

PROMOTING SAFE EDUCATION ENVIRONMENTS: EFFECTIVENESS OF ASSERTIVENESS-BASED BST INTERVENTIONS AGAINST BULLYING

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ABSTRACT

Bullying remains a critical concern in Indonesian education, with national and global data highlighting persistently high prevalence rates and profound negative impacts on students' academic, psychological, and social well-being. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of an assertiveness counseling module, utilizing Behavioral Skills Training (BST), in reducing bullying behavior among students at MTs Muhammadiyah 22 Padangsidempuan. Employing a pre-experimental, one-group pretest-posttest design, a purposively selected sample of 50 students, representing victims, bystanders, and perpetrators, participated in the intervention. Quantitative data were collected using a validated Bullying Behavior Scale and analyzed with paired-sample t-tests. Results revealed a significant decrease in bullying tendencies post-intervention, with most students shifting from moderate/high to low/very low categories, and a large effect size indicating substantial practical impact. The findings confirm that BST-based assertiveness education is effective in transforming bullying behaviors and fostering a more positive school climate, aligning with evidence from international literature while addressing gaps in culturally relevant interventions for religious and semi-rural educational settings. This research contributes practical guidance for integrating assertiveness training into counseling curricula and underscores the urgent need for skill-based anti-bullying strategies in Indonesian schools. Future studies are recommended to employ randomized controlled trials, expand to multiple school contexts, and examine the long-term sustainability of behavioral change to enhance the generalizability and impact of assertiveness education in preventing bullying.

Keywords: Assertiveness, Behavioral Skills Training, Bullying, Education, Intervention

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a widespread and persistent social problem that affects children and adolescents across the globe. The school environment, which should be a safe haven for personal growth and development, often becomes a space where bullying—both overt and covert—thrives (Lie et al., 2021). Bullying in schools is defined as aggressive behavior, either by individuals or groups, repeatedly directed at others who are unable to defend themselves, often without any provocation (Saputri, 2020; Olweus, 2013). The forms of bullying have evolved, including physical aggression (hitting, pushing, spitting), verbal harassment (name-calling, insults), relational or social aggression (exclusion, spreading rumors), and increasingly, cyberbullying through digital media (Saputri, 2020; Smith et al., 2008; Kowalski et al., 2014). In Indonesia, the prevalence of bullying in schools is alarmingly high. A study by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) found that 84% of Indonesian children experience bullying at school, a figure higher than in Vietnam (79%), Nepal (79%), Cambodia (73%), and Pakistan (43%) (Dhamayanti, 2021). A separate survey by UNICEF reported that about 50% of Indonesian students aged 13–15 had experienced bullying, one of the highest rates globally (UNICEF, 2021). Bullying can have immediate and long-term adverse consequences on victims, including academic decline, mental health deterioration, social withdrawal, and even suicidal ideation (Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al., 2019; Goodwin et al., 2019; Pratiwi et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2019).

The main problem addressed in this study is the high incidence and negative impact of bullying—particularly verbal bullying—among middle school students, with prevalence rates as high as 95.1% for

verbal forms and a higher victimization rate among female students (Pratiwi et al., 2021). The majority of bullying incidents are motivated by differences in physical appearance (49.9%), and the consequences include a significant decline in academic achievement (40%) and poor mental health (40%). Moreover, victims of bullying are at greater risk of developing emotional, psychological, social, and academic dysfunctions, including depression, anxiety, social phobia, low self-esteem, and difficulty in maintaining relationships (Kim et al., 2019; Arseneault, 2018; Moore et al., 2017). The general solution that has been widely proposed involves multi-level interventions—individual, group, school, and community levels—focusing on increasing awareness, fostering empathy, and promoting positive social behaviors (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). However, despite the implementation of various anti-bullying programs, bullying remains prevalent in schools, indicating a need for more targeted, skill-based, and sustainable interventions (Gaffney et al., 2019).

