

Level up Your Mind: Digital Counseling Gamification to Increase Student Engagement in Guidance and Counseling Services

Lailan Syafira Putri Lubis¹, Wina Wulandari^{2*}, Nurhayati³, Sri Muliatik⁴,
Nurlela⁵, Farhanasyah Putri⁶
Universitas Alwashliyah Medan

Corresponding Author: Wina Wulandari wina.wulandari01@yahoo.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Gamification,
Digital Counseling, Student
Engagement

Received : 23, September

Revised : 25, October

Accepted: 27, November

©2025 Lubis, Wulandari, Nurhayati,
Muliatik, Nurlela, Putri: This is an
open-access article distributed under
the terms of the [Creative Commons
Atribusi 4.0 Internasional](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



ABSTRACT

The Level Up Your Mind program was implemented at the At-Tanzil Guidance Studio in Malaysia to enhance student engagement in guidance and counseling services through a digital gamification approach. The activity aimed to develop students' emotional awareness, regulation, and social-emotional skills. Conducted from August 20–23, 2025, the program included module preparation, implementation of five counseling games, and evaluation using observation and questionnaires. Results showed an increase in student attendance from 55% to 88%, along with improved emotion recognition and active participation. The program contributed to strengthening students' emotional intelligence and provided an innovative, engaging, and sustainable model of counseling services for non-formal education institutions, particularly those serving Indonesian migrant children abroad.

INTRODUCTION

Education is the main foundation in shaping character and child development, encompassing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. At the elementary school age, children are in a period of rapid intellectual and emotional growth. Therefore, the educational services provided are not only oriented towards academic achievement but also need to develop social-emotional intelligence, empathy, and the ability to interact with the environment. One important component that supports this holistic development is guidance and counseling services (BK). Through BK services, children learn to recognize themselves, manage emotions, develop self-confidence, and build healthy social relationships. As stated by Goleman (1995), "the ability to recognize, manage, and appropriately express emotions is the foundation for an individual's personal and social success."

However, in practice, counseling services often face significant challenges, especially in non-formal educational institutions that serve vulnerable groups such as Indonesian migrant worker children abroad. Low interest and participation of students in counseling sessions is a common problem in various educational contexts (Nugroho, Setiawan, & Lestari, 2025). Traditional counseling activities conducted verbally or in a one-way manner are often considered monotonous and irrelevant to the modern children's world, which is more accustomed to visual interactions and digital technology. This situation is also found at Sanggar Bimbingan At-Tanzil, Malaysia, a non-formal educational institution that serves as a learning center for Indonesian migrant worker children. The students there face limited learning media, restricted access to technology, and the absence of a fun and interactive counseling service model.

The context of these migrant children has unique characteristics that make it an important social and academic phenomenon to study. They live in socially and emotionally unstable situations, often face economic limitations, and sometimes experience feelings of inferiority due to their family's social status in the country of residence (Wulan, Hakim, & Siregar, 2021). Such psychological pressure requires a counseling approach that is not only informative but also recreational, safe, and capable of building emotional connections. Therefore, it is necessary to innovate school counseling services that are tailored to the needs and developmental characteristics of migrant children.

One innovative approach relevant to these challenges is gamification. Deterding (2011) defines gamification as "the use of game design and game elements to enhance user engagement in a non-game context." In the context of education and counseling, gamification serves to increase intrinsic motivation through mechanisms such as points, levels, challenges, and rewards (Hamari, Koivisto, & Sarsa, 2014). These game elements not only provide enjoyment but also trigger active engagement, curiosity, and the desire to achieve specific goals. Lee and Hammer (2011) add that gamification shifts students' learning orientation from merely "getting grades" to "experiencing learning as an adventure."

The implementation of gamification in counseling services offers great opportunities to strengthen interactions between teachers and students. Through a game-based approach, counseling sessions can be transformed from rigid activities into enjoyable emotional experiences. For instance, games such as the Wheel of Emotion or Problem Solver Bingo can help students recognize and express their feelings, while activities like Future Hero encourage the development of a positive self-image. This approach aligns with the concrete-operational cognitive developmental stage in elementary school children, who tend to understand things through direct and visual experiences (Piaget in Prasetyaningrum, Wulandari, & Putra, 2025).

Furthermore, this approach can be analyzed using the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) developed by Deci and Ryan (1985). This theory asserts that human motivation is influenced by three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Gamification allows these three needs to be met: children gain freedom in taking on game roles (autonomy), feel capable of completing challenges (competence), and experience positive social relationships with their peers (relatedness). Fulfilling these psychological needs has been shown to enhance intrinsic motivation and active participation (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

In addition, advances in digital technology also expand the possibilities for applying gamification in counseling. Research by Prasetyaningrum et al. (2025) shows that mobile app-based digital counseling can increase students' accessibility and motivation to attend counseling sessions. Similar findings were reported by Cheng (2023), who stated that digital gamification is effective in promoting mental health and enhancing participant engagement. In the context of migrant children, digital counseling packaged with simple game elements becomes highly relevant, as it can create an interactive learning environment without requiring sophisticated technology.

