The Effectiveness of Social Skills Training in Improving Students' Interpersonal Communication

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Abstract. The prevalent issue of low social skills and interpersonal communication among adolescents increases vulnerability to violence, such as bullying, both within the school environment and in social circles. Therefore, this research aimed to measure the effectiveness of social skills training (SST) in improving students' interpersonal communication skills. A quantitative experimental method was adopted, using the Quasi-Experimental Design in the form of a Nonequivalent Control Group Design. Students from grade VIII Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) Negeri 3 Bantul were selected as respondents through purposive sampling and were analyzed using paired sample t-tests. The pre-test and post-test results showed significant improvements in students' interpersonal communication skills in the experimental group, whereas no such improvements were observed in the control group. In conclusion, SST effectively improved interpersonal communication skills of students at MTs Negeri 3 Bantul.

Keywords: Effectiveness, interpersonal communication, social skills training

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Introduction

Humans are social creatures who need social skills to interact effectively with others and improve positive social relationships (Kilic & Aytar, 2017). Poor social skills can hinder the formation of positive relationships, while good skills are crucial in influencing human social life (Tanaka *et al*., 2021). Good social skills help individuals communicate appropriately and effectively (Corey, 2016: 360), create healthy relationships, expand social networks, manage conflict, increase self-confidence, and improve interpersonal communication.

Interpersonal communication covers the exchange of information in ways that influence one another, whether through direct contact in social group collaboration (Eganov *et al*., 2020), or through verbal and non-verbal communication between individuals. This interaction is characterized by openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality (Devito, 2016: 26). Good interpersonal communication skills are crucial for maintaining healthy relationships and resolving conflicts (Akbar *et al*., 2020). Furthermore, they symbolize the maintenance of close relationships, ensuring smooth interactions (Onyeator & Okpara, 2019). The primary objectives of interpersonal communication are to reach an understanding, share information, establish relationships, or achieve certain goals based on mutual desires.

The communication between parents and peers significantly influences adolescents' interpersonal communication skills because they are susceptible to cognitive changes and are often challenged by diverse ideas that prompt the reviewing of parents' values . This process leads to questioning and opposing parental views, as adolescents develop their ideas (Desmita, 2017: 221). As a result, adolescents often face challenges in developing their identity and social skills, including showing deviant behavior, having low communication skills and self-directed behavior, and having a low sense of responsibility (Aliim & Ayriza, 2019). These issues often result from a lack of understanding and discipline in developing a sense of responsibility, unaware of the consequences of their actions. Ideal interpersonal communication during adolescence can improve social skills, reasoning, effective communication, empathy, collaboration, adaptation, respect for diversity, conflict management, problem-solving, and the mature expression of feelings. Therefore, effective interpersonal communication can provide emotional support,

increase self-motivation, and foster a sense of responsibility through family support and the social environment.

Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs), equivalent to Junior High School, is a classification of schools catering to adolescents students who require interpersonal communication skills to increase motivation and the quality of good relationships with others (Khairani *et al.*, 2019). The low interpersonal communication skills of students at MTs Negeri 3 Bantul were evident from the research interview with the Guidance and Counseling teacher. Based on the interview results, the teacher showed several reasons students are vulnerable to bullying from their peers. Internally, students tend to be quiet, lack the courage to fight, struggle to adapt and communicate due to their background in Islamic boarding school, are unable to accept suggestions and opinions from others, including guidance from teachers, and often choose isolation. Externally, these set of students fear seniors due to prevailing seniority at school.

The interviews with students regarding interpersonal communication problems showed several issues. Some students feel less confident appearing in public, such as in class, due to embarrassment when speaking and expressing opinions. Others lack confidence when communicating and interacting with new or unfamiliar individuals because they are shy and afraid of not being responded to. Additionally, some students are embarrassed to communicate with friends of the opposite sex, fearing ridicule or making mistakes. The interview results also showed that others feel inferior, perceiving their abilities as the worst and imperfect. Finally, there are students who prioritize others' feelings over their own and struggle with assertiveness.