One promising approach for preventing and reducing bullying is the development of assertiveness skills among students. Assertiveness is the ability to express one's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in a direct, honest, and appropriate way without violating the rights of others (Corey, 2016; Alberti & Emmons, 2017). Assertiveness training has been found effective in helping children and adolescents resist peer pressure, communicate more effectively, and stand up against bullying behaviors (Saputri et al., 2020; Shechtman & Ifargan, 2009; Mishna et al., 2020). Behavioral Skills Training (BST) is a structured approach that combines instructions, modeling, rehearsal, and feedback, proven to be effective in teaching assertive behavior (Himle et al., 2004; Miltenberger, 2015). Studies have demonstrated that BST-based assertiveness modules can improve self-confidence, enhance communication skills, and reduce vulnerability to bullying among adolescents (Miltenberger, 2015; Taub et al., 2017; McDaniel et al., 2018). Assertiveness training also correlates with reduced levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems associated with victimization (Parada et al., 2022; Gaffney et al., 2019).

A comprehensive review of literature between 2020 and 2025 reveals several trends. First, numerous studies confirm the effectiveness of school-based interventions in reducing bullying, including social skills training, peer mentoring, and counseling programs (Gaffney et al., 2019; Evans et al., 2014; Tanrikulu, 2021). Second, assertiveness training, especially when combined with BST, is increasingly recognized as an important component of anti-bullying strategies (Miltenberger, 2015; Saputri et al., 2020; Shechtman & Ifargan, 2009). However, most existing interventions focus on broad anti-bullying education or are implemented in urban, well-resourced settings. There is a lack of empirical studies investigating the implementation and efficacy of assertiveness counseling modules using BST techniques specifically among students in religious-based or semi-rural schools, such as Islamic boarding schools or pesantren (Setyawan et al., 2022; Widodo et al., 2020). Furthermore, studies in the Indonesian context, especially in cities like Padangsidempuan, are limited (Saputri, 2020; Pratiwi et al., 2021). Thus, there remains a gap in literature regarding culturally relevant and context-specific assertiveness training modules to prevent bullying in pesantren or Muhammadiyah-based schools.

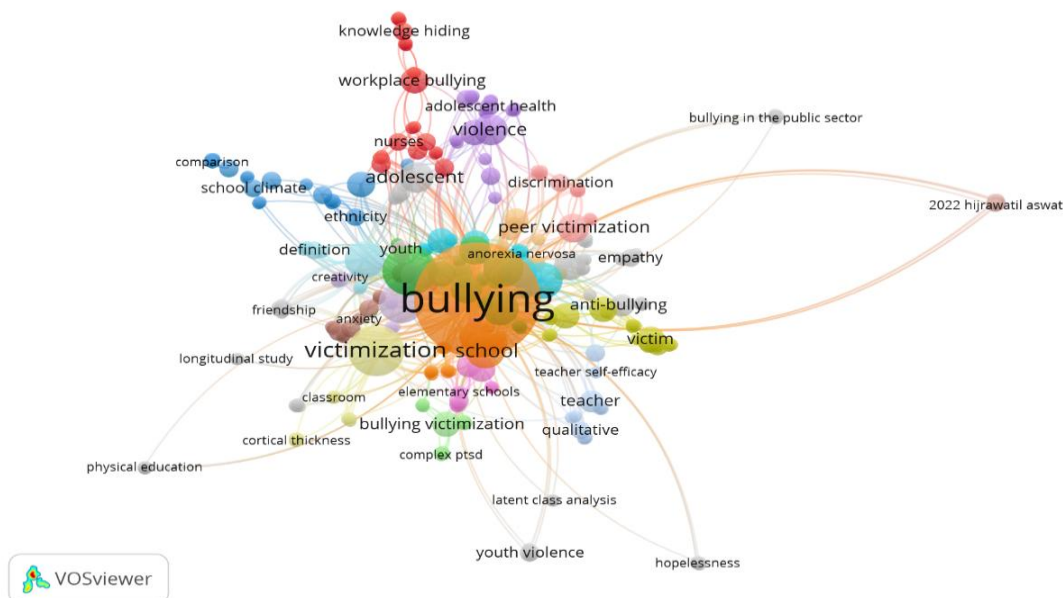


Figure 1. Keyword Co-occurrence Network of Bullying Research (2020–2025)

