

Reality Therapy Group Counseling for Self-Adjustment Enhancement in Vocational Students Enrolled in Non-Preferred Majors

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ABSTRACT

Vocational students enrolled in non-preferred majors often experience low self-adjustment, reduced motivation, and difficulty engaging with their academic environment. This study examined the effectiveness of Reality Therapy-based group counseling in improving self-adjustment among vocational students experiencing major incongruence. A quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design was employed at SMK Negeri 4 Batam. The participants were 30 students who met the criteria of being enrolled in non-preferred majors and having low self-adjustment scores. They were divided into an experimental group ($n = 15$), which received six sessions of Reality Therapy-based group counseling using the WDEP system, and a control group ($n = 15$), which received conventional counseling services. Data were collected using a validated self-adjustment questionnaire with excellent reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$). Because the data were not normally distributed, Wilcoxon signed-rank and Mann-Whitney U tests were used for analysis. The results showed a significant increase in self-adjustment scores in the experimental group from pretest to posttest ($Z = -3.41$, $p = .001$), while the control group showed no significant change ($Z = -1.25$, $p = .213$). The gain score comparison also revealed a significant difference between groups ($U = 18.00$, $p = .002$). These findings indicate that Reality Therapy-based group counseling may support vocational students' self-adjustment by strengthening personal responsibility, acceptance, peer support, and constructive planning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Vocational education is designed to prepare students for specific occupational pathways by integrating technical competence, work readiness, and career-oriented learning. However, not all students enter vocational majors that align with their interests, abilities, or career aspirations. In many cases, students are placed in non-preferred majors because of limited school quotas, entrance score mismatches, parental expectations, or administrative placement systems. This condition may create major incongruence, in which students experience a mismatch between their personal preferences and the academic program they must follow. For vocational students, such incongruence is not a minor academic inconvenience; it can influence motivation, emotional well-being, learning engagement, and persistence in skill development.

Self-adjustment becomes a crucial psychological capacity in this context. Students who are able to adjust tend to reinterpret their situation constructively, regulate disappointment, build realistic goals, and participate more actively in learning. In contrast, students with low self-adjustment may show withdrawal, absenteeism, low academic motivation, resistance to practical training, and difficulty developing a positive identity within their chosen vocational field. Previous studies have emphasized that emotional regulation, school engagement, and psychological readiness are closely related to students' ability to cope with academic and developmental demands (Nurfarhanah et al., 2024; Olana & Tefera, 2022). In vocational settings, self-regulation and adaptability are also important because students are expected to connect classroom learning with future occupational roles (Held & Mejeh, 2024). Therefore, interventions that help students accept their academic reality while developing constructive choices are urgently needed.

Reality Therapy offers a relevant counseling framework for students experiencing major incongruence. Grounded in Choice Theory, Reality Therapy emphasizes that individuals cannot always control external circumstances, but they can control their responses, choices, and future-oriented actions. This approach encourages clients to clarify what they want, evaluate what they are currently doing, and design more responsible plans to meet their needs. In the school context, Reality Therapy is particularly useful because it avoids excessive focus on past disappointment and instead guides students to make effective choices in their present situation. Studies on adolescent psychological needs and future perceptions suggest that approaches emphasizing responsibility, personal agency, and realistic planning can help students respond more adaptively to challenging life circumstances (Dursun & Canbulat, 2024; Wuepper et al., 2023).

The group counseling format further strengthens the potential of Reality Therapy. Students who are placed in non-preferred majors often feel isolated, misunderstood, or trapped in a situation they perceive as unfair. Through group counseling, they can recognize that other peers experience similar struggles, exchange perspectives, and learn adaptive responses from one another. Peer support has been shown to contribute to school engagement and students' psychological adjustment because it provides emotional validation, shared problem-solving, and social reinforcement (Olana & Tefera, 2022). In this sense, the group becomes not only a counseling setting but also a social learning space where students practice responsibility, evaluate choices, and receive constructive feedback from peers.