The analysis conducted by Aliim & Ayriza (2019) found that some students limited their socialization, communicating only with their mates. The results showed that these set of students tend to be shy and unable to communicate with other peers. Some make friends and participate in all school activities with just one classmate, while some still feel embarrassed and even remain silent when asked to express their feelings. Additionally, there are students who feel reluctant to start conversations with peers outside of class, hesitate to argue to reach appropriate agreements, and lack the confidence to build communication with their peers.

The results of interviews with Riowati and Muis (2016) showed that students often do not recognize or respect the rights of others, struggle to socialize, and are less engaged in social activities. They show a lack of attention and concern for individual's welfare, have little interest in helping others, and fail to uphold high values, such as obeying school rules and behaving appropriately. Further interviews with students indicated the presence of dominant groups or gangs in classes, leading to hatred, verbal bullying, and hostility when disputes arise. The observation results also indicated individualistic, selfish, indifferent, and apathetic behavior among students, with some not interacting well with classmates, engaging in verbal intimidation, disturbing friends, making noise, disrespecting teachers, ignoring assignments, and failing to respect canteen staff and school cleaners.

Based on the data regarding social skills, particularly interpersonal communication skills, intervention is necessary. Social skills training (SST) conducted through group counseling services is essential to address these weaknesses and improve students' interpersonal communication skills. Therefore, SST in this research is crucial for helping students develop the ability to socialize effectively.

SST is a learning process designed to help individuals who have difficulty socializing, are withdrawn, or struggle to communicate and interact with others. It is based on cognitive-behavioral therapy, a structured, active, directive, and short-term method aimed at overcoming personality barriers. SST indicates changes in cognitive aspects followed by behavioral changes. Behavioral changes occur quickly when consequences follow the mastery of cognitive aspects (Purwanta, 2015: 185). Through SST, individuals are taught to communicate and listen actively, read facial expressions and body language, manage conflict, resolve problems, build self-confidence, and develop new skills in a structured manner that enhances their social abilities.

Interpersonal communication among students can also be improved through other methods, as evidenced by various investigations. For instance, Kamaruzzaman (2016) showed that group guidance services using psychodrama methods successfully improved students' interpersonal communication skills. These improvements were characterized by good communication abilities such as speaking, asking questions, being open, showing mutual respect, empathy, and being a good listener. Adhityaputra and Saripah (2015) found that while interpersonal communication skills of RPSAA high school students were high, three aspects, including openness, supportiveness, and equality, were rated medium. Additionally, the research indicated that game methods could improve students' interpersonal communication skills. The results suggested effective interventions for improving interpersonal communication among students. SST through group counseling services not only enhances communication but also helps individuals with internalization problems related to social skills to interact effectively, teach new skills, and correct wrong behavior and thinking patterns. This causes SST to be considered highly appropriate for the

subject of this research, but cannot only be fully effective due to psychological barriers and unhealthy thought patterns in individual behavior. Therefore, SST is supplemented with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to strengthen its impact.

The term CBT is a therapeutic method that focuses on the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behavior, helping individuals identify negative thoughts and beliefs that may hinder their ability to interact effectively with others. Particularly effective in groups with short-term and specific goals (Corey, 2016: 351), it is highly efficient in problem-solving and skills development. CBT uses strategies to break negative circuits and replace individuals' feelings, thoughts, and behaviors with adaptive mechanisms (Beaulieu & Sulkowski, 2015: 28), fostering the development of a more logical and adaptive thinking style (Wright *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, it helps individuals cultivate more adaptive thought patterns and reduces psychological barriers to social interaction.

CBT and SST complement each other in improving interpersonal communication skills, making both programs integral to this research. Several investigations indicate the support of CBT for SST as it offers solutions to overcome psychological obstacles and alter unhealthy thought patterns. When combined with SST, CBT provides individuals with practical skills used in social situations, including assertive communication training, interpersonal skills, social relations, independent and social living skills, and social problem-solving (Nurjanah *et al.*, 2022). SST has been used for over 40 years to assist individuals struggling with social skills (Saga *et al.,* 2022). It is particularly suitable for adolescents who are learning to navigate the social environment given their challenges in communicating needs, interpreting social signals, resolving existing conflicts, and dealing with negative experiences such as peer rejection, anxiety, and depression. Therefore, integrating SST into the school environment is considered appropriate to improve students' interpersonal communication skills.

