

School Counselling Plan for Academic Anxiety: A Case Study

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It is common for students to experience anxiety related to their assignments or other academic tasks. The objective of the present study was to develop a school counselling plan and to explore its effectiveness in addressing academic anxiety and improving study skills. The study used a single case study research design and the participant was a 12-year-old girl struggling with academic difficulties, time management issues, memorizing lessons, fear of making mistakes while reading and anxiousness. Informal assessment included semi-structured interviews with the informants and the student, behavioral observations, subjective ratings, academic assessments including written, oral, and conceptual evaluations, and formal assessment included the administration of Study Anxiety Scale (SAS) (Maqsood & Ijaz, 2013) and Paired Association Learning Test (PALT) (Mahmood & Sheikh, 1989). The results of the assessment showed a noticeably high academic anxiety, indicating that the client had severe anxiety related to her academic tasks and situations. A school counselling plan was developed keeping in view the idiosyncratic needs of the client. The counselling plan included rapport building, psychoeducation, mind mapping, ABC model, reinforcement, SQ3R, chunking, thought feeling connection, relaxation exercises, star breathing exercises, coping cards, positive coping statements, dictionary concept, activity scheduling, ABC technique for time management, and social skills training. A total number of 12 sessions were conducted. The client's presenting difficulties were improved as per follow-up assessments. This improvement demonstrated the effectiveness of school counseling plan in reducing the difficulties associated with lack of study skills.

Keywords: academic anxiety, school counselling, time management, study skills

It is common for students to experience anxiety related to academic tasks such as assignments or exams. A mild to moderate level of anxiety can serve as a motivator for achieving academic objectives and it is referred to as facilitative anxiety (Academic Anxiety Resource Center, 2023). However, students should have adaptive coping mechanisms to manage their academic anxiety otherwise, it starts to interfere with their ability to achieve academically. The term academic anxiety is defined as an anxiety that is broader than test anxiety and includes all the anxieties that a student faces in a school. It is more related to schooling in general (Cassady, 2010; Cassady et al., 2019). It is also described as a worry or dread due to academic-related tasks or situations such as exams, assignments, courses (math, reading, or science), peer and parental pressure to perform well academically, or general worry about studying or working in groups in class (Academic Anxiety Resource Center, 2023). In a research by Vitasari et al. (2010), it was concluded that anxiety is one of the main indicators of academic success. When it comes to their academics, students with anxiety-related issues have a passive behavior in class, showing little enthusiasm for studying and performing poorly on projects and tests. Hooda and Saini (2017) describes tension/ worry, task-generated frustration,

emotional instability, lack of study skills and procrastination as the components of academic anxiety. While students' psychological symptoms of anxiety include feeling anxious before a tutorial class, panicking, going blank during a test, feeling helpless while working on assignments, or lacking interest in a difficult subject, the physiological symptoms of anxiety include headaches, sweaty palms, palpitations, rapid heartbeat, or feeling cold (Das et al., 2014).

Among the sources of academic anxiety, studying in a foreign language has been reported as the second major cause of academic anxiety (Shahrouri, 2016). In Pakistan, the national language is Urdu, however, English language is used as a major mode of communication. There are both English and Urdu medium schools where mode of teaching, instructions and books are in their respective languages. The students often face difficulty while studying in English medium schools (Naeem et al., 2014). Other sources of academic anxiety include fear of other students while presenting in foreign language and parental expectations (Shahrouri, 2016). Additionally, Kaur et al. (2021) reported that academic anxiety can also be caused by some external factors such as home environment, educational institute, or school and internal factors such as motivation, academic sense of achievement, and procrastinating behavior. In a longitudinal research on self-efficacy and academic anxiety, Green (2022) reported that academic anxiety is positively correlated with self-efficacy and they also reported that lack of engagement in the class can also be due to a lack of confidence and attention during the lecture. Researchers have been exploring the connection between anxiety and how it affects students' academic performance. They found that higher levels of anxiety are associated with low academic achievement in school students (Luigi et al., 2007; Shakir, 2014). According to another study, academic anxiety is related to poorer working memory, shorter short-term memory, more distractions, and lack of concentration (Hashempour & Mehrad, 2014). Mahajan (2015) reported that academic anxiety is related to parental involvement and encouragement in high school students. In general, low-ability students' high levels of anxiety were more strongly linked to poorer performance (Sena et al., 2007).

