Effectiveness of Social Skills Group-Counseling Program in Improving Students’ Motivation towards Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study assesses the effectiveness of a social skills group-counseling program in enhancing the motivation to learn for students with learning difficulties. The study design employed a quasi-experimental method using pre-posttest technique. The sample size was (N = 16) female students who enrolled in 3rd, 4th and 5th grade and have learning difficulties from one governmental school in Ramallah. The students received ten sessions of group-counseling aimed to enhance students’ social skills, each lasting 45 minutes. Using the motivational scale for learning tests, the results have shown that there were significant differences between the means of pre-and post-level of motivation to learn. Means differences indicated that the social skills training program is effective in raising the level of motivation to learn for students with learning difficulties.

Keywords: effectiveness, social skills, group-counseling, motivation, learning difficulties

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Learning difficulties are considered a relatively new field compared to other special education fields, which now occupy many governments and education systems in order to provide effective educational services for a large segment of their children. The phenomenon of learning difficulties refers to the students who appear ordinary in many life situations, but they appear educationally as people with disabilities (Amer & Mohammad, 2008; Zayad, 2001). The statistics revealed that the prevalence of learning difficulties ranges between (10-15%) of children in school ages (Al-Waqfi, 2003). The main trouble with these children is the obvious difference between academic achievement and mental abilities, by comparing the actual performance of the child in different academic fields and the expected performance based on his mental and chronological age (Snyder et al., 1994). This difference is classified as “learning difficulties” and requires the provision of special educational services (Snyder et al., 1994).

Students with learning difficulties show problems in the social and academic fields as compared to their counterparts who do not have learning difficulties including a low level of social skills, self-concept, self-esteem and motivation (Bear et.al 2002; Chapman, 1988, Vaughn, 2001), academic difficulties, behavioral problems, and rejection from their peers, which leads to low self-perception (Bear, Mink & Manning, 2002). The results of meta-analysis conducted by Kaval & Forness (1996) indicated that 75% of students with learning difficulties demonstrated a social information deficit due to social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties.

Mobya (1993) emphasized on the importance of social skills due to their relatedness to self-concept and more importantly the evaluations of others for an individual, especially the significant individuals in his/her life. These evaluations appear through the processes of social interaction. Also, Mobya indicated that appropriate social skills can provide individuals with an important basis that leads to strong relationships with peers, and academic success. On the other hand, inappropriate social skills during childhood are associated with a number of negative outcomes including juvenile delinquency, mental health problems, unacceptable social behavior and low levels of motivation for achievement (Mobya, 1993).

Motivation for learning is another key factor for academic success. It is considered as a distinct state of general motivation, and refers to the internal state of the learner that leads him to pay attention to the educational
situation, and accept it with targeted activity, and continue it until learning is achieved. Such motivation is closely related to the socialization process, therefore, the responsibility for helping students to raise their motivation lies with the school, home and other social institutions. The results of Qattami & Adass study (2002) have indicated that there is a strong association between the high motivation for achievement of children and the emphasis of their mother on their independence at home. Therefore, there is a strong need for a wide range of programs that aim to help them use their potential capabilities based on educational examinations that address their needs (Amer & Mohammad, 2008; Zayad, 2001).

The effort to understand students’ motivations for learning is one indicator of the success of teachers and educators in general. Banadura (1997) and Vaughn (2001) indicated that students with learning difficulties have academic and social difficulties in the social skills they possess compared to their equivalents who do not have learning difficulties. These difficulties have become one of the emotional, social and academic characteristics that distinguish them, the most prominent of which is their low self-concept; where they see themselves as a failure. Therefore, there is a need for social skills training to address their undesirable social behaviors within groups in natural situations, to teach them new social skills, and contribute to increasing the motivation to learn (Abu-Hassouna, 2004; Boase, 2009).

