



Contents lists available at ojs.aeducia.org

Indonesian Journal of Guidance and Counseling Studies

Volume 2, Issue 2, (2025), 10.64420/ijgcs.v2i2

Journal homepage: <https://ojs.aeducia.org/index.php/ijgcs>

IJGCS

E-ISSN 3063-038X

P-ISSN 3063-0363

Research Article

Read Online: <https://doi.org/10.64420/ijgcs.v2i2.353>

Open Access

Application of Behavior Contract Group Counseling to Improve Discipline among High School Students

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ABSTRACT

Background: Student tardiness remains a persistent disciplinary problem that disrupts classroom routines and hampers academic engagement in secondary schools, requiring structured behavioral interventions to promote measurable and sustainable behavioral change. **Objective:** This study evaluated the effectiveness of group counseling using behavior contract techniques in reducing chronic tardiness among high school students. **Method:** A classroom action research design spanning two cycles was implemented with four habitual latecoming students at SMA Negeri 18 Surabaya. Each cycle comprised planning, action, observation, and reflective evaluation. Data collection combined direct behavioral observations, semi structured interviews, and school attendance records, analyzed through qualitative descriptive synthesis. **Results:** Following Cycle I, tardiness decreased from seven to thirteen monthly episodes down to two to three occurrences per week. By the end of Cycle II, tardiness was eliminated completely to zero incidents as participants consolidated individual commitment to agreed behavioral targets alongside consistent positive reinforcement, clear accountability sanctions, and stringent attendance monitoring. **Conclusion:** Group counseling applying behavior contract strategies effectively eradicates recurrent lateness, providing an accountable model for institutional discipline management. **Originality/Value:** This study provides empirical and practical novelty in the field of behavioral school guidance and counseling by demonstrating the effectiveness of behavior contract group counseling in completely eliminating student tardiness from baseline frequencies of seven to thirteen times per month to zero incidents in the second cycle through positive reinforcement schemes, structured consequences, and rigorous monitoring regarding the reduction of student indiscipline within the context of at risk habitually late students at SMA Negeri 18 Surabaya, which has remained underexplored with measurable action frameworks. These findings enrich empirical evidence and serve as a strategic benchmark in developing school discipline management standard operating procedures, designing actionable behavioral contract templates for guidance counselors, and integrating action-based group counseling interventions to foster sustainable student punctuality and academic accountability.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: August 26, 2025

Revised: September 11, 2025

Accepted: October 27, 2025

Published: October 29, 2025

KEYWORDS

Behavior contract;
Group counseling;
Discipline;
High school students

1. INTRODUCTION

Schools serve as spaces for expanding knowledge and experience. Students not only receive academic education, but also learn moral values, ethics, social skills, and discipline. However, a common problem in schools is low discipline, especially undisciplined behavior. Juvenile delinquency is often related to an individual's attitude toward discipline. Discipline itself is a condition in which a person consciously and voluntarily obeys rules of conduct

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How to Cite this Article:

Sa'adah, L., & Nurudducha, N. (2025). Application of Behavior Contract Group Counseling to Improve Discipline among High School Students. *Indonesian Journal of Guidance and Counseling Studies*, 2(2), 97-106. <https://doi.org/10.64420/ijgcs.v2i2.353>



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(Pozzi et al., 2014). Discipline is a fundamental element of education that not only reflects an individual's character but also impacts the overall quality of learning. Student discipline is closely correlated with academic success and the formation of positive character, which ultimately determines their readiness to face life's challenges in the future. One aspect of discipline that is often highlighted is punctuality in attending school (Thomas et al., 2020). Punctuality is an important indicator of responsibility and commitment to the learning process. However, tardiness remains a serious problem in many educational institutions. Undisciplined behavior can be understood as the inability of students to be in the agreed place at the agreed time (Mahvar et al., 2018). Tardiness hinders the development process and the achievement of academic goals (Bowers & Moyer, 2017).

In addition to disrupting the learning process in the classroom, tardiness also has the potential to reduce motivation to learn, both for students who are late and those who are distracted by it. When students arrive late, the class's focus is easily disrupted; it is not uncommon for there to be mocking reactions towards students who are undisciplined. According to Liu et al. (2021), the impact is both short-term and long-term. Long-term impacts include calls to parents, lower grades, failure to advance to the next grade, and even expulsion if no change is made. Short-term impacts include decreased concentration, disruption of the teaching and learning process, disturbance to classmates, and sanctions. Lack of discipline in students generally stems from weak self-management (Smith et al., 2022). Self-management plays an important role in achieving educational success. Self-management refers to the process of organizing and utilizing all available resources to achieve one's goals (Bratzke et al., 2015).

