

Improving assertive communication through role-playing based group guidance for students who are victims of verbal bullying at the junior high school level

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Abstract

Verbal bullying in Indonesian schools has been shown to negatively affect students' psychological well-being and foster passive communication patterns among victims. This study aims to examine the effect of group guidance utilizing role-playing techniques on improving assertive communication among students who are victims of verbal bullying. A quasi-experimental pretest-posttest nonequivalent control group design was employed, involving 14 eighth-grade students equally divided into an experimental group and a control group. Results of the Paired Samples T-Test demonstrated that group guidance utilizing role-playing techniques significantly improved assertive communication among students who were victims of verbal bullying ($t = -11.762$; $p < 0.05$), with the experimental group showing a 38.53% increase in mean scores compared to the control group, which showed no meaningful change. This study provides empirical evidence that role-playing-based group guidance is an effective and practical intervention strategy for school counselors in supporting verbal bullying victims in communicating assertively, and recommends future research to expand the sample size and explore its integration with other counseling approaches.

Keywords: *assertive communication, group guidance, role playing, verbal bullying*



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Introduction

Bullying remains a persistent problem in Indonesian schools. Data from Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia (KPAI) show a continued rise in reported cases, with 383 incidents recorded by March 2024 alone, 34% of which took place within educational institutions (KPAI,

2024). This does not only happen in Indonesia. For instance, UNICEF declared that thirty-three percent of adolescents have experienced bullying (UNICEF, 2025), and according to UNICEF's U-report, 2,777 Indonesian youths aged 14-24 have experienced bullying. Among the bullying forms, physical and verbal bullying are the most common (Syavika et al., 2023). Verbal bullying consists of name-calling, mocking, verbal threats and comments, and many forms of inappropriate verbal expressions (Kurnia, Astuti, and Yusuf, 2021). It includes taunting, use of bad and/or offensive language, and acts that publicly humiliate the bullying perpetrator that victims usually perceive as normal to social conduct (Pebriana & Supriyadi, 2024).

The effects of harassments go beyond discomfort. Psychologically, bullying disrupts the sense of safety of the student and erodes their self-esteem, making them more vulnerable to depression and anxiety (Rahmatillah et al., 2024). Socially, they become more withdrawn. Fintari and Fauziah (2024) found that victims completely withdraw from their harassment peer group, avoid socializing, and, in many cases, talk to teachers and classmates in very low voices. They fail to learn and are less likely to perform at an acceptable level (Najah et al., 2022).

Given how deeply verbal bullying disrupts both communication and well-being, targeted professional intervention is not optional it's necessary. One practical method is to strengthen victims' assertive communication skills. Being assertive means that students are able to stand up for themselves without being self-destructive. Sari and Widyatmoko (2025) noted that students' social skills in coping with bullying are stronger if students are more assertive. Practicing assertive communication makes it easier for students to recognize their needs and express them (Aryani, 2022). Additionally, Hartini, Regina, and Sutanto (2024) reported that assertiveness training was effective in helping bullying victims strengthen their self-esteem and was more successful in helping victims express their feelings and needs constructively rather than in a reactive way. For victims, asserting themselves helps defend their needs, lowers harm, and creates positive relationships with their peers in the school environment.

Many attempts were made to employ various interventions to help strengthen assertive skills. Samad (2024) reported that assertiveness training in individual counseling helped students confidently volunteer and participate in class and respond to bullying in a more assertive way, but due to the individual nature of the counseling, students did not have the opportunity to practice assertiveness skills with peers. Melati, Fatimah, and Manuardi (2022) reported that Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) decreased social anxiety in victims by targeting irrational beliefs and improved the ability to make direct communication, but due to the cognitive nature of REBT, students had very limited opportunities to directly practice assertiveness skills. In group counseling, Abdi et al. (2024) reported that client-centered counseling offered a safe environment to share and determine coping skills, but the non-directive nature of the approach did not strengthen assertiveness skills.

Group guidance that includes role-playing shows considerable potential. Tabang et al. (2025) found that role-play based group guidance led to considerable pre-test to post-test gains in assertiveness among bullying victims. Similarly, Fitriani (2022) found that self-confidence among bullying victims was improved by group guidance that incorporated role-playing. Self-confidence is a necessary precursor to the successful enactment of assertive communication.

