



The Effectiveness of Group Counseling with Assertive Training Techniques in Enhancing Self-Esteem among Adolescents Victimized by Bullying

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ABSTRACT

Based on the researcher's observations at a private vocational high school in Medan, adolescents who were victims of bullying exhibited low levels of self-esteem. Low self-esteem can exacerbate feelings of anxiety, depression, and social isolation, which are often experienced by bullying victims. Bullying itself refers to any form of oppression or violence intentionally carried out by an individual or a stronger group, with the primary aim of harming others, and is typically conducted repeatedly. This study aims to determine whether group counseling using the assertive training technique is effective in enhancing students' self-esteem. The research employed a quantitative approach with a Quasi-Experimental method using a One-Group Pretest-Posttest Design. The participants consisted of eight students with low self-esteem, selected through purposive sampling. The research instrument used was a self-esteem questionnaire. Data were analyzed using the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test, which yielded a Z-value of -2.524 with a p-value of 0.012. Since the p-value < 0.05, the results indicate a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores. It can be concluded that group counseling with the assertive training technique is effective in improving self-esteem among adolescents who are victims of bullying.

1. Introduction

Education is intended not only to enhance intellectual capacity but also to shape individuals into better human beings; however, moral issues remain a major challenge. At present, moral decline is increasingly prevalent among students and university learners, manifested in various forms of deviant behavior ranging from ethical violations to acts of violence (Yuyarti, 2018). Violence among students may take physical forms, such as slapping, kicking, or brawling, as well as verbal forms, such as mocking, insulting, and belittling others. When such actions occur repeatedly, they are categorized as bullying. This behavior encourages perpetrators to become bolder in committing more serious criminal acts, while victims often lose

self-confidence, feel worthless, and experience unhappiness (Musyarofah & Juandi, 2021). Bullying is defined as the use of power or strength to harm another person, leaving the victim feeling pressured, traumatized, helpless, and subjected to recurring incidents. According to Randall in Lusiana & Arifin (2022), bullying is an intentional aggressive behavior aimed at causing physical or psychological discomfort to others. Such aggressive behavior is typically directed toward students who are unable to defend themselves due to an imbalance of power between the parties involved (Yuyarti, 2018).

The findings of a study by Oktaviany & Ramadan (2023) through observation and interviews revealed that bullying does not always manifest in physical violence but also in nonverbal forms, such as mocking, ridiculing, or displaying demeaning expressions. The types of bullying behaviors identified included fighting, pushing, kicking chairs, calling peers by their parents' names, and making victims the subject of ridicule with nicknames considered humorous. In addition, bullying also appeared in verbal forms, such as calling peers ugly or commenting on their unusual appearance. Generally, victims of bullying lack the strength to defend themselves, let alone stop the incident, which causes the behavior to occur repeatedly. Victims often feel incapable of protecting themselves from negative actions due to physical or mental weakness, leading to stress triggered by overwhelming fear (Masrukoyah, 2018). One of the most significant impacts of bullying is a decline in self-esteem. Adolescents who become victims of bullying often experience feelings of worthlessness, helplessness, and a loss of self-confidence, which can hinder their social, emotional, and academic development and may persist into adulthood. This issue must be addressed because self-esteem is a variable that plays a crucial role in emotional and behavioral adjustment, academic achievement, and other significant educational outcomes (Maden et al., 2022).

Self-esteem is an individual's assessment of themselves, which is based on their relationships with others. According to Baron and Byrne, as cited in Hafiz et al. (2023), self-esteem is defined as a self-evaluation that reflects a person's attitude toward themselves, ranging from very negative to very positive. Interaction with the surrounding environment is one of the factors that can influence the quality of an individual's self-esteem. Self-esteem indicates the degree of confidence in one's abilities, significance, success, and worth, or in other words, it represents the result of self-assessment expressed through the attitudes present within the individual. Coopersmith explains that the formation of self-esteem is influenced by several aspects, namely significance, virtue, power, and competence (Rokhmatika & Muslikah, 2024). Furthermore, Maslow, as cited in Nafwari & Qudsyi (2024), asserts that self-esteem plays a crucial role in creating conditions or processes that guide students in developing their potential and personal growth. This, in turn, enables the achievement of academic success and a better quality of life, as well as supports individuals in realizing self-actualization. Self-esteem is particularly important for adolescents, as it contributes to the development of their ability to build positive relationships with their environment.