This research combines SST with group counseling, prioritizing interpersonal communication and engaging conscious thoughts, feelings, and behavior in a here-and-now perspective (Gunawan, 2017: 91), a departure from previous reviews. Conducted with adolescents students, the investigation addresses a period of vulnerability marked by transitions and changes in various aspects of life. Therefore, adolescents with social skills deficiencies require intervention, making SST particularly suitable for improving interpersonal communication. This is supported by previous reviews indicating the effectiveness of SST in improving and addressing low social skills in children and adolescents. Gokel and Dagli (2017) found that the program positively

impacted adolescents conscripted into the military. Similarly, Riowati and Muis (2016) reported that SST through peer counseling improved social adjustment in grade VIII students. The investigation of Pekdogan (2016) found that a story-based SST program effectively addressed low social skills development in children aged 5-6 years. These results showed the positive impact of the program across various settings and age groups.

The research examines the effectiveness of SST in improving students' interpersonal communication in the MTs environment through group counseling, using different times, places, and subjects. Therefore, the investigation aims to determine the effectiveness of the program in improving interpersonal communication for students at MTs Negeri 3 Bantul.

MTs, similar to equivalent state schools in terms of teaching general knowledge, are distinguished by their focus on religious education and the embodiment of Islamic values in daily life (Umami *et al.*, 2022). This provides MTs students characteristics distinct from their counterparts in state schools, possessing a deeper understanding of and engagement with the Islamic religion. Additionally, many students at MTs, particularly those at MTs Negeri 3 Bantul, reside in Islamic boarding schools where their social interactions are limited and segregated by gender. Therefore, SST through group counseling services becomes necessary to help students adapt to school life and communicate effectively with peers, including those of the opposite sex. After attending SST program, students are expected to show improved communication and socialization within the Islamic boarding school and wider community settings.

Several analysts compared SST provided to the experimental group with group counseling services using discussion methods commonly adopted by Guidance and Counseling teachers at MTs Negeri 3 Bantul in the control group. The pre-test and post-test results for each group were examined, alongside observations of changes in students' interpersonal communication skills after treatment. The comparison helped to establish the superior effectiveness of SST in improving students' interpersonal communication. Therefore, this research aimed to determine the effectiveness of SST program in enhancing interpersonal communication of MTs Negeri 3 Bantul students.

Methods

This research adopted a quantitative experimental method using the Quasi-Experimental Design, specifically the Nonequivalent Control Group Design. The design was selected to enable the comparison of results between a control group and an experimental

group that received SST through group counseling services, enhancing the accuracy of the results.

A total of 140 grade VIII students at MTs Negeri 3 Bantul, were selected as the sample using a purposive sampling method, based on specific considerations or characteristics (Sugiyono, 2019: 153). The method was adopted because the research was not general but focused on SST to improve students' interpersonal communication. Therefore, the sample consisted of students with low levels of interpersonal communication, as identified using a valid and reliable interpersonal communication scale instrument (table 4). The sample was limited to 12 students who met the predetermined criteria because the treatment was carried out in a group counseling service setting. The ideal size for group counseling services was 6 individuals, as evidenced by Rasimin & Hamdi (2018: 126). The sample was divided into two groups, including 6 students in the experimental group, who received the treatment, and 6 students in the control group, who failed to receive the treatment, as detailed in table 1.

Data were collected using a Likert scale to measure the attitudes, opinions, and perceptions regarding the social phenomenon of interpersonal communication. The instrument for data collection was designed based on the characteristics of effective interpersonal communication as outlined by Devito (2011: 285), which included openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality.