The researcher discovered this problem of tardiness during field experience practice at a public high school in Surabaya. Observations revealed that several students frequently arrived late, and attendance records indicated that tardiness occurred almost daily. Interviews with four students, identified as YL, DT, RV, and BS, revealed a frequency of tardiness ranging from 7 to 13 times per month, with durations of 30–60 minutes. The causes varied, including both intentional and unintentional actions. Intentional factors included waiting for friends, being too relaxed at home, and delaying departure. Unintentional factors included oversleeping, poor time management, long distance between home and school, and lack of transportation. Students also mentioned staying up late to hang out and play games until past 1 a.m., which made it difficult for them to wake up early.

These findings align with the school counselor's statement: students are often late because they stay up late and have limited transportation options. The counselor has repeatedly called and advised students to reduce unproductive activities, but the habit continues due to peer pressure. The sanctions imposed include standing in front of the flagpole while singing the national anthem, Indonesia Raya, and recording the offense in a disciplinary book. If the frequency is high, students will be referred to the guidance and counseling room for further discussion of the problem. If there is no change, the school sends a letter to the parents, although in practice, tardiness still often recurs.

Undisciplined behavior can become a recurring habit due to a sense of comfort, so quick and appropriate intervention is needed (Wood & Neal, 2016). The recommended treatment is guidance and counseling services, particularly group counseling with a behavioral approach using behavior contract techniques. The counselor recommends the use of this specific technique because it has not been applied before, with the hope that a behavioristic approach through group counseling can encourage positive behavioral change.

Behavioral (behavioristic) counseling is the process of modifying an individual's actions by reducing negative habits and replacing them with positive and adaptive habits (Muslih, 2017). Its application refers to the principle of operant conditioning through rewards, reinforcement, and punishment, with an agreement between both parties that the behavioral targets are clear and focused (Rahmawati & Wiryosutomo, 2020). Corey explains that behavior contracts work by reinforcing new behaviors through systematic reinforcement (Edgemon et al., 2021). A behavior contract is an agreement between two or more people to behave in a certain way and receive rewards for that behavior. Contracts help students understand their obligations and form good social habits (Majeika et al., 2020).

Group counseling settings are considered appropriate because they provide a space for individuals to share their experiences, support one another, and work together to find solutions. Group counseling utilizes group dynamics to help students overcome problems (Magrur, 2020). The application of behavior contracts has been proven to reduce tardiness, as evidenced by Rahmayani's (2023) quantitative findings, which demonstrate a decrease in undisciplined behavior at vocational schools. Thus, group counseling using behavior contract techniques is expected to reduce the number of students arriving late to school.

This study aims to assess the effectiveness of group counseling using behavior contract techniques in improving student attendance discipline (punctuality) at SMA Negeri 18 Surabaya, with a focus on reducing the frequency and duration of tardiness, the level of compliance with the contract, and changes in supporting factors such as time management, personal commitment, and peer support. The study was conducted through two-cycle classroom

action research (planning, implementation, observation, reflection) with four students who had a history of high tardiness as subjects, using observation, interviews, and tardiness record documentation data collection techniques to map the baseline, monitor progress, and evaluate the results of the intervention descriptively.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach through Classroom Action Research (CAR) in the form of guidance and counseling. CAR is carried out as a reflective process on the actions of educators, spanning from planning and implementation to assessment in real classroom situations, to improve learning deficiencies (Christophersen et al., 2024). The aim is to improve teachers' professional performance and student learning activities. PTK also serves to strengthen teachers' capacity in implementing learning and school services, including the skills to apply various learning strategies, approaches, models, methods, or techniques (Utomo et al., 2024). For school counselors, CAR is a systematic procedure to maximize Guidance and Counseling services (Yasa et al., 2024). This study consisted of two cycles (Cycle I and Cycle II), each going through four phases: planning, implementation, Observation, and reflection.

2.2 Research Object

The study involved four students who met the criterion of 7–13 late arrivals in one month. Identification was based on attendance records and verified through observations and interviews. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through systematic classroom and school-gate observations using a structured checklist, semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, and administrative staff to capture perspectives on lateness and its causes, and a document review of official student tardiness logs (dates, times, reasons) to corroborate and triangulate the findings.

