






Cognitive religious alignment in expressive writing: Insights from Islamic schools



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Background: The integration of religious education with cognitive development strategies has become a growing area of interest, particularly within Islamic schools. Understanding how religious concepts influence cognitive and emotional processes through expressive writing, can provide valuable insights into the holistic development of students.

Objectives: This study aims to explore the cognitive religious alignment in students within Islamic schools, focusing on how religious teachings embedded in expressive writing exercises, influence their cognitive and emotional capabilities, particularly in managing anxiety and enhancing problem solving and resilience.

Method: This study involved 111 participants from three different Islamic schools in Indonesia. A qualitative approach was used to analyse students' writings to identify the influence of religious concepts on cognitive and emotional development.

Results: The findings indicate that students who engaged with religious teachings through expressive writing, demonstrated improved emotional regulation, resilience, and cognitive problem-solving skills. The integration of Islamic concepts provided a framework for students to navigate anxiety and emotional challenges effectively, contributing to both their academic and spiritual growth.

Conclusion: The study concludes that the integration of religious content into expressive writing interventions is effective in supporting the holistic development of students in Islamic schools. It enhances their cognitive and emotional capabilities while fostering spiritual growth.

Contribution: This research contributes to the understanding of how religious education can be effectively combined with cognitive and expressive development strategies. It offers a framework for implementing religiously informed expressive writing interventions, that support the holistic development of students in Islamic educational settings.

Keywords: cognitive religious alignment; expressive writing; Islamic education; emotional regulation; cognitive development; Islamic schools; anxiety management.

Introduction

The intersection of cognitive processes and religious education presents a compelling area of research, particularly within the context of expressive writing in Islamic schools. Expressive writing, an approach that encourages individuals to freely articulate their thoughts and emotions, has been well-documented for its psychological and educational benefits (Baker 2004; Fuentes, Kahn & Lannin 2021; Lepore et al. 2002). This practice facilitates a deep exploration of personal experiences, often unveiling the cognitive frameworks that shape perception and understanding.

In Islamic educational settings, where religious teachings are integrally woven into the curriculum, expressive writing provides a unique perspective on cognitive religious alignment. This concept refers to the manner in which students' cognitive frameworks are influenced and moulded by their religious education, affecting how they articulate their thoughts and beliefs (Alkouatli 2021; Kasim, Yusoff & Mansor 2021). The structured environment of Islamic schools fosters both academic and spiritual growth (Chanifah et al. 2021), creating a distinctive context to investigate how students internalise and express their religious and cognitive experiences through writing.

Existing literature has explored various aspects of cognitive development in religious contexts, highlighting how religious beliefs shape moral reasoning and worldview (Mathes 2021). Additionally, research on expressive writing has demonstrated its role in enhancing self-understanding and emotional regulation (Sexton & Pennebaker 2009). However, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these two dimensions, cognitive development influenced

by religious education and the practice of expressive writing, intersect within specific educational settings like Islamic schools.

The theoretical basis for this research is grounded in the integration of cognitive development theories, religious education frameworks, and expressive writing theories. Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Butterworth 2022) emphasises the role of cognitive structures in understanding the world. This theory supports the idea that cognitive frameworks are continuously shaped and refined through experiences, including religious education. According to Kohlberg's stages of moral development (Moheghi, Ghorbanzadeh & Abedi 2020), religious education influences moral reasoning and cognitive development. This framework provides insight into how religious teachings might shape cognitive processes and affect expressive capabilities. Pennebaker's work on expressive writing (Pennebaker 1997) highlights its impact on emotional and cognitive processing. This theory suggests that expressive writing can reveal underlying cognitive structures and emotional states, making it a useful tool for studying cognitive religious alignment.

The conceptual framework for this study integrates these theories to explore how religious education influences cognitive processes and how these processes are reflected in expressive writing. By linking Piaget's cognitive development theory with Kohlberg's moral development stages and Pennebaker's expressive writing research, the study aims to create a comprehensive understanding of how religious beliefs and cognitive frameworks intersect through the medium of writing.

Current studies often examine religious education and cognitive development separately, or focus on general educational contexts without considering the unique interplay of religion and expressive practices (Miller 2020; Viertel, Reis & Rohlfing 2023). This study addresses this gap by integrating these dimensions, providing a novel perspective on how religious teachings shape cognitive processes and expressive abilities through the lens of expressive writing. Specifically, there is limited exploration regarding how these practices influence students' cognitive abilities, emotional regulation, and overall writing development. This study addresses these gaps by exploring how religious teachings integrated into expressive writing exercises in Islamic schools, impact students' cognitive and emotional development particularly in; managing anxiety, enhancing problem-solving skills, and fostering resilience.

