

The Effectiveness of Group Counseling Using the Behavior Contract Technique in Improving Vocational High School Students' Discipline

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ABSTRACT

Discipline is an important aspect of vocational education because it is closely related to the formation of responsibility, compliance with rules, and students' readiness to enter the world of work. However, preliminary observations indicated that five Grade X TAB students at SMK Negeri 1 Palangka Raya had low levels of discipline, as reflected in behaviors such as arriving late, failing to wear complete school uniforms and attributes, skipping classes, being frequently absent without explanation, and paying insufficient attention during classroom learning. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique in improving students' discipline. This research employed a quantitative approach with a preexperimental one group pretest posttest design. The population of the study consisted of Grade X students at SMK Negeri 1 Palangka Raya, while the sample comprised five Grade X TAB students selected through purposive sampling based on observations, interviews, and criteria indicating low discipline. Data were collected using a student discipline questionnaire and analyzed using a paired sample t test. The findings showed that the students' mean discipline score increased from 44.60 in the pretest, which was categorized as low, to 69.80 in the posttest, which was categorized as moderate, after receiving group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique. The statistical test showed a significance value of Sig. two tailed = 0.000 < 0.05, indicating a significant difference between students' discipline scores before and after the intervention. These findings suggest that group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique can be used as an alternative strategy to help vocational high school students improve discipline through behavioral agreements, strengthened responsibility, and group support. Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted cautiously because the sample size was limited and the study did not include a control group.

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Introduction

Vocational education requires a high level of discipline because students are not only prepared to achieve academic success, but also to enter the world of work, which demands responsibility, compliance with rules, punctuality, and behavioral consistency. In this study, discipline is understood as students' capacity to regulate their behavior, comply with agreed rules, and consistently demonstrate responsibility in the school environment. This understanding is relevant to the vocational school context because disciplinary violations may affect students' work readiness, the orderliness of the learning process, and the formation of students' character.

Based on observations and interviews with the guidance and counseling teacher at SMK Negeri 1 Palangka Raya, particularly regarding Grade X TAB students, several forms of disciplinary problems were found to occur simultaneously. These problems included arriving late, failing to wear complete school uniform attributes, being frequently absent without explanation, paying insufficient attention during learning activities, and skipping classes at certain times. This condition indicates that students' disciplinary problems do not appear merely as single rule violations, but tend to be multiple and interrelated. If not addressed appropriately, such disciplinary behaviors may disrupt the learning climate, weaken students' sense of responsibility, and potentially influence their peers.

One relevant approach to addressing disciplinary problems is the behaviorist approach through the Behavior Contract technique. The behaviorist approach views behavior as a learned response that can be shaped and modified through the arrangement of stimuli, consequences, reinforcement, and habituation (Corey, 2017; Miltenberger, 2024). In the Behavior Contract technique, students are guided to agree on specific behavioral targets in written form, accompanied by clear consequences, positive reinforcement, and mutually agreed educational sanctions. This technique is considered appropriate for improving discipline because it positions students as active, responsible participants who are directly involved in the process of changing their own behavior.

Several previous studies have shown that the Behavior Contract technique is effective in improving discipline and reducing students' disciplinary problems. Monica et al. (2022) found that behavioral counseling using the behavior contract technique could improve students' learning discipline. Prakarsari (2024), through a literature review of studies published between 2019 and 2024, reported that behavior contract counseling helped reduce negative student behavior and increase students' responsibility for their own behavior. Sa'adah and Nurudducha (2025) also showed that group counseling using behavior contract techniques could improve students' attendance discipline and reduce tardiness. However, most previous studies have focused on specific disciplinary behaviors separately, used different educational level contexts, or have not specifically examined the application of the Behavior Contract technique in group counseling for vocational high school students with multiple disciplinary problems. Therefore, the research gap in this study lies in the limited experimental studies on the effectiveness of group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique to address several forms of disciplinary problems simultaneously among vocational school students.

This gap is important to examine because vocational high school students have distinct developmental characteristics and educational demands. They are in the adolescent developmental stage, which requires the strengthening of autonomy, responsibility, and self regulation. Therefore, group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique is considered relevant because it allows students to formulate concrete commitments to behavioral change, receive peer support, and monitor behavioral progress within a group setting. The integration of behavior contracts and group dynamics is expected to strengthen students' motivation, self control, and consistency in complying with school rules.

