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# Soul Stunting in Higher Education:
## Four Case Narratives from the Campus Counseling Room in Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Soul stunting is a term used by the researcher to describe the arrested growth of a student's inner life, characterized by difficulties in managing emotions, building healthy relationships, and responding wisely to life's challenges. As both researcher and counselor, the author engaged directly with the participants in a real counseling setting, allowing for an authentic observation and intervention in their soul development. This condition often originates in family upbringing patterns and can persist into university years, affecting academic engagement, social relationships, and career readiness. While conceptual discussions on emotional intelligence and student development are abundant, most remain theoretical or survey-based, with limited impact on real behavioral change. The present study addresses that gap through an action-oriented, practice-based approach. The aim of the present study is to explore the phenomenon of soul stunting among university students through four real case narratives from the campus counseling room, focusing on five dimensions of soul development: emotional maturity, empathy, the ability to build healthy relationships, reflective rather than reactive thinking, and effective problem-solving. It also demonstrates how emotionally intelligent communication can serve as an effective strategy for restoring and strengthening these aspects of students' soul development.

**Methods:** This qualitative case study was conducted through real counseling experiences in diverse natural settings, including campus counseling rooms, cafés, practice fields, public spaces, social media, and WhatsApp conversations. The counselor, bringing more than two decades of cultivating emotionally intelligent communication skills, particularly through emotional discernment, served as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation. Data were gathered through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and reflective field notes. Ethical considerations included concealing participant identities and omitting formal informed consent to preserve the natural flow of interactions and avoid behavioral manipulation.

**Results:** Analysis of four authentic counseling narratives revealed that emotional discernment, as a form of tacit knowledge, plays a pivotal role in identifying, addressing, and transforming soul stunting.

**Conclusion:** Findings offer practical implications for campus counseling services, policy-making, and family-based interventions.

**Keywords:** *Soul stunting; Emotional discernment; Tacit knowledge; Family engagement.*

# 1. Introduction

Indonesia is actively addressing the issue of physical stunting, a condition of impaired physical growth in children. However, beyond the topics of nutrition and height, there is another form of stunting that is harder to recognize: soul stunting. This is not about underdeveloped bodies, but about the stagnation of the human soul. In this context, soul stunting refers to arrested development in emotional maturity, empathy, reflective thinking, and the capacity to build healthy relationships.

Unfortunately, this issue is rarely discussed. In the campus counseling room, I have encountered students who appear physically healthy and academically functional, yet show signs of emotional immaturity, particularly in how they relate to others, including their parents. These signs manifest in closed-off behavior, passive or explosive communication patterns, and a narrow worldview. They seem alive, yet in many aspects, their souls appear folded and shrinking.

From Maslow's perspective, humans are designed to grow toward self-actualization and become fully human. However, this potential does not unfold automatically. It must be seen, nurtured, and supported by emotionally safe environments. When a child grows up in an environment lacking recognition, filled with pressure, or devoid of emotional safety, that potential may wither before it can bloom. The signs are evident: poor relational skills, fear of failure, and fragile self-esteem.

In this context, emotional discernment can be understood as a form of tacit knowledge, personal, context-dependent understanding that is difficult to articulate verbally yet deeply embedded in lived experience. Polanyi (1966) emphasized that "we can know more than we can tell," highlighting the intuitive nature of much human understanding. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) later expanded this concept through the SECI model, which explains the transformation of knowledge through socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization. This perspective reinforces the idea that profound emotional growth often emerges from sustained and embodied interaction rather than from abstract instruction. In this counseling-based action research, tacit knowledge plays a crucial role, as success depends heavily on the researcher's ability to sense, interpret, and respond appropriately to emotional cues, especially when dealing with deeply rooted psychological patterns such as soul stunting.

This paper presents four real case narratives from the campus counseling room, where students often arrive with inner restlessness but without the language to express it. Three of them, namely Meri, Sinta, and Novin, show deep-rooted signs of soul stunting, gradually eroding their personal agency. The fourth, Marissa, demonstrates soul strength, serving as a contrast that highlights the potential for emotional growth. In this paper, I do not merely report the cases, but also explore how emotionally intelligent communication can serve as a pathway to healing the soul, gently yet earnestly.