However, research gaps exist in the studies cited above. For example, Tabang et al. (2025) used role-playing to improve assertive behavior but did not address either verbal bullying or assertive communication. Nuliandini et al. (2016) used role-playing in group counseling to reduce bullying, but did not discuss the participants' communication skills. Fitriani (2022) used role-playing to enhance self-confidence of bullying victims and did not focus on assertive communication. These research gaps suggest a clear need for programs that address assertive communication for victims of verbal bullying. Assertiveness training offers knowledge and strategies (Hartini, Regina, & Sutanto, 2024), but tends toward instruction rather than practice. Role-playing, by contrast, gives students a chance to rehearse verbal responses, regulate emotions, maintain eye contact, and

manage anxiety in simulated bullying scenarios (Rismi, Yustiana, & Budiman, 2020). Combining the two within group guidance may offer a more practical path to building real communicative competence and self-efficacy.

Role-playing is a behavioral rehearsal technique that gives students structured space to explore interpersonal dynamics, build confidence, and develop empathy toward marginalized or ridiculed peers (Rismi, Yustiana, and Budiman, 2020). Within group guidance specifically, Sadewa, Mutakin, and Triana (2022) note that role-playing helps bullied students develop assertiveness, process emotions, restore social harmony, and accumulate peer experiences that improve self-image. This study therefore sets out to examine whether group guidance services using role-playing techniques can improve assertive communication among verbal bullying victims, with the aim of offering a workable alternative strategy for school counselors and contributing to the field's theoretical understanding of what role-playing can do for this population.

Unlike prior studies that examined role-playing in general student populations, this study makes three distinct contributions. First, role-playing is structured around five specific dimensions of assertive communication drawn from Alberti and Emmons (2017), rather than applied generically. Second, the study targets verbal bullying victims specifically a group whose passive communication patterns are emotionally rooted, not merely skill-based. Finally, the study control group received group guidance with no role-playing. This control group design is more specific than a treatment vs. no-treatment group design. The study aims to assess the impact role-playing in group guidance has on the assertive communication of participants who have been victims of verbal bullying.

Method

The study aims for a quantitative methodology, collecting numerical data for statistical analysis on the relationships among variables. This method allows for the objective identification and measurement of cause-and-effect relationships using systematic procedures, and yields findings that are generalizable (Pandang & Anas, 2019). The study employs a quasi-experimental design and a pretest-posttest nonequivalent control group design. Complete randomization was not employed because the study was conducted in a setting where the participants were chosen based on certain criteria, and random assignment was not appropriate for these conditions (Pandang & Anas, 2019). The research design is illustrated as follows:

Table 1. Research Design

Group	Pretest	Treatment	Posttest
Experiment	Y ₁	X	Y ₂
Control	Y ₃	x	Y ₄

Keterangan :

- Y₁ : Pretest for the experimental class
- Y₂ : Posttest for the experimental class
- Y₃ : Pretest for the control class
- Y₄ : Posttest for the control class
- X : Treatment (Group guidance with role-playing techniques)
- x : Group guidance lecture and case study techniques

The population of this study consists of eighth-grade students who were identified as victims of verbal bullying based on data obtained from initial assesments conducted by school counselor, yielding a total of 50 students. However, not all victims of verbal bullying demonstrated low assertive communication skills. Therefore, an assertive communication scale was subsequently administered to the 50 identified students to determine their level of assertive communication.

Based on the results, 14 students were found to have low to very low assertive communication scores.

The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) actively enrolled eighth-grade students; (2) identified as victims of verbal bullying; and (3) demonstrating low to very low assertive communication skills based on the assertive communication scale. The exclusion criteria for this study are as follows: (1) Students who scored in the moderate, high, or very high categories on the assertive communication scale; (2) Students who were not identified as victims of verbal bullying based on data from the school counselor; (3) students who were unwilling to participate in the entire series of group counseling sessions. The 14 students were then equally divided into an experimental group and a control group of 7 participants each. According to (Pandang and Anas 2019), small-scale experimental studies with rigorous controls may utilize a sample of between 10 and 20 participants; thus, the designation of 14 subjects meets the recommended criteria. Next, the 14 subjects were divided into an experimental group and a control group, each consisting of 7 people, with the subjects assigned randomly.

