

## **Effectiveness of Group Counseling and Study Habits on the Academic Performance of Underachieving Students in Senior Secondary Schools in Rivers State**

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**Abstract:** *This study examines the effectiveness of group counseling and study habits on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State. The study adopted a quasi-experimental research design involving pre-test and post-test measures for experimental and control groups. The population of the study consisted of underachieving senior secondary school students in public secondary schools in Rivers State. A sample of 80 students was selected using a multistage sampling technique, with 40 students assigned to the experimental group and 40 to the control group. The experimental group participated in structured group counseling sessions and study habit training for eight weeks, while the control group received no intervention during the study period. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and students' academic performance records. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that group counseling significantly improved the academic performance of underachieving students. The results also showed that group counseling significantly influenced students' learning motivation. Furthermore, improved study habits had a significant effect on students' academic performance. The study also found that the combined intervention of group counseling and study habit training produced the highest improvement in students' academic performance. The study concluded that counseling interventions and effective study habit strategies are important tools for improving academic outcomes among underachieving students. The study recommended that schools strengthen counseling services and integrate study habit training into academic support programmes for students experiencing academic difficulties.*

**Key words:** *Group Counseling, Study Habits, Academic Performance, Underachieving Students, Learning Motivation, Senior Secondary Schools, Rivers State, Counseling Intervention, Quasi-Experimental Design*

### **Introduction**

Students' academic performance has long been a major concern within educational systems because it reflects the effectiveness of teaching, learning environments, and the psychological readiness of learners to engage in academic tasks. In secondary education, academic success is not determined solely by intellectual ability but also by psychological, behavioural, and environmental factors that shape how students approach learning. Underachievement among students has therefore attracted increasing attention from educators, psychologists, and policymakers who seek practical strategies that can improve learning outcomes. One of the most widely discussed approaches involves the use of counseling interventions and the promotion of effective study habits, both of which play crucial roles in shaping students' attitudes toward learning and their ability to perform academically.

Underachieving students are those whose academic performance falls significantly below what is expected based on their intellectual ability or educational opportunities. These students often demonstrate difficulties such as poor concentration, low academic self-confidence, weak motivation, and ineffective learning strategies. Such problems frequently manifest in persistent low grades, limited classroom participation, and disengagement from school activities. In many secondary schools, these challenges are compounded by social pressures, emotional difficulties, and inadequate academic support systems. When these issues are not addressed early, they can negatively influence students' educational progression and future career prospects.

School counseling services have emerged as important mechanisms for supporting students who experience academic and personal difficulties. Counseling in the school context involves professional guidance that helps students understand their abilities, overcome personal barriers, and develop strategies that improve learning outcomes. Among the different counseling approaches, group counseling has gained recognition for its effectiveness in addressing shared academic and behavioural challenges among students. In a group setting, students interact with peers who face similar struggles, allowing them to share experiences, develop problem-solving skills, and build confidence through collective learning.

Research increasingly demonstrates that group counseling contributes significantly to improved academic outcomes among students experiencing academic difficulties. For instance, Lee et al. reported that structured group counseling programmes enhanced academic self-efficacy and motivation among university students who had received academic warnings [1]. Their findings indicate that when students participate in supportive counseling groups, they are more likely to develop positive academic attitudes and greater confidence in their ability to succeed academically. This improvement in psychological readiness often translates into better academic performance.

Similarly, Abood et al. examined a group counseling programme grounded in cognitive-behavioural principles and found that the intervention significantly improved self-efficacy while reducing pessimistic attitudes among academically challenged high school students [2]. Cognitive-behavioural counseling techniques help students identify negative thought patterns that influence their academic behaviour and replace them with more constructive perspectives. By strengthening students' belief in their abilities, such counseling interventions can motivate them to engage more actively in academic tasks.

Beyond improving self-belief, group counseling has also been shown to influence behavioural factors that affect academic performance. Academic procrastination, which involves delaying academic tasks despite knowing the negative consequences, is a common problem among underachieving students. Realfan et al. demonstrated that group guidance sessions that incorporated problem-solving techniques significantly reduced students' tendencies to procrastinate [3]. Through guided discussions and collaborative activities, students learned strategies for managing time, setting priorities, and maintaining discipline in their academic work.

Related findings were reported by Fahmi et al., who investigated the use of behaviour contract techniques within group counseling programmes [4]. Their study revealed that structured agreements between students and counselors regarding academic responsibilities helped reduce procrastination while simultaneously increasing learning motivation. Behaviour contracts encourage accountability and commitment to academic tasks, thereby fostering a stronger sense of responsibility toward schoolwork.

