



Islamic Counseling as an Intervention for Enhancing Social Empathy and Caring Behavior among Secondary School Students

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of an Islamic counseling approach in fostering students' social empathy and concern for others at senior high school. A qualitative descriptive design was employed to explore the counseling process, the forms of Islamic counseling implemented, and the perceived contribution of Islamic values to students' social development. Data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews with guidance and counseling teachers, and analysis of relevant school documents. The data were analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña framework through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings indicate that students' social empathy and concern were generally adequate but remained uneven, with insensitive behaviors such as teasing peers based on socioeconomic differences still occurring in everyday interactions. Islamic counseling was implemented through individual counseling, group counseling, personal and relational approaches, and recurring Islamic habituation activities, including Qur'an reading before the Dhuhr prayer. The counseling process emphasized active listening, contextual Islamic guidance, self-reflection, and the internalization of values such as respect, *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), *ta'awun* (mutual assistance), and *rahmah* (compassion). The findings suggest that these practices contributed to greater awareness of the emotional consequences of interpersonal behavior and encouraged more caring and respectful interactions among students. The study highlights the potential of Islamic counseling as a holistic approach to integrating psychological, spiritual, moral, and social development in secondary education.

Keywords: Islamic Counselling, Social Empathy, Social Concern, Guidance and Counselling, Islamic Values

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INTRODUCTION

Upper secondary education is not solely concerned with students' academic achievement but also plays a critical role in developing their social, emotional, moral, and spiritual capacities. Students are expected to acquire the ability to understand others, establish healthy interpersonal relationships, demonstrate concern for their social environment, and assume responsibility for their actions (Ilham et al., 2023; Mannan et al., 2024). Schools therefore have a broader responsibility to create conditions that support students' development as socially responsible individuals (Hasanah, 2021; Shinta, 2024). Within this context, guidance and counseling services constitute an important component of the educational process because they provide systematic assistance for students in understanding themselves, responding to developmental challenges, resolving personal and interpersonal problems, and developing constructive patterns of behavior.



In school settings, guidance and counseling should not be understood merely as a remedial service for students experiencing psychological or academic difficulties (Mudarris et al., 2022; Obaid et al., 2024). Rather, it is a developmental and preventive process intended to facilitate students' optimal growth across personal, social, academic, and career domains (Gadaire et al., 2020; Muthi'ah & Setiawan, 2025; Mutia & Hargiana, 2021). This broader function is particularly relevant to the development of students' social behavior, including empathy, respect, cooperation, and concern for others. Nevertheless, the implementation of counseling services in educational institutions has frequently emphasized psychological adjustment and problem solving, while the spiritual and moral dimensions of students' development have received comparatively less systematic attention (Arsyad et al., 2025; Paramansyah et al., 2024; Sari, 2023). Such an orientation may limit the capacity of counseling to address the deeper value systems that influence how students interpret social situations and regulate their behavior toward others.

The development of social empathy and concern for others is influenced not only by psychological factors but also by the values and meanings through which individuals understand their relationships with other people (Fuqoha et al., 2025; Naqiyah et al., 2022; Prismadianto et al., 2025). In this regard, spirituality can provide an important source of moral orientation and self-regulation. Within Islamic education, values such as compassion (*rahmah*), mutual assistance (*ta'awun*), respect for human dignity, responsibility, and care for others constitute fundamental principles of interpersonal conduct. Integrating these values into school counseling may therefore provide a more holistic framework for addressing students' social development. Islamic counseling offers such a framework by integrating psychological assistance with Islamic teachings and spiritual development (Abdurrahman et al., 2021; Bagis et al., 2024; Fahmi et al., 2024), with the broader aim of supporting individuals in achieving well-being and meaningful functioning in both worldly and spiritual dimensions.