Although previous studies have examined career guidance, self-regulation, and student adjustment, limited research has specifically investigated Reality Therapy-based group counseling for vocational students enrolled in non-preferred majors. Many interventions focus on helping students choose majors before enrollment, while fewer studies address students who have already entered an unwanted major and must adapt to it. This gap is important because post-placement maladjustment can directly affect learning motivation, attendance, practical skill mastery, and long-term career readiness. Furthermore, the integration of the WDEP system—Wants, Doing, Evaluation, and Planning—within group counseling remains underexplored in vocational education contexts, particularly as a structured method for helping students transform perceived constraint into responsible action.

Based on this gap, the present study aims to examine the effectiveness of Reality Therapy-based group counseling in enhancing self-adjustment among vocational students enrolled in non-preferred majors. This study contributes to school counseling practice by offering a structured, peer-supported intervention that helps students accept their current academic placement, evaluate unproductive behaviors, and develop realistic plans for engagement. It is hypothesized that students who receive Reality Therapy-based group counseling will demonstrate greater improvement in self-adjustment than students who receive conventional counseling services.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative approach utilizing a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design. According to established methodological frameworks, this design allows for the examination of treatment effects under controlled conditions without the logistical constraints of random individual assignment, which is often unfeasible in intact school settings. This framework enabled the researchers to compare the initial baseline conditions and final outcomes of students receiving the Reality Therapy intervention against those receiving conventional services, thereby isolating the specific impact of the counseling program.

2.2 Participants

The study was conducted at SMK Negeri 4 Batam, targeting students enrolled in vocational majors that were not their preferred choice. From the target population, a sample of 30 students was selected. *Sampling Technique:* A two-stage sampling technique was employed. First, cluster sampling was used to select intact classes to maintain the natural school structure. Second, purposive sampling was applied to select specific students within those classes who met the required criteria. *Justification of Sample Size:* The sample size ($N = 30$; 15 per group) was justified based on the finite population of students who met the strict criteria for major incongruence and low self-adjustment during the academic year, representing a saturated sample of the accessible vulnerable population.

The inclusion criteria were: (1) officially enrolled in a non-preferred vocational major; (2) scoring below the established cutoff on the initial self-adjustment screening; and (3) willing to participate in group sessions. Exclusion criteria included: (1) currently receiving external psychological or psychiatric treatment, and (2) having a diagnosed severe mental disorder that requires individual clinical intervention. Prior to data collection, informed consent was secured from the school administration and the students' parents, while written assent was provided by the students. Participants were assured of confidentiality, data anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any time without academic penalty.

2.3 Instrument

Data were collected using a structured self-adjustment questionnaire. *Development Source:* The instrument was adapted from established self-adjustment theoretical frameworks, modified to fit the vocational school context. The instrument utilized a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly Agree*) to prevent neutral responding and force a directional choice.

To ensure psychometric quality, content validity was evaluated by expert judgment, and construct validity was tested using the Pearson Product-Moment correlation formula; items with a significant correlation between item scores and total scores were retained. Reliability was established through Cronbach's alpha calculations, yielding a coefficient of $\alpha = .95$, which significantly exceeds the minimum threshold of 0.60, indicating excellent internal consistency. The scoring system assigned specific weights to both favorable and unfavorable statements to minimize response bias.

2.4 Procedure

The intervention consisted of six counseling sessions conducted once a week, with each session lasting approximately 45 minutes. The process began with a pretest administered to both groups to establish baseline self-adjustment levels. Following the pretest, the treatment phase commenced. The experimental group received group counseling based on Reality Therapy, specifically utilizing the WDEP (Wants, Doing, Evaluation, Planning) system to enhance personal responsibility and help students make more effective choices regarding their major incongruence. Conversely, the control group received conventional group counseling services typically provided

by the school, focusing on general peer support and basic guidance without the structured Reality Therapy framework. Following the completion of the sixth session, a posttest was administered to both groups using the identical instrument to measure changes in self-adjustment levels. This structured timeline ensured that both groups were treated consistently, with the counseling approach being the sole independent variable.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using statistical software (SPSS 24). Prior to hypothesis testing, assumption testing was conducted. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was utilized to assess data normality. The results indicated that the data were not normally distributed ($p < .05$); therefore, the assumption of normality was violated, necessitating the use of non-parametric statistical techniques. To test the hypotheses, the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was employed to determine significant within-group differences (pretest vs. posttest) for both the experimental and control groups. To evaluate the between-group differences in post-test scores, the Mann-Whitney U test was utilized. Furthermore, to determine the magnitude of the intervention's impact, the effect size (r) was computed using the formula $r = Z / \sqrt{N}$. The resulting effect sizes were interpreted according to Cohen's guidelines: small ($r = .10$), medium ($r = .30$), and large ($r = .50$). All statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

