Thesis-Related Anxiety Among Pre-Service Elementary Teachers: A Phenomenological Study of Triggers and Manifestations

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Abstract: Thesis writing is a demanding academic process that may be accompanied by anxiety and academic disruption. This study explored how pre-service elementary teachers experienced thesis-related anxiety, the internal and external factors they perceived as triggers, and its cognitive, physiological, behavioral, and emotional manifestations. A descriptive qualitative phenomenological study was conducted at Mulawarman University from March to June 2026. Of 154 students screened, 109 reported anxiety. Six students from the 2022 cohort were purposively selected, with two representing each screening category (low, moderate, and high). Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed through coding, subtheme clustering, and theme development, supported by the Miles and Huberman framework. Three themes emerged: experiences across thesis stages, internal and external triggers, and multidimensional manifestations. Supervision barriers and laziness were commonly reported external and internal triggers, respectively. Anxiety was described through excessive worry, heart palpitations, procrastination, and fear of failure. Findings highlight the importance of clear supervision and accessible student support.

Abstrak: Penulisan skripsi merupakan proses akademik yang menantang dan dapat disertai kecemasan serta gangguan aktivitas akademik. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman kecemasan terkait skripsi pada mahasiswa calon guru sekolah dasar, faktor internal dan eksternal yang dipersepsikan sebagai pemicu, serta manifestasinya secara kognitif, fisiologis, perilaku, dan emosional. Penelitian menggunakan desain fenomenologi kualitatif deskriptif di Universitas Mulawarman pada Maret–Juni 2026. Dari 154 mahasiswa yang mengikuti penyaringan, 109 melaporkan mengalami kecemasan. Enam mahasiswa angkatan 2022 dipilih secara purposif, masing-masing dua dari kategori rendah, sedang, dan tinggi. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur, ditranskripsikan secara verbatim, lalu dianalisis melalui pengodean, pengelompokan subtema, dan pengembangan tema dengan dukungan kerangka Miles dan Huberman. Tiga tema ditemukan: pengalaman kecemasan sepanjang proses skripsi, pemicu internal dan eksternal, serta manifestasi multidimensi. Hambatan bimbingan dan rasa malas merupakan pemicu eksternal dan internal yang sering dilaporkan. Kecemasan tampak melalui kekhawatiran berlebihan, jantung berdebar, prokrastinasi, dan ketakutan akan kegagalan. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya bimbingan yang jelas dan dukungan bagi mahasiswa.

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A. Introduction

Writing an undergraduate thesis is a major academic transition that requires independent inquiry, scientific reasoning, academic writing, and sustained self-regulation (Adebisi, 2022). For many students, it is their first extended research project and may therefore be intellectually and emotionally demanding. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) has highlighted mental health as an important concern in university populations, while studies have associated anxiety with difficulties in academic functioning and well-being (Tan et al., 2023; Tang & He, 2023). Research from different contexts has also reported academic anxiety during demanding assessment and thesis-writing periods (Kawengian & Subekti, 2024; Oentarto & Situmorang, 2024; Paradowska, 2024). These concerns align with UNESCO's discussion of student well-being in higher education (UNESCO IESALC, 2024) and the broader commitment to inclusive, quality education under Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Thesis-related anxiety may emerge as students identify a topic, select research methods, collect and analyze data, attend supervision meetings, respond to revisions, and work toward completion deadlines (Pravita & Kuswandono, 2022). Difficulties in academic writing, beliefs about writing ability, cognitive and behavioral responses to anxiety, and insufficient support may further complicate the process (Kawengian & Subekti, 2024; Nurkamto et al., 2022; Riftianti et al., 2024). A systematic review and meta-analysis also estimated that approximately one-third of undergraduate students experience elevated anxiety (Ahmed et al., 2023). Related research in mathematics education offers a useful, though contextually distinct, perspective on the role of psychological resources: Rahman et al (2025b) reported that project-based learning was associated with improved mathematics interest and self-efficacy among senior high school students. In another study, Rahman et al (2025a) found that self-efficacy and self-regulation predicted elementary students' mathematical problem-solving, whereas mathematics anxiety was not a significant predictor. These studies do not examine thesis anxiety directly, but they suggest that students' emotional experiences should be considered alongside perceived competence and self-regulatory resources. In higher education, student empowerment research has likewise highlighted mentoring, collaboration, and support as ways to promote student engagement and competency development (Prasetia et al., 2026).