Islamic counseling, however, should not be reduced to the delivery of religious advice or moral instruction. Its distinctive contribution lies in the integration of religious values into a reflective counseling process through which students are encouraged to understand their experiences, evaluate their behavior, and develop internally motivated commitments to positive change (Ayeti et al., 2024; Fuqoha et al., 2025; Yuliza & Daulay, 2023). When a school counselor introduces Islamic principles in addressing interpersonal problems, the process involves more than transferring normative knowledge. Islamic values can function as a *frame of reference* through which students interpret their own actions, emotions, and relationships with others. Through reflection and dialogue, students may be encouraged to examine whether their behavior is consistent with values such as compassion, justice, respect, responsibility, and mutual assistance. This distinction is important because externally imposed compliance may produce situational behavioral change, whereas internalized values have greater potential to guide students' behavior when direct supervision is absent. Accordingly, the effectiveness of Islamic counseling should be examined not simply in terms of the transmission of religious messages but in terms of how religious values are incorporated into students' processes of self-reflection, moral reasoning, and interpersonal behavior.

One of the central social capacities relevant to this process is social empathy. Social empathy refers to an individual's capacity to understand and respond appropriately to the emotional experiences, circumstances, and perspectives of others. It involves not only recognizing another person's feelings but also developing an awareness of the social conditions that shape those experiences. Closely related to empathy is social concern, which is manifested through attention to others' needs, willingness to provide assistance, supportive behavior, and a sense of responsibility toward the social environment. Both capacities are

essential for establishing constructive interpersonal relationships and fostering a supportive school climate (Buirski, 2022; Kim et al., 2024; Purwanto & Wafa, 2023). Students who possess stronger empathy and social concern are more likely to respond constructively to peers' difficulties, avoid behaviors that may cause social harm, and participate in mutually supportive relationships.

The importance of these capacities becomes particularly evident in the context of contemporary adolescent social interaction. Adolescents increasingly construct their social identities through interactions with peers and through comparison with others. Consequently, peer norms can strongly influence how students perceive social status, difference, and interpersonal relationships. In some school environments, differences in socioeconomic circumstances, appearance, possessions, or modes of transportation may become informal markers of social status. When such markers are used to ridicule or marginalize peers, the resulting behavior cannot necessarily be interpreted only as an individual deficit in empathy. It may also reflect peer-group norms that normalize exclusion, comparison, or ridicule. This suggests that interventions directed exclusively at individual students may have limited and temporary effects if the social norms surrounding their behavior remain unchanged. Effective counseling therefore needs to help students critically reflect not only on their individual actions but also on the social values and peer expectations that shape those actions.

Despite these findings, an important research gap remains. Previous studies on Islamic counseling have predominantly examined broad outcomes such as character formation, moral development, spiritual awareness, or general improvements in students' behavior. Studies specifically examining how Islamic counseling is implemented as a counseling process to strengthen social empathy and concern for others remain relatively limited. More importantly, there is insufficient attention to the mechanisms through which Islamic values are translated from normative teachings into students' reflective processes and observable interpersonal behavior. This gap is significant because the presence of Islamic values in counseling materials does not automatically demonstrate that those values have been internalized by students or incorporated into their everyday social decision-making. Understanding the implementation process is therefore essential for determining how Islamic counseling can move beyond religious instruction toward meaningful changes in students' social attitudes and behavior.

The issue is particularly relevant in the context of SMA Negeri 1 Portibi, North Padang Lawas Regency, where social interactions among students provide an important setting for examining the development of empathy and social concern. Preliminary observations of the school context indicate the persistence of behaviors reflecting limited concern for peers and the surrounding social environment, including indifference toward classmates experiencing difficulties, reluctance to help others, inadequate respect for differences, and limited sensitivity to the social conditions of peers. Such behaviors may be associated with broader changes in patterns of adolescent interaction, the influence of digital technology, changing peer relationships, and insufficient habituation of social values in students' everyday lives (Natashasya & Winingsih, 2025). These circumstances indicate the need for a counseling approach that addresses both students' psychological development and the moral-spiritual foundations underlying their interpersonal behavior.

