

Developing a Humanistic Counseling-Based Framework to Enhance Students' Academic Well-Being in the Merdeka Curriculum Context

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to develop a humanistic counseling framework that is contextually aligned with the dynamics of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly concerning the phenomena of autonomy overload, self-regulation pressure, and students' emotional uncertainty. The research employed a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and school document analysis. The data were analyzed thematically using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to produce a comprehensive theoretical construction. The findings indicate that the principles of humanistic counseling possess relational capacities that directly address the mechanistic challenges emerging within autonomy-based learning. This theoretical and empirical synthesis yields three core dimensions of the framework: Empathic-Autonomy Alignment, Academic Self-Actualization Support, and Reflective-Experiential Guidance. These dimensions work interdependently to strengthen healthy autonomy, enhance academic clarity, and stabilize students' emotional well-being. The study offers a conceptual contribution to the development of school counseling models that are relevant to the needs of contemporary education in Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology in the 21st century has brought significant changes to all aspects of life, including the field of education. Digital transformation facilitates access to information, yet it simultaneously introduces new psychological pressures experienced by today's learners (Zidan Fahman Arbi & Amrullah Amrullah, 2024). Excessive exposure to technology may decrease mental health, as individuals are compelled to follow trends, pursue high lifestyles, and cope with online-based social pressures. Among students, these changes are reflected in increased screen time, social media pressure, cyberbullying, and reduced face-to-face social interaction patterns that directly contribute to heightened mental health vulnerability (Aji Wicaksono et al., 2025).

Students' leisure time in the digital era is increasingly spent passively, influencing their mental and emotional conditions. Symptoms of stress, anxiety, academic fatigue, and feelings of inadequacy occur more frequently, though they often remain unrecognized. Many students hide their emotional states behind a "social mask," appearing fine externally while experiencing psychological strain internally (Putri Masayu Asahri & Sartono Sartono, 2025). Their ability to conceal emotions makes mental health issues difficult to detect early. Therefore, a more comprehensive and sensitive approach is needed to understand students' emotional conditions, particularly within schools as their primary learning environment.

In the context of Indonesian education, these challenges have become more complex with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This curriculum promotes flexible, project-based learning and grants students autonomy in determining their learning styles and pace. While it offers great opportunities for developing 21st-century competencies, the Merdeka Curriculum inadvertently increases demands for learning independence, self-management, and the ability to handle academic pressure. Students are now expected to design their own learning pathways, adapt to cross-disciplinary projects, and demonstrate strong self-regulation capacities (Abd Rahim & Bambang Ismaya, 2023). Inability to meet these demands can lead to emotional strain, reduced motivation, and low academic well-being.

Globally, academic well-being is understood as a condition in which students are able to function optimally in academic contexts not only in terms of achievement, but also positive learning experiences, emotional balance, and academic satisfaction (Windy Ana Fitriyanti, 2025). Academic well-being serves as the foundation for learning engagement, motivation, and long-term academic development. Thus, within the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, which emphasizes autonomy and personalized learning, academic well-being becomes a critical aspect that educators and school counselors must address.

However, existing studies in Indonesia examine academic well-being in a fragmented manner focusing on learning motivation as a determinant of academic outcomes, academic stress, and school climate yet have not integrated these aspects into a more holistic well-being framework (Susanto et al., 2024). The humanistic counseling approach is strongly connected to efforts to enhance intrinsic motivation, sense of belonging, and student self-actualization. Principles such as empathy, unconditional positive regard, and individual empowerment align closely with students' fundamental needs in self-directed learning (Yeni Apriyanti & Dzifa Hesti Hazal Wardhani, 2025). When integrated with the dynamics of the Merdeka Curriculum, the humanistic approach can create a more supportive learning environment, foster self-regulation, and strengthen academic well-being.

Although prior studies have highlighted learning motivation, academic stress, and the effectiveness of various counseling approaches in education, they have not addressed the most fundamental need in Merdeka Curriculum implementation: developing a conceptual framework grounded in humanistic counseling principles to strengthen students' academic well-being. To date, no research has systematically integrated three essential domains the characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum, the concept of academic well-being, and the humanistic counseling approach into a unified framework capable of guiding school counselors in providing adaptive, emotionally attuned academic support.

