



Embedding Social Emotional Learning into Experiential Learning: Experiences of College Students with Mental Health Problem

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of five third-year students in the Special Education Study Program at FIP UNY who experienced severe depression and high anxiety while taking the "Teaching Children with Emotional and Behavior Disorders" course. This course-design integrates social-emotional learning (SEL) with experiential learning (EL) to support the academic success of students with mental health problems (high anxiety and severe depression). This exploratory qualitative study used semi-structured in-depth interviews (40–60 minutes) with five students selected through PHQ-9 and GAD-7 screening (score ≥ 15). Data were analysed with NVivo 12 Pro through open coding to themes, with validity checks through member checking, audit trails, and reflexive memoing. Results showed that four out of five students responded positively to the learning process that integrated SEL–EL. They found it easier to understand the material, were more confident in expressing their opinions, and felt more confident in facing assignments. Emotional dynamics (active participation and self-efficacy) were also apparent: most felt more comfortable and open in discussions, although some were constrained by classroom noise, a preference for lecture methods, or feelings of inferiority compared to more capable peers. This study concludes that the integration of SEL–EL contributes to increased active participation and academic self-efficacy among students with depression and anxiety. The practical implication is the importance of course design that includes brief emotional reflection, gradual assignments with clear criteria, and fair participation protocols.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mental health issues among college students in Indonesia are increasingly recognized as a serious problem. National surveillance indicates an upward trend in emotional mental health problems among young people aged 15–24 (Agency for Research and Health Development of the Indonesian Ministry of Health [Risksdas], 2018). Multi-institutional studies report high prevalence. More than half of students screen positive for clinically relevant anxiety symptoms, and approximately one quarter report depressive symptoms (Kotera et al., 2024; Astutik et al., 2020).

Mental health problems in students not only damage well-being but also interfere with the learning process and academic achievement. In general, these difficulties have a negative impact on personal and social functioning, including lower motivation and weaker engagement, together with reduced effectiveness in academic activities (Finning et al., 2020; Grøtan et al., 2019). The mental health status of first-year students predict the risk of academic performance problems and lower academic scores (Deng & Li, 2024; Ekawati et al., 2025). In upper-level students, negative associations are also observed between mental health problems and academic achievement (Zhang et al., 2024; Ekawati et al., 2025; Muin et al., 2025). The mental health problems among students generally include anxiety, depression, and somatization, together with distress or reduced resilience (Muin et al., 2025). The converging findings highlight the urgency of classroom designs that can support learning while protecting student well-being.

One learning approach that is suitable for students with mental health problems is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). SEL focuses on developing competencies in self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). In higher education, SEL-oriented programs have been linked to reductions in depressive symptoms, improved academic performance,

and more adaptive social behavior among college students (Reicher & Matischek-Jauk, 2018; Simion, 2023). The existing literature, however, has mostly examined SEL as a general curriculum or campus-wide program, and much less is known about course-embedded SEL targeting students who already experience high anxiety or severe depression. Evidence from psychosocial interventions does indicate that depression and anxiety can be reduced in student populations (Seppälä et al., 2020; Gladstone et al., 2021), yet these studies seldom isolate SEL as an instructional design within a specific course. This gap motivates an examination of how course-embedded SEL can support college students with significant mental health problems.

Experiential Learning (EL) provides a complementary structure by organizing study around concrete experience, reflective observation, conceptualization, and experimentation (Ickes et al., 2016). Studies suggest that EL can increase engagement, critical thinking, and academic self-confidence (Dundas et al., 2017). Integrating SEL with EL may cultivate a supportive classroom climate that not only promotes academic competence while strengthening resilience and well-being (Cullen et al., 2017; Sulolipu et al., 2020). Empirical studies that explore this synergy specifically among students with significant anxiety and depression remain limited.