Within this context, Islamic counseling may provide a distinctive approach because it connects students' psychological experiences with an ethical and spiritual framework that emphasizes responsibility toward others. Rather than positioning students merely as recipients of moral advice, counseling can facilitate dialogue and self-reflection concerning concrete interpersonal experiences, such as responding to a friend's difficulties, dealing with socioeconomic differences, resolving interpersonal conflict, or resisting peer pressure to ridicule others. Through this process, Islamic principles may become personally meaningful

standards for evaluating behavior and making social decisions. Such an approach also has the potential to address the influence of peer norms by encouraging students to critically examine whether commonly accepted behaviors within their social groups are consistent with the moral values they claim to uphold.

Accordingly, this study addresses the need for a more contextually grounded understanding of how Islamic counseling is implemented in secondary education to strengthen students' social empathy and concern for others. Rather than focusing solely on whether Islamic counseling produces positive outcomes, this study examines the process, strategies, and experiences involved in its implementation by school guidance and counseling teachers. The study is therefore intended to describe and analyze how Islamic counseling is implemented by guidance and counseling teachers to foster students' social empathy and concern for others at SMA Negeri 1 Portibi, North Padang Lawas Regency. By focusing on the implementation process and the relationship between Islamic values, students' self-reflection, and social behavior, this study is expected to contribute to the growing literature on spiritually integrated school counseling and provide practical insights for developing counseling practices that support students' psychological, moral, spiritual, and social development in an integrated manner.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to obtain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of an Islamic counseling approach in fostering students' social empathy and concern for others. The study was conducted at SMA Negeri 1 Portibi, North Padang Lawas Regency, Indonesia, selected purposively because the school implements guidance and counseling services that incorporate Islamic values into student support activities. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focused on exploring the processes, practices, experiences, and contextual factors underlying the implementation of Islamic counseling rather than measuring its effectiveness through predetermined quantitative indicators.

The participants were guidance and counseling teachers who were directly involved in implementing Islamic counseling services at the school. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement, practical experience, and knowledge of the counseling activities relevant to the research focus. The selection criterion was intended to ensure that the information obtained reflected sustained engagement with the implementation process rather than incidental knowledge of school counseling activities. However, because the participants were drawn from a specific professional position within one school, the study recognizes that the findings primarily represent the perspectives of service providers and should not be interpreted as a comprehensive representation of students' or other stakeholders' experiences. This limitation is considered in interpreting the scope and transferability of the findings.

Data were collected through non-participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Observation was conducted to examine how Islamic counseling activities were implemented in the school context, including the ways in which Islamic values were incorporated into counseling practices and students' social development activities. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with guidance and counseling teachers explored the implementation process, strategies used to foster empathy and social concern, supporting factors, and challenges encountered during service delivery. Relevant documents, including counseling activity records, school activity reports, and records of religious habituation activities such as Qur'an reading, were examined to complement and contextualize the observational and interview data. Data were analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña framework, involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion

drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2015). The analysis proceeded iteratively, allowing emerging patterns concerning counseling practices, students' social development, enabling conditions, and implementation challenges to be identified and interpreted in relation to the research objectives.

To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, the researchers conducted cross-checking between information obtained through interviews and evidence contained in school documentation and observed activities. Particular attention was given to the consistency between participants' accounts of Islamic counseling practices and documented evidence, including records of Qur'an-reading habituation and counseling-related activities. This procedure was used to reduce the possibility of relying solely on retrospective self-reports and to strengthen the evidentiary basis of the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Condition of Students' Social Empathy and Social Concern

The relatively positive but uneven condition of students' social empathy and concern. The guidance and counseling teacher described the general condition of students as fairly good, while also identifying a number of students who still demonstrated insensitive or inappropriate interpersonal behavior. One of the most frequently identified behaviors was teasing related to socioeconomic differences, particularly differences in students' vehicles and appearance.

The counselor explained that some students occasionally made jokes about classmates whose vehicles were perceived as less adequate than those of other students. The behavior was generally observed in informal situations, particularly when students arrived at or left school. According to the counselor, such behavior was sometimes treated by the students as ordinary joking rather than as a form of social harm. This finding suggests that problematic social behavior may occur in subtle forms and may not necessarily appear as overt interpersonal conflict.