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

Appropriate social skills provide the individual with an important foundation that leads to good social relationships with peers and academic success (Al-Qudah & Al-Tarturi, 2007). Social skills can be classified into two aspects: the first control versus submission, which shows the individual's ability to assert himself. The second is love versus hate, which refers to establishing relationships with others. These two aspects have a great impact on determining individual social behavior as a result of the interaction (Abu Saree, 1986). Scholars have argued that inappropriate social skills during childhood are associated with a number of negative consequences in the development of paradigms of social behavior (Al-Qudah & Al-Tarturi, 2007), such as aggressive behavior (Ali et al., 218), social withdrawal, extreme shyness, problems with social, emotional, and behavioral adaptation (Sharma, 2004), and social inefficiency (Parnes, 2003).

Social learning theory has argued that the individual resorts to using these behaviors due to the failure to learn more appropriate methods of interacting with people. Additionally, this theory has debated that school failure often stimulates undesirable behavior, and creates problems in school that hinders their social adaptation and opportunities for employment during life. These undesirable behaviors include extreme shyness, poor self-control, non-adaptive behaviors such as aggression, social withdrawal, immaturity, subversion, lack of acceptance, and a feeling of psychological loneliness. Moreover, lack of social skills leads to failure of social life, repetition of pressures and hardships, and failure of interpersonal relationships (Goleman, 2000). Therefore, there is a need to learn social skills, among the most important elements of which are self-assertion skills, emotional skills and communication skills (e.g. transmission skills, introduction skills, control skills, social and emotional flexibility) (Faraj, 2002).

Literature reviewed has shown that several scholars have examined the consequences of lack of social skills. For example, Kaval & Forness study (1996) pointed out that weak social skills may occur in kindergarten, or during school years, and may continue until adulthood. The negative impact of the poor social skills is reflected in the increased risk in the adolescence and adulthood stages of school dropout, psychological disturbance, juvenile delinquency, and criminal behavior. The interaction between poor social skills and learning difficulties creates unpleasant consequences (Kaval & Forness, 1996). Other studies have reported that fragile social skills negatively influenced social interaction, academic achievement (Parker & Asher, 1987), and motivation for achievement (Sharma, 2004).

Other scholars including Bear et al. (2002) have analyzed the concept of self among students with learning difficulties. The analysis included 61 research studies conducted between 1986-2000. The results of this study revealed that there is a clear weakness in the concept of self among students with learning difficulties in the aspects related to their perception about their academic and mental abilities (Bear et al., 2002).

Gresham & Elliott (1989) summarized that the unacceptable social behavior of students with learning difficulties appears because of three situations: lack of skills, lack of performance, inability to self-control, and Atkinson believes that the tendency to achieve success is educated, and it differs between individuals. While Atkinson believed that the tendency to obtain success is an educated matter, and it differs between individuals as well as
among one individual according to different situations; he also added that motivation to achieve success is influenced by three main factors: the motives, possibility, and value of success (Atkinson as cited in Petri & Govern, 2004).

Therefore, scholars have argued that improving the attitudes of students with learning difficulties and raising their motivation towards studying are possible through a counseling program to promote social skills (Court & Givon, 2003), social competence and academic achievement (Abu- Hassouna, 2004), self-concept (Awad, 2009) and collaboration with peers (Jonsson et al., 2019), by giving medium-challenging tasks, and providing students sufficient time to complete assignments (Cook et al., 2001). Also helping students to use multiple senses in the educational process had a positive effect in improving their abilities (Author, 2020), and their academic achievement in Arabic and Mathematics (Mafra, 2015). Additionally, Momeni (2012) has claimed that providing training on live skills can improve students’ social & emotional competence. Moreover, encouraging students who do not have learning difficulties to accept and help their peers who have such difficulties can promote their self-concept (Larson, 2002). Qana'a & Nawangsih (2018) aims to see the effectiveness of group counseling in improving student social skills. Many students complain about social problems such as the difficulty to get along with and be accepted in the campus which is a new environment for them. These problems will impact on students' psychological conditions such as the decline of learning motivation, inferior feeling and even intention to resign. used Quasi Experimental method with One-Group Pretest-Posttest Design, and the research subject was Telkom University student. it showed that the Z value is -2.023 with a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, which means the group counseling improved social skills of Telkom University students.