It is important to identify the factors that lead to academic anxiety to help understand it and develop specific intervention plans for anxiety-related issues faced by students. Furthermore, it is important to explore the academic-related difficulties of students and differentiate them from learning difficulties. In this context, Naeem et al. (2014) reported that multiple factors such as medium of instructions, budget issues, teacher's qualification, and quality of syllabus must be taken in account while assessing academic difficulties of school children. Keeping in view these factors in Pakistan, it is important to introduce a school based counselling plan to manage the academic difficulties that do not meet the criteria of learning difficulties faced by students. Therefore, the present study is designed to develop a school counselling plan to manage the academic anxiety in schools students.

Objective of the Study

- To explore the effectiveness of a school counselling plan for the management of academic anxiety

Hypothesis

H1: School counselling plan is likely to significantly reduce the academic anxiety of the student.

Method***Research Design***

A single case study research design was used to investigate the effectiveness of a school counselling plan to manage academic anxiety.

Participant

The participant was a 12-year-old student, last born among 3 siblings and was studying in Grade 6 in a government school. The study was conducted at a Government school of girls in Lahore, Pakistan.

Case Description

Client's problem started 8 months ago when her family transferred her from an Urdu to English medium School. After moving to the new school, the client felt anxious as all of her books were in English while she has studied every concept in Urdu up till Grade 5. In the previous school, the client was able to score average marks and did not face much difficulty in academic-related tasks. The client reported feeling anxious during the class especially when her teacher asked her to read aloud in the class or asked her to write on the whiteboard. She faced difficulty in memorizing and pronouncing the words in English. Client also reported her teacher as strict as she used to scold her in front of the class whenever she made a mistake while reading. She also feared that if she made any mistake in classroom, her class fellows would make fun of her. Client tried to remember her lessons but due to her fear of teacher, she sometimes, forgot her lesson or answers to an oral quiz in front of her teacher. She also faced difficulty in memorizing the long questions of science. Furthermore, she did not have any friends in the new school. She used to sit alone in the class and felt difficulty in making new friends as her class fellows knew each other for years and were in the same school for some years. Also, client was repeating her school year, due to which she stated that her classmates tease her as a failure.

Regarding her family history, client was living in a nuclear family system with her parents and two brothers. Her father was an auto rickshaw driver and her mother worked as a maid in different houses. Client reported satisfactory relationship with both parents and siblings, but a conflictual home environment due to financial issues. Client reported that she has to help her mother in home chores due to which she faces difficulty in managing time. Client also reported that belonging to a low socio-economic status, her family could not afford tuition or academy expenses. The client's birth was normal as reported by the informant. Client achieved all her developmental milestones at the appropriate ages. She did not experience any illness or head injury during childhood. The client reported herself as being shy since childhood. She reported that she had 2 friends in the previous school and she did not participate much in school activities. The client said she likes to draw and read stories. She described herself as a helpful and responsible child.

Assessment Measures

Informal assessment was done with the help of semi-structured interview, subjective rating, reinforcer identification, and academic assessment, while formal assessment was done with the help of study anxiety scale (SAS), and paired association learning test (PALT).

Semi-Structured Interview

Interview with the client. It is an initial meeting with a client to assess what types of problems the client is dealing with. The rationale behind the clinical interview was to collect in-depth information about the client. It was done to explore the developmental history of the problem and background information (personal, family, and educational), etc. Client's problem was also explored in terms of when it started, how it was being maintained and what is the current level of the client's problem. Overall, it was revealed from the interview that the client was facing academic related difficulties and lack of social skills.