"There are still students who make fun of their friends, especially when they see differences in their economic condition or the vehicles they use."

The finding also indicates that students' social empathy was not uniform. Some students were described as demonstrating concern when their peers encountered difficulties, whereas others were less sensitive to the feelings and circumstances of their classmates. The variation suggests that social empathy develops differently among students even within the same educational environment.

From the perspective of multidimensional empathy, the behavior observed by the counselor can be interpreted in relation to perspective taking and empathic concern. Perspective taking involves the tendency to understand another person's point of view, whereas empathic concern concerns feelings of warmth, compassion, and concern for another person experiencing difficulty. The teasing behavior identified in this study indicates that some students may not consistently consider how their comments are experienced by the target of the interaction.

However, the finding should be interpreted cautiously. The assessment that students' social empathy was "fairly good" was based primarily on the counselor's observations rather than on direct assessments of students' experiences. Consequently, the data do not establish the prevalence or intensity of empathy deficits among students. Instead, they provide a practitioner-based description of recurring social behaviors that became relevant to the implementation of Islamic counseling.

The Implementation Process of Islamic Counseling

The forms and processes through which Islamic counseling was implemented. The data indicate that Islamic counseling was not implemented as a single, isolated counseling technique. Rather, it was integrated into individual counseling, group counseling, personal approaches, and recurring Islamic habituation activities. The counseling process generally began with establishing a trusting relationship between the counselor and the student. The counselor first listened to the student's problem before providing guidance. Islamic values were then connected to the student's concrete experiences and interpersonal behavior. This process allowed religious principles to be discussed in relation to situations encountered in students' everyday lives.

Table 1. Forms of Islamic Counseling Implementation at SMA Negeri 1 Portibi

Counseling Component	Implementation Practice	Primary Purpose	Islamic Value Emphasized
Individual counseling	Listening to students' problems, exploring the underlying situation, and providing contextual Islamic guidance	Addressing individual problems and encouraging self-reflection	Responsibility, respect, compassion
Group counseling	Discussing interpersonal issues and allowing students to exchange perspectives and experiences	Developing positive peer interaction and social awareness	Brotherhood, mutual assistance
Personal/family-like approach	Maintaining warm, non-judgmental relationships beyond formal counseling sessions	Building trust and facilitating openness	Compassion, respect, care
Islamic habituation	Qur'an reading before the Dhuhr prayer two to three times per week	Reinforcing spiritual reflection and religious habituation	Spiritual awareness, moral responsibility
Contextual advice	Relating Islamic teachings to students' everyday interpersonal situations	Connecting religious principles with actual behavior	Respect, sincerity, concern for others

Table 1 show that the counselor's approach emphasized relationship building before behavioral guidance. The personal approach was particularly important because the counselor described students as being more willing to disclose their problems when they perceived the counselor as approachable and non-judgmental. Thus, the formal counseling process was supported by interpersonal interactions occurring outside scheduled counseling sessions.

The individual counseling process also followed a sequence of listening, understanding the problem, providing contextual guidance, and encouraging reflection. Islamic teachings were therefore not introduced as an isolated set of prescriptions but were connected to the student's particular circumstances. In group counseling, the process created opportunities for students to hear alternative perspectives from their peers. This was particularly relevant to social empathy because students could encounter experiences and viewpoints that differed from their own.

In addition, the school conducted Qur'an-reading habituation before the Dhuhr prayer approximately two to three times per week. Within the context of this study, the activity functioned as a recurring religious practice that accompanied the counseling process. The data do not permit the conclusion that this activity independently produced behavioral change; rather, it appeared to provide a broader spiritual environment in which the values discussed during counseling could be repeatedly reinforced.