Thus, the "Level Up Your Mind" study provides a significant contribution to the development of knowledge, both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, this study expands the application of Self-Determination Theory and the Emotional Intelligence Framework in the context of gamification-based counseling for migrant children. Practically, this study presents a counseling service model that is easy to adapt, enjoyable, and sustainable for non-formal educational institutions abroad. The novelty of this research lies in the combination of the target context (migrant children), the approach (digital counseling gamification), and the social outcomes (enhancing student engagement and emotional well-being).

By designing participatory and meaningful counseling experiences through digital gamification, this study is expected to open new paradigms in elementary school counseling services, particularly for the Indonesian migrant children community abroad.

IMPLEMENTATION AND METHODS

Implementation Approach

The Level Up Your Mind program is implemented using a digital counseling gamification approach, which is a strategy that integrates game elements into the guidance and counseling (GC) service process to enhance students' motivation, engagement, and emotional learning experience. This approach is designed with consideration of the developmental characteristics of elementary school-aged children, particularly students at the At-Tanzil Guidance Studio in Malaysia, who are children of Indonesian migrant workers. Each game used is not only intended to provide entertainment but also contains educational meaning that fosters self-awareness, emotional regulation skills, social abilities, and problem-solving skills.

The principle of implementing this activity emphasizes being active, participatory, and enjoyable. Children are not positioned as passive recipients of advice, but as active participants who learn through experience and social interaction. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) view that effective learning is formed through social processes and direct experience. Thus, gamification-based counseling activities are designed to align with the world of children, which is closely associated with play. According to Gee (2018), effective learning processes should be experiential, playful, and emotionally engaging. In this context, gamification serves as a transformative medium that bridges the cognitive and affective aspects of children.

This approach is also based on the Self-Determination Theory proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985). This theory emphasizes the importance of satisfying three basic psychological needs, namely autonomy, competence, and social relatedness, for individuals to be intrinsically motivated. Through gamification, students are given the freedom to choose activities, challenges that match their abilities, and collaborative experiences that strengthen their sense of connection with peers. Thus, gamification not only creates an enjoyable play atmosphere but also fosters motivation and emotional engagement in the counseling process (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Activity Stages

The implementation of the Level Up Your Mind program is carried out through three main stages, namely the preparation stage, the counseling game implementation stage, and the monitoring and evaluation stage.

Preparation Stage

This stage begins with coordination between the implementation team and the management of the At-Tanzil Guidance Studio to determine the activity schedule and adjust it according to the conditions of students and teachers. At this stage, the development of a gamification-based counseling game module is carried out, consisting of five main types of games: Wheel of Emotion, Problem Solver Bingo, Emotion Quest, Future Hero, and Solution Spinner. The module is developed with consideration for aspects of child development as well as the values intended to be instilled during the counseling activities. In addition, the implementation team also prepares supporting media such as scoreboards, game

cards, emotion wheels, and symbolic prizes that serve as a form of positive reinforcement for students' participatory behavior (Hamari, Koivisto, & Sarsa, 2014).

Counseling Game Implementation Stage

This stage is the core of the activity, where all gamified counseling activities are carried out directly with the students. Each counseling session is packaged in the form of group games that foster self-confidence, the ability to express emotions, and social skills. For example, in the Wheel of Emotion game, students are invited to recognize various types of emotions and share relevant personal experiences. Meanwhile, Problem Solver Bingo helps students practice finding solutions to everyday problems creatively, and Future Hero encourages students to envision a positive self-image as a future hero with good character. All activities are carried out collaboratively among teachers, facilitators, and students in an enjoyable atmosphere. According to Kottman and Meany-Walen (2018), play-based counseling approaches like this are effective in helping children express themselves without pressure while building a sense of safety in the counseling process.

Monitoring and Evaluation Stage

The final stage focuses on assessing the process and outcomes of the activities. Evaluation is conducted in a participatory manner involving teachers, students, and facilitators. Direct observation is used to observe the level of participation, emotional expressions, and student enthusiasm during the activities. In addition to observation, group reflection is carried out to assess the effectiveness of each game and to gather input from participants and mentors. This reflective approach follows Brookfield's (2017) view that learning evaluation should not be seen as a final judgment but as an ongoing process to improve and strengthen educational practices. Through this evaluation, an understanding is gained of the most effective games and the tangible impact of gamification on increasing student engagement in counseling services.

