

Effectiveness of Group Counseling Using the Actualizing Human Strengths Technique to Enhance Student Empathy

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the effectiveness of group counseling services using the Actualizing Human Strengths technique in fostering student empathy. The approach used is a quantitative method with a one-group pretest-posttest Design. The research subjects consisted of six 7th-grade students from class VII-J at MTsN 2 Medan who were identified as having low levels of empathy based on the pretest results. Data were collected using an empathy scale questionnaire modified from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) and analyzed using normality tests, homogeneity tests, and the Paired Sample T-Test. The results revealed a significant increase in empathy scores after the intervention, with a significance value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). These findings indicate that group counseling services employing the Actualizing Human Strengths technique effectively enhance empathy among students at MTsN 2 Medan.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Empathy is important for building healthy social relationships, mutual understanding, and creating a harmonious learning environment [1]. Among junior high school students, especially those in the seventh grade transitioning from childhood to adolescence, the ability to empathize becomes one of the important indicators in their social-emotional development [2]. Unfortunately, various phenomena occurring in the educational environment indicate a decline in empathy, which is reflected in behaviors such as a lack of concern, conflicts among peers, and a lack of ability to understand others' perspectives [3].

A similar condition was also identified at MTsN 2 Medan, specifically among the students of class VII-J. Based on the initial observation results and interviews with the counseling teacher, a tendency for students to exhibit individualistic behavior, a lack of responsiveness to their friends' feelings, and an inability to show concern for the social

situations around them was found. This indicates the need for appropriate intervention to systematically and structurally enhance students' empathy.

One relevant approach in this context is group counseling services using human strength actualization techniques. This technique is rooted in a humanistic approach that emphasizes the positive potential of individuals, such as compassion, responsibility, social sensitivity, and the capacity to care [4]. Through group counseling, students are encouraged to recognize their positive strengths and develop the ability to apply them in social life. By facilitating open discussion and interpersonal reflection, students are urged to understand others' feelings better and respond empathetically [5].

Group counseling is an approach in guidance and counseling services conducted in a small group format aimed at helping individuals understand themselves, overcome problems, and develop their potential optimally through structured social interaction [6]. In the process, the counselor acts as a facilitator who guides the group dynamics so that each member can share experiences, provide feedback, and receive emotional support [7]. Group counseling is effectively used to address various psychological and social issues, such as low self-esteem, anxiety, difficulties in adaptation, and interpersonal conflicts. Through interactions among members, group counseling encourages the development of empathy, self-awareness, and better social skills [8].

Various studies have explored the effectiveness of group counseling in enhancing students' empathy [9] through role-playing techniques, self-disclosure, and bibliotherapy. However, actualizing human strengths as a group counseling approach is rarely the main focus of interventions. This technique emphasizes exploring and strengthening the positive potential within individuals, such as compassion, responsibility, and the capacity to care for others, which are fundamental elements in developing empathy. Previous research by Atamau et al. [10] has explored the effectiveness of group counseling in enhancing students' empathy through role playing, bibliotherapy, and other behavioral-cognitive approaches. Although these techniques can encourage students to understand others' perspectives, most of these approaches are situational and have yet to touch on the deeper aspects of personal awareness and intrinsic values that underpin empathetic behavior.

Research gaps arise when counseling approaches are still minimal that explicitly develop empathy through the strengths and positive potential of the human being. One approach that offers a different path is the technique of actualizing human strengths, which is rooted in humanistic theory, particularly the thoughts of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, emphasizing that every individual has positive potential, such as love, responsibility, and social concern, which can be actualized in social interactions.

Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in the effort to combine a humanistic approach with group counseling practices to enhance students' empathy. This research offers a new intervention model focusing on behavioral change and reinforcing intrinsic humanitarian values. This approach aligns with the principles of character education and the holistic development of students, as emphasized in the Merdeka Curriculum and the national education vision. The study aims to test the effectiveness of group counseling services using human strength actualization techniques to improve the empathy of seventh-grade students in MTsN 2 Medan. The results of this research are expected to contribute practically to

implementing guidance and counseling services, particularly in designing interventions that comprehensively touch on students' emotional and social aspects.

2. METHOD

This research uses a quantitative approach with an experimental design to examine the causal relationship between the independent and the dependent variables. Experimental research is considered the most suitable method for testing the effectiveness of an intervention because it allows for tight control over external variables that may affect the results [11]. In this context, a quantitative approach provides a basis for objective and measurable analysis through statistically processed numeric data.