The Contribution of Islamic Counseling to Students' Social Empathy

The perceived contribution of Islamic counseling to students' social empathy. The counselor reported a decrease in incidents of teasing and greater awareness among some students regarding the consequences of making negative comments about their peers. This change was particularly visible in situations involving socioeconomic differences. The

counselor explained that students were encouraged to consider the feelings of the person who became the target of the joke and to recognize that differences in economic circumstances should not be used as a basis for humiliation. The counselor stated:

“I remind them that we should not judge or make fun of someone because of what they have. We have to think about how that person feels when being treated that way.”

The counseling process therefore encouraged students to move from an immediate evaluation of another person toward consideration of the other person’s subjective experience. In practical terms, students were encouraged to ask themselves how they would feel if they were placed in the same position as the person being teased. This reflective process represents an important mechanism through which perspective taking may be encouraged.

A second dimension involved the development of concern for others. Islamic teachings concerning compassion, respect, mutual assistance, and the prohibition of degrading others were used to provide moral meaning to students’ interpersonal experiences. The counselor described the purpose of the guidance not simply as preventing students from violating school rules but as helping them understand why respectful treatment of others is morally important.

“Respecting other people is not only because of their position or status. We teach students to respect others sincerely because every person deserves to be respected.”

The findings suggest that repeated counseling conversations provided opportunities for students to reconsider previously normalized forms of joking. Rather than treating teasing solely as a disciplinary violation, the counselor framed the behavior as an interpersonal and moral issue. This distinction is important because it shifts the focus from external compliance toward reflection on the consequences of one’s actions.

Nevertheless, the evidence should not be interpreted as demonstrating a measured increase in empathy. No standardized empathy scale or pretest–posttest design was used in the study. The reported reduction in teasing and increased awareness should therefore be understood as qualitative indications of behavioral and attitudinal change as perceived by the counselor, rather than as conclusive evidence of causal effectiveness.

The Role of Islamic Values in Fostering Social Concern

The fourth finding demonstrates that Islamic values constituted an important framework through which social concern was communicated and interpreted. Among the values emphasized by the counselor were respect for others, *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), *ta’awun* (mutual assistance), and *rahmah* (compassion). These values were presented as practical principles for interpersonal conduct rather than merely as religious concepts.

The counselor emphasized that genuine concern should not depend on a person’s social position, economic condition, or status within the school. Students were encouraged to treat their peers respectfully and to avoid participating in behavior that could humiliate or exclude others.

“We teach them that helping and respecting friends should be done sincerely, not because the friend has a certain position or status.”

The data further indicate that Islamic values were connected to concrete social behaviors. Students were encouraged to refrain from joining groups that mocked particular classmates, to show attention to peers experiencing difficulties, and to provide assistance

when necessary. Thus, the implementation of Islamic counseling attempted to translate abstract religious principles into observable interpersonal practices.

The school's recurring Qur'an-reading activity also formed part of this value environment. Although the activity was primarily religious in nature, the findings suggest that it created a recurring opportunity for students to engage with religious practices within the school environment. In combination with counseling, these activities contributed to an environment in which spiritual and social values were repeatedly communicated. Importantly, the findings indicate that the counselor viewed social concern as an outcome of internalized values rather than merely obedience to school regulations. Students were encouraged to understand that caring for others is a religious and moral responsibility. This orientation potentially strengthens the motivational basis of prosocial behavior because students are invited to connect their interpersonal decisions with their broader religious identity.

Discussion

The central contribution of the approach lies in the way Islamic values are connected to students' concrete interpersonal experiences through listening, reflection, counseling dialogue, and repeated social habituation. The counseling process addressed both dimensions by encouraging students to consider the perspective of peers who were being teased while simultaneously emphasizing compassion and responsibility toward them. A student may perceive a comment about a friend's vehicle as harmless humor, while the recipient may experience it as humiliation or social exclusion (Kabakçi & Ergene, 2024; Kelley et al., 2023; Malone & Lewis, 2023). This discrepancy illustrates why perspective taking is relevant to school counseling. The counseling process can interrupt the automatic interpretation of teasing as "just a joke" by asking students to consider the emotional and social consequences of their behavior.