Based on the explanation above, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique in improving the discipline of Grade X TAB

students at SMK Negeri 1 Palangka Raya in the 2025/2026 academic year. Specifically, this study seeks to determine differences in students' discipline levels before and after receiving group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique, particularly among students who demonstrate multiple disciplinary problems, such as arriving late, failing to wear complete school attributes, skipping classes, being frequently absent without explanation, and paying insufficient attention during classroom learning.

Method

Research Design and Approach

This study employed a quantitative approach with a preexperimental research design. The quantitative approach was used because this study aimed to measure changes in students' discipline levels through numerical data analyzed statistically (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The research design used was a one group pretest posttest design. In this design, students' discipline levels were measured before the intervention through a pretest, followed by the implementation of group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique, and then measured again after the intervention through a posttest.

The selection of this design was based on the purpose of the study, namely to determine changes in students' discipline levels after receiving group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique. However, the one group pretest posttest design has limitations because it does not involve a control group. In this design, threats to internal validity may occur because changes in posttest scores cannot be fully attributed to the intervention alone. They may also be influenced by other factors, such as participant maturation, learning experiences, the school environment, or other events occurring during the intervention process (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Therefore, the findings of this study should be interpreted cautiously as an indication of changes in students' discipline scores after the intervention, rather than as strong causal evidence.

Research Subjects

This study was conducted at SMK Negeri 1 Palangka Raya. The population of the study consisted of all Grade X TAB students in the 2025/2026 academic year, totaling 21 students. The sample was selected using purposive sampling, namely a sampling technique based on specific considerations or criteria that are aligned with the purpose of the study. Purposive sampling is appropriate when researchers need participants who possess particular characteristics relevant to the research focus (Campbell et al., 2020).

Based on interviews with the guidance and counseling teacher and the recapitulation of attendance data, five male students were selected as research subjects. These five students were chosen because they demonstrated relatively similar disciplinary problems that appeared simultaneously, namely frequent absence without explanation, arriving late, failing to wear complete school attributes, skipping classes at certain times, and paying insufficient attention to teachers' explanations in class. The selection of subjects with these characteristics was intended to ensure that the intervention focused on students who genuinely needed services to improve discipline.

However, the very small sample size is an important limitation of this study. A sample of five students does not allow broad generalization of the findings to all vocational high school students. Therefore, the findings of this study only describe changes in discipline among the subjects involved in the study. Future research should use a larger sample, involve a control group, and include more diverse school or program contexts to strengthen the external validity of the findings.

Intervention Procedure

The intervention in this study was delivered through group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique. The service was conducted in six meetings, consisting of group formation, identification of disciplinary problems, formulation of behavior contracts, implementation of behavioral commitments, monitoring of behavioral changes, and final evaluation. During the counseling process, students were guided to become aware of disciplinary behaviors that needed to be changed, set more disciplined behavioral targets, develop written agreements, determine positive reinforcement, and agree on educational consequences if the contract was not fulfilled.

The Behavior Contract technique was used because it is consistent with behavior modification principles, which emphasize behavioral change through agreement, reinforcement, consequences, and habituation (Miltenberger, 2024). In the context of group counseling, this technique also provides opportunities for students to support one another, remind one another, and strengthen their commitment to behavioral change collectively.

Instrument and Data Collection Techniques

The main data in this study were collected using a student discipline questionnaire in the form of a closed ended questionnaire with a Likert scale. The scale consisted of four response options, namely Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree, with a score range from 1 to 4. The blueprint of the discipline instrument was adapted from a student discipline questionnaire used in related research and then adjusted to the context of discipline among vocational high school students.

Before being used in the study, the instrument was tested for validity and reliability. Of the 30 statement items tested, 27 items were declared valid and 3 items were removed. Instrument reliability was tested using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which is commonly used to assess the internal consistency of measurement instruments (Taber, 2018). The reliability test showed a coefficient of 0.923. This value indicates that the instrument had very high reliability and was suitable for measuring students' discipline. In addition to the questionnaire, this study also used supporting data in the form of observation, interviews with the guidance and counseling teacher, and field documentation to strengthen the understanding of students' discipline conditions before and after the intervention.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis techniques used in this study included quantitative descriptive analysis and inferential analysis. Descriptive analysis was used to calculate the minimum score, maximum score, mean score, and category of students' discipline levels in the pretest and posttest. The scores were then categorized into discipline intervals, namely low, moderate, and high.

