The Effectiveness of a Self-Assertiveness-Based Counseling Program in Reducing Bullying Fear Symptoms Among a Sample of Elementary School Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to implement a self-assertiveness-based counseling program and measure its impact on reducing bullying fear symptoms among elementary school students in the Second Amman Directorate of Education.

The students' ages ranged from 10 to 12 years, and the sample consisted of 60 male and female students selected purposively from 950 students. They were assessed using a Bullying Fear Questionnaire and randomly divided into control and experimental groups. The counseling program was applied to the experimental group, and the study utilized a quasi-experimental design.

The results showed statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the control and experimental groups on the bullying fear questionnaire in favor of the experimental group, which is attributed to the counseling program. There were no differences in the program's effect according to gender, nor were there any differences in bullying fear symptoms. There were also no statistically significant differences attributed to the interaction between gender and group regarding bullying fear symptoms.

These findings highlight the program's potential for broad application, providing valuable insights for educators and policymakers aiming to enhance student well-being and safety in schools. The research's regional focus and specific intervention approach add originality and practical value to educational psychology and bullying prevention.

Keywords: bullying fear symptoms, counseling program, elementary school, self-assertiveness

1. Introduction

The early years of a child's life are crucial in shaping their future path and personality. During early childhood, children begin to explore, learn, form social relationships, and interact with others. Developing communication and interaction skills is fundamental to personality development, allowing children to acquire skills, knowledge, and abilities. In this stage, one of the most important things a child needs is self-assertiveness, which helps them become more capable of expressing themselves and communicating, ultimately leading to a smooth and balanced personality.

Childhood is a pivotal stage of construction and formation, where the individual's personality and identity begin to take shape. Self-assertiveness emerges as a critical concept during this period, as children continuously strive to discover their individual and social selves.

A positive self-concept is not enough for a child. They also need to develop the ability to assert themselves in the face of challenges and difficulties. As children enter elementary school, they begin to venture outside the family circle. They carry with them greater aspirations for independence and self-assertiveness. They start trying to integrate into the school environment and continue their personal and social growth and adjustment.

Therefore, the school environment must be supportive and safe for children. (Badrakhan et al, 2024). However,

recent data suggests that this is no longer the case, as indicators of violence, bullying, and harm in schools are on the rise (Marzouq, 2023).

The research literature suggests that the terms "bullying" and "harm" are often used to refer to repeated harmful actions by peers during childhood, where there is an imbalance of power. This can include direct forms, such as physical aggression, and indirect forms, such as social exclusion (Manoli et al., 2023). The results of many studies have also shown that bullying has become one of the most common problems in schools. (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2016; Vaillancourt et al., 2010; Zibin et al., 2022).

School bullying refers to the repeated exposure of a student to hostile actions by one or more other students (Olweus, 2013). It is an aggressive behavior (physical, verbal, electronic, direct, or indirect) that occurs repeatedly and involves an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim, where the victim finds it difficult to defend themselves (Morton et al., 2019).

As the mixed results of studies suggest, physical bullying may be more common than interpersonal bullying (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). In contrast to these findings, other studies have shown that verbal and interpersonal bullying are the most frequent types (Cappadocia et al., 2012). Studies on bullying in Jordan have shown that, although it is considered a serious problem worldwide, attention to this phenomenon emerged late in the Arab world, especially in Jordan. It is interesting to note that Jordanian students recorded the highest prevalence of bullying victims at a rate of 44.3% compared to other Arab countries, including Lebanon (33.6%), Morocco (31.9%), Oman (38.5%), United Arab Emirates (20.9%) (Fleming & Jacobsen, 2010).

Addressing this phenomenon requires concerted efforts to prevent bullying and cooperation from various parties, including the government, teachers, health professionals, parents, health workers as counselors, the community environment, and the child himself (Laschinger, 2014; Salimi et al., 2019). Numerous studies have proposed a range of solutions and therapeutic and preventive interventions for bullying, such as supportive and collaborative teacher interventions, programs designed to prevent bullying among students that generally focus on increasing children's emotional and social competence and assertive skills and training teachers to deal with child bullying (Wachs et al., 2019; Lee & Ju, 2019).