The level of an individual's self-esteem can be observed through several characteristics they display. According to Rosenberg and Owens, as cited in

Suharso et al. (2018), individuals with high self-esteem tend to be optimistic, proud, and satisfied with themselves. They are more attuned to their competencies, capable of disregarding negative feedback, and able to perceive adverse events as opportunities for self-improvement. Moreover, they are more likely to experience positive emotions, express themselves spontaneously, strive to develop their capacities, take risks, and demonstrate constructive attitudes in both thinking and interacting with others. In contrast, adolescents with low self-esteem tend to be pessimistic, find it difficult to appreciate their surroundings, and experience inhibited personality development. Experiences such as insults, social rejection, academic failure, or a lack of recognition often contribute to a decline in self-esteem. As a result, individuals become hesitant in making decisions, reluctant to share their thoughts, prone to comparing themselves with others, and inclined to perceive challenges negatively (Indrawati, 2021).

Low self-esteem can hinder an individual's psychological growth, leading to feelings of inferiority, lack of confidence, difficulty in social interaction, and a sense of alienation, which often results in social withdrawal (Ani et al., 2019). Students' low self-esteem is influenced by various factors, such as the belief that they are less intelligent, experiences of being mocked by peers, fear of making mistakes when expressing opinions, and lack of family support. They also frequently feel insecure due to physical conditions, academic failure, or difficulties in socializing. This situation is further exacerbated by experiences of bullying, which diminish self-confidence. Therefore, the role of counselors is essential in helping students develop their self-esteem so that they are better able to engage in learning activities and daily life.

One effective approach to enhancing self-esteem is group counseling with the assertive training technique. This service is provided by counselors to several students in a group setting with the aim of preventing potential problems and fostering their personal development. Through group counseling, disturbing feelings can be addressed with input, suggestions, and feedback from other members. This service not only helps clients overcome their problems but also facilitates discussions on various topics by utilizing group dynamics. The process encourages the development of students' emotions, thoughts, insights, and attitudes, thereby fostering more effective and optimal behavior (Mawaridz & Rosita, 2019).

The assertive training technique serves to improve interpersonal relationships and help individuals live more effectively in interacting with their environment. Its purpose is to train clients to act according to their needs and desires without neglecting the rights and interests of others. Assertive training is a behavioral therapy designed to help adolescents recognize and express their needs and opinions firmly while still respecting others. This practice is simple, can be combined with other techniques such as relaxation or modeling, and is effective in changing individuals' behaviors, feelings, and attitudes. Implementation can be carried out either individually or in groups (Prastiwi, 2014). This article focuses on assertive training in a group format, which aims to help individuals defend themselves, understand their rights, and recognize the importance of being assertive without resorting to aggression (Lubis et al., 2022).

In developing assertiveness, clients are guided to become more aware and skilled in interacting with confidence. They record behaviors in social situations that trigger anxiety and then evaluate their success or failure in expressing themselves. This reflective process helps them recognize behavioral patterns, sources of discomfort, and strategies for improvement. Clients are also encouraged to model assertive behavior from others, practice expressing opinions firmly yet politely, and repeat the process consistently until effective assertive skills are established. With consistent practice, assertive behavior becomes more natural and can be applied more effectively in various social situations. Assertiveness provides individuals with greater self-control and enhances the quality of their interactions with others (Pradana & Putrim, 2024).