The experimental group received an intervention in the form of group guidance utilizing role-playing techniques, while the control group received group guidance using lectures and case studies. The group guidance intervention was implemented across six structured sessions, following four key stages: opening, transition, main activity, and closing (Hasanah et al. 2022). The first session was dedicated to introductory activities, including an introduction to the concepts of assertive communication and verbal bullying. The subsequent five sessions incorporated role-playing activities targeting specific aspects of assertive communication within the main activity stage. As for the control group, the intervention was also divided into six sessions. Sessions one through three focused on introducing the concepts of assertive communication and verbal bullying through lectures. Then, in the fourth session, a case study on refusing requests was presented. The fifth session returned to lectures and explanations. Finally, the sixth session covered topics on building self-confidence and group support for sustainable change. The following is a breakdown of the topics for each session in the experimental group and the control group :

Table 2. Role Playing Based Group Guidance Sessions and Topics

Sessions	Topics for experiment group	Topic for control group
1	Introduction to the concept of assertive communication and verbal bullying	Introduction to the concept of assertive communication and verbal bullying
2	Practice role-playing acting Pairedly	Differences from Passive and Aggressive Styles
3	Practice role-playing expressing feelings comfortably	The Basic Formula for Assertive Responses
4	Practice role-playing defending oneself in a healthy manner	Case Discussion on Refusing Requests
5	Practice role-playing being able to express opinions	Receiving Criticism and Praise (Lecture and Explanation)
6	Practice role-playing respecting the rights of others	Building Self-Confidence and Group Support for Lasting Change

Sadewa, Mutakin, and Triana (2022) asserts that role-playing methods yield a more positive impact when implemented in small groups, as they allow for more personalized feedback. The average age of the sample ranged from 13 to 14 years. The pre-test and post-test results of both groups were then statistically analyzed to determine the effect of the technique on students' levels of assertive communication. The following is an overview of the stages of this research:

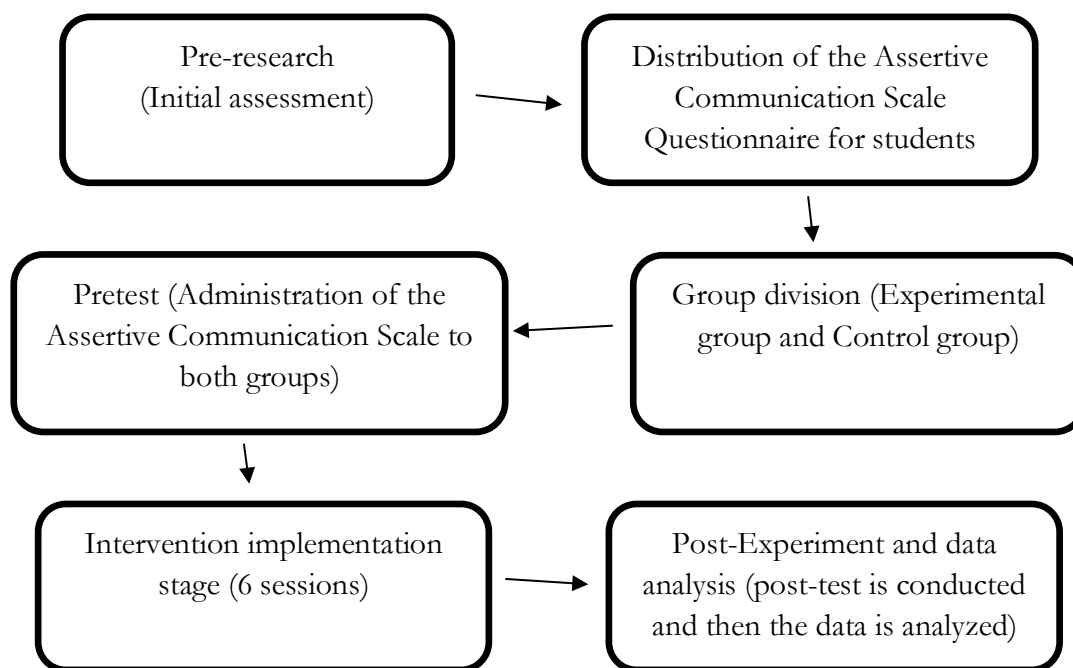


Figure 1. Research Procedures

The data analysis techniques employed include descriptive statistical analysis and inferential statistical analysis using the Independent Samples T-Test. Descriptive analysis is intended to illustrate the level of assertive communication among students who are victims of verbal bullying both before and after receiving the intervention, presented through frequency distribution tables and percentages. Inferential statistical analysis aims to test the hypotheses proposed in the study (Sugiyono, 2023). The application of the t-test requires that the data from each variable be normally distributed and homogeneous; therefore, prerequisite tests namely the normality test and homogeneity test were conducted prior to hypothesis testing. Content validity was established through expert review by two faculty members specializing in Guidance and counseling at Universitas Negeri Makassar.

To address potential threats to internal validity and ensure the rigor of this quasi-experimental design, several mitigation strategies were implemented to control for selection, expectancy, and measurement biases. While full population randomization was unfeasible, selection bias was systematically minimized by applying strict, identical baseline criteria during purposive sampling to assign the 14 selected participants into the experimental and control groups. To mitigate the Hawthorne effect and experimenter expectancy bias where participants might alter their behavior simply because they know they are in a treatment group both groups received identical session lengths and structured formats led by a school counselor following standardized guidance protocols. Furthermore, to counteract social desirability and response bias during testing, the assertive communication scale was administered under strict confidentiality assurances in a neutral setting, utilizing an instrument whose structural objectivity was independently verified by expert reviewers from Universitas Negeri Makassar.

Findings

Group guidance sessions utilizing role-playing techniques for students who are victims of verbal bullying were conducted over six meetings, each based on the theoretical framework of behavioral group counseling with an assertiveness training approach (Corey 2011). The combination of psychoeducation, modeling, role-play, positive reinforcement, and homework was

consistent with the behavior theory, and the incorporation of each of these elements involved practice of behavioral rehearsal, observational learning, and reinforcement of the behavior, which was aimed at changing passive behavior to assertive behavior. The assertive communication scale was based on the theory of Alberti and Emmons (2017). From the first 50 items, 34 were validated with an item analysis at a r -table value of 0.284. The scale was then determined to be reliable with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.740. The Independent Samples T-Test was used to analyze the data.

Most participants, both in the experimental group (71.4%) and in the control group (71.4%), were 14 years old. This indicates that mid-adolescence is a sensitive stage for peer verbal bullying. The data shows that most participants were victims of verbal bullying, were of the low assertive communication level, and were female: experimental group (85.7%) and control group (71.4%). This suggests that female adolescents are more likely to internalize negative social experiences and respond to verbal bullying with passive communication, unlike male adolescents who tend toward more overt responses. Together, these demographic patterns suggest that female students in mid-adolescence represent a particularly at-risk group in need of targeted intervention within school counseling. The following is a table of demographic participants in the experimental group and the control group:

Future research should work with larger and more diverse samples, use independent fidelity assessments, include follow-up measurements, and pursue stronger psychometric validation to improve both the internal and external validity of findings in this area:

Table 3. Demographic Participant in The Experimental and Control Groups

Demographic Data	Experiment Group		Control Group	
	N	%	N	%
Age				
13 yo	2	28,6%	2	28,6%
14 yo	5	71,4%	5	71,4%
Gender				
Male	1	14,3%	2	28,6%
Female	6	85,7%	5	71,4%

Next, a normality test was conducted to determine whether the data in each group were normally distributed or not. Because the sample size was small, the Shapiro-Wilk test was appropriate for analyzing the results. The results showed that the p -value for the experimental group was 0.402 and for the control group was 0.625. Since the p -values for both groups were greater than 0.05 ($0.402 > 0.05$ and $0.625 > 0.05$), the data for the experimental and control groups are normally distributed.

A homogeneity test was conducted to determine whether the variances of the data between the experimental group and the control group are equal (homogeneous). The standard used was based on the mean. The significance value (based on the mean) obtained was 0.201. Since the significance value is greater than 0.05 ($0.201 > 0.05$), it can be concluded that the data variances are homogeneous. This means there is no significant difference in variance between the experimental and control groups.