Parents can play a significant role in reducing bullying because their parenting style links a child's bullying experiences to school. Parental involvement in school bullying increases intervention effectiveness (Axford et al., 2015). Since most bullying occurs in school, schools should take the lead in combating it. Teachers also play an essential role in guiding classroom groups to reject bullying (Sentse et al., 2015) clearly.

Self-assertiveness is defined as the ability of an individual to express their feelings, thoughts, and opinions towards people and situations around them appropriately, both verbally and behaviorally, safely and directly, and to demand their rights in a positive and socially acceptable manner (Allahyar & Jenaabadi, 2015). Self-assertiveness is the ability of an individual to express beliefs, desires, or feelings directly in all simple and challenging situations and in a way that respects others. This contributes to positive interpersonal interaction and achieves the individual's social development (Khattabi et al., 2020).

According to Al-Mnaizel (2017), self-assertiveness skills include the following:

- Not allowing personal rights to be violated
- Expressing feelings in a transparent manner
- Defending personal rights
- Social responsibility
- Expressing positive emotions
- Refusing and accepting with complete freedom
- Apologizing for mistakes

1.1 Problem of the Study

The problem of the current study emerged from the targeted age group, which is the primary stage. This stage is of great importance due to the experiences, knowledge, and personality formation that it entails for the child, as well as the acquisition of all the skills that work to refine his personality in the future. Given the child's transition from the family environment to the school environment, they will undoubtedly be exposed to tricky situations and various challenges, including bullying. Therefore, it is necessary to implement counseling programs in which we seek to instill and consolidate the concept of self-assertiveness in students at this particular stage. A study by Ben Zeroual (2022)

mentioned a relationship between the feeling of psychological security and the skill of self-assertiveness in students who are victims of bullying, which confirms the importance of having such studies in our Arab society. The researcher aimed to investigate the effectiveness of a self-assertiveness-based counseling program in lowering symptoms of fear of bullying in primary school students due to the little existing research on this topic and its variables. This study aims to answer the following hypothesis: There are no statistically significant differences (at the level of $\alpha \geq 0.05$) between the mean scores of the study participants on the Fear of Bullying Symptoms Scale in the post-test, attributed to the variables of the group (experimental and control), gender (male and female), and the interaction between them.

1.2 Importance of the Study

The significance of the study stems from the pivotal role of the elementary school stage in shaping a child's personality across psychological and social dimensions, as well as the detrimental impact that fear of bullying can have on the child's development. The study examines these effects and the symptoms resulting from them. It treats them through a constructed counseling program to help reduce these symptoms in a sample of elementary school students aged 10–12 years.

Although researchers have focused on bullying and its related psychological and social variables, studies have neglected students who are vulnerable to bullying, which creates fear in them of being harmed by others. The program is based on enhancing children's coping and assertiveness skills and providing them with social and psychological skills to help them protect themselves in case they are exposed to any form of bullying.

1.3 Study Terminology

Counseling Program: A set of organized procedures and steps based on scientific foundations, principles, techniques, and counseling theories. It includes providing counseling services to experimental group members through several counseling sessions over time (Shehata et al., 2021).

Self-Assertiveness: The individual's ability to express beliefs, desires, or feelings directly in all simple and challenging situations in a way that respects others, which contributes to positive personal interaction and achieves the individual's social development (Khattabi et al., 2020).

School Bullying: Any aggressive behavior (physical, verbal, electronic, direct or indirect) that occurs repeatedly and involves an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim, where the victim finds it difficult to defend himself or herself (Morton et al., 2019).

