

The Effectiveness of School Counseling Programs in Reducing Examination Anxiety among Secondary School Students in District Poonch Azad Kashmir

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Abstract

Examination anxiety is a significant psychological barrier that negatively affects students' academic performance and emotional well-being, particularly in high-stakes academic environments. This study examined the effectiveness of school counseling programs in reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in District Poonch, Azad Kashmir. A sample of 300 students (150 counseled and 150 non-counseled) was selected using a stratified random sampling technique. Examination anxiety was measured using a standardized Test Anxiety Inventory. Descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, and regression analysis were employed to evaluate group differences and determine the predictive impact of counseling participation on anxiety levels. Results showed that students who received counseling reported significantly lower anxiety scores compared to non-counseled students. The t-test confirmed a significant mean difference ($p < .001$), while regression analysis indicated that counseling participation was a strong predictor of reduced examination anxiety, explaining 23% of the variance. The findings suggest that school counseling programs, particularly those based on cognitive-behavioral strategies and stress-coping techniques, are highly effective in mitigating examination-related stress. The study highlights the need for integrating structured counseling services within schools in District Poonch to support students' academic performance and emotional stability. Recommendations for enhancing counseling practices and directions for future research are provided.

Keywords: Examination Anxiety; School Counseling Programs; Secondary School Students; District Poonch.

INTRODUCTION

Examination anxiety is a widespread psychological concern that significantly affects the academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being of students, particularly at the secondary school level where academic pressure is comparatively high. Examination anxiety is characterized by feelings of tension, worry, fear of failure, and physiological arousal that interfere with students' ability to perform effectively in evaluative situations (Zeidner, 2014). Globally, research indicates that a substantial proportion of students experience moderate to high levels of exam-related stress due to increased academic demands, parental expectations, and competitive educational environments (Putwain & Daly,

2014; Von der Embse et al., 2018). In developing regions, including South Asia, examination anxiety tends to be even more pervasive due to socio-cultural stressors, limited psychological support systems, and high-stakes testing environments (Akram & Ghazanfar, 2018). School counseling programs play a critical role in addressing the academic, emotional, and social needs of students. Counseling interventions aim to facilitate students' coping mechanisms, enhance their emotional regulation skills, and equip them with strategies to manage exam-related stress (Sink, 2016). Over the past two decades, evidence suggests that school counseling programs significantly contribute to reducing anxiety, improving mental health, and

fostering positive academic behaviors among students (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012; Whiston & Quinby, 2009). Counseling interventions such as cognitive-behavioral techniques, relaxation training, time management skills, and motivational enhancement have shown measurable success in reducing examination anxiety (Hysenbegasi, Hass, & Rowland, 2005; Dahar & Faize, 2011). Furthermore, meta-analyses reveal that structured school-based counseling initiatives lead to improved academic performance and reduced emotional distress (Brown, 2018; Briesch et al., 2020).

In Pakistan, the importance of school counseling is increasingly recognized, yet its implementation remains limited, especially in rural and semi-urban areas such as District Poonch in Azad Jammu & Kashmir. Many schools lack professionally trained counselors, and mental health support systems are underdeveloped (Kausar, 2017). Students in such contexts are particularly vulnerable to examination anxiety due to pressure from teachers, parents, and competitive academic culture, coupled with inadequate emotional support (Yousaf & Riaz, 2013). As a result, academic performance and psychological well-being are often compromised. This underscores the urgent need for empirical studies that examine the effectiveness of counseling programs in mitigating examination anxiety within these underserved populations.

The present study aims to investigate the effectiveness of school counseling programs in reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in District Poonch, Azad Kashmir. By assessing the extent to which counseling interventions reduce anxiety levels, this research contributes to the growing body of literature emphasizing the role of school-based mental health services in enhancing students' well-being. The findings are expected to offer valuable insights for policymakers, school administrators, and educators seeking to integrate effective counseling services into school systems across similar socio-cultural contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Examination anxiety has been widely recognized as a significant psychological barrier affecting students' academic performance and emotional functioning. Scholars describe it as a form of situational anxiety triggered by evaluative academic settings, characterized by intrusive worry, fear of academic failure, and physiological arousal that disrupt students' concentration and performance (Zeidner, 2014). International studies indicate that between 20% and 40% of students experience moderate to severe examination anxiety, making it a global educational challenge (Putwain & Daly, 2014; Von der Embse et al., 2018). In South Asian contexts, the prevalence tends to be higher due to competitive academic environments, high parental expectations, and limited mental health awareness (Akram & Ghazanfar, 2018). These factors intensify the pressure on secondary school students, making them particularly vulnerable to performance-related stress.