While conceptual discussions on emotional intelligence, parenting styles, and student development are abundant, most remain theoretical or survey-based, resulting in limited impact on actual behavioral change. Very few studies adopt an action-oriented approach in which the researcher is directly involved in authentic counseling interactions, observing as well as influencing emotional growth in natural settings. This current investigation addresses that gap by presenting a qualitative case study grounded in real counseling experiences, where emotionally intelligent communication, particularly through emotional discernment, is applied both as a research lens and as an intervention strategy.

Therefore, the present study aims to examine the phenomenon of soul stunting among university students through four real case narratives from the campus counseling room. The analysis focuses on five key dimensions of soul development, namely emotional maturity, empathy, the ability to build healthy relationships, reflective rather than reactive thinking, and effective problem-solving, and explores how emotionally intelligent communication, particularly through emotional discernment, can be applied both as a research lens and an intervention strategy to foster growth in these areas.

## 2. Methods

This research is a case study that I conducted in a counseling guidance setting that is not confined to a physical space. Counseling sessions can take place in cafés, in field practice areas, in other public spaces, on social media, or through online conversations such as WhatsApp. In this research, I define the "counseling room" broadly as any context of interaction that is safe, purposeful, and constructive, where conversations aim to guide participants to understand themselves, strengthen character, and develop personal resilience. This approach allowed me to observe counseling dynamics in contexts that are natural and relevant to the participants' daily lives.

My presence in the counseling room served not only as a data collector but also as an interpreter of the emotional interactions taking place. A case study in counseling settings requires emotional discernment, the ability to distinguish, respond to, and care for the nuances of participants' emotions accurately without intervening or distorting their original experiences. High personal integrity serves as the foundation of my entire research process, ensuring that every step is conducted ethically and truthfully. I have built this competence through a distinctive personal journey: growing up in a family environment marked by soul stunting, then choosing to move forward to pursue master's and doctoral degrees in psychology. My consistent interest in emotionally intelligent communication, combined with extensive experience in building and maintaining relationships with diverse groups of people, has shaped a mature socio-emotional sensitivity. For more than two decades, I have trained myself in attentive listening, lived out emotional communication in daily life, and applied it in both professional and personal contexts (Yeyentimalla, 2025; Yeyentimalla, et al., 2025). This background has enabled me to capture meanings hidden behind verbal and nonverbal expressions, enrich the analysis, and provide a depth of findings rarely achieved by conventional qualitative studies.

I understand this competence as a form of tacit knowledge, a type of knowledge that is real and impactful in solving life problems but difficult to teach to others, especially to those who are unaware that they have communication problems. In the field of knowledge management, explicit knowledge refers to knowledge that can be easily articulated and shared through documentation, while tacit knowledge originates from personal experience, context, and intuition, elements that are difficult to transfer into written manuals. The emotionally intelligent communication that I practice is a form of tacit knowledge that I have developed through two decades of attentive listening and relationship building with a wide variety of individuals. This experience enriches the analysis and distinguishes the present study from conventional qualitative approaches.

Data collection was carried out through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and reflective note-taking during interactions in the various counseling spaces described above. I conducted participant observation by engaging directly in conversations while maintaining my position as a researcher who records the dynamics of interaction. In-depth interviews were conducted flexibly, following the natural flow of conversation so that participants felt safe to share their experiences and feelings. In addition, I wrote reflective notes immediately after each session to capture nonverbal details, emotional nuances, and situational contexts that might be overlooked if relying solely on audio recordings. All data were then analyzed thematically, taking into account both explicit meanings expressed and implicit meanings inferred, in line with the characteristics of a qualitative case study.

In this research, I did not use a formal informed consent procedure for participants. Instead, I chose to disguise all participants' identities in the manuscript so that no individual could be traced. This approach was taken to maintain data authenticity in the context of naturalistic observation. Participants I met were not told that they were simultaneously clients and co-researchers, so interactions occurred naturally without manipulation in speech or body language. In this way, I could record responses, expressions, and emotional dynamics in their pure form as they occur in everyday counseling situations. Ethical considerations were still prioritized through strict confidentiality and the removal of all information that could lead to personal identification.

