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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the effects of a self-esteem development program on middle-school students in the seventh grade. The study included 21 students with low self-esteem, of which 11 were in the experimental group and 10 were in the control group. After identifying the participants, the researcher implemented an eight-session program, each session lasting 90 minutes on average, for the students in the experimental group. Non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was used to determine whether there was a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test score averages of the experimental and control groups. Non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test was used to determine whether there was a significant within-group difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental and control groups. The results indicate that the self-esteem scores of the students in the experimental group, who participated in group activities, increased. There was no change in the self-esteem scores of the students in the control group. The results of the study were discussed and interpreted in light of the relevant literature.

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<u>*Research Article*</u>

A Group Counseling Practice for Improving Middle-School Students' Self-Esteem [*]

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the effects of a self-esteem development program on middle-school students in the seventh grade. The study included 21 students with low self-esteem, of which 11 were in the experimental group and 10 were in the control group. After identifying the participants, the researcher implemented an eight-session program, each session lasting 90 minutes on average, for the students in the experimental group. Non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was used to determine whether there was a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test score averages of the experimental and control groups. Non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test was used to determine whether there was a significant within-group difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental and control groups. The results indicate that the self-esteem scores of the students in the experimental group, who participated in group activities, increased. There was no change in the self-esteem scores of the students in the control group. The results of the study were discussed and interpreted in light of the relevant literature.

Keywords: Self-esteem, group counseling, middle school, students

1. INTRODUCTION

Self-esteem is defined as a person's general sense of self-worth and acceptance or the perception of how much people value themselves (Harter, 1990). Branden (2001) notes that self-esteem has two aspects: personal competence and worthiness. Taylor, Peplau, and Sears (2007) defined self-esteem as the sum of an individual's beliefs about the self. Rosenberg (1965) defined self-esteem as one's positive or negative attitude toward the self. High self-esteem refers to a positive general evaluation of the self, whereas low self-esteem refers to negative thoughts and feelings about one's self-worth. Self-esteem is a part of our personality and has two elements: Self-knowledge and self-awareness. These elements include individuals' perceptions about themselves, their strengths and weaknesses, attitudes, abilities, and values (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003).

Children become aware of their characteristics through their communication with adults and peers. Among developmental periods, adolescence is a critical period in terms of self-awareness. However, it is treated as a transitional period between childhood and adulthood. In this context, notably, the transition from primary to middle school is also a challenging and stressful period for children. The middle-school period, which corresponds to the pre-adolescence years, is risky because of the decrease in the self-esteem of adolescents in this age group (Striegel-Moore, 2001). Early implementation of self-esteem development programs can have beneficial results. Self-esteem is a complex milestone concept that is fundamental in personality development. Although an individual's basic personality begins to form at an early age, research indicates that self-esteem may change,

deteriorate, or decrease, especially during pre-adolescence (12–13 years old) (Cantin & Boivin, 2004). Therefore, a self-esteem enhancement program was implemented with students of this age range as part of the research.

Research has determined that self-esteem is positively related to happiness, life satisfaction, self-confidence, sociability, and optimism (Yang, Tian, Huebner, & Zhu, 2019). Meanwhile, low self-esteem in childhood is negatively associated with negative thoughts; avoidance of new experiences; difficulty in managing conflicts (Khullar & Tyagi, 2014); loneliness (Luo, Liu, & Zhang, 2020); suicide attempts (Barrera, Montoya-Castilla, Pérez-Albéniz, Lucas-Molina, & Fonseca-Pedrero, 2020); anxiety (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004); and behavioral problems (Weels, Hunnikin, Ash, & Goozen, 2020). Results show that high self-esteem works as a buffer against mental disorders emerging from one's childhood (Ahn & Fedewa, 2011). Researchers suggest that high self-esteem protects against stressful situations and that it reduces the negative consequences of stress (McGee, Williams, & Nada-Raja, 2001). Further, self-esteem developed at an early age has a strong influence on the formation of psychological resilience and well-being later in life (Orth, Robins, & Roberts, 2008).

Low self-esteem manifests itself in the daily lives and behaviors of children and adolescents. Children and adolescents with low self-esteem may blame themselves, have low self-confidence, and have negative thoughts about themselves. Yahaya et al. (2004) stated that individuals with low self-esteem present characteristics such as avoiding competition, not taking initiative, being pessimistic, lacking self-confidence, and facing difficulties in decision-making. Children and adolescents must enhance their self-esteem for their psychological well-being and to form positive emotions such as self-confidence, responsibility, and feeling lovable and valuable in the future. Adolescence is an appropriate period for interventions to be made for the formation of a healthy self-perception. Therefore, the study aims to aid middle-school students through a group counseling practice involving psychological counseling and guidance to increase their self-esteem.