1.4 Limitations and Constraints of the Study

This study has several limitations. Subject-matter limitations include a focus on a specific guidance program designed to enhance self-assertiveness and address symptoms of fear of bullying. Regarding human limitations, the participants are primary school students aged 10 to 12 who exhibit symptoms of fear of bullying. Time limitations are set by the study conducted during the second semester of the 2024 academic year. Spatial limitations confine the study to public schools within Amman's Second Directorate of Education. Additionally, the generalizability of the study's results is constrained by the psychometric properties of the instruments used and the validity of the participants' responses. Consequently, the ability to generalize the findings to similar populations is also limited.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Previous Studies and Explanatory Theories

Yosep et al. (2024) study aims to elucidate assertiveness therapy as a means to mitigate bullying behavior and its effects among adolescents. This study employs a scoping review methodology. The employed search approach is the PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews, utilizing three databases: PubMed, CINAHL, and Scopus. The authors employed inclusion and exclusion criteria for article selection. The keywords used in the article search were bullying, assertiveness therapy, and adolescents. The data analysis employed descriptive qualitative methods. The findings indicated that ten papers addressed assertive therapy. All articles indicate that assertiveness therapy can greatly diminish bullying behavior and its effects, including alleviating anxiety and enhancing self-esteem. Assertiveness therapy techniques are implemented through education, games, and role-playing. Education is conducted both online and offline. Educational media is delivered directly and via platforms such as educational videos, which are accessible anytime. Gender and cultural considerations are crucial elements in the execution of assertive treatment. Assertive treatment can enhance interpersonal skills, social skills, empathy, and assertiveness, mitigating bullying

behavior and its effects on adolescents. This data serves as the foundation for nurses to implement assertive therapy to prevent and mitigate teenage bullying behavior.

Hikmat et al. (2024) study aims to examine the efficacy and implementation strategies of the KiVa anti-bullying program in preventing and mitigating bullying behavior among students. This study employed a scoping review design utilizing the PRISMA Extension for the Scoping Review search method. A scoping review of studies indexed in the CINAHL, PubMed, and Scopus databases was performed. Following the elimination of duplicates and the screening of publications, 11 papers were incorporated into the review. This study employed descriptive qualitative data analysis. The eleven included studies consisted of randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental research, with a sample range of 1,051 to 23,520 respondents, comprising elementary to high school kids aged 6 to 15. The KiVa Anti-bullying intervention effectively diminished bullying behavior among pupils (p-value < 0.05). This intervention requires collaboration among educators, government officials, students, and healthcare professionals to establish a bullying prevention system. The activities included education, assertiveness and empathy training, role-playing, counseling, and games. The intervention is implemented through both online and offline methods. This therapy can be enhanced through targeted interventions for victims, perpetrators, and both parties. Interventions must be implemented and monitored consistently to avert recurring bullying behavior among students. Creating online interventions is essential to avoid student bullying and ensure broad accessibility.

Chicote-Beato et al. (2024) study aims to enhance research and analyze cyberbullying programs deployed in primary schools to evaluate their outcomes and the elements on which these programs concentrate. A comprehensive and methodical search for empirical research was conducted, including 17 programs in the review. Cyberbullying preventive treatments initiated at the initial interaction with technology are successful in mitigating and diminishing cyberbullying-related behaviors. Emotional competence, self-regulation skills, school atmosphere, and online safety are variables present in programs that yield excellent outcomes in preventing cyberbullying. Moreover, the necessity to develop and validate targeted data collection instruments for Primary Education is emphasized, alongside the imperative to enhance intervention implementation and evaluation frequency, promoting collaboration between families and educational institutions.

Marzouq (2023) conducted a study aimed at exploring the relationship between self-assertiveness and violence among children during the primary school stage. The study population consisted of several children from primary schools in the Asmarat area, affiliated with the Khalifa and Muqattam Educational Directorate in Cairo Governorate, with 380 children (boys and girls). The total study sample consisted of 320 children (boys and girls) from primary schools. The research results revealed an average level of self-assertiveness among the sample individuals. Additionally, the results concluded that there was an inverse and statistically significant relationship between self-assertiveness and school violence amongst children in the primary school stage, with the presence of statistically significant differences in self-assertiveness attributable to the gender variable (boys scoring higher than girls) and the age variable (older children scoring higher than younger children). Finally, the results indicated that statistically significant differences existed between the mean scores of children with high and low levels of self-assertiveness regarding school violence in favor of those with low levels of self-assertiveness.

In the study by Tony and Rawi (2022), they explored the impact of an eclectic selective counseling program on improving self-esteem in kindergarten children who were victims of bullying. The research sample included eight children who had been victimized by bullying. The study found statistically significant differences between the average ranks of the study sample in the pre-and post-test self-esteem measurements, favoring the post-test. Additionally, no statistically significant differences were found between the average ranks of the study sample in the post-test and follow-up measurements of self-esteem, indicating the program's sustainable effect.

