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Research Article

The Effect of Assertiveness Skills Training on Reduction of Emotional Victimization of Female High School Students

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of assertiveness skills (AS) training on reduction of Emotional victimization in Sanandaj high school female students in Iran (Academic year of 2013-14). Thus, 50 students (25 experimental, 25 control) were selected using random clustering sampling. This study was a quasi-experimental design with pretest, posttest and control group. Data was collected using Iranian form of bullying victimization scale. In an assertiveness skills training program, experimental group attended at eight 90-min sessions (one session per week), but control group never attended at any session. Data was examined using ANCOVA in SPSS. The results in both experimental and follow-up stages showed that there was a significant differences between pretest and posttest in experimental group. The findings were suggested that an assertiveness skills training program decreased students' Emotional victimization as an effective intervention.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is not an unfamiliar occurrence and it is believed to be interwoven with the history of schools advent. Bullying and Victimization by peers is a major problem in many countries around the world. A survey of 38 countries shows that 13 % of youth are victimized by bullies at least two times a month, with some countries showing prevalence rates up to 19 % (Brendgen & Troop-Gordon, 2015). So scholars have long recognized that prevention of youth aggression and bullying is a major public health issue (Modecki et al, 2014). Olweus (1993) defined bullying as an aggressive action that has been repeated over and over by the person and includes an unequal power between the bully and the victim. According to the definitions of bullying, there are five important features of bullying behavior: 1. It is an aggressive action; 2. this aggression is usually Not preexcited; 3. It occurs repeatedly; 4. It includes unequal power between the bully and the victim 5. It occurs in small social groups that their members are familiar with each other (Hulsey, 2008). Based on the theory of Olweus and other Theorists, bullying behavior includes a broad range of destructive behaviors that regularly and for a period of time causes the victimization of people in different ways, which Emotional victimization is one of the most important forms (Rothon, Head, Klineberg, & Stansfeld, 2011). Emotional victimization also known as indirect, psychological, non-verbal bullying is a kind of bullying that occurs using social relations among groups and includes becoming victimized by acts of rumormongering, slander, gossiping, provoking other individuals to hurt a victim, and most importantly ignoring, banishing and excluding the victim from social groups or activities (Corvo & deLara, 2010). An important identity of becoming emotionally victimized rather than physically and verbally, is that it is indirect and more psychological and is not always visible, and therefore it is more likely to be ignored, and thus cause more serious damage to the victim. In addition, as emotional bullying systematically humiliates the person and hurts his/her feeling, it does deeper damage to the victim than other types of bullying. A great number of

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research including Rigby (2007) and Card et al. (2008) have shown that girls in comparison with boys are more involved in indirect forms of bullying. In Iran, also Mohammad Khani (2002) has reported that girls are victimized mainly by rumor-mongering, which is one of the main forms of emotional bullying (Cheraghi & Piskin, 2011). In other words, the possibility for girl to either become an emotional bully or victim is higher than for boys and this indicates the vitality of investigation of emotional victimization in female students in schools.

The victims are students who are targeted by bullies and are known with properties such as weakness, introversion, sensitiveness, shyness, caution, insecurity and with high levels of anxiety (Felipe, García, Babarro, Arias, 2011; Espelage & Holt, 2013). In terms of physical properties, the majority of the victims are smaller than bullies and usually are weaker in defending and taking care of themselves, either physically or verbally. Hence are often target of aggression of the bullies with no reason (Turner, Finkelher & Ormord, 2010). They usually have defective and negative insight about themselves and also have poor social skills. These students have negative perspectives about themselves and their status, and usually are alone in the school environment and so are not in social networks of their peers or have limited relations with them (Felipe et al., 2011). A combination of these defects has increased the possibility for a victim to be targeted by bullies that can aggravate their problems over time. These students after a while get more introverted and secluded and may reach the level of desperation, and having the least self-esteem and self-confidence (Dukes, Stein & Zane, 2009), growing negative feelings about themselves and lose their courage and the ability to defend themselves. If victimization in this student be continuing, it can cause a series of physical health problems such as neurological - digestive disorders, sleep disorders, headaches and muscle tensions, academic and school problems such as escaping and refusing to go to school (Kowalski, & Limber, 2013), psychological problems such as severe depression(Roth, Coles & Heimberg, 2002), disruption in a person's mental health and wellbeing(Tofi & Farrington, 2008) and at a higher level developing suicidal thoughts and even the possibility of suicide attempts (Espelage & Holt, 2013).