These demands can accumulate rather than occur independently: uncertainty about research decisions may coincide with concerns about supervisor feedback, family expectations, financial obligations, and the time available to complete the degree. Understanding students' own interpretations is therefore important for distinguishing the situations they find threatening from explanations imposed by researchers.

This issue was also observed among students in the Primary School Teacher Education (PGSD) Study Program at Mulawarman University. Preliminary screening of 154 students from the 2022 cohort found that 109 reported experiencing anxiety during thesis writing. Although this screening indicated that thesis-related anxiety was present, it did not explain how students experienced anxiety, which situations intensified it, how they perceived internal and external triggers, or how anxiety appeared in their academic activities. These questions

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require an inquiry that goes beyond screening scores to understand students' lived experiences. Such an account may help educators recognize that similar academic demands can be interpreted differently across students and that support should respond to the contexts students describe.

Previous studies have examined thesis-related anxiety using different approaches. Kasim et al (2024) investigated anxiety in final-paper writing quantitatively and identified concerns such as negative evaluation, time pressure, and language-related difficulties. Berutu & Mutiawati (2023) explored learning anxiety and mental health among final-year students qualitatively. Dian et al (2024) examined anxiety during thesis-proposal writing through narrative inquiry, while Riftianti et al (2024) investigated information anxiety during thesis preparation. This literature establishes that anxiety occurs in academic research contexts and may be associated with personal, social, and procedural demands. However, the studies differ in focus and approach, and further contextual description is useful to connect students' accounts of thesis writing with the situations they perceive as triggers and the ways anxiety manifests.

Accordingly, the gap addressed in this study is the need for an integrated phenomenological account that brings together students' experiences of thesis-related anxiety, their perceived internal and external triggers, and its cognitive, physiological, behavioral, and emotional manifestations. Rather than diagnosing a clinical condition or testing causal relationships, descriptive phenomenology can help represent how students understand and describe their experiences. The novelty of this study lies in examining these three connected dimensions within the experiences of pre-service elementary teachers at one Indonesian university, thereby providing context-specific insight into thesis anxiety and academic support.

This study addresses three research questions: (1) How do PGSD students experience anxiety during the thesis-writing process? (2) What internal and external factors do they perceive as triggering thesis-related anxiety? And (3) How is thesis-related anxiety manifested cognitively, physiologically, behaviorally, and emotionally? By addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute a more integrated understanding of thesis-related anxiety and provide practical, context-sensitive insights for academic supervision and student well-being support in higher education.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design to explore pre-service elementary teachers' lived experiences of anxiety during undergraduate thesis writing. Descriptive phenomenology was selected to describe participants' reported experiences and the meanings they attached to thesis-related situations while minimizing interpretations beyond their accounts (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The study was conducted in the Primary School Teacher Education (PGSD) Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Mulawarman University, Indonesia, from March to June 2026.

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Participants were six PGSD students from the 2022 cohort who were actively writing their undergraduate theses and reported experiencing anxiety. Initial screening involved 154 students, of whom 109 reported experiencing anxiety and proceeded to the anxiety screening procedure. Purposive sampling was subsequently used to select six participants, with two representing each of the low, moderate, and high screening categories. These categories were used to obtain variation in participants' experiences rather than to compare anxiety severity statistically or establish clinical diagnoses. The questionnaire scores served as a basis for participant selection and were not interpreted as standardized psychometric measures.