Ben Zeroual (2022) conducted a study to investigate the level of psychological security and self-assertion skills among a sample of elementary school students who were victims of bullying and whether there was a correlation between the two. The study also aimed to identify the differences between the two groups of students: victims of bullying and regular students.

The study sample consisted of 24 students who were victims of bullying and 31 regular students. The descriptive method was used, and the results of the study showed that there was a correlation between psychological security and self-assertion skills among students who were victims of bullying. The results also showed that there were statistically significant differences in the level of self-assertion skills between students who were victims of bullying and regular students. Additionally, the results showed that there were statistically significant differences in the level of psychological security between students who were victims of bullying and regular students.

Salimi et al. (2019) conducted a study to investigate the effects of a cognitive-social theory-based anti-bullying intervention on bullying and victimization behaviors, as well as social competence, in male students. A randomized controlled trial was conducted in deprived urban areas of Kermanshah, western Iran. A random sample of 280 male students from grades five and six was included in the study. The sample also included some parents, teachers, and school staff. The results showed that the interventions significantly reduced bullying and victimization and increased social competence in the intervention group compared to the control group.

Dervishi et al. (2019) aimed to investigate the relationship between bullying and depressive symptoms in schoolchildren; the study sample consisted of 284 students aged 13-18 years. The results showed that there was a statistically significant relationship between victimization (whether as a bully or a victim) and depressive symptoms.

Mustafa (2018) conducted a study to investigate the prevalence of peer victimization and its relationship with depressive symptoms, academic achievement, and demographic variables (grade level and gender) in a sample of students aged 10-15 years from public and private schools in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. The results showed that the prevalence of victimization among students was 33%. There was a statistically significant positive correlation between peer victimization and depression but no statistically significant correlation between peer victimization and academic achievement. Boys were more likely to bully and be depressed than girls.

AL-Tkhayneh, (2024) used factor analysis to identify the main influences behind school bullying. The findings revealed that personal, social, and environmental factors all play significant roles in bullying incidents. This research provides a framework for understanding how different variables interact to contribute to bullying in educational settings.

Also, Al-Tkhayneh & Nser (2020) explored cyberbullying in the UAE, focusing on gender and social ecology. The results showed that gender differences influence cyberbullying behaviors, with variations in how males and females engage in or experience online harassment. Additionally, social factors, such as family dynamics and peer relationships, were found to impact the prevalence of cyberbullying.

Further research by Rehim et al (2020) investigated cyberbullying among students in Al-Ain, surveying parents to assess contributing factors. The study identified several key influences, including excessive internet use, lack of parental supervision, and exposure to violent online content. These findings emphasize the need for greater awareness and preventive measures to protect young internet users.

Beyond traditional bullying, Al-Tkhayneh et al (2023) also examined emerging threats in digital spaces, such as crime in the Metaverse. Their study discusses potential future crime patterns in virtual environments and the legal challenges they may pose. This research highlights the evolving nature of cyber-related offenses and the necessity for updated regulations to address new forms of digital misconduct.

Overall, these studies provide valuable insights into bullying and cyberbullying, offering evidence-based recommendations for prevention and policy development. The findings underscore the importance of addressing both individual and societal factors to reduce these harmful behaviors.

Many theories explain the concept of self-assertiveness and assertive behavior, which a person practices in their life. Freud's psychoanalytic theory posits that the stronger the ego, the more it can reduce the intensity of personal conflicts and adapt to the surrounding society. The behavior theory, on the other hand, posits that self-assertiveness is a state of refraining from anxiety and psychological disturbance by suppressing emotions and feelings that have been formed through a culture that encourages children to be excessively polite and not to oppose. This means that assertive behavior can be learned and controlled.

Rogers believes that humans have an innate tendency to achieve and assert themselves. Self-assertiveness is the result of events that derive meaning from the experiences that the individual tends to acquire and understand in a way that achieves their self.

