

Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Group Counseling Services in Increasing Empathy

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Abstract. This study aims to describe students' views on the effectiveness of group counseling services in strengthening empathy capacity at SMA Negeri 12 Pekanbaru. The background of this study is that empathy is an integrated social-emotional competency that is fundamental to harmonious interactions between students and the development of positive character. The methodology chosen was descriptive qualitative, with the subjects being students who had experienced group counseling services facilitated by their homeroom teachers as guidance counselors. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies, and was then analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman. The findings show that students appreciate group counseling as an effective forum that contributes to strengthening empathy. Improvements were observed in terms of emotional awareness, listening and appreciation skills, and manifested in real behavior in the form of caring for others. Limitations were found in groups with a certain number of members, where the time provided seemed sufficient on average. Nevertheless, the overall impression of the direction of group counseling remained positive, with consequences that supported the strengthening of the Pancasila student profile that was being implemented.

Keywords: Students' Perception, Group Counseling, Empathy

INTRODUCTION

Among high school students, adolescence is an intense period for identity formation and multidimensional social interaction, and these two elements influence each other. Self-awareness expands, but along with it comes a weakness in social interaction, particularly in the form of a deficit in empathy, which is the capacity to appreciate and understand the emotional aspects experienced by others (Rogers, 1995) . Clear signs of this weakness can be observed in the surge in bullying incidents, declining social solidarity, and rampant disputes in daily interactions at school (Susanto and Mufidah, 2024) .

Empathy plays an important role in shaping students' character. Students with high empathy tend to be more caring, able to work together, and avoid aggressive behavior (Davis, 2018) . Therefore, schools should not only focus on academic aspects, but also instill social-emotional skills that support the creation of a healthy learning environment (Yusuf, 2012) . Without empathy, social interactions at school are prone to causing prolonged conflict.

One strategy that guidance counselors can use is group counseling services. According to Corey (2023) , group counseling provides a space for students to share experiences, listen to each other, and develop social skills. In group dynamics, students learn to express their feelings while understanding the perspectives of others, making it an effective medium for fostering empathy (Zuhara, 2020) .

Previous studies have highlighted that group counseling is effective in improving students' empathy and social relationships. For example, Asadi, Zahra, Kobra Kazemian Moghadam (2025) found that a group-based cognitive-behavioral approach can improve empathy and self-perception in students who exhibit bullying tendencies. Another study by Tuna (2024)) showed that cognitive- behavioral therapy in groups successfully fostered empathy while reducing discriminatory attitudes among students. This proves that group counseling plays a significant role in shaping students' empathic skills.

Several studies have shown the effectiveness of group counseling in increasing student empathy. Widodo and Putra (2024) found that students who participated in group counseling showed an increase in their ability to understand the feelings of their peers. Primayanti (2014) added that a humanistic approach in group counseling can increase students' social awareness. These findings reinforce the assumption that group counseling can be an effective strategy in increasing empathy.

Although many studies confirm the benefits of group counseling, studies on students' perceptions of the effectiveness of this service are still limited. Most studies focus on the final results in the form of increased empathy scores or social skills, rather than on the subjective experiences of students when participating in counseling (Hasanah, Asrori, and Halida, 2024) . In

fact, it is important to know students' perceptions because they influence the continuity and acceptance of counseling programs in schools.

At SMA Negeri 12 Pekanbaru, guidance counselors have implemented group counseling services to address social relationship problems among students. However, so far there has been no in-depth study on how students assess the effectiveness of these services. This condition is interesting to study because it can provide an overview of the success of group counseling in high schools in the local context, as well as provide practical input for school counselors.

Based on the above description, this study aims to reveal students' perceptions of the effectiveness of group counseling services in increasing empathy at SMA Negeri 12 Pekanbaru. By knowing how students view these services, schools can evaluate and optimize counseling strategies to better suit students' needs. This study is also expected to contribute theoretically to the development of group counseling studies in Indonesia.