Interview with Informants. Semi-structured interview was also carried out with client's teacher and parents. Client's teacher reported that the client did not participate in any class activity and never paid attention to her instructions. She reported that the client remains silent during the whole class. Due to these issues, client's academic performance has declined.

Behavior Observation

The purpose of behavioral observation is to observe and systematically record the behavior of individuals to describe the behavior. The client was wearing a neat and clean uniform. She was nervous at the beginning of the session and was not maintaining eye contact. When rapport was built, she started to maintain proper eye contact. She took time to open up about her academic problems and issues. The rate, volume, and tone of speech were appropriate and the words were understandable.

Subjective Ratings

The purpose of the subjective rating scale was to identify and know about the severity level of the presenting problems of the client. The ratings were taken on a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 means low level of problem and 10 means maximum severity of the problem.

Table 1

Table Showing Subjective Ratings of the Presenting Problems by the Client

Presenting Problems	Client Ratings
Academic difficulties	7
Time management issues	7
Forgets lesson in front of the teacher	8
Difficulty in memorizing lesson	8
Anxiousness	8

Reinforcer Identification (Miltenberger, 2015)

The reinforcers were identified by asking the client. This was done with the client so that it would help the counselor reinforce the client's positive behavior through these

reinforcers. These reinforcers were praising, activities such as drawing, Mehndi design, food items (candies, snacks), and stickers.

Operational Definition (Leahy, 2003)

The operational definition is the construct that represents an individual's knowledge about the problem. An operational definition of the problems was asked from the client to understand her perception of the problems.

Table 2

Operational definition of problems by Client

Problems	Operational Definition
Academic Difficulties in Science and English (lack of study skills)	She was unable to understand the concepts in science and was unable to pronounce English words
Anxiousness	She feels anxious in front of the teacher and when she was asked to read in class, also reported heart palpitation during answering the questions
Difficulty in memorizing lessons	She was feeling lack of concentration in class and was forgetting her lessons in front of her teacher
Time management problem	She was facing difficulty in managing time.

Academic Assessment (Dimitt et al., 2007)

An academic assessment of the client was done and the rationale behind the assessment was to evaluate the client's problem with science comprehension and English pronunciation. Academic assessment was done on three levels which were Oral, Written, and Conceptual.

Oral Assessment. Reading assessment for Urdu and English was done to assess if the client was able to pronounce and understand the words. The client was given a paragraph from her English and Urdu books to read from her course books. The client was observed during the assessment and her mistakes were noted down. The quantitative interpretation of the verbal assessment is given below in Table 3. The client was given one passage from her book of science and another passage from her book of Urdu for reading to assess the client's reading abilities and comprehension skills. The client read all the words of the passage and made 18 mistakes in English and 12 mistakes in Urdu. She was observed with appropriate comprehension skills. The client's assessment tests were also viewed which indicated client had no conceptual clarity instead she crammed the lessons. It was observed in the English reading test that the client was just reading it without understanding the concept and making sense of the passage.

Table 3

Verbal Assessment of the Client

Subjects	Total	Correct	Incorrect
English	31	13	18
Urdu	35	19	16

Written Assessment. The client was given a passage from her book of English and another passage from the book of Urdu for dictation. The list contained both easy and difficult words to assess the status of the client more clearly. The quantitative interpretation of the written assessment is given in Table 4. The client was given an English paragraph to write and a paragraph to write in Urdu. The client wrote 12 correct words of English and 23 correct words of Urdu. The client made 19 mistakes in writing English words and 12 mistakes in writing Urdu words.

Table 4

Written Assessment of the Client

Subjects	Total	Correct	Incorrect
English	31	12	19
Urdu	35	23	12

Conceptual Assessment. A conceptual assessment was done to check the comprehension skills of the client. In comprehension skills, the client was given a paragraph from her science book and was asked to explain the theme of the paragraph. The client read the paragraph but she was unable to explain it.

