger into something more positive and meaningful. This process helps them express their feelings in a more purposeful and creative way, enabling better understanding and management of their emotions. Previous research supports these findings; for example, research conducted by Mordechay et al. [52] found that expressive writing improves emotional health by helping individuals regulate emotions and cope with stress. Loftus et al. [53] demonstrated that writing-based therapy is effective in reducing anxiety in children with emotional disorders because it provides them with a safe and structured environment to process their feelings. Therefore, story writing functions as an educational therapy that assists students in managing their emotions and significantly decreases anxiety.

4.4. Anxiety Reduction through Self-Expression

Writing serves as an effective means of self-expression for managing student anxiety. Through writing, students can release their emotional burdens and express concerns that are difficult to convey verbally. Many students use writing as a form of "venting" to ease the fear, anxiety, or stress they experience in school or boarding school environments. Schroder et al. [54] showed that expressive writing is effective in reducing anxiety by helping individuals process their emotions. Wang and Tang [55] discovered that regular writing increases psychological well-being and reduces stress. These data demonstrate that writing is not merely a creative activity but also an emotional treatment that benefits students' mental health.

4.5. Improved Self-Understanding and Reflection

Writing helps children to understand and regulate their emotions more effectively. By articulating their emotions through narratives, individuals can reflect on their personal experiences, identify emotional patterns, and understand their influence on interpersonal behavior and relationships. This technique reduces anxiety while improving self-awareness and critical thinking skills. Lu et al. [56] suggest that expressive writing improves emotional regulation and psychological well-being. Documenting emotions allows individuals to understand and manage negative sentiments, thereby reducing tension and anxiety. These findings are consistent with those of students who reported improved emotional regulation after engaging in writing activities.

5. Discussion

As a result of the writing program conducted for six weeks, students' ability to comprehend, articulate, and control emotions significantly improved. Initially, students struggled to articulate negative emotions, such as worry and despair; however, after writing frequently, they improved their ability to understand and manage their feelings in a constructive way.

Writing is used as a means of introspection that assists students in managing their personal experiences without fear. Research conducted by Pennebaker [57] stated that expressive writing can reduce stress and improve mental health. Harris et al. [58] shows that story writing helps manage students' anxiety through the story-writing process. Azuaje et al. [59] suggest that expressive writing can increase emotional awareness as well as manage emotional awareness.

Experiential learning-based storytelling has been shown to be effective in reducing students' anxiety [2]. The model involves four stages: concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation, which help students to gradually manage their emotions. In the early stages, students write down their experiences and feelings, which helps them to identify and release anxiety that is difficult to express verbally. Argudo [60] showed that expressive writing helps improve emotional regulation and relieve stress. In the reflection stage, students evaluate their experiences and find ways to manage anxiety more systematically [61]. In the conceptualization stage, students begin to form a healthier mindset and look at their experiences from a broader perspective, as stated by de Ruiter and Thomaes [62].

This process helps them understand that their anxiety can be managed. In the active experimental stage, they applied the strategies they learned to cope with anxiety in their daily lives. Fava and Tomba [63] found that individuals who regularly wrote experienced improved emotional well-being and a reduction in long-term anxiety. The results of the theme analysis show that the narrative writing program based on Experiential Learning facilitates students' emotional development, reduces anxiety, and changes mindsets. Through writing, children can articulate their emotions more systematically, understand their sentiments, and manage their anxiety more effectively. Writing facilitates the transformation of students' unpleasant emotions into creative expressions, thereby increasing their emotional growth. The reflection phase in the Experiential Learning paradigm allows individuals to acknowledge their emotions and foster psychological resilience. Jacques and Alves [64] corroborated these findings, suggesting that expressive writing improves emotional well-being. Writing offers a safe environment for children to express their anxiety. Writing reflections helps individuals understand and manage their concerns. Gortner et al. [65] found that expressive writing significantly reduced anxiety in those experiencing emotional discomfort. During the shift in mentality, students began to view challenges from a broader perspective and developed more adaptable cognitive strategies.

The reflective writing process strengthens self-awareness and problem-solving. Studies by Woldt and Nenad [66] and Sajidin and Supeno [67] show that reflective writing improves cognitive function and critical thinking skills. Overall, story writing serves not only as a means of expression but also as an effective strategy for improving students' emotional and psychological well-being through the Experiential Learning approach.

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrated that EL-based story writing effectively reduces anxiety in elementary school students. After six weeks of the program, significant changes were observed in students' emotional aspects, anxiety levels, and mindset. Students became better able to recognize and express emotions that were previously difficult to verbalize. Happiness levels increased to 60%, while students who did not experience anxiety increased to 40%, indicating that writing helped them understand and manage their emotions more effectively. Thematic analysis identified three main impacts: emotional development, anxiety reduction, and changes in mindset. Writing provides a reflective space for students to process their feelings, reduce emotional distress, and develop positive and adaptive mindsets. The results of this study also have practical implications for Pesantren education. Teachers can integrate writing activities as a learning method that not only improves literacy skills but also supports students' emotional health. Thus, writing can be an effective tool for creating a more conducive learning environment for students' mental well-being. However, this study has limitations, such as the limited sample coverage of two madrasahs in Ponorogo, the relatively short duration of the program, and the lack of analysis of external factors such as family environment and social interactions outside the classroom. For future research, it is recommended that the scope of participants be expanded, the intervention be carried out over a longer period, and external factors that can affect student anxiety be considered. This research can provide more comprehensive insights into developing writing therapy-based learning strategies to support students' emotional well-being.

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