This article outlines the theoretical foundations of cognitive religious alignment, describes the research methodology, and presents findings from an in-depth analysis of student writings in Islamic schools. Through this exploration, the study seeks to illuminate the interplay between cognition, religious education, and expressive writing, offering new perspectives on how religion shapes cognitive and expressive capabilities.

Research methods and design

To investigate the phenomenon of cognitive religious alignment in expressive writing within Islamic schools, a qualitative content analysis approach was employed (Drisko & Maschi 2015; Forman & Damschroder 2007). This method allowed for a systematic examination of the content and themes of student writings, providing insights into how cognitive frameworks are influenced by religious education.

The content analysis process followed a series of structured stages, beginning with the selection of the sample (Forman & Damschroder 2007). A purposive sampling method was employed to select a representative sample of student writings from various Islamic schools, ensuring a diverse range of students' expressive writings across different age groups and educational levels (Ahmad & Wilkins 2024). This selection was made to provide insights into how cognitive religious alignment develops across varying stages of education. Data collection involved gathering student-written essays and reflective pieces on topics related to religious education, morality, and faith. These writings were collected over a defined period, with consent from the participating schools and students, ensuring ethical considerations and confidentiality.

Once the data were collected, data coding and theme identification began. A deductive coding framework was used, which involved creating a set of predefined codes based on existing literature and theories (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard 2019) on cognitive religious alignment. These codes were tailored to capture themes related to religious beliefs, cognitive processes, and values expressed in the students' writings. Additionally, inductive coding was employed, allowing for the identification of emerging themes that were not anticipated at the outset of the research.

The coding process was carried out in several phases (Vaismoradi et al. 2016): (1) Initial Coding: a thorough review of the student writings was conducted, with passages relevant to cognitive religious alignment highlighted and categorised under preliminary themes; (2) Theme Development: the codes were grouped into broader themes that illustrated recurring patterns related to the cognitive frameworks shaped by religious teachings; (3) Thematic Analysis: these themes were analysed for their connections to specific elements of religious education and cognitive development, with particular attention to how these frameworks influence students' religious understanding and expression.

Finally, interpretation and analysis were conducted by examining how the identified themes (Nicmanis 2024) reflected cognitive religious alignment, particularly in the context of Islamic teachings and values. This analysis was aimed at understanding how religious education influences the cognitive processes involved in student writing, including the integration of religious knowledge and personal belief systems

The study was conducted in three Islamic schools located in different regions to ensure a diverse sample. A total of 111 students, aged 13 years – 18 years, were selected to participate, encompassing a range of ages and educational stages to ensure a comprehensive analysis of cognitive religious alignment across different developmental levels. Students were given a series of expressive writing prompts designed to elicit personal reflections, thoughts, and emotions (Fuentes et al. 2021). These prompts were crafted to be open-ended, allowing students to freely express themselves while naturally integrating their religious perspectives. Examples of prompts included: ‘Write about a time when you went through a difficult situation’, and ‘Reflect on your moment that has had a significant impact on you’.

In addition to the expressive writing prompts, participants used an Islamic lesson workbook specifically designed for this study. The workbook contained lessons on various Islamic teachings, principles, and stories from the Quran and Hadith. These lessons were intended to reinforce religious concepts and provide a contextual framework for the students’ expressive writing. Workbook activities included reflective questions and tasks that encouraged students to connect the lesson content with their personal experiences and thoughts. The phases of this study can be seen in Figure 1.

The collected writings were analysed using a qualitative content analysis framework, which involved several key steps (Braun & Clarke 2006). Each piece of writing was read multiple times to identify recurring themes and patterns. Codes were assigned to specific phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that reflected key concepts related to cognitive religious alignment. These codes were then grouped into broader categories that encapsulated the main themes observed in the students’ writings, including aspects such as religious beliefs, moral and ethical reflections, emotional responses, and cognitive processes influenced by religious teachings. The categories were further analysed to identify

overarching themes that connected the students’ cognitive and religious frameworks. Themes were examined for consistency across different age groups and educational levels to understand how cognitive religious alignment evolves with development.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the content analysis, triangulation was employed. This involved cross-referencing findings with previous literature on expressive writing and religious education, conducting follow-up interviews with a subset of students to gain deeper insights into their writing and thought processes, and seeking feedback from educational and religious scholars to validate the interpretations of the data. Additionally, two independent researchers were involved in the coding and categorisation process. Inter-rater reliability was assessed to ensure consistency in the coding scheme and interpretations, with discrepancies discussed and resolved through consensus as seen in Table 1.