## 3.  Case Presentation

**Case 1: Meri -- Years of Lying Behavior Reinforced by her Mother**

Meri (20 years old) was a final-semester student in the Diploma III in Nursing Program. The case began when her mother, who comes from the same hometown and shares family ties with me, contacted me on January 31, 2022, saying that Meri had failed her final thesis for a Diploma III in Nursing and was having issues with her main supervisor. I asked Meri to meet me that afternoon at the campus counseling room (Yeyentimalla, 2025).

Meri explained that her supervisor was angry because she had forged the supervisor's signature on her thesis approval sheet. I acknowledged this as a serious offense and advised Meri to apologize directly, but she claimed the supervisor refused to meet her. The next day, her mother called again and made a shocking revelation: they had given several million rupiah to the supervisor, who had even written the thesis. They now felt deceived because Meri still failed. I tried to contact the supervisor to hear her perspective, but she responded aggressively, accusing me of blindly defending the student and threatening to report me to the police, calling the accusation a severe defamation.

I urged Meri to write a detailed chronology, but she was unresponsive. Her answers were vague: "I don't know," "I forgot," or "I didn't pay attention." When asked where the money was handed over, she said it was at a café she couldn't name. As the campus counselor, I compiled a report with supporting documents, including a bank statement confirming a money transfer from Meri's mother on the date they mentioned.

When the study program held a meeting with relevant parties, I wasn't invited. Meri's mother later told me, "You should've just come, break in if needed. Because you didn't come, the meeting felt like a trial for us." For me, as an educated person, attending without an invitation was not an option. Her words reflected a weak emotional structure and a controlling dynamic that persisted throughout our interaction.

Mediation by the Director concluded with a decision requiring Meri to declare her story untrue and apologize. Her supervisor demanded a video apology posted on social media, but I intervened to prevent this.

A new supervisory team was assigned. Yet Meri showed no improvement. She became pregnant and got married one week before giving birth. Her study period was extended to the tenth semester, but she still failed her thesis, Child Nursing, and Maternity Nursing courses. Eventually, she was dismissed on September 5, 2024.

Meri later filed complaints against the institution to both a civil society organization and the Ombudsman, but no misconduct was found.

Today, Meri maintains a social media presence, falsely claiming to have graduated and become a nurse. To me, this represents soul stunting, a condition of undeveloped emotional maturity. She frequently lied, and her mother consistently covered for her. At one point, they even attempted to bribe me, an offer I firmly rejected. Throughout the counseling process, patterns of control and playing victim remained. I have no regrets about recommending Meri's dismissal. In this conflict, I was the only one who truly grew and learned.

**Case 2: Sinta -- Caring for Parents as the Utmost Duty**

Sinta, a 19-year-old first-semester student in the Applied Bachelor of Nursing program, introduced herself to me via WhatsApp text message. Her profile photo was blank. It was Monday, November 6, 2023. Her message came in at 6:09 a.m., requesting a meeting with me. As I was getting ready for the flag-raising ceremony that starts at 7:00 a.m., I responded at 6:43. "Yes, you may meet me right after the ceremony."

Instead of saying thank you, Sinta asked: "What time does the ceremony end, Ma'am, if I may ask?"

I replied, "If you also attend the ceremony, you'd already know. That's a strange question."

She went silent. For context, the first Monday of each month includes a flag-raising ceremony attended by all faculty, staff, and students, typically lasting 30 minutes. A student being unaware of this struck me as odd.

At 9:30 a.m., while I was working on my laptop, I heard a soft knock. A petite student appeared. I invited her in and asked her to sit. Her voice was very quiet. She said she wanted to ask about the requirements for the Basic Nursing practicum. That question should have been directed to the course coordinator, not to me. Still, I listened. She shared that she struggled to concentrate, had no friends, and received no emotional support from her family.