Group counseling with the assertive training technique can serve as an alternative to improve the self-esteem of students who experience communication difficulties or social pressure as a result of bullying. This technique helps students express their thoughts and feelings clearly without being aggressive, thereby fostering self-confidence. Through group dynamics, participants are able to share experiences, provide feedback, and learn to transform negative thought patterns into positive ones. Based on this background, the present study aims to analyze the effectiveness of group counseling with the assertive training technique in enhancing the self-esteem of adolescents who are victims of bullying at a private vocational high school in Medan. This study is expected to help students value themselves and others, develop the courage to express their opinions, adopt openness, and engage in positive interactions within social relationships.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative quasi-experimental method with a one-group pretest-posttest design. In this design, the dependent variable is measured within a single group both before (pretest) and after (posttest) the treatment is administered. Following the implementation of the treatment, the pretest and posttest scores of the group are compared. The advantage of this experimental design lies in its ability to compare participants' scores before and after the treatment using the same measurement instrument (William & Tan, 2019).

<i>Pretest</i>	Treatment	<i>Posttest</i>
O1	X	O2

Description:

O1 : Pretest (test administered before the intervention)

X : Intervention (using the assertive training technique)

O2 : Posttest (test administered after the intervention)

This study examined two variables, namely the independent variable and the dependent variable. The independent variable is the factor that influences or causes changes in another variable. In this research, the independent variable (X) is Group Counseling with the Assertive Training Technique. The dependent variable, on the other hand, is the variable that is influenced by the independent variable and serves as the focus of measurement in the study. In this case, the dependent variable (Y) is Self-Esteem among Adolescents Victimized by Bullying.

Participants

This study was conducted at a private vocational high school (SMK Swasta) in Medan with a total of 32 eleventh-grade students. An initial screening was carried out among these 32 students to identify those who had experienced bullying. The screening results revealed that 13 students were victims of bullying. The self-esteem levels of these students were then measured using a self-esteem scale adapted by Aziz (2022). Based on the results, 8 students were identified as having low self-esteem, consisting of 4 male and 4 female students, selected through purposive sampling. According to Sugiyono, as cited in Ani et al. (2019), purposive sampling is a sampling technique in which participants are chosen based on specific considerations. This means that the selection of participants was determined according to certain criteria that had been established beforehand by the researcher.

Data Collection Technique

The data collection technique in this study employed a questionnaire instrument to measure participants' level of self-esteem. The measurement used in the questionnaire was based on a Likert Scale with ratings ranging from 1 to 4, consisting of four options: Strongly Agree (SS), Agree (S), Disagree (TS), and Strongly Disagree (STS). Participants were asked to select one of the four options according to how well the statements reflected themselves. For data processing, each response was assigned a score based on the Likert scale values. These scores were then summed to obtain each participant's total self-esteem score. The total scores were subsequently categorized into levels of self-esteem: low, medium, or high. Before being used in the study, the questionnaire instrument underwent validity and reliability testing. The self-esteem questionnaire consisted of 4 indicators with a total of 31 items. The validity test results showed an r-table value of 0.244. Reliability testing conducted on the 31 valid items indicated a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.768, which was greater than the r-table value of 0.244. Therefore, it can be concluded that the questionnaire items were reliable with a qualification of a very high coefficient.

Data Analysis Technique

The data in this study were analyzed using the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test with the assistance of SPSS for Windows version 25 to identify improvements or declines, differences, and the effects of the intervention provided. The analysis was conducted by comparing participants' conditions before and after the implementation of the assertive training technique.

Research Procedure

Preparation Stage. The implementation procedure of this study consisted of several systematic stages. In the first stage, the researcher conducted observations and selection in collaboration with the school counselor to obtain data on bullying victims, and employed a self-esteem questionnaire adapted from the instrument used in Aziz (2022). This means that the instrument was directly adopted and used without significant modifications to its content or structure. The second stage was the participant selection process using purposive sampling, with the criteria of eleventh-grade students identified by the school counselor as having low self-esteem and willing to participate in the intervention activities. The third stage involved administering a pretest to obtain baseline data on students' low self-esteem levels. In the fourth stage, the researcher provided informed consent forms, which served as statements of willingness from the participants to take part in the services provided.

Implementation Stage. The pretest results indicated that 8 students were experiencing low self-esteem due to bullying. The researcher then conducted group counseling using the assertive training technique over four sessions. Upon completion of all sessions, the students completed the posttest using the same questionnaire.