Following the normality and homogeneity tests, a statistical analysis was conducted using a parametric test, specifically an Paired samples t-test to compare the differences in means between the two groups. The following are the results of the t-test:

Table 4. Paired Sample T-Test Results Control Group

Paired Samples Test Control Group		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pretest - Posttest	1.14286	2.34013	.88448	-1.02140	3.30711	1.292	6	.244

The results of the paired sample t-test in the control group showed that there was no significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores. The significance value (Sig. (2-tailed)) was greater than 0.05.

Table 5. Paired Sample T-Test Results Experiment Group

Paired Samples Test Experiment Group		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pretest - Posttest	-24.71429	5.55921	2.10118	-29.85569	-19.57288	-11.762	6	.000

The results of the paired sample t-test showed a t-value of -11.762 with a significance value (Sig. (2-tailed)) of $0.000 < 0.05$. Thus, there was a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of students' assertive communication after being given the intervention in the form of group guidance using role-playing techniques. Confirming that group guidance utilizing role-playing techniques is effective in improving assertive communication among students who are victims of verbal bullying. Based on Cohen's test results, a value of 4.45 was obtained, indicating that the intervention had a very large effect on improving students' assertive communication.

Discussion

Assertive communication refers to the ability to express one's thoughts, feelings, and needs honestly and directly while simultaneously respecting the rights and feelings of others (Tondok et al. 2022). In the context of verbal bullying victimization, this capacity is particularly critical, as repeated exposure to verbal aggression tends to suppress students' willingness to speak up, defend their boundaries, and engage in healthy social interaction. This study aims to address these concerns by implementing a role-playing-based assertive communication training program consisting of six structured sessions. The sessions target different aspects of assertive communication. This includes the ability to speak comfortably when one is angry and the ability to express personal feelings and opinions (Alberti and Emmons, 2017).

From the findings, it is clear that the intervention had a significant positive impact on the assertive communication skills of the experimental group. The t-test value was (-11.762, $p < 0.05$, mean difference = -24.71429). The mean score during the pre-test was 64.14, while the score during the post-test increased to 88.85. This demonstrates a 38.53% improvement. In contrast, the mean

score of the control group had a slight decline from 67.00 to 65.86. This indicates that the control group who did not participate in the intervention had no significant improvement in assertive communication. This related to the argument made by Oktaviani, Umar, and Pandang (2024) that without any intervention opportunities for verbal bullying victims to improve their self-confidence freezes or declines due to the prevailing social pressure.

The first dimension identified is the ability to act independently. This dimension is a building block of assertive communication. It describes the extent to which an individual is likely to make decisions and take actions according to their own judgment, as opposed to succumbing to social pressure. With the role-playing exercises, students were put into situations involving social pressure and bullying. This put students in a controlled environment where they had the opportunity to practice autonomous decision-making in a safe psychological environment. This aligns with the research of Nuramelia, Putri, and Nur (2025), which stated that role-play techniques had the ability to change individuals' viewpoints from being passive and timid to courageous, proactive, and expressive. This change in individuals was likely because role play allowed students to practice a new behavior outside of a judgmental space. This was supported by Maisyaroh and Astuti (2024), who stated that role-playing in group guidance significantly improves students' assertive behavior by providing controlled practice of communication in a safe and psychological environment.

Using verbal bullying as a form of bullying results in behavior where the victim actively suppresses their emotions, which over time creates a passive communicative behavior and increases vulnerability to further bullying (Khaira 2023). Role play exercises incorporated in sessions three and four focused on the two aforementioned dimensions and placed students in emotionally challenging situations. Participants were then able to practice expressing feelings, as well as demonstrating and defending boundaries. This included the use of appropriate tone of voice, word choice, and body language. Constructive group dynamics throughout the sessions foster a supportive and safe environment. This, along with the provision of annotated and direct feedback, served to initiate the processing of boundary establishment. This result is consistent with the research conducted by Mawarni, Yuline, and Halida (2025), which states that safe environments initiated by group dynamic interactions enable the practice of communication skills and promote assertive behavior, while Tabang et al. (2025) state that connectedness among group members decreases the social anxiety that bullying victims typically demonstrate.