I gave her advice about becoming a responsible individual, something already reflected in her communication style. I invited her to reflect on that morning. She had asked to meet, I responded immediately and gave her the first available slot. Yet she asked what time the ceremony ended. Such narrow thinking leads to unnecessary complications. I encouraged her to learn to appreciate others and to affirm the good in them. That's the foundation of emotionally intelligent communication, confirmation, recognition (Yeyentimalla, 2020).

I gave her a copy of my book, Confidence with Professor Rajawali: Smart Strategies for Completing Your Degree (in Indonesian, Pede Bersama Professor Rajawali: Jurus Jitu Menyelesaikan Studi). As she left, she said nothing, not even "thank you", even though I had just advised her to practice gratitude.

At the end of the semester, Sinta came back to me because her GPA was below 2.75. She was accompanied by an older cousin. She said she felt sad because lecturers often scolded her for falling asleep in class. I offered guidance on self-management: get enough sleep at night, don't delay assignments. I asked if she had read the book I gave her. She said no. I asked why. She answered, "I was lazy." I glared. Her cousin did too and immediately reprimanded her.

The following semester, she still failed to reach the GPA minimum. This time she came with her father. They didn't appear close. Her father suggested the university improve its facilities, such as updating the library collection. I explained that our library is among the best in Indonesia, his daughter simply refused to read. I asked her again if she had read the book I gave her, one that addresses emotional communication, clearly her issue. Sinta didn't seem interested.

Last semester, Sinta applied for leave to care for her sick mother. On July 15, 2025, she extended the leave, this time because she herself was ill. When she first came to request the leave, I invited her to consider other options, such as hiring a nurse to care for her mother. I explained that if she took a leave, she would later have to study with junior classmates and might struggle to adjust. Still, she and her father chose to proceed with the leave.

Two years have now passed. I have seen no progress in Sinta's communication skills. She only contacts me when she needs something. Beyond that, she makes no effort to foster rapport or make our interactions pleasant. From observing her father, I sensed he was not a supportive figure. He once scolded his daughter in front of me. I suspect this dynamic is one of the main reasons Sinta has not developed into a more confident individual.

## Case 3: Novin -- Soul Stunting in a Boundaryless Home

Novin, a female student in a Diploma III Nursing program, appeared quiet and unassuming. Yet beneath her calm surface were three incidents of theft, targeting three classmates: a wallet, an iPhone, and an ATM card. The last case, involving Vira's BSI card, led to a police report after IDR 1,688,000 was withdrawn. CCTV footage captured Novin and a man named Ardika.

Ardika was Novin's boyfriend, whom she met on Instagram two years earlier. Unemployed and manipulative, he emotionally and financially exploited her. This is a clear case of love scamming, a rising digital-age crime where false romantic bonds are used to deceive and control. In recent months, Novin frequently asked her parents for large sums of money, IDR 8 million for a phone that was never purchased. The money likely went to Ardika. The initial response came when police visited the hospital where students were undergoing clinical rotation. In the presence of supervisors and mentors, Novin returned IDR 1,500,000. However, IDR 188,000 remained unpaid.

The case was referred to the counseling unit. I met Novin and told her: "Your honesty today determines your path forward." She claimed she owed only IDR 100,000. I gave her three days to make amends: repay the money in person, apologize, and send me a photo of the meeting. I also contacted her mother for support.

Three days passed. No update. On the fourth day, I pressed firmly. They begged for one more day. I agreed. When the photo was finally sent, I noticed something odd: the cash Vira held included small denominations, even IDR 1,000 notes. Suspicious, I contacted Vira. She confirmed the remaining amount was IDR 188,000, not IDR 100,000, and submitted a bank notification. The supervisor also verified the details.

I submitted this recommendation: "This student cannot be trusted. Recommendation: dismissal. A softened approach may involve academic leave."

The program and department meetings in early July 2025 confirmed dismissal, softened by allowing Novin to resign. Her mother wept, pleading due to her cancer condition and Novin being the family's hope. I listened with empathy, but the decision stood. Ample space had been offered for change, yet Novin remained evasive, dishonest, and unaccountable.

This case reveals how boundaryless parenting fosters soul stunting, producing diminished inner maturity, a weakened moral compass, and vulnerability to manipulation. Love without limits is not a saving force. It becomes destructive.