The experimental design applied in this research is the One Group Pretest-Posttest Design, a quasi-experimental design involving one group of subjects tested before and after treatment/intervention. This design allows researchers to compare the conditions of subjects before and after the intervention to observe significant changes that can be linked to the treatment provided. The systematic representation of this design is as follows:

$$O_1 \text{ (Pretest)} \rightarrow X \text{ (Treatment/Intervention)} \rightarrow O_2 \text{ (Posttest)}$$

This design was chosen because it is deemed suitable for field conditions that do not allow for the random formation of control groups, but can still provide an overview of the effectiveness of the intervention through repeated measurements on the same group.

This study's population includes all class VII-J students at MTsN 2 Medan, with 30 students. From this population, a sample of 6 students was selected who met the criteria as individuals with low empathy levels based on the results of the empathy scale completion. The selection of research subjects used a purposive sampling technique, which is a deliberate sampling technique considering specific characteristics relevant to the focus of the research. The criteria used include low empathy scores and the subjects' readiness to participate in the intervention consistently.

The selection of a relatively small sample size in this study was not without consideration. The main focus of this research is intense intervention for individuals exhibiting specific psychological symptoms, in this case, low empathy. Therefore, an approach with limited participants allows the researchers to provide more in-depth and individualized attention to each subject. However, this small sample size also limits the research, as it affects the generalizability of the findings to a broader population [12]. The findings obtained are more exploratory and contextual, making it important to further investigate in a larger population in future research.

The main instrument in this research is an empathy scale developed by adapting and modifying the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) created by Davis. The IRI is one of the most widely used empathy measurement tools internationally because it covers empathy's cognitive and affective dimensions. The aspects of empathy measured in this study include:

1. Perspective Taking (the ability to take the perspective of others),
 2. Fantasy (the tendency to imagine oneself in fictional or imaginative situations),
 3. Empathic concern (concern for others), and
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4. Personal Distress (emotional response to the suffering of others).

This scale is formulated as statements with four response options, without a neutral option, to avoid central tendency bias that may obscure the measurement results. This strategy is in accordance with the guidelines for psychological scale construction by Azwar [13]. Furthermore, the development of the empathy scale also refers to the results of the adaptation of Nurkholis' research [14] in his thesis titled *The Relationship Between Empathy and Prosocial Behavior Among Students of SMA Negeri 1 Tebing Tinggi, Meranti Islands Regency*. This adaptation is carried out to ensure the relevance to the cultural context and the age of the participants and to strengthen the validity of the content of the measurement tool used.

The primary data collection technique was conducted through a Likert scale questionnaire comprising five response categories: Very Often, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, and Never. Using the Likert scale allows researchers to measure the intensity or frequency of students' empathetic experiences in various social situations. In addition to the questionnaire, the researchers also conducted observations, interviews, and documentation as triangulation techniques to strengthen the validity of the data and provide richer context to the quantitative results [15].

Interpretation criteria based on the total maximum score are used to determine the categories of low and high empathy. Students with a score ≤ 22.5 have low empathy, while students with a score ≥ 45 are categorized as having high empathy. These criteria are established based on previous validity and reliability tests so that they can be justified psychometrically. With a structured design and systematic approach, this research aims to reveal the extent of changes in students' empathy levels after receiving specific treatments and to open up scientific discussion about the effectiveness of psychopedagogical interventions in developing students' social character at the junior high school level.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

To identify who has a low level of empathy, an initial measurement was conducted using a pretest in the form of a questionnaire given to class VII-J, with a total population of 30 students. The results showed that six students were categorized as having minimal empathy. Below are the results of the pretest empathy scale questionnaire conducted with the students.

Table 1. Pretest Data of the Empathy Scale

No	Name	Empathy Scale		
		Total	Category	% (interval)
1	AFP	65	Low	58%
2	AZ	67	Low	60%
3	HTH	65	Low	58%
4	MA	69	Low	62%
5	NAW	69	Low	62%
6	QLS	66	Low	59%

Based on the pretest data of the empathy scale given to 6 participants, all respondents showed a level of empathy categorized as low. This is indicated by a total score ranging from

65 to 69, with a result percentage interval between 58% and 62%. This data shows that most participants have a very minimal sense of empathy. Therefore, it is necessary to implement group guidance services using the technique of actualizing human strengths to address the issues of these students.