The significant advancements made in the experimental group gained even more clarity when separate dimensions of assertive communication were analyzed, as acting autonomously was the primary focus of the development. The final sessions highlighted participants' advancements in the dimensions that describe the ability to express opinions assertively and the ability to respect the rights of others. During the final sessions, participants began to demonstrate the ability to express their opinions while maintaining the communicative rights of others. On the other hand, the decline of members of the control group (-1.1 points; -1.6%) demonstrates that the absence of organized influence doesn't just mean assertive communication as a means to verbal bullying of victims remains stagnant. The ability to assertively express opinions verbally erodes as a result of the lasting psychological impact of continued bullying. These findings demonstrate the involvement of role playing activities in organized influence. It is shown to be effective in the simultaneous organization of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of communication and assertive behavior.

The fourth and fifth dimensions regard assertive opinion expression and the concomitant respect for others' rights. They embody the more cognitively advanced elements of assertive communication. These dimensions of assertive communication require students to express their opinion while simultaneously respecting the communicative rights of others. These dimensions were addressed in sessions five and six through role-play involving group disagreement and speech interruption. The feedback provided by the session attendees suggested that their understanding and ability to analyze the communication elements in the presented role-play scenarios had

improved. This qualitative shift confirms the opinion of Guna and Ulfa (2019), that role-play in a group guidance context is an excellent way to improve student assertiveness in all dimensions, and corresponds to the findings of Sitanggang and Wijaya (2025) that role-play in a group context, in as few as three sessions, significantly improves students' assertive behavior, a finding that was even more present in the six sessions of the current study.

The total categorical transformation seen in the experimental group, all seven of whom transitioned from the low range in the pre-test to the moderate or high range in the post-test, suggests that assertive communication training needs practices that integrate ample opportunities to receive positive reinforcement. Marliani, Suasta, and Gunawan (2021) support the theory that the transformation occurred as a result of the role-playing intervention, citing a lack of change in the control group. Musthofiyah, Mustakimah, and Muthohar (2025) argue that the use of role-playing and similar methods generates socio-emotional behavior transformations that do not occur naturally. Furthermore, Dethan and Rahayu (2025) argue that bullying can gradually erode students' self-confidence and social skills, highlighting the need for time-bound, structured interventions. Abdi et al. (2024) maintain that victims of verbal bullying require an extended, structured intervention to prevent the negative impacts from becoming even more established

Overall, the t-value of 11.130 and the substantial mean difference between the experimental and control groups confirm that group guidance utilizing role-playing techniques is an effective intervention for improving assertive communication among students who are victims of verbal bullying. This conclusion is supported by Sadewa et al. (2022), who assert that role-playing is highly effective in training assertiveness by providing direct simulation in a safe environment, and by Yuniati (2022), who emphasizes that addressing bullying requires a direct practice approach rather than theoretical instruction alone. Additionally, Pasolang, Padang, and Pagirik (2026) note that high levels of peer support a natural byproduct of the group guidance format enhance adolescents' self-confidence through recognition, acceptance, and positive interaction within the group, further explaining the magnitude of the improvement observed in the experimental group.

At the psychological level, the effectiveness of role-playing can be explained through three interrelated mechanisms. First, behavioral rehearsal through repeated role simulation reduces avoidance responses and anxiety. Second, observational learning through peer modeling provides vicarious reinforcement of assertive patterns. Third, structured reflection facilitates cognitive reappraisal, where students reinterpret threatening situations as manageable. The convergence of these three mechanisms explains why role-playing in group guidance produces not only short-term behavioral changes but also deeper, more sustainable internalization of assertive communication values among verbal bullying victims.

Conclusion

This study provides preliminary evidence suggesting that group guidance utilizing role-playing techniques effective in improving assertive communication among students who are victims of verbal bullying, as indicated by $p < 0.001$ and a substantial mean difference between the experimental and control groups. These findings demonstrate compatibility between the initial objective outlined in the introduction and the empirical evidence obtained, and provide a structured, dimension-specific intervention framework that school counselors may consider in supporting verbal bullying victims. However, these findings should be interpreted cautiously given several design constraints, including the quasi-experimental design without full randomization, the small sample size ($n = 14$), the absence of intervention fidelity checks, the lack of follow-up measurements, the potential for experimenter bias, and the use of a self-developed instrument that has not yet undergone construct validation through EFA or CFA. Future research should work with larger and more diverse samples, use independent fidelity assessments, include follow-up measurements, and pursue stronger psychometric validation to improve both the internal and external validity of findings in this area.

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