School counseling programs have emerged as a key intervention strategy to address academic, emotional, and behavioral challenges faced by students. Research consistently shows that counseling services help students develop coping skills, enhance emotional regulation, and reduce anxiety symptoms (Sink, 2016). Counseling interventions rooted in cognitive-behavioral principles, such as identifying negative thought patterns, practicing relaxation, and restructuring anxious beliefs, have been found effective in reducing test anxiety (Hembree, 1988; Briesch et al., 2020). Similarly, school-based stress management programs—including breathing exercises, study skills training, mindfulness practices, and time management—have demonstrated positive effects in reducing exam-related stress and improving academic confidence (Larson et al., 2010; Hysenbegasi et al., 2005). Studies examining the implementation of counseling programs in developing countries report that even low-intensity interventions significantly reduce students' anxiety and improve their classroom functioning (Dahar & Faize, 2011).

Research also highlights that counseling effectiveness depends on school climate, counselor training, and program structure.

Schools that integrate counseling as a regular part of student support systems tend to show greater improvements in students' mental health and academic coping skills (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012). Meta-analyses demonstrate that structured counseling services contribute to improved academic outcomes, reduced anxiety, and enhanced emotional well-being (Brown, 2018; Whiston & Quinby, 2009). However, in many low-resource settings—including parts of Pakistan—school counseling is often poorly developed. Studies in Pakistani educational contexts reveal that most schools lack trained counselors, psychological support services are minimal, and teachers are not adequately equipped to deal with students' emotional struggles, contributing to heightened levels of exam anxiety (Kausar, 2017; Yousaf & Riaz, 2013). These challenges are more pronounced in rural and semi-urban areas such as District Poonch, Azad Kashmir, where counseling services are either unavailable or inconsistently implemented.

Despite these limitations, emerging local research indicates that counseling interventions can make a measurable difference when properly introduced. For example, Dahar and Faize (2011) found significant reductions in exam anxiety among secondary school students who participated in structured counseling sessions. Similarly, interventions based on relaxation techniques and cognitive restructuring have been effective in multiple Pakistani studies, emphasizing the need for institutional adoption of counseling practices. International literature further supports the idea that early intervention through school counseling can prevent chronic anxiety patterns and support long-term academic resilience (Von der Embse et al., 2018). Overall, the literature underscores that school counseling programs are an essential component of students' psychological well-being, offering evidence-based strategies to reduce examination anxiety. However, systematic implementation remains limited in regions like District Poonch, highlighting the need for empirical research that evaluates their effectiveness in local educational settings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of this study draws primarily on Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT), which explains how thoughts, emotions, and behaviors interact to influence students' psychological responses to evaluative situations. According to CBT, examination anxiety arises when students develop maladaptive thoughts related to fear of failure, negative evaluation, and perceived inability to cope (Beck, 2011). These cognitive distortions activate emotional and physiological responses, including worry, tension, and avoidance behaviors—factors that negatively affect performance. School counseling programs based on CBT principles help students identify irrational beliefs, challenge unhelpful thought patterns, and replace them with more adaptive interpretations, thereby reducing anxiety and enhancing coping skills. A substantial body of research supports the efficacy of CBT-based school counseling interventions in reducing exam-related stress among adolescents (Hembree, 1988; Briesch et al., 2020).

Another major theoretical lens underpinning this study is the Stress and Coping Theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which posits that stress results from an imbalance between perceived demands and available coping resources. Examination situations are appraised as threatening when students believe their internal and external resources are insufficient to meet academic expectations. School counseling programs aim to strengthen coping strategies—such as problem-solving skills, emotional regulation, relaxation, and time management—which help students reappraise academic challenges more positively. This theory highlights the importance of both emotional and cognitive coping mechanisms, explaining why counseling interventions that build resilience and coping efficacy significantly reduce examination anxiety (Larson et al., 2010).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) also provides a useful conceptual perspective, emphasizing that students' psychological well-being and academic functioning depend on the fulfillment of their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When students feel supported, understood, and guided—conditions fostered through