The interpersonal communication scale used in this research was developed in 2022 to measure students' interpersonal communication skills. The scale was validated by experts in Personal-Social Guidance and Counseling and subsequently tested on grade VIII students at MTs Negeri 3 Bantul. The interpersonal communication scale met the validity requirements using the Pearson Product Moment correlation formula, with a calculated r-value of <.349 (r Product Moment table, N = 32, 5% significance level). The reliability of the instrument was tested using the Cronbach Alpha formula, resulting in a reliability coefficient value of .891, thereby indicating its reliability. The interpersonal communication scale consisted of 33 items that were both valid and reliable. The items included favorable and unfavorable statements, each accompanied by 4 answer choices that were scored and then categorized. The scoring rules and diagnostic categories were detailed in tables 2 and 3.

The process and activities were conducted based on the "Social Skills Training Guide through Group Counseling in Improving Interpersonal Communication for MTs Negeri 3 Bantul Students," prepared by analysts and validated by an expert in the field of personal-social guidance and counseling skills.

The guide included the rationale, objectives, counseling methods, steps for using SST through group counseling services, evaluation and follow-up procedures, references, and attachments. The research began with a pre-test using an interpersonal communication scale to assess the level of interpersonal communication skills of grade VIII students. Subsequently, SST through group counseling was conducted over seven meetings for more than one month.

Details of the treatment provided to the experimental group included the following. *First meeting*: The initial stage of the counseling session comprised the counselor establishing relationships with group members by greeting, introducing, and explaining group counseling and interpersonal communication. The counselor discussed contracts or rules for counseling and facilitated each member in briefly expressing their complaints or problems.

Table 1

Sample Experimental Group and Control Group

No.	Name	Class	Gender
Experimental Group			
1	EEW	8D	Woman
2	ANR	8D	Man
3	FH	8D	Man
4	SDN	8C	Man
5	MF	8E	Man
6	EDAS	8B	Woman
Control Group			
1	ZAM	8E	Man
2	VRP	8C	Man
3	MKNE	8D	Man
4	SN	8D	Woman
5	RPNK	8D	Woman
6	EDAW	8B	Woman

Table 2

Assessment of Interpersonal Communication Scale (Favorable and Unfavorable)

Score	Answer Options
Favorable (F)	
4	Highly Compliant (SS)
3	Compliant (S)
2	Non-Compliant (TS)
1	Highly Non-Conforming (STS)
Unfavorable (UF)	
1	Highly Compliant (SS)
2	Compliant (S)
3	Non-Compliant (TS)
4	Highly Non-Conforming (STS)

Table 3

Diagnostic Categorization

Score	Category
$X < (Mi - 1.0\ SDi)$	Low
$(Mi - 1.0\ SDi) \leq X < (Mi + 1.0\ SDi)$	Medium
$(Mi + 1.0\ SDi) \leq X$	High

Second meeting: During the work phase of the counseling session, the focus was on exploring the counselee's problems and using SST. The first stage of training covered identifying the students' specific interpersonal communication deficiencies. Group members were directed to understand and document their perceptions of these deficiencies and behavioral targets for change.

Third meeting: The second stage of SST covered role-playing and role modeling related to interpersonal communication, where students were asked to act out a prepared role-play scenario.

Fourth meeting: The third stage of SST continued, with students studying and practicing the social interaction script prepared by the analyst.

Fifth meeting: The fourth stage of SST covered the provision of corrective feedback and constructive criticism regarding the training process and the implied behavioral targets that were still not appropriate.

Sixth meeting: The fifth stage of SST included the provision of positive reinforcement to the counselee by giving praise (applause) and a gift (pen) to those who expressed their opinions confidently.

Seventh meeting: In the terminating stage, the analysts explained that the group counseling activities would soon end and provided a brief review of group dynamics during the sessions. Each group member was allowed to reflect on feelings, share experiences, and explain plans for integrating the lessons learned, and the counselor offered follow-up opportunities.

SST through group counseling was evaluated by administering a pre-test and post-test to students using the interpersonal communication scale instrument. Students also filled out a satisfaction questionnaire regarding the group counseling services. As a follow-up, the analysts planned further investigations and individual counseling for those in need.