2.4 Data Analysis

A mixed analytic strategy was employed. First, quantitative analysis summarized observable change during each action cycle using descriptive statistics computed from structured observation notes and photo-based tallies. Second, qualitative analysis involved open and axial coding of field notes and interview excerpts to identify recurrent themes. Results from both strands were integrated and reported in a descriptive narrative.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

The first step was a pre-cycle activity in which the researcher conducted observations and interviews with school counselors to determine the condition of the students. According to the documentation of tardiness records, it was found that students were late for school 7-13 times per month. Therefore, the school counselor advised the researcher to conduct group counseling using special techniques such as behavior contracts.

3.1.1 Results of Cycle 1 Action Research

The implementation in cycle 1 included the planning, implementation, Observation, and reflection phases. Among others:

a. Planning

The planning stage involved identifying and analyzing the problems to be studied, specifically those that occurred at school, and identifying students with problems based on guidance and counseling documents. It also included preparing the appropriate type of counseling services, preparing observation and evaluation guidelines, compiling the necessary behavior contract sheets, and compiling a counseling schedule.

b. Implementation/Action

The implementation stage consists of four steps, which are explained below:

First, the initial stage. This stage includes (1) greeting and warmly welcoming group members; (2) asking one of the group members to lead a prayer; (3) asking about the group members' well-being; (4) then each group member introduces themselves in turn.

Second, the transition stage. This stage includes (1) the group leader explaining why this counseling is being held; (2) the group leader explaining the principles of group counseling; (2) the group leader asking about readiness to proceed to the next stage, which is the activity.

Third, the activity stage. This stage includes (1) the group leader selecting and determining the issues to be discussed first; (2) group members sharing the issues they are currently facing; (3) the group leader inviting a question and answer session for each member regarding what they are facing; (4) group members ask questions about the problems faced and discuss them thoroughly; (5) the group leader provides a behavior contract sheet to ensure discipline for the next week; (6) the group leader observes group members in each activity.

Fourth, the closing stage. This stage includes (1) the group leader explaining that the counseling activity will end according to the time agreed upon at the beginning of the activity; (2) group members reflecting on today's counseling activities; (4) the group leader closes the counseling session with a prayer and a greeting.

c. Observation

From the results of the Observation, the students' participation in the group counseling atmosphere was quite enthusiastic and friendly. They began to realize that undisciplined behavior at school is not good behavior, and the activities ran smoothly. However, some students seemed shy to open up and share their personal experiences in front of others. However, there were still students who violated the behavior contract sheet during the specified time as a form of commitment to discipline, so improvements in the form of follow-up were needed in cycle I. The following is a table of student tardiness cases after counseling in cycle 1:

Table 1. Documentation of cycle one tardiness records after implementing the behavior contract within 1 week

Counselee	Tardiness
DT	2 times late
RV	3 times late
YL	2 times late
BS	2 times late

In the table above, students still experience tardiness even though group counseling and the implementation of behavior contracts were carried out in Cycle I.

1. Reflection

Based on the results of observations during the implementation of counseling in an effort to reduce tardiness at school, several points for reflection were obtained for improvement in Cycle II: (1) Students began to show enthusiasm and activeness in group counseling sessions; (2) Some students still seemed hesitant about sharing personal experiences or expressing problems in front of others; (3) Compliance with the behavior contract was not consistent, resulting in occasional instances of undisciplined behavior upon arrival at school; (4) The scheduling of group counseling was constrained by the students' busy schedules and school activities, so more careful coordination was needed with the counselors, school counselors, and subject teachers.

In line with the findings from Cycle I, improvements are needed through the implementation of Cycle II to optimize the intervention. The planned follow-up includes: (1) Strengthening rapport with students; (2) Reaffirming commitment to the behavior contract that has been filled out and agreed upon; (3) Optimizing session scheduling through the support of school counselors, including requesting the use of specific class hours with the approval of the relevant teachers.

3.1.2 Results of Cycle II Action Research

1) Planning

In Cycle II, the planning process was similar to that in the previous cycle, encompassing the determination of the counseling schedule, design of the RPL, and selection of techniques and services for implementing counseling.