Study Anxiety Scale (Maqsood & Ijaz, 2013)

The study anxiety scale (SAS) is a 28-item rating scale that ranges from 0- 3 (not at all to always). Study Anxiety Scale consists of 3 subscales. Fear of evaluation consists of 13 items and it explores the fear of making mistakes or getting scolded. Behavioral manifestation consists of 9 item exploring behaviors such as fidgeting hand, sweating etc. Lastly, memory interference consists of 6 items exploring conditions that may cause hindrance in learning. The study anxiety scale was administered to determine the client's anxiety issues in the classroom. The Cronbach Alpha of the subscales was .87, .72, and .72 for fear of evaluation, behavioral manifestations, and memory interference, respectively. The Cronbach Alpha of the overall scale was $\alpha = .91$. The test was administered in a distraction-free environment and all the instructions were given to the client before administering the scale. The client completed the test in 10-15 minutes.

The test score indicates that the client scored moderate to severe on all three factors i.e., fear of evaluation, behavioral manifestation, and memory inference. Client's higher score on fear of evaluation indicates her anxiety about doing poorly in front of the teacher, and fear of making mistakes in front of the teacher. Her score on behavioral manifestation indicates her behavioral problem such as fidgeting, and unable to speak in front of teacher and class. Her score on memory interference indicates the client memory-related issue that results in the forgetting of the lesson. The total score of the client was high on the scale which indicates severe academic-related anxiety.

Table 5

The Factors, Obtained Scores, Mean, Standard Deviation, and Category of the Client on the Study Anxiety Scale

Factors	Obtained Score	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Category
Fear of Evaluation	24	16.86	8.84	Moderate
Behavioral Manifestation	15	7.30	4.90	Severe
Memory Interference	10	6.05	3.59	Severe
Total SAS	49	60	15.17	Moderate

Paired Associate Learning Test (Mahmood & Sheikh, 1989).

PALT contains three lists of easy and difficult words and it was administered on the client to explore the learning ability of the client. The client had to remember the words in first trial and then repeat them to the counsellor. The client was instructed about the procedure of tests before administration. The score of the client in the first trial was below average on the easy and difficult words. On the second trial, the client scored average on both easy and difficult words. On the third trial, the client scored above average in easy words and average in difficult words. The overall score of the client was average which showed that the client can learn with guidance. It showed that the client could learn if she continues to practice the lesson a few times. It took approximately 10 minutes to complete the test. During test administration, the client was attentive. She listened to the counsellor with full attention and concentration. The client enjoyed the activity and at the end of the session gave positive feedback to the counselor about the activity. The quantitative interpretation of the Paired Association Learning test is given in Table 6.

