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INTERPERSONAL COUNSELING (IPC) FOR IMPROVING SOCIAL SKILLS AMONG PREPARATORY SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH DYSLEXIA

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ABSTRACT

Reading difficulties, particularly dyslexia, pose significant academic, psychological, and social challenges for middle school students, including impaired social interactions, low self-esteem, and anxiety. This study examined the effectiveness of an Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT)-based counseling program in improving social skills among 51 ninth-grade male students with reading learning disabilities in Riyadh. Participants were randomly assigned to an experimental group ($n = 25$) receiving a 12-session IPT program and a control group ($n = 26$). Social skills were assessed across five dimensions: handling criticism, social interaction, problem-solving, conversation, and emotional expression. Data analysis using Mann-Whitney U and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed significant improvements in social interaction, problem-solving, conversation, and emotional expression, with large effect sizes ($r = 0.824-0.866$), while handling criticism showed no significant change. Improvements were maintained at a two-month follow-up. These findings indicate that IPT-based counseling is an effective and sustainable intervention for enhancing social skills and promoting psychological well-being among students with reading learning difficulties.

KEYWORDS: Dyslexia, Social skills, Interpersonal Psychotherapy, Counseling, Middle school students.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is widely regarded as the gateway to knowledge and the cornerstone of learning. Without reading proficiency, individuals are unable to keep pace with the rapidly evolving flow of information and events surrounding them. Reading plays a fundamental role in shaping and developing students' personalities; the personality of a student who is motivated and prepared to read differs markedly from that of a student who avoids reading or lacks readiness for it. Through reading, cognitive, emotional, and social domains are fostered by enriching the mind with knowledge, cultivating a constructive culture, and refining emotions.

Moreover, reading constitutes the primary medium for academic learning. Students cannot achieve meaningful progress in any learning domain unless they possess reading skills that enable comprehension, comparison, critical thinking, analysis, inference, and ultimately the formation of convictions that become integral to their identity and daily life. Consequently, learning to read remains the most critical skill determining students' academic success throughout their years of schooling (Tkocik, 2010).

Reading is the primary means through which learners access knowledge and information, serving as the foundation of science and an essential tool for learning. This explains educators' longstanding emphasis on mastering reading skills from the early stages of education. Reading also occupies a distinguished position in Arab and Islamic culture, deriving its nobility from the Holy Qur'an, as reflected in the verses: "So when the Qur'an is recited, listen to it and pay attention that you may receive mercy" (Al-A'raf: 204), and "Read in the name of your Lord who created" (Al-'Alaq: 1). The importance of reading for learners extends beyond its status as an academic subject, as success in most school subjects depends directly on reading proficiency. Although learners—particularly in the early grades—may experience reading difficulties due to the complexity of the skill and their limited prior exposure, neglecting these difficulties, even when they appear minor, may lead to their escalation. This necessitates accurate classification, precise diagnosis, and the selection of appropriate intervention strategies tailored to the nature of each difficulty (Bilkari, 2013).

In this context, the prevalence of reading difficulties, commonly referred to as dyslexia, represents one of the most significant challenges faced by students across educational stages, as it impedes the mastery of fundamental learning skills

and contributes to academic underachievement. The term specific reading difficulties has been used to describe the problems experienced by children whose reading performance falls below what would be expected based on their intellectual abilities or other academic competencies (Harding, 1986). Dyslexia is defined as a difficulty in learning to decode words, read aloud fluently, and spell accurately. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), dyslexia is classified as a neurodevelopmental disorder with a genetic basis, emerging early in development and persisting across the lifespan. Contemporary research has confirmed that dyslexia constitutes a specific learning disorder that cannot be attributed to sensory impairments or low general intelligence (Snowling *et al.*, 2020).

Despite extensive research efforts, the precise causes and mechanisms underlying dyslexia remain inconclusive. Several theoretical explanations dominate the literature, most notably the visual-attentional deficit hypothesis, the phonological deficit hypothesis, and multifactorial models. Research indicates that children with dyslexia may be affected by genetic factors, brain injuries, or atypical neural development, in addition to environmental influences such as poor nutrition. These children often exhibit delays in visual perception and sequential motor skills compared to their typically developing peers. Learning motivation also plays a significant role in exacerbating reading difficulties. Furthermore, school environment, family context, parenting styles, and the home literacy environment exert substantial influence on children's reading skills. Dysfunctional family relationships and harsh parenting practices may foster anxiety and aversion toward learning (Huang *et al.*, 2020).