Before hypothesis testing was conducted, the normality of the data was examined using the Shapiro Wilk test. The Shapiro Wilk test is commonly used to examine whether data are normally distributed and is considered appropriate for small samples (Mishra et al., 2019). Because this study used a paired one group design, the main assumption examined was the normality of the difference scores between the pretest and posttest. After the data met the normality assumption, hypothesis testing was conducted using the paired sample t test with IBM SPSS Statistics version 25 for Windows. The paired sample t test was used to compare two paired scores from the same subjects, namely scores before and after the intervention (Field, 2018).

The basis for decision making was that if the value of Sig. two tailed was less than 0.05, then H_0 was rejected and H_a was accepted, indicating a significant difference between students' discipline scores before and after receiving group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique. However, because this study used a very small sample and did not involve a control group, the statistical results should be interpreted as preliminary evidence of changes in discipline scores rather than as strong causal evidence. To strengthen the validity of future

findings, subsequent studies are recommended to use stronger experimental designs, such as a quasi experimental design with a control group, a larger sample size, and follow up measurements to examine the sustainability of students' behavioral changes.

Results

This study was conducted at SMK Negeri 1 Palangka Raya and involved five Grade X TAB students who were identified as having low levels of discipline. The intervention was delivered through group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique in six structured meetings, beginning with the initial measurement, followed by counseling sessions, follow up, and final measurement. The schedule of the research implementation is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Schedule

No	Date	Activity
1	October 1, 2025	Pretest
2	October 2, 2025	Counseling Session 1
3	October 3, 2025	Counseling Session 2
4	October 6, 2025	Counseling Session 3
5	October 13, 2025	Follow up
6	October 14, 2025	Posttest

Before hypothesis testing was conducted, the researcher first performed a normality test using the Shapiro Wilk method because the sample size was fewer than 50. The normality test results showed a significance value of 0.332 for the pretest and 0.483 for the posttest. Both values were greater than 0.05, indicating that the data were normally distributed. Furthermore, the homogeneity test showed a significance value of 0.383, which was greater than 0.05, indicating that the data variance was homogeneous. However, because this study used a paired design, the most relevant assumption for the paired sample t test was the normality of the difference scores between the pretest and posttest.

Students' discipline levels were measured using a discipline questionnaire before and after the group counseling service with the Behavior Contract technique. In the pretest, the minimum score was 34 and the maximum score was 54, with a mean score of 44.60. Based on the interval category, this score indicated that students' discipline level was in the low category. After receiving group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique, the minimum score increased to 58 and the maximum score increased to 81, with a mean score of 69.80. These results indicate an increase in the mean score of 25.20 points, showing that students' discipline level shifted from the low category to the moderate category.

Table 2. Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Scores

No.	Student	Pretest	Category	Posttest	Category
1	A	34	Low	58	Moderate
2	B	40	Low	64	Moderate
3	C	45	Low	70	Moderate
4	D	50	Low	76	Moderate
5	E	54	Low	81	Moderate

No.	Student	Pretest	Category	Posttest	Category
	Mean	44.60	Low	69.80	Moderate

To clarify the improvement in each student's score, a gain score was calculated by subtracting the pretest score from the posttest score. The gain score results showed that all students experienced an increase in discipline scores after participating in group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique.

Table 3. Gain Scores of Students' Discipline

No.	Student	Pretest	Posttest	Gain Score	Percentage Increase from Initial Score
1	A	34	58	24	70.59%
2	B	40	64	24	60.00%
3	C	45	70	25	55.56%
4	D	50	76	26	52.00%
5	E	54	81	27	50.00%

Based on Table 3, all students showed an increase in discipline scores, with gain scores ranging from 24 to 27 points. The mean gain score of 25.20 indicates that the improvement did not occur only in one or two students, but was experienced by all research subjects. Student A increased by 24 points, Student B by 24 points, Student C by 25 points, Student D by 26 points, and Student E by 27 points. In percentage terms, the average increase in discipline scores from the initial score was 56.50%. These findings indicate that group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique produced positive changes in the discipline of the five students who participated in the study.

To examine whether the increase in scores was statistically significant, a paired sample t test was conducted. The test results showed a significance value of $p < 0.001$. Since this value was lower than 0.05, H_0 was rejected and H_a was accepted. Thus, there was a significant difference between students' discipline scores before and after receiving group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique.