METHODOLOGY

This study applies a qualitative method with a case study design. This type of design was chosen solely because the study sought to obtain a holistic and in-depth understanding of students' subjective experiences when participating in group counseling services (Creswell, 2017). Case studies are considered relevant because this micro context provides an opportunity for researchers to explore and interpret students' perceptions comprehensively by collecting data in the real environment at SMA Negeri 12 Pekanbaru.

The participants in this study consisted of ten 11th grade students at SMA Negeri 12 Pekanbaru, who were selected using purposive sampling in order to recommend students to the guidance and counseling teacher. The criteria for selecting students were those who showed below-average levels of empathy and who had experienced interpersonal conflict situations. The field intervention was carried out in the counseling room, which functions within the school and is equipped with facilities for providing group services.

The data in this study were obtained through three main techniques. First, in-depth interviews were conducted to understand students' perceptions of the effectiveness of group counseling services. Second, participatory observation was applied during counseling sessions to record interactions and group dynamics. Finally, documentation was carried out by collecting counselor notes, service schedules, and student reflection results. Triangulation of these three methods was carried out to increase the validity and reliability of the data obtained (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman triangulation model (1994), which includes three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was carried out by selecting relevant interview and observation results, which were then presented in the form of narratives and tables of findings. Conclusions were drawn inductively based on patterns of student perceptions that emerged from the field data.

In order to ensure data validity, this study applied simultaneous source and technique triangulation procedures. Source triangulation was carried out by examining the consistency of information obtained from three actors, namely students, counselors, and relevant school documents. Meanwhile, technique triangulation was carried out by integrating findings from three different data collection methods, namely semi-structured interviews, systematic observation, and document analysis. This process was reinforced by applying the member check technique, which specifically asked students to review and confirm the summary of the interview results to ensure the suitability and accuracy of the representation of their subjective experiences

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

Through in-depth interviews with participants in the group counseling program at SMA Negeri 12 Pekanbaru, the analysis results showed a significant positive trend in students' views of group counseling services. The interviews indicated that students viewed this service as an effective forum for encouraging the development of empathy among peers. The distinctive features of these observations were evident in the patterns of active listening that emerged among participants, appreciation of emotional dynamics, and concrete services in the form of support that emphasized social concern.

Further analysis confirmed that the growth of empathy was distributed across two dominant dimensions. The dimension of emotional empathy, in this context, was achieved when students not only identified but also deeply felt the emotional state of their peers through structured personal narrative exchange sessions. Complementing this, the development of empathy in action is realized when participants proactively respond to social cues with tangible gestures, including offering motivation, directing support, and radiating solidarity, especially when peers are under pressure.

Data analysis shows that students rate group counseling as effective in increasing empathy. The research findings are divided into several dimensions:

- a. Emotional empathy: students are able to listen actively, appreciate their friends' feelings, and share in the emotions they experience.
- b. Empathy in action: students show genuine concern, such as offering encouragement or support.
- c. Positive social relationships: group counseling fosters openness, social closeness, and solidarity.
- d. Implementation constraints: the large number of members and time constraints made sharing opportunities less equitable.

In addition, group counseling services also have an impact on strengthening social relationships. Students reported openness, social closeness, and group solidarity after attending counseling sessions. They felt more connected to their classmates, even those with whom they had previously had little interaction. This shows that group counseling not only fosters individual empathy but also builds more harmonious social bonds.

However, there are obstacles in implementing group counseling. Some students mentioned that the large number of members limited the time for sharing stories. In addition, the limited duration of the meetings often caused discussions to be interrupted when they were in full swing. These obstacles indicate the need for technical improvements to optimize group counseling services.