This scientific gap creates both a theoretical and empirical void. Developing such a framework is urgent, particularly to help counselors and guidance teachers navigate the paradigm shift toward autonomy, differentiation, and project-based learning. An integrated framework not only provides a solid theoretical foundation but also enables counselors to increase their sensitivity to the dynamics of students' academic well-being, offer more systematic intervention mechanisms, and ensure that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum aligns with efforts to protect students' psychological health.

Driven by this need, the present study seeks to answer the central question: *How can a humanistic counseling-based framework be developed to enhance students' academic well-being within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum?* Addressing this question requires a qualitative approach capable of exploring the experiences, perceptions, and needs of both students and counselors in depth. Correspondingly, the study is directed toward three interrelated objectives that form the foundation of the conceptual framework. First, the study aims to identify in depth the challenges and academic well-being needs experienced by students in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly regarding learning autonomy, differentiated instruction, and

flexible learning rhythms. Second, it examines the contribution of fundamental humanistic counseling principles: such as deep empathy, unconditional positive regard, and counselor genuineness in supporting students' emotional and academic needs, and explores how these principles can be adapted to Indonesian school contexts. Third, the study seeks to develop a conceptual framework that is not only theoretically relevant but also applicable to school counseling practice, offering new directions for strengthening guidance and counseling services and providing a significant academic reference in the discourse on improving students' academic well-being in the era of the Merdeka Curriculum.

In doing so, this study offers a novel contribution through the systematic integration of Merdeka Curriculum characteristics, academic well-being theory, and humanistic counseling principles a synthesis that has not been previously developed and is expected to enrich both scholarship and educational practice in Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative design using a conceptual model development approach, which enabled the construction of a conceptual framework through the integration of empirical findings, humanistic psychology theories, and educational policy documents (Beliyawati et al., 2025). This approach was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive analysis of the development of academic well-being concepts and their relevance to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, while also interpreting humanistic counseling principles within the Indonesian educational context. The researcher was fully involved in all stages of literature identification, thematic analysis, and model construction.

The data sources in this study consisted of three main groups. The first group comprised recent empirical articles examining academic well-being, curriculum implementation dynamics, and humanistic approaches in counseling services, selected based on thematic relevance and methodological quality. The second group included educational policy documents, particularly the official Merdeka Curriculum guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. The third group consisted of core theoretical literature on humanistic counseling, including key concepts such as empathy, unconditional positive regard, and counselor genuineness as elaborated in Rogers's works. In addition to these sources, the study also incorporated limited exploratory interviews with two school counselors to capture contextual issues in the field.

The analysis process was carried out through several systematic stages. The first stage was literature identification, which involved collecting relevant documents based on keywords and research focus. The second stage involved screening and assessing the eligibility of the literature, using principles adapted from PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) to suit the needs of a conceptual study. Once the eligible literature was established, the next stage was thematic coding, in which concepts, patterns, and key issues were coded following the procedures of thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The fourth stage was theme clustering, which organized the themes into three overarching domains: the Merdeka Curriculum, academic well-being, and humanistic counseling.

The subsequent stage was model construction, in which these three domains were integrated into a coherent conceptual framework. The final stage was expert judgment, involving counseling and curriculum specialists who evaluated the clarity, coherence, and relevance of the resulting model. All research procedures were visualized in a flowchart illustrating the sequence of literature identification, screening, thematic analysis, model construction, and preliminary validation. This methodological approach ensured analytical rigor and provided a strong scientific foundation for developing a humanistic counseling-based framework that aligns with the Indonesian educational context.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Thematic Identification of Academic Well-Being Challenges in the Merdeka Curriculum

The thematic analysis revealed three central challenges to students' academic well-being in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, namely autonomy overload, self-regulation pressure, and emotional uncertainty. These three dimensions reflect the direct consequences of increased autonomy, differentiated learning, and process-based assessment systems that constitute the core features of the curriculum. The themes were identified through thematic coding of empirical and theoretical literature, Merdeka Curriculum documents, and exploratory interviews with school counselors. Cross-source validation ensured that the findings were not only conceptual but also grounded in practical implementation at the school level. This identification provides a clear mapping of the vulnerability points of students' academic well-being and serves as an analytical basis for linking these issues to the structural characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum as well as the need for more adaptive psychopedagogical interventions.