Overall, these three stages run continuously to achieve the main goal of the program, namely to enhance the motivation, engagement, and emotional well-being of migrant children through an interactive, adaptive, and enjoyable counseling approach.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of the Level Up Your Mind program at Sanggar Bimbingan At-Tanzil, Malaysia, has yielded significant results in enhancing student engagement in guidance and counseling (GC) services. This program was carried out through a counseling gamification approach that integrates game elements with the emotional learning process. Observation and evaluation results showed improvements in several key aspects, namely student attendance, emotion recognition, social problem-solving skills, and self-confidence in interactions.

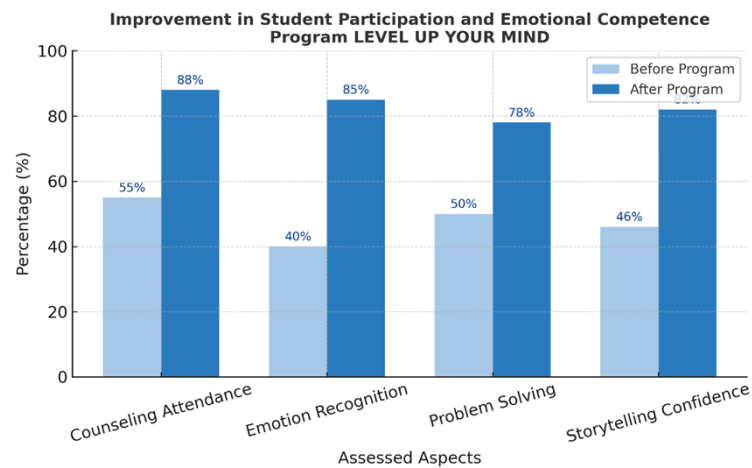


Table 1. Comparison of Results Before and After the Level Up Your Mind Program

These results confirm that a gamification approach can enhance students' motivation and participation in counseling services. Activities packaged in the form of games provide an enjoyable and meaningful learning experience. According to Hamari, Koivisto, and Sarsa (2014), game elements such as challenges, points, and instant feedback can stimulate students' intrinsic motivation through positive reinforcement. This is evidenced by a significant increase in student attendance in counseling sessions, from 55% to 88%.

Improvements in the aspects of emotion recognition and expression indicate the effectiveness of the Wheel of Emotion and Emotion Quest games in helping children recognize and name the emotions they feel. This finding aligns with Goleman (1995), who stated that emotional awareness is the foundation of emotional intelligence. The Problem Solver Bingo and Solution Spinner games also contribute to enhancing students' abilities to solve problems and manage negative emotions constructively.

From the perspective of motivation theory, this finding can be explained through Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020). The gamification approach provides students the opportunity to satisfy three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and social relatedness. The autonomy aspect is seen when students are free to choose roles and express opinions without pressure. The competence aspect appears when students successfully complete game tasks and feel capable of overcoming challenges. Meanwhile, the social relatedness aspect is built through peer support and a collaborative group atmosphere. These three aspects contribute to increased intrinsic motivation and active student participation.

From a social and emotional perspective, the Future Hero activities have a positive impact on students' self-image and future expectations. Children begin to see themselves as individuals with positive values, such as a "patient hero" or a "brave hero." Visual reflection processes like this help them cultivate hope and healthy self-confidence. This approach aligns with Kottman and Meany-Walen's (2018) view that play-based counseling creates a safe space for children to express themselves and develop their potential without fear of judgment.

In addition, the observation results showed a change in teachers' perception of the role of BK services. Previously, teachers considered BK merely as the provision of individual advice. After participating in training and gamification mentoring, teachers began to understand that BK can also be a medium for creative and enjoyable social and emotional learning. This aligns with the findings of Prasetyaningrum, Wulandari, and Putra (2025), who asserted that digital-based counseling innovations can enhance the effectiveness and accessibility of BK services.

The context of Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia is an important aspect that strengthens the contribution of this research. Their unique social conditions living far from extended family and formal school environments in Indonesia demand an inclusive and adaptive counseling approach. The Level Up Your Mind program has successfully created a safe interaction space for them to learn how to recognize and express themselves. This demonstrates that the gamification approach is highly relevant in the context of cross-cultural education and vulnerable children groups.

Overall, the results of this study not only demonstrate the successful implementation of gamification methods in enhancing student engagement, but also provide theoretical contributions to the strengthening of the Self-Determination Theory and the Emotional Intelligence Framework in the context of counseling guidance for migrant children.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The implementation of the Level Up Your Mind program at the At-Tanzil Guidance Center in Malaysia shows that a gamification-based counseling approach is effective in enhancing student engagement, motivation, and emotional competence in guidance and counseling (G&C) services. The integration of game elements such as the Wheel of Emotion, Problem Solver Bingo, Emotion Quest, Solution Spinner, and Future Hero successfully transformed the previously passive counseling atmosphere into an interactive, enjoyable, and meaningful learning process.