Table 6

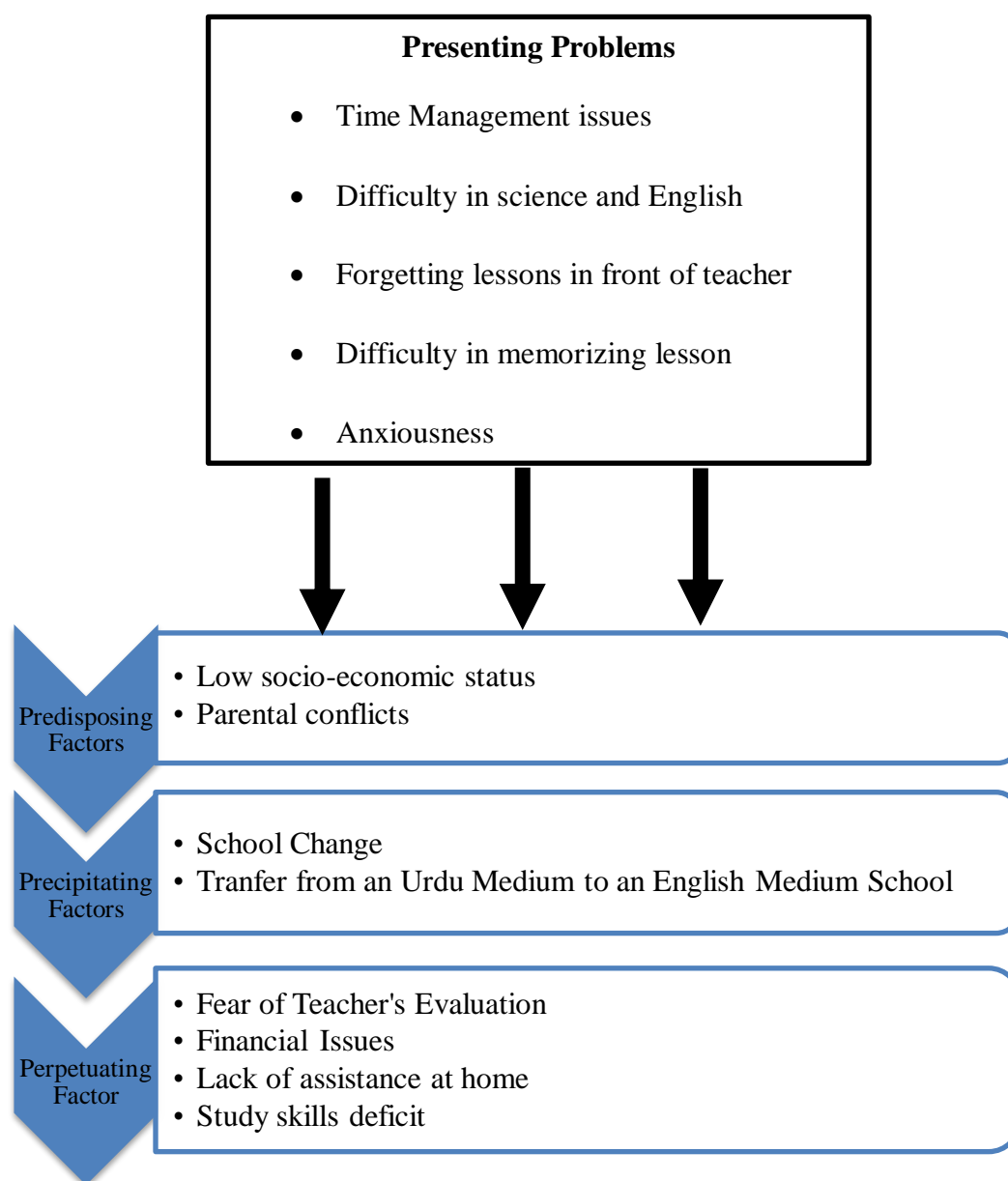
Results of Paired Associate Learning Test

Trials	Raw Score	<i>M</i>	Category
Trial 1			
Easy	4	4.68	Below average
Difficult	0	1.48	Below average
Trial 2			
Easy	5	5.73	Average
Difficult	2	2.58	Average
Trial 3			
Easy	6	5.73	Above average
Difficult	3	3.03	Average

Case Formulation

Figure 1

Pictorial Demonstration of 5P's Model of Case Formulation



Counselling Plan

The counselling plan was based on behaviour model and is focused on improving study skills, time management skills and anxiousness related to academic tasks. The techniques of mind mapping, happy pyramid, chunking, dictionary concept were used to improve the study skills deficits; while, activity scheduling and ABC technique for prioritising tasks to manage time were used for time management; and lastly, ABC model and relaxation exercises (star breathing, positive imagery, use your senses) coping cards, positive coping statements, healthy vs unhealthy coping technique were used to manage client's anxiousness related to academic tasks. The details are given below in Table 7.