Theme 1: Autonomy Overload

The first finding indicates that students experience autonomy overload, which refers to the sense of being overwhelmed by the abundance of learning choices within the Merdeka Curriculum, including the selection of projects, competency pathways, and learning pace (Munawar, 2022). Although this flexibility is designed to support differentiation, it can lead to conceptual confusion and decision uncertainty for some students (Amanda Dewi Nadila et al., 2025). Interviews with counselors reinforce this finding, revealing that several students struggled to determine projects that matched their abilities and interests.

Theoretically, this overload emerges as a consequence of the pedagogical shift toward self-directed learning. The Merdeka Curriculum requires more intensive and recurrent academic decision-making, which places a substantial burden on executive functions, particularly planning, monitoring, and decision-making (Muh Husyain Rifai et al., 2024). When these demands exceed students' cognitive regulatory capacities, perceptions of competence decline and academic well-being becomes impaired (Ahmad Shofi Mubarak et al., 2025). The trend of increasing autonomy overload is especially visible during the early stages of curriculum implementation, when teacher scaffolding is not yet optimal and support mechanisms are not fully standardized (Endah Saadah & Hanafiah, 2024). The transition toward autonomy-based learning can heighten self-regulatory demands and trigger cognitive load during the adjustment period (Siti Zubaidah, 2020).

Theme 2: Self-Regulation Pressure

Self-regulation pressure refers to the burden on students to manage their time, tasks, emotions, and motivation independently, without strict supervision (Aysah et al., 2025). Interviews revealed that many students found it difficult to establish project schedules or maintain consistency in completing P5 assignments because they were not accustomed to explicit self-regulation. Policy literature indicates that self-paced learning requires students to set their own learning targets, but not all students possess mature self-regulatory strategies (Sukmawati et al., 2024). Mechanistically, this pressure arises because the Merdeka Curriculum requires self-monitored learning, meaning students must set goals, track task progress, and adjust learning strategies autonomously (Kusumawati, 2024). For students with limited metacognitive literacy or weak self-regulation capacities, this situation can lead to decreased academic performance and diminished well-being (Apriyanto et al., 2025).

These findings align with research showing that in curricula providing greater autonomy, the need for self-regulated learning becomes crucial, and when unmet, students' well-being tends to decline (Mahesanara & Nastiti, 2024). Moderating factors such as students' age, teacher support, and the presence of a reflective school culture also influence the extent to which self-regulation pressure is experienced (Asmare et al., 2025). The implications for counseling practice

are significant: schools need to provide explicit scaffolding for self-regulation such as training in time-management strategies and self-monitoring tools, along with regular monitoring by counselors and teachers (Babinski et al., 2023). This corresponds with the study's aim to identify students' essential needs related to academic well-being.

Theme 3: Emotional Uncertainty

Emotional uncertainty refers to emotional burdens such as performance anxiety, fear of failure, ambiguity regarding student roles in projects, and feelings of isolation (Hilliard et al., 2020). Interview data revealed that some counselors observed students feeling uncertain about what constitutes success in Merdeka Curriculum projects, questioning whether grades, mastery experiences, or collaborative contribution should be prioritized. This ambiguity, combined with formative assessment systems that students do not fully understand, leads to apprehension regarding evaluation standards. Scientifically, emotional uncertainty can be explained as a result of high autonomy combined with formative assessment practices that students perceive as inconsistent (Bee & Madrigal, 2013). Ambiguous assessment standards and unclear performance expectations create emotional pressure, while autonomous learning demands students to take greater responsibility for self-assessment and project management (Boekaerts, 1991). These conditions increase anxiety and reduce self-efficacy because students feel unsure whether their actions are genuinely recognized as successful.

This emotional burden tends to escalate during the early curriculum implementation stages because schools and teachers may not yet provide an emotional safe space for students to explore failure or seek meaning. Global research shows similar patterns, indicating rising academic anxiety in contexts that emphasize autonomous and project-based learning (Stefanou et al., 2013). Emotional uncertainty, therefore, is not only a local phenomenon but reflects a universal challenge that emerges when learning freedom is expanded. The practical implications of this theme highlight the necessity of emotional support within the school system: counselors must facilitate reflective dialogues, provide validation for students' feelings, and create an environment where failure can be discussed productively. This aligns with the study's objective to identify academic well-being needs that inform the development of humanistic interventions.