Table 4. Results of the Paired Sample t Test and Effect Size

Analysis Component	Value
Mean pretest score	44.60
Mean posttest score	69.80
Mean difference	25.20
Standard deviation of difference scores	1.304
t	43.218
df	4
Sig. two tailed	$p < 0.001$
Cohen's dz	19.33
Effect size interpretation	Very large

In addition to statistical significance, this study also calculated the effect size using Cohen's dz for paired data. The calculation showed a Cohen's dz value of 19.33. This value indicates that the difference between pretest and posttest scores had a very large effect. However,

the interpretation of this effect size must be made cautiously because the sample size was very small, consisting of only five students. Therefore, the effect size in this study is more appropriately understood as an indicator of the strength of change among the research subjects, rather than as a basis for broad generalization to all vocational high school students.

Overall, the findings indicate that group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique has the potential to improve the discipline of Grade X TAB students at SMK Negeri 1 Palangka Raya. This improvement was reflected in the increase in mean scores, positive gain scores among all students, significant paired sample t test results, and a very large effect size. Nevertheless, because this study involved a small sample and did not include a control group, the findings should be interpreted as preliminary evidence of positive change after the intervention, rather than as strong causal evidence that can be widely generalized.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique has the potential to improve the discipline of Grade X TAB students at SMK Negeri 1 Palangka Raya. This improvement was reflected in the increase in the mean discipline score from the low category in the pretest to the moderate category in the posttest. The increase suggests positive changes in students' disciplinary behavior after participating in the group counseling intervention. However, because this study used a one group pretest posttest design with a limited number of participants, the findings should be interpreted cautiously as an indication of behavioral change after the intervention, rather than as strong causal evidence (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Field, 2018).

This finding can be explained through a behaviorist perspective, particularly the principle that behavior can be shaped through consequences, reinforcement, and the arrangement of the learning environment. Behavior modification emphasizes that behavior can be changed systematically when target behaviors are clearly defined, measured, reinforced, and evaluated through consistent procedures (Miltenberger, 2023). In school based behavioral intervention, a behavior contract or contingency contract is understood as a strategy that explicitly defines target behaviors, success criteria, and consequences. Majeika et al. (2020) explain that behavior contracts are used to define behavioral expectations and specify reinforcement when students demonstrate target behaviors. Therefore, this technique is relevant for helping students understand which behaviors need to be changed and what consequences follow those behaviors.

The improvement in students' discipline can also be understood as the result of a gradual behavior modification process. Alwahbi (2020) shows that contingency contracting has been used in educational contexts to improve academic and nonacademic behaviors, including task completion, classroom participation, and student engagement in school activities. This is consistent with the characteristics of the Behavior Contract technique in the present study, which helped students set disciplinary behavior targets, monitor commitments, and receive consequences based on agreements that had been established. In this sense, the contract functioned not merely as a written agreement, but as a structured behavioral intervention that connected students' commitments, behavioral expectations, reinforcement, and accountability (Alwahbi, 2020; Majeika et al., 2020; Miltenberger, 2023).

In addition to behavior modification, the improvement in discipline is also related to the strengthening of self control. Discipline does not only refer to compliance with external rules, but also to students' ability to regulate impulses, maintain commitment, and direct their behavior toward agreed goals. Duckworth et al. (2019) define self control as the alignment of thoughts, emotions, and actions with long term valued goals when individuals face more immediately attractive alternatives. In this study, behavior contracts helped students practice self control through clear targets, behavioral monitoring, and agreed consequences. This process allowed

students to become more aware of their behavior, evaluate their own progress, and maintain commitment to behavioral change.

The importance of self control in educational contexts is also relevant to vocational students. Students in vocational high schools are expected not only to follow school rules, but also to develop readiness for work environments that require punctuality, responsibility, consistency, and adherence to procedures. Therefore, discipline in vocational education should be understood not merely as obedience to school regulations, but also as a foundation for developing professional habits. Through the Behavior Contract technique, students were encouraged to connect daily disciplinary behavior at school with broader expectations of responsibility and work readiness. This interpretation is consistent with the view that self control contributes to academic functioning by helping students regulate behavior, manage competing impulses, and remain aligned with valued educational goals (Duckworth et al., 2019).

The group counseling format also played an important role in strengthening behavioral change. In a group context, students do not only receive direction from the counselor, but also obtain social support, feedback, and reinforcement from peers. Yalom and Leszcz (2020) explain that group dynamics can facilitate interpersonal learning, social support, feedback, group cohesion, and the development of a therapeutic group climate. In this study, peer support functioned as a form of social reinforcement that helped students maintain their commitment to disciplined behavior. Therefore, the success of the intervention was not determined solely by the behavior contract as a technique, but also by the supportive dynamics within the counseling group.