Table 7*School Counselling Plan*

Session 1	Session 7
Rapport Building	Chunking
Behavioural Observation	Positive Coping Statements
Interview with Client and Informant	Coping Cards
Session 2	Session 8
Rapport Building	Dictionary Concept
Interview with client and informant	Relaxation Exercises such as star-breathing technique and Positive Imagery
Reinforcement Identification	
Formal Assessment (Study Anxiety Scale) (Maqsood & Ijaz, 2013)	
Session 3	Session 9
Informal Academic Assessment	Health vs Unhealthy coping
Formal Assessment (Paired Associate Learning Test) (Maqsood & Sheikh, 1989)	Use your senses
Session 4	Session 10
Psychoeducation	Social Skills Training
ABC Model	
Thought feeling Connection	
Session 5	Session 11
Mind Mapping	Social Skills Training
Making a Schedule/ Timetable	
Reinforcements	
Session 6	Session 12
SQ3R Technique	Review of techniques
ABC Method for Task Prioritization	Post-assessment

Ethical Considerations

- Consent was taken from the client and guardian as well to collect the information and to provide intervention to the client.

Results

A total of 12 sessions were conducted with the client. In sessions 1 to 3, formal and informal assessments were done. In session 4, psychoeducation was done to explain client's lack of study skills, time management skills and anxiousness. Furthermore, client's teacher and parents were also informed. The ABC model (Davidson, 2019) was used to explain the role of thoughts/belief system in the maintenance of the problem. Client's thoughts such as "I am a failure" and "everyone will make fun of me while reading" were used to explain ABC model. In the next sessions (5-7), the major focus was on the development of study skills and time management skills. The techniques such as mind mapping (Buzan, 2007), SQ3R (Dalton & Radwan, 2017), dictionary concept (Ezeh et al., 2022), and chunking (Berk, 2003) were used

to improve study skills while scheduling time (Patel et al., 2013) and ABC method for task prioritization (Floyd et al., 2014) were used to improve time management skills of the client. In session 7-9, relaxation exercises (such as star breathing exercise, positive imagery), positive coping statements, and coping skills were also discussed to improve client's skills to manage anxiety related to academic tasks. The sessions 10 and 11 focused on the development of social skills (Miltnerberger, 2015). Session 12 was focused on post assessment and review of techniques. The overall ratings of the client's problem revealed that she had severe problems; whereas the post-management rating showed that significant improvement.

Pre and Post-Assessment Ratings

Pre and post-assessment subjective ratings were taken from the client and the purpose behind it was to compare pre-management and post-management ratings of the problems. Client's pre and post-management subjective ratings of the problems indicated that she had severe levels of problems and after the administration of the counselling plan, the rating on these problems was reduced. The client reported a significant improvement in her anxiety and academic problems through the practical implementation of the techniques discussed in the counseling plan. The pre and post-management subjective ratings are given in Table 7.