There are several group counseling practices aimed at increasing self-esteem. Steese, Dollette, Phillips, and Hossfeld (2006) conducted a group study with 13-year-old female students in experimental and control groups for 10 weeks. Practices related to topics such as friendship relations, self-image, body image, and assertiveness were performed in these sessions. In the measurements made at the end of 10 weeks, there was an increase in the self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-confidence, body image, and social support scores of the students in the experimental group.

Multiple studies have concluded that intervention programs aimed at enhancing self-esteem are effective. Trumbull (1987) applied group counseling to improve students' self-esteem. He formed experimental and control groups with eight participants; the students in the experimental group engaged in practices related to self-esteem, communication, interpersonal relations, self-discipline, and values for 12 weeks. Resultantly, the self-esteem scores of the students in the experimental group were found to increase. Tanksley (1994) found that students' self-esteem increased after engaging in a program created for fifth-grade students with low self-esteem. Kaya and Saçkes (2004) found a significant increase in the self-esteem levels of middle-school students with low self-esteem in the eighth grade by engaging in an intervention program. Akbari, Mohamadi, and Sadeghi (2012) study with 40 female students in experimental and control groups showed that assertiveness training had positive results on the increase of students' self-esteem and self-confidence. Thus, the self-esteem development programs implemented are mostly applied to adolescent groups and the results are positive.

Group work is effective for intervention programs aimed at developing healthy self-esteem. Corey (1990) found that group counseling is particularly suitable for adolescents. Smead (1990) emphasized that group counseling provides an appropriate environment for young people to acquire new behaviors and that children learn and socialize in groups. Group and individual friendships are

critical in the lives of adolescents. Through such groups, adolescents learn about social rules, socialize, meet their psychological needs, and assert their existence. Group counseling practices help adolescents share their problems; realize that they are not the only ones experiencing these problems; and reduce their feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and loneliness.

Therefore, researchers believe that group counseling practices designed within the framework of certain objectives could have positive results in raising middle-school students' self-esteem. The program prepared for middle-school students presented in this study aimed to raise students' self-esteem. The study tested the following hypotheses:

1. The posttest scores obtained from the self-esteem scale of the students in the experimental group participating in the group counseling practice will be statistically higher than the posttest scores of the students in the control group from the self-esteem scale.

2. The distribution of the post-test scores obtained from the self-esteem scale of the students in the experimental group participating in the group counseling will be significantly higher than the distribution of the pre-test scores.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Design

A quasi-experimental study was conducted with pretest, posttest, and experimental-control groups, aiming to examine the effect of group counseling practices on the self-esteem of middle-school students. In cases where the controls cannot be provided as required by real experimental models, quasi-experimental designs are used (Karasar, 2016). The study's design was that of a pretest/posttest model (2×2) with experimental and control groups, and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was administered to the experimental and control groups as a pretest before starting the study. In the next stage, the experimental group participated in a self-esteem development program, consisting of eight sessions; the control group underwent no intervention. At the end of the program, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was re-administered to the experimental and control groups as a posttest.

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2.2. Research Group

The research group consists of 13-year-old secondary school students (the experimental group comprised six girls and five boys and the control group comprised five girls and five boys) studying in the seventh grade in the central Kayapınar district of Diyarbakır province in Türkiye. For participants' selection, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was administered to 258 seventh-graders. After the evaluation, students with low self-esteem scores were interviewed individually through the school counseling service. In the preliminary interview based on the principle of volunteerism, students received information about the duration, process, and confidentiality of group counseling. In the school in question, eighth-graders were preparing for their high-school exam and fifth-graders were considered likely to experience adaptation problems as beginners at the middle-school level; therefore, these grades were excluded from the program.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

2.3.1. Personal information form:

A personal information form was used to collect demographic information such as gender, grade level, and age.