Chupp & Boes (2012) describes the effectiveness of small group social skills lessons with elementary students, using Too Good for Violence: A Curriculum for Non-violent Living by the Mendez Foundation. The school counselor and school social worker taught the curriculum in a structured small group of 4th grade students in 8 weekly sessions. The skills taught were conflict resolution, anger management, respect for self and others, and effective communication. The impact that the social skills lessons have on elementary students’ knowledge of skills, behavior, and academics.

JaeHo Yu, et al. (2021) aim to evaluate the effectiveness of physical therapy interventions reported for use in children with delayed developmental to improve motor skills, cognition, and social skills outcome. PubMed, PEDro, and Google scholar from 2010 to 2020 for current physical therapy interventions in children with developmental delay. Outcomes were motor skills, social skills, and cognition ability. Results Searches identified 20 randomized trials including 1132 children with developmental delay. Interventions were various with different sample sizes. The most used intervention was dual task with video game/VR, skill instruction and massage therapy. all the intervention types showed to be effective to improve motor, social and cognition in children with Developmental Delay. Results from this review reveal that dual tasks with video game/VR and massage therapy are effective to improve motor and cognition and skill instruction, education programs including parents are more effective for social skills improvement.

The results of previous studies reviewed have indicated the importance of social skills for students with learning difficulties and the effectiveness of a social skills counseling program in motivating those students and reinforcing their self-concept. However, the current study was unique in dealing with a variable that was not addressed by previous studies in Palestinian environment, as it combined a group-counseling program and social skills content to promote motivation to learn among students with learning difficulties.

Research Question
This study aims to examine one research question:
To what extent is a social skills group-counseling program effective in increasing the level of motivation to learn in students with learning difficulties?

Descriptive of the Social Skills Group-Counseling Program

Theoretical Framework of the Program in this Study

Behavioral-cognitive theory (CBT) was used in developing this social skills group-counseling program, which combines both behavioral and cognitive methods of therapy. This approach of therapy is considered as a training or educational model through which individuals acquire new knowledge and skills, enabling them to change their
knowledge, behaviors, and mood (Person, 1989). It has been argued that learning laws are more complex than those related to apparent behavioral expressions, and claimed that cognitive processes play a crucial role in shaping apparent behavior and should be taken into account even if they cannot directly observe them or objectively study them. Additionally, CBT assumes that people are not passive, as they interact with environmental stimuli and form concepts around them, which in turn affect their behaviors. In other words, cognitive behavioral followers believe that there is a continuous interaction between environmental influences, cognitive processes and behavior (Al-Khatib, 2001). Therefore, it is important to analyze and modify the person’s cognitive processes such as imagination, thinking, and self-talk, in order to change their apparent behavior (Granvold, 1994).

Counseling Approach in the Program of this Study

The program employed a group-counseling method which has several advantages that distinguish it from other counseling methods, in that it offers a microcosm of real life situations. It provides an opportunity for people: 1) to express themselves and speak with their peers, 2) give and take feedback from their peers in a safe environment, 3) expose problems of relationships that we do not identify in the individual counseling. This helps students gain confidence in themselves, and learn acceptable social behavior through communication and interaction in an easy manner (Magharius, 1999 as cited in Shawahneh, 2008: 108).

Program Goals

It is expected from each student participating in this program to be able to achieve the following goals: 1) raise the level of one’s social competence, 2) increase one’s ability to interact socially with other people, 3) model desired behaviors, 4) exercise the skill of attendance behavior (showing respect and concern for the other person), 5) know the concepts of communication and communication with others, 6) raise the level of one’s ability to solve problems and deal with them, and 7) increase the level of motivation towards learning among students of the sample.