Cross-Cutting Themes

In addition to the three major themes, the analysis also identified cross-cutting themes that reinforce and complicate the dynamics of academic well-being. Assessment practices substantially affect emotional uncertainty, as unclear rubrics and the prevalence of formative assessment increase students' anxiety about performance (Rahmi Hayati & Ida Wahyu Wijiyati, 2025). Teacher and counselor readiness to provide autonomy scaffolding also varies widely, with some schools not yet prepared to effectively stimulate students' self-regulation. Digital influences emerged as another moderating factor, where distractions from social media and peer comparison exacerbate both self-regulation and emotional burdens (Pramana et al., 2025). Moreover, individual variability including differences in metacognitive literacy, family support, and prior learning experiences highlights that students respond to the demands of the Merdeka Curriculum in diverse ways.

Table 1. Academic Well-Being Challenges in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

Theme	Core Definition	Indicators	Analytical Explanation
Autonomy Overload	Cognitive burden caused by the intensity of academic choices	Confusion in selecting projects or pathways, high curriculum	An imbalance arises between decision making demands and the maturity of

Theme	Core Definition	Indicators	Analytical Explanation
	that exceed students' self regulation capacity	flexibility, counselor reports	executive functions during the early stages of implementation
Self-Regulation Pressure	Pressure to independently manage time, tasks, and learning progress within a self paced system	Difficulty maintaining project schedules, low metacognitive literacy, variability in teacher support	Increased SRL demands without adequate scaffolding lead to declines in performance and well being
Emotional Uncertainty	Affective uncertainty related to evaluation standards, the meaning of success, and students' roles in projects	Ambiguous rubrics, performance anxiety, inconsistent evaluation practices	Formative assessments that students do not fully understand heighten anxiety and reduce self efficacy
Cross-Cutting Factors	Factors that strengthen or mediate the three main themes	Variations in teacher readiness, unclear assessments, digital distractions	Misalignment occurs between curriculum demands, student capacity, and overall system readiness

Sources: Author's analysis based on the official Merdeka Curriculum documents (Kemendikbudristek, 2022–2024), self-regulated learning theory (Boekaerts, 1991; Stefanou et al., 2013), academic well-being concepts, and recent empirical studies on autonomy-based learning (Munawar, 2022; Amanda Dewi Nadila et al., 2025; Aysah et al., 2025).

From these thematic findings, it is evident that the emerging challenges are not only individual but also contextual, and they directly address the study's first objective, which is to identify students' academic well being needs within the Merdeka Curriculum. These findings provide a strong foundation for further analysis of how humanistic counseling principles can be operationalized to meet those needs. Accordingly, this thematic analysis paves the way for a more in depth discussion of relevant humanistic interventions, which will be elaborated in the following section.

Humanistic Counseling Principles and Their Relevance

The humanistic counseling approach positions the counselor–student relationship as the primary medium of psychological change, emphasizing subjectivity, self actualization, and the strengthening of autonomy (I Wayan Indra Praekanata, 2024). In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes differentiation, self directed learning, and formative evaluation, this approach becomes highly relevant because it provides a safe space for students to navigate increased academic freedom. Its dialogical and nondirective character enables students to express the ambivalence, anxiety, and confusion that often emerge as they adapt to the new curriculum. Consequently, the humanistic approach not only complements the pedagogical demands of the Merdeka Curriculum but also offers an affective foundation that supports student well being.

The principle of empathy functions as an initial emotional regulation mechanism that reduces anxiety when students confront high levels of autonomy (Lalu Rifki Sanjaya et al., 2025). When counselors demonstrate a deep understanding of students' perspectives, the cognitive

tension caused by autonomy overload decreases, giving students room to clarify their academic values and preferences. The principle of unconditional positive regard strengthens academic self worth by providing an experience of unconditional acceptance, which is essential when students face evaluative uncertainties (Proctor et al., 2021). Meanwhile, congruence or counselor authenticity offers validation of students' subjective experiences, helping them recognize and organize their emotional responses to the demands of self directed learning (Burks & Robbins, 2012). These principles operate synergistically to restore the sense of agency that is often disrupted by self regulation pressure and performance uncertainty.