Changes in students' interpersonal communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal, were observed at each treatment meeting. The changes were compared to the interpersonal communication skills before and after treatment. The control group received seven meetings led by the guidance and counseling teacher, following the typical method adopted in schools for addressing students issues, specifically through discussion groups. The research concluded with a post-test for both the experimental and control groups to measure the improvement in interpersonal communication skills after treatment.

The data was processed using statistical methods and analyzed with parametric tests because it was normally distributed and homogeneous. The paired sample t-test method was adopted to determine the difference in the average scores between two paired samples, identifying changes in interpersonal communication skills before and after treatment in both the experimental and control groups. This test was used because it assessed the average difference between two paired samples measured at different times, before and after the treatment.

Results and Discussion
Results

The pre-test administration of the interpersonal communication scale was determined based on the interval categorization of scores specified in Table 4. The use of the interpersonal communication scale covered a pre-test on grade VIII students at MTs Negeri 3 Bantul, except for grade VIII A, which served as the test material for the instrument. The results, as presented in figure 1, showed that students with the lowest and medium levels of interpersonal communication skills were in class D (7% low and 21% medium), while those with the highest level were in class E (84%).

Based on the pre-test results shown in figure 1, the research sample comprised students with the lowest interpersonal communication skills, though only 4 were from grade VIII. To meet the sample requirements, 8 students from the medium category were selected from the existing sample of 12. The sample was divided into two groups, each consisting of a mix of students from classes B, C, D, and E. The experimental group, comprising 6 students, had a pre-test score of 469 with an average of 78.17, falling within the medium category. Meanwhile, the control group, containing 6 students, had a pre-test score of 496 with an average of 82.67, categorized as medium (tables 5 and 6).

The pre-test results obtained by both groups would determine the central tendencies of students' interpersonal communication scale scores in each group, as presented in table 7.

Based on the results of the pre-test scores and central tendencies, it could be observed that students' interpersonal communication in both groups was in the medium category before treatment. Following the post-test, students completed the interpersonal communication scale to assess their skills after receiving treatment. The experimental group scored 619, with an average of 103.167, falling within the high category. Meanwhile, the control group scored 554, with an average of 92.333, falling within the medium category (tables 8 and 9).

The central tendency results of the post-test group counseling services in the experimental and control groups were provided in table 10. Following treatment, the experimental group's interpersonal communication ability was categorized as high, while the control group remained in the medium category after receiving counseling services.

Table 4

Categorization of Interpersonal Communication Skills

Interval	Category
33 - 65	Low
66 - 98	Medium
99 - 132	High

Table 5

Experimental Group Pre-test Scores

No.	Name	Pre-test Score	Category
1	EEW	62	Low
2	ANR	63	Low
3	FH	76	Medium
4	SDN	77	Medium
5	MF	95	Medium
6	EDAS	96	Medium
	Total Score	469	
	Average	78.17	Medium

Table 6

Control Group Pre-test Scores

No.	Name	Pre-test Score	Category
1	ZAM	63	Low
2	VRP	64	Low
3	MKNE	83	Medium
4	SN	93	Medium
5	RPNK	96	Medium
6	EDAW	97	Medium
	Total Score	496	
	Average	82.67	Medium

Table 7

Central Pre-test Tendency

	Group	
	Experiment	*Control*
Mean	78.17	82.67
Standard Deviation	14.825	15.655
Minimum	62	63
Maximum	96	97

Table 8

Experimental Group Post-test Scores

No.	Name	Post-test Score	Category
1	EEW	101	*High*
2	ANR	90	*Medium*
3	FH	108	*High*
4	SDN	109	*High*
5	MF	98	*Medium*
6	EDAS	113	*High*
	Total Score	619	
	Average	103.167	*High*

Table 9

Control Group Post-test Score.

No.	Name	Post-test Score	Category
1	ZAM	86	*Medium*
2	VRP	77	*Medium*
3	MKNE	94	*Medium*
4	SN	99	*High*
5	RPNK	88	*Medium*
6	EDAW	110	*High*
	Total Score	554	
	Average	92.333	*Medium*

Table 10

Post-test Central Tendency.

