

STRENGTHENING ADOLESCENT IDENTITY AWARENESS AND SELF-POTENTIAL RECOGNITION THROUGH GROUP COUNSELING

Nur Hermatasyah^{1*}, Putri Nurina²

¹² Institut Daarul Qur'an Jakarta, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: tasiyahherma@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Adolescents are vulnerable to identity confusion and low self-confidence when social pressure and repeated comparison with peers obscure their understanding of personal strengths. This study examined the implementation of group counseling to strengthen identity awareness and self-potential recognition among junior high school students. The study used Guidance and Counseling Action Research with a qualitative descriptive approach. Three Grade VIII students were selected from the personal-domain results of the General Problem Checklist (AUM Umum). Data were collected through participatory observation, brief interviews, documentation, self-assessment, and group reflection. The intervention comprised four counseling sessions addressing self-introduction, exploration of strengths, reflection on social comparison, and formulation of personal development commitments. The findings indicated observable improvement in students' willingness to describe themselves, identify nonacademic as well as academic strengths, express feelings, accept limitations, and establish realistic development goals. Group interaction provided corrective feedback and emotional support that reduced deficit-focused self-evaluation and encouraged more balanced self-perceptions. Within the limits of a small action-research group, the study indicates that structured group counseling can support healthier identity construction and more purposeful recognition of adolescent potential.

Keywords: Adolescent Identity; Group Counseling; Junior High School Students; Self-Awareness; Self-Potential

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a transition from childhood to adulthood in which biological maturation, cognitive development, emotional reorganization, and changes in social relationships occur simultaneously. During this period, young people begin to answer increasingly complex questions about who they are, what they value, how they are perceived by others, and what direction they want their lives to take. Steinberg (2017) describes adolescence as a period marked by rapid development and heightened sensitivity to peer contexts. These changes create opportunities for growth, but they can also generate uncertainty when adolescents do not yet have stable standards for evaluating themselves.

Identity awareness refers to an adolescent's developing understanding of personal characteristics, values, interests, strengths, limitations, social roles, and future aspirations. It is not a fixed label but an evolving organization of self-knowledge that helps individuals make decisions and maintain continuity across different situations. A relatively coherent identity gives adolescents a basis for setting goals, interpreting experience, and responding to social pressure. By contrast, weak identity awareness may lead to dependence on external approval, unstable self-evaluation, and difficulty recognizing personal potential.

Self-potential recognition is closely related to identity development. Potential includes academic ability, creativity, communication, empathy, leadership, persistence, practical skill, and other capacities that can be strengthened through experience. However, adolescents frequently define ability too narrowly. Students who compare themselves primarily through academic rankings or visible achievements may conclude that they have little potential, even when they demonstrate interpersonal, artistic, organizational, or reflective strengths. A deficit-focused interpretation of the self can reduce initiative and discourage students from participating in developmental opportunities.

Self-confidence is one psychological condition that influences whether adolescents are willing to express ideas, initiate relationships, try unfamiliar tasks, and recover from mistakes. Wicaksono et al. (2022) reported that group counseling can support confidence by enabling young people to

communicate, receive feedback, and reinterpret their experiences in a supportive social setting. Confidence does not require adolescents to deny limitations. Rather, it involves a realistic belief that they can learn, contribute, and make choices while continuing to improve.

The contemporary digital environment intensifies the developmental challenge. Social media presents selected images of achievement, appearance, popularity, and lifestyle that can become unrealistic standards for self-evaluation. Adolescents may compare their ordinary experiences with the curated outcomes displayed by others. Repeated upward comparison can create feelings of inadequacy and may shift attention away from personally meaningful strengths. The problem is not digital media alone, but the absence of reflective skills that help students interpret digital content and distinguish external visibility from authentic personal value.

The formation of identity also has an educational and relational dimension. Ki Hadjar Dewantara's conception of human development emphasizes the integration of thought, feeling, and intention in the cultivation of character. From this perspective, educational support should not merely transmit information; it should help learners understand themselves, regulate their choices, and direct their capacities toward constructive purposes (Ramazhan & A'yun, 2024). School counseling is therefore positioned not only as a response to problems but also as a systematic means of facilitating personal development.