Expressive writing serves as a mirror reflecting the intricate interplay between personal experiences and deeply held beliefs. It allows individuals to process and articulate their innermost thoughts, emotions, and values, providing a unique window into their cognitive and emotional world. Within Islamic schools, this method reveals how students internalise and articulate their religious teachings, demonstrating the profound impact of faith on their daily lives and decision-making processes.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the Ethics Committee of Madrasah Tsanahwiyah Terpadu Ar-Roihan Lawang, and ethics consent was received on 05 February 2024. The ethics approval number is 139A/SKL/MTs-AR/II/2024.

Results

The analysis of the expressive writing from 111 students revealed that 67.87% showed a profound alignment between their cognitive processes, emotional responses, and moral reflections with their religious beliefs and teachings. The expressive writing of students naturally integrated Islamic principles into their thoughts, decisions, and emotional expressions, illustrating the significant influence of religious education on their cognitive and emotional development. Figure 2 presents the frequency of key religious concepts—such as *Iman* [faith], *Shukr* [gratitude], *Sabr* [patience], and *Tawakkul* [submission]—that students incorporated into their narratives. This section explores how these concepts are reflected in students’ daily lives, and how Islamic values guide their decision-making, problem-solving, and goal-setting. This alignment is particularly evident when viewed through the lens of Kohlberg’s stages of moral development, which suggests that moral reasoning evolves through a process of cognitive development influenced by environmental factors (Kohlberg & Hersh 1977), including religious education.

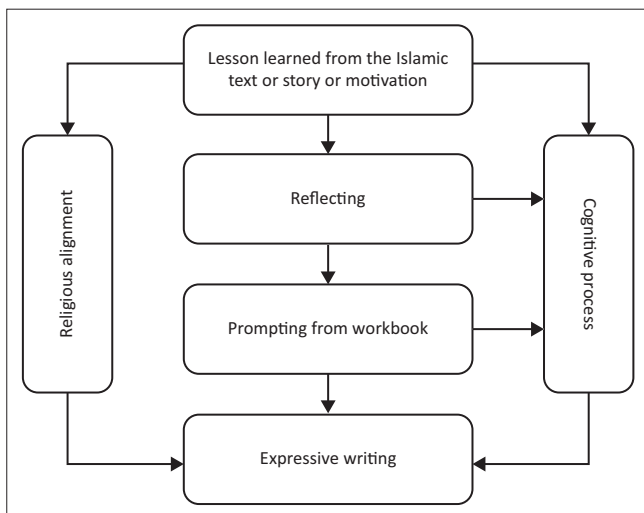


FIGURE 1: Phases of cognitive religious alignment in expressive writing.

A substantial portion of the students reflected the concept of *Tawakkul* in their writings. They frequently expressed their reliance on Allah, particularly in contexts involving decision making and facing challenges. Phrases such as ‘trusting Allah’s plan’ and ‘relying on divine wisdom’ were common, indicating that these students have internalised the belief that ultimate control lies with God. For instance, one student wrote, ‘I trust that whatever happens is part of Allah’s plan for me, and I rely on His wisdom to guide me through life’s challenges’. This expression of *Tawakkul* not only highlights their faith in God’s plan but also shows how deeply this belief influences their approach to life.

Expressions of gratitude were prevalent in the writings of the students. The concept of *Shukr*, or thankfulness, was evident as students frequently used phrases such as *Alhamdulillah* [Praise be to Allah] to express gratitude for various aspects of their lives, from personal achievements to everyday blessings. Many students articulated a sense of thankfulness not just for major life events, but for the small, daily occurrences that they attribute to Allah’s grace. One student, for example, wrote, ‘Every morning, I wake up and say *Alhamdulillah* for the gift of another day’. This demonstrates how deeply the practice of gratitude is embedded in their daily routines and thought processes, reflecting an ongoing awareness of the blessings they believe come from Allah.