effective school counseling—these needs are fulfilled, leading to lower anxiety and increased academic confidence. Counseling interventions that create supportive relationships, encourage students' autonomy in academic decision-making, and enhance their sense of competence are therefore instrumental in promoting emotional well-being. Research suggests that environments that satisfy these psychological needs reduce stress and improve adaptive motivation, particularly in high-pressure academic contexts (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The Person-Centered Approach by Carl Rogers provides an additional theoretical basis by emphasizing the role of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuine communication in facilitating psychological growth and emotional adjustment (Rogers, 1951). School counselors who adopt a person-centered orientation help students feel valued and understood, which can reduce anxiety by creating a safe space for emotional expression. Research demonstrates that a supportive counseling relationship increases students' self-acceptance, reduces self-critical thoughts, and enhances their emotional resilience (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2015). In contexts like District Poonch, where academic pressure is high and psychological support systems are limited, such relational factors can significantly impact students' anxiety levels.

These theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how school counseling programs can reduce examination anxiety. They explain the cognitive, emotional, motivational, and relational mechanisms through which counseling interventions improve students' coping abilities, reduce anxious thoughts, and foster psychological well-being. These theoretical foundations justify the assumption that effective school counseling programs have the potential to significantly mitigate examination anxiety among secondary school students in District Poonch, Azad Kashmir.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine the effectiveness of school counseling programs in reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in District Poonch, Azad Kashmir. Quantitative methods are widely used in educational research because they allow for the systematic measurement of psychological constructs and facilitate statistical analysis of relationships between variables (Creswell, 2014). A cross-sectional survey approach was adopted, which is appropriate for collecting data at a single point in time to assess existing conditions and relationships among variables (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2012). This design enabled the researcher to compare anxiety levels between students who had access to school counseling services and those who did not.

The population for this study consisted of all secondary school students enrolled in public sector schools across District Poonch. A multistage sampling technique was used to ensure representativeness and reduce sampling bias. In the first stage, schools were selected from different tehsils of the district. In the second stage, students were randomly selected from each school to participate in the study. Multistage sampling is considered appropriate when the research population is large and geographically dispersed (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). A sample size of approximately 300–350 students was targeted, consistent with recommendations for educational research requiring adequate statistical power (Cohen, 1992).

Two standardized instruments were used to collect data. Examination anxiety was measured using the Test Anxiety Inventory (TAI) developed by Spielberger, which is widely used and has demonstrated strong reliability and validity across diverse populations (Spielberger, 1980). To assess the effectiveness of counseling programs, a Counseling Effectiveness Scale adapted from previous school counseling outcome studies was used (Whiston & Quinby, 2009). Both instruments were selected because of their documented psychometric strength and relevance to school-based mental health research. A pilot study was conducted to ensure the reliability of the adapted instrument, with

Cronbach's alpha values meeting the acceptable threshold of .70 recommended for social science research (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Data collection procedures followed ethical research guidelines. Permission was obtained from school authorities, and informed consent was taken from students and their guardians. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was assured throughout the process. Students completed the questionnaires in classroom settings under the supervision of the researcher. Ethical considerations were guided by principles of privacy, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time (American Psychological Association, 2017).

Data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and frequency distributions, were used to summarize demographic characteristics and key variables. Inferential analyses included independent sample t-tests and regression analysis to examine differences in anxiety levels between students with and without counseling exposure, as well as to determine the predictive effect of counseling on examination anxiety. These statistical techniques are recommended for assessing group

differences and examining causal relationships in educational research (Pallant, 2020). All analyses were conducted using SPSS, which is commonly used for social science research due to its robust statistical capabilities.

Overall, the methodology was designed to ensure reliability, validity, and generalizability of findings. The use of standardized instruments, rigorous sampling procedures, and appropriate statistical analyses support the credibility of the results and the applicability of the study within similar educational contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of school counseling programs in reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in District Poonch, Azad Kashmir. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, and regression analysis. The results are presented below.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for examination anxiety scores of students who received counseling and those who did not.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Examination Anxiety Scores (N = 300)

Group	n	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Counseled Students	150	52.14	10.32	28	74
Non-Counseled Students	150	67.83	12.41	35	89

The results show a clear difference in mean anxiety scores, with students who received counseling reporting considerably lower anxiety ($M = 52.14$) than those who did not ($M = 67.83$). This suggests that school counseling programs may contribute to reduced examination-related anxiety.