2.3.2. Rosenberg self-esteem scale:

The scale developed by Rosenberg (1965) to measure self-esteem is in English. It was adapted to Turkish by Çuhadaroğlu (1986) and consists of 63 items and 12 subscales. The subscales are self-esteem, continuity of self-concept, trusting people, sensitivity to criticism, depressive affect, daydreaming, psychosomatic symptoms, feeling threatened in interpersonal relationships, ability to participate in discussions, relationship with parents, relationship with father, and psychic isolation (Çuhadaroğlu, 1986). Our study used the 10-item self-esteem subscale. There is no time limitation in

applying the scale to adolescents. The responses for the self-esteem subscale range from very true to very false. For items 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7, the scores are very true: 4, true: 3, false: 2, and very false: 1, and that for items 3, 5, 8, 9, and 10 are very true: 1, true: 2, false: 3, and very false: 4; the scores one can obtain from the scale range between 10 and 40. In the validity and reliability study of the scale in Türkiye, the validity coefficient was found to be .71 and the reliability coefficient as .75.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data obtained within the scope of the research was analyzed using the IBM SPSS-22 program. Mean and standard deviation values were used in the analysis of descriptive data. Non-parametric Mann- Whitney U test was used to determine whether there was a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test score averages of the experimental and control groups. Non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test was used to determine whether there was a significant within-group difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental and control groups.

2.5. The Process

The planning and creation of the group process occurred in stages. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was applied to 258 volunteer seventh-grade students in accordance with the wishes of the students and parents who applied to the school guidance service and the observations of the school counselor in the middle school in the central Kayapınar district of Diyarbakır province in Türkiye. After the evaluation, individual interviews were conducted with students with low self-esteem scores.

In the preliminary interview based on the principle of volunteerism, students received information about the duration, process, and confidentiality of group counseling. The student's parents also received information about the group counseling process. In the next stage, students and parents who volunteered for the study provided informed consent and parental permission statements. The school in which the study took place received a briefing about the group counseling process and gave institutional permissions. Ethical principles and legal processes were followed, and participants' confidentiality was protected. After the preliminary interview, 21 students volunteered to participate in the study. These students were randomly assigned to two groups based on a draw. Then, these two groups were randomly classified as experimental and control groups through another draw. The researcher ensured that there were 10 and 11 volunteers in the experimental and control groups, respectively. These numbers of participants were deemed sufficient for the group process in this study. Group sessions were held outside of class hours (once a week for 90 minutes) in the seminar room of the school where the research was conducted. For ensuring the internal validity of the experimental study, the members of the experimental and control groups were selected from different classrooms so as not to affect the results of the experimental procedure to minimize communication between the experimental and control groups. The group counseling program conducted in this study aimed to increase self-esteem in middle-school students, and various sources were used to create this program and design its activities (Sır, 2022). Further, Büyüköztürk, Kılıç-Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz, and Demirel (2008) study was taken as a reference to choose the method of analysis. Before conducting the program with the experimental group, the researcher consulted two experts with doctoral qualifications in the field of guidance and counseling.

2.6. Intervention Plan

Session 1: The session started with the group members and the leader sitting in a circle. In an introductory activity, the group leader asked the students to find a positive adjective for themselves with the initial letter of their names and to introduce themselves. After all the students introduced themselves, they were asked to say the adjectives and names of their groupmates, in turn, to get to know each other positively. Group members were asked to introduce themselves each time they took the floor. Group rules were established with the members. The group leader distributed emotions cards

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and explained the names of emotions and how they can be felt in different intensities. The leader asked the students to relate the emotions on the emotions card with their experiences and emphasized the importance of sharing emotions in healthy ways.

Session 2: After the group leader asked how the students spent the week and how they were doing, they presented a summary of the previous week's session. The leader asked students to write down the characteristics they liked and disliked about themselves on a worksheet. Students formed pairs, and they were asked to read the characteristics they had listed with the phrase "I am...." Students performed activities on topics such as describing a situation in which they felt successful, the things they would like to change about themselves, and the importance of accepting themselves as they are with their positive and negative characteristics. At the end of the session, the group leader asked the students to describe themselves with three positive sentences, and they ended the session.

Session 3: After the group leader asked how the students spent the week and how they were doing, they presented a summary of the previous week's session. Activities were carried out on topics such as the importance of students expressing themselves, using body language, making sentences using I-language and you-language, and listening without being judgmental. Role-playing activities were carried out on topics such as expressing ourselves in interpersonal relationships and effective listening.

Session 4: The leader explained the concept of roles to the students and discussed the different roles in our lives, such as student, son/daughter, friend, nephew, niece, and team member, and that we may not be able to fulfill every one of our roles well. Students were provided a Role Questionnaire and asked to express how they feel about their roles as student, friend, and individuals and their thoughts about these roles.

Session 5: The aim was to show students the importance of setting learning goals for developing self-esteem. Various activities were carried out with the students on topics such as what kind of a student they want to be, how they can create goals, what they can do to achieve these goals, and what they need. The leader asked the students where and how they would like to see themselves after one year.