Group counseling is particularly relevant because identity is formed in interaction with others. Corey (2016) explains that counseling groups provide opportunities for members to disclose experiences, observe interpersonal patterns, test new ways of responding, and receive feedback in a protected setting. For adolescents, a well-managed group can transform peer influence from a source of pressure into a source of perspective and encouragement. Members learn that uncertainty is shared, strengths can take different forms, and self-understanding can develop through respectful dialogue.

Previous studies have generally emphasized the contribution of group counseling to self-confidence, interpersonal competence, and adjustment. These findings are important, but a practical gap remains in how school counselors can connect confidence-building activities with explicit exploration of identity and self-potential. In many school contexts, students are encouraged to be confident without first being helped to identify what they value, what they can do, and how social comparison shapes their self-judgment. The present study addresses that gap by organizing counseling sessions around identity awareness, multidimensional recognition of potential, and personal development commitments.

A preliminary review of the General AUM assessment at SMPN 18 Tangerang City indicated that several students experienced personal-domain concerns associated with weak self-understanding and difficulty identifying strengths. Three Grade VIII students with the highest relevant problem indicators were selected for a small counseling group. Their initial participation suggested closed communication, low confidence, and a tendency to evaluate themselves through comparisons with peers. These conditions made it necessary to provide a structured service in which students could explore their experiences without being judged.

The novelty of this action-oriented study lies in integrating four elements within one school counseling process: recognition of identity-related difficulties, exploration of academic and nonacademic potential, reflection on social comparison, and formulation of individualized commitments. The intervention did not treat identity as an abstract topic. It translated identity work into observable counseling activities, including self-description, peer feedback, strength mapping, reflective discussion, and goal setting. This design is intended to be practical for counselors working with small groups in regular school settings.

School is a strategic context for this work because adolescents encounter repeated evaluation, peer interaction, and expectations about future pathways within the same environment. These experiences can either clarify or destabilize identity. When counseling services are limited to crisis response, students who appear compliant may receive little assistance in understanding persistent self-doubt. Developmental group counseling offers an earlier intervention by helping students build language for describing strengths, recognize the influence of comparison, and make choices before uncertainty develops into avoidance or disengagement. The approach is also efficient because carefully selected

students can learn from one another while the counselor observes interpersonal patterns that may not emerge in an individual meeting.

Accordingly, this study aimed to describe the implementation of group counseling and analyze its contribution to strengthening adolescent identity awareness and self-potential recognition. The study focused on changes in students' self-description, openness, recognition of strengths, self-acceptance, and orientation toward personal development. Because the participants were limited to three students and the data were qualitative, the analysis emphasizes process and observable change rather than statistical generalization.

METHOD

This study employed Guidance and Counseling Action Research using a qualitative descriptive approach. Action research was selected because the purpose was to improve a counseling service through planned intervention, observation, and reflection in an authentic school setting. The qualitative approach supported close attention to how students described themselves, participated in group interaction, responded to peer feedback, and formulated personal commitments. Consistent with Creswell and Creswell (2023), meaning was interpreted from participants' experiences and from patterns observed during the intervention.

The participants were three students from Grade VIII-7 at SMPN 18 Tangerang City. They were selected purposively on the basis of the General AUM results in the personal domain and subsequent counselor consideration. Selection focused on students who showed substantial difficulty with self-understanding, confidence, and recognition of personal strengths. The small group size was appropriate for intensive interaction and enabled the counselor to observe each member's contribution across the sessions. The participants are discussed collectively to avoid disclosure of personal identities.

The action process consisted of planning, action, observation, and reflection. During planning, the counselor reviewed the assessment information, formulated service objectives, developed session materials, and prepared observation and reflection formats. The action stage comprised four group counseling meetings. Observation occurred throughout the meetings and focused on participation, verbal expression, response to feedback, and changes in self-description. Reflection was used after each meeting to evaluate the adequacy of the activities and to determine the emphasis of the subsequent session. Figure 1 summarizes this cyclical process.