In cognitive theory, Ellis emphasized that irrational beliefs contribute significantly to non-assertive behavior, such as weak social relationships, guilt, and lack of self-confidence. On the contrary, people who have positive beliefs about themselves behave positively and have fewer psychological disorders. Social learning theory explains that the presence of non-assertive models in a child's environment helps to acquire non-assertive behavior. Conversely, a child can be taught assertive behavior by providing models of assertive characters, whether real or symbolic (Sucan et al., 2015).

2.2 The Psychology of Fear

Fear permeates the lives of many children. Fear of peer aggression or bullying has become a wide-spreading form of distress and concern among students. Some children feel an internal or external pressure to follow certain actions or behaviors, out of fear of rejection over anticipated peers. Children become scared of physical attacks, potential injury, humiliation, and ostracism as the possibility of someone doing something threatening looms large, while many other consequential feelings and emotions arise. Many children unjustifiably believe that bad things may happen to them despite the absence of a real threat to their safety. Children may feel concerned about voicing their opinions or engaging in an argument for fear of retaliation (Midgett et al., 2016). Bullying fear is a significant concern facing school-aged children and adolescents, and is known as the fear of being bullied by someone.

This fear can threaten many aspects of a child's social outcome and psychological well-being. In particular, it can lead them to believe that they are inferior, either in the social realm or in general. Bullying fear also shapes children's social reactions and behavioral outcomes in either directing it at the instigator or self-isolation. It is a link between the occurrence and outcomes of bullying. There is a strong possibility that children bullied may develop a secondary representation of injury, and they may listen to and believe the bullying itself, leading to a hypersensitivity about their own personal value. Though a specific explanation of its effectiveness needs yet to be addressed, the pilot study results suggest a decrease in children's overall bullying fear through acceptance training.

2.3 Self-Assertiveness in Counseling

In the struggle against school bullying, counseling programs are crucial since children and youths typically reveal their issues with bullying to someone other than adults. Numerous studies have been published to develop and evaluate school counseling programs for primary and secondary students. A variety of well-designed, theoretically sound bullying counseling programs have been developed in the US, including the I Can Problem Solve Program, The Open Circle Curriculum, the Bullying Prevention Program, and Steps to Respect. By consulting with parents and community organizations, some schools have begun to develop their own anti-bullying programs. Turkey has already completed its first large-scale anti-bullying program in 2009. However, these existing research studies, typically comprising one session, do not move beyond the symptoms of bullying. Teachers can implement these programs under the supervision of school counselors or psychologists (Midgett et al., 2016). Counseled students are typically instructed to inform teachers or other school staff of bullying incidents and make students utilize techniques such as humor, ignoring, and walking away instead of assertively defending themselves. These interventions, however, are risky in that they may intensify the bullying.

In the case of group counseling, students, typically both perpetrators and victims, sit in a single room without knowing each other's identities, and without a transparent mechanism to restrain bullying group members. Perpetrators use such settings to harass victims. For the group discussion to be meaningful to victims, they need to be reported without being facially recognized by embarrassingly naming their teachers or schools. In peer-support strategies, such as buddy benches and buddy dynamics, mutual trust is essential, but how can victims isolate the persons they trust? Bullying, by definition, means the unbalanced distribution of power. Bystanders basically avoid direct interference because of the fear of being bullied. However, in recent years, there have been complaints of "no bullying among standing bystanders." Other uncertainties involve the informed friends who do not directly intervene despite overwhelmingly hearing confessions of bullying. All these prospective interventions require additional technically professional operating systems to bolster the ongoing counseling measures.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a quasi-experimental approach, comparing outcomes between an experimental group and a control group. To evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention, pre-test and post-test assessments were conducted. The research focuses on elementary school students (ages 10–12) attending government schools within the Second Amman Education Directorate. From an initial pool of 950 students who completed the Fear of Bullying Symptoms Questionnaire, 60 participants showing significant symptoms of bullying-related fear were selected and randomly assigned to either the control or experimental group.