Such unpleasant consequences of victimization calls for creation and application of suitable intervention programs to help the victims increase their strengths and build a sense of dealing with such behaviors and thereby reduce their victimization. One of these effective programs might be Assertiveness skills training because as mentioned earlier the victims mostly suffer from low self-efficacy and self-esteem, the feelings of helplessness and inability and this causes them to have little or no courage and Assertiveness to defend themselves in interpersonal encounters. While Assertiveness skills training programs can improve people's information, beliefs and characteristics namely self-esteem, self-efficacy and courage in a way that they can alter their negative views and create more dignified interpersonal relationships (Landazabal, 2001). Wolpe (1969) claims that Assertiveness training program as a therapeutic approach is suitable for people who suffer from interpersonal situations and are tired of problems arising from these situations. Assertiveness training program are then run in order to improve the opinions and behaviors of the people in relation to courage such that they are able to look at themselves through a better perspective and reach self-trust, express their personal thoughts and emotions properly, and ultimately refuse to let others invade their privacy and make abuses from them (Hargie, Saunders & Dickson, 2004). On the contrary, the absence of courage and Assertiveness in interpersonal situations causes people to show mainly passive and neutral behaviors, tolerate high levels of anxiety and stress and gradually form this belief that they are defenseless towards the abuse of others (Ilkhchi, Poursharifi & Alilo, 2011), and may eventually become the victim in these situations (Deltisidou, 2009). So it seems that in bullying which is an interpersonal social situation if a victim reaches the sufficient level of courage and Assertiveness and his belief in competence and self-esteem improve, he will have an improved power to deal with bully's behaviors. In line with this finding, Folton (1997) claims that Assertiveness is an effective means for improving inner power of the individuals in stressful social situation such as bullying. Assertiveness skills training program has good experimental support in enhancing mental health and improving interpersonal skills and a variety of research have reported the positive effect of this kind of training on enhancement of social compatibility and social skills (Barton-Arwood, Morrow, Lane & Jolivette, 2005), increasing the social support from Individuals, increasing the competence of adolescents in cases of conflicting situations with peers (Korem, Horenczyk & Tatar, 2012), and the reduction of conflicts in interpersonal situations and expansion of satisfactory social communication (Korsgaard, Roberson & Rymph, 1998). However, so far in Iran, little research has been done on the effects of different interventions including Assertiveness skills training on students who have been victims of bullying. Only Moghtadaei et al., (2011) showed that programs based on social skills training has a positive effect on improving students' behavior who were victims of bullying. On the other hand, According to the highly destructive effects of bullying behaviors on the victim students, especially the abundant effects of emotional victimization on female students, it is very important that we effectively intervene in this process of victimization through conducting measurable and applicable studies among groups involved in bullying, specially the group of victims and carefully assess the outcomes associated with our interventions.

Research Objective: In this regard, the present study has
sought to respond to the question of whether or not Assertiveness Skills Training is effective in reducing the amount of emotional victimization of female students.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Population and sample**

The statistical population of this study consists of all secondary high school female students from Sanandaj city in the 2013-2014 academic year. The final sample under study was considered 25 persons for each group. To do so, firstly one secondary high school was chosen using cluster random sampling method among all secondary high schools in Sanandaj city and then all students of this school responded to the scale of bullying victimization. Then 50 of the students who had the highest scores in emotional victimization, were randomly placed in an experimental group (n = 25) and a control group (n = 25).

**Persian form of Bullying Victim's Scale (B.V.S)**

In present study (B.V.S) was used to collect data in pretest and posttest phases. This scale was made and validated based on Elvis’s (1996) questionnaire and normalized with Iranian cultural situation. It consists of 26 items that evaluates physical, verbal and emotional victimization at a 6 degree Likert scale. For reliability evaluation of this scale the test-retest method is used. The coefficients obtained for all test is r = 0.98 and for emotional area is r = 0.98 that indicates high reliability of this scale. To assess the validity of the method, construct validity has been used. The results showed that the correlation coefficient for the emotional subscales questions is fluctuating between the minimum and maximum of 0.87 and 0.93 that show all the emotional subscales questions evaluate this subject(Moradi, 2009).