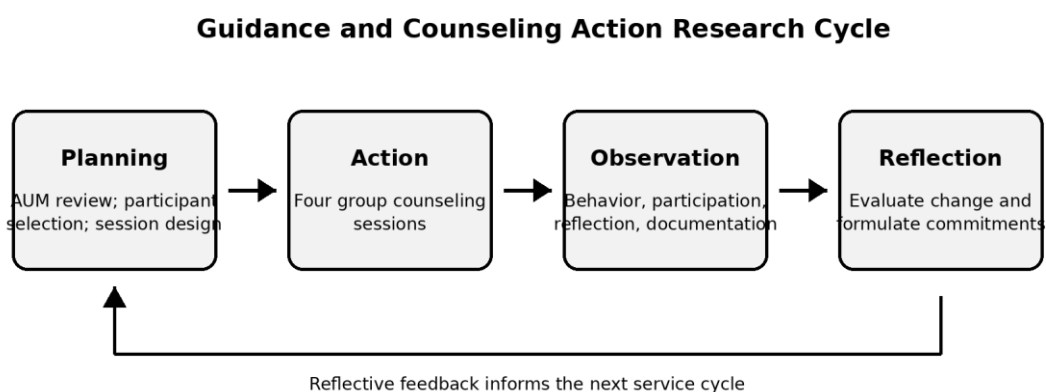


Figure 1. Guidance and Counseling Action Research Cycle

The first session established group norms and psychological safety. Members introduced themselves and discussed situations in which they felt confident or uncertain. The second session focused on identifying potential. Students mapped strengths, interests, successful experiences, and qualities noticed by others. The third session addressed social comparison and self-acceptance. Members examined how peer and social-media comparisons affected their judgments and practiced generating more balanced interpretations. The fourth session consolidated learning through self-reflection and the preparation of realistic personal development commitments.

Data were collected through participatory observation, brief interviews embedded in counseling dialogue, student self-assessment, documentation of activities, and written or oral group reflection. Observation notes recorded changes in openness, willingness to speak, ability to name strengths, and patterns of giving or receiving feedback. Self-assessment was used to capture the students' own interpretations of change. Documentation included session plans, strength-mapping outputs, reflection statements, and personal commitments. These sources were compared to obtain a more coherent description of the process.

Data analysis followed qualitative descriptive procedures of data reduction, organization, comparison, and conclusion drawing. First, information unrelated to the study focus was excluded. Second, relevant statements and observations were grouped under the themes of identity awareness, self-potential recognition, confidence and openness, social comparison, self-acceptance, and future commitment. Third, evidence from different sessions and data sources was compared to identify consistent changes. The conclusions were then discussed in relation to adolescent development and group counseling theory.

The counseling activities were sequenced from lower-risk to higher-risk participation. Descriptive introductions and general discussion preceded more personal reflection, thereby allowing trust to develop gradually. Questions were open-ended and focused on experience rather than interrogation. Peer feedback was guided by two rules: every statement had to be respectful, and every identified strength had to be linked to an observable example. These procedures helped prevent unrealistic praise and encouraged students to connect identity claims with evidence from everyday behavior. The counselor also summarized emerging themes at the end of each session so that members could confirm, clarify, or reject interpretations before they were carried into the next meeting.

The quality of interpretation was supported through repeated observation across four meetings, comparison of multiple data sources, and reflective review after each session. The counselor distinguished observed behavior from broader interpretation and avoided assigning numerical improvement scores that were not generated by the study. Because the design involved only three purposively selected students, the findings are best understood as evidence of service improvement in this particular group rather than as a basis for population-level causal claims.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Initial Conditions and Identity-Related Challenges

At the beginning of the counseling process, the students showed difficulty describing themselves in specific and balanced terms. Their self-statements tended to emphasize what they could not do or how they differed from peers who were perceived as more successful. When asked about strengths, members initially referred almost exclusively to academic achievement. Students who did not view themselves as academically prominent therefore concluded that they lacked meaningful ability. This narrow standard limited their recognition of interpersonal and character-based potential.

The students' initial behavior also indicated low confidence in the group situation. Participation was hesitant, answers were brief, and personal experiences were disclosed only after the counselor provided repeated prompts and reassurance. Social comparison appeared as an important background pattern. Members described evaluating themselves against classmates or content observed on social media. Such comparison was not always explicit, but it shaped the language they used: other people were described as smarter, more capable, more popular, or more certain about their future.

These initial conditions are consistent with the developmental sensitivity of adolescents to peer evaluation. Identity exploration often depends on feedback from others, but external feedback can become harmful when it is interpreted as a complete measure of self-worth. Zimmer-Gembeck and Skinner (2021) emphasize the relationship between adolescent coping and identity development. In the present group, comparison functioned as an avoidant shortcut: rather than examining their own experiences and capacities, students reached global conclusions based on another person's visible performance.