The theme of *Sabr*, or patience, emerged in the writings of the students, particularly in relation to enduring hardships and overcoming obstacles. Students often described situations where they had to exercise patience, invoking the concept of *Sabr* as a guiding principle. Many students wrote about personal struggles and the importance of maintaining patience during difficult times, often linking this patience to their faith in Allah’s timing and wisdom. For example, one student mentioned, ‘During tough times, I remind myself to have *Sabr*, knowing that Allah tests us with challenges to make us stronger’. This suggests that students are not only aware of the concept of *Sabr* but also actively apply it in their lives, seeing it as a necessary trait for navigating life’s trials.

The concept of *Taqwa*, or submission to God’s will, was another prominent theme, present in the writings of the students. This concept reflects a strong adherence to Islamic principles, as students often mentioned the importance of following Allah’s commands and aligning their actions with divine will. Many students expressed a conscious effort to submit to Allah in their daily lives, framing their decisions and actions within the context of religious obedience. One student wrote, ‘I strive to submit to Allah’s will in everything I do, making sure my actions reflect His commands’. This indicates a profound integration of religious teachings into their moral and ethical framework, where the concept of *Taqwa* serves as a foundational guide for their behaviour and decisions.

A significant number of students emphasised the importance of honesty and integrity in their writing. Many students wrote about truthfulness as a key value in their lives, often citing Islamic principles that underscore the importance of being truthful in all circumstances. One student wrote, ‘I

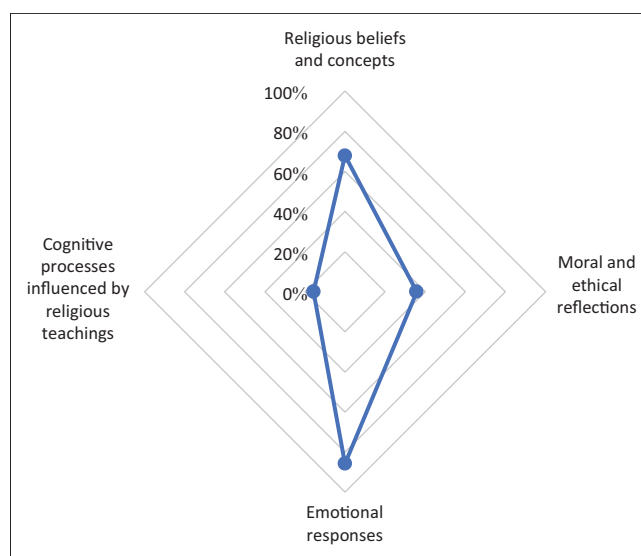


FIGURE 2: Frequency of religious beliefs and expressive writing.

TABLE 1: Category and coding in Islamic expressive writing.

Category	Code	Example phrases or words
Religious beliefs and concepts	Faith and trust in God [<i>Iman</i>]	Trusting Allah, Allah’s plan, reliance on God
	Gratitude and thankfulness [<i>Shukr</i>]	Thankful to Allah, grateful for blessing, <i>Alhamdulillah</i>
	Patience and perseverance [<i>Sabr</i>]	Being patient, enduring hardships, <i>Sabr</i> during tough times
	Submission to God’s will [<i>Tawakkul</i>]	Submitting to Allah, Allah’s will, following Allah’s commands
Moral and ethical reflections	Honesty and integrity	Always tell the truth, honesty is the best policy, integrity in actions
	Kindness and compassion	Being kind to others, showing compassion, helping those in need
	Justice and fairness	Treating everyone fairly, standing up for justice, being fair in decisions
	Responsibility and accountability	Being responsible, accountability to Allah, owning up to mistakes
Emotional responses	Joy and happiness	Feeling happy, joy in faith, happiness from worship
	Fear and anxiety	Fear of Allah, anxiety about the future, worried about sinning
	Love and affection	Love for Allah, affection for family, caring for friends
	Sadness and grief	Feeling sad, grieving a loss, sadness in trials
Cognitive processes influenced by religious teachings	Decision making	Deciding based on faith, guided by Islamic principles, making choices for Allah
	Problem solving	Finding solutions through prayer, seeking guidance from the Quran, Islamic way of handling issues
	Reflective thinking	Reflecting on my actions, thinking about Allah’s wisdom, contemplating religious lessons
	Goal setting	Setting goals to please Allah, aiming for <i>Jannah</i> , goals aligned with faith

believe that honesty is the best policy, as it is what Allah expects from us. Telling the truth, even when it's hard, keeps my heart clean'. This focus on honesty indicates that students view truthfulness not only as a moral obligation but as a fundamental aspect of their identity, deeply embedded in their understanding of right and wrong.