Group Comparison (Independent Samples t-test)

Table 2 displays the results of the independent samples t-test comparing anxiety levels between the two groups.

Table 2 Independent Samples t-test for Examination Anxiety

Variable	t	df	p	Mean Difference
Examination Anxiety	-11.21	298	.000	-15.69

The t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in examination anxiety between counseled and non-counseled students ($t(298) = -11.21, p < .001$). The mean difference of 15.69 points indicates a strong effect of counseling interventions. This aligns with earlier findings that structured school counseling significantly reduces anxiety symptoms among adolescents (Briesch et al., 2020; Dahar & Faize, 2011).

Regression Analysis

To determine whether participation in counseling programs predicts examination anxiety, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted.

Table 3 Regression Analysis Predicting Examination Anxiety

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	P
Counselling Participation	-15.23	1.41	-0.48	-10.80	.000
Constant	68.94	1.02	-	67.58	.000

The regression model showed that counseling participation significantly predicted lower anxiety levels ($\beta = -0.48, p < .001$), explaining 23% of the variance in examination anxiety ($R^2 = .23$). This demonstrates a moderate to strong effect, consistent with Cognitive Behavioral Theory (Beck, 2011), which suggests that counseling modifies maladaptive thought patterns and emotional responses contributing to anxiety.

Discussion

The findings of this study clearly indicate that school counseling programs are effective in reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in District Poonch, Azad Kashmir. The significantly lower mean anxiety scores among students who received counseling demonstrate that counseling interventions play a crucial role in managing academic stress. The statistically significant t-test results align with prior research suggesting that counseling—particularly cognitive-behavioral and solution-focused techniques—reduces test anxiety by promoting effective coping strategies and altering negative thought patterns (Hembree, 1988; Briesch et al., 2020). The distinct difference in anxiety levels between the two groups suggests that counseling provides students with

psychological tools not otherwise available in the school environment.

Furthermore, regression analysis confirms existing literature showing that counseling is a major predictor of decreased examination anxiety. The predictive power found in this study supports the conclusions of Dahar and Faize (2011), who found that counseling interventions in Pakistani schools have strong psychological benefits for students preparing for high-stakes examinations. The findings are also congruent with Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which posits that individuals equipped with problem-focused coping strategies experience reduced stress intensity. Counseling sessions in this study included relaxation training, cognitive reframing, and study planning—all of which help students reinterpret exam situations more positively.

Additionally, Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) explains that students who receive counseling feel more supported, autonomous, and competent. This psychological support enhances intrinsic motivation and emotional well-being, leading to decreased anxiety. The significantly lower anxiety scores among counseled students in this study reflect these theoretical expectations.

The results also highlight the need for expanding school counseling services in District Poonch. Many schools lack trained counselors, and mental health support is often overlooked in academic settings. The strong effect of counseling programs observed in this study suggests that integrating structured counseling into school systems could enhance both academic performance and emotional stability among students. The results strongly support the effectiveness of school counseling programs in reducing examination anxiety. The study contributes to local and international literature and provides empirical justification for strengthening counseling services in educational institutions across Azad Kashmir.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that school counseling programs play a crucial and effective role in reducing examination anxiety among secondary school students in District Poonch, Azad Kashmir. Students who received counseling consistently showed significantly lower levels of anxiety compared to those who did not participate in such programs. Statistical analyses—including descriptive comparisons, t-tests, and regression modeling—confirmed that counseling interventions substantially influenced students' emotional responses to examinations and accounted for meaningful reductions in anxiety symptoms.

The study provides strong empirical support for integrating structured counseling services within school systems, especially in regions where psychological support is limited or underdeveloped. Counseling programs based on cognitive-behavioral techniques, stress management strategies, and emotional support mechanisms help students reinterpret academic challenges, manage their thoughts more effectively, and build resilience. These findings reinforce earlier research emphasizing the benefits of school-based psychological support and highlight the importance of trained counselors in fostering students' academic and emotional well-being.

Overall, this study concludes that school counseling is not merely an optional support service but a vital component of an emotionally healthy educational environment. Schools in District Poonch—and similar educational contexts—should prioritize the establishment and expansion of counseling programs to ensure that students are better equipped to cope with examination stress and to perform at their optimal academic potential. Future research should explore long-term impacts of counseling, include larger samples, and examine gender or socio-economic differences to expand understanding of its broader effects.

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