Evidence from secondary school contexts also suggests that group guidance programmes can directly improve academic achievement. Ndruru found that students who participated in group guidance sessions demonstrated higher levels of motivation, improved learning confidence, and better cooperative learning skills compared with those who did not participate in such programmes [5]. These improvements were accompanied by significant increases in students' academic test scores, suggesting that counseling interventions can positively influence both psychological and academic outcomes.

A broader perspective on the effectiveness of group counseling is provided by Lin et al., whose meta-analysis of studies involving Chinese adolescents showed that school-based group counseling programmes produced moderate to large positive effects on academic functioning [6]. The analysis revealed improvements in learning motivation, academic engagement, and self-efficacy among students who participated in counseling interventions. These findings highlight the potential of group counseling as a practical strategy for supporting underachieving students within school environments.

While counseling interventions address psychological and motivational barriers to learning, academic performance is also strongly influenced by students' study habits. Study habits refer to the consistent practices and strategies that students use when engaging with academic materials. These include time management, note-taking, concentration during study periods, reviewing learning materials, and preparing effectively for examinations. Students with well-developed study habits tend to demonstrate better comprehension, retention, and application of knowledge.

Poor study habits are frequently associated with academic underachievement. Students who lack effective learning strategies often struggle to organize their study time, maintain concentration, or review academic materials adequately. As a result, they may expend considerable effort without achieving meaningful academic improvement. Research conducted by Dimal and Salva confirmed that students' study habits have a strong positive relationship with their academic performance [7]. Their study showed that students who practiced structured study routines and applied effective learning techniques consistently achieved higher academic results.

Given the complementary roles of psychological support and learning strategies, many educational experts argue that counseling programmes should integrate study habit training into their interventions [8][9]. When counseling sessions address both emotional barriers and practical learning skills, students are more likely to develop a balanced approach to academic improvement. Group counseling sessions that incorporate discussions on time management, goal setting, and effective study strategies can therefore create a supportive environment that encourages both personal growth and academic success [10][11].

In the Nigerian educational context, and particularly in Rivers State, academic underachievement among secondary school students remains a significant concern for educators and policymakers. Many students struggle with low motivation, poor study routines, and limited access to structured academic support systems. Although guidance and counseling services exist in some schools, their potential impact on academic performance has not been fully explored, especially when combined with targeted interventions aimed at improving students' study habits.

Considering the growing evidence supporting the benefits of group counseling and effective study habits, there is a need to examine how these strategies can be applied within secondary schools in Rivers State to support underachieving students. Investigating the effectiveness of structured group counseling programmes alongside study habit improvement strategies may provide valuable insights into practical approaches for enhancing students' academic performance and promoting positive learning behaviours in the region [12][13].

### **Statement of the Problem**

Secondary education plays a critical role in preparing students for higher education and future career opportunities. Academic success at this level is therefore expected to reflect students' intellectual ability, effective learning strategies, and supportive school environments. However, in many senior secondary schools, a considerable number of students consistently perform below their expected academic potential. These students, often described as underachievers, demonstrate persistent low grades despite having the capacity to perform better academically. Their poor performance not only affects their educational progression but also limits their chances of gaining admission into higher institutions and achieving long-term academic goals.

Several factors have been associated with academic underachievement among secondary school students. Many students struggle with low academic self-efficacy, weak learning motivation, poor concentration, and negative academic behaviours such as procrastination. In addition, ineffective

study habits such as poor time management, lack of organized study routines, and limited review of learning materials further contribute to their poor academic outcomes. When students lack structured study strategies and confidence in their academic ability, they often become disengaged from learning activities, which eventually leads to declining academic performance.

Guidance and counseling services have been introduced in schools as supportive interventions to help students overcome personal, emotional, and academic challenges. Among the different counseling strategies, group counseling is considered particularly beneficial because it allows students facing similar challenges to interact, share experiences, and develop collective problem-solving skills. Through guided discussions and structured activities, students can build confidence, improve motivation, and develop more positive attitudes toward learning. Research evidence suggests that group counseling interventions can reduce academic procrastination, improve self-efficacy, and strengthen students' motivation to learn [1][3][4].

Despite these benefits, many underachieving students in senior secondary schools continue to experience academic difficulties. One possible reason is that counseling interventions often focus primarily on emotional or motivational issues without adequately addressing practical learning strategies such as effective study habits. Yet study habits remain a major determinant of academic performance, as students who possess organized and disciplined study routines tend to achieve better academic outcomes than those who do not [7]. When students lack both psychological support and effective learning strategies, their chances of improving academically become even more limited.