**Procedure**

The aim of the study was AS training. For this purpose, victim students' scores were collected and calculated using the scale of (B.V.S). then, 50 people were chosen based on the highest scores they gained, and were randomly placed in an experimental group and a control group. Experimental group attended eight 90-min sessions for two months (one session per a week) under AS training for the purpose of examining its effect on decreasing emotional victimization while control group never attended any session. After lasting sessions, posttest was conducted by (B.V.S) scale on both groups. Data analysis was performed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation), and inferential statistics (ANCOVA) with SPSS 19.

**Sessions of AS training**

The AS training sessions were arranged and edited by Mohammadkhanii (2004) based on Instructional Package so-called "students' assertiveness skills" on the recommendation of the Theoretical and Practical Skills Training Assistance of Education Ministry, and the package of “Group Assertiveness Training” (Printz, 2003).

**Session 1.** To create proper treatment and emotional relations with participants, organize 5-people groups to do group activities, as necessary, provide two short stories on situations requiring assertive behaviors, provide a definition of assertiveness concept, state the assertive individuals' main characteristics, state the different outcomes of lack of assertiveness, need for main assertiveness skills and be trainable of assertiveness.

**Session 2.** To train and debate about seven main components of assertiveness in groups, train fundamental principles of assertiveness, train and debate about individuals’ rights and responsibilities in IC.

**Session 3.** To arrange main interpersonal communication (IC) styles (passive, aggressive, and assertive), debate about passive and aggressive communication styles, passive and aggressive individuals’ main characteristics, communication message of each style, passive and aggressive individuals’ essential goal from doing passive and aggressive behaviors, underlying reasons, outcomes and consequences of these behaviors.

**Session 4.** To train assertive communication style, train the assertive individuals’ eight main characteristics, communication message of assertive behaviors, essential goals of IC style, debate about group of participants, outcomes and consequences of assertive behaviors, yield two examples from IC situations and responses to these situations through assertive communication style.

**Session 5.** Providing the main classification of assertiveness skills to verbal skills (such as speech rate, volume, tone of voice, words, eye contact, facial expressions and physical distance) and nonverbal skills (such as commenting, expressing feelings and request), expression the importance of non-verbal skills in the communications, training Each of these skills and practice each of these skills with subjects.

**Session 6.** To reflect the importance of verbal skills, present the examples of situations needed to use these skills, train the five typical steps to reflect demands and feelings, offer the examples of actual interpersonal situations, exercise to state assertively demands and
feelings with participants.

Session 7. To present a four-step model of assertive behavior, exercise these steps with participants, offer the situations of life needed to do assertive behaviors, exercise this model as a role playing by participants through replacement of roles.

Session 8. To present special assertive techniques, including decisively rejection, fallen-line surface method, disarm method, exercise practically these methods with participants, offer the situations in where assertive behaviors aren’t appropriate or may be dangerous, debate about what they have learned in groups during sessions and changes in which they observe in them, propose a collection, and conclude the arranged sessions on assertiveness skills.

**RESULTS**

The data of table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of the experimental and control groups in the pre-test, post-test and Follow Up level for victims of emotional bullying. Based on this information, the mean of the experimental group is reduced after intervention. Since to examine this hypothesis, the pre-test / post-test experiment design with control group was used, to analyze the results a covariance analysis was applied, So the impacts of pre-test results be controled as an covariate random variable. So at first we examine one of the main covariance analysis hypotheses that is the homogeneity of the variances. The default hypothesis of homogeneity of variances was examined by Levene’s test and the results are presented in table 2. As the results show, the variance error of groups under study is equal and homogeneous because the obtained F = 0.874, is not significant at P < 0.05 level. So it can be claimed that the hypothesis of homogeneity of variances in our covariance analysis is confirmed and not rejected.