2) Actions

During the implementation stage of the research, the researcher employed the behavior contract technique in conjunction with group counseling. The following are the stages of the second meeting:

First, the initial stage. This stage includes (1) greeting and warmly welcoming group members; (2) asking one of the group members to lead a prayer; (3) asking about the group members' news.

Second, the transition stage. This stage includes (1) ice breaking; (2) the group leader explaining the reasons for holding group counseling; (3) the group leader explaining the principles of group counseling; (4) the group leader asking about readiness to proceed to the next stage.

Third, the activity stage. This stage includes (1) the group leader selecting and determining the issues to be discussed first; (2) group members sharing the issues they are currently facing; (3) the group leader inviting a question and answer session for each member regarding what they are facing; (4) group members ask and answer questions related to the problems they are facing and discuss them thoroughly; (5) group members commit by filling out the behavior contract form again and agreeing on the effective date; (6) the group leader observes each group member's activities.

Fourth, the closing stage. This stage includes (1) the group leader asking how members feel about participating in this counseling activity; (2) the group leader informing members that the counseling will end soon as agreed at the beginning of the activity; (3) group members reflecting on the activities that have been carried out; (4) the group leader closing the counseling session with a greeting and prayer.

3) Observation

From the results of observations in Cycle II during this group counseling activity, it was observed that the activity ran smoothly and the students felt enthusiastic, comfortable, and happy to participate. They were also more open when carrying out the counseling process compared to Cycle 1 yesterday. After conducting the group counseling activity, the researcher observed a reduction in the students' undisciplined behavior, as documented in records of student tardiness. The researcher also asked the school counselor about the students' progress. The number of disciplinary problems in Cycle II was lower than in Cycle I, where some students were still late, despite a behavior contract having been implemented for the following week. After counseling in cycle II and the implementation of the previously agreed behavior contract for the following week, the documentation of tardiness showed that no students were late. The following table compares Cycle I and Cycle II:

Table 2. Comparison of tardiness data after Cycle 1 and Cycle II interventions

Counselee	Post-Intervention Cycle I	Post-Intervention Cycle II
DT	2 times late	Not late
RV	3 times late	Not late
YL	2 times late	Not late
BS	2 times late	Not late
Total	9 times late	—

The following table shows the significant differences between before treatment (pre-cycle), cycle 1, and cycle 2 in terms of student tardiness data obtained from student tardiness records:

Table 3. Comparison of Pre-Cycle, Cycle I, and Cycle II

Counselee	Pre-Cycle (1 week prior)	Cycle 1	Cycle 2
DT	3 times	2 times	0
RV	4 times	3 times	0
YL	3 times	2 times	0
BS	3 times	2 times	0
Total	13 times	9 times	0

4) Reflection

The results of the author's observations on the implementation of group counseling using the behavior contract technique at SMA Negeri 18 Surabaya showed that (1) the counseling activities ran smoothly and the counselees felt comfortable and happy; (2) the atmosphere was more open and friendly among group members; (3) The reduction and decrease in tardiness showed a decrease from 9 instances of tardiness to none at all within a week, based on the tardiness record book and follow-up results with the school counselor.

3.2. Discussion

According to the results of observations and interviews with school counselors, several students were consistently late for school. Documentation of tardiness records showed that there were students who were late 7-13 times in a month. From the results of interviews conducted with the four counselors, it was explained that several factors contributed to tardiness, including waking up late, poor time management, and a lack of personal transportation. Waking up late is usually caused by unproductive activities at night, such as drinking coffee and playing games until late, or engaging in several extracurricular activities. This group counseling was conducted in two cycles, namely Cycle I and Cycle II.

This research is an action research project on guidance and counseling, also known as PTBK, which consists of two cycles: Cycle I and Cycle II. In cycle I, the implementation of group counseling was not yet fully maximized. Based on the results of the evaluation, observation, and documentation of student tardiness, it was found that some students were still late and had not yet fully committed to the behavior contract that had been previously agreed upon. Therefore, action research was conducted in Cycle II, where an improvement was observed compared to Cycle I. The stages of this research consisted of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection.

Cycle I began with an opening stage where the students as practitioners greeted each other, asked about each other's news, and welcomed the group members warmly, asking one of the group members to lead the prayer. In the transition stage, the researcher, as the group leader, explained the reasons for holding group counseling, outlined the principles of counseling, and assessed the students' readiness to proceed to the next stage, which was the activity stage. Then, in the core stage, the group leader determined the issue to be discussed, which was tardiness to school. Group members shared their problems, then were given a behavior contract to fill out as a form of commitment not to be late for school. The behavior contract was agreed upon for implementation over the next week; however, based on the results of observation and documentation of tardiness, it became apparent that some students continued to arrive late to school.