Data Processing Stage. The data obtained from the pretest and posttest were analyzed statistically to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention using SPSS for Windows version 25. The data analysis employed the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test to measure the differences in self-esteem scores before (pretest) and after (posttest) the intervention. This test was chosen because the data were not normally distributed and the number of participants was fewer than 30 respondents. The aim was to determine the effectiveness of group counseling with the assertive training technique in improving self-esteem among adolescents who were victims of bullying.

3. Results and Discussion

The eleventh-grade class at the Private Vocational High School (SMK Swasta) in Medan, which served as the research site, consisted of 32 students with a relatively balanced gender composition, namely 17 male students and 15 female students. In general, the classroom learning dynamics were fairly conducive, although several issues emerged concerning students' social interactions. Some students tended to be passive during class discussions, while others were more dominant in expressing their opinions. This condition often led to communication imbalances, which in turn could result in misunderstandings and even acts of bullying, both verbal and non-verbal. The teacher had attempted to address these issues through a persuasive approach; however, instances of mockery and belittling behavior still occasionally appeared during the learning process. In addition, students' levels of self-confidence varied: some were able to express their opinions fluently, while others preferred to remain silent out of fear of being wrong or feelings of inferiority. This

situation illustrates that classroom conditions were not only shaped by academic learning processes but also by the psychological and social dynamics of students, which require special attention through group counseling services.

Data were collected from grade XI students who met the criteria of having low self-esteem. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of group counseling using the assertive training technique in enhancing self-esteem among adolescents who are victims of bullying. Data were obtained through the administration of pre-tests and post-tests using a self-esteem measurement instrument specifically designed for adolescent bullying victims. The instrument employed a four-point Likert scale, which had been validated and tested for reliability, with response options scored from 1 to 4. The maximum possible score was 124, and the minimum score was 31. The determination of the highest and lowest scores, as well as the interval range, was calculated as follows: 1) maximum score = $4 \times 31 = 124$, 2) minimum score = $1 \times 31 = 31$, and 3) interval range = $(124 - 31) \div 3 = 31$. The pre-test results of the self-esteem scale for adolescent bullying victims indicated the following distribution:

Table 1. Pre-test Frequency Distribution

Interval	F	Category	%
94-124	0	High	0%
63-93	0	Moderate	0%
31-62	8	Low	100%
Total	8		100

Based on the data analysis presented in Table 1 regarding the pretest frequency distribution, it was found that all 8 adolescents who were victims of bullying and participated in the study fell into the low self-esteem category. These participants subsequently received group counseling using the assertive training technique over four sessions. The pretest measurement of self-esteem was conducted only on these 8 students, who had previously been selected based on the criteria of being bullying victims with low self-esteem. In other words, from the entire population of students who experienced bullying, only those with low self-esteem were selected for measurement and included as research participants, meaning that the pretest sample was limited to these 8 students. Following the intervention, the participants completed the posttest using the same questionnaire. The posttest results provided a frequency distribution as follows:

Table 2. Post-test Frequency Distribution

Interval	F	Category	%
94-124	8	High	100
63-93	0	Moderate	0
31-62	0	Low	0
Total	8		100

Based on the results presented in the table above, a significant change was observed among the participants following the intervention. All 8 students who initially fell into the low self-esteem category were subsequently classified in the high category.

Based on the pretest and posttest administered to the participants, the analysis of the self-esteem scale yielded the following results:

Tabel 3. Data Hasil Pretest dan Posttest

No	Participant	Pretest Score	Category	Posttest Score	Category
1	CD	61	Low	103	High
2	DS	62	Low	96	High
3	KAL	62	Low	94	High
4	MAA	62	Low	112	High
5	MR	60	Low	94	High
6	MAI	58	Low	100	High
7	RO	61	Low	95	High
8	TS	60	Low	97	High

Based on the results presented in Table 3, it can be observed that before the intervention (pretest), all 8 eleventh-grade students were classified in the low self-esteem category. Following the implementation of group counseling using the assertive training technique (posttest), the students' self-esteem showed a significant increase, reaching the high category. In this study, the researcher employed the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test using SPSS for Windows version 25. The test results indicated a Z value of -2.524 with a p-value of 0.012. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores. This finding demonstrates that group counseling with the assertive training technique is effective in enhancing self-esteem among adolescents who are victims of bullying. Based on the results, the alternative hypothesis (H_a) is accepted, and the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected.