Within the self actualization framework, humanistic counseling encourages students to identify academically meaningful goals rather than merely following curricular requirements. This process is particularly relevant in addressing self regulation pressure, as intrinsically internalized goals are more sustainable than externally imposed ones (Kusumawati, 2024). Humanistic facilitative conditions reinforce students' reflective capacity, emotional mapping, and independent learning strategies (Sartika et al., 2025). Thus, this approach addresses the cognitive, emotional, and motivational dimensions that underlie the challenges observed within the Merdeka Curriculum.

Integrating humanistic principles with the thematic findings outlined earlier reveals strong mechanistic correspondence. Empathy reduces autonomy overload; unconditional positive regard enhances self worth, buffering the impact of self regulation pressure; congruence stabilizes emotional responses in conditions of emotional uncertainty. The humanistic approach provides a dialogical space that enables students to understand curricular ambiguity, process performance related anxiety, and renegotiate their sense of competence (Lalu Rifki Sanjaya et al., 2025). In other words, this approach aligns closely with the psychological needs emerging from the dynamics of learner autonomy.

Compared with cognitive behavioral (CBT) or traditional behavioral approaches, humanistic counseling offers conceptual flexibility that is more compatible with the Merdeka Curriculum. CBT is structural and focuses on cognitive restructuring, while behavioral approaches emphasize the reinforcement of specific responses (Khotimah & Nurjannah, 2024). These approaches work effectively in contexts with standardized goals and structured learning environments but are less optimal within differentiated learning settings that require self exploration and freedom to discover solutions. Humanistic counseling, by contrast, operates through meaning making and interpersonal connection, making it better suited to helping students understand the dynamics of autonomy and evaluative ambiguity.

Scientifically, humanistic counseling aligns more closely with the demands of the Merdeka Curriculum because it supports the internalization of learning values, strengthens self determination, and fosters reflective self regulation. Empathy and acceptance facilitate a psychologically safe environment that students need to face ambiguity and complex academic choices. Furthermore, its client centered orientation enables students to build coherent academic narratives, deepen the meaningfulness of learning, and enhance their resilience in facing project demands and formative assessments. Humanistic counseling also helps students integrate emotions, goals, and learning experiences so that academic development emphasizes not only performance but also personal growth (Allysha Syatifa Fitriana, 2025). Given that the Merdeka Curriculum encourages reflection and authenticity in learning, the humanistic approach serves as the most compatible psychopedagogical support. Its nondirective nature creates a space for students to experiment with learning strategies without the pressure of rigid evaluation. This is particularly important in contexts of high autonomy, where failure must be framed as part of growth rather than a threatening risk.

By providing emotional validation and clarity of experience, humanistic counseling enables students to build more adaptive self regulation capacities, navigate curricular ambiguity,

and develop a sense of mastery. The synergy between the flexibility of the humanistic approach and the characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum positions it as a highly effective framework for supporting students' holistic well being. The mapped humanistic principles offer relational and psychological foundations that can be translated into a curriculum based counseling model. Accordingly, the next section will develop a framework that integrates student needs, the dynamics of the Merdeka Curriculum, and humanistic principles into an applicable conceptual model for school counselors.

Development of the Humanistic Counseling-Based Framework

The development of this framework was constructed by integrating humanistic counseling theory with empirical findings showing that students currently experience choice confusion, self regulation pressure, and emotional instability within the Merdeka Curriculum. This theory driven integration positions the humanistic approach as a relational foundation capable of addressing the mechanistic problems emerging from a choice based learning system, particularly students' need for emotional clarity and reflective support amid the expansion of academic autonomy. Through the intersection of theoretical concepts and students' experiential patterns, this synthesis produced three core dimensions that constitute the proposed framework.

The first dimension, *Empathic Autonomy Alignment*, functions to balance the expansion of academic freedom with the need for adequate emotional scaffolding. Counselor empathy helps reduce autonomy related anxiety when students confront multiple learning pathways, while experiential validation increases perceived clarity, which in turn decreases cognitive overload (I Wayan Indra Praekanata, 2024). This alignment process ensures that students are able to interpret their academic choices in a directed manner without losing a sense of self control. Designed in this way, this dimension directly addresses the symptoms of autonomy overload and pathway confusion identified in the field data. "This dimension ensures that the expansion of autonomy does not compromise students' psychological safety."