After the complete intervention was applied, 6 study samples were directed to complete the same questionnaire again. The purpose was to observe changes in the subjects after the intervention was provided. Based on the post-test data given to the 6 participants, the results showed that all participants fell into the high category regarding increased empathy. The total scores ranged from 83 to 94, with a percentage interval between 74% and 84%. The post-test results can be seen in the following table:

Table 2. Post-test Data of the Empathy Scale

No	Name	Empathy Scale		
		Total	Category	% (interval)
1	AFP	83	High	74%
2	AZ	85	High	76%
3	HTH	90	High	80%
4	MA	92	High	82%
5	NAW	94	High	84%
6	QLS	92	High	82%

Compared to the results of the empathy pretest (Table 1), where all participants showed low levels of empathy with percentages ranging from 58% to 62%, the post-test results showed a significant improvement in behavioral changes, particularly regarding empathy. This indicates that the intervention or treatment provided after the pretest measurement effectively enhanced the sense of empathy. To determine the effectiveness of the intervention on the students' sense of empathy, the researcher conducted several statistical tests, namely the normality test, the homogeneity of variance test, and the Paired sample T-test.

3.1.1. Normality Test

Table 3. Tests of Normality

1 and 2		Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
pretest- posttest	pretest	,215	6	.200*	,850	6	,158
	post-test	,229	6	.200*	,891	6	,321

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

The normality test was conducted using two methods, namely Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk. Based on the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, the significance value for the pretest and post-test data is 0.200. Meanwhile, based on the Shapiro-Wilk test, the significance value for the pretest is 0.158 and for the post-test is 0.321. All significance values are greater than 0.05, which means the data is normally distributed. Therefore, it can

be concluded that the data meet the requirements for proceeding to parametric analysis using the paired sample t-test.

3.1.2. Homogeneity Test

Table 4. Test of Homogeneity of Variance

		Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
pretest-posttest	Based on the Mean	5,556	1	10	,040
	Based on the Median	2,044	1	10	,183
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	2,044	1	5,876	,204
	Based on the trimmed mean	5,086	1	10	,048

Next, a homogeneity test was conducted using Levene's test to determine whether the pretest and post-test data have the same variance (homogeneous). The test results showed that the significance value in the 'Based on Mean' category is 0.040, and in the 'Based on Trimmed Mean' category is 0.048, both below 0.05, indicating that the data is not homogeneous based on these two categories. However, in the 'Based on Median' and 'Based on Median with adjusted df' categories, the significance values are 0.183 and 0.204, respectively, which are greater than 0.05, suggesting that homogeneity may still be accepted in some approaches. Nevertheless, the analysis continued due to the small sample size and normal data distribution.

3.1.3. Paired Sample T-Test

Table 5. Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	pretest-post-test	-22,500	3,619	1,478	-26,298	-18,702	-15,227	5	,000

The Paired Sample T-Test is used to determine if there is a significant difference between the pretest and post-test results of online game addiction. The analysis results show an average difference of -22.500, with $t = -15.227$, degrees of freedom ($df = 5$), and a significance value (2-tailed) of 0.000. The significance value, far below 0.05, indicates a significant difference between the pretest and post-test scores. The average score decrease of 22.5 points indicates that the intervention effectively reduces online game addiction among the students.

Based on the results of the statistical analysis, it can be concluded that the intervention provided, based on the results of the pretest and post-test, successfully reduced the level of online gaming addiction significantly. The data indicate a normal distribution of scores, and although there is heterogeneity in some aspects of variance, the results of the Paired Sample T-Test still show significant changes. Thus, the intervention applied in this study is effective in reducing online gaming addiction behavior among students.

3.2. Discussion

The research results show that group guidance services using the Actualizing Human Strengths technique can significantly improve students' empathy. Based on the pretest results, all six participants had empathy scores in the low category, with percentage intervals between 58% and 62%. After the intervention, the post-test results indicated a significant improvement, with empathy scores in the high category, ranging from 74% to 84%. This serves as initial evidence that an approach emphasizing students' strengths positively impacts the development of affective aspects such as empathy.

The results of this study indicate a significant increase in students' empathy levels after being provided with group counseling services using a human strength actualization approach. The increase in the average score from the pretest of 66 (low category) to 89 (high category) in the post-test reflects the effectiveness of the intervention. These findings are in line with several previous studies. Research by Sari and Indrawati [16] shows that personal strength-based group counseling services can increase social awareness and empathy among middle school students. In their research, students who received similar interventions demonstrated improved abilities to understand the feelings of others and exhibited higher prosocial behavior.