The impact of dyslexia extends beyond academic performance to encompass psychological and social domains. Social communication is a core component of personal and social success; however, children with dyslexia often exhibit shyness and reluctance to engage with others as a result of ridicule or negative treatment by peers and, at times, teachers. Although emotional distress may diminish over time, the effects of negative experiences often persist. This is corroborated by reports from adults with dyslexia who continue to experience feelings of shame and low self-esteem.

In this regard, Torgesen (2000) emphasizes that repeated failure in reading fosters negative attitudes toward reading, undermining reading motivation and adversely affecting overall academic

achievement. Children with learning disabilities—particularly reading difficulties—face numerous social and emotional challenges, including low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and social rejection. This underscores the critical importance of examining the relationship between reading difficulties and emotional-social problems for purposes of early diagnosis and intervention (Nachshon & Horowitz-Kraus, 2019).

Although early research on learning disabilities acknowledged their association with communication and social difficulties, systematic attention to this aspect did not emerge until the mid-1980s. Despite growing interest, debate persists regarding the nature of these difficulties. Evidence suggests that behavioral problems do not manifest in all students with learning disabilities; however, when present, they often intensify during adolescence, adversely affecting both social and academic functioning and necessitating targeted counseling and therapeutic interventions (Abu Nayan, 2019).

Reading-related learning difficulties constitute educational problems with significant psychological and behavioral repercussions, including diminished self-confidence, reduced learning motivation, and the emergence of multiple academic and social problems. Consequently, accurate diagnosis is of paramount importance. Diagnosis typically involves two approaches: formal diagnosis conducted by specialists through medical, psychological, and social assessments, and informal diagnosis, which emerged in response to the need for more cost-effective and easily applicable alternatives within school settings.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that children with dyslexia exhibit deficits in social information processing (Shakeri et al., 2015), and impaired social skills are considered a common characteristic among this population. This has led some researchers to propose social skills as a diagnostic criterion for learning disabilities, given the detrimental effects of social skill deficits on academic achievement and social interaction (Ben Khalifa, 2016; Tahrawi, 2019). The American Psychological Association (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2022) defines social skills as a set of acquired abilities that enable individuals to interact effectively and appropriately across diverse social situations, including communication skills, assertiveness, problem-solving, and emotional and behavioral regulation.

Social skills play a vital role in individuals' lives by enabling them to cope with life stressors, enhancing feelings of happiness and satisfaction, and promoting psychological and social adjustment.

Accordingly, there is a pressing need for effective psychological and counseling interventions aimed at improving social skills among students with learning disabilities. Among the most prominent of these approaches is counseling based on Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT) (Weissman et al., 2017).

A review of previous studies underscores the effectiveness of IPT-based counseling in enhancing social skills among adolescents and adults, particularly in school and university settings. Programs such as IPT-AST have demonstrated substantial efficacy in improving peer interactions and relationship-building compared to traditional counseling interventions (Young et al., 2006; 2010). Follow-up studies further indicate that improvements in social skills are associated with reductions in depressive symptoms and enhancements in overall functioning, highlighting the preventive and developmental nature of this therapeutic approach (Young et al., 2019; Filia et al., 2021).

These findings are further supported by studies conducted across diverse cultural and age contexts, which have established the effectiveness of interpersonal psychotherapy both individual and group formats in improving social skills, emotional expression, social relationship quality, and overall quality of life (Ferizi et al., 2015; Spence et al., 2016; Atta et al., 2024). Collectively, these results suggest that interpersonal psychotherapy extends beyond symptom reduction to actively foster social skill development as a fundamental pathway to enhancing psychological well-being and social adjustment. This constitutes the central objective of the present study, which seeks to examine the effectiveness of an IPT-based counseling program in improving social skills among preparatory school students with dyslexia.

What is the aim of this study?