In the analysis of the expressive writing from 111 students, 35.7% demonstrated a focus on moral and ethical reflections grounded in Islamic teachings. This percentage highlights the significant, though somewhat less prevalent, role of moral values in their writings. The values of kindness and compassion were highlighted by the students. In their writing, students frequently discussed acts of kindness and helping others, portraying these actions as central to their moral beliefs. They often connected their desire to be kind to the teachings of Islam, which encourages believers to show compassion and support to those in need. For example, a student mentioned, 'Being kind to others, especially those who are struggling, is important to me because it's what the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) taught us to do'. This demonstrates that kindness and compassion are not merely abstract concepts for these students but are actively practiced and seen as essential expressions of their faith.

Themes of justice and fairness appeared in the writings of the students. These students reflected on the importance of treating others fairly and standing up for justice, often linking these values to their Islamic education. Many expressed a strong sense of moral duty to ensure fairness in their interactions, whether in personal relationships or in broader social contexts. One student wrote, 'I always try to be fair in my dealings with others because I know that Allah loves those who are just'. This emphasis on justice and fairness reveals a deep understanding of these ethical values, with students recognising their significance in maintaining harmony and righteousness in society.

The concept of responsibility and accountability was a central theme for the students. In their writing, many students expressed a strong sense of duty to act righteously and acknowledged their accountability to Allah for their actions. They often wrote about the importance of owning up to their mistakes and taking responsibility for their behaviour, indicating a mature understanding of the ethical implications of their actions. For instance, a student noted, 'I know that I am responsible for everything I do, and I must answer to Allah for my actions, so I try to do what is right'. This reflects a conscientious approach to ethical behaviour, where students are motivated by a desire to fulfil their obligations to both themselves and their faith.

A closer look at the expressive writing revealed that 85.69% of the responses were deeply intertwined with the writers' religious beliefs. This high percentage indicates that students frequently connect their emotional experiences with their faith, illustrating the profound impact of religious

teachings on their emotional lives. Expressions of joy and happiness were prominent in the writings of the students. These students often linked their feelings of happiness to their faith, finding comfort and contentment in worship and religious practices. Many described how participating in prayer, reciting the Quran, or engaging in other religious activities brought them a sense of peace and fulfilment. For instance, one student wrote, 'I feel true happiness when I pray and remember Allah. It's like my heart is at peace'. This connection between religious practice and emotional well-being suggests that for these students, their faith is a primary source of joy and inner contentment.

Fear and anxiety were mentioned by the students, particularly in relation to their awareness of sinning and concerns about the future. These emotions often reflected a conscious understanding of their religious obligations and the potential consequences of their actions. Students wrote about the fear of displeasing Allah and the anxiety associated with making mistakes or facing uncertain outcomes. One student expressed, 'I sometimes worry about whether I'm doing enough to please Allah, and it makes me anxious about the future'. This indicates that their emotional experiences are closely tied to their religious consciousness, where the fear of sin and the desire to fulfil religious duties contribute to their emotional landscape.

Love and affection were recurring themes in the writings of the students. Their expressions of love were often directed towards Allah, family, and friends, showing how their emotional lives are deeply connected to their religious beliefs. Students frequently mentioned their love for Allah as a driving force behind their actions and decisions, as well as their affection for family and friends as expressions of their faith. For example, a student wrote, 'I love Allah and my family with all my heart, and I try to show it by being kind and caring every day'. This demonstrates that love, in its various forms, is not just an emotion but a reflection of their religious commitment and moral values.

Experiencing sadness or grief is often in the context of trials and challenges. These students reflected on their emotions through a religious lens, frequently invoking concepts like *Sabr* [patience] and relying on their faith to cope with difficult times. One student shared, 'When I feel sad, I remember that Allah is always with me, and it helps me to be strong and patient'. This shows that even in moments of sorrow, students turn to their faith for comfort and guidance, viewing their emotions as part of a larger spiritual journey.

