Research Article

Effectiveness of Psychological First Aid and Communication Skills in Enhancing Self-Efficacy: A Randomized Controlled Trial

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Abstract

Background: Supporting students' psychological well-being is crucial for teachers, especially during crises. However, communication barriers and a lack of confidence in administering Psychological First Aid (PFA) often hinder effective support. This study examines the impact of PFA training and interpersonal communication skills on educators' self-efficacy.

Methods: A randomized controlled trial with cluster sampling was conducted among 88 educators from four schools in Aceh (September–October 2024). Participants were randomly assigned to intervention and control groups, and data were collected using a pre-test and post-test design. The intervention consisted of PFA and interpersonal communication training, delivered in 2-hour sessions over four weeks. Self-efficacy was measured using the General Self-Efficacy Scale, and data were analyzed using normality tests, the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, and the Mann-Whitney U Test.

Results: Educators who received PFA training showed significantly higher self-efficacy than the control group (U=537.500, Z=-5.785, p<0.001). Similarly, interpersonal communication training significantly improved self-efficacy (U=306.500, Z=-5.783, p<0.001).

Conclusion: PFA and interpersonal communication training enhance teachers' self-efficacy in providing psychological support. Wider implementation of these interventions is recommended to improve students' psychological well-being in Aceh.

Keywords: Psychological First Aid, Communication Skills, Self-Efficacy, Mental Health Training

Introduction

Teachers play a crucial role in education, particularly in supporting students' mental health and helping them cope with trauma. In times of crisis or distress, teachers are often the first to provide psychological support to students. However, students may experience anxiety, depression, or stress due to academic pressure, social media influences, or family-related issues. These psychological challenges not only impact students' well-being but also affect their academic performance and social development (Lestari and Rista, 2023). To effectively address these issues, teachers must possess high levels of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, defined as a person's belief in their ability to overcome difficulties, is critical for teachers in managing classrooms and providing psychological support (Bandura, 1977; Rahayu, 2023).

In Indonesia, mental health issues among students are increasingly concerning. A 2023 survey by the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia found that 6.1% of adolescents aged 15 and older were diagnosed with mental disorders. Additionally, more than 3,200 students from elementary to high school levels exhibited mild to severe symptoms of depression (Kompas.com, 2022). Teachers' lack of training in providing psychological support exacerbates the problem, making it difficult for students to receive timely and appropriate help.

Aceh, a disaster-prone region, faces even greater challenges regarding student mental health. In 2023, Aceh experienced 418 recorded disasters (Badan Penanggulangan Bencana Aceh, 2024), many of which had significant psychological consequences. Post-disaster trauma often leads to mental health conditions such as PTSD (World Risk Report, 2023). Given this context, equipping teachers with the skills to provide psychological support is essential.

However, the lack of teacher training in Indonesia makes it difficult to address students' mental health challenges effectively. A study found that 65.6% of high school students exhibited symptoms of poor mental health. One potential intervention to address this issue is Psychological First Aid (PFA) training (Suswati, Yuhbaba and Budiman, 2023). PFA is an internationally recognized, empathy-based approach designed to help individuals experiencing psychological distress due to trauma or disaster. Organizations such as the National Institute for Mental Health and the World Health Organization endorse PFA as a first-line intervention for trauma management.

Beyond PFA, interpersonal communication skills are also critical in providing psychological support. Strong communication enables teachers to build rapport with students, fostering a supportive environment where students feel comfortable discussing their concerns (UNICEF, 2015). Research indicates that self-efficacy significantly influences interpersonal communication, shaping an individual's ability to engage effectively with others (Rubin and Martin, 1994). By enhancing their communication skills, teachers can better understand students' emotional needs and provide more effective support.

Previous studies have demonstrated that both PFA training and interpersonal communication skills can enhance teachers' ability to support students. PFA training has been shown to improve teachers' confidence in responding to students' psychological needs (Rahmatulloh, Pratiwi and Rahimmatussalisa, 2021). Similarly, research suggests that improved interpersonal communication skills contribute to greater self-efficacy among teachers (Yulikhah, Bukhori and Murtadho, 2019). These findings underscore the need for comprehensive training programs that integrate both PFA and interpersonal communication skills to strengthen teachers' self-efficacy in providing psychological support to students. This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of PFA training and interpersonal communication skills in enhancing teachers' self-efficacy. By increasing self-efficacy, teachers are expected to provide better psychological support to students experiencing mental health challenges, particularly in disaster-prone areas such as Aceh.

Methods

This research follows the CONSORT criteria and employs a randomized controlled trial (RCT) design with a cluster sampling technique using a pretest-posttest approach in both the intervention and control groups. The study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of Psychological First Aid (PFA) training and interpersonal communication skills in enhancing teacher self-efficacy in Aceh. Data were collected using a validated questionnaire administered before and after the intervention. The intervention group received PFA training and interpersonal communication training using the GATHER method, whereas the control group did not receive any training and was only assessed through questionnaires.

This study was conducted in Aceh, a province in Indonesia with a high disaster risk and psychological impact on its population. Teachers working in schools within the region were selected as study participants. The inclusion criteria required that teachers be willing to participate in the training, have at least one year of work experience, and have not previously attended similar training. The sample size was determined based on Cohen's table, ensuring an adequate number of participants to achieve statistical power. Given a 95% confidence level and an alpha value of 0.05 in a population of 100 people, a minimum sample of 88 teachers was required, with 44 assigned to the intervention group and 44 to the control group.

The RCT process began with an enrollment phase, during which 106 teachers were assessed for eligibility. While no participants refused to participate, 18 individuals were excluded as they did not meet the inclusion criteria. The remaining 88 participants were randomly allocated into two groups: one receiving the intervention and the other serving as a control. Notably, there was no attrition throughout the study, as all participants completed the intervention and post-intervention assessments. This exceptionally high retention rate ensured that the final analysis included the entire randomized population, allowing for robust conclusions about the intervention's effects. The study flow is illustrated in Figure 1.

To measure self-efficacy, the study utilized the General Self-Efficacy (GSE) questionnaire, a well-established instrument designed to assess an individual's confidence in achieving goals and overcoming obstacles. The questionnaire, which consists of multiple Likert-scale items, was administered both before and after the intervention. Additionally, observation sheets were used during the training to assess participants' behavioral and skill-based changes, including active listening, communication effectiveness, and support provision.

The intervention involved PFA training and interpersonal communication training for the intervention group, conducted over a period of four weeks, with weekly sessions lasting two hours. The PFA training was structured around the "Look, Listen, Link" approach, which emphasizes observing needs, actively listening, and facilitating access to necessary resources for students experiencing psychological distress due to disasters, crises, or trauma. The interpersonal communication component of the training focused on enhancing teachers' communication skills

using the GATHER method, which includes: Greeting individuals warmly, Assessing and Asking about their situation, Telling relevant and calming information, Helping in developing an action plan or seeking support, Explaining next steps clearly to reduce uncertainty, and Reassuring the individual that they are not alone.

Table 1 Frequency Distribution of Respondent Characteristics

No	Demographic Data	Median Intervention Group (IQR)	Control Group Median (IQR))	Test Statistics	p-value
1	**Age** Adults (20-60 years)	25.00 (5)	30.00 (6)	U=501,000	p<0.001
		f (%)	*f (%)*		
2	**Gender** Man Woman	11 (25.0) 33 (75.0)	6 (13.64) 38 (86.36)		p=0.280
3	**Last education** Bachelor Master	39 (88.64) 5 (11.36)	38 (86.36) 6 (13.64)	χ2=0.104 df=1	p=1.000
4	**Jobs Other Than Teachers** There isn't any Lecturer Dormitory Guardian Dormitory Manager Other	32 (72.73) 0 (0.0) 2 (4.55) 1 (2.27) 9 (20.45)	23 (52.27) 2 (4.55) 0 (0.0) 1 (2.27) 18 (40.91)	χ2=8.473 df=4 Value = 7.915	p=0.039
5	**Length of work** One year More than a year	11 (25.0) 33 (75.0)	5 (11.36) 39 (88.64)	χ2=2.750 df=1	p=0.97
6	**Have Attended PFA Training** Never	88 (100.0)	88 (100.0)	-	-

The training content was divided into two key components. The PFA module introduced participants to the concept of PFA, its core principles, and the "Look, Listen, Link" strategy, which included practical exercises in identifying psychological needs, active listening, and providing appropriate support. Meanwhile, the interpersonal communication module focused on an empathetic communication approach and the GATHER framework, equipping teachers with practical strategies to support students experiencing psychological distress.

For data analysis, statistical software was used to assess the effectiveness of the intervention. The normality of the data distribution was first evaluated through a normality test, which indicated that the data were not normally distributed. Consequently, the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was employed to analyze within-group differences, with a significant threshold of p<0.05. To compare differences between the intervention and control groups, the Mann-Whitney U test was applied, where a p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Nursing, Universitas Syiah Kuala. Before participation, all teachers received comprehensive information about the study's objectives, potential benefits, and risks. Informed written consent was obtained from each participant before enrollment. To maintain confidentiality, no personal identifiers were included in the research reports. Participation was entirely voluntary, and teachers were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

Results

A total of 88 participants were included in this study, with 44 assigned to the intervention group and 44 to the control group. The demographic characteristics of both groups were comparable, with no significant differences in age, gender, education level, or occupation (p>0.05), ensuring that the groups were well-matched at baseline (Table 1).

Pre-Test Comparisons

Pre-test results revealed no significant difference in interpersonal communication self-efficacy between the intervention and control groups (U=475.000, p=0.798). This indicates that both groups had similar self-efficacy levels before the intervention.

Table 2 Comparison of Psychological First Aid Self-Efficacy in the Intervention and Control Groups

Variables	Test	Intervention Group Median (IQR)	Control Group Median (IQR)	Mann-Whitney U Test	p-value
	Pre-test	35.00 (10)	37.00 (10)	U=796,500	p=0.151
	Post-test	41.00 (10)	37.00 (9)	U=537,500	p<0.001
Self-Efficacy Psychological First Aid	Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test	Z= -5.785 p<0.001	Z=-0.605 p=0.545		

Post-Test Comparisons

Following the intervention, the median self-efficacy score in the intervention group increased to 41.00 (IQR = 10), while the control group had a median score of 31.00 (IQR=6). The Mann-Whitney U test revealed a significant difference between the groups (U=306.500, p<0.001), demonstrating the intervention's positive effect on interpersonal communication self-efficacy (Table 2).

Within-Group Analysis

A within-group analysis using the Wilcoxon test showed that the intervention group experienced a significant improvement in self-efficacy scores from pre-test to post-test (Z =-4.402, p<0.001). In contrast, the control group did not exhibit a statistically significant change (Z= -1.783, p=0.075) (Table 3). These findings suggest that the intervention was effective in enhancing interpersonal communication self-efficacy, whereas the control group did not show notable improvement.

Table 3. Comparison of Interpersonal Communication Self-Efficacy In the Intervention and Control Groups

		In the Intervention and Control Groups			
Variables	Test	Median Intervention Group (IQR)	Median Intervention Group (IQR)	Mann-Whitney U Test	p-value
	Pretest	36.50 (6)	38.00 (9)	U=900,500	p=0.572
Interpersonal Communication Self-Efficacy	Posttest	46.00 (10)	36.50 (8)	U=306,500	p<0.001
	Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test	Z= -5.783 p<0.001	Z=-1.050 p<0.294		

Discussion

This study found a significant difference in self-efficacy scores within the intervention group before and after the intervention, as indicated by U=537.500 with p<0.001. The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test further confirmed this change, showing Z =-5.785 and p=0.001. Similarly, the interpersonal communication intervention yielded a significant improvement in self-efficacy, with U= 306.500 and p<0.001. The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test for this intervention group also demonstrated a significant change (Z =-5.783, p<0.001). These results suggest that Psychological First Aid (PFA) and communication skills training effectively enhance teachers' self-efficacy in providing psychological support. This aligns with previous research indicating that educators with higher self-efficacy are more capable of supporting students facing mental health challenge (Suranto and Sugiarti, 2021).

Strengthening teachers' self-efficacy is particularly beneficial in Aceh, where students may face mental health difficulties due to trauma, academic pressures, or external stressors. Improved self-efficacy enables teachers to create a supportive learning environment and respond effectively to students' needs (Ramin Mojtabai and Mark Olfson, 2020; Lestari and Rista, 2023). Previous studies have also confirmed that PFA and communication skills training equip educators with the ability to identify and address students' mental health concerns (Ohrt et al., 2020; Zaza and Yeung, 2023).

Additional research suggests that different subgroups of teachers may experience varying impacts from PFA and communication training. The increase in self-efficacy was higher for teachers who had many years of teaching experience and received training compared to teachers with less experience and never received training. Teachers' experiences with PFA and communication training differ according on their years of teaching and past expertise. Experienced teachers benefited more from additional training, according to previous research, and they also showed a greater rise in self-efficacy following training. But in order to make comparable improvement, less experienced teachers might require longer or more frequent sessions.

The observation showed that experienced teachers gained self-assurance, participated in conversations, and gave well-organized criticism. Increased empathetic communication and increased understanding of students' emotional needs were seen after the intervention. The good effect of the training on teachers' capacity to provide psychological support is corroborated by these findings. The possibility of informal exposure to PFA in the control group cannot be eliminated, but there is no indication that they received similar training or information during the study. In addition, significant improvements only occurred in the intervention group, reinforcing the effectiveness of the training. If external factors play a role, their impact is estimated to be minimal. For further research, stricter control over potential external exposure can be considered.

These findings are consistent with Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, which posits that self-efficacy is influenced by four key sources: performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, verbal encouragement, and emotional states. In this study, teachers' self-efficacy improved due to direct training experiences, which provided opportunities for skill development through role-playing and simulation exercises. Vicarious learning occurred as teachers observed effective psychological support techniques and applied them in practice. Verbal encouragement, provided through feedback during training, reinforced teachers' confidence in their abilities. Additionally, by helping teachers manage emotional stress when supporting students, the interventions contributed to a more stable emotional state, which further strengthened their self-efficacy. Bandura's dimensions can be used to understand this increase in self-efficacy, strength (those with high self-efficacy tend to persist in providing psychological support), generality (teachers felt more capable of addressing mental health issues) and magnitude (teachers felt more capable of addressing mental health issues) (Sadovnikova *et al.*, 2018; Masa *et al.*, 2022).

Teacher self-efficacy in Aceh is crucial in facing the challenges of students' mental health due to trauma and academic pressure (Ramin Mojtabai and Mark Olfson, 2020; Lestari and Rista, 2023). PFA training and communication help teachers identify and address this issue (Ohrt *et al.*, 2020; Zaza and Yeung, 2023). The control group without training did not experience significant changes, reinforcing the finding that PFA enhances educators' readiness (Ismail, 2023). PFA combines practical approaches, simulations, and individual feedback to enhance self-efficacy and mental resilience (Sijbrandij *et al.*, 2020; Gilbert *et al.*, 2021; Hermosilla *et al.*, 2023; Deady *et al.*, 2024). Higher self-efficacy contributes to a proactive approach in mental health support (Villagonzalo *et al.*, 2018).

Supervision and retraining are necessary to maintain the long-term benefits of PFA (Wang *et al.*, 2021; Park and Choi, 2022). Additionally, good interpersonal communication strengthens the teacher-student relationship, creating a safe environment for students to share their concerns (UNICEF, 2015; Attamimi, Lestari and Rinenggantyas, 2024). Teachers skilled in communication provide better emotional support, build relationships that encourage students to seek help, and recognize signs of stress earlier (Rubin and Martin, 1994; Ohrt *et al.*, 2020; de Sousa Mata *et al.*, 2021; Linge *et al.*, 2021; Xie and Derakhshan, 2021; Byun and Kim, 2022).

Limitation
This study has several limitations. The sample size was restricted to certain regions in Aceh, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the short duration of the intervention may not fully capture its long-term impact. Furthermore, relying solely on questionnaires and observation sheets may not provide a comprehensive assessment of behavioral changes in real-life situations. Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs and qualitative methods to better understand the lasting effects of PFA and communication skills training.

Conclusion
These interventions could be widely implemented in disaster-prone regions to equip educators with the necessary skills to support students experiencing mental health challenges. Sustained training and follow-up programs should be considered to ensure long-term effectiveness in improving teachers' ability to offer psychological support. Future interventions should consider tailored training models that accommodate teachers with differing degrees of prior knowledge considering these differences in training efficacy across various subgroups. Extended training modules or follow-up mentorship programs, for instance, can be beneficial for new teachers, while advanced workshops on crisis intervention techniques might be more appropriate for seasoned educators. This strategy would guarantee that all teachers, regardless of experience level, get the most out of communication and psychological first aid training.

Abbreviations
PFA: Psychological First Aid
GSE: General Self-Efficacy
WHO: World Health Organization
PTSD: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Availability of Data and Materials
The data used in this study are available to the primary author upon reasonable request.

Declarations
Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate
The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Nursing, Universitas Syiah Kuala has approved this study. After receiving an explanation of the purpose of the study, each participant gave written consent.

Consent for Publication
Participants provided written consent for anonymous data to be published as part of the results of this study.

Competing Interests
The author declares that he has no conflict of interest related to this research.

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