Table1 . Thematic Coding of Students' Perceptions of Group Counseling

Category	Code	Theme	Student Quotes
General Perceptions	P1	Group counseling promotes openness	"I feel more relieved being able to talk in a group; it turns out that many of my friends have problems too."
Emotional empathy	E1	The ability to understand other people's feelings	"When a friend tells me something sad, I feel it too."
Empathy in action	E2	Genuine concern and support	"Now, when a friend is feeling down, I greet them more often or cheer them up."
Social relationships	R1	Closeness and solidarity	"I feel closer to my friends, like we're one big family."
Technical challenges	K1	Too many members	"Sometimes not everyone gets to share their story because the group is too large."
Technical issues	K2	Limited time	"Time runs out quickly, even though there is still much to discuss."

From this thematic coding, it can be concluded that students view group counseling as an effective platform for increasing empathy, both emotionally and in terms of actions, while also strengthening social relationships. However, its effectiveness is influenced by technical factors

Table2 . Research Findings and Discussion

Main Theme	Research Findings (Field Data)	Discussion (Literature & Analysis)
Emotional Empathy	Students learn to listen actively, appreciate feelings, and share their friends' emotions.	According to Yusuf (2019), group counseling improves students' ability to understand the emotional perspectives of others, thereby strengthening the cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy
Empathy in Action	Students are more sensitive, willing to encourage others, and show genuine concern for their peers	This is in line with Komalasari (2020), who emphasizes that empathy is not only emotional awareness, but also manifested in prosocial actions such as helping and providing support
Positive Social Relationships	Group counseling encourages self-disclosure, social closeness, and group solidarity.	These findings reinforce Prayitno's (2018) opinion that group counseling creates a climate of togetherness, increases interaction, and builds mutual trust among students
Technical Constraints	The large number of members and limited meeting time meant that some students did not have time to share.	This is in line with Asrori's (2017) research, which states that the effectiveness of group counseling is influenced by group size and facilitator time management. Technical improvements are needed to optimize the process

However, there are obstacles in the implementation of group counseling. Some students mentioned that the large number of members limited the time for sharing. In addition, the limited duration of the meeting caused discussions to often stop when they were in full swing. These obstacles indicate the need for technical improvements to optimize group counseling services

Discussion

The findings of this study are consistent with the arguments of (2020), which highlight the role of group counseling in strengthening social skills, particularly empathy. The process of interaction within the group provides an opportunity for participants to see situations from other people's perspectives, thereby strengthening attitudes of respect and caring for one another. These findings are also in line with the study by Putri (2025), which shows that group counseling can improve emotional awareness and communication skills necessary for everyday life.

In this context, the development of empathy among students at SMA Negeri 12 Pekanbaru implies the success of social-emotional learning in line with the educational goals recently announced in the Pancasila Student Profile program. The indicators of emotional empathy and concrete actions identified in this study show that the values of caring and mutual cooperation, which are part of noble character, are beginning to be internalized in students. Despite several technical obstacles identified, the results of the study show that group counseling has significant prospects for optimization and integration with guidance counseling strategies in secondary schools.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study on students' perceptions of the effectiveness of group counseling services in increasing empathy at SMA Negeri 12 Pekanbaru, it can be concluded that group counseling services have a significant positive impact. Students feel more open in expressing their feelings and personal experiences, thus creating an atmosphere of mutual trust within the group. This shows that group counseling can be an effective medium in helping students overcome problems and build emotional connections.

In addition, the results of the qualitative analysis show that group counseling plays a role in increasing student empathy, both emotionally and in terms of concrete actions. Students not only learn to understand the feelings of others, but are also encouraged to provide social support, care, and solidarity. These experiences contribute to strengthening social relationships, a sense of togetherness, and bonding among students, which are very important in school life.

However, this study also found obstacles in the implementation of group counseling, namely the large number of members and time constraints. These obstacles meant that not all students had the same opportunity to share their experiences. Therefore, it is recommended that school counselors make technical adjustments, such as dividing the group into smaller groups or extending the service time, so that the effectiveness of group counseling can be optimized.

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