This study is based on classroom phenomena observed in the course “Teaching Children with Emotional and Behavior Disorders” in the Special Education Undergraduate Program, Faculty of Education, Yogyakarta State University, for third-year students. Program screening using the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 identified several students with scores at or above fifteen, indicating severe or moderately severe symptom levels. The course therefore embedded brief SEL routines within EL activities to support participation and learning for these students. The setting offers a concrete context in which to examine how students with mental health difficulties participate in an SEL-integrated EL approach.

This study investigates the learning experiences of students with high anxiety and severe depression in the SEL-integrated EL learning context. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following questions: (1) How do students with severe depression and high anxiety experience an SEL approach integrated with EL in this course? (2) Which emotional and social attributes do they report when participating in lectures that employ SEL integrated with EL, particularly with respect to active participation and academic self-efficacy?

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

Research Design

An exploratory qualitative design was adopted, with in-depth interviews conducted to examine the experiences of students with mental health issues in learning that integrated social-emotional learning (SEL) and experiential learning (EL). In line with case-study logic, results were presented as contextual insights rather than generalized outcomes (Crowe et al., 2011).

Context and Participants

Table 1. The Students as Research Participants

Participant	Gender	PHQ-9 (Depression)	GAD-7 (Anxiety)
EST	Female	15 (Severe)	17 (Severe)
NIS	Female	23 (Severe)	17 (Severe)
EN	Female	21 (Severe)	19 (Severe)
NF	Female	17 (Moderately Severe)	16 (Severe)
BR	Male	15 (Moderately Severe)	16 (Severe)

The study took place in the Special Education Study Program, Faculty of Education (FIP), Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta (UNY), in the “Teaching Children with Emotional and Behavior Disorders” course during the odd semester of 2024. A preliminary survey screened students with two validated instruments that are widely applicable in clinical, research, and community settings and include scoring and follow-up guidelines: the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) for depression and Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) for anxiety. PHQ-9 was used to screen for symptoms of depression over the past few weeks (Dian et al., 2022), while GAD-7 measured anxiety levels during the same period (Jaya et al., 2024).

Screening was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia by trained psychologists, and referrals were provided when scores indicated severe distress. Students with PHQ-9 ≥ 15 and/or GAD-7 ≥ 15 were eligible. Five third-year

students (four female: EST, NIS, EN, NF; one male: BR) met inclusion criteria (Table 1). They were identified as having major depression and high anxiety based on the screening results, as presented in the following table.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted individually during the 2nd and 3rd weeks of November 2024. Each lasted 40–60 minutes and was conducted via Zoom to ensure accessibility and comfort for participants. Sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and the researcher also took fieldnotes during and after the interviews. A semi-structured interview guide was used to explore two main aspects: 1) students experience responding to an SEL integrated with EL, 2) emotional and social attributes they feel when participating in lecture activities (active participation and self efficacy). Reflection and Suggestions – differences in learning experiences compared to previous courses, and ideas for improving self-efficacy and participation in the future. To ensure psychological safety, participants were reminded that they could pause, skip, or stop the interview at any time without consequence. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, and confidentiality was emphasized throughout the process.

Data Analysis

The interview data were carefully recorded to ensure accuracy and then transcribed verbatim to capture participants' responses in detail and reviewed multiple times to identify significant statements aligned with the research objectives. Redundant or irrelevant data were excluded to maintain clarity and focus (Blair, 2015). The coding process involved breaking the data into discrete meaning units. These codes were grouped into subthemes that were then synthesized into broader themes. Similarly, codes were aggregated into the theme. An audit trail was maintained throughout the analysis, documenting coding decisions, changes in theme development, and researchers' reflections. Reflexive memoing captured the researchers' evolving interpretations, ensuring transparency and rigor. The use of NVivo 12 Pro facilitated systematic data management, retrieval, and analysis, strengthening the reliability and confirmability of findings (Wong, 2008).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was maintained through multiple strategies. Credibility was supported by careful transcription, repeated review of data, and member-checking with participants. Transferability was ensured by providing thick descriptions of the course, participants, and learning environment. Dependability was strengthened through a transparent audit trail that included coding steps, analytic decisions, and NVivo 12 Pro outputs. Finally, confirmability was addressed through reflexive memoing, allowing researchers to document assumptions and minimize bias.