Table 3 shows the obtained F is significant with regarding pre-test scores as an covariate variable at level of p < 0.05 and therefore it can be concluded that the intervention of Assertiveness skills training resulted in a significant difference between experimental and control groups. The extent of the impact is about 80 percent that means 80 percent of the post-test variance is related to Assertiveness skills training intervention. Also, according to the resulted findings, it can be stated that there is a significant difference between the experimental and control group modified means with F = 185.198 and df = 1 and confidence level of 0.95. The statistical power =1 that indicates the appropriateness of the sample size.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16/88</td>
<td>1/81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11/52</td>
<td>1/418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Follow up</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11/44</td>
<td>1/261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16/20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17/64</td>
<td>1/753</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Follow up</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17/48</td>
<td>1/759</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1:** Mean and standard deviation of emotional victims of bullying

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Among-groups’ df</th>
<th>In-group df</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0/874</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0/026</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2:** Levene test to examine variance consistency in emotional victims of bullying

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Eta squared</th>
<th>Power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental stage</td>
<td>group</td>
<td>467/337</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>467/337</td>
<td>185/198</td>
<td><strong>000/0</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>error</td>
<td>118/602</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>2/523</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11219</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Followup stage</td>
<td>group</td>
<td>461/508</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>461/508</td>
<td>205/761</td>
<td><strong>000/0</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>error</td>
<td>105/418</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>2/243</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>total</td>
<td>11023</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3:** The covariance analysis for the effect of Assertiveness skills training on emotional victimization.
CONCLUSION

The results showed that Assertiveness skills training as an effective intervention reduced students' emotional victimisation. Although there was not any research that directly investigates the impact of Assertiveness skills training on reducing students' victimization, however, our findings were in line with the results of Moghtadaei et al. (2011) that showed social skills-based training program has a positive effect on improving the behavior of students who are victims of bullying. Also the results of this study are consistent with researches that have shown Assertiveness skills training increases students' courage, enhances the adolescents' competence in case of conflicts with peers (Borbely et al., 2005), reduces conflicts in interpersonal situations and expands satisfactory social communication (Korsgaard, Roberson, Rymph, 1998). The effectiveness of Assertiveness skills training on students victims of bullying can thus be explained that this approach can improve information, beliefs, self-esteem, self-efficacy and courage of the victim such that they are able to change their negative views and manage to build dignified interpersonal relationships with others (Landazabal, 2001). In fact, individuals with high levels of Assertiveness are more able to reduce conflicts in interpersonal situations greatly and reduce their stress-causing resources (Pourjali, Zarnaghash, 2010). Wolpi (1969) also estates that Assertiveness skills training is suitable as a therapeutic approach for people who suffer in interpersonal situations or people who are tired of problems arising from interpersonal situations. The phenomenon of bullying can be one of these interpersonal situations that are causing problems. While the victim's level of social connections deficits through the process of bullying and may lead to personal isolation in the event of the continuation of the problem, Assertiveness training could help them re-establish effective and productive communication in interpersonal relations and increase appropriate and compatible social behaviors. As Folton (1997) claimed that Assertiveness is a means that can be applied in stressful conditions, such as bullying, and enhances personal power in these conditions. Research continually has shown that Assertiveness training is very important in the improvement of adolescent’s social communication (Korem, Horenczyk, Tatar, 2012). A courageous student at the same time that establishes close relationships with others keeps himself safe from abuse of others. This is while those lacking Assertiveness do not believe they can save themselves from abuse of others (Ilkhchi, Poursarhifi, Alilo, 2011). In fact, Assertiveness training help that person to send this message with their courageously behavior to others that no one is little and less valuable and shall not be feared or suppressed or humiliated and ridiculed (Talbott, et al, 2012). So, on the subject of phenomenon of bullying, by learning Assertiveness skills, victim students found the ability to deliver such a precise message to the bullies and eventually prevented the constant bullying behaviors of them. In this research also, through the Assertiveness skills training intervention applied on the experimental group, the students’ emotional victimization rate was significantly reduced. Thus in total it can be concluded that Assertiveness skills training as an effective intervention succeeded in decreasing emotional victimization of the secondary school female students under study.

Similar studies are one of the factors that can help the researchers to compare their results. However, as this study is new so the lacking of sufficient background for this comparison is one of its limitations. Also, the sample limitation to secondary high school girl students, which cannot be generalized to boys and other grades, can be another limitation of this study. It is suggested that new studies conduct in larger study groups and in single case Designs. Considering the current study and the literature, which shows the strong scientific and experimental background in Assertiveness skills, this program is suggested to be used as a part of in-service training of school counselors and other school staff for improving cognitive, emotional and behavioral abilities of victim students of bullying.

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