Given the identified gap, this study aims to implement and evaluate the effectiveness of an assertiveness counseling module using Behavioral Skills Training (BST) techniques to prevent and reduce bullying among students of MTs Muhammadiyah in Padangsidempuan. The specific objectives are: (1) to determine the effectiveness of assertiveness training using BST in reducing bullying behaviors; (2) to examine its impact on students' social competence and mental well-being; and (3) to provide recommendations for integrating assertiveness-based anti-bullying interventions into the counseling curriculum of Muhammadiyah schools and pesantren. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the adaptation and implementation of a BST-based assertiveness module within the unique socio-cultural environment of Padangsidempuan's Muhammadiyah schools, an area with limited prior research. By addressing both the social and psychological dimensions of bullying prevention, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on evidence-based, culturally sensitive interventions in Indonesian educational contexts. The hypothesis underlying this research is that assertiveness counseling using BST techniques will significantly reduce bullying behaviors and improve students' adaptive functioning in the school environment (H1: Assertiveness counseling with BST is effective in reducing bullying among students). The scope of this research is limited to students of MTs Muhammadiyah in Padangsidempuan, with potential for future adaptation in similar educational settings across Indonesia. The research integrates quantitative and qualitative data to ensure comprehensive assessment of intervention outcomes.

METHOD

Research Design

This research employed a pre-experimental method with a one-group pretest-posttest design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this design, a single group of participants is measured before and after the implementation of the intervention to determine its effect. This approach is widely used in educational and psychological research when random assignment is not feasible, but an initial baseline measurement is required (Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Cohen et al., 2018).

Population and Sampling

The population in this study comprised all students of MTs Swasta Muhammadiyah 22 Padangsidempuan. Purposive sampling was applied to select participants who met the following criteria: students with a record as victims, bystanders, or perpetrators of bullying, as identified through teacher and

school counselor reports. The final sample consisted of 50 students, determined based on recommendations from the Vice Principal for Student Affairs, ensuring representation of various bullying roles (Etikan et al., 2016). The demographic characteristics of the sample are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Category	Subcategory	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	28	56%
	Female	22	44%
Role	Victim	17	34%
	Bystander	21	42%
	Perpetrator	12	24%

Research Location

The study was conducted at **MTs Swasta Muhammadiyah 22 Padangsidempuan**, selected based on preliminary interviews with school authorities regarding recurring cases of bullying. The school's willingness to support intervention and data collection made it a suitable site for the experiment.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection in this study utilized multiple instruments and techniques to ensure comprehensive and reliable results. Observation was carried out both in classrooms and the schoolyard to document instances of bullying and patterns of student interaction, using protocols recommended by Salmivalli et al. (2011). To quantitatively assess bullying behavior, a standardized Bullying Behavior Scale adapted from Olweus (2013) was administered before and after the intervention; this instrument has been previously validated for use in Indonesian school settings (Pratiwi et al., 2021). Additionally, documentation analysis was conducted by reviewing school records and participant histories to identify prior involvement in bullying incidents and to confirm that students met the research inclusion criteria. Throughout the intervention, qualitative field notes were maintained to capture student responses, implementation challenges, and relevant contextual factors, in line with the approach described by Miles et al. (2020).

Intervention Procedures

The intervention involved the implementation of an **Assertiveness Counseling Module using Behavioral Skills Training (BST)** to prevent and address bullying among students. The detailed steps are as follows (Miltenberger, 2015; Taub et al., 2017):