Two primary tools were used in this study: The Fear of Bullying Symptoms Questionnaire and a specialized guidance program grounded in Self-Assertion Theory. The questionnaire, developed after reviewing existing literature, assesses four key dimensions of bullying-related fear: physical (e.g., fear of being hit), verbal (e.g., fear of threats or insults), social (e.g., fear of exclusion), and psychological (e.g., fear of harassment). To ensure accuracy, the questionnaire was

reviewed by 12 experts, with 80% agreement leading to the final 30-item version. Additionally, a reliability test involving 35 students outside the study sample yielded a high Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.95, confirming the tool's consistency.

3.2 The Counseling Program: Structure and Implementation

The counseling program was designed to help children develop key skills based on self-affirmation theories, with a focus on four core areas: (1) behaving assertively without fear, (2) learning alternative behaviors and decision-making, (3) improving self-expression in challenging situations, and (4) strengthening social skills. The program consisted of ten structured sessions, each lasting 45 minutes, ensuring a balance between engagement and effective learning.

3.2.1 Program Structure and Delivery

The sessions were spread over several weeks to allow students sufficient time to absorb and practice new skills. Frequent scheduling helped maintain continuity and reinforce learning. Each session incorporated interactive activities tailored to build self-assertiveness, including:

- Introduction to Self-Assertiveness – Students explored the concept of personal rights and situations where those rights might be violated.

- Role-Playing Scenarios – Practical exercises allowed participants to practice responding to real-life bullying situations.

- Communication Skills Training – Verbal and nonverbal techniques were taught to help students express themselves clearly and respectfully.

- Coping Strategies for Bullying – Discussions focused on handling bullying effectively without escalating conflict or becoming passive.

- Confidence-Building Activities – Positive reinforcement, group work, and constructive feedback were used to boost self-assurance.

- Reflection and Feedback – Students shared their progress and set personal goals for applying skills outside sessions.

- Peer Interaction Exercises – Group activities encouraged supportive relationships and mutual assertiveness practice.

3.2.2 Monitoring and Evaluation

The program was continuously assessed and adjusted based on student and facilitator feedback, ensuring flexibility and relevance. Post-program evaluations, including self-administered questionnaires, measured its effectiveness in reducing fear of bullying and enhancing assertiveness.

3.2.3 Validation and Analysis

Before implementation, five experts reviewed the program to confirm its validity, leading to refinements. Key variables included the guidance program (independent variable), bullying fear levels (dependent variable), and gender (mediating variable). Statistical analysis—using means, standard deviations, ANCOVA, and correlation coefficients—verified the reliability of the assessment tools and program outcomes.

This structured yet adaptive approach ensured the program effectively addressed bullying-related fears while fostering long-term confidence and social skills in participants.

4. Results

Hypothesis**:** There are no statistically significant differences at the level ($\alpha \geq 0.05$) between the mean scores of the study individuals on the bullying fear symptoms scale in the post-test attributed to the group variables (experimental and control) and gender (males and females) and the interaction between them.

To verify the hypothesis, the arithmetic means and standard deviations were calculated for the scores of the sample individuals on the bullying fear scale in the post-test according to the gender and group variables. The results are shown in Table (1).

Table 1. Arithmetic Means and Standard Deviations of Sample Individuals' Scores on the Pre-test Bullying Fear Scale According to Gender and Group Variables

Measurement Variables		Pre-test		Post-test	
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Group	Experimental	201.66	25.97	153.93	27.96
	Control	203.07	24.41	200.63	22.17
Gender	Males	205.77	24.35	186.87	36.16
	Females	198.97	17.47	167.70	30.07

It is evident from Table 1 that there is a difference between the average scores of the experimental and control groups in reducing symptoms of fear of bullying. The average score of the control group for the total sample (males and females) was 200.63, while the average score of the experimental group was 153.93, which might indicate a decrease in fear of bullying within the experimental group. Additionally, the Table showcases a difference between the average scores of males and females on the fear of bullying scale in the post-test measurement. The average score for males was 186.87, and the average for females was 167.70.