Of the participants, 15.66% demonstrated cognitive processes strongly shaped by their religious teachings in the analysis of the expressive writing. This proportion highlights that while religious principles do impact students' thinking, it is a less prevalent theme compared to their emotional responses and moral reflections. The findings show that their decision-making processes are influenced by their faith. In their

writings, students often cited Islamic principles as a guide for making choices, reflecting a reliance on religious teachings to navigate life's decisions. For example, one student wrote, 'When I have to make a decision, I always think about what Allah would want me to do. I try to choose the path that pleases Him the most'. This illustrates that for these students, decision-making is not just a practical exercise but a spiritual one, where faith plays a crucial role in determining the right course of action.

The application of religious teachings to problem-solving was a common theme, mentioned by the students. Many students described how they turn to prayer and seek guidance from the Quran when faced with challenges, showing that their approach to solving problems is deeply rooted in their faith. One student shared, 'Whenever I face a problem, I pray first and ask Allah for guidance. I also try to find answers in the Quran, which helps me see things more clearly'. This reliance on religious practices for problem-solving indicates that students view their faith as a practical resource that provides clarity and direction in difficult situations.

Reflective thinking was evident in the writings of the students, who frequently engaged in contemplation about their actions and decisions in the context of Islamic teachings. These students often reflected on how well their behaviour aligned with their faith and sought to improve themselves by adhering more closely to religious principles. One student wrote:

'I always try to reflect on my actions at the end of the day, thinking about whether I've lived according to Allah's commands. This helps me become a better person.' (male, 14-years-old, student)

This focus on reflective thinking shows that students are not only aware of their religious obligations but are actively engaging in self-assessment to ensure their lives are in harmony with their beliefs.

The setting of goals to please Allah and achieve spiritual success was a recurring theme, expressed by the students. In their writing, students frequently articulated ambitions that were aligned with their religious beliefs, such as striving for *Jannah* [paradise] as tools for reflection and or aiming to live a life that reflects Islamic values. One student noted, 'My main goal is to live a life that will make Allah happy and lead me to Jannah. Everything I do, I try to do with this in mind'. This demonstrates that goal setting for these students is not merely about personal achievement but is deeply intertwined with their spiritual aspirations, with their faith providing both motivation and direction.

Discussion

Impact of expressive writing on participants

In this study, the students' expressive writing reflects a cognitive process that aligns with Piaget's stages of

development, particularly the formal operational stage. At this stage, adolescents begin to think abstractly and are capable of introspection, which is evident in their ability to reflect on their emotions and integrate religious concepts into their writing. This aligns with Pennebaker's theory, where writing serves as a tool for organising and processing emotions (Pennebaker & Francis 1996). While current research often treats religious education and cognitive development as separate topics, or focuses on broader educational contexts without addressing the specific interaction between religion and expressive practices (Shahjahan et al. 2022). This gap underscores the need to investigate how religious teachings influence both cognitive and emotional growth, especially within particular educational environments. In contrast, this study takes a more holistic approach, exploring how religious education impacts not only students' cognitive development but also their expressive practices, with a focus on writing.

For instance, when students write about their anxiety or fears, they often relate these emotions to abstract concepts like faith [*Iman*] and trust in the divine will [*Tawakkul*]. This ability to connect personal experiences with abstract religious concepts indicates that the students are operating within Piaget's formal operational stage. They are not just describing their feelings but are also engaging in higher-order thinking by linking these feelings to broader philosophical or religious ideas, which Pennebaker's theory suggests is crucial for emotional healing (Sexton & Pennebaker 2009). This cognitive ability to reflect on and integrate complex concepts into their emotional expression also aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasises the role of cultural tools (Basile 2023), such as religious teachings, in shaping cognitive processes. Furthermore, the students' capacity to express these emotions through writing also supports the notion of cognitive reappraisal, a strategy for managing emotions by changing one's interpretation of a situation (Bodrogi, Bereczkei & Deak 2022), which is central to emotional regulation and psychological resilience

James W. Pennebaker's theory posits that expressive writing serves as a therapeutic tool that helps individuals process and make sense of emotional experiences. According to Pennebaker, the act of writing about one's thoughts and feelings, particularly about stressful or traumatic events, allows for emotional release and cognitive restructuring, which can lead to improved psychological well-being. The process of writing enables individuals to organise and integrate their experiences (Pennebaker 2018), reducing emotional distress and promoting emotional and cognitive healing.