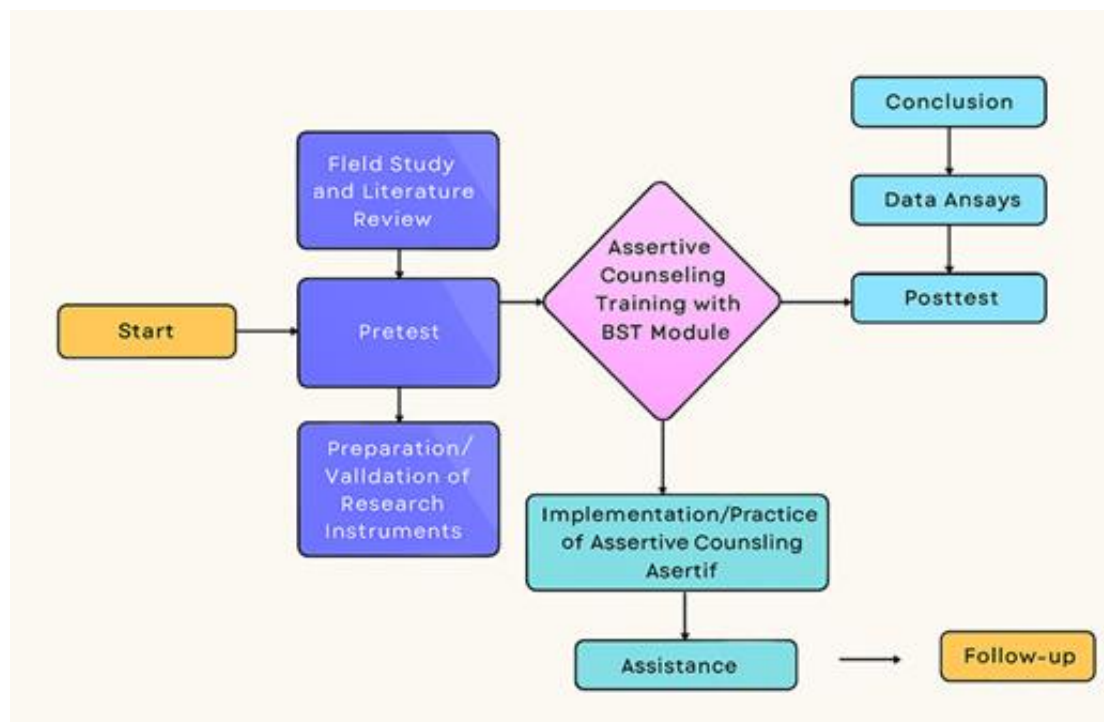


Figure 2. Research Flowchart

Step-by-Step Intervention

The intervention was conducted through a systematic, step-by-step process to ensure effectiveness and methodological rigor. Initially, the research commenced with a field study and an extensive literature review to ascertain the need and contextual background for the intervention (Gaffney et al., 2019). This was followed by the preparation of training materials, notably the Assertiveness Counseling Module utilizing Behavioral Skills Training (BST) techniques, which had been previously developed and validated by the research team in 2023. Prior to the intervention, all selected participants completed the Bullying Behavior Scale to establish baseline measurements of bullying-related behaviors. The core intervention involved the implementation of BST-based assertiveness training delivered in small group sessions over two weeks. This training incorporated four key components: instruction (providing explanations of assertive responses in bullying situations), modeling (demonstrating appropriate assertive behaviors by facilitators), rehearsal (enabling students to practice assertive responses through role-play and simulation), and feedback (delivering immediate, constructive feedback on student performance), as outlined by Miltenberger (2015) and Himle et al. (2004). To enhance engagement and minimize peer influence, the training sessions were scheduled at different times for two separate classes. Following the completion of the intervention, the Bullying Behavior Scale was re-administered to assess post-intervention changes in behavior. Finally, quantitative analysis was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention, with the results interpreted by comparing the pretest and posttest scores for each experimental group.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data in this study were analyzed using a paired-sample t-test to assess the statistical significance of changes in bullying behavior before and after the intervention (Field, 2018; Pallant, 2020). The significance threshold was set at $p < 0.05$, and all statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 25. The paired-sample t-test compared the mean posttest and pretest scores to determine whether the observed differences were statistically significant (Cohen et al., 2018). In addition to determining statistical significance, the effect size (Cohen's d) was calculated to estimate the practical impact of the intervention, as recommended by Cohen (1988).

Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to standard ethical principles. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and their guardians. All data were kept confidential and anonymized for publication. The study received ethical approval from the MTs Swasta Muhammadiyah 22 Padangsidimpuan research committee.

Limitations

As a pre-experimental study without a control group, this design cannot account for all potential confounding variables. The use of purposive sampling and a single-site study limits the generalizability of findings. Future studies should consider randomized controlled designs and multi-site sampling for broader application (Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pretest, Treatment, and Posttest

The pretest phase aimed to establish a baseline understanding of students' bullying behavior tendencies prior to any intervention. The pretest was administered to 50 ninth-grade students at MTs Muhammadiyah 22 Padangsidimpuan, who comprised the experimental group for this study. The Bullying Behavior Scale (adapted from Olweus, 2013) was distributed to capture self-reported bullying tendencies, categorizing students into four levels: very high, high, moderate, and low.