The second dimension, *Academic Self Actualization Support*, emphasizes the facilitation of academic self awareness and the ability to self direct in a realistic manner. The provision of unconditional positive regard reduces evaluative pressure, which often triggers failures in self regulation, while strengthening academic self worth improves students' capacity to manage their goals and learning strategies. This approach positions academic achievement as a process of developing potential rather than merely responding to rigid performance demands. By reorganizing this learning orientation, the second dimension directly addresses the self regulation pressures resulting from the target driven learning models embedded within the Merdeka Curriculum. "This dimension positions academic achievement as an expression of personal potential rather than a purely performative demand."

The third dimension, *Reflective Experiential Guidance*, provides a structured reflective space that maintains the essence of the humanistic approach without turning into directive instruction. Counselors use reflective prompts to stimulate meaning making, while adjusting the pacing of guidance to remain aligned with students' developmental rhythms. Through this mechanism, reflection helps reduce the emotional uncertainty commonly experienced in project based curricula, where learning trajectories are not always linear. This approach allows students to transform learning experiences into clearer and more coherent academic insights. "Reflective guidance helps students transform learning experiences into academic clarity."

These three dimensions do not operate as isolated components but function as an interconnected relational system. Empathy creates a safe space that enables self exploration, which in turn opens the pathway toward stable and realistic self actualization. Self actualization then strengthens self regulation, allowing reflective processes to gain greater depth and consistency. Clearer reflection reduces anxiety and reinforces the alignment between autonomy and emotional support, creating a sustainable cycle of supportive autonomy. "Together, the three dimensions

form a mutually reinforcing relational dynamic, generating an optimal learning environment for autonomy and academic well being.”

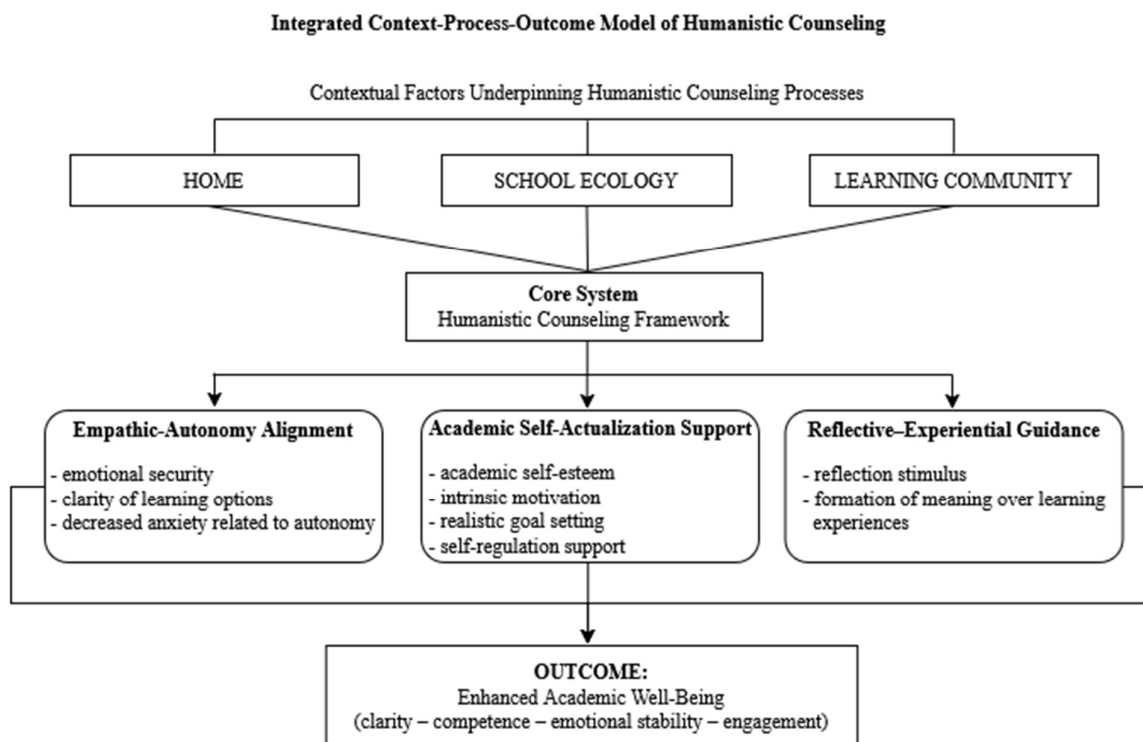


Figure 1. Integrated Context-Process-Outcome Model of Humanistic Counseling

Sources: Developed by the author based on humanistic counseling principles (Rogers, 1951; Burks & Robbins, 2012; Proctor et al., 2021), self-actualization theory, and thematic findings on academic well-being challenges within the Merdeka Curriculum (Munawar, 2022; Abd Rahim & Ismaya, 2023; Susanto et al., 2024).