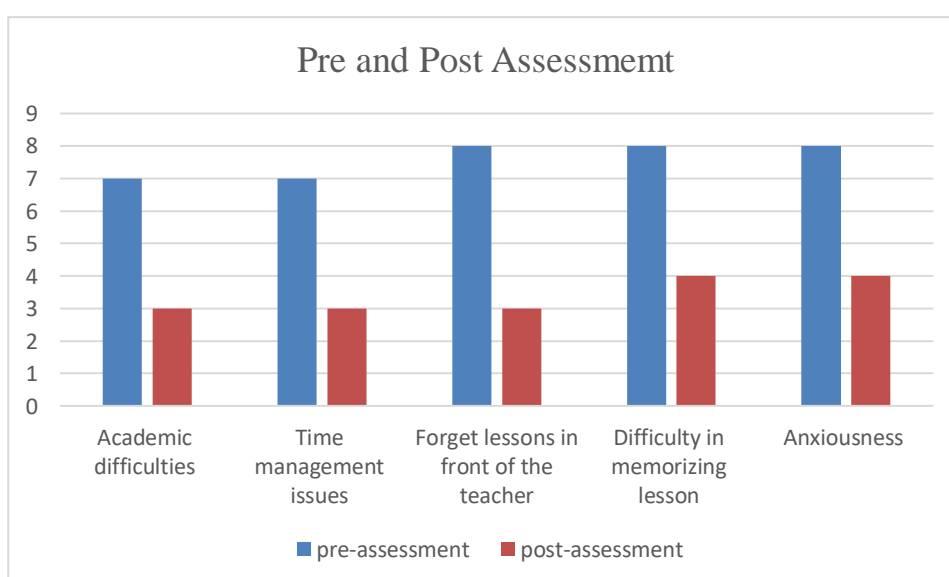
Table 8

Subjective Ratings of the Problems as rated by the Client (Post & Post-assessment)

Presenting Problems	Pre-Ratings	Post-Ratings
Academic Difficulty	7	3
Time Management issues	7	3
Forgetting lessons in front of the teacher	8	3
Difficulty in memorizing lesson	8	4
Anxiousness	8	4

Figure 2

Figure showing Pre and Post-Assessment Ratings



Discussion

A.R., a 12 years old girl, was studying in Grade 6 in a government school. She came with the problems of academic difficulties, memorizing issues, lack of time management skills and feeling anxious. Her fear of making mistake in front of teacher was leading to the emergence of other problems i.e. spelling mistakes, forgetting concepts etc. The regression in her academic tasks can be attributed to her deficits in study skills, time management skills and social skills. The client was transferred from an Urdu medium school to an English medium school and due to this, client was feeling difficulty in understanding, comprehending and writing effectively the subjects that were being taught in the English language.

The client belonged to a low socioeconomic status (SES) and was facing financial constraints at home. This might again contribute to poor performance in academics. The low SES might be negatively affecting her academic performance. As showed by the research by Rodríguez-Hernández et al. (2020), the children who belong to low SES often struggle in their academics. Furthermore, the client had fear of her teacher, and she experienced problems in asking for the teacher's assistance in academics as well. This might be explained by the behavioral principle of operant conditioning (Spiegler & Guevremont, 2003). Her class teacher was strict and used to scold her on making a mistake and her classmates used to make fun of her as she was repeating her class. The negative consequences of feeling bad were maintaining her behavior of not asking for help in academic issues. The client always remained anxious due to her parental conflicts and this factor was affecting her academics as well. This factor was highlighted in the research by Reid et al. (2004) which suggested that children with emotional behavioural problems such as anxiousness had significant deficits in academic achievement. These students performed at a significantly lower level than did students without these issues across academic subjects and settings.

Overall, a total number of 12 sessions were conducted with the client and client showed significant improvement in study and time management skills and this helped her in studying effectively, remembering lessons and asking for assistance when required.

Conclusion

The study highlights how important it is to recognize and manage academic anxiety and the deficits in study skills as they significantly affect the academic performance of a student. The overall counselling plan, focusing on study skills deficits, time management, relaxation and social skills training of the client, effectively improved client's presenting problems.

Limitations and Suggestions

The present counseling plan only focused on the idiosyncratic needs of the client. There is a need to develop generalized counselling plans to focus on the development of study skills, time management skills and stress management of students. Furthermore, this research uses a single case study research design, therefore, future studies are recommended to apply the school counselling plan on a larger group of students. Longitudinal research with bigger sample sizes in a range of age groups and educational contexts may shed more light on the effectiveness of school counselling plan in improving study skills and reducing anxiety associated with academic tasks.

Implications

This research demonstrated the effectiveness of a school counselling plan and its significance in assisting school-aged children in overcoming academic anxiety and related academic obstacles. This counselling plan can be used by school counsellors to design sessions, workshops or seminars. By addressing academic anxiety, it advocates for a more complete approach to support academic success through the integration of psychological therapies within educational frameworks. In summary, the study promises better results for students by combining educational practices and psychological interventions in supporting students' academic and emotional well-being.

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