Session 6: In this session, the group leader carried out practices on topics such as improving social relations, developing a sense of self-confidence in social environments, and developing the ability to say no and be assertive. The students were divided into groups of two and given topics such as being forced by a friend to do something you do not want to do and forgetting to go to an appointment. They were asked to act in sociable and timid roles. At the end of the role-play, there was a group interaction on dimensions such as how students felt and what they thought.

Session 7: This session was focused on creating goals for students to feel better about themselves emotionally and physically and to build healthy friendships. Through the ABC model, students performed activities on examples related to the dimensions of a situation, thought, and emotion. Emphasizing that the main factor that constitutes our emotions, regardless of the situations experienced, is the dimension of thought, activities were carried out on the idea that if we can change what we think about ourselves in any situation we experience, our emotions can also change. Further, students engaged in activities to recognize perfectionist thoughts and to understand that being perfect is not possible or realistic.

Session 8: An evaluation of the work conducted in the group environment in the previous seven sessions was conducted. There were discussions regarding students' learnings about the aspects they liked and disliked about themselves, the roles they have and how not all roles can be equally liked, their goals as students, how it is not possible to be perfect, and so on. There was also a conversation about what the students learned from the activities and how the end of the group process affected them. Group members were asked to say goodbye to each other with positive sentences, and the group process ended.

3. FINDINGS

The results of the descriptive and normality analysis of the data obtained within the scope of the research are presented in Table 1. As seen in Table 1, the pre-test score averages of the participants in the experimental group were determined as $X = 21.63$ ($SD = 1.74$), and their post-test score averages were determined as $X = 31.54$ ($SD = 3.50$). The pre-test score averages of the participants in the control group were determined as $X = 20.60$ ($SD = 1.34$), and their post-test score averages were determined as $X = 20.90$ ($SD = 1.57$).

Table 1. Descriptive and normality analysis results of pre-test and post-test data of experimental and control groups.

	Experimental Group		Control group	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
N	11	11	10	10
X	21.63	31.54	20.60	20.90
Ss	1.74	3.50	1.34	1.57
Skewness	.54	1.62	-.77	-1.07
Kurtosis	.20	2.58	-.12	2.90

To examine the difference between the pre-test score averages of the experimental and control groups, a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was applied. The findings regarding the analysis results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test results for the pre-test data of the experimental and control groups

	Group	N	X_{order}	$\sum_{order}$	U	Z	p
Pre-test	Experimental	11	12.59	138.50	37.50	-1.26	.22
	Control	10	9.25	92.50			

When Table 2 is examined, it is determined that there is no significant difference between the pre-test data score averages of the participants in the experimental and control groups ($Z = -1.26$, $p > .05$). A non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was applied to examine the difference between the post-test score averages of the experimental and control groups. The findings regarding the analysis results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Non-parametric Mann Whitney-U test results for the post-test data of the experimental and control groups.

	Group	N	$X_{sıra}$	$\sum_{sıra}$	U	Z	p
Post-test	Experimental	11	16.00	176.00	.000	-3.89	.00*
	Control	10	5.50	55.00			

$p<.05$

When Table 3 is examined, it is determined that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the post-test data of the participants in the experimental and control groups ($Z = -3.89$, $p < .05$). The mean scores of the post-test data of the participants in the experimental group ($X = 31.54$) were found to be higher than those of the control group ($X = 20.90$). Therefore, the first hypothesis of the research, "The post-test scores of the students in the experimental group participating in the group counseling practice from the self-esteem scale will be statistically higher

than the post-test scores of the students in the control group from the self-esteem scale" has been confirmed.

Non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test was applied to compare the pretest and post-test mean scores of the participants in the experimental group. The findings of the analysis results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test for pre-test and post-test data of the experimental group.

	Measurement	N	X_{order}	$\sum_{order}$	Z	p
Experimental Group	Positive order	11	6.00	66.00	-2.96	.00*
	Negative order	0	0.00	0.00		
	Equal	0				

When Table 4 is examined, a significant difference is found between the pre-test and post-test scores of the participants in the experimental group (Z = -2.96, p < .05). It is observed that the average scores of the pre-test data (X = 21.63) of the participants in the experimental group are lower than the average scores of the post-test data (X = 31.54). Therefore, the second hypothesis of the research, "The distribution of the post-test scores of the students in the experimental group participating in the group counseling practice from the self-esteem scale will be significantly higher than the distribution of the pre-test scores" was confirmed.

Non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test was applied to compare the pretest and posttest mean scores of the participants in the control group. The findings of the analysis results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test results for the pre-test and post-test data of the control group.