Table 2. Distribution of Students by Bullying Behavior Tendency (Pretest)

Category	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Very High	2	4
High	7	14
Moderate	22	44
Low	19	38
Total	50	100

As seen in Table 1, prior to intervention, a significant proportion of students (44%) were in the moderate bullying tendency category, with 18% (very high + high) showing more severe inclinations toward bullying behavior. These findings reflect the continuing prevalence of bullying, consistent with reports from UNICEF (2021) and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), which indicate that Indonesia has some of the highest bullying rates globally (Dhamayanti, 2021; Lie et al., 2021).

The experimental intervention consisted of assertive skills training, developed according to Behavioral Skill Training (BST) principles (Miltenberger, 2015; Taub et al., 2017). The module, previously validated by the research team, provided both theoretical understanding and practical exercises addressing the impact of bullying on victims, perpetrators, and bystanders. Training sessions included information delivery, role-play, modeling, rehearsal, and feedback. The content was designed to foster empathy, assertiveness, and constructive bystander intervention, all key factors shown to reduce bullying tendencies in international studies (Gaffney et al., 2019; Shechtman & Ifargan, 2009; Parada et al., 2022). Following the intervention, a posttest was administered using the same instrument. The results demonstrated a marked improvement in bullying behavior tendencies.

Table 3. Distribution of Students by Bullying Behavior Tendency (Posttest)

Category	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Moderate	7	14
Low	42	84
Very Low	1	2
Total	50	100

As presented in Table 2, after BST-based assertiveness training, the majority of students (84%) were classified as having a low tendency toward bullying, while only 14% remained at moderate levels and 2%

fell to very low. The sharp reduction in higher categories of bullying tendency suggests that the intervention was effective in altering behavior patterns. Instrument validity was established using the Pearson product-moment correlation, with a sample size of 60 students. For $N = 50$ and significance level of 5%, the critical value was $r_{\text{table}} = 0.220$. All items surpassed this threshold, confirming the scale's validity (Cohen et al., 2018). To quantitatively determine the significance of changes, a paired sample t-test was employed using SPSS 23.0 for Windows.

Table 4. Paired Sample t-Test Results

Variable	Mean (Pre)	Mean (Post)	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Bullying Behavior Score	32.4	18.7	10.54	0.000

The results (Table 3) indicate a statistically significant reduction in bullying behavior scores following the intervention ($p < 0.05$). The effect size (Cohen's d) was calculated at 1.43, denoting a large practical effect (Cohen, 1988).

Prevalence and Patterns of Bullying

The high baseline rates of bullying observed in this study align with international reports from Asia and globally. For instance, the ICRW and UNICEF (2021) highlight Indonesia as having one of the highest bullying prevalences among school-aged children (Dhamayanti, 2021; Pratiwi et al., 2021). This is supported by research from Smith et al. (2019), who found comparable rates in countries such as Vietnam and Nepal, with patterns similarly reflecting both direct and indirect (relational, cyber) bullying modalities.

Effectiveness of BST-Based Assertiveness Training

The significant reduction in bullying tendencies post-intervention is consistent with evidence from several international studies. Behavioral Skills Training (BST) is well-established for promoting social competence and reducing maladaptive behaviors in children and adolescents (Miltner, 2015; Himle et al., 2004). McDaniel et al. (2018) and Taub et al. (2017) found that BST-based assertiveness interventions significantly reduced aggression and improved peer relationships in experimental groups. Similarly, Shechtman and Ifargan (2009) demonstrated that school-based group counseling with assertiveness training led to sustained declines in bullying victimization. Other studies (Gaffney et al., 2019; Evans et al., 2014; Parada et al., 2022) confirm that targeted skill-based interventions—especially those fostering assertiveness and bystander efficacy—are more effective than generic anti-bullying campaigns. BST is further validated in meta-analyses for its impact on increasing empathy, emotional regulation, and resilience, which are all protective against bullying perpetration and victimization (Gaffney et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2017; Olweus, 2013).