	Group	
	Experiment	*Control*
Mean	103.17	92.33
Standard Deviation	8.472	11.431
Minimum	90	77
Maximum	113	110

Table 11

Paired Sample T-test Results

Group	Sig. (2-tailed)	Information
Pre-test – post-test Experiment	.005	There are differences
Pre-test – post-test Control	.069	There is no difference

Hypothesis testing used statistical tests to determine differences in students' interpersonal communication skills before and after treatment using a paired t-test parametric method. The test results for the experimental group showed a significance value of .005 (p<.05), indicating a significant difference in interpersonal skills after SST treatment with group counseling. Meanwhile, for the control group, the significance value was .069 > .05 (p > .05), suggesting no significant difference after receiving group counseling with guidance and counseling teachers, as detailed in table 11.

Based on the test results, the hypothesis indicating that SST effectively improved the interpersonal communication skills of students at MTs Negeri 3 Bantul, was accepted.

Discussion

The research aimed to assess the effectiveness of using SST to improve students' interpersonal communication at MTs Negeri 3 Bantul through group counseling services. Initially, a pre-test was conducted using the interpersonal communication scale for MTs students, excluding the instrument trial class. A total of 12 students with the lowest pre-test scores were selected as subjects. The subjects were grouped into two, including the experimental group (6 subjects) received SST treatment through group counseling services by the analysts, while the control group (6 subjects) received group counseling services led by Guidance and Counseling teachers. Before being administered treatment through group counseling services, the average interpersonal skills were in the medium category. Subsequently, both the counselor and the Guidance and Counseling teacher conducted seven group counseling sessions. After treatment, both the experimental and control groups were subjected to a post-test to determine the level of students' interpersonal communication skills. Based on the post-test results, the experimental group's interpersonal
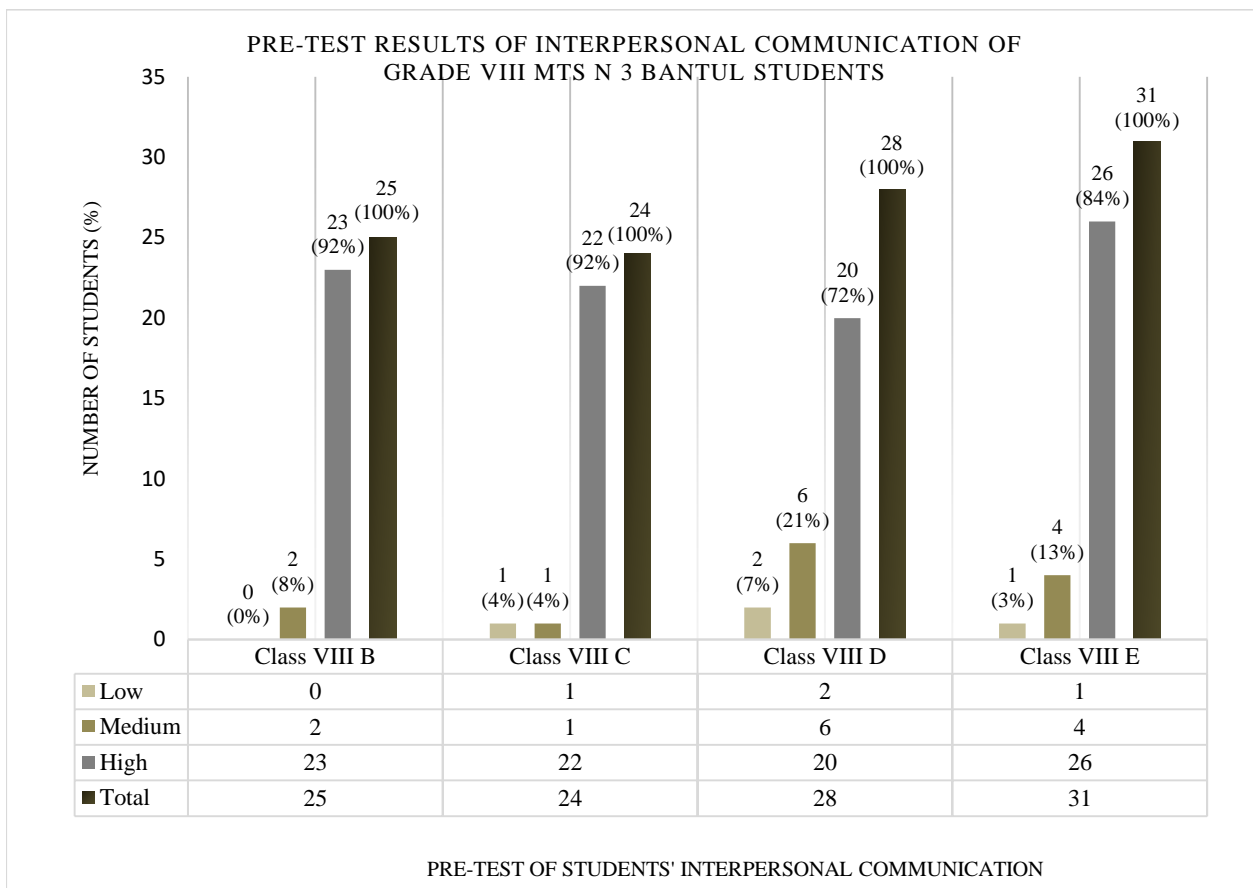
Figure 1. Results of Student Interpersonal Communication Through Pre-test