The initial condition of self-esteem among adolescents who were victims of bullying, prior to receiving group counseling using the assertive training technique, indicated that their self-evaluation remained at a low level. Based on the pre-test conducted before the intervention, the data revealed that all participants, totaling 8 students, fell into the low category. No students were classified in the moderate or high self-esteem categories. This condition reflects that at the initial stage, all adolescent bullying victims exhibited uniformly low self-esteem and had not yet shown signs of positive development. These findings illustrate that the bullying experiences encountered by the students had a serious impact on their self-worth.

Other research supporting these findings is the study conducted by Virilia et al. (2024), which demonstrated that emotion regulation strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal, can enhance the resilience of adolescents who are victims of bullying by strengthening their self-esteem. In this context, low self-esteem among adolescent bullying victims highlights the need for appropriate psychological

interventions to help them reinterpret traumatic experiences more adaptively, thereby restoring confidence and increasing personal resilience. Adolescents with low self-esteem are reported to have greater difficulty accepting their own limitations and often engage in self-criticism. They may also struggle to carry out daily activities due to feelings of frustration and depression, leading them to withdraw from their social environment. Therefore, it is crucial for adolescents to develop healthy self-esteem, as it positively influences their ability to achieve personal success (Salsabila et al., 2022). Assertive training is a technique designed to help individuals express feelings, address difficulties in saying “no,” communicate affection, and provide other positive responses. According to Corey, as cited in Rayyana (2024), the goal of assertive training is to assist clients in developing social independence, enabling them to express themselves appropriately and effectively.

Based on the analysis of the post-test data, there was a significant difference in the self-esteem of adolescents who were victims of bullying after receiving group counseling using the assertive training technique. Prior to the intervention, all participants were classified in the low self-esteem category, as shown in the pre-test results presented in Table 1. Following four sessions of group counseling with assertive training, all participants in the experimental group experienced a significant increase, with every student moving into the high self-esteem category in the post-test (Table 2). The group counseling sessions were designed to help adolescent bullying victims improve their self-esteem and enhance their self-confidence. During the counseling process, students were given the opportunity to share their experiences and emotions within a safe and supportive environment. This is particularly important, as victims of bullying often feel isolated, unheard, and lacking social support, which contributes to their low self-esteem.

In addition to providing emotional support, group counseling also imparts social skills and coping strategies to address the pressures or negative impacts of bullying. Students are taught how to recognize and manage their emotions, develop assertive communication, and strengthen their self-worth through self-empowerment exercises and self-reflection. In this way, they begin to transform negative perceptions of themselves into more positive and realistic views. These findings indicate that group counseling using the assertive training technique has a positive effect on enhancing the self-esteem of adolescents who are victims of bullying. The results of the Wilcoxon test further support this conclusion, demonstrating that the significant increase in self-esteem observed among students after the intervention was not due to chance, but rather the result of the counseling services provided.

The implementation of group counseling using the assertive training technique to enhance the self-esteem of bullying victims was conducted by providing sessions focused on developing assertive communication skills. The process began by creating a safe and trusting environment among the participants, followed by encouraging them to share their bullying experiences and the impacts on their self-confidence. Subsequently, the counselor introduced the concept of assertive behavior, enabling bullying victims to express their thoughts, feelings, and needs firmly while still respecting others. The training involved simulations (role-plays)

and group discussions, during which participants learned how to refuse inappropriate requests, voice objections, and strengthen their self-worth. Feedback from group members and the counselor helped participants refine their assertive communication, making it more natural. As a result, the training enhanced participants' courage to act assertively and confidently when facing bullying, while also helping them overcome fear and diminished self-esteem.