Implementation of Group Counseling

The group formation stage was essential because the students needed evidence that the counseling space would not reproduce the judgment they experienced elsewhere. The counselor introduced confidentiality, respectful listening, equal participation, and the right to express uncertainty. Simple introductory activities were used to reduce tension. As members recognized that the others also experienced insecurity, the group became less evaluative and more collaborative. This normalization reduced the belief that personal doubt was an individual failure.

Strength exploration produced an important shift in the content of discussion. Students were asked to recall situations in which they had helped someone, completed a difficult task, learned a skill, persisted after failure, or received appreciation. The counselor and peers then identified abilities embedded in those experiences. For example, a student who believed that he had no special capacity was recognized by group members as empathetic, attentive, and able to listen carefully. The feedback helped separate potential from formal rank and enabled the student to consider social competence as a legitimate strength.

Self-reflection activities encouraged members to distinguish between facts, interpretations, and comparisons. A low score or a peer's achievement was treated as a specific event rather than proof of permanent inferiority. Students examined the standards they used to judge themselves and considered whether those standards represented personal goals or merely social expectations. This process did not eliminate comparison immediately, but it made comparison visible and therefore open to evaluation.

The final meeting focused on commitment. Each student identified a strength to develop, a comparison habit to reduce, and a practical action that could be attempted in the near term. The commitments were deliberately modest and individualized. Their value lay in converting new self-understanding into direction. Identity awareness became connected to behavior: recognizing oneself as a good listener, for example, could lead to participation in peer support, collaborative learning, or communication activities.

The sequence of sessions appeared to matter. Strength identification before the deeper discussion of comparison gave students a constructive reference point. They did not enter the comparison discussion only with instructions to stop comparing themselves; they already had emerging evidence that their identities included qualities not captured by the standards they usually applied. This made the reflection more credible. Likewise, commitment planning was placed after peer feedback so that goals could be built from recognized strengths rather than from shame or pressure. The intervention therefore functioned as a progression from safety, to evidence, to reinterpretation, and finally to action.

Observed Changes in Identity Awareness and Self-Potential Recognition

Across the four sessions, the students became more willing to speak about personal experiences and to respond to one another. Their self-descriptions gradually became more differentiated. Instead of using broad negative labels, members began to identify particular strengths and areas for improvement. This shift is important because realistic identity awareness requires both acceptance and specificity. Global labels such as "not talented" provide little guidance, whereas statements such as "I listen well but need to speak more confidently" create a basis for development.

Recognition of potential also broadened. Academic ability remained meaningful, but it was no longer treated as the sole indicator of competence. Students acknowledged empathy, communication, listening, persistence, willingness to help, and social sensitivity. The group's feedback was influential because strengths identified by peers were experienced as more credible than generic encouragement. At the same time, members were encouraged to connect feedback with concrete examples so that praise did not become empty reassurance.

Table 1 synthesizes the qualitative differences observed before and after the group counseling process. The table does not represent standardized scores; it summarizes recurring patterns found in observation, student reflection, and group discussion.

Table 1. Qualitative Changes Observed During Group Counseling

Indicator	Initial Pattern	Pattern After Four Sessions
Self-description	General and deficit-focused	Specific, balanced, and reflective
Recognition of potential	Focused mainly on academic performance	Academic and nonacademic strengths recognized
Social comparison	Frequent peer and social-media comparison	More self-referenced evaluation
Self-disclosure	Hesitant, passive, and brief	More open expression of experiences
Self-acceptance	Low confidence; focus on shortcomings	Better acceptance and realistic goals

Role of Group Dynamics in Personal Development

Group dynamics contributed through universality, mutual feedback, modeling, and emotional support. Universality occurred when students recognized that other members also struggled with uncertainty and comparison. Mutual feedback enabled them to see qualities that were difficult to identify independently. Modeling occurred when one member's openness encouraged another to speak. Emotional support reduced defensiveness and made it possible to examine limitations without interpreting them as rejection.

These processes align with Corey's (2016) view that groups can provide a social microenvironment for insight and behavioral learning. The counselor's role was not to provide fixed identities for the students but to structure interaction so that members could test and refine their own interpretations. This distinction is important. Identity support becomes more sustainable when adolescents participate actively in constructing meaning rather than receiving labels from adults.