Four instruments were used: an initial screening sheet, an anxiety questionnaire, an anxiety-trigger exploration sheet, and a semi-structured interview guide. The screening sheet and anxiety questionnaire supported participant selection, and the questionnaire was reviewed by experts before use. The interview guide was aligned with the research questions and explored the onset of anxiety, anxiety-inducing situations, feelings during thesis writing, effects on academic activities, perceived internal and external triggers, and cognitive, physiological, behavioral, and emotional manifestations.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. With participants' permission, each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview accounts constituted the primary qualitative data. Participants were assigned codes S1–S6 to protect their identities. The anxiety-trigger exploration sheet was used as a supporting instrument for examining factors associated with participants' anxiety; its role in data verification should be reported consistently with the procedures actually performed.

Data were analyzed through coding, subtheme clustering, and theme development, with the Miles and Huberman framework guiding data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al., 2014). First, each transcript was read carefully, and meaningful statements relevant to the research questions were assigned descriptive codes. Second, related codes were grouped into subthemes according to shared content. Third, the subthemes were organized into three overarching themes: experiences of anxiety during thesis writing, perceived internal and external triggers, and manifestations of anxiety. Coding records and analytical memos were maintained to document analytical decisions and examine the consistency of interpretations with participants' accounts.

Trustworthiness was supported through an audit trail and reflexive notes distinguishing participants' statements from the researcher's interpretations. Member checking and peer debriefing were not conducted. Detailed descriptions and anonymized verbatim quotations were used to preserve participants' perspectives and make the relationship between data and interpretations transparent (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017).

The study received ethical clearance from the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education Research Ethics Committee, Mulawarman University. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, voluntary participation, recording procedures, and right to withdraw without consequence. Written permission was obtained before audio recording. Confidentiality was maintained through participant codes and password-protected storage of

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audio recordings and transcripts. Data were scheduled to be retained for five years and then securely destroyed in accordance with institutional data-management policies.

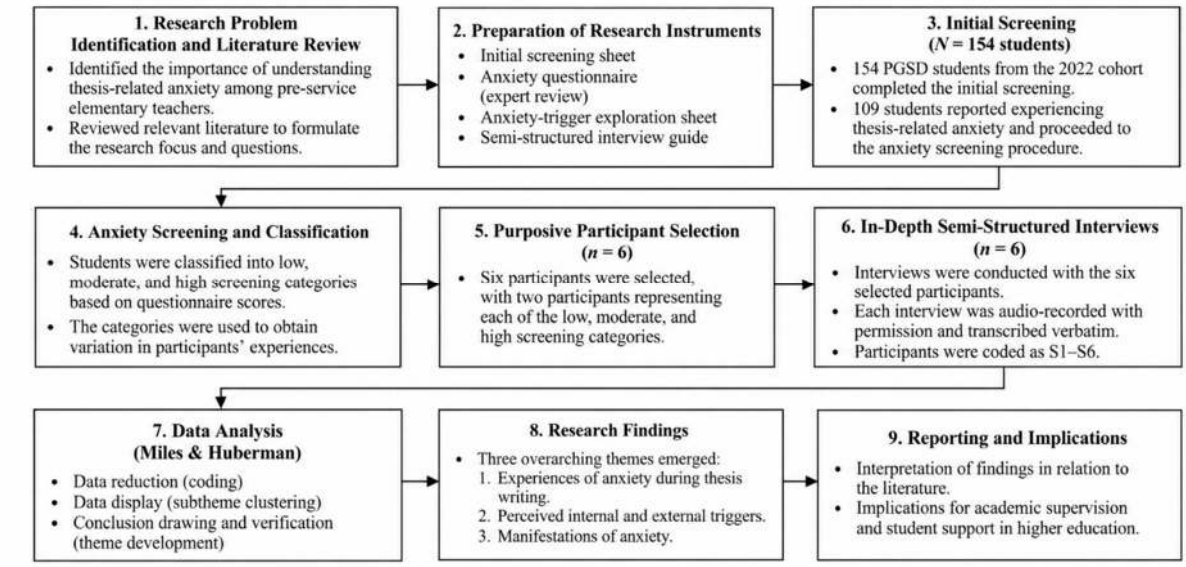


Figure 1. Research Flow of the Thesis-Related Anxiety Study

C. Result

The analysis of interviews with six participants identified three overarching themes: (1) participants' experiences of anxiety during thesis writing, (2) internal and external factors triggering anxiety, and (3) cognitive, physiological, behavioral, and emotional manifestations of anxiety. The tables present the subthemes identified through the analysis. The reported frequencies refer to the number of participants who mentioned each subtheme, not the number of times it occurred. Because the study involved six purposively selected participants, these frequencies are descriptive and should not be interpreted as estimates of anxiety prevalence among university students.