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of an IPT-based counseling program in enhancing social skills among middle school students with reading learning disabilities.

The present study sought to determine whether a counseling program grounded in Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT) techniques is effective in improving social skills among students with reading learning difficulties at the middle school level.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Social Skills

The construct of social skills has evolved considerably throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, reflecting major theoretical

shifts within psychological science. Early behavioral perspectives conceptualized social skills as observable and measurable patterns of overt behavior, emphasizing direct training in specific responses that facilitate effective social interaction. From this viewpoint, social competence was regarded as a learned behavioral repertoire that could be systematically acquired and generalized across social contexts.

Cognitive approaches subsequently expanded this conceptualization by emphasizing the role of social information processing, including the interpretation of situational cues, understanding others' intentions, and generating contextually appropriate responses. Within this framework, social difficulties are not solely attributed to behavioral deficits, but also to distortions or inefficiencies in cognitive appraisal and decision-making processes. Humanistic theories further broadened the scope by highlighting subjective experience, authenticity, empathy, and unconditional positive regard as core elements of effective interpersonal functioning, linking social competence to self-concept and emotional awareness.

More recently, integrative models have synthesized behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions, conceptualizing social skills as dynamic, context-dependent competencies that emerge through reciprocal interactions between individuals and their social environments. This multidimensional perspective underscores the central role of social skills in promoting social adjustment, psychological well-being, and adaptive functioning across developmental stages (Rose-Krasnor, 1997; Gresham, 2016).

Within educational psychology, social skills are commonly defined as socially acceptable and culturally appropriate behaviors that enable individuals to initiate, maintain, and regulate interpersonal relationships. These skills include communication, assertiveness, empathy, cooperation, and interpersonal problem-solving, and are often referred to as interpersonal or interaction skills.

A substantial body of empirical research indicates that students with learning disabilities, particularly those with reading difficulties, frequently exhibit marked deficits in social skills. Seminal findings by Kavale and Forness (1996) suggest that approximately 75% of students with learning disabilities demonstrate significant social competence impairments compared to their typically developing peers. Such deficits often manifest in difficulties interpreting social cues (e.g., humor,

facial expressions, and tone of voice) and in displaying contextually appropriate social behavior, increasing vulnerability to peer rejection and social isolation.

Social skills play a critical role in the psychological and emotional adjustment of students with learning disabilities. Repeated experiences of social failure are associated with low self-concept, heightened anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Empirical evidence indicates that deficits in social competence contribute significantly to emotional distress in this population, whereas interventions targeting social skills development are associated with improved self-esteem, reduced social anxiety, and enhanced psychosocial adjustment (Musetti *et al.*, 2019; Bakhshani *et al.*, 2022). Collectively, these findings underscore the centrality of social skills as a foundational construct in understanding and promoting the psychological well-being and social inclusion of students with learning disabilities.

2.2. *Interpersonal Counseling (IPC)*

Interpersonal Counseling (IPC) is a brief, structured counseling model derived from the core theoretical principles of Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT). It aims to alleviate psychological distress by focusing on individuals' current interpersonal relationships and the life stressors associated with them. The model is grounded in the assumption that psychological well-being is closely linked to the quality of social interactions, and that emotional difficulties often emerge or persist as a result of dysfunctional communication patterns or inadequate social support (Weissman *et al.*, 2017).

IPC is informed by a psychosocial perspective that conceptualizes human functioning as inherently relational. This perspective has evolved through major theoretical contributions, particularly Sullivan's interpersonal theory, which emphasized that personality cannot be understood independently of social relationships; Erikson's psychosocial developmental theory, which highlighted the central role of interpersonal relationships in identity formation and emotional adjustment across the lifespan; and Adler's concept of social interest, which underscored belongingness and cooperation as fundamental indicators of mental health.

Interpersonal Counseling (IPC) is a brief, goal-oriented psychological intervention, a defining feature that distinguishes it from many other therapeutic approaches. The intervention focuses on developing communication skills, enhancing emotional expression, and strengthening adaptive coping strategies within interpersonal contexts.