Ethics

This study was conducted with careful attention to research ethics and participant well-being. All participants signed informed consent forms. Confidentiality was safeguarded through anonymization and secure storage of digital files (password-protected). Only the research team had access to identifiable data. Participants were informed of counseling and referral pathways if screening or interviews raised significant emotional distress.

3. RESULTS

Based on the experiences of five students with high anxiety and severe depression (EST, NIS, EN, NF, and BR) who participated in lectures using an integrated social-emotional learning (SEL) and experiential learning (EL) approach, several main themes were obtained from the two research questions. For the first research question: "How did students with severe depression and high anxiety respond to the learning approach (SEL and EL)?" two themes and several sub-themes were found. These two themes were related to the contribution of SEL and EL to their learning performance. Then, for the research question: "How did they experience emotional and social dynamics when participating in lectures using the SEL approach integrated with EL?", two main themes were also found: the experience of active participation and the experience of self-efficacy. Table 2 summarizes themes, subthemes, endorsement counts, and representative evidence, followed by expanded narrative for each theme.

Table 2. Themes, subthemes, endorsement counts, and representative evidence

Aspects	Themes	Subthemes	Sample Quotes
The experience of responding to learning approaches	Social emotional learning	Supports the development of self-understanding and self-management skills	"The way the lecturers asked about our condition... encouraged us to understand our readiness." (NS)
		Increase enthusiasm in learning	"What made me excited was when I was asked... it was fun to write about our feelings and desires and then speak out to friends." (EST)
		Feels relaxed to active in learning	"Because in this class there is an interlude of reflection... we are more relaxed in learning." (EST)
	Experiential learning	Understanding concepts to real situations	"It makes us understand more about the learning material." (BR)
		Feel free to convey thoughts and experiences	"So during the group discussion session, I always actively conveyed what we had found before." (EN)
		Feel the experience of sharing in learning context	Learning is very interesting because we gathered with our group to discuss...(NF)
		Feel easy to find key material	"The concepts that have been explained can be our guide to the field." (BR)
		Feeling prepared for the next task	"The way the lecturer delivered it was quite clear, so I wanted to know more (EN)
The Experience of social-emotional attributes	Active participation	Feeling comfortable and not afraid to participate	"Usually, such reinforcement makes me feel more confident to be active." (EST)
		Feeling more open-minded	"So we know a lot from several cases delivered by friends... the knowledge is broader." (NF)
		Feeling discomfort in students who like conventional lectures	"Sometimes it's because I feel I still don't understand the material. So, I think it's better to ask my friends for an explanation first." (NIS)
	Self-efficacy	Feeling confident to engage	"This learning has really boosted my confidence because there are a lot of Q&A and discussion." (EST)
		Feeling insecure when faced with more capable students	"It is also the knowledge of our friends that makes us a bit shy to have an opinion." (NIS)

Students' Responses to Social Emotional Learning Approach

Students described SEL routines as a practical scaffold for readiness and regulation at the very start of class. Four of five accounts linked brief condition checks, concise feeling notes, and short reflection prompts to improved monitoring of personal readiness and clearer decisions about when to speak or listen. The quote "The way the lecturers asked about our condition... encouraged us to understand our readiness" (NS) illustrates how a few minutes of structured attunement helped students calibrate participation. Enthusiasm was commonly attributed to the chance to write and voice personal states in low-stakes ways, captured in "What made me excited was when I was asked... it was fun to write about our feelings and desires and then speak out to friends" (EST). Relaxation also surfaced as a consistent effect, as noted in "Because in this class there is an interlude of reflection... we are more relaxed in learning" (EST), which participants tied to better focus during the main activities.