The observed increase in self-disclosure also had a reciprocal effect. As students spoke more openly, peers could offer more relevant feedback; as feedback became more relevant, the group felt safer and members became more willing to disclose. This constructive cycle demonstrates why group counseling can be particularly useful for identity work. The interpersonal process supplies information that individual reflection alone may not provide, while counselor facilitation protects the process from ridicule or domination.

Another important feature was the movement from evaluation to curiosity. At the outset, students tended to ask whether they were better or worse than others. During later sessions, the questions became more developmental: what conditions helped them perform well, what strengths appeared in difficult situations, and what action could help a quality grow. Curiosity reduced the pressure to reach a final judgment about the self. This is compatible with the developmental nature of adolescent identity, which requires room for exploration, revision, and learning. The group did not provide a final answer to who each student was; it provided a safer and more disciplined process for continuing that inquiry.

Discussion, Implications, and Limitations

The findings indicate that group counseling supported a movement from externally dominated self-evaluation toward more balanced self-understanding. This does not mean that peer influence disappeared. Rather, students began to interpret peer information within a broader personal framework. Steinberg (2017) notes that adolescent development involves increasing autonomy while peer relationships remain highly salient. The counseling process addressed this tension by helping students listen to others without surrendering the authority to evaluate their own goals and qualities.

The broadening of potential recognition is consistent with educational approaches that view development as multidimensional. The students' early equation of potential with academic ranking reflected a restricted school-based narrative of ability. By identifying communication, empathy, persistence, and social contribution, the group created alternative pathways for competence. This interpretation supports the argument of Amaliyah and Rahmat (2021) that educational processes should facilitate the development of students' potential rather than reduce learning to performance indicators.

The reduction in excessive comparison was connected to self-acceptance rather than complacency. Students were encouraged to acknowledge current limitations while setting achievable development goals. This distinction is central: self-acceptance provides a stable starting point for improvement, whereas global self-rejection often produces avoidance. The personal commitments prepared in the final session showed that acceptance and aspiration can operate together. Members could value an existing strength and still identify a skill requiring practice.

For school counseling practice, the study suggests that identity-focused services should include concrete activities rather than rely only on advice. Strength mapping, experience-based feedback, comparison analysis, reflective questions, and commitment writing can be integrated into a short group program. Counselors should also help students recognize nonacademic potential and should monitor group norms carefully so that feedback remains specific, respectful, and development-oriented.

The findings also have implications for digital literacy. Discussions of social media should move beyond warnings about screen time and address how students interpret idealized representations. Counselors can help adolescents ask what information is missing from an online image, whether the comparison standard is relevant to their own values, and what personal evidence contradicts a negative conclusion. Such reflection turns digital influence into a topic of identity education.

Several limitations should be considered. The study involved only three students from one class and used qualitative observations without a standardized pretest-posttest measure. The intervention was short, and the study did not include long-term follow-up to determine whether commitments were maintained. The counselor also served as the primary observer, which may introduce interpretive bias. Therefore, the findings should not be generalized beyond the immediate group without further investigation.

Future studies can strengthen the evidence by involving larger groups, using validated measures of self-concept or identity status, collecting follow-up data, and comparing different counseling techniques. Research may also examine whether the effects vary according to gender, digital-media use, family support, or initial confidence. Despite these limitations, the action research achieved its practical purpose by documenting how a structured counseling service can help students articulate strengths, reconsider comparison habits, and develop more authentic self-development goals.

CONCLUSION

Group counseling contributed to stronger identity awareness and self-potential recognition among the three participating Grade VIII students. Through structured self-introduction, strength exploration, reflection on social comparison, peer feedback, and personal commitment, students became more willing to express experiences, describe themselves in specific terms, identify academic and nonacademic strengths, and accept limitations without reducing themselves to negative labels. The group process transformed peer interaction into a source of perspective and support, while counselor facilitation helped members connect insight with realistic developmental action. These findings are limited to a small qualitative action-research group and do not establish broad causal effectiveness; nevertheless, they show that identity-focused group counseling is a practical school service for helping adolescents construct healthier, more balanced, and more purposeful understandings of themselves.

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