Fitriani and Fauziah [17] researched the effectiveness of positive psychology approaches in group guidance to enhance empathy among adolescents. It states that strengthening individual character strengths, such as compassion, kindness, and social awareness, significantly contributes to the empathetic development of students. This aligns with the human strength actualization approach used in this research, which emphasizes recognizing self-potential as the foundation for intervention. Next, the research by Anggraini and Yusri [18] suggests that group self-disclosure techniques can increase students' emotional understanding, thereby strengthening interpersonal empathy. This technique is similar in principle to human strength actualization techniques, as both create a safe space for meaningful reflection and interpersonal interaction.

A study by Maulana and Rachman [19] emphasizes the importance of cultural context in developing empathy scales and implementing interventions. In adapting his research at the high school level, he demonstrated that a student-centered, strength-based approach is relevant and effective in enhancing prosocial behavior. This research supports the findings that contextually adjusted empathy scales can yield valid and relevant data for designing interventions [20], proving that group guidance services with positive reinforcement techniques and self-actualization can significantly improve students' self-confidence and social relationships. This correlates positively with the results of this study, where the increase in empathy also reflects the strengthening of interpersonal relationships and the improvement of the quality of social interactions.

Statistically, the normality test results show that the data is normally distributed. Although the variance homogeneity test indicates that the results are not entirely homogeneous, the analysis continues because of the normal data distribution and the small sample size. The results of the Paired Sample T-Test yield a significance value of 0.000 (<0.05), indicating a significant difference between the pretest and post-test results. Thus, these findings reinforce the results of the five journals mentioned above that group guidance

services using techniques centered on developing individual strengths effectively enhance students' empathy.

The Actualizing Human Strengths technique reinforces students' positive character traits such as compassion, courage, integrity, and social concern. When these strengths are realized in a group context, students learn to recognize the potential for goodness within themselves and others, enhancing their ability to understand and empathize with others' emotional experiences. The concept of actualizing human strengths aligns with the findings of successful group guidance based on cultural values, such as the bibliotherapy technique, which has successfully increased students' empathy in MTs [21].

This technique is based on Abraham Maslow's theory of self-actualization, which states that individuals are naturally driven to become the best version of themselves. However, this drive requires the right stimulation and facilitation to realize that potential. Therefore, AHS becomes a strategic instrument in guidance services, guiding students in recognizing personal strengths such as empathy, honesty, courage, curiosity, and compassion [22].

In Indonesian education, techniques that promote self-awareness have proven to be more comprehensive than dramatic methods [23]. Furthermore, the Actualizing Human Strengths technique is relevant to the early adolescent development, where individuals seek identity and social values. This technique encourages students to be aware of the feelings of others but also to recognize their social responsibilities and contributions in shaping a harmonious learning environment.

This research reinforces the idea that group guidance serves as a place for sharing and reflection and to strengthen personal character. Winter et al. [24] explain that empathy is the ability to sense the emotional states of others, feel sympathy, try to solve problems, and take the perspective of others. When learners are given space to explore their positive strengths through supportive group interactions, empathy grows as a social response and becomes part of a healthier and more complete self-identity.

During the implementation, the experimenter facilitated discussions on individual strengths (such as honesty, attention, and responsibility). Furthermore, participants reflected on their experiences when using these strengths in the context of empathy. This mechanism was expanded to positive personal aspects; the result is that empathy is built from the awareness of one's strengths, not just interpersonal practice. Putri et al. [25] highlight the role of school counselors in identifying forms of empathy and strategies for psycho-social handling during group learning. The technique of Actualizing Human Strengths can be more effective in facilitating the process of internal strength spotting, affective reflection, and the application of empathy in daily interactions.

The results of this study provide an important contribution to the practice of guidance and counseling services in schools. The Actualizing Human Strengths technique can serve as a strategic alternative in student character development, especially in fostering deep and sustainable empathetic attitudes. With this approach, school counselors help students solve problems but also guide them to discover their best potential.

4. CONCLUSION

The research results show that group guidance services using the human strength actualization technique effectively increase the empathy of seventh-grade students in class VII-J. The empathy scores of the participants significantly increased from a low category (58%-62%) to a high category (74%-84%) after the intervention, as evidenced by the Paired Sample T-Test with a significance value of 0.000. These findings indicate that guidance counselors can use this approach to foster empathy and social character among school students. This technique is relevant to be applied in the context of social-emotional learning. However, this research has limitations in the form of a small sample size and the absence of a control group, making the results not widely generalizable. Future research should use an experimental design with a control group, involve a larger sample, and test the sustainability of long-term intervention effects.

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