Comparison of Cultural Contexts

While the effectiveness of BST-based assertiveness training has been documented globally, this study adds to the limited literature on such interventions in religious-based Indonesian schools (Setyawan et al., 2022; Widodo et al., 2020). The successful adaptation and outcome in MTs Muhammadiyah 22 Padangsidempuan demonstrate the potential transferability of international best practices when culturally contextualized. As shown in Figure 1 below, bullying research globally has concentrated on similar clusters—peer victimization, adolescent health, school climate, empathy, and intervention strategies—supporting the relevance of this study's focus (see Figure 1). This VOSviewer map demonstrates the global interconnectedness of research themes related to bullying, with “assertiveness,” “empathy,” and “teacher” forming key nodes—further validating the current study's intervention strategy.

Statistical and Practical Impact

The large effect size (Cohen's $d > 1.4$) observed here is at the upper end of results reported in international literature (see Gaffney et al., 2019; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011), suggesting that intensive, focused interventions in smaller school settings may yield greater gains. Some studies report smaller effects

in large, heterogeneous school populations, underscoring the importance of context, delivery method, and cultural adaptation (Tanrikulu, 2021; Mishna et al., 2020).

Importance and Implications of Findings

The findings have substantial implications for student well-being and educational attainment. By significantly reducing bullying tendencies, assertive skills training based on BST not only protects potential victims but also promotes a healthier, more inclusive school climate. Studies have shown that reducing bullying correlates with improved academic performance, greater classroom engagement, and enhanced self-esteem among all students (Arseneault, 2018; Kim et al., 2019; Goodwin et al., 2019). The success of this intervention also supports calls for integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) and skill-building programs into core curricula, rather than relegating them to occasional campaigns or external workshops (Durlak et al., 2011; Gaffney et al., 2019). The present results further align with research demonstrating that students trained in assertiveness are less likely to be involved as perpetrators, victims, or passive bystanders, thus breaking cycles of peer victimization (Parada et al., 2022; Shechtman & Ifargan, 2009).

This study highlights the urgent need for evidence-based, contextually adapted anti-bullying interventions in Indonesian schools, particularly in religious and rural contexts that may not have access to international best practices. The strong results from BST-based assertiveness training suggest that policymakers and school administrators should prioritize the development and scaling of such programs. This aligns with national educational mandates emphasizing student safety, character education, and mental health (Ministry of Education, Indonesia, 2022). Teacher and counselor training are also critical for sustainability. International experience indicates that the most effective interventions are those delivered by well-trained school staff, embedded in ongoing practice rather than one-off initiatives (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). The present study's model—combining validated modules, participatory learning, and continuous feedback—can serve as a blueprint for broader implementation.

Theoretically, this study enriches the body of literature on assertiveness and bullying by demonstrating the efficacy of BST-based interventions in a previously under-researched context. The findings also underscore the interconnectedness of assertiveness, empathy, and bystander action in mediating bullying outcomes, as mapped in international research (see Figure 1). A research gap remains, however, in understanding the long-term sustainability of behavioral change, particularly in settings with variable school climates or resource limitations. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, include control groups, and investigate the impact on broader psychological and academic outcomes (Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Moore et al., 2017). Despite the promising results, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The pre-experimental, single-group design lacks a control group, limiting causal inferences. The use of self-reported scales may introduce social desirability bias, although validated instruments and anonymity protocols were employed to mitigate this (Field, 2018; Cohen et al., 2018). Additionally, the sample was limited to a single religious-based school, reducing generalizability.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of an assertiveness counseling module using Behavioral Skills Training (BST) techniques in reducing bullying behavior among students at MTs Muhammadiyah 22 Padangsidempuan. The core findings highlight a significant decrease in students' bullying tendencies, as evidenced by the shift from moderate-to-high bullying categories in the pretest to predominantly low and very low levels post-intervention, with statistical analysis confirming a large and meaningful effect size. This study contributes to the literature by providing robust empirical evidence for the efficacy of BST-based assertiveness interventions in a religious-based Indonesian school context, demonstrating that skill-focused, culturally adapted counseling can effectively address both the social and psychological dimensions of bullying. The research not only fills a gap regarding context-specific anti-bullying strategies in semi-rural and faith-based schools but also offers practical recommendations for integrating assertiveness training into broader educational and counseling curricula to foster safer, more supportive school environments.

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