Classroom climate shifts were visible in moment-to-moment choices. Students reported making small but frequent decisions about turn-taking, volunteering, and question timing, which they traced to a sense of safety signaled by validation and invitations to contribute. These micro-decisions accumulated across sessions into higher perceived willingness to participate, especially during plenaries. The SEL routines appeared to function as a warm start that stabilized attention and reduced initial avoidance, which is particularly salient for students who enter class with elevated anxiety.

Variability remained across individuals and sessions. Two participants described barriers related to comfort with emotional disclosure and time-of-day effects. One account pointed to reluctance to write detailed emotions, while another noted reduced energy in afternoon sessions that limited focus even when routines were present. These negative cases suggest that SEL should keep reflection prompts short and predictable, allow brief responses for students who prefer concision, and consider session scheduling when possible.

Students' Response to Experiential Learning Approach

Connection of concepts to real situations was the strongest and most universal pattern in the EL sequence. All five participants reported that beginning from concrete experiences and prior cases made ideas easier to understand, as captured by "It makes us understand more about the learning material" (BR). Group work then provided a channel for sharing these cases and maintaining momentum, reflected in "So during the group discussion session, I always actively conveyed what we had found before" (EN), and complemented by "Learning is very interesting because we gathered with our group to discuss..." (NF). The flow from concrete experience into reflective observation fostered comparisons across cases, which students described as helpful for seeing patterns rather than isolated events.

Clarity about core ideas strengthened during abstract conceptualization. Four participants said they could pick out key material and carry it forward into the next task, for example, "The concepts that have been explained can be our guide to the field" (BR). Preparation for upcoming assignments improved when lecturers signposted the main takeaways and previewed steps, which one student linked to motivation to inquire further. The combined effect was a sense of direction through the EL phases and a clearer line of sight from discussion to application.

Boundary conditions were evident. One participant described difficulty when the discussion moved into more abstract territory and favored a more conventional lecture format in those moments. This preference suggests that abstraction benefits from additional supports such as concise organizers, visual summaries, and explicit signaling of transitions between EL phases so that students who need firmer structure are not left behind.

The Experience of Social-Emotional Attributes: Active Participation

Comfort and willingness to participate improved for most students under conditions of safety and shared purpose. Encouraging language from lecturers, clear role expectations, and the invitation to contribute without penalty were cited as reasons to speak, summarized by "Usually, such reinforcement makes me feel more confident to be active" (EST). Perspective broadening through exposure to peers' cases was another driver, as reflected in "So we know a lot from several cases delivered by friends... the knowledge is broader" (NF). These accounts indicate that a supportive climate from SEL and the concrete anchoring from EL combined to lower the practical barriers to taking a turn.

Participation was sensitive to design and environment. Two students pointed to lengthy or unfocused conversations and a noisy, loosely arranged room as reasons to defer speaking in the plenary. One student

preferred first checking understanding with a peer, captured in “Sometimes it's because I feel I still don't understand the material. So, I think it's better to ask my friends for an explanation first” (NIS). Timeboxing discussion segments, rotating discussant roles, and ensuring audibility and seating coherence appear to be practical conditions that preserve the gains in participation for anxious students.

The Experience of Social-Emotional Attributes: Self-Efficacy

Academic self-efficacy increased for three students and showed moderate gains for two. Confidence was attributed to frequent Q&A, opportunities to argue, and visible validation after contributions, for example, “This learning has really boosted my confidence because there are a lot of Q&A and discussion” (EST). Preparedness improved when outlines and previews were available before class, which supported advance study and reduced uncertainty during live discussion. Observational learning also mattered; one student reported that seeing a peer's answer confirmed by the lecturer made it easier to speak next.