Program Content

This group-counseling program was designed as a therapeutic program and aims to provide a number of vital social skills to students who have learning difficulties. It consists of ten sessions, each lasting forty-five minutes. The first session focused on helping the group members get to know one another by introducing themselves and building the relationship between group members. It also focused on establishing the foundations of their meetings by identifying and agreeing on the rules that governed the behaviors of group members, and explaining this counseling program and its purposes. These and other activities taught students how to interact positively with their colleagues in the group. In the second session the counselor (the first author) emphasized on the group’s rules and the importance of adhering to them. The counselor then discussed the causes of the troubles and problems they faced, took examples from students, analyzed them in relation to wrong beliefs, and ended by explaining how understanding things wrongly contributes to the persistence of problems. The third session concentrated on an individual’s self-talk and negative ideas when facing the difficulties, and the extent to which the student was affected by his internal dialogue, negative beliefs and thoughts. Students practiced the skill of positive self-talk and excluding negative thoughts. In the fourth session, group laws, acceptance and mutual respect were discussed, and students distinguished between the destructive ideas that cause them troubles and the adaptive ideas that help them to act in an acceptable manner. At the end, students practiced the skills of replacing destructive thoughts with acceptable ones. In the fifth and sixth sessions, problem-solving skills were presented and students applied the steps and skills of problem solving. Also, students practiced the skills of identifying all possible alternatives, choosing the most appropriate alternative and making the final decision. In the seventh session, students presented situations in which they felt extremely ashamed and discussed the reasons that led to those positions and feelings. In the eighth and ninth sessions focused on listening and paraphrasing skills, and helping students to distinguish between active and non-active participation. Additionally, the meaning of communication, effective ways of communicating with others, and the usefulness and importance of positive communication were discussed. The tenth session focused on discussing the most important changes that occurred to students, their personalities, their motivation to learn, their relationships with others, their ability to listen and communicate with others. They were also asked to express their views on the program and the extent of benefiting from it.

Techniques Used in Group-Counseling Sessions: Several methods were used including lectures, classroom discussions and dialogue, skill analysis into sub skills, modeling, role-playing, applied behavioral analysis, peer
sharing strategy, cooperative groups strategy, simulation strategy, and personal connections strategy. Using multiple techniques in training students on social skills is crucial because it gives the opportunity for students to use all their senses (Authors, 2020). Additionally, students were given enough time and allowed to repeat the tasks required of them in order to master the skills.

Assessments: Several assessments methods were used during and at the end of the program to evaluated students’ improvement such as worksheets, questions, observations and homework assignments. At the end of the program, all students completed the motivation to learning test.

II. METHOD

Data Collection and Participants

The data were collected at two points, the first time at the beginning of January 2020, before the start of the program, and the second time was after the last session, at the beginning of February 2020. The sample of the study consisted of female students (N = 16) who were enrolled in the 3rd, 4th, 5th grade in the 2019/2020 Academic year, ages ranging from 9-12 years old, were diagnosed with learning difficulties, and had an annual academic achievement below 60%. All the students were from one governmental school in Ramallah.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Third grade</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth grade</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth grade</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Selection Process

The first step was to identify the students who have learning difficulties based on a pre-classification by their teachers. Usually, those students participate in activities designed specifically to help them overcome their learning difficulties in a special room called “resources room.” After that, a diagnostic standard test was prepared in 2012 (Author, 2012) and applied by the first author to ensure that these students have learning difficulties in reading, writing and mathematics. The grading scale used by the Ministry of Education & Higher Education in evaluating school examinations were followed in evaluating the results of the diagnostic test with this study sample. This grading scale included the following ranking: Excellent (+90%), very good (80-89%), good (70-79%), poor (60-69%), fail (50-59%). The results of the diagnostic test for all participants were less than 60%, indicating that those students have learning difficulties in reading, writing and mathematics. At the beginning of the program the total participants was eighteen students, then after two sessions two students were excluded from the program for not being bound to attend.

Procedures

This study utilized a quasi-experimental research design, pretest-posttest technique to assess the effectiveness of the social skills group-counseling program applied on female students who have learning difficulties. Means, Standard Deviations, and Independent Samples t-test were used to compare the differences between students’ performance at the pretest and at the posttest.