communication skills improved to the high category, while the control group remained in the medium category.

The analysis using the paired sample t-test showed significant differences in the level of interpersonal communication skills of the experimental group after SST treatment through group counseling services. Conversely, no substantial differences were observed in the control group after receiving counseling from Guidance and Counseling teachers. It was evident that SST through group counseling services improved students' interpersonal communication skills. The research hypothesis was accepted, indicating that SST through group counseling services effectively optimized the interpersonal communication skills of MTs Negeri 3 Bantul students.

Communication skills were considered necessary for effective communication, as they facilitated the establishment of affectionate and harmonious relationships (Sahputra, 2018). These skills also played an important role in social life (Endah *et al.*, 2021), serving as a channel for information exchange among individuals within a group, and transmitted through various media and technologies (Sulistiasih & Widodo, 2022). Students endowed with high social skills and proficient interpersonal communication could effortlessly engage in verbal and non-verbal communication, share thoughts, feelings, ideas, imaginations, and convey messages clearly and comprehensively (Utomo & Harmiyanto, 2016).

Biological and psychological barriers such as stuttering, hearing impairments, lack of concentration, or nervousness often hindered effective personal communication. Additionally, gender-related obstacles, particularly reluctance among women to open up to male counterparts, and misunderstandings arising from differing socio-cultural backgrounds between communicators and communicants, could further hinder communication. The barriers contributed to prejudices, conflicts, one-way communication, reliance solely on verbal explanations, and inappropriate use of media (Ngalimun, 2017: 72). Therefore, social skills were considered an important factor in developing good relationships, adherence to social norms and principles, instilling a sense of responsibility, fostering altruism, and enhancing information processing abilities (Gokel & Dagli, 2017).

SST through group counseling served as an effective strategy for Guidance and Counseling teachers or counselors to improve students'

interpersonal communication skills and foster good relationships with peers. Deficiencies in social skills could negatively affect adolescents' social, emotional, and academic performance (Tedjawidjaja & Kuntoro, 2020). Tedjawidjaja and Kuntoro (2020) conducted research indicating the effectiveness of SST in improving students' social relationship skills through activities such as giving and receiving praise, engaging in conversation, and showing empathy, thereby facilitating the formation of close relationships with peers in the school environment. SST, supplemented by CBT, served as an intervention to build social skills effectively.

CBT was an approach to SST that showed the influence of thought on emotions and behavior (Beck, 2021: 14). It used various short interventions designed to solve problems efficiently and effectively, helping individuals develop new skills (Corey, 2016: 351). SST was particularly beneficial for individuals with interpersonal communication problems and social skills deficits, as it provided specific guidance about the social world (Moody & Laugeson, 2020).