Quantitative results showed a significant increase in student attendance, the ability to recognize emotions, social problem-solving skills, as well as confidence in expressing personal feelings. These findings demonstrate that gamification not only serves as a form of entertainment but also as an effective pedagogical and psychological strategy to develop emotional literacy, self-regulation, and social connectedness among students. When counseling is packaged in the form of engaging and student-centered activities, intrinsic motivation naturally grows, and participation becomes more sustainable.

Theoretically, the results of this study reinforce the relevance of Self-Determination Theory proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985) and the Emotional Intelligence Theory by Goleman (1995). The fulfillment of three basic psychological needs autonomy, competence, and social relatedness was evident in the implementation of the program, contributing to increased students' intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, these results provide empirical evidence that play-based and gamification approaches can be effectively implemented in non-

formal educational contexts, particularly for Indonesian migrant children facing emotional and social challenges.

Overall, Level Up Your Mind contributes to the enrichment of theory and practice in counseling by presenting an innovative model that integrates emotional learning, motivation, and pedagogical creativity. The success of this program demonstrates that gamification-based counseling has the potential to be a sustainable strategy for enhancing emotional well-being, particularly for children who are vulnerable or in cross-cultural educational environments.

Based on the results and reflections from the program implementation, there are several recommendations for further development and application. First, formal and non-formal educational institutions are advised to adopt a gamification approach in guidance and counseling services. Simple, inexpensive games that can be easily adapted to the local culture can serve as an effective means to increase student interest and engagement. Therefore, training for teachers and counselors should include modules on game- and technology-based counseling methods to ensure more optimal implementation.

Second, future research and community service need to examine the long-term impact of gamification-based counseling, especially on emotion regulation, learning motivation, and students' social adjustment. Longitudinal studies are necessary to assess the sustainability of behavioral and emotional changes after the intervention ends.

Third, policymakers and educational institutions are expected to support the integration of gamification approaches in both national and international education programs, especially for communities of Indonesian migrant children abroad. Collaboration between schools, learning centers, and universities will help ensure the sustainability of emotional education services for these children.

Ultimately, replicating the Level Up Your Mind program in various cultural contexts is highly recommended. By adapting the game content, language, and local values, this model can serve as a flexible framework for character development and the emotional well-being of children in diverse global educational settings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author expresses gratitude to Universitas Negeri Padang for their financial support and facilitation in the implementation of the Level Up Your Mind program. Thanks are also extended to the At-Tanzil Guidance Studio, Malaysia, for granting permission, support, and active participation during the activities. The author also appreciates the contributions of the supervising teachers, students, and fellow team members who have worked together with dedication, enabling this program to run successfully.

REFERENCES

- Brookfield, S. D. (2017). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cheng, V. W. S. (2023). Gamification for mental health promotion: A systematic review of the effectiveness of gamified interventions. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 25(6), 1–15.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Deterding, S. (2011). Gamification: Toward a definition. In *Proceedings of the CHI 2011 Workshop on Gamification*.
- Gee, J. P. (2018). *Teaching, learning, literacy in our high-risk high-tech world: A framework for becoming human*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- Hamari, J., Koivisto, J., & Sarsa, H. (2014). Does gamification work? A literature review of empirical studies on gamification. In *Proceedings of the 47th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (pp. 3025–3034). IEEE.
- Kottman, T., & Meany-Walen, K. (2018). *Partners in play: An Adlerian approach to play therapy*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Lee, J. J., & Hammer, J. (2011). Gamification in education: What, how, why bother? *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 15(2), 1–5.
- Moltrecht, B., Patalay, P., Stapley, E., North, C., & Deighton, J. (2020). A digital intervention for children's mental health: Development and feasibility of a CBT-based gamified app. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 25(3), 173–182. <https://doi.org/10.1111/camh.12345>.
- Nugroho, A., Setiawan, H., & Lestari, D. (2025). Gamifikasi dalam layanan bimbingan konseling untuk meningkatkan partisipasi siswa. *Jurnal Bimbingan Konseling Indonesia*, 11(1), 15–28.
- Prasetyaningrum, R., Wulandari, F., & Putra, Y. (2025). Inovasi konseling berbasis digital: Studi penerapan aplikasi mobile pada sekolah menengah. *Jurnal Konseling dan Psikologi Pendidikan*, 9(2), 101–115.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2020). Brick by brick: The origins, development, and future of self-determination theory. *Advances in Motivation Science*, 7, 111–156.

- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wulan, S., Hakim, A., & Siregar, N. (2021). Pendidikan anak migran Indonesia di Malaysia: Tantangan dan strategi pembelajaran. *Jurnal Pendidikan Luar Negeri*, 5(2), 45-60.
- Zainuddin, Z., Chu, S. K. W., Shujahat, M., & Perera, C. J. (2020). The impact of gamification on learning and instruction: A systematic review. *Educational Research Review*, 30, 100326. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100326>.