Measurement

Diagnostic Standard Test. This test was developed by the first author (Author, 2012) to measure students’ learning difficulties in reading, writing and mathematics. This test includes nine questions under four sections.
such as (Item 1a: “read the following paragraph aloud”), (Item 1b: “read the following text then answer the subsequent questions”) and (Item 1: “write the following in a beautiful font”). To check validity, the diagnostic test was sent to nine reviewers who are experts in learning disabilities to verify the comprehensiveness and integrity of the items as well as the clarity of their formulation. Amendments were made according to the reviewers’ suggestions. For reliability, the test demonstrated an acceptable level of Cronbach’s Alpha (.85).

*Motivation to learn scale.* This measure was developed by AlSha’ar (2007) to assess students’ motivation to learn such as (Item 1: “I care most about being a successful student in my studies”) and (Item 5: “I work hard to get homework done”). All items were rated on five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). To examine reliability, the measure was applied to an exploratory sample consisting of 40 students. Split-half method indicated that the measure has a high level of reliability (.90).

### III. RESULTS

This study was designed to assess the effectiveness of a social skills group-counseling program in motivating students with learning difficulties to learn. Pre-posttest technique was used to determine the changes that occurred at the level of motivation to learn after giving training in the practice of social skills. The results of the independent t-test indicated that there were differences in the means of pre-and post-level of motivation of students with learning difficulties. The results from the pre-test \( M = 61.4, SD = 6.35 \) and post-test \( M = 102.59, SD = 6.70 \) level of motivation to learn indicated that the social skills group-counseling program is effective in increasing the level of motivation to learn for the students with learning difficulties \( t (30) = 1.697, p = .001 \).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>61.41</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1.697</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>102.59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### IV. DISCUSSION

Consistent with the previous studies (Awad, 2009; Santrock, 2003), the results of this study have indicated that there is an improvement among students in the level of their motivation to learn at the end of the social skills group-counseling program that was provided over ten sessions. This means that this social skills program has the potential to help students to cooperate with their peers and build positive relationships with them, which assists them in their academic adjustment. The results of the previous research have stressed that individuals who are highly motivated when it comes to achievement are more likely to work seriously and successfully in their lives as compared with those who have a lower level of motivation for achievement (Awad, 2009; Santrock, 2003). Likewise, in line with the former research (e.g. Alawneh, 2004) it is expected that when students possess social skills, they will show acceptable behaviors that will positively reflect on their motivation towards learning. Indeed, the previous researchers have noted that students with learning difficulties who do not possess appropriate social skills are more likely to display disorganized behaviors which reflects negatively on their motivation to learn and limits their chances of success in their lives (Alawneh, 2004). Additionally, Sprinthall (1996) claimed that social motivations are educated and acquired. Therefore, the researchers of this study believe that the group-counseling program that was applied to students with learning difficulties was effective in increasing their level of motivation to learn. We could say that students' mastery of several social skills that they learned through this group-counseling program is the reason behind their improvement in their motivation. This conclusion is consistent with the previous studies (Ali et al., 2018; Awad, 2009; Abu-Hassouna, 2004; Court & Givon, 2003; Goo et al., 2001; Author, 2020; Jonsson et al., 2019). Chupp & Boes (2012) show that The skills taught were conflict resolution, anger management, respect for self and others, and effective communication. The impact that the social skills lessons have on elementary students’ knowledge of skills, behavior, and academics.

**Recommendations and Conclusion**
The results of this study have highlighted a number of important implications for educational practitioners and future research. First, the study has emphasized on the importance of using a social skills group-counseling program with students who have learning difficulties in the elementary stage of education in order to promote students’ motivation to education. Using this program requires giving training for special education practitioners and educational counselors in schools on how to use counseling and social skills with students who have learning disabilities or ordinary students of different age groups. Another suggestion is that it is important to encourage the educational counselors to include parts of social skills in their development programs. For future research, there is a need to examine the impact of this social skills program on other variables such as achievement and self-concept. Moreover, comparative studies are also useful for comparing the effectiveness of this social skills program versus other educational programs.

REFERENCES