Participants' Experiences of Anxiety During Thesis Writing

Participants described anxiety as an experience that emerged at different stages of the thesis-writing process. Some reported becoming anxious before intensive thesis work, often after hearing negative accounts from peers or senior students. Others associated the onset of anxiety with registering for the thesis course, entering the supervision process, pressure to graduate quickly, or a change of academic supervisor. Anxiety became particularly salient during supervision, revisions, and the period approaching completion deadlines.

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Table 1. Participants' Experiences of Anxiety During Thesis Writing

Theme	Subtheme	Number of Participants
Onset of anxiety	Negative perceptions regarding the undergraduate thesis	2
	Registering for the thesis course	1
	Pressure to graduate quickly	1
	Entering the supervision process	2
	Change of academic supervisor	1
Anxiety-inducing situations	Attending supervision sessions	5
	Facing revisions	2
	Approaching the deadline	2
Feelings during thesis writing	Fear of not graduating on time	2
	Feeling pressured by parental expectations	1
	Concern about thesis quality	1
	Feeling inadequate	1
	Fear of research failure	1

As shown in Table 1, supervision was the most frequently reported anxiety-inducing situation, mentioned by five of the six participants. Participants described concerns about making mistakes, meeting supervisors' expectations, and handling revisions. They also reported fear of not graduating on time, concerns about thesis quality, feelings of inadequacy, parental expectations, and fear of research failure. These accounts indicate that anxiety was associated not only with the academic tasks involved in thesis writing but also with the consequences participants anticipated if they could not meet academic expectations.

Internal and External Factors Triggering Anxiety

Participants associated their anxiety with both internal and external factors. Internal factors included perceived laziness, limited understanding of the research process, difficulty adhering to planned schedules, and low self-confidence. External factors included economic pressure, family demands, social comparison, barriers in the supervision process, research obstacles, and time pressure. Table 2 summarizes these factors and the number of participants who mentioned each one.

Table 2. Internal And External Factors Triggering Anxiety

Theme	Subtheme	Number of participants
Internal factors	Perceived laziness	3
	Limited understanding of the research process	1
	Difficulty adhering to the planned schedule	1
	Low self-confidence	1
External factors	Economic pressure	1
	Family demands	2
	Social comparison	1
	Barriers in the supervision process	4
	Research obstacles	1

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Theme	Subtheme	Number of participants
	Time pressure	3

As shown in Table 2, perceived laziness was the most frequently mentioned internal factor, reported by three participants, while barriers in the supervision process were the most frequently mentioned external factor, reported by four participants. These factors were described in connection with specific academic situations rather than as isolated causes of anxiety. One participant described how difficulty initiating thesis work and approaching deadlines could occur together:

> *"Saya tahu harus ngerjain, tapi kadang malas banget kak. Terus kalau udah deket deadline baru panik, jantung udah nggak karuan."* (S3 BKM-01)

Another participant described anxiety associated with supervision and unclear revision requirements:

> *"Saya takut banget ketemu dosen pembimbing. Kalau chat aja udah deg-degan, apalagi mau ketemu langsung. Revisi juga sering nggak jelas, jadi bingung harus mulai dari mana."* (S5 BKM-04)

These accounts illustrate how participants experienced anxiety in the interaction between personal challenges and external academic demands. The findings do not suggest that any single factor independently explains the anxiety experienced by all participants.