## Case 4: Marissa -- A Harmonious Family, A Gracious Daughter

As a university counselor, I do not merely act as a gatekeeper, but as someone who proactively reaches out. On June 13 and 14, 2025, I accompanied a fellow lecturer on a clinical supervision visit for maternal nursing students at a local public health center. Unexpectedly, the students were not wearing the mandated white uniforms, instead following instructions from the clinical instructor to wear casual attire. Despite my colleague's clear reminder the day before to comply with university regulations, none of the eight students informed her of the change. The conflict escalated when this duality of instructions went uncommunicated.

My colleague became upset and canceled the clinical session. During the return trip, I listened to her and acknowledged her frustration. I immediately began thinking of a peaceful resolution. My strategy was to persuade the students to initiate reconciliation. However, I didn't have their contact numbers. I decided to wait until Monday, June 16, 2025, to reach out to Puji, a former student now working at the health center, to help gather their contact information.

Puji provided all eight contact numbers. I chose to reach out to Ana first and coached her on conflict resolution. I prepared a message for her to send to the lecturer. Unfortunately, Ana was unresponsive. Instead of delivering the message herself, Arif, the unhelpful group leader, stepped in. This diverted the message from its intended tone, and the lecturer became even more upset, as evidenced by her ALL CAPS replies.

I then contacted another student. Marissa. Her response was swift, respectful, and compliant. I guided Marissa to reach out to the lecturer with a message of apology and willingness to follow the new guidance for clinical placement. Marissa quickly grasped the spirit of reconciliation and actively collaborated to resolve the conflict between her group and the supervising lecturer. Her responsiveness enabled the group to restore their relationship with the lecturer and resume productive guidance. Reconciliation occurred. The students and the lecturer met in the Counseling Room (Ruang BK), and I volunteered to document the meeting as a photographer.

As a token of appreciation, I gave Marissa my book Confident with Professor Rajawali (in Indonesian, Pede Bersama Professor Rajawali), which documents successful communication practices during my doctoral studies. Unlike other students who also received the book, Marissa later confirmed she had finished reading it. She described it as enlightening and eye-opening, expanding her view of student–lecturer relationships as potentially warm and friendly.

In our later conversations, Marissa shared that she comes from a harmonious family. Her parents are both educators: her father is a high school teacher and her mother teaches at the elementary level. Marissa is the youngest, with a brother nine years her senior who is married and works in the capital of the regency. They are close and video call each other daily. In Marissa's family, open communication is key. Her parents allow her to have healthy friendships in and beyond campus, and she is encouraged to express opinions and have autonomy.

This affirms my hypothesis that children raised in democratic families tend to grow into emotionally healthy individuals. Marissa quickly grasped the logic of reconciliation and actively collaborated to resolve the conflict between her group and the supervising lecturer. Her responsiveness enabled the group to restore their relationship with the lecturer and resume productive guidance.

## 4.   Comparative Analysis of Four Cases

The four cases, namely Meri, Sinta, Novin, and Marissa, illustrate diverse developmental trajectories in higher education, shaped by contrasting family dynamics and parenting styles.

**Similarities:**
Each case involves a university student whose behaviors and emotional responses are deeply rooted in their upbringing. The presence or absence of emotional literacy, responsibility, and autonomy is visible in how these students face interpersonal conflicts or respond to academic expectations. All four cases underscore the role of family environments in shaping psychological maturity.

**Differences:**
Meri displays long-standing deceitful behavior, silently reinforced by her mother. Her case reflects a deep-rooted lack of accountability and blurred boundaries in the parent-child relationship.

Sinta, in contrast, exemplifies a strong familial bond anchored in filial devotion. Her priority is caregiving for aging parents, which may be noble, but potentially overshadows her academic focus and self-actualization.

Novin represents a case of emotional underdevelopment, stemming from a permissive parenting style. Her passivity and avoidance behaviors signal a lack of internal discipline and direction.

Marissa stands apart as a portrait of emotional resilience and maturity. Raised in a democratic and communicative household, she demonstrates initiative, respect, and clarity in problem-solving. Her behavior reveals a healthy capacity for self-regulation and collaborative conflict resolution.