Social comparison constrained contribution for a minority of participants. Hesitation in the presence of peers perceived as more capable led to silence in the plenary for some moments, described as “It is also the knowledge of our friends that makes us a bit shy to have an opinion” (NIS). Norms that welcome partial answers, structured turn rotation, and targeted invitations to quieter students may help convert moderate self-efficacy into visible participation for these cases.

4. DISCUSSION

Student Responses to SEL-integrated EL

Findings indicate that brief, predictable SEL routines functioned as a preparatory scaffold for students who screened with severe depression and high anxiety. Four of five participants described feeling calmer, more willing to start tasks, and more prepared to speak after short check-ins and respectful validation. This pattern is consistent with SEL's emphasis on self-awareness and self-management as proximal buffers that help learners appraise internal states and select adaptive strategies in academic contexts (Weissberg & Cascardino, 2013; Reicher & Matischek-Jauk, 2018). From a control-value perspective, naming feelings can reduce uncertainty and restore a sense of control, which in turn makes learning goals feel attainable. Participants' language about “readiness” and “less tense” maps onto that mechanism and helps explain why small choices about asking questions or initiating work became easier.

Experiential structures appeared to translate that affective stabilisation into conceptual traction. All participants reported that starting from concrete cases, moving through guided reflection, and then abstracting key ideas made concepts feel graspable and the next steps visible. This sequence aligns with the experiential learning cycle, in which concrete experience and reflective observation feed conceptualisation and subsequent experimentation (Ickes et al., 2016), and with evidence that such cycles support engagement and confidence on tasks requiring judgement and transfer (Dundas et al., 2017). The complementary roles are notable: SEL routines lowered the threshold to engage, while EL provided a pathway for purposeful action once engagement began. Participants' subthemes in Table 2 (“feels relaxed to active,” “understanding concepts to real situations,” “feeling prepared for the next task”) reflect this handoff from emotion regulation to sense-making and planning.

A plausible process model emerges across interviews. First, brief SEL activities helped students down-regulate arousal and name internal states. Second, EL tasks anchored attention in familiar, concrete experiences that reduced extraneous load and increased perceived relevance. Third, clarity of concepts and next-step expectations supported behavioural activation, evidenced by reports of speaking in groups and attempting tasks. The model remains explanatory rather than causal, yet the repeated ordering of experiences across four of five cases provides a coherent account of how the two approaches operated together for learners managing anxiety and depression.

Emotional and Social Dynamics in Participation

Participation gains were linked to a climate participants experienced as safer and more predictable. Students described lower fear of negative evaluation, greater openness to peers' ideas, and clearer knowledge of what counted as a helpful contribution. These features are compatible with research showing that structured encouragement and visible criteria reduce avoidance in students with anxiety or depressive symptoms and support approach-oriented behaviours (Grøtan et al., 2019; Steel, 2010). The combination of short “warm entry” SEL routines and EL's expectation of sharing concrete cases repositioned discussion as a place to test ideas rather

than a performance with binary right–wrong stakes. Quotes in Table 2 under “Active participation” and “Self-efficacy” illustrate this reframe.

Contextual moderators qualified the pattern and are important for instructional design. One participant preferred linear exposition for abstract segments, suggesting that brief advance organisers and explicit signalling of transitions can support learners who are unsettled by meandering talk. Two participants pointed to environmental constraints, such as classroom noise and dispersed seating, which diluted attentional resources and reduced willingness to contribute. These obstacles echo findings that distraction and ambiguous facilitation attenuate the benefits of otherwise strong activities in higher education settings (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Ramadianto et al., 2022). Social comparison also emerged as a barrier, with one participant reporting inhibition when seated with peers perceived as more capable. That reaction is consistent with links between anxiety, self-evaluation, and participation hesitation, and it underscores the need for routines that normalise partial answers and distribute turns deliberately.