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to determine the significance of these differences between the average scores of the experimental and control groups, as well as between the average scores of males and females, and to understand the interaction effect between group and gender on the fear of bullying scale in the post-test measurement. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Analysis of (ANCOVA) Covariance to Determine the Significance of Differences between Means of Bullying Fear Scale Scores in Post-Test According to Group, Gender, and Their Interaction

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean Squares	F Value	Significance Level
Pre	6383.182	1	6383.182	14.7880	0.000
Gender	355.860	1	355.860	0.8240	0.368
Group	31706.340	1	31706.340	73.456	0.000
Gender-by-Group Interaction	706.009	1	706.009	1.636	0.206
Error	23739.88	55	431.634		
Total	69644.183	59			

Table (2) shows that there were statistically significant differences at the significance level ($\alpha \geq 0.05$) between the means of the experimental and control groups, where the value of "F" was 73.456 for bullying as a predictor at the level of 0.000. By referring to the Table of means, we notice that the mean score of the experimental group in the fear of bullying was lower than that of the control group, indicating the program's effect in reducing the fear of bullying in the experimental group.

As for the significance of the differences between males and females on the fear of bullying scale, it is clear from Table (2) that there were no statistically significant differences at the significance level ($\alpha \geq 0.05$) attributed to gender differences. The difference between the mean scores of males and females was apparent but not statistically significant, which may indicate that the effect of the counseling program on reducing the fear of bullying was similar for males and females. The Table also shows no significant effect of the interaction between gender and group at the significance level ($\alpha \geq 0.05$), which explains that each factor had an independent effect on reducing the fear of bullying.

The study results showed differences between the means of the experimental and control groups regarding the program's effect in reducing the fear of bullying in favor of the experimental group. It also showed that there was no significant effect of interaction between genders. This can be explained by the fact that the effect of the guidance program on reducing the fear of bullying was similar for males and females. This result is consistent with the study by Tony and Rawi (2022), which showed that there were statistically significant differences between the median ranks of the primary study sample in the pre-and post-tests of the self-esteem level in favor of the post-test, in addition to the absence of statistically significant differences between the median ranks of the primary study sample in the post- and follow-up tests of self-esteem, which indicates the continuity of the program's effect.

The study by Salimi et al. (2019) showed that the interventions significantly reduced bullying and harm and increased social competence in the intervention group compared to the control group. Accordingly, the guidance program and its strategies played a significant role in asserting oneself against bullying in children. At the same time, it differed from the study by Mustafa (2018) that the prevalence of bullying among students was (33%), and that there is a statistically significant positive correlation between peer bullying and depression, while there is no statistically significant correlation between peer bullying and academic achievement. Males were more bullies and more prone to depression than females.

5. Discussion

The self-assertiveness-based counseling program that was carried out to improve bullying fear among elementary school students was not proven to have any interaction effects between the genders of participants and the group or between genders only. This finding implies that the approach used in this study was equally beneficial to all genders.

They highly appreciated the program components, such as self-assertiveness training, role play, communication improvement, and dealing with bullying, which may be universally effective for females and males. This is in concord with the study conducted by Yosep et al. (2024), which postulated that assertiveness therapy significantly decreased bullying and enhanced self-esteem in the various populations of adolescents with slight gender differences. This research supports this claim by arguing that some therapeutic approaches positively affect both genders.

Bearing in mind the depiction of the above research findings from Marzouq (2023), the local culture might also impact the perception and practices of gender roles in education. There are some traditions where the ways boys and girls respond to bullies and assertive training could be similar because they concern gender roles in culture, and that could be the reason why no difference in the research was found between boys and girls.

As will also be mentioned in the methodology section of this paper, the program's structure was consecutive and similar for all participants, and no alterations were made according to gender. This consistent approach may have had similar effects in male and female participants. Similar results were obtained by Hikmat et al. (2024) with the KiVa program that did not report differences depending on gender, therefore underlining that some anti-bullying interventions could be effective for boys and girls without specific adaptations.

The results from this study are consistent with the study conducted by Tony and Rawi (2022), in which the interventions enhanced the self-esteem of students with bullying experiences, and no gender disparity was observed. However, it differs from Marzouq (2023) in that gender differences were noted in self-assertiveness and experiences of violence, and thus, such outcomes may depend on various attributes focused on different interventions.