The expressive writing intervention significantly impacted participants who reported experiencing anxiety, leading to notable changes in their emotional expression and cognitive processing (Pennebaker 1997). The qualitative analysis of their writing samples revealed that these participants frequently articulated their anxiety in terms of religious reflections and emotional responses intertwined with Islamic

teachings. This reliance on religious concepts to process their anxiety demonstrates how the expressive writing intervention encouraged participants to frame their anxiety within the context of their faith, which appeared to provide them with a sense of comfort and resilience.

Participants also exhibited a shift in their cognitive processing as they engaged with the intervention (Stine-Morrow & Basak 2011). Initially, their writings reflected a heightened sense of fear and uncertainty about the future, with many expressing concerns about their ability to meet religious obligations or make the right decisions. However, as the intervention progressed, a noticeable change occurred in their writing. Participants began to incorporate more references to divine wisdom and reliance on Allah's plan, suggesting a cognitive alignment with religious teachings that helped mitigate their anxiety. This shift indicates that the expressive writing intervention, when combined with religious reflection, may have contributed to reducing participants' anxiety, by reinforcing their trust in divine guidance and the concept of submission to God's will.

The semantic analysis of the Islamic words used in participants' writings revealed that these terms were not merely superficial additions but were deeply integrated into the participants' narratives. For instance, the use of *Tawakkul* often appeared in contexts where participants were dealing with uncertainty or anxiety, highlighting their reliance on divine guidance as a means of coping. Similarly, the term *Sabr* was frequently used in conjunction with descriptions of personal struggles, indicating that participants viewed patience as a necessary response to life's challenges, in alignment with Islamic teachings. This aligns with Bandura's social cognitive theory, which emphasises the role of self-efficacy and perceived control over one's environment (Bandura 1985). The participants demonstrate how their religious beliefs empower them with a sense of control and resilience in the face of adversity, reinforcing their cognitive and emotional responses to challenges. Moreover, the frequent use of these concepts suggests a cognitive schema, a mental framework shaped by religious teachings, that influences how participants process and respond to emotional experiences, underscoring the role of religion in shaping their coping strategies.

Participants also used these Islamic terms to reflect on their moral and ethical decisions. Words like *Insha'Allah* [God willing] were often employed when discussing future plans or aspirations, showing that participants viewed their goals as contingent upon divine will. This integration of religious language into their writing suggests that participants not only internalised these concepts but actively applied them to their cognitive and emotional processes, using Islamic words as tools for reflection and decision-making. This process corresponds with Kohlberg's stages of moral development, where individuals advance through different levels of moral reasoning, with a strong focus on universal ethical principles (Kohlberg & Hersh 1977). In this case, participants demonstrate a moral framework grounded in

Islamic teachings, where divine will and the principle of submission to God's plan shape their moral decision making.

Overall, the frequent and meaningful use of Islamic language in the expressive writing samples highlights the profound influence of religious education on participants' cognitive, emotional, and moral development. This connection between language and thought underscores the role of religious teachings in shaping how participants understand and articulate their experiences (Wuthnow 2011), particularly in the context of managing anxiety and making decisions aligned with their faith.

Implications for expressive writing interventions in Islamic education

The findings of this research have significant implications for the use of expressive writing interventions within Islamic education contexts, particularly when addressing anxiety and emotional challenges among students. The integration of religious content into these interventions can enhance their effectiveness and provide both educational and therapeutic benefits.

The integration of Islamic workbooks or religious content into expressive writing interventions has proven to be highly effective, particularly for participants dealing with anxiety or other emotional challenges. The findings indicate that the use of religious content resonates deeply with students who are already familiar with and committed to Islamic teachings. This cultural and spiritual relevance makes the writing exercises more meaningful and engaging, as participants are able to connect the content with their personal beliefs and life experiences (Vieten & Lukoff 2022). This connection fosters a more profound reflection, allowing students to explore their emotions and anxieties through a familiar and comforting lens.

The integration of religious content encourages deeper emotional expression (Ammerman 2020). Participants were more willing to explore and articulate their anxieties and challenges when they could do so within the context of their religious beliefs. This openness leads to a more authentic and thorough exploration of their emotions, which is a key component of the healing process in expressive writing (Guo 2023). Overall, the integration of Islamic teachings into expressive writing interventions creates a more holistic approach that addresses both the emotional and spiritual needs of participants, making the intervention more effective in promoting mental health and emotional well-being.