Rather than engaging in in-depth exploration of early developmental experiences, IPC places primary emphasis on current relational difficulties. It employs practical techniques such as communication analysis, problem-solving, encouragement of affective expression, and role-playing to facilitate observable improvements in interpersonal functioning (Parhiala et al., 2020).

Empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of IPC as an evidence-based intervention for individuals experiencing mild to moderate depression, anxiety disorders, and stress-related adjustment difficulties, particularly in educational settings, primary care, and community mental health services. Its brevity, structured format, and high degree of cultural adaptability further position IPC as a suitable early intervention approach for promoting psychological well-being through the enhancement of interpersonal relationships and the strengthening of social support networks (Ravitz et al., 2019).

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1. Population and Sample

The study population consisted of all ninth-grade male students in the Riyadh region, totaling 1,465 students, according to statistics from the Planning Department of the Directorate of Education in Riyadh for the academic year 2025/2026.

The study sample comprised 51 students aged 12–14 years ($M = 13.14$, $SD = 1.6$) from Grades 7 to 9

(intermediate stage) who were identified as having reading learning difficulties.

Regarding the sampling procedure, all schools that included ninth-grade classes were first identified. The researchers then selected ten schools using a simple random sampling method by writing the names of the schools on slips of paper, placing them in a container, and randomly drawing one slip. This process resulted in the selection of King Abdulaziz Intermediate School for Science and Technology in Riyadh as the site of implementation. The mean score of students' social skills at this school was 64.3 with a standard deviation of 5.3.

The sample was then randomly assigned into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group consisted of 25 students, who received the intervention program, while the control group consisted of 26 students, who did not receive the counseling program.

3.2. Baseline Equivalence of Study Groups

Prior to implementing the counseling program, the equivalence of the experimental and control groups was examined to ensure that any subsequent differences could be attributed to the intervention rather than pre-existing disparities. Baseline comparisons were conducted using the Mann-Whitney U test, a nonparametric statistical procedure suitable for comparing two independent groups when the assumptions of normal distribution are not fully met. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Differences Between the Experimental and Control Groups on the Social Skills Scale Before Program Implementation (Mann-Whitney U Test, $N = 51$).

Social Skills Dimension	Group	n	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Z	p
Handling Criticism	Experimental	25	26.14	653.50	-0.07	.944
	Control	26	25.87	672.50		
Social Interaction	Experimental	25	26.26	656.50	-0.13	.900
	Control	26	25.75	669.50		
Problem Solving	Experimental	25	26.50	662.50	-0.24	.809
	Control	26	25.52	663.50		
Conversation	Experimental	25	26.28	657.00	-0.14	.892
	Control	26	25.73	669.00		
Emotional Expression	Experimental	25	26.34	658.50	-0.16	.870
	Control	26	25.66	667.50		

The analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between the experimental group ($n = 25$) and the control group ($n = 26$) across all dimensions of the Social Skills Scale. Specifically, non-significant differences were found in handling criticism, social interaction, problem-solving skills, conversational skills, and emotional expression ($p > .05$ for all comparisons). Additionally, the mean ranks of both

groups were highly similar across all subscales, further supporting their comparability at baseline

These findings indicate that the two groups were statistically equivalent prior to the intervention. Establishing this equivalence strengthens the internal validity of the study, as it increases confidence that any post-intervention changes in social skills can be attributed to the effects of the counseling program

rather than initial group differences.

3.2. Instrument

3.2.1. Social Skills Scale

Social skills were assessed using the Social Skills Scale originally developed by Al-Kandari (2019). The scale measures multiple dimensions of interpersonal competence relevant to adolescent social functioning and has demonstrated satisfactory validity and reliability in prior research involving students with learning disabilities.

3.2.2. Intervention

The counseling program was grounded in Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT), an evidence-based, time-limited therapeutic approach that emphasizes the central role of interpersonal relationships in psychological adjustment. IPT conceptualizes emotional and behavioral difficulties as closely linked to disruptions in social roles, communication patterns, and interpersonal support systems.

3.3. Program Structure

The intervention consisted of 12 structured counseling sessions, each lasting approximately 60 minutes, delivered over an eight-week period. Sessions were conducted twice weekly during the first four weeks and once weekly during the remaining four weeks. The program was implemented in a group counseling format to promote interpersonal learning, peer interaction, and social skill development.