Cognitive, Physiological, Behavioral, and Emotional Manifestations of Anxiety

The third theme concerned how anxiety was experienced across four interconnected domains: cognitive, physiological, behavioral, and emotional. Table 3 summarizes the manifestations reported by participants. The frequencies for difficulty concentrating, procrastination, and avoidance require verification against the original transcripts and coding matrix because the corresponding counts differ between the original tables.

Table 3. Manifestations of Anxiety During Thesis Writing

Domain	Subtheme	Number of participants
Cognitive	Negative thoughts	3
	Difficulty concentrating	2
	Excessive worry	6
Physiological	Sleep pattern disturbance	2
	Heart palpitations	6
	Physical complaints	3
Behavioral	Procrastination	4
	Avoidance of academic or thesis-related activities	2
Emotional	Fear of failure	4
	Worry	4

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Domain	Subtheme	Number of participants
	Stress	3
	Crying	1

Cognitive manifestations included negative thoughts, difficulty concentrating, and excessive worry. All six participants reported excessive worry related to supervision, thesis quality, graduation, family expectations, or research outcomes. These accounts suggest that anxiety involved persistent concerns about thesis-related demands and their possible consequences.

Physiological manifestations included sleep disturbances, heart palpitations, and physical complaints such as headaches, fatigue, and weakness. Heart palpitations were reported by all six participants. One participant stated, "*Setiap mau bimbingan pasti jantung berdebar*" (S1 BKM-02). Another described experiencing fear and palpitations while waiting for or meeting a supervisor, participating in seminars, and conducting research activities (S6 BKM-02). These accounts illustrate the physical discomfort participants associated with thesis-related situations.

Behavioral manifestations included procrastination and avoidance of thesis-related or academic activities. Participants described delaying thesis work in connection with fear, fatigue, uncertainty, or anticipated supervision. One participant explained:

> "*Karena takut bimbingan kak, saya ngerasa takut bimbingan jadi saya skripsinya saya tunda-tunda gitu.*" (S1 BKM-03)

This account illustrates how fear associated with supervision could coincide with postponing thesis work. The behavior was interpreted in the context of participants' accounts rather than attributed to a single cause. The final frequencies for procrastination and avoidance should be reported only after the discrepancies in Table 3 have been resolved.

Emotional manifestations included fear of failure, worry, stress, and crying. These responses reflected concerns about graduating, meeting academic expectations, and disappointing family members. One participant described the emotional burden of thesis writing:

> "*Saya sering nangis kak kalau lagi sendirian. Nggak tahu kenapa, tapi rasanya berat banget. Takut nggak lulus, takut ngecewain orang tua.*" (S4 BKM-03)

Another participant stated:

> "*Stres banget saya, sampai kadang nggak bisa tidur. Mikirin skripsi terus, nggak bisa santai.*" (S2 BKM-01)

These accounts illustrate the emotional strain participants experienced in relation to thesis completion and its perceived consequences.

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Taken together, the three themes show how thesis-related situations and internal and external pressures were associated with participants' experiences of anxiety. Anxiety was expressed through cognitive concerns, physiological responses, behavioral changes, and emotional distress. Participants also described difficulties in maintaining academic routines, including postponing thesis work and concentrating on tasks. These findings illustrate the interconnected nature of thesis-related anxiety within the experiences of the six participants.