SST steps used in this research were based on the theory of Beaulieu and Sulkowski (2015: 78). The steps included identifying students' specific skills deficiencies, role-playing and modeling, learning and practicing various social interaction scripts, and providing feedback and positive reinforcement. This program enabled students to interact more effectively with others and acquire additional social skills (Yuasa, 2020). SST fostered openness, self-awareness, and comfort in social interactions (Witarso & Utoyo, 2018).

SST provided specific abilities that help individuals reintegrate into their environments by providing positive social experiences (Hotton & Coles, 2016). The program specifically aided adolescents in improving functional communication skills, conflict resolution, and problem-solving (Beaulieu & Sulkowski, 2015: 78), addressing behaviors that hindered their development (Beelmann & Losel, 2021). SST also trained adolescents to act according to social norms, improving their ability to interact in various situations. Therefore, counselors conducted the program to help adolescents improve their behavior, interactions, and social functioning. Integrating SST from early adolescence could enhance social skills and prevent juvenile delinquency (van der Stouwe, *et al.*, 2021). The use of the program in age-appropriate counseling settings, such as peer guidance and children's stories, within group counseling settings was ideal. SST provided a forum for expressing conflicting feelings, exploring self-confidence, and understanding how to convey concerns to peers (Corey, 2016: 7).

Group counseling prioritized interpersonal communication by consciously including thoughts, feelings, and behavior in the present perspective (Gunawan, 2017: 91). It was particularly effective when the counselor worked with members facing similar issues. Group members learned to accept their own and others' attitudes, fostering self-confidence (Rasimin & Hamdi, 2018: 10). Based on this, the research adopted group counseling for adolescents in a school setting, recognizing that adolescence was a crucial period for developing social skills. Adolescents, typically aged 13 to 18 years, needed to establish positive peer relationships that significantly impacted their self-perception (Tetono *et al.*, 2017: 267).

Adolescents who lacked social skills benefitted from interventions that supported their transition to adulthood. The research engaged MTs Negeri 3 Bantul students who participated in SST through group counseling. Post-treatment results showed that students had increased confidence, willingness to speak and communicate, and the ability to express opinions in class and groups. They initiated conversation, including with the opposite sex, answered teachers' questions, accepted their strengths and weaknesses, and showed assertiveness. The results were in line with the observation of Aliim (2019), which indicated the positive impact of SST in schools (Lubis & Ashadi, 2018). Therefore, students became more willing to join peers, manage shyness, ask questions when confused, and resolve learning-related issues more effectively.

This research supported previous results that SST effectively developed positive behavior, enhancing individuals, ability to interact socially and respond to social needs (Sari, 2015). SST provided a framework for teaching and modeling effective interpersonal communication and socialization methods. According to Amin (2019), therapists used examples of interaction with the environment as a model in social intervention skills training. The approach helped individuals become accustomed to more comfortable communicating within their environment. Therefore, SST was an effective method for addressing interpersonal communication issues and other social skills problems.

Although this research was conducted with thoroughness, it still had several limitations. The sample was restricted to one school, limiting the generalizability of the results. Additionally, students' interpersonal communication problems were identified solely through interviews with Guidance and Counseling teachers and students, without engaging parents.

Conclusion

In conclusion, SST conducted through group counseling services has proven its effectiveness in enhancing the level of interpersonal communication skills of students at MTs Negeri 3 Bantul. This was evidenced by significant changes observed in students,

who had become more confident in verbal expression, expressing opinions, and engaging in communication with peers, individuals of the opposite sex, teachers, adults, and acquaintances. Moreover, they had increased self-acceptance of their strengths and weaknesses without experiencing feelings of inferiority and had shown assertive behaviors.

It was recommended that counseling services provide special soundproof rooms to ensure the comfort and privacy of counselors or students. Additionally, the research results and training initiatives should be actively integrated by students within their social environments. Future investigations were recommended to expand the scope to include a more diverse range of subjects and conduct reviews in new wider locations.

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