A final interpersonal nuance concerns disclosure. Several participants valued opportunities to write or speak about feelings in structured, time-limited ways, yet one student expressed discomfort with detailed feeling reports and noted attentional dips in afternoon sessions. This tension points to an ethical boundary for SEL in university classrooms: emotion-focused prompts should invite, not require, disclosure; prompts should be neutral and time-bounded; and participation credit should rest on engagement with the academic task, not depth of personal sharing. Such safeguards preserve psychological safety for students who manage depression and anxiety while keeping the course centred on learning goals.

Implications for Course Design

Design choices can intentionally strengthen the mechanism participants described. A short, optional SEL check-in at the start of each meeting can support regulation and prime attention without turning the class into a counselling space (Seppälä et al., 2020). EL tasks can proceed in compact layers: a brief authentic case, two to three reflection prompts that point attention to salient features, a concise articulation of take-home concepts in plain language, and a small application that lets students “try out” the concept. Worked examples and transparent criteria help students cross the experience-to-abstraction boundary and were associated by participants with increased confidence and readiness (Cullen et al., 2017; Sulolipu et al., 2020). These moves are especially pertinent in a course preparing special education teachers, where modelling emotionally attuned and academically rigorous practice is itself a program outcome (Baimenova et al., 2015; Rabi, 2018).

Participation architecture deserves parallel care. Rotating roles (discussant, summariser, evidence-checker) distribute airtime and create multiple low-stakes entry points. Short think–write–pair cycles provide alternatives for students who find speaking costly and reduce the impact of social comparison. Simple environmental adjustments, such as clustering groups more tightly, setting audibility norms, and time-boxing exchanges, protect attention and keep discussions purposeful (Manli, 2024). Given one student’s preference for linear explanation during abstract segments, inserting one-minute “anchor summaries” between phases can stabilise learners who benefit from explicit conceptual signposting.

Limitations and Future Directions

Interpretation should remain appropriately bounded. The sample comprised five students in a single course; PHQ-9 and GAD-7 scores functioned as screening indicators rather than diagnostic assessments; and evidence drew on self-report, with the attendant risks of recall and social desirability bias. Afternoon scheduling, room acoustics, and seating were not controlled and likely interacted with the experiences reported. These features argue for cautious language about effectiveness and for framing the account as a process description rather than a causal claim.

Next steps can test robustness and isolate active ingredients. Replications across sections and programs with larger samples can examine whether the sequence from SEL routines to EL engagement to participation and self-efficacy persists with different teaching teams. Mixed-methods designs that combine standardised measures, classroom observations, and artefacts can triangulate changes in readiness and participation across time. Experimental or quasi-experimental contrasts can vary discussion protocols, noise management practices, and check-in formats to identify which components matter most for learners managing anxiety and depression. Longitudinal tracking can probe durability and transfer, such as whether confidence and participation generalise

to courses with fewer supports. These directions would strengthen validity and yield design guidance instructors can use in everyday practice.

5. CONCLUSION

This study answers two main research questions. First, students with severe depression and high anxiety responded positively to the integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) with experiential learning (EL). Four out of five participants stated that this approach made them more prepared and comfortable attending lectures, easier to understand the material, and more enthusiastic to participate. One participant, although still participating in the process, felt uncomfortable when asked to express emotions openly.

Second, their experiences in terms of emotional attributes were evident in the form of active participation and self-efficacy. The majority of students felt more confident in asking questions, discussing, and expressing their opinions, while two participants reported obstacles in the form of classroom noise, unclear instructions, and feelings of inferiority when compared to peers who were considered more capable. In general, their active participation and self-efficacy increased through a combination of direct experience, group reflection, and positive feedback from lecturers and peers.

Although limited to a small number of participants, one course, and non-diagnostic screening instruments, these findings confirm the potential of integrating SEL–EL in supporting students' mental well-being and academic achievement. Further research with a larger sample size, across study programs, and using a mixed-method approach is needed to test its effectiveness more comprehensively and sustainably.

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