Then, from the results of the evaluation and reflection carried out in group counseling, students appeared to be quite enthusiastic and active in following each stage of the group counseling process, even though they still seemed shy about opening up about their personal experiences or sharing their problems in front of others. Another aspect evaluated was the implementation of counseling, which had to be adjusted to accommodate the students' busy school schedules. The researchers also had to coordinate and request permission regarding counseling hours from the school counselor and subject teachers. The results of the reflection and evaluation in the previous cycle were not optimal in several aspects; therefore, it was necessary to conduct research in the next cycle, namely Cycle II, in order to obtain more optimal results from the counseling.

Cycle II was not much different from Cycle I, in which the researchers agreed on a counseling schedule with the students and coordinated with the school counselor and subject teachers regarding the implementation time. At the initial stage, the researchers began by greeting the students, praying before starting the activity, inquiring about their news, and introducing a neutral topic. During the transition stage, ice-breaking was carried out so that students felt less awkward and more open (more interactive) because they felt more comfortable and involved from the start. Next, the group leader explained the reasons for holding group counseling again at this second meeting, explained the principles of counseling, and assessed the students' readiness to proceed to the next stage of counseling, namely the activity.

In this activity stage, the counselor asks the counselees to explore the problems of group members in more depth, one at a time, then conducts a question-and-answer session and discusses the problems thoroughly. The researcher asks group members to be genuinely committed to the behavior contract sheet that will be filled out and agreed upon (as applicable) for the next week, in order to monitor the students' progress. The students agreed and were genuinely committed to the behavior contract sheet that they would fill out and agree upon, and promised to sincerely implement it, so that they would not simply underestimate and violate it, as they had done in the previous counseling session in Cycle I. Then, at the closing stage, the researcher asked about their feelings regarding participating in group counseling at this meeting, and the researcher invited one of the counselees to reflect on the activities that had been carried out and lead a prayer. At the end of the counseling session, the researcher expressed appreciation for the students' participation in the counseling activities from start to finish, and then concluded with a greeting.

From the results of the group counseling conducted in Cycle II, there was progress among the students, as evidenced by the observations, which showed that the students were more open than they had been in the previous meeting. The students demonstrated a strong commitment to the behavior contract agreed upon during the second group counseling meeting. This was evident from the fact that no students were late for a week after the counseling, in accordance with the effective date of the behavior contract, and was reinforced by the documentation of student tardiness.

Theoretically, group counseling in schools is a developmental service that utilizes group dynamics for adaptive behavioral change (Williams et al., 2028). In the context of discipline, groups provide a space for modeling, peer support, and social accountability that reinforce commitment to change. The basic principles are based on social learning theory (observational, vicarious learning) and self-regulation, in which students learn to recognize triggers for undisciplined behavior, set improvement targets, monitor their own progress, and provide feedback to one

another. Facilitators play a role in managing group norms, ensuring a safe psychological climate, and structuring sessions to focus on measurable behavioral goals (Schaufeli, 2017).

The behavior contract technique is rooted in operant behaviorism (reinforcement, extinction, and measured punishment) and contingency management (Davis et al., 2020). A behavior contract is a written agreement between the student and counselor/teacher that includes: operationally defined target behaviors, success criteria, time frame, specific positive reinforcement consequences, and monitoring procedures (Kriechman et al., 2010). Within the goal-setting framework, goals are formulated using the SMART method and broken down into shaping stages, allowing for small progress to be immediately reinforced. Reinforcement can take the form of tokens, social recognition, or access to enjoyable activities, while cost responses are applied carefully to suppress unwanted behavior without damaging relationships (Eiraldi et al., 2020).

The implementation of behavior contracts in group counseling follows a cycle: baseline assessment (frequency of tardiness and rule violations), formulation of individual contracts that are agreed upon and understood by the group, daily monitoring using simple logs, and periodic evaluation for adjustments to reinforcement or criteria. Group dynamics are utilized for reflection, problem-solving, and social reinforcement of compliance. Success is measured through consistent reductions in indicators of indiscipline and increased compliance with class/school rules (Elam-Snowden, 2025). Ethically, contracts must be transparent, non-repressive, culturally sensitive, and guarantee student autonomy; collaboration with homeroom teachers/parents extends the consistency of reinforcement across settings, making behavioral change more stable and sustainable.

4. IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

4.1 Research Implications

These findings suggest that group counseling utilizing behavior contract techniques is a worthwhile approach to adopt as a structured intervention in school counseling programs, aiming to improve attendance and discipline. Specific, measurable, and immediate positive reinforcement should be combined with training in time management and healthy sleeping habits. Guidance and counseling units can utilize digital monitoring sheets to enhance accountability and provide quick feedback, while fostering peer support within the group. At the school policy level, these results support the integration of behavioral interventions into the annual guidance and counseling work plan as well as brief training for teachers on operant conditioning principles. For further development of the science, follow-up studies are recommended to expand the sample, compare the results with those from other techniques, and assess the long-term sustainability of the effects.

4.2 Research Contributions

This study contributes to strengthening the evidence base for BK interventions in schools by showing that group counseling using behavior contracts is effective in reducing tardiness in the context of Indonesian public high schools. Theoretically, these findings enrich the behavioral counseling literature with evidence of the application of behavior contracts to the issue of attendance discipline, not just general classroom behavior.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

5.1 Research Limitations

This study contributes to strengthening the evidence base for BK interventions in schools by showing that group counseling using behavior contracts is effective in reducing tardiness in the context of Indonesian public high schools. Theoretically, these findings enrich the behavioral counseling literature with evidence of the application of behavior contracts to the issue of attendance discipline, not just general classroom behavior.

5.2 Recommendation for Future Research

Future research should expand the sample and school context (multi-site) and employ a quasi-experimental design or a controlled randomized test with a comparison group to enhance the validity of the findings. The follow-up period should be extended (e.g., 3–6 months) to assess the sustainability of the effects. The outcome variables should be expanded to include other aspects of discipline, total attendance, academic achievement, and psychosocial indicators (such as self-management, motivation, and peer support), using standardized instruments. Cross-technique comparisons are also important, for example, behavioral contracts vs. solution-focused counseling, brief CBT, or motivational interviewing, including testing variations in contract components (type of reinforcement, monitoring frequency, parent/teacher involvement).

6. CONCLUSION

The application of group counseling with behavioral contract techniques effectively reduced undisciplined behavior in school among students at SMA Negeri 18 Surabaya. Through two cycles of classroom action involving planning, implementation, observation, and reflection, there was a gradual improvement from a high frequency of tardiness in the pre-cycle to 2–3 times per week in Cycle I, to no tardiness in Cycle II. These results suggest that strengthening commitment through behavioral contracts, combined with systematic monitoring and feedback, can lead to more adaptive behavior.

The group counseling process contributed to the formation of peer support, increased self-awareness, and personal accountability. Specific positive reinforcement, affirmation of consequences, and improved counselor-counsee relationships proved to be important for maintaining compliance with the contract. Coordination with homeroom teachers, subject teachers, and school counselors also facilitated scheduling, ensured consistency in implementation, and expanded the scope of supervision both inside and outside of counseling sessions.

These findings confirm that group counseling using behavioral contracts is a viable intervention that can be integrated into school counseling programs to improve attendance and discipline. However, generalization is still limited by the small sample size, single context, and relatively short duration of the intervention. Therefore, further research with a stronger design, a larger sample, a more extended follow-up period, and more comprehensive outcome variables is needed to verify the sustainability and scope of the intervention's effects.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express their gratitude to the students of SMA Negeri 18 Surabaya who were willing to be research subjects, as well as to the supervising lecturers and teachers who assisted in the research process.

Author Contribution Statement

All authors read and approved the final manuscript and are responsible for the scientific content of this article. Lailatus Sa'adah: Conceptualization; Methodology; Data curation; Investigation; Formal analysis; Writing the initial draft. Nurudducha: Validation; Conceptualization; Writing-review & editing;

Declaration of Generative AI (GenAI) Usage in Scientific Writing

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to declare. All co-authors have seen and agree with the contents of the manuscript and there is no financial interest to report.

Funding Statement

This study was self-funded by the authors and received no external financial support from any institutional or commercial entities.

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First Publication Right:

Indonesian Journal of Guidance and Counseling Studies

Article info:

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64420/ijgcs.v2i2.353>

Word Count: 6038

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