	Measurement	N	X_{order}	$\sum_{order}$	Z	p
Control Group	Positive order	3	3.50	10.50	.00	1.00
	Negative Order	3	3.50	10.500		
	Equal	4				

When Table 5 is examined, it is determined that there is no significant difference between the mean scores of the control group's pretest and posttest data (Z = .00, p > .05).

4. DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of a group counseling program for improving self-esteem conducted with middle-school students. The results indicate that the self-esteem scores of the experimental and control groups in the pretest and posttest differed, with the experimental group's scores increasing in the posttest. This study's results uphold the findings of past studies in the area. An examination of the literature from Turkey reveals that although a limited number of studies are aimed at improving self-esteem, the results obtained are positive (Ordu, 2005).

As for research from other countries, psychoeducation programs aimed at supporting students with low self-esteem are based on various theoretical foundations and there are positive results (Steese et al, 2006). McVey, Davis, Tweed, and Shaw (2004) conducted a study on adolescents and determined that a life skills development psychoeducation program was effective in increasing students' satisfaction with their body image and self-esteem. Bozanoğlu (2005) determined that a program based on the cognitive-behavioral approach had a positive effect in increasing the self-esteem of students who lost one academic year and continued to be in high school. Kim (2008) examined the effect of a group psychological counseling program based on reality therapy to reduce internet addiction and increase university students' self-esteem. The study was conducted over five sessions,

with two sessions per week. The results showed that the program based on reality therapy was effective in decreasing students' internet addiction and increasing their self-esteem. Lazaro et al. (2011) aimed to improve social skills and increase self-esteem in adolescents diagnosed with eating disorders through group therapy. They found that group therapy was effective in increasing self-esteem, improving the perception of physical appearance, and increasing the level of happiness in adolescents. Doğru and Peker (2004) applied a self-esteem development program to 16 high-school students, divided into experimental and control groups. The program focused on self-expression, communication, goals, taking responsibility, mutual acceptance, and support. There was a significant increase in the self-esteem scores of high-school students in the experimental group compared to the control group. Similarly, the program implemented in the current study was effective in increasing participants' self-esteem. The evaluation of students' positive and negative characteristics, the importance of accepting themselves as they are in all aspects, communication, effective listening, self-expression, and the activities carried out in the sessions had a positive impact on strengthening self-esteem. Further, activities related to the different roles we have and our feelings and thoughts about these roles, the goals set as students, improving social relations and increasing self-confidence in social environments, developing the ability to say no, being assertive, and understanding the importance of our thoughts on the emergence of our emotions and behaviors are considered useful. The group process was also effective in increasing the self-esteem scores of the experimental group. Group practices have positive effects on interpersonal communication, interaction, modeling, and collaboration (Lukens & McFarlane, 2004). Additionally, factors such as people modeling each other, decreasing the feeling of loneliness, and the coming together of people with similar problems are thought to be effective in the increase in self-esteem scores in the experimental group.

The intervention program developed in this study was conducted with seventh-graders in middle school. Future studies can focus on the effects of group counseling programs for different school levels. Researchers predict that programs for improving self-esteem in primary, secondary, and high-school students will make significant contributions to the psychological well-being of children and adolescents and their mental health in adulthood. In the studies conducted with middle school students, it was seen that they benefited from activities such as active listening, using I language, saying no, expressing their thoughts and feelings in interpersonal relations, and improving their assertiveness skills. In addition to this, various applications have been made on subjects such as the roles of the students, their goals as students, what they can do to achieve these goals and what they need. Based on the finding that the self-esteem levels of the students in the experimental group increased as a result of the study, it is recommended to conduct group studies in secondary school guidance services on subjects such as effective communication, expressing our thoughts and feelings, the roles we have, reaching our goals, and assertiveness education. In addition, it is recommended that school psychological counselors give seminars and training on subjects such as expressing feelings and thoughts appropriately, communicating effectively, and using self-language. In addition, various studies can be carried out for families by school psychological counselors. It is recommended that seminars be given to mothers and fathers on topics such as establishing healthy communication with young people, especially in adolescence, and what healthy and unhealthy child-rearing attitudes are. The lack of follow-up measurements in the current study is considered a limitation of the research. The follow-up measurements, which were planned to be taken a few months after the end of the group program, could not be made due to the earthquake in Kahramanmaraş on 06.02.2023 and the closure of schools.

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Ethics Committee Decision

This research was carried out with the permission of DicleUniversity Social and Human Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee with the decision numbered E-14679147-663.05-391910 dated 14.11.2022.

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