In line with the study conducted by Lusiana and Arifin (2022), it was revealed that the self-esteem levels of students prior to receiving group counseling with assertive training were low, as evidenced by the pre-test results. Following the intervention, self-esteem levels increased, as demonstrated by the post-test scores. Furthermore, the Wilcoxon test conducted using SPSS version 26 yielded an Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) value of 0.026, leading to the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis (H_a) since $0.026 < 0.05$. This indicates that the self-esteem of seventh-grade students who were victims of bullying significantly improved after receiving group counseling with assertive training, demonstrating that this intervention is effective for enhancing self-esteem among bullying victims. These findings are supported by the research of Ramadhani et al. (2024), which showed that the implementation of assertive training successfully increased the assertiveness of students who were victims of bullying at MTsN 1 Kota Makassar. Students in the experimental group experienced a significant increase in assertiveness, moving from a low category (pre-test) to a high category (post-test). In contrast, the control group maintained low assertiveness levels across both measurement points.

In line with the study conducted by Rahayu (2019), which examined eighth-grade students at SMP Muhammadiyah 2 Sendangagung during the 2018/2019 academic year who had advanced to ninth grade in the 2019/2020 academic year, students' self-esteem levels were assessed through pre-test, post-test, and subsequent analysis. Prior to participating in group counseling using the assertive training technique, the pre-test results showed a total score of 263, with a mean score of 29.22. After attending the assertive training group counseling sessions, the post-test results indicated a total score of 574, with a mean score of 63.78. From these pre-test and post-test results, it can be concluded that there was a significant increase in the average self-esteem of the eighth-grade students, rising from 29.22 to 63.78, with a difference of 311 and a mean gain of 34.55.

Group counseling using the assertive training technique has been proven effective in enhancing self-esteem among adolescents who are victims of bullying. The results of the Wilcoxon test indicated a significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores, demonstrating that assertive training can uniformly improve self-esteem in bullying victims. These findings are supported by the study conducted by Musyarofah and Juandi (2021), which also showed an increase in self-esteem among bullying victims following the application of assertive training. Therefore, it can be concluded that the assertive training technique is effective in improving self-esteem among bullying victims. Based on the data analysis, an increase in self-esteem scores was observed in participants before and after counseling interventions using the assertive training technique. Prior to the intervention, participants had a self-esteem score of 36, which falls into the low category.

Following the first cycle of intervention, the score increased to 61, and after the second cycle, it reached 89.

Based on the analyzed data, it is evident that there was an increase in self-esteem among eleventh-grade students. Group counseling using the assertive training technique has been proven effective in enhancing self-esteem in adolescents who are victims of bullying. This technique helps participants become more confident in expressing their thoughts and feelings. This improvement is reflected in the pre-test and post-test results conducted by the researcher. The post-test scores were higher than the pre-test scores, indicating that the group counseling sessions with assertive training had a positive impact on self-esteem. Although this study demonstrated significant changes, future research is recommended to employ larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, it is suggested that subsequent studies consider long-term observations of students following the intervention to assess its sustained effects.

4. Conclusion

This study confirms that group counseling using the assertive training technique is an effective intervention strategy for enhancing the self-esteem of adolescents who are victims of bullying. Through this service, students learn to express their thoughts and feelings clearly and appropriately without being aggressive. The training process, conducted in a group setting, allows participants to share experiences, provide mutual support, and receive constructive feedback. The results of the study indicate that students who participated in group counseling with assertive training experienced increased self-confidence, a more positive attitude toward themselves, and improved ability to interact within their social environment. This intervention helps adolescents transform negative thought patterns into more adaptive ones, reduces fear in communication, and fosters respect for themselves and others.

Thus, group counseling based on the assertive training technique can serve as a practical approach in school counseling services to address psychological issues experienced by adolescents, particularly those related to low self-esteem resulting from bullying experiences. These findings are expected to provide valuable insights for school counselors and educational practitioners in designing more effective interventions to enhance students' psychological well-being within the school environment.

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