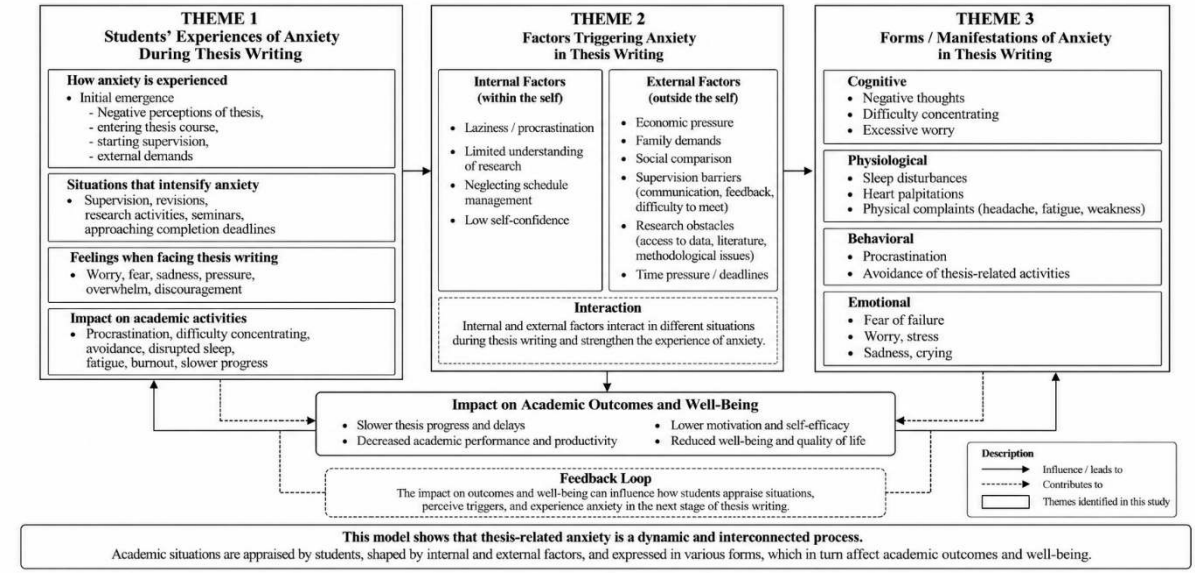


Figure 2. Summary of the Three Overarching Themes of Thesis-Related Anxiety

Figure 2 summarizes the relationships among the three themes: experiences of anxiety during thesis writing, internal and external triggering factors, and the cognitive, physiological, behavioral, and emotional manifestations of anxiety. Academic difficulties, including procrastination and concentration problems, should be represented as experiences associated with these themes rather than as a separate fourth overarching theme.

D. Discussion

The findings suggest that thesis-related anxiety should be understood not merely as an individual emotional response but as an experience shaped by the relationship between academic demands, students' appraisals of those demands, and the resources available to manage them. This interpretation is consistent with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping proposed by Lazarus & Folkman (1984), which explains that stress depends partly on how individuals evaluate a situation and their perceived capacity to cope with it. Within thesis writing, tasks such as responding to supervisory feedback and making research decisions may become threatening when students feel uncertain about expectations or their ability to meet them. This perspective helps explain why similar academic requirements may be experienced differently across students.

The findings also highlight the importance of the supervisory relationship as part of the academic environment. Supervision is intended to provide direction and feedback, yet

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uncertainty in communication or revision expectations may make the process more difficult to navigate. This interpretation is consistent with research addressing students' difficulties in academic writing and thesis supervision, including Nurkamto et al (2022), who examined academic-writing competencies and supervision challenges from supervisors' perspectives. Pravita & Kuswandono (2022) also examined the relationship between writing anxiety, academic procrastination, and self-regulation in undergraduate thesis writing. The present study complements these perspectives by locating students' anxiety within their lived experience of the thesis process, emphasizing that supervisory practices and students' interpretations of feedback are important contextual considerations rather than merely procedural matters.

Self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) and self-regulated learning theory (Zimmerman, 2000) provide further lenses for interpreting the relationship between perceived competence, task management, and academic pressure. Students who doubt their capability to conduct research may find it harder to initiate tasks, make decisions, or persist when encountering difficulties. Likewise, challenges in planning and monitoring progress may leave students less prepared for approaching deadlines. These theories do not establish that low self-efficacy or weak self-regulation caused the anxiety observed in this study. Rather, they offer a framework for understanding how perceived capability and self-management may be relevant to students' responses to demanding academic situations. This interpretation also suggests that support should address both research competence and the practical skills required to manage a long-term academic task.