The model developed in this study occupies a distinctive position compared to existing frameworks, particularly the Student Well Being Model, which adopts a macro perspective and emphasizes multidimensional aspects of well being without examining the relational mechanisms that emerge within counselor student interactions. Accordingly, the new framework designed in this study functions as a bridge that connects humanistic principles with contemporary academic needs while filling a conceptual gap in the literature on relationally based academic well being interventions. Scientifically, the framework offers novelty by integrating a humanistic approach with the characteristics of a national curriculum that demands flexibility and autonomy, a domain that remains minimally explored in Indonesian scholarship.

From a theoretical standpoint, this model extends the humanistic approach by articulating more concrete mechanistic functions such as autonomy support, reflective alignment, and academic emotional regulation components that have not been explicitly formulated in classical models (Priyadarshini et al., 2025). Contextual alignment also emerges as a key strength: each dimension is formulated based on the structure of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes self paced learning, freedom in project selection, and the need for stable reflective guidance. Consequently, this framework provides a relevant contribution to the ongoing implementation of the curriculum. Its practical relevance is also evident, as school counselors can use the structure of this framework as a guide for assessment, intervention design, and more targeted counseling processes without diminishing the humanistic character at the foundation of the relational work.

Overall, the theoretical and empirical integration that shapes this framework provides a robust conceptual foundation for the subsequent analytical stages. The synthesis between humanistic principles and the thematic findings on students' academic well being produces a model that is not only theoretically relevant but also operationally suited to the needs of the Merdeka Curriculum, which demands autonomy and learning flexibility. The framework therefore serves as a critical starting point for understanding how humanistic counseling-based interventions can function as responsive approaches to the academic challenges experienced by students.

This concluding section summarizes the position of the framework as the outcome of a conceptual–empirical synthesis with operational implications for school counseling practice in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. The three core dimensions: Empathic Autonomy Alignment, Academic Self Actualization Support, and Reflective Experiential Guidance offer an analytical structure that can be used to map students' academic well being needs and identify relevant forms of support. Through this mapping, the framework enables the design of counseling strategies consistent with the characteristics of autonomy based and project based learning. In addition, the model highlights the relational and reflective competencies that school counselors must strengthen to ensure stable implementation across diverse school contexts. In sum, the framework not only broadens the understanding of humanistic support within the national education ecosystem but also opens pathways for further examination of its validity and applicability across various implementation settings of the Merdeka Curriculum.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the academic well-being challenges emerging within the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum namely autonomy overload, self-regulation pressure, and emotional uncertainty can be understood through relational and psychological mechanisms that are not yet fully accommodated in current school counseling practices. Through the integration of humanistic counseling theory and empirical findings, this research formulates a three-dimensional framework that maps the relational support students need to navigate the demands of autonomy-based learning. Conceptually, the framework contributes by showing that a humanistic approach can bridge students' need for clarity, validation, and reflective space within the ecosystem of the Merdeka Curriculum. Overall, the findings address the research objectives by offering a conceptual model that is relevant, contextually grounded, and potentially foundational for developing more adaptive counseling interventions in schools.

Future research should examine the empirical validity of the proposed framework through field-based research designs, including implementation studies, intervention effectiveness analyses, and the development of assessment instruments aligned with the framework's three dimensions. It is also essential to investigate how variations in school contexts such as teacher readiness, reflective culture, and counselor capacity shape the model's applicability. Methodological challenges, including limited access to field data, heterogeneous levels of school readiness, and differing understandings of the Merdeka Curriculum, must be considered in subsequent research phases. In addition, developing counselor capacity-building programs grounded in humanistic principles should be prioritized to evaluate the extent to which this model can be operationalized consistently and effectively in school counseling practices across diverse regions in Indonesia.

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