The recurring religious activity appears to reinforce the spiritual environment surrounding counseling, but the present study does not establish an independent causal relationship between Qur'an reading and increased empathy. Its significance is better understood as part of a supportive institutional context in which Islamic values are repeatedly encountered. This interpretation is consistent with the logic of qualitative inquiry, in which practices are examined as interconnected elements of a social setting rather than isolated variables. The analysis therefore supports the proposition that religious habituation may complement counseling, but it does not justify attributing observed behavioral changes exclusively to the habituation program.

Islamic counseling can contribute to students' spiritual awareness and social attitudes, including empathy and concern for others. Islamic counseling can support moral development and social responsibility (Dewi & Zaenurrosyid, 2023; Pike et al., 2021). The contribution of the present study lies less in claiming that Islamic counseling is generally beneficial and more in identifying the practical mechanisms through which its implementation may support social development. The importance of repeated value exposure, but places this process within an explicitly Islamic counseling framework. Rather than treating character values as a general behavioral curriculum, the counselor links respect, compassion, mutual assistance, and social responsibility to students' religious worldview.

Simply telling students that they should respect others does not necessarily produce sustained behavioral change. The more meaningful process appears to occur when students are encouraged to reflect on specific interpersonal experiences and connect them with Islamic values. The role of peer norms also deserves particular attention. Individual students' actions may be influenced by the social expectations of their peer group. Consequently, counseling that focuses exclusively on the individual may have limited effects if the surrounding group continues to normalize ridicule or socioeconomic comparison. The group counseling

component identified in this study provides a potentially important response because it creates a space in which students can collectively reconsider interpersonal norms (Jubba et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2023). Rather than simply instructing an individual student not to tease others, group processes may encourage students to establish alternative norms based on respect, compassion, and mutual support.

Social empathy develops when students are encouraged to understand another person's perspective and emotional condition, while social concern becomes visible when that understanding is translated into respectful, supportive, and non-humiliating behavior. These limitations also identify directions for future research. Subsequent studies could incorporate students' perspectives through individual interviews, focus groups, or validated measures of empathy and prosocial behavior. Longitudinal research could examine whether behavioral changes associated with Islamic counseling are sustained over time. Future research could also investigate the role of peer-group norms more systematically, particularly whether group-based Islamic counseling can modify collective norms surrounding teasing, socioeconomic comparison, and social exclusion. Such research would strengthen understanding of how spiritually integrated counseling can move from individual moral reflection toward broader changes in school social culture.

The study indicates that the contribution of Islamic counseling to students' social empathy and concern lies not simply in the presence of Islamic content but in the way Islamic values are enacted through a relational, reflective, and context-sensitive counseling process. The integration of individual counseling, group interaction, personal approaches, and recurring religious practices creates multiple opportunities for students to connect religious values with everyday social behavior. Islamic counseling has potential as a holistic approach to social-emotional and moral development in secondary education, while further empirical research is needed to establish its effectiveness across different student populations and educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of Islamic counseling at SMA Negeri 1 Portibi contributes to the development of students' social empathy and concern for others through an integrated process involving individual counseling, group counseling, personal approaches, and recurring Islamic habituation activities. The findings indicate that students' social empathy was generally adequate but remained uneven, particularly in relation to teasing and insensitive behavior associated with socioeconomic differences. Islamic counseling addressed these issues by integrating values such as respect, *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), *ta'awun* (mutual assistance), and *rahmah* (compassion) into reflective counseling processes that encouraged students to consider the perspectives and feelings of others. The study further suggests that the relational and contextual nature of counseling, particularly the combination of active listening, non-judgmental interaction, value-based guidance, and peer-based reflection, provides an important mechanism for translating Islamic teachings into everyday social behavior. Although the reported reduction in teasing and improvement in social awareness should not be interpreted as causal evidence because the study did not employ standardized pre-post measures or student-based source triangulation, the findings demonstrate the potential of Islamic counseling as a holistic approach to integrating psychological, moral, spiritual, and social development in secondary education.

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