These four cases collectively highlight that emotional and character development is not only an individual task but also a systemic outcome influenced by parenting quality. Soul stunting in adulthood often reflects unprocessed or poorly nurtured emotional landscapes from childhood. In contrast, students raised with healthy emotional scaffolding tend to thrive academically, socially, and morally.

This matrix summarizes the findings from the four cases presented here, covering five dimensions of soul development: (1) emotional maturity, (2) empathy, (3) ability to build healthy relationships, (4) tendency toward reactive or reflective thinking, and (5) problem-solving skills.

Matrix 1 illustrates that although the four cases come from diverse backgrounds and personal dynamics, their soul development can be distinctly mapped across the five key dimensions. Three students (Meri, Sinta, Novin) demonstrated significant limitations in most dimensions, particularly in emotional maturity, empathy, and reflective thinking. In contrast, Marissa stood out as an example of soul strength, displaying optimal growth across all five dimensions.

Matrix 2 presents a comparative view of the five dimensions of soul development: emotional maturity, empathy, ability to build healthy relationships, reflective versus reactive thinking, and problem-solving, across the four cases. The table highlights both shared patterns and distinct differences. While Meri, Sinta, and Novin display varying degrees of soul stunting, Marissa stands out as the only case demonstrating strong soul strength. These contrasts provide a solid foundation for understanding the link between an individual's initial condition and the intervention strategies applied, paving the way for deeper analysis in the Discussion section.

**Matrix 1. Comparison of Four Cases Across Five Dimensions of Soul Development**

| Dimension | Meri (Soul Stunting) | Sinta (Soul Stunting) | Novin (Soul Stunting) | Marissa (Soul Strength) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Emotional maturity | Easily triggered, struggles to regulate emotions; tends to withdraw under pressure | Highly sensitive, overly anxious, finds it hard to calm herself | Emotionally unstable, frequent mood swings, minimal self-awareness | Emotionally stable, able to regulate emotions even in difficult situations |
| Empathy | Low empathy, difficulty reading others' feelings | Empathy blocked by excessive self-focused anxiety | Limited empathy, tends to judge quickly without understanding context | High empathy, able to sense and respond to others' emotional needs |
| Ability to build healthy relationship | Relationship tend to be transactional and fragile | Avoids deep emotional involvement | Struggles to maintain relationship due to unresolved conflicts | Builds equal, supportive, and long-term relationship |
| Reactive vs reflective thinking | Reactive, rarely considers long-term consequences | Reactive, often driven by fear | Reactive, makes emotional decisions without evaluation | Reflective, considers multiple perspectives before acting |
| Problem-solving skills | Avoids problem or blames others | Delay confrontation, avoids decision-making | Solves problems quickly but superficially, often causing new issues | Solves problems, constructively, considering all parties involved |

**Matrix 2. Dimensions of Soul Development in Four Counseling Cases**

| Case | Emotional maturity | Empathy | Ability to build healthy relationships | Reactive/reflective thinking | Problem-solving skills |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Meri | Low | Low | Poor | Reactive | Weak |
| Sinta | Low | Moderate | Poor | Reactive | Weak |
| Novin | Low | Low | Poor | Reactive | Weak |
| Marissa | High | High | Strong | Reflective | Strong |

## 5. Discussion

Marissa's case represents the ideal outcome of democratic parenting: open communication with parents, autonomy, and emotional warmth. She has grown into a psychologically healthy individual, communicative and capable of recognizing truth reflectively. Her emotional intelligence is evident in her ability to identify emotions, understand others' perspectives, and rebuild broken relationships.

In contrast, the cases of Meri, Sinta, and Novin illustrate forms of soul stunting, a term used to describe psychological growth impairments caused by unhealthy parenting. Meri exhibits long-term manipulative behavior reinforced by her mother's negative support. Sinta appears responsible, yet experiences identity disorientation due to emotional pressure from caring for her parents at the cost of her academic focus. Meanwhile, Novin exhibits signs of passivity, lack of initiative, and dependence, traits stemming from a permissive parenting style that failed to establish healthy boundaries.