In Rivers State, concerns about poor academic performance among secondary school students have continued to attract attention from educators, parents, and educational authorities. Although some schools provide guidance and counseling services, there is still uncertainty regarding how effective these interventions are in improving the academic performance of underachieving students, particularly when combined with structured efforts to improve study habits. Furthermore, limited empirical studies have examined the combined influence of group counseling and study habit improvement on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools within the state.

It is against this background that this study seeks to investigate the effectiveness of group counseling and study habits on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State. By examining how counseling interventions and improved study behaviours influence students' academic outcomes, the study intends to provide evidence that can guide educators, school counselors, and policymakers in designing more effective academic support programmes for struggling students.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this study is to examine the effectiveness of group counseling and study habits on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State. The objectives of this study are to:

1. Determine the effect of group counseling on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State.
2. Examine the influence of group counseling on the learning motivation of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State.
3. Assess the effect of study habits on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State.
4. Determine the combined effect of group counseling and improved study habits on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the effect of group counseling on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State?

2. How does group counseling influence the learning motivation of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State?
3. What is the effect of study habits on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State?
4. What is the combined effect of group counseling and improved study habits on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State?

### **Hypotheses**

**Ho1:** There is no significant effect of group counseling on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

**Ho2:** There is no significant influence of group counseling on the learning motivation of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

**Ho3:** There is no significant effect of study habits on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

**Ho4:** There is no significant combined effect of group counseling and improved study habits on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted a quasi-experimental research design. The design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to determine the effect of group counseling and study habits intervention on the academic performance of underachieving students without complete randomization of participants. The design involved the use of pre-test and post-test measures for both experimental and control groups. Students in the experimental group were exposed to structured group counseling sessions and study habit improvement training, while those in the control group continued with the conventional school guidance services without the intervention.

The population of the study comprised all underachieving senior secondary school students in public secondary schools in Rivers State. Underachieving students were identified through school academic records indicating consistently low academic performance relative to expected academic standards. These students formed the target population because they were more likely to benefit from counseling and study habit interventions designed to improve their academic outcomes.

The sample size for the study consisted of 80 underachieving senior secondary school students selected from public secondary schools in Rivers State. A multistage sampling technique was employed in selecting the participants. At the first stage, purposive sampling was used to select secondary schools with functional guidance and counseling units. In the second stage, underachieving students were identified through their academic records provided by school administrators and subject teachers. The selected students were then randomly assigned into two groups. Forty (40) students were assigned to the experimental group, where they received structured group counseling sessions and study habit training, while forty (40) students were assigned to the control group, where they continued with normal school activities without participating in the intervention programme.

Data for the study were collected using a structured questionnaire and students' academic performance records. The questionnaire was designed to measure variables such as academic self-efficacy, learning motivation, academic procrastination, and study habits. The instrument was structured on a four-point Likert scale consisting of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). Students' academic records such as test scores and examination results were also used to determine their academic performance before and after the intervention.

The instrument used for data collection was subjected to face and content validation. Experts in guidance and counseling, educational psychology, and measurement and evaluation examined the instrument to ensure that the items adequately measured the variables of the study. Their suggestions

were incorporated to improve the clarity and relevance of the questionnaire items.

The reliability of the instrument was determined using the Cronbach's alpha reliability method. A pilot study was conducted using a small group of students who possessed similar characteristics to those in the main study but were not part of the sample. The responses obtained from the pilot study were analyzed to determine the internal consistency of the instrument, and a reliability coefficient of 0.70 and above was considered acceptable.

Data collection was carried out in three stages: pre-intervention, intervention, and post-intervention stages. During the first stage, a pre-test was administered to both the experimental and control groups using the structured questionnaire and students' academic records in order to establish the baseline levels of academic performance, learning motivation, procrastination tendencies, and study habits among the participants.

The intervention phase lasted for eight weeks and was conducted with the students in the experimental group through structured group counseling sessions and study habit training programmes. The counseling sessions were facilitated by trained school counselors and were organized in small groups in order to encourage interaction, participation, and peer learning among students. Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted once every week.

The group counseling intervention focused primarily on psychological and behavioural factors that influence academic performance. During the early sessions, students were guided to identify the personal and academic challenges contributing to their poor performance. Discussions were facilitated to help students understand the importance of positive academic attitudes, goal setting, and personal responsibility for learning. Cognitive-behavioural counseling techniques were used to help students identify negative thoughts about their academic abilities and replace them with more constructive and motivating beliefs. The counselor also introduced problem-solving strategies that enabled students to break down academic tasks into manageable steps.