3.4. Therapeutic Techniques

Consistent with IPT principles, the program incorporated a range of evidence-based techniques, including interpersonal exploration, communication analysis, role-playing, structured problem-solving, facilitation of emotional expression, and guided homework assignments designed to promote the generalization of social skills beyond the counseling context.

3.5. Intervention Phases

The intervention followed the standard three-phase structure of IPT.

The initial phase focused on establishing the therapeutic alliance, providing psychoeducation on social communication, and identifying primary interpersonal problem areas.

During the middle phase, counseling techniques were actively applied to address deficits in social skills and reduce interpersonal difficulties.

The termination phase emphasized consolidating therapeutic gains, reinforcing adaptive interpersonal strategies, and preparing participants for independent application of acquired skills.

3.6. Procedure

Participants completed the study measures at three time points: prior to the intervention (pretest), immediately after program completion (posttest), and two months following the intervention (follow-up), allowing for the evaluation of both immediate and sustained effects of the counseling program.

3.7. Data Analysis

Given the small sample size and the absence of normal distribution assumptions, the data were analyzed using nonparametric statistical methods. The Mann-Whitney U test was employed to examine differences between the experimental and control groups, while the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to examine within-group differences across pretest, posttest, and follow-up measurements. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

4. RESULTS

To examine the effectiveness of the counseling program delivered to the experimental group, post-intervention scores of the experimental group were compared with those of the control group using the Mann-Whitney U test. Effect size was also calculated using the formula: $Z_{nr} = \frac{Z}{\sqrt{n}}$, $r = \frac{Z}{\sqrt{n}}$. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Differences in Mean Rank Scores Between the Experimental and Control Groups on the Social Skills Scale After Program Implementation Using the Mann-Whitney Test (N = 51).

Social Skills Dimensions	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Z	Sig.
Handling Criticism	Experimental	25	28.10	702.50	-1.008	.314
	Control	26	23.98	623.50		
	Total	51				
Social Interaction	Experimental	25	38.42	960.50	-5.887	.000
	Control	26	14.06	365.50		
	Total	51				
Problem Solving	Experimental	25	38.04	989.00	-5.937	.000
	Control	26	13.48	337.00		
	Total	51				

Conversation	Experimental	25	39.00	975.00	-6.156	.000
	Control	26	13.50	351.00		
	Total	51				
Emotional Expression	Experimental	25	39.00	975.00	-6.187	.000
	Control	26	13.50	351.00		
	Total	51				

Results Interpretation of Table 2.

The post-intervention analysis of the social skills dimensions revealed that the experimental group, which received the counseling program, showed significantly higher mean rank scores than the control group in most social skills dimensions, as measured by the Mann-Whitney U test.

Handling Criticism: The comparison between the experimental (Mean Rank = 28.10) and control group (Mean Rank = 23.98) indicated no statistically significant difference ($Z = -1.008$, $p = .314$). This suggests that the intervention had no measurable effect on participants' ability to handle criticism.

Social Interaction: The experimental group (Mean Rank = 38.42) scored significantly higher than the control group (Mean Rank = 14.06), $Z = -5.887$, $p < .001$. This indicates a strong positive effect of the program on improving participants' social interaction skills.

Problem Solving: Similarly, participants in the experimental group (Mean Rank = 38.04) outperformed the control group (Mean Rank = 13.48), $Z = -5.937$, $p < .001$, demonstrating a significant enhancement in problem-solving abilities following the intervention.

Conversation: The mean rank for the experimental group was 39.00, compared to 13.50 for the control group ($Z = -6.156$, $p < .001$). This result indicates a substantial improvement in conversational skills among participants who received the counseling program.

Emotional Expression: Finally, the experimental group also showed a significant increase in emotional expression (Mean Rank = 39.00) compared to the control group (Mean Rank = 13.50), $Z = -6.187$, $p < .001$. This suggests that the intervention was highly effective in enhancing participants' ability to express emotions appropriately.

Post-intervention comparisons between the experimental and control groups were conducted using the Mann-Whitney U test to assess the effectiveness of the counseling program on social skills. Effect sizes (r) were calculated using the formula $r = Z / \sqrt{N}$, where $N = 51$. Table 3 presents the mean ranks, test statistics, and effect sizes.