Diana Baumrind's (1967) classic theory classifies parenting styles into three categories: authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative (democratic). The author introduces the term "toxic parenting" to describe parenting that not only leans authoritarian or permissive, but also damages a child's self-worth, either by reinforcing unhealthy behavior (Meri's case), by neglecting the child's developmental needs (Novin's case), and excessive demand from parents (Sinta's case).

Daniel Goleman's (1995) theory of emotional intelligence emphasizes that recognizing and managing one's own emotions, self-motivation, empathy, and social skills are crucial for life success. Students experiencing soul stunting often struggle with these dimensions. "The emotional mind is far quicker than the rational mind" is Goleman's legendary statement, grounded in long-standing research in the field of emotional intelligence.

In campus counseling practice, the counselor introduces the concept of emotionally intelligent communication a key approach. It is grounded in two core principles: emotional animation and emotional simulation. Emotional animation refers to the courage to express positively-valenced emotions in both spoken and written dialogue, creating emotional safety. Emotional simulation refers to the wisdom of processing feelings before expressing them, in order to preserve mutual relationships. These principles, once developed as soft skills, lay the foundation for authentic connections (Yeyentimalla, 2020; Yeyentimalla, et al., 2025).

At its peak, emotional awareness produces emotional discernment, demonstrated by the counselor in resolving the conflict between Marissa's group and their clinical supervisor. The counselor recognized both the students' dynamics and the supervisor's personality, initiating, not just intervening but provoking in the positive sense, a shift in awareness and agency. Marissa, as the selected student, took proactive steps toward resolution. The approach succeeded: a broken relationship was restored.

These findings should also be understood within the framework of Indonesia's collectivistic culture, where harmony, respect for hierarchy, and group belonging are highly valued (Triandis, 1994). In such contexts, open confrontation is often avoided, and emotional expression may be restrained to maintain social cohesion. While these norms can foster solidarity, they may also contribute to soul stunting by discouraging individuals from articulating personal struggles or dissenting views. This contrasts with individualistic cultures, where self-expression and personal autonomy are more strongly encouraged, potentially reducing the likelihood of prolonged emotional underdevelopment but increasing the risk of social fragmentation. In higher education settings, the collectivistic dynamic can result in students who outwardly conform yet inwardly experience unresolved emotional underdevelopment. Understanding soul stunting through this cultural lens is essential for designing interventions that respect collective values while also promoting emotional growth and autonomy.

Understanding soul stunting through this cultural lens underscores the need for interventions that respect collective values while promoting emotional growth and autonomy. Based on these insights, higher education institutions should consider integrating emotional intelligence and communication skills training into student development programs. Creating safe spaces, both physical and virtual, where students can share their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment is essential. Counselors and lecturers should receive training in emotional discernment to better identify and address soul stunting, particularly in collectivistic contexts where such issues are often hidden beneath outward conformity. Collaboration with student organizations can also help build peer support systems that normalize discussions around emotional well-being.

While these recommendations present promising directions for practice, the present study has certain limitations. The findings are drawn from four case studies conducted within a specific cultural and institutional context, which may limit their generalizability. The naturalistic observation approach, while valuable for capturing authentic interactions, also means that not all relevant variables could be controlled or measured. Future research could expand the sample size, include comparative studies across different institutions and cultural contexts, and explore longitudinal outcomes to strengthen the evidence base.

## 6.  Conclusion

The presentation of these four cases affirms that the quality of family upbringing significantly influences the development of students' mental well-being, as reflected in their readiness to respond to conflict and to engage in emotionally intelligent communication. Democratic and loving parenting fosters emotionally healthy individuals who are cooperative and capable of managing conflict constructively. In contrast, permissive, authoritarian, or dysfunctional parenting contributes to soul stunting, a condition in which individuals appear mature by age but are hindered in emotional intelligence and social interaction. These findings underscore the importance of family involvement in student counseling, as well as the application of emotionally intelligent communication, communication that is attuned to one's own and others' emotions, and able to express them in safe and constructive ways. The principles of emotional animation and emotional simulation can be practiced and become essential keys in supporting Generation Z to face the challenges of the times.

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## Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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