The findings of this study contribute to the practice of guidance and counseling in vocational schools. Group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique can be used as an alternative service to help students who experience disciplinary problems, especially when disciplinary behaviors appear in multiple forms at the same time, such as arriving late, skipping classes, being absent without explanation, failing to wear complete school attributes, and paying insufficient attention during learning. In this regard, the Behavior Contract technique does not only function as a tool for behavioral control, but also as a medium for training responsibility, decision making, self monitoring, and behavioral consistency (Alwahbi, 2020; Majeika et al., 2020; Miltenberger, 2023).

Practically, the findings show that guidance and counseling teachers can use behavior contracts as a more educational intervention strategy compared with disciplinary approaches that rely solely on punishment. Behavior contracts allow students to participate in formulating behavioral change targets, understand the consequences of their behavior, and evaluate their progress more concretely. This strategy can also help guidance and counseling teachers develop more collaborative services because students are not positioned merely as objects of discipline, but as active subjects who participate in determining their own behavioral change commitments. Such collaborative involvement is important because behavior change is more likely to occur when students understand the target behavior, agree on the consequences, and receive consistent reinforcement for positive behavioral progress (Majeika et al., 2020; Miltenberger, 2023).

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The small number of participants, consisting of only five students, means that the findings cannot be generalized broadly to all vocational high school students. In addition, the one group pretest posttest design without a control group means that the increase in discipline scores cannot be fully attributed to the intervention alone. Other factors, such as teacher influence, changes in school rules, peer support outside the counseling sessions, or students' personal awareness, may also have contributed to behavioral change. Therefore, future studies are recommended to use stronger experimental designs, involve a control group, include a larger sample, and conduct follow up measurements to examine the sustainability of changes in students' disciplinary behavior (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Field, 2018).

Overall, this study shows that group counseling using the Behavior Contract technique has the potential to serve as a relevant guidance and counseling strategy for improving the discipline of vocational high school students. The effectiveness of the intervention can be understood through the combination of behavior modification principles, self control training, clear consequences, behavioral monitoring, and peer support in the group process (Alwahbi, 2020; Duckworth et al., 2019; Majeika et al., 2020; Miltenberger, 2023; Yalom & Leszcz, 2020). When implemented systematically, this technique can help guidance and counseling teachers develop services that are more objective, measurable, collaborative, and oriented toward students' behavioral change.

Conclusion

This study affirms that school counselors play an important role in promotive, preventive, educational, early detection, psychosocial support, and referral services within the context of student mental health. However, school counselors are not authorized to conduct clinical diagnoses based on DSM 5 TR criteria, provide intensive psychotherapy, prescribe medication, or independently manage severe mental disorders, such as major depression with suicide risk, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, complex PTSD, severe eating disorders, and substance abuse. These cases require intervention from clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, or other mental health professionals who possess appropriate clinical and medical competencies.

The practical implications of these findings indicate that schools need to establish clear referral protocols, case documentation systems, and collaborative networks involving community health centers, clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, hospitals, and students' families. Competence boundaries should not be understood as a weakness of school counselors, but as an essential part of professional ethics. These boundaries help prevent practice beyond professional authority, reduce the risk of inappropriate case management, and ensure that students receive services that correspond to their psychological and clinical needs.

This study has limitations because it employed a documentary study method and therefore did not directly capture the empirical experiences of school counselors in dealing with clinical cases in school settings. Future research is recommended to use empirical approaches, such as interviews, surveys, case studies, or mixed methods, to examine referral practices, school counselors' readiness, barriers to interprofessional collaboration, and the effectiveness of early mental health detection training for guidance and counseling teachers or school counselors.

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Research Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of educational and counseling research. The participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, and participation was carried out with consent and school approval. The identities of the students involved in this study were kept confidential, and the data were used only for academic and research purposes.

Author Contributions

Nathasya Yovely Luhulima: conceptualization, data collection, implementation of the group counseling intervention, data analysis, and writing of the original draft.

Oktamia Karuniaty Sangalang: research methodology, supervision of the counseling procedure, validation of the research process, and manuscript review.

Nopi Feronika: instrument review, data interpretation, manuscript editing, and final revision.

All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

Artificial Intelligence Use Statement

The authors declare that artificial intelligence, if used, was employed only as a technical support tool for language editing, grammar checking, and improving manuscript readability. All scientific analysis, data interpretation, arguments, and conclusions remain the full responsibility of the authors.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly shared to protect the confidentiality of the students who participated in the study.

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