As the results of this study did not show a significant difference between males and females regarding the effectiveness of the self-assertiveness-based counseling program, this means that this program may be helpful for all students without exception. Further studies should involve more participants, encompass various subjects, and/or use more sophisticated assessment instruments to examine possibly subtle differences in how different genders may benefit from interventions that reduce bully-victim fear. Furthermore, investigating cultural characteristics and specifics of different components of interventions might offer a more profound understanding of how to adapt anti-bullying intervention programs for different groups of students.

6. Recommendations

Based on the present study, the following recommendations should be considered by educators when implementing the self-assertiveness-based counseling program in different education settings:

- Customization to Fit Educational Settings

The self-assertiveness program should be modified depending on the situation in the educators' particular educational setting. This includes using relevant and appropriate cultural material in the content to teach the students. For example, the situations in role-plays used for training should be based on the possible circumstances that a learner might encounter in the given school or community.

- Integration into existing curriculum

To support the self-assertiveness program, it needs to be incorporated into the school's curriculum and showcase its best features. This could be done in health and social lessons or in a separate section of a character development curriculum. The fact that the sessions are integrated into the school timetable guarantees that every student is exposed to the training.

- Professional development for educators

Incorporate category-selective education for educators on SIT principles and techniques. This should include approaches that can be adopted in implementing the program, the behavior change model, handling complex issues that may emerge in the course of the sessions, and class manners. Continuing professional education will assist the educators in feeling prepared, competent, and confident about delivering the program.

- Engage parents and the community

Engage the parents and other people in society to expand this program beyond class. Such activities could include informative presentations to parents on the concept of self-assertiveness and ways of promoting the skills at home. It may also mean using other people from the community as an example of assertiveness or starting invited speakers in the classroom.

- Addressing diverse needs

Understand and deal with students from different cultures or with disabilities of any form. This may mean varying the course contents for students with learning disabilities or for those who require extra home support.

7. Limitations

Measurement Tools and Sensitivity:

The instruments used to assess the level of bullying fear may not have been very sensitive in capturing variations in response to the intervention between the male and female participants. This could lead to an underestimation of gender-specific effects, a limitation also highlighted in the larger literature on bullying intervention.

Sample Size and Statistical Power:

Because the study's sample size was relatively small and given the statistical analysis used, the study may not have been able to note slight but real differences between genders or interactions between genders with other variables. This is a familiar problem in educational research, where a variety of populations or activities may obscure noticeable variations.

Social Desirability and Response Biases:

Some response distortions, such as social desirability, could have influenced how students described their experience of bullying fear. Men and women may either underneed to overestimate effects to meet certain expectations regarding how they should feel, which may obscure actual effects.

8. Conclusion

The self-assertiveness-based counseling program discussed in this study is an essential step toward eradicating bullying fear among elementary students. Based on our results, we can conclude that although the program may have some potential to increase students' self-assertiveness, there are no significant differences in the results depending on gender or interaction effects. This, in a way, insinuates that the program's effectiveness is consistent across all ages, hence a good groundwork for its application in every educational sector.

The absence of gender differences may be attributed to the relevance of the self-assertiveness skills taught to children of all genders. Such universality is helpful because there is no need to make changes regarding gender that would complicate the process of preparing the program and its subsequent use. However, the lack of interaction brings a closer look at the program components and how they are being implemented to see whether they are positively impacting all participants.

This research work enriches the literature by emphasizing the need for assertiveness training in the acquisition of the social and emotional competencies of children. This points to the need for such programs in the social development of children, focusing on peer relations and bullying, which constitutes a considerable part of the school experience. Further, the study points towards the importance of the systematic review and revision of the educational interventions to fit the current needs of the learners and to enhance the effectiveness of the interventions in the different groups of populations.

Concerning this, it is crucial to suggest expanding self-assertiveness programs as components of the educational curriculum because the development of these skills should be initiated at an early stage. Thirdly, through parents and the community's involvement in these initiatives, schools can help make the practice of these skills by the children outside class possible through support.

Therefore, although the program has demonstrated possible improvement, its effectiveness will depend upon constant practice, frequent monitoring, and further development. This research provides a foundation for more studies that would disentangle the effectiveness of educational interventions like the self-assertiveness program and is the gateway to discovering approaches that meet the needs of all students.

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