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Positive Counseling And Group Dynamics For Slow Learner Independence: Konseling Positif dan Dinamika Kelompok untuk Kemandirian Siswa yang Lambat Belajar

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Abstract

General Background Inclusive education policies mandate equitable psychological and pedagogical support for all learners, particularly those with diverse cognitive profiles. **Specific Background** Borderline intellectual functioning places adolescents at substantial risk of chronic academic failure, necessitating proactive interventions to build self-regulation, initiative, and responsibility. **Knowledge Gap** Conventional school guidance predominantly relies on reactive, deficiency-based remediation rather than leveraging positive psychological resources and collaborative peer interactions to build autonomy. **Aims** This Classroom Action Research investigates the application of strength-based cooperative therapy to cultivate academic autonomy among marginalized adolescents within an inclusive junior high school setting. **Results** Following two cyclical interventions incorporating gratitude exercises, hope mapping, and collaborative support, participants' autonomous engagement metrics transitioned from a low baseline of 38.1 percent to a very high category of 89.1 percent. Observational assessments further confirmed substantial progression in self-confidence, collaborative participation, and academic self-regulation. **Novelty** This research distinctly integrates positive psychology principles with peer therapeutic factors, shifting the intervention paradigm from deficit correction to psychological strength optimization. **Implications** Educational institutions must prioritize strength-based cooperative therapies as a primary preventative framework to foster holistic academic autonomy among vulnerable student populations.

Highlights

- ♦ Strength-based therapeutic interventions significantly elevate academic autonomy and self-regulation among marginalized adolescents.
- ♦ Iterative cooperative peer support strategies successfully transition at-risk individuals from passive dependency to active classroom participation.
- ♦ Psychological resource optimization drastically transitions autonomous engagement metrics from low baseline levels to exceptional proficiency.

Keywords

Positive Psychology; Inclusive Education; Academic Autonomy; Classroom Action Research; Therapeutic Peer Support

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, inclusion is the dominant principle of contemporary education systems. It is based on the premise that all students, regardless of their learning traits or abilities, have the right to equal, meaningful and high quality educational services. This commitment has been further reinforced in Indonesia by the national education policies for inclusive schooling under the umbrella of Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn). The government is committed to expanding educational access for all learners and this has resulted in a continued increase in the number of schools implementing inclusive education. Nevertheless, the growth of inclusive education has not always been matched by sufficient psychological and pedagogical support services particularly for students who face learning difficulties but do not satisfy the formal requirements for special educational needs. One of them is students who are at risk of slow learning who often experience academic difficulties and limited focused intervention (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Borderline intellectual functioning is estimated to be between 13% and 15% of the general population internationally. It is typically defined as persons with an intelligence quotient (IQ) score of between 70 and 85 (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). While not all of these individuals will be diagnosed with intellectual disability, many have slow cognitive processing, difficulty with abstract reasoning, limited working memory and little control of attention, which can adversely affect their academic achievement (Hallahan et al., 2021). In the educational setting, such characteristics are often seen as slow understanding of instructional material, challenge in following multi-step directions, slow acquisition of new concepts, and increased need for repetition and structured learning support. As a result, students at risk for slow learning are particularly vulnerable to continued failure in school if they do not receive sufficient educational intervention.

International education assessments also highlight the urgency of the matter. The latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows that there is a large gap in learning between students in Indonesia and students in the rest of the world with almost one-third of students below minimum proficiency levels in literacy and mathematics (OECD, 2022). Moreover, the National Assessment in Indonesia has always shown significant differences in learning outcomes among regions, especially in schools with limited educational resources and professional support services (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). Although slow learning traits alone cannot explain low academic achievement, the findings suggest that a large portion of students need more personalized education support to attain the desired learning outcomes. Challenges increase during early adolescence, a developmental period when students are expected to exhibit greater autonomy, responsibility and self-regulation in learning. Learning independence is a key competence that enables students to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning activities, while remaining motivated and persistent when faced with academic difficulties. At the same time, at-risk students often demonstrate lower learning independence than their peers. They often depend much on teachers or classmates to complete academic tasks, lack confidence to make independent decisions, and lack the self-regulation of learning behaviors. Zimmerman and Schunk (2021) suggest that these patterns of dependence are primarily related to limitations in executive functioning and self-regulated learning. If not addressed, low learning independence can lead to decreased intrinsic motivation, increased academic anxiety, reduced academic engagement and a higher risk of school dropout (OECD, 2022).

But many schools still tend to use guidance and counseling services for problem-oriented and remedial interventions rather than preventive and developmental approaches. Often, traditional counseling is reactive, addressing behavioral or emotional problems after they have already appeared, rather than using what students can already do to keep problems from getting out of hand. Recent advances in positive psychology have changed the focus from deficiency-based interventions to interventions that target individuals' strengths, personal resources, and psychological well-being (Seligman, 2021). The positive counseling based on the principles of positive psychology is a proactive approach that aims at fostering optimism, resilience, self-efficacy, gratitude, hope and other positive psychological characteristics, which help individuals to work more efficiently in educational and social environments. Empirical evidence suggests that positive psychology interventions are promising in promoting significant gains in students' academic engagement, emotional well-being, life satisfaction, and overall school adjustment (Rashid & McGrath, 2020; Waters & Loton, 2021). Besides individual psychological factors, students' learning behaviors are also affected by the social contexts in which educational interventions take place. Group dynamics foster a safe interpersonal environment where behavioural and emotional growth can occur through peer interaction. Yalom and Leszcz (2020) have identified several therapeutic factors that are contained within effective group interventions, such as group cohesion, universality, interpersonal learning, mutual support, altruism, and observational learning. These mechanisms offer opportunities for participants to increase self-awareness, confidence, communication skills and adaptive coping skills. Students at risk of slow learning might benefit from attending structured counseling groups which can reduce their sense of academic isolation, improve their sense of belonging and encourage them to participate more actively in learning activities. Interventions carried out in groups tend to be more effective than those focused solely on the individual in improving the social competence, self-regulation and collaborative learning skills of students with learning difficulties (Florian, 2021).

The context of SMPN 1 Muara Wahau as an inclusive junior high school shows the opportunities and challenges in providing appropriate counseling services for students who are at risk of slow learning. The school counseling teacher's initial observations revealed that some students had difficulty understanding complex classroom instructions, required repeated instructions to complete academic tasks, and relied excessively on teachers and classmates during classroom activities. Also, many students seemed reluctant to share their thoughts in class discussions and lacked confidence when asked to work on their own. The findings suggest that existing counseling services should be more systematic, preventive and strength-based to develop students' psychological resources as well as their academic competencies. To address these problems, the study used a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design, which allows practitioners to systematically improve educational practices through iterative cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection (Kemmis et al., 2021). School counseling is a particularly appropriate setting for classroom action research because it enables counselors to continually evaluate and

enhance intervention strategies based on the students' responses during the implementation process. This kind of iterative process allows counseling services to be responsive to the changing needs of students and provides real-world evidence of the effectiveness of the intervention in real school contexts.

An important priority in inclusive education is to enhance the learning autonomy of students at risk of slow learning, as discussed above. One promising venue is a positive counseling approach based on group dynamics, incorporating the strengths-based principles of positive psychology and the therapeutic benefits of peer interaction. Therefore, this research aims to examine the implementation of positive counseling approaches based on group dynamics in improving the learning independence of students at risk of slow learning at SMPN 1 Muara Wahau. The findings are expected to provide empirical evidence for the establishment of guidance and counseling services in inclusive schools and practical recommendations for the support of students at high academic risk who are not formally recognized as students with special educational needs.

METHOD

This study used a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design in the effort to improve the effectiveness of guidance and counseling services in developing the learning independence of students at risk of slow learning. CAR was chosen because it allows counselors to systematically apply, assess, and improve interventions through ongoing cycles of reflective practice. The study employed the action research framework suggested by Kemmis et al. (2021) that includes four iterative stages: planning, action, observation and reflection. Furthermore, a qualitative descriptive approach supported by quantitative data was used to gain a comprehensive understanding of both the intervention process and its outcomes. This mixed approach enabled the researchers to study behavioral changes taking place during the counseling sessions while objectively measuring improvements in students' learning independence. This research was conducted at SMPN 1 Muara Wahau, an inclusive junior secondary school in East Kutai Regency, Kalimantan Timur, Indonesia. The sample consisted of 20 seventh grade students. There were 14 regular students and 6 students at risk of slow learning. Student Selection Students were chosen based on the following criteria: (1) below the school's Minimum Mastery Criterion (MMC) for academic achievement, (2) slower comprehension of instructional materials as compared to their classmates, (3) needed repeated explanations during classroom instruction, (4) recommendations from subject teachers and the school counselor, and (5) borderline learning capacity characteristics as shown in a preliminary assessment. The counseling intervention was carried out in two action cycles, the second cycle aimed to improve the aspects that have not yet achieved the expected results in the first cycle.

The intervention had positive group counseling sessions which aimed at fostering students' psychological resources and learning independence through structured group dynamics. During counseling, students were involved in several positive psychology interventions including strength exploration, positive reflection, gratitude exercises, hope mapping, and self-efficacy enhancement. The activities were aimed to boost students' confidence, optimism, intrinsic motivation, responsibility and initiative in learning and to foster supportive peer interaction in the counseling group. The two action cycles were iterative, so the intervention could be refined continually as a result of the reflection that followed each cycle. Methodological triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple instruments for data collection. During the counseling sessions, observation sheets were used to record students' change of behavior and group interaction. A Learning Independence Questionnaire was used to measure students' emotional, social and academic independence using four-point Likert scale. Additional qualitative data were obtained via semi-structured interviews with students and the school counselor and via documentation and reflective notes to document the implementation process. The quantitative data were analyzed descriptively by using percentage comparison and mean score at pre-intervention, Cycle I, and Cycle II. Qualitative data were analyzed through data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing according to Creswell and Creswell (2022). The intervention was deemed successful if at least 75% of the students attained a high level of learning independence and the average score of learning independence increased by at least 20% from the baseline, with observable improvements in students' initiative, responsibility, self-confidence, decision-making ability, and self-regulation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Initial Condition (Pre-Test)

Before the intervention was applied, the six students categorized as being at risk for slow learning were given a pretest to find out their initial level of learning independence. The findings showed that the students had a low to moderate level of learning independence in general. There were four students who were classified in the low category and the other two students were classified as moderate learning independence. The results show that most of the students had not yet developed the self-regulatory skills and autonomous learning behaviors expected at the junior secondary school level. The results of the pre-test also revealed several behavioral characteristics related to low learning independence. Most of the students expressed low self-confidence in expressing their opinions in classroom activities and counseling sessions. They were likely to be passive, avoided initiating discussions and were reluctant to answer teachers' questions without encouragement. This lack of confidence seemed to limit their active engagement in the academic and social learning contexts. Moreover the students were prone to depend on their fellow students to accomplish learning tasks. Rather than trying to solve problems on their own, they often asked for help from peers before trying themselves. Such dependence suggests a limited belief in their abilities and a lack of development of self-directed learning skills, which are critical for successful academic achievement. The first observation also revealed that students were not engaged in collaborative learning activities. They rarely came up with ideas, took on responsibilities in the group or participated in the decision-making. Moreover, the students showed problems with self-organization of their own learning, such as organizing their study time, doing tasks independently and being consistently responsible for their academic assignments. Overall, these pre-

intervention results justified the need for a structured counseling intervention to reinforce students' confidence, responsibility, initiative and self-regulation as core elements of learning independence.

Cycle I Results

In the stage of planning the researcher prepared all instructional and research components necessary to carry out the first intervention cycle. The activities include the development of the Guidance and Counseling Service Implementation Plan (RPLBK), the preparation of counseling materials based on the principles of positive counseling, the design of observation sheets and learning independence questionnaires, and the determination of the schedule for counseling sessions. The Cycle I counseling materials were designed to assist students in identifying their strengths, building confidence, and fostering positive group dynamics in the development of learning independence. The intervention was conducted in group counseling sessions with a positive counseling approach based on the group dynamics. The activities commenced with an ice-breaking session to establish a comfortable and supportive environment among the participants. Next students did strength exploration in which they identified their own strengths and previous successful experiences. This activity was then followed by positive reflection in which students shared positive experiences and learned from each other. The session ended with a group discussion on independent learning behaviors and students were encouraged to share ideas on responsibility, initiative and self-directed learning. Most students appeared shy and reluctant to actively participate at the beginning of the intervention. However, with the continued encouragement of the counselor and fellow students, several students gradually gained confidence in sharing their opinions and participating in group discussions. These results meant that the counseling activities could make the learning environment more supportive and decrease the students' reluctance to interact socially.

The observation during Cycle I showed a lot of improvement of students' learning behaviors. The self-confidence of students improved the most, and group participation and task independence also increased compared to the initial condition, but both remained at a moderate level.

Table 1. *Observation Results of Cycle I*

Indicator	Mean Score	Category
Self-confidence	2.6	High
Group participation	2.2	Moderate
Task independence	2.1	Moderate

It was observed that students' willingness to participate in counseling sessions increased. The improvements were particularly evident in self-confidence as a number of students began to express their opinions spontaneously and interact more easily with their classmates. Still, participation was uneven and there were students who needed prompts from the counselor before participating in group discussion. Similarly, although students demonstrated greater responsibility in completing assigned tasks, some students still relied on their classmates when they were tackling more difficult tasks. The results imply that the intervention resulted in promising behavioral changes but required additional reinforcement to reinforce students' independent learning behaviors. The post-test administered at the end of Cycle I indicated a significant increase in the students' learning independence when compared to the pre-test. One student scored in the high category while the other 5 students scored in the moderate category. Importantly, there were no students in the low category after the completion of the first cycle.

Table 2. *Post-Test Results of Cycle I*

Student	Score	Percentage	Category
Student 1	44	61.1%	High
Student 2	42	58.3%	Moderate
Student 3	43	59.7%	Moderate
Student 4	40	55.5%	Moderate
Student 5	30	41.6%	Moderate
Student 6	31	43.0%	Moderate

The post-test results show that the positive counseling intervention can improve the students' learning independence. Students expressed ideas more confidently, participated more in group activities, and took more responsibility for learning tasks. These improvements were encouraging, although most of the participants had not reached the expected level of learning independence yet, which was established as the success criterion of the study. Therefore, a second cycle of action was considered necessary for further intervention to achieve more consistent and sustainable improvement in behaviors. The reflection phase showed that the application of positive counseling using group dynamics had started to give a positive change that was meaningful to the students' independence in learning. Compared to the first condition, students were more confident, active in discussions and willing to interact with peers during counseling sessions. Despite the positive developments, there were still a number of challenges. Some students still were not confident to give their opinion because they were afraid to make mistakes. Secondly, the counseling groups were still unevenly participated. Some students still needed continuous guidance and encouragement from the counselor to actively participate in the discussion. Third, some students depended on their classmates when doing learning tasks, especially when they considered the tasks to be difficult. The findings were used in developing Cycle II which was designed to promote active student participation, build student self-confidence, foster student initiative in group interactions, and improve student independent learning behaviors through more intensive positive counseling activities and structured peer support.

Cycle II Results

Cycle II planning stage was performed based on the reflection results obtained in Cycle I. During the previous cycle, several enhancements were implemented to optimize the efficacy of the counseling intervention and to tackle the remaining

challenges. The researcher increased the number of participatory activities to encourage students to be more involved, provided more intensive positive feedback throughout the counseling sessions to reinforce students' confidence and motivation, and optimized peer interaction within the counseling groups to reinforce mutual support and collaborative learning. These changes were intended to promote greater initiative, responsibility and self-regulation on the part of students while creating a more supportive and engaging group environment. Cycle II counseling was expected to improve the positive behavioral changes that began to develop in Cycle I. Students were engaged in activities to reinforce successful experiences, to provide mutual support between peers, to set simple and achievable goals for learning and to reflect on their personal development during the intervention. In contrast to the first cycle, students seemed much more confident and actively involved from the beginning of the sessions. They took an active part in the discussions, were open to sharing their personal experiences and showed more initiative in the group activities. The counseling groups became more and more collaborative as students built each other up and supported each other in the learning process. These findings suggest that the improvements made in the planning stage were successful in increasing the effectiveness of the positive counseling intervention. Observations from Cycle II showed significant gains in all of the observed indicators of learning independence. All indicators were in the very high category compared to Cycle I which indicated that students had become significantly more independent, confident, and actively involved in the counseling process.

Table 3. Observation Results of Cycle II

Indicator	Mean Score	Category
Self-confidence	4.6	Very High
Group participation	4.3	Very High
Task independence	4.1	Very High

The result of observation shows that there was a significant increase in students' behavior in the second cycle. Students were more confident in expressing opinions, participated in discussions without constant prompting from the counselor, and worked well with peers. Moreover, they showed more responsibility in completing learning tasks independently and showed more self-regulation in counseling activities. The students demonstrated greater initiative and were more receptive to making decisions independently during individual and group learning activities than in the previous cycle. The increase of students' learning independence can be seen from the post-test after Cycle II. All six students were in the very high category which suggested that the intervention has met the success criteria that was set for the study.

Table 4. Post-Test Results of Cycle II

Student	Score	Percentage	Category
Student 1	69	95.8%	Very High
Student 2	67	93%	Very High
Student 3	65	90%	Very High
Student 4	64	88.8%	Very High
Student 5	62	86.1%	Very High
Student 6	60	83.3%	Very High

The results show that students showed considerable gains in learning independence compared to both the baseline assessment and Cycle I. All participants reached the target level of independence, indicating that more than 75% of the students achieved a high level of learning independence and the mean score was improved by well over the required 20% improvement from the pre-test condition. The results confirm the effectiveness of the positive counseling approach based on group dynamics to spread independent learning among students at risk of slow learning. The overall effectiveness of the intervention was found out by comparing the learning independence score obtained in the pre-test, Cycle I and Cycle II. Results indicated a steady upward trend throughout the intervention.

Table 5. Recapitulation of Learning Independence Improvement

Stage	Percentage	Category
Pre-Test	38.1%	Low
Cycle I	52.8%	Moderate
Cycle II	89.1%	Very High

From the comparison, it can be seen clearly that the students' learning independence improved gradually in both cycles of the intervention. The average score of learning independence increased significantly from 38.1% before the intervention to 52.8% after Cycle I, after the first implementation of positive counseling. After the refinements in Cycle II, the average score increased to 89.1%, which put students in the very high category. This trend shows that the ongoing reflection and improvement during the cycles of Classroom Action Research played a major role in the success of the intervention.

Table 6. Recapitulation of Learning Independence Indicators

Indicator	Cycle I	Cycle II
Self-confidence	2.6	4.6
Group participation	2.2	4.3
Task independence	2.1	4.1

The increase of all observed indicators from Cycle I to Cycle II was significant as shown in Table 6. The largest change was in self-confidence where there was an increase from 2.6 to 4.6 showing that students were much more willing to express opinions and participate actively in learning activities. The group participation increased significantly from 2.2 to 4.3, which indicated the increase of collaboration, communication, and interaction with peers during the counseling sessions. Likewise, the students' task independence increased from 2.1 to 4.1, which meant that they were not only better at completing academic tasks independently but also took on more responsibility for their own learning. In general, the improvements that occurred consistently, both in quantitative outcomes and behavioral observations indicate that the positive counseling

approach based on group dynamics is very effective in improving the learning independence of students at risk of slow learning. Students developed as more autonomous learners in the inclusive school environment through ongoing positive reinforcement, positive peer interaction and structured reflective activities resulting in increased confidence, initiative, responsibility and self-regulation.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the application of a positive counseling approach based on group dynamics can effectively improve the learning independence of students at risk of slow learning at SMPN 1 Muara Wahau. The improvement was indicated by the gradual increase of students' learning independence from the initial condition (38.1%; low category) to Cycle I (52.8%; moderate category) and to Cycle II (89.1%; very high category). In addition to the quantitative improvement, qualitative observations showed positive behavioral changes, including more self-confidence, more participation in group discussions, more responsibility for academic tasks, and less dependence on teachers and peers. These findings imply that positive counseling could enhance students' psychological resources and facilitate meaningful changes in behavior that are conducive to independent learning. Students at risk of slow learning typically show low level of learning independence before intervention. Before the counseling program was implemented, the students had no initiative, often relied on their classmates to do the assignments, were reluctant to express their opinions, and were not confident in classroom activities. These behaviors indicate that their learning difficulties were not only due to cognitive limitations but were also related to insufficient self-regulation, low self-efficacy and limited opportunities to experience academic success. This finding supports the argument that interventions for students at risk for slow learning should address psychological and social dimensions in addition to academic performance, as learning independence develops through the interaction of cognitive, emotional, and environmental factors.

The changes in behaviors observed in Cycle I show that the positive counseling created a psychologically safe environment where students were gradually more willing to participate in the learning activities. Students were encouraged to recognize their abilities rather than focus on their weaknesses through strength exploration and positive reflection. With the progress of the counseling sessions, students started to express their opinions with more confidence, participated in discussions and initiated simple learning tasks independently. The findings demonstrate the tenets of positive psychology that focus on the fact that acknowledging one's strengths promotes optimism, motivation and psychological well-being leading to increased involvement in learning (Waters & Loton, 2021). Moreover, the supportive relationship between the counselor and students favored the formation of trust, which is considered as an essential prerequisite for effective behavioral change in group counseling settings. The first cycle gave encouraging results, but the improvement did not reach the expected level. Some students were still reluctant to actively involve themselves in the class and still depended on their friends when they had difficulty doing the tasks. These findings can be understood in the light of the characteristics of the slow learning risk students. Students like this usually need more time, repeated practice and consistent reinforcements before the new behaviors become stable. Thus, the Cycle II interventions with more peer interaction, goal setting activities, more intensive positive feedback, and continuous reinforcement of successful experiences provided more opportunities for students to internalize independent learning behaviors. The considerable enhancement observed in the second cycle suggests that behavioral change in students at risk of slow learning is a slow process and needs continuous intervention rather than one-time counseling activities.

The notable enhancement in Cycle II can also be interpreted through the lens of Self-Regulated Learning Theory, which emphasizes that successful learners intentionally strategize, supervise, and assess their own learning endeavors (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2021). During the counseling sessions, students gradually learned to set realistic learning goals, organize their learning activities, try to solve problems on their own, and reflect on their own learning progress before seeking help. As these self-regulatory behaviors became more consistent, students took more responsibility for their academic tasks and relied more on their own abilities than on external supports. This suggests that the intervention was successful in improving students' ability to self-regulate their own learning, one of the components of learning independence. Further evidence of the usefulness of the intervention came from the therapeutic processes that emerged through group dynamics. The counseling sessions gave the students to support each other, to experience similar learning challenges and to provide emotional support. These interactions helped to create a stronger sense of group identity, and to reduce feelings of isolation among participants. These results are consistent with Yalom and Leszcz's theory of therapeutic factors in group counseling, particularly with the principles of universality, instillation of hope, and interpersonal learning, which promote behavioral change through supportive relationships with peers. As the group environment became more cohesive the students became more open to express themselves, learn from others' experiences and grew more confident in handling their own learning challenges.

Another important finding of this study is related to the enhancement of the individual components of learning independence. Students showed more initiative in starting learning activities, took more responsibility for finishing assignments, expressed ideas with more confidence, made better decisions, and showed better self-regulation over the course of the intervention. These improvements indicate that the learning independence is a multidimensional construct including the emotional, social and academic competencies and not a mere ability to perform the tasks independently. The combination of strength exploration, positive reflection, hope mapping, goal setting, and peer support allowed students to develop these interconnected dimensions simultaneously leading to more holistic behavioral development. The present results are in agreement with prior studies that report group counseling interventions improve the psychological functioning of students with learning difficulties. This study, however, extends the previous findings by incorporating positive counseling principles within group dynamics to emphasize the development of students' strengths rather than focusing solely on deficits or maladaptive behaviors. The intervention was not only focused on cognitive restructuring or behavioral modification but also raised students' awareness about their personal potential, allowed them to experience repeated success, and offered them continuous social support from peers. As a consequence, not only academic responsibility, but also confidence, motivation, social interaction, and autonomous decision making showed gains. These findings also support Positive

Education, Self-Determination Theory, Self-Regulated Learning Theory and the principles of inclusive education, all of which emphasize that meaningful learning occurs when students' psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness are satisfied.

The study suggests that positive counseling based on group dynamics is an effective guidance and counseling strategy to promote learning independence for students at risk of slow learning in inclusive schools. The intervention led to a progressive behavioral change, starting with improvements in emotional aspects, then with increased social participation and finally with greater academic independence. These findings provide empirical support for strength-based counseling in inclusive educational environments and suggest that systematic, reflexive, and collaborative counseling interventions can have a positive contribution to students' psychological development and independent learning behaviors. Also, the study has practical implications for school counselors since it underscores the necessity of incorporating positive psychology tenets and structured group interaction in counseling services for students with learning vulnerabilities.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this classroom action research, it can be concluded that the implementation of the positive counseling approach based on group dynamics is effective in improving the learning independence of students at risk of slow learning at SMPN 1 Muara Wahau. The intervention was systematically implemented through two action research cycles of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection, using positive counseling techniques such as strength exploration, positive reflection, gratitude exercise, hope mapping, goal setting, and peer support in a supportive group counseling setting. The intervention was successful in creating a psychologically safe environment for students to identify their strengths, build self-confidence and engage in counseling activities. Hence, students showed increasing development in several aspects of learning independence, such as being more confident in expressing opinions, more initiative in doing learning tasks independently, more responsible for academic activities, more capable in making decisions, and more self-regulated. The observation results, interview findings, and questionnaire scores consistently showed these changes in behavior, with the average learning independence level increasing from 38.1% (low category) in the pre-test to 52.8% (moderate category) after Cycle I and reaching 89.1% (very high category) after Cycle II. The findings, in general, suggest that the integration of the principles of positive counseling with group dynamics is an effective and innovative guidance and counseling intervention for the promotion of the academic, social and emotional development of students at risk of slow learning, and provides empirical support for its application in inclusive school settings.

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