Expressive writing that incorporates Islamic teachings reinforces the religious education already provided in Islamic schools. Students deepen their understanding and internalisation of these teachings through reflecting on religious concepts through writing. This process not only strengthens their faith but also encourages them to apply religious principles to real-life situations, thereby enhancing

their cognitive and moral development (Andrei 2023). The integration of religious content into expressive writing fosters emotional intelligence among students. By reflecting on their emotions in relation to religious teachings, students learn to identify, understand, and manage their emotions more effectively. This development of emotional intelligence is crucial for their overall well-being and can help them navigate challenges both inside and outside of the classroom.

The combination of educational and therapeutic elements in expressive writing interventions supports the holistic development of students. Islamic teachings provide a framework for resilience, patience, and gratitude, which are essential traits for personal growth (Chalmiers, Istemi & Simsek 2023). As students engage with these concepts through writing, they develop not only academically but also emotionally and spiritually, preparing them to lead balanced and fulfilling lives. The process of engaging with these teachings through expressive writing allows students to internalise these values more deeply, making them an integral part of their daily lives.

Then, the therapeutic benefits of integrating religious content into expressive writing are particularly evident in its potential to support mental health. For students experiencing anxiety or emotional challenges, the intervention provides a safe space to explore their feelings and find solace in their faith. This can lead to a reduction in anxiety and stress, as students learn to cope with their emotions through religious practices and teachings. Incorporating religious teachings into expressive writing encourages students to engage in reflective practice, which is a key aspect of both education and personal development. Through reflection, students can assess their thoughts and actions considering their religious beliefs, leading to greater self-awareness and intentionality in their lives.

Limitations and future directions

One of the primary limitations of this study is the relatively small sample size, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences among students in different Islamic educational settings. A larger and more varied sample could provide a broader understanding of how religious concepts influence cognitive processes and emotional regulation. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data through expressive writing samples introduces potential biases, as students may present themselves in a more favourable light or may not fully articulate their internal experiences. The analysis techniques, while thorough, were also limited by the subjective interpretation of qualitative data, which could affect the consistency and accuracy of the findings.

The findings of this study are specific to the participants involved and the particular context of the Islamic school where the research was conducted. Therefore, the generalisability of the results to other populations or educational settings may be limited. Cultural, religious, and socio-economic factors unique to this group of students might influence how they engage with expressive writing and religious teachings. Future

research should consider conducting similar studies in diverse Islamic educational contexts, including urban and rural settings, to explore how these factors may affect the outcomes. Additionally, comparative studies across different religious or secular educational systems could provide valuable insights into the broader applicability of integrating religious teachings with expressive writing interventions.

To build on the findings of this study, future research should explore the long-term effects of integrating religious concepts into expressive writing on students' emotional and cognitive development. Longitudinal studies could help determine whether the benefits observed are sustained over time and how they contribute to students' overall well-being and academic success. Moreover, future studies could experiment with different types of religious content, including more personalised or student-selected religious texts, to assess their impact on the effectiveness of the intervention. Exploring the role of teacher facilitation and the potential for digital or peer-supported expressive writing platforms within Islamic education could also offer new avenues for enhancing the therapeutic and educational benefits of this approach.

Conclusion

This article outlines the theoretical foundations of cognitive religious alignment and its impact on students' cognitive and expressive capabilities. Through an in-depth analysis of student writings in Islamic schools, the study illuminates the interplay between cognition, religious education, and expressive writing. The findings reveal that integrating Islamic teachings into expressive writing not only aids in emotional regulation and anxiety management but also enhances cognitive processes related to problem-solving and resilience.

By exploring how religious concepts shape students' cognitive and expressive development, this research offers new perspectives on the role of religion in education. It highlights the potential of religiously informed expressive writing interventions to foster holistic development, supporting students academically, emotionally, and spiritually. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of how religious education can be effectively integrated with cognitive development strategies, offering a framework for future educational practices within Islamic schools.

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Competing interests

The author reported that they received funding from Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan which may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed publication. The author has disclosed those interests fully and has

implemented an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising from their involvement. The terms of these funding arrangements have been reviewed and approved by the affiliated University in accordance with its policy on objectivity in research.

Authors' contributions

R.K. was responsible for the conceptualisation, methodology, writing the original draft, validation, and editing of the manuscript. S.B. contributed to the formal analysis, investigation, project administration, and data curation. N.K. contributed to the validation, data curation, and editing of the manuscript. S.S. was responsible for data curation and provided resources for the research. K.K. contributed through editing and provided for the project.

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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