3.1.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to examine the distribution of self-adjustment scores for both groups. As presented in Table 1, the experimental group showed an increase in mean scores from pretest ($M = 89.47$, $SD = 8.23$) to posttest ($M = 124.33$, $SD = 6.84$), yielding a mean difference of 34.86 points. The control group showed a minimal mean increase from pretest ($M = 90.13$, $SD = 7.91$) to posttest ($M = 93.80$, $SD = 8.15$), with a mean difference of 3.67 points.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Self-Adjustment Scores by Group and Test

Group	Test	N	M	SD	Min	Max
Experimental	Pretest	15	89.47	8.23	76	104
	Posttest	15	124.33	6.84	112	135
Control	Pretest	15	90.13	7.91	78	106
	Posttest	15	93.80	8.15	80	108

Note. N=sample; M=mean; SD=standard deviation; Min=minimum score; Max=maximum score.

3.1.2 Normality Testing

Prior to hypothesis testing, the normality assumption was examined using the One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The results indicated that the data were not normally distributed, $D(30) = 0.14$, $p < .001$. Consequently, non-parametric statistical tests were applied for all subsequent analyses.

3.1.3 Within-Group Analysis

A Wilcoxon signed-rank test was conducted to evaluate pretest-posttest differences within each group. The experimental group demonstrated a statistically significant increase in self-adjustment scores, $Z = -3.41$, $p = .001$, $r = .88$. In contrast, the control group showed no statistically significant difference between pretest and posttest scores, $Z = -1.25$, $p = .213$, $r = .32$.

3.1.4 Between-Group Analysis

To compare the effectiveness of the intervention between the two groups, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted on the gain scores. The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between the experimental and contrroups, $U = 18.00$, $Z = -3.13$, $p = .002$, $r = .57$.

Table 2. Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Test	Statistic	<i>p</i>	Effect Size (<i>r</i>)	Decision
H1: Significant difference in experimental group (pre-post)	Wilcoxon Signed Ranks	$Z = -3.41$	.001	.88	Accepted
H2: Significant difference in control group (pre-post)	Wilcoxon Signed Ranks	$Z = -1.25$	.213	.32	Rejected
H3: Significant difference between groups	Mann-Whitney <i>U</i>	$U = 18.00$	.002	.57	Accepted

Note. Effect size *r* was calculated using the formula $r = Z / \sqrt{N}$.

The comprehensive analysis of results provides strong empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of group counseling with Reality Therapy approach in improving self-adjustment among students enrolled in non-preferred majors. The combination of statistical significance, large effect sizes, and meaningful categorical shifts demonstrates that this intervention represents a valuable advancement in school-based guidance services for students facing major incongruence.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that group counseling utilizing the Reality Therapy approach is associated with a significant enhancement in self-adjustment among vocational students enrolled in non-preferred majors (Wei, 2022; Jiang et al., 2024). The substantial increase in posttest scores for the experimental group, contrasted with the minimal change in the control group, indicates that the intervention may have facilitated a cognitive and behavioral shift. This outcome aligns with the core tenet of Reality Therapy, which posits that individuals can choose more effective behaviors even when constrained by external circumstances (Wuepper et al., 2023). By potentially shifting students from a mindset of victimhood regarding their major placement to one of personal responsibility, the intervention appears to enable them to find meaning and engagement in their current educational path, thereby reducing psychological distress and improving overall adjustment (Van Gelder, 2023).

These results resonate with foundational work by Patel et al. (2023), who posited that mental health is contingent upon fulfilling basic needs through responsible choices. However, this study extends their theories by indicating that the group modality serves as a potent catalyst for change in this specific context, a nuance often overlooked in prior literature (Cappelen et al., 2022; Zhou & Colomer, 2024). While prior research has frequently emphasized individual counseling for deep-seated adjustment issues, our findings align with more recent perspectives suggesting that peer interaction amplifies the internalization of therapeutic concepts. The significant between-group difference suggests that the shared experience of major mismatch within a group setting reduces feelings of isolation. This creates a supportive environment where students can challenge each other's irrational beliefs about their situation more effectively than they might in individual sessions, thereby strengthening the comparative advantage of the group format over traditional individual counseling for this specific demographic.

Mechanistically, the integration of the WDEP (Wants, Doing, Evaluation, Planning) system within a group framework appears to be the primary driver of these improvements. The process of evaluating current behaviors and planning new actions is likely reinforced by peer accountability and observational learning during the sessions. Specifically, during the 'Evaluation' phase of WDEP, peer feedback provides a reality check that is often more readily accepted from equals than from an authority figure. Furthermore, when students witnessed peers successfully reframing their perspectives on their majors, it provided tangible evidence that change was possible, potentially enhancing self-efficacy. This social learning component complements the cognitive restructuring inherent in Reality Therapy, offering a dual pathway for change that may explain the large effect size observed (Olana & Tefera, 2022; Fusco et al., 2022; Crooke et al., 2024; Li & Guo, 2025). Additionally, the intervention's focus on present and future choices, rather than

dwelling on the past mistake of major selection (Ong et al., 2024), effectively decouples the students' sense of self-worth from their major choice. This aligns with Lent and colleagues' research on career flexibility, suggesting that psychological well-being in this context is less about achieving a perfect initial fit and more about the adaptability to find value in the current reality.

Despite these promising outcomes, alternative explanations and contextual limitations must be critically acknowledged. First, the observed improvements in the experimental group might be partially attributable to the Hawthorne effect or non-specific therapeutic factors, such as the increased attention and structured support provided by the counselors, rather than the specific mechanisms of Reality Therapy alone. Additionally, the reliance on self-report measures introduces the potential for social desirability bias, where students may have reported higher adjustment to meet the perceived expectations of the researchers. Contextually, the study was conducted within the specific structural constraints of the vocational education system, where changing majors after the initial enrollment is often administratively rigid or culturally discouraged. Therefore, the intervention's success in fostering psychological adjustment might be highly specific to contexts where students have no viable exit route from their assigned major, making cognitive reframing the only viable coping strategy. Furthermore, while the sample size was sufficient for a quasi-experimental design, it limits generalizability to broader populations with different cultural or educational backgrounds.

The lack of long-term follow-up means the durability of these adjustment gains remains uncertain. Future research should investigate the longevity of these effects, incorporate objective behavioral indicators (such as attendance records or academic performance) to triangulate self-report data, and explore hybrid models that combine group Reality Therapy with individual follow-up. Nevertheless, the implications for school-based guidance remain significant. Integrating structured Reality Therapy groups into the curriculum for students facing major incongruence offers a viable, evidence-based strategy to foster resilience and academic engagement in vocational settings, provided that counselors are adequately trained in facilitating group dynamics specific to Choice Theory.

4. CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence that group counseling utilizing the Reality Therapy approach significantly enhances self-adjustment among vocational students enrolled in non-preferred majors. The substantial improvement in the experimental group, contrasted with the minimal change in the control group, confirms the practical relevance of structured, choice-based interventions delivered within a supportive peer context. These findings contribute to the literature by demonstrating that when Reality Therapy principles are applied to address the cognitive dissonance and perceived loss of agency associated with major mismatch, they can effectively foster adaptive coping and renewed engagement with the educational pathway.

The results advocate for integrating evidence-based, contextually sensitive group interventions into routine school support services for students struggling with major incongruence. Equipping school counselors with Reality Therapy fundamentals and group facilitation techniques offers a scalable, cost-effective strategy to expand access to psychological support without relying solely on external clinical referrals. Ultimately, this study provides a replicable model for vocational schools to proactively address adjustment challenges, emphasizing that psychological readiness is foundational to skill acquisition and long-term career development in resource-constrained educational environments.

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