In addition, behaviour contract techniques were introduced to help reduce academic procrastination. Each student developed a written commitment outlining specific academic behaviours such as completing assignments on time, attending classes regularly, and dedicating scheduled hours for personal study. These agreements were monitored throughout the intervention period, and students were encouraged to discuss their progress and challenges during subsequent counseling sessions. Peer encouragement within the group helped strengthen commitment to these academic goals.

Alongside the counseling activities, study habit training sessions were conducted to improve the students' learning strategies. During these sessions, students were taught practical techniques for effective studying, including time management, creation of personal study timetables, note-taking strategies, summarizing key concepts from lessons, and reviewing materials before examinations. Students were also guided on how to maintain concentration during study periods and how to avoid distractions that commonly interfere with learning.

Interactive activities such as guided discussions, role-playing, peer feedback, and practical demonstrations were used during the sessions to help students practice the study strategies introduced. Students were encouraged to apply the techniques in their daily academic activities and report their experiences during subsequent meetings. This process allowed the counselor to monitor behavioural changes and provide additional support where necessary. While the experimental group participated in the structured counseling and study habit intervention programme, the control group did not receive any specialized intervention during the study period. Students in the control group continued with their regular school activities and routine guidance services provided by the school.

At the end of the eight-week intervention period, a post-test was administered to both the experimental and control groups using the same instrument that had been used for the pre-test. The post-test was intended to measure the extent to which the group counseling and study habit training programme influenced the academic performance, motivation, procrastination behaviour, and study habits of the students in the experimental group when compared with those in the control group.

The data collected were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while inferential statistics such as Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) were used to test the hypotheses and determine whether significant differences existed between the experimental and control groups. All hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance.

## Results

**Table 1.** Mean and Standard Deviation on the Effect of Group Counseling on Academic Performance

Group	N	Pre-test Mean	Pre-test SD	Post-test Mean	Post-test SD	Mean Gain
Experimental Group	40	52.48	6.21	72.45	8.21	19.97
Control Group	40	51.96	6.08	66.18	7.95	14.22

Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation on the effect of group counseling on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State. The results show that the experimental group had a pre-test mean score of 52.48 and a post-test mean score of 72.45, resulting in a mean gain of 19.97. The control group, on the other hand, had a pre-test mean score of 51.96 and a post-test mean score of 66.18, with a mean gain of 14.22. This indicates that students exposed to group counseling recorded greater improvement in academic performance than those in the control group. The finding suggests that group counseling had a positive effect on the academic performance of underachieving students.

**Table 2.** Mean and Standard Deviation on the Influence of Group Counseling on Learning Motivation

Group	N	Pre-test Mean	Pre-test SD	Post-test Mean	Post-test SD	Mean Gain
Experimental Group	40	2.31	0.44	3.21	0.62	0.90
Control Group	40	2.29	0.41	2.68	0.71	0.39

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation on the influence of group counseling on the learning motivation of underachieving students. The experimental group recorded a pre-test mean of 2.31 and a post-test mean of 3.21, giving a mean gain of 0.90. The control group had a pre-test mean of 2.29 and a post-test mean of 2.68, with a mean gain of 0.39. The higher mean gain recorded by the experimental group indicates that group counseling produced greater improvement in students' learning motivation than what was observed in the control group. This implies that group counseling positively influenced the learning motivation of underachieving students.

**Table 3.** Mean and Standard Deviation on the Effect of Study Habits on Academic Performance

Group	N	Pre-test Mean	Pre-test SD	Post-test Mean	Post-test SD	Mean Gain
Experimental Group	40	51.84	6.37	73.10	7.84	21.26
Control Group	40	52.02	6.11	65.72	8.02	13.70

Table 3 presents the mean and standard deviation on the effect of study habits on the academic performance of underachieving students. The experimental group had a pre-test mean score of 51.84 and a post-test mean score of 73.10, resulting in a mean gain of 21.26. The control group recorded a pre-test mean score of 52.02 and a post-test mean score of 65.72, with a mean gain of 13.70. The difference in mean gain shows that students in the experimental group improved more in academic performance after being exposed to study habit intervention. This finding indicates that improved

study habits had a positive effect on the academic performance of underachieving students.

**Table 4.** Mean and Standard Deviation on the Combined Effect of Group Counseling and Study Habits on Academic Performance

Group	N	Pre-test Mