



Jurnal Bimbingan Konseling

journal homepage: <https://journal.unnes.ac.id/journals/jubk>



The effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral group counseling using self-talk techniques to improve self-adjustment in junior high school students

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Article Info	Abstract
Keywords: Cognitive-behavioral, self-talk, emotional intelligence, self-adjustment	Self-adjustment is an essential developmental competency that enables adolescents to cope with academic demands, emotional challenges, and social transitions. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral group counseling using self-talk techniques in improving self-adjustment among seventh-grade junior high school students. A quantitative approach with a pretest–posttest control-group design was employed, involving 12 students selected through purposive sampling and assigned to experimental and control groups. Data were analyzed using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test and Mann–Whitney U test. The results demonstrated a substantial increase in the experimental group's mean self-adjustment score from 45.83 to 65.33, whereas the control group showed minimal improvement from 49.33 to 49.50. The Wilcoxon test indicated a statistically significant improvement within the experimental group ($Z = -2.207$, approximately $p = .027$). These findings suggest that cognitive-behavioral group counseling incorporating self-talk techniques is a promising approach for supporting students' adjustment to academic and social demands. The study highlights the potential application of structured cognitive-behavioral interventions in school counseling, although further research is needed to confirm their comparative effectiveness and long-term outcomes.

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.15294/jubk.v15i1.28048>

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p-ISSN 2252-6889

e-ISSN 2502-4450

Introduction

Self-adjustment is a fundamental developmental competency that enables adolescents to respond adaptively to academic expectations, interpersonal relationships, emotional challenges, and environmental demands. During early adolescence, students experience substantial cognitive, emotional, and social changes that may influence their ability to function effectively within educational environments. Difficulties in self-adjustment can manifest through academic disengagement, interpersonal conflicts, emotional distress, and challenges in meeting school expectations. Azpiazu et al. (2025) demonstrated that adolescent school maladjustment is associated with contextual and psychological factors, particularly social support, self-concept, and resilience. Similarly, Fabris et al. (2024), in a study involving 698 adolescents, identified significant associations between school belonging, psychological maladjustment, and educational functioning. These findings indicate that self-adjustment is a multidimensional developmental process that requires attention to both psychological resources and students' educational environments.

The transition from elementary to junior high school represents a particularly important period for developing self-adjustment. Students encounter unfamiliar learning environments, increasing academic responsibilities, new peer relationships, and greater expectations for independent functioning. Lorian et al. (2024), through a longitudinal study involving 649 students, demonstrated that changes in peer relationships during the transition to secondary education varied according to students' previous social experiences. Furthermore, Beatson et al. (2023), in a systematic review of 26

school-based intervention studies, emphasized the importance of supporting students' social-emotional and educational adjustment during the transition between educational levels. These findings suggest that adjustment difficulties should not be viewed solely as individual shortcomings but also as developmental challenges arising from interactions between students and changing educational environments.

Recent research also highlights the importance of preventive and developmentally appropriate interventions during educational transitions. Bagnall et al. (2024) evaluated a longitudinal school-transition support program and found improvements in students' coping efficacy and transition-related experiences. Their findings emphasize the importance of systematic interventions that develop students' psychological preparedness and coping resources. In the context of junior high school education, such interventions are particularly relevant because students must simultaneously navigate academic pressures, emotional changes, and peer-related expectations. In religious boarding school environments, these demands may become more complex as students must also adapt to communal living arrangements, structured daily routines, and institutional regulations. Consequently, guidance and counseling services should address students' cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal adjustment needs through structured and contextually responsive interventions.

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) provides a relevant theoretical framework for addressing adjustment difficulties because it emphasizes the interrelationships among cognitive interpretations, emotional responses, and behavior. From this perspective, maladaptive responses may be maintained by negative automatic thoughts, dysfunctional beliefs, and inflexible interpretations of challenging experiences. Cognitive-behavioral interventions encourage individuals to recognize these patterns, evaluate their validity, and develop more adaptive cognitive and behavioral responses. Zhang et al. (2023), through a meta-analysis of 29 rigorous studies involving 22,420 students, examined the effectiveness of school-based psychological interventions targeting anxiety and depression. Their findings provide evidence supporting the relevance of structured psychological interventions in educational settings. Similarly, Tse et al. (2023) systematically reviewed school-based CBT interventions for social anxiety among children and adolescents and identified promising intervention outcomes, although methodological limitations remained. Collectively, these findings support the application of cognitive-behavioral approaches within schools while highlighting the need to investigate broader developmental outcomes, including self-adjustment.

One cognitive-behavioral strategy that may be particularly relevant to self-adjustment is self-talk. Self-talk refers to internal verbal statements through which individuals interpret experiences, evaluate their capabilities, and regulate behavioral responses. Negative self-talk, such as perceiving oneself as incapable of academic success or social acceptance, may reinforce maladaptive interpretations of school-related challenges. Conversely, constructive and realistic self-talk may help students reinterpret difficult situations, develop adaptive coping strategies, and respond more effectively to academic and interpersonal demands. Within CBT, self-talk techniques can be incorporated into cognitive restructuring processes to encourage students to identify negative automatic thoughts and formulate more functional alternatives. Ilma et al. (2024) investigated cognitive-behavioral group counseling incorporating cognitive restructuring and self-talk techniques to address students' academic procrastination, indicating the relevance of these techniques to school-related behavioral difficulties. Nevertheless, evidence concerning academic procrastination cannot be directly generalized to students' overall self-adjustment, which encompasses broader personal, social, and emotional functioning.

Integrating self-talk techniques into group counseling may provide additional opportunities for developing adaptive competencies through interpersonal interaction. Group counseling creates a structured environment in which students can discuss adjustment-related challenges, examine alternative perspectives, receive feedback, and practice more constructive cognitive and behavioral responses. Jung and Kim (2025) examined a cognitive-behavioral group counseling program involving middle school students at risk of school dropout and reported significant improvements in school adjustment, interpersonal relationships, and psychological well-being compared with a control group. This study provides more direct empirical support for applying cognitive-behavioral group counseling

to students' adjustment difficulties. However, it did not specifically isolate self-talk as the primary therapeutic technique. Accordingly, further investigation is warranted to determine whether cognitive-behavioral group counseling incorporating structured self-talk activities can improve self-adjustment among students experiencing the transition to junior high school.

Despite increasing evidence supporting school-based CBT, several research gaps remain. First, previous studies have frequently examined specific psychological or behavioral outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and academic procrastination (Ilma et al., 2024; Tse et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023), whereas relatively limited attention has been directed toward self-adjustment as a comprehensive developmental outcome. Second, although cognitive-behavioral group counseling has been investigated in relation to school adjustment (Jung & Kim, 2025), the specific application of self-talk techniques within this intervention format requires further empirical examination. Third, evidence concerning the implementation of CBT-based self-talk interventions among seventh-grade students remains contextually limited, particularly in educational environments characterized by simultaneous academic, interpersonal, and institutional adjustment demands. Addressing these gaps may provide a clearer understanding of how structured cognitive-behavioral counseling can support students during the transition to secondary education.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral group counseling using self-talk techniques in improving self-adjustment among seventh-grade junior high school students. Specifically, the study compares changes in self-adjustment between students receiving the intervention and those in a control group. The study is expected to contribute empirical evidence concerning the application of self-talk within cognitive-behavioral group counseling and provide practical implications for developing structured, developmentally appropriate guidance and counseling interventions that support students' adjustment to academic and social demands.

Method

This study used purposive sampling, considering seventh-grade junior high school students who had low tendencies in self-adjustment based on initial observations and preliminary questionnaire distribution. There were 12 participants in total, who were then divided into two groups, namely the experimental group and the control group, each consisting of six students. The experimental group received group counseling using the Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) approach with self-talk techniques, while the control group did not receive any intervention. The group counseling service with self-talk techniques consisted of six sessions, and the second group received group counseling using the CBT approach with self-talk techniques.

The data collection instrument in this study was a psychological scale, namely the Self-Adjustment Scale. The scale was developed based on theoretical reviews and adapted to the conditions of junior high school students. The scale was designed using a 4-point Likert scale (Very Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2,

Very Disagree = 1) to encourage more decisive responses and avoid central bias. The Self-Adjustment Scale is based on Schneiders' (1964) concept, covering three dimensions: personal adjustment, social adjustment, and academic adjustment. Construct validity was tested using item-total correlation (Pearson Product Moment), and reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha with a value of 0.81.

This study uses a quantitative approach with an experimental design employing a Pretest-Posttest Control Group Design. In this design, the researcher compares two or more groups receiving different treatments to observe the differences in outcomes. This experimental study involves a control group, which is not given any treatment or is given a different treatment, to ensure that the changes observed in the experimental group are caused by the treatment given, not by other factors.

The research procedure began with administering a pretest to both groups to determine their initial emotional and self-adjustment scores. Next, the experimental group was given treatment in the form of CBT group counseling using self-talk techniques, conducted in six sessions. The sessions were designed progressively, starting with self-introduction and emotions, identifying negative thoughts, practicing positive self-talk, and ending with evaluation and reinforcement. After all sessions were completed, both groups were given a post-test to measure changes in scores. The data obtained were then analyzed using the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test to examine differences before and after the intervention in the experimental group, as well as the Mann-Whitney test to compare the experimental and control groups.

Results and Discussion

The findings indicated a substantial improvement in self-adjustment among junior high school students who participated in cognitive-behavioral group counseling using self-talk techniques. Descriptive analysis revealed different patterns of change between the experimental and control groups. Although the experimental group initially demonstrated a lower mean self-adjustment score than the control group, its score increased considerably following the intervention. In contrast, the control group showed minimal change between the pretest and posttest measurements. These results suggest a favorable pattern of self-adjustment development among students who received the intervention.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Nonparametric Test Results for Students' Self-Adjustment

Variable	Group	Pre		Post		Gain		Z_1
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Self-adjustment	Experimental	45.83	2.00	65.33	3.08	19.50	5.13	-2.207
	Control	49.33	1.03	49.50	1.38	.17	1.472	-.276
		$Z_2 = -2.729$				-.903		
		Asymp. Sig. .06				Asymp. Sig. .004		

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; Gain = posttest minus pretest score; Z_1 = Wilcoxon signed-rank test statistic; Z_2 = reported Mann–Whitney U test statistic.

As presented in Table 1, the experimental group's mean self-adjustment score increased from 45.83 (*SD* = 2.00) at pretest to 65.33 (*SD* = 3.08) at posttest, representing an improvement of 19.50 points. Conversely, the control group's mean score increased only slightly, from 49.33 (*SD* = 1.03) to 49.50 (*SD* = 1.38), with a mean gain of 0.17 points. The descriptive difference in mean gains between the groups was 19.33 points. These findings suggest that students receiving cognitive-behavioral group counseling with self-talk techniques experienced considerably greater improvement in self-adjustment than those in the control group. However, the difference in baseline scores indicates that equivalence between the groups should not be assumed without further statistical examination.

The changes in mean self-adjustment scores are illustrated in Figure 1. The experimental group demonstrated a pronounced increase between pretest and posttest, whereas the control group maintained relatively stable scores.

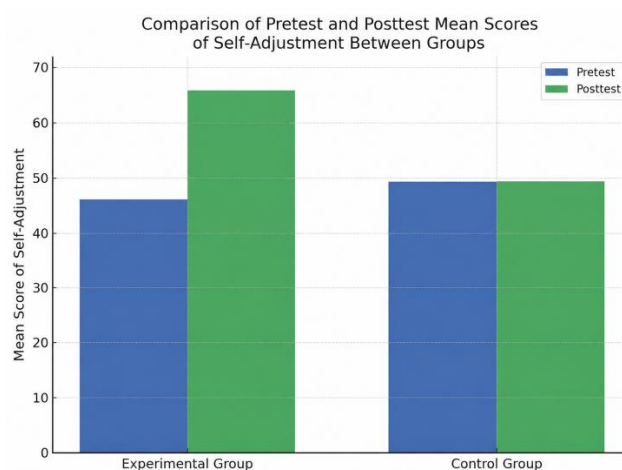


Figure 1. Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Mean Self-Adjustment Scores Between the Experimental and Control Groups

To examine changes in students' self-adjustment, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was employed for within-group comparisons, while the Mann–Whitney U test was used for between-group comparisons. The reported Wilcoxon results indicated a statistically significant change in the experimental group ($Z = -2.207$, approximate $p = .027$), whereas the control group demonstrated no statistically significant change ($Z = -0.276$, approximate $p = .783$). The original narrative additionally reported a significant posttest difference between groups ($Z = -2.903$, approximate $p = .004$). However, inconsistencies between the narrative and the original

Mann–Whitney table require verification before the between-group result can be interpreted definitively. The available inferential statistics are summarized in Table 1.

The within-group findings provide preliminary evidence of improved self-adjustment among students receiving cognitive-behavioral group counseling using self-talk techniques. The experimental group's substantial mean gain, accompanied by minimal change in the control group, suggests a favorable pattern of improvement following the intervention. However, Bland and Altman (2011) emphasized that statistically significant within-group changes do not necessarily establish superiority over a comparison group. Therefore, the Mann–Whitney results must be verified, and baseline differences should be considered when estimating comparative intervention effectiveness. This methodological consideration is particularly important for ensuring valid conclusions about treatment outcomes.

The observed improvement can be interpreted through the cognitive-behavioral framework, which emphasizes the relationships among thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Self-talk techniques encourage students to identify maladaptive thoughts, challenge negative interpretations, and develop more realistic and constructive internal statements. Ilma et al. (2024) reported that cognitive-behavioral group counseling incorporating cognitive restructuring and self-talk techniques was associated with reduced academic procrastination among students. Similarly, Steinberg et al. (2024) demonstrated that a cognitive restructuring intervention helped maintain adolescents' use of cognitive restructuring skills, although its effects on psychological symptoms did not significantly exceed those of an active comparison intervention. Furthermore, Tse et al. (2023) identified promising benefits of school-based CBT for social anxiety among children and adolescents. Collectively, these findings support the potential relevance of cognitive-behavioral self-talk for students' school adjustment, although its underlying mechanisms require further empirical investigation.

This interpretation is consistent with Ilma et al. (2024), who investigated cognitive-behavioral group counseling incorporating cognitive restructuring and self-talk techniques to reduce students' academic procrastination. Similarly, Shany Rusfa et al. (2022) reported improvements in body image satisfaction following cognitive-behavioral group counseling using self-talk techniques. Although these studies examined different outcomes, they demonstrate the applicability of cognitive-behavioral self-talk interventions to students' psychological and behavioral difficulties. The present findings extend this perspective by examining self-adjustment as a broader developmental outcome. Nevertheless, changes in negative automatic thoughts and self-talk patterns were not measured directly; therefore, cognitive restructuring remains a plausible explanatory mechanism rather than an empirically established mediator.

Self-adjustment also involves managing emotional responses to academic demands, interpersonal challenges, and unfamiliar situations. Within this context, cognitive-behavioral self-talk may encourage students to recognize negative interpretations, develop alternative perspectives, and respond more constructively to frustration. Pedrini et al. (2022), through a systematic review of school-based interventions, identified generally beneficial effects on adolescents' emotional regulation skills, although intervention outcomes varied across studies. Their findings suggest that psychological interventions addressing cognitive and emotional processes may be relevant to students' adjustment. However, the present study did not independently measure emotional regulation, and therefore improvements in this domain cannot be concluded solely from changes in overall self-adjustment scores.

The group counseling format may provide additional opportunities for interpersonal learning. Through discussion, reflection, and interaction with peers, students may explore alternative interpretations of social difficulties and practice more adaptive responses. Chen and Jiang (2024) demonstrated improvements in social adjustment following modified cognitive-behavioral group therapy among children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Similarly, Tse et al. (2023), in a systematic review, identified promising findings concerning school-based cognitive-behavioral interventions for social anxiety among children and adolescents. Although the populations and outcomes differed from those of the present study, these findings support the potential relevance of cognitive-behavioral group interventions for students experiencing interpersonal challenges.

From a broader perspective, the findings contribute to research on school-based cognitive-behavioral interventions by examining self-adjustment rather than focusing exclusively on anxiety, emotional difficulties, or specific academic behaviors. Zhang et al. (2023), in a meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials, reported beneficial effects of school-based mental health interventions targeting anxiety and depression. However, treatment outcomes are not necessarily uniform across different domains of psychological functioning. Mitchell et al. (2024), for example, found that a school-based cognitive-behavioral group counseling program improved participants' understanding of cognitive processes and coping strategies without producing a significant reduction in overall anxiety symptoms. These findings highlight the importance of distinguishing improvements in intervention-related skills from measurable changes in psychological outcomes.

The present study provides preliminary evidence that cognitive-behavioral group counseling incorporating self-talk techniques may support students' adjustment to academic and social demands. The substantial improvement observed in the experimental group suggests the potential relevance of structured cognitive-behavioral interventions in school settings. Azpiazu et al. (2024) demonstrated that school adjustment is associated with social support, resilience, and positive affect, highlighting the importance of psychological and interpersonal resources in adolescents' adaptation. Similarly, Wang et al. (2024), through a systematic review, reported small to moderate benefits of school-based transdiagnostic interventions for students' mental health. Nevertheless, the specific contribution of self-talk remains uncertain because the intervention combined cognitive-behavioral and group counseling processes.

These findings have practical implications for school guidance and counseling services, particularly during students' transition to secondary education. Lorian et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of peer relationships and individual differences in students' adjustment during school transitions. Accordingly, counselors may incorporate cognitive-behavioral self-talk activities to facilitate constructive thinking, adaptive coping, and interpersonal adjustment. However, effective implementation requires structured assessment, professional supervision, and systematic evaluation. Van Pelt et al. (2025) emphasized the importance of intervention fidelity, including adherence, dosage, and delivery quality, in evaluating school-based psychological programs. Therefore, integrating self-talk techniques with systematic monitoring may strengthen the quality and accountability of school counseling services.

Conclusion

This study indicates that cognitive-behavioral group counseling using self-talk techniques shows promise for improving self-adjustment among seventh-grade junior high school students. The experimental group demonstrated a significant within-group improvement in self-adjustment, accompanied by a substantially greater mean gain than the control group, although the between-group statistical results require further verification. These findings suggest that self-talk techniques may help students develop more adaptive thinking patterns, manage emotional responses, and cope with academic and social demands. The study highlights the potential of integrating CBT-based group counseling into school guidance and counseling programs to support students' personal and social adjustment. Further research involving larger samples, rigorous experimental designs, and follow-up assessments is recommended to establish the intervention's comparative effectiveness and long-term outcomes.

Author Contributions Statement

Meista Aditya Efha: Conceptualization, Investigation, Data curation, Visualization, Writing – original draft. **Mungin Eddy Wibowo:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – review & editing. **Ashari Mahfud:** Supervision, Project administration, Resources, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript for publication.

Declaration of Generative AI

In preparing this manuscript, the authors utilized ChatGPT to support language refinement and improve the clarity and readability of the text. The authors subsequently examined and revised the content where appropriate and accept full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final published version of the manuscript.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors confirm that they are not aware of any financial interests or personal relationships that could have unduly influenced the research or its presentation in this article.

Funding Statement

This study was conducted without dedicated grant funding from government, commercial, or non-profit funding organizations.

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