A further contribution concerns the relationship between psychological experiences and academic functioning. The study's integrated account connects students' interpretations of thesis demands with cognitive, physiological, behavioral, and emotional responses. This contextual perspective is consistent with the broader concern for student mental health and well-being in higher education discussed by the World Health Organization (2022). It also adds detail to thesis-writing research by examining how anxiety is situated within a particular academic context: pre-service elementary teacher education at an Indonesian university. Rather than presenting anxiety as a uniform experience, the study shows the value of examining the circumstances in which students interpret demands as difficult to manage.

Taken together, this study contributes an integrated, context-specific phenomenological account of thesis-related anxiety. It responds to the first research question by interpreting anxiety as an experience shaped across the thesis process; to the second by showing the relevance of interacting personal and contextual conditions; and to the third by conceptualizing anxiety as multidimensional rather than exclusively emotional. These contributions support practical attention to transparent supervisory communication, explicit revision priorities, realistic milestones, and accessible research and well-being support. Because the study involved six purposively selected participants from one program, these implications should be understood as context-informed insights rather than causal conclusions or generalizable estimates of student anxiety.

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E. Implication

The findings have implications for higher education institutions, academic supervisors, and student counseling services. At the institutional level, universities should establish clear thesis guidelines, predictable supervision schedules, accessible research-method support, and early support mechanisms for students experiencing difficulties during thesis completion. Counseling services can complement academic support by providing psychoeducation on anxiety management, time management, and research self-efficacy, as well as opportunities for peer support and individual counseling when needed. Academic supervisors should provide constructive and specific feedback, clarify revision priorities, establish realistic milestones, and maintain regular communication to help students understand expectations and manage their workload. Collaboration among supervisors, study programs, and counseling services may facilitate early identification of students who need additional assistance and ensure that academic and psychological support are coordinated. These implications position student well-being as an integral part of academic support and thesis supervision rather than an issue addressed only after difficulties become severe. Because the study involved six purposively selected participants from one study program, these recommendations should be adapted to institutional contexts and evaluated in future research.

F. Limitation and Suggestion for Further Research

This study has several limitations. First, the participants consisted of only six pre-service elementary teachers from one study program at a single university, which limits the transferability of the findings to other institutional and academic contexts. Second, the analysis relied primarily on interview data, so participants' experiences were not examined through additional qualitative sources such as observations, reflective journals, or document analysis. The absence of member checking and peer debriefing may also have limited opportunities to examine alternative interpretations of the findings. Furthermore, the low, moderate, and high categories used during participant selection were based on screening questionnaire scores and were not validated psychometric classifications; therefore, the findings cannot establish differences in anxiety severity among these categories.

Future research should involve participants from multiple universities and academic programs to explore how institutional environments and supervisory practices shape thesis-related anxiety. Combining interviews with observations of supervision sessions, reflective journals, and relevant academic documents may provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' experiences and strengthen the credibility of the findings. Researchers should also consider member checking, peer debriefing, and explicit examination of researcher positionality where feasible. In addition, validated anxiety measures could be used when the objective is to examine differences between anxiety levels, while longitudinal studies could follow students from thesis proposal development to completion to investigate how anxiety changes over time. Further studies could also examine the roles of self-efficacy,

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self-regulation, coping strategies, and social support in helping students manage thesis-related demands.

G. Conclusion

This study shows that thesis-related anxiety among pre-service elementary teachers is a multidimensional experience shaped by students' perceptions of academic demands and the personal and contextual conditions surrounding thesis completion. The findings indicate that anxiety may emerge at different stages of the thesis-writing process, particularly during supervision, revisions, and approaching deadlines. Internal factors, such as perceived laziness, limited research understanding, and low self-confidence, interacted with external pressures, including supervision barriers, family demands, and time constraints. Anxiety was expressed through cognitive, physiological, behavioral, and emotional responses that could coincide with difficulties in maintaining academic routines. The main contribution of this study is an integrated, context-specific phenomenological understanding of thesis-related anxiety that connects students' experiences, perceived triggers, and manifestations. The findings highlight the importance of clear supervisory communication, constructive feedback, realistic academic milestones, and accessible academic and well-being support. However, given the small purposive sample from one university, the findings should be interpreted within the study context and should not be generalized to all university students.

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