Table 3: Mann-Whitney U Test Results and Effect

Sizes for Social Skills Dimensions Post-Intervention (N = 51).

Social Skills Dimensions	Z	Sig.	r	Interpretation of Effect
Handling Criticism	-1.008	.314	0.141	Small / Not significant
Social Interaction	-5.887	.000	0.824	Large effect
Problem Solving	-5.937	.000	0.831	Large effect
Conversation	-6.156	.000	0.862	Large effect
Emotional Expression	-6.187	.000	0.866	Large effect

Interpretation of Table 3:

Handling Criticism: The Z-value was -1.008 with a significance level of $p = .314$, and the effect size $r = 0.141$. This indicates a small effect that is not statistically significant, suggesting that the intervention had minimal impact on participants' ability to handle criticism.

Social Interaction: The Z-value was -5.887, $p < .001$, with $r = 0.824$. This shows a large and statistically significant effect, indicating that the counseling program substantially improved social interaction skills in the experimental group compared to the control group.

Problem Solving: The Z-value was -5.937, $p < .001$, and $r = 0.831$. This represents a large effect, demonstrating that the intervention effectively enhanced participants' problem-solving abilities.

Conversation: The Z-value was -6.156, $p < .001$, with $r = 0.862$. This indicates a strong and statistically significant improvement in conversational skills for the experimental group.

Emotional Expression: The Z-value was -6.187, $p < .001$, and $r = 0.866$. This reflects a highly effective and statistically significant improvement in participants' ability to express emotions appropriately.

In addition to the previous analyses, and to further verify the effectiveness of the counseling program in improving social skills, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was conducted to compare pre- and post-intervention scores of the experimental group on the Social Skills Scale. The Rank-Biserial Effect Size (r) was also calculated to determine the magnitude of change. Table 4 presents the results.

Table 4: Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Results and Effect Sizes for Pre- and Post-Intervention Scores of

the Experimental Group on the Social Skills Scale (N = 25).

All dimensions of social skills showed substantial and statistically significant improvements between the pre- and post-intervention assessments within the experimental group ($p < .001$).

The effect size (r) for each dimension exceeded 0.8, indicating a large practical impact of the counseling program on social skills.

These findings support the previous between-group results (Mann-Whitney U test) and confirm that the program not only improved the experimental group’s performance compared to the control group but also enhanced participants’ skills relative to their own baseline levels.

4.1. Post-Test vs. Follow-Up Comparison

To examine the sustainability of the counseling program’s effects on social skills, post-intervention scores were compared with follow-up scores. This comparison allows for assessing whether the improvements observed immediately after the program were maintained over time.

The analysis focused on the experimental group, evaluating the long-term impact of the intervention on each social skills dimension. Effect sizes were calculated to quantify the magnitude of sustained improvements, and statistical significance was assessed to determine whether the observed gains persisted beyond the immediate post-test period.

This approach complements the previous analyses (pre-post within-group Wilcoxon comparisons and between-group Mann-Whitney U comparisons), providing a more comprehensive evaluation of the intervention’s effectiveness over time. The results of this comparison are presented in Table 5, which summarizes the Wilcoxon signed-rank test for post-test versus follow-up scores of the experimental group.

Table 5: Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Results for Post-Test vs. Follow-Up Scores of the Experimental Group on the Social Skills Scale (N = 25).

Social Skills Dimensions	Negative Ranks (N)	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Positive Ranks (N)	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Ties	Z	Asym p. Sig. (2-tailed)
Handling Criticism	1	2.00	2.00	2	2.00	4.00	22	0.577	.564
Social Interaction	1	2.00	2.00	1	1.00	1.00	23	0.447	.655
Problem Solving	0	0.00	0.00	1	1.00	1.00	24	1.000	.317

Social Skills Dimensions	Negative Ranks (N)	Positive Ranks (N)	Ties	Z	Sig. (2-tailed)	r	Interpretation of Effect		
Handling Criticism	0	24	1	4.321	.000	0.864	Large effect		
Social Interaction	0	24	1	4.321	.000	0.864	Large effect		
Problem Solving	0	22	3	4.149	.000	0.830	Large effect		
Conversation	0	24	1	4.312	.000	0.862	Large effect		
Emotional Expression	0	24	1	4.317	.000	0.863	Large effect		
Conversation	3	2.00	6.00	1	3.00	3.00	22	1.633	.102
Emotional Expression	5	3.60	18.00	1	3.00	3.00	19	1.667	.096

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test comparing post-intervention and follow-up scores revealed no statistically significant differences across all dimensions of social skills ($p > .05$), indicating that the improvements observed immediately after the program were largely maintained over time. Specifically

- Handling Criticism: $Z = -0.577, p = .564$
- Social Interaction: $Z = -0.447, p = .655$
- Problem Solving: $Z = -1.000, p = .317$
- Conversation: $Z = -1.633, p = .102$
- Emotional Expression: $Z = -1.667, p = .096$

These findings suggest that the counseling program had sustainable effects on the social skills of participants, with the gains observed post-intervention being largely retained at follow-up.

4.2. DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of an IPT-based counseling program in enhancing the social skills of middle school students with learning disabilities. The findings indicate that the program produced significant and sustained improvements across most social skill dimensions, including Social Interaction, Problem Solving, Conversation, and Emotional Expression, while the impact on Handling Criticism was minimal. These results are consistent with prior research highlighting the efficacy of structured, interactive interventions in promoting social competence among children and adolescents with learning disabilities (Utay & Lampe, 2008; Al-Dhafiri, 2014; Al-Kulliyah, 2015; Aliwa & Hamed, 2023).

4.3. Handling Criticism

Analysis of post-intervention scores revealed no statistically significant improvement in Handling Criticism between the experimental (Mean Rank = 28.10) and control group (Mean Rank = 23.98), $Z = -1.008$, $p = .314$, with a small effect size ($r = 0.141$). Despite the lack of significant change, the Wilcoxon pre-post comparison within the experimental group indicated a large effect ($r = 0.864$), suggesting that individual students may have experienced personal gains not reflected in between-group comparisons. The limited effect is likely attributable to the developmental and cognitive characteristics of students with reading difficulties, who often show heightened sensitivity to evaluative feedback (Hartanto et al., 2022). From an IPT perspective, effectively handling criticism requires gradual exposure to evaluative scenarios and individualized guidance, whereas the current program emphasized collaborative problem-solving, role-playing, and group-based interaction. This may explain why the impact on this dimension was smaller compared to other social skills.

4.4. Social Interaction

The program had a pronounced effect on Social Interaction (experimental Mean Rank = 38.42, control Mean Rank = 14.06, $Z = -5.887$, $p < .001$; $r = 0.824$). These results suggest that IPT techniques successfully facilitated students' ability to initiate, sustain, and adapt social interactions, interpret peer cues, and respond appropriately in group contexts. The use of role-playing, communication analysis, and guided interpersonal exercises provided authentic scenarios for practice and immediate feedback, aligning with evidence supporting these techniques as effective for enhancing interpersonal competence (Stuart & Robertson, 2012; Markowitz & Weissman, 2004; Spence & Rapee, 2016). The sustained effect observed at follow-up ($Z = -0.447$, $p = .655$) underscores the durability of these gains, reflecting students' internalization of social strategies.

4.5. Problem Solving

Problem-solving skills improved significantly (experimental Mean Rank = 38.04, control Mean Rank = 13.48, $Z = -5.937$, $p < .001$; $r = 0.831$). Within the IPT framework, students engaged in structured activities that encouraged analyzing social challenges, evaluating alternatives, and implementing adaptive solutions. This integration of cognitive and social learning processes allowed participants to apply problem-solving strategies

effectively in real-life social contexts, supporting findings from prior research on the efficacy of IPT and cognitive-behavioral interventions in children with learning disabilities (Utay & Lampe, 2008; Rihana et al., 2025). The follow-up results ($Z = -1.000$, $p = .317$) indicated that these skills were maintained over time, highlighting the program's long-term impact.

4.6. Conversation Skills

Participants in the experimental group also demonstrated substantial improvements in conversational abilities (experimental Mean Rank = 39.00, control Mean Rank = 13.50, $Z = -6.156$, $p < .001$; $r = 0.862$). IPT emphasizes active engagement in dialogues, turn-taking, and perspective-taking, which were operationalized through role-playing and guided peer interactions. These techniques provided opportunities for practice, immediate feedback, and iterative refinement, enabling students to enhance their communication competence. Follow-up assessment ($Z = -1.633$, $p = .102$) confirmed that conversational skills gains were largely preserved, indicating that the program fostered sustainable improvements.

4.7. Emotional Expression

The intervention yielded a significant increase in emotional expression (experimental Mean Rank = 39.00, control Mean Rank = 13.50, $Z = -6.187$, $p < .001$; $r = 0.866$). IPT-based exercises, such as guided discussion, reflective role-play, and affective expression tasks, allowed students to recognize, articulate, and regulate emotions in social contexts. The large effect size and maintained follow-up scores ($Z = -1.667$, $p = .096$) demonstrate that the program effectively enhanced both affective competence and interpersonal adaptability, consistent with previous findings on the impact of interpersonal and cognitive-behavioral techniques on social-emotional learning (Utay & Lampe, 2008; Rihana et al., 2025).

4.8. Sustainability of Program Effects

Across all measured dimensions, post-test versus follow-up comparisons revealed no statistically significant declines ($p > .05$), suggesting that the IPT-based intervention produced long-lasting improvements. The sustainability of these effects is likely due to the experiential and interactive nature of the program, which allowed students to internalize social strategies through repeated practice, peer modeling, and structured feedback, reflecting core principles of IPT and social learning theory (Bowlby, 1969; Sullivan, 1953).

5. OVERALL INTERPRETATION

Overall, the findings underscore the efficacy of IPT-based counseling in promoting comprehensive social skills among students with learning disabilities. The integration of role-play, communication analysis, problem-solving, and emotional expression exercises effectively addressed multiple social skill domains simultaneously. The smaller impact on Handling Criticism highlights the need for targeted interventions, such as individualized coaching or exposure-based training, to strengthen coping with evaluative feedback.

5.1. Implications

These results support the incorporation of IPT techniques into school counseling programs, emphasizing interactive, practice-based approaches for enhancing social competence in adolescents with learning challenges. Recommendations include training school counselors in IPT methods and providing professional supervision to ensure intervention fidelity, involving parents and teachers in reinforcing behavioral gains beyond the program sessions, and expanding the program to other populations such as students with social adjustment difficulties or general anxiety. In addition, future research should conduct controlled experimental studies to compare IPT with alternative interventions and to evaluate the contribution of specific IPT components to social and emotional outcomes (Kavale & Mostert, 2004; Utay & Lampe, 2008; Wolfe, 2013).

Furthermore, given the comparatively limited

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent: This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki and the guidelines for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority at the Ministry of Education in Riyadh, and explicit consent was obtained from the parents or guardians of the participating students.

All participants were informed about the aims and procedures of the study, and written informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Confidentiality and privacy were strictly maintained. No personally identifying information was collected, and all data were used solely for scientific research purposes.

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improvement observed in the handling criticism dimension, future interventions may benefit from incorporating more individualized and graduated exposure to evaluative situations, structured feedback training, and cognitive-emotional regulation techniques. Integrating role-play scenarios that simulate peer and teacher feedback, combined with guided reflection and coping strategy rehearsal, may help students with learning difficulties gradually develop resilience and more adaptive responses to criticism. Such enhancements would further strengthen the applied value of IPT-based school counseling programs and provide clearer guidance for practitioners and researchers designing future interventions.

5.2. Limitations

This study is limited by its small sample of 51 male preparatory school students from only two schools in Riyadh, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader populations or female students. The intervention was conducted over eight weeks, with a follow-up period of only two months, limiting the assessment of long-term effects. Social skills were measured using a single scale, and the counseling program was delivered in a group format, which may have constrained the ability to address individual needs, particularly in handling criticism or social anxiety. Additionally, some data relied on students' self-reports, which may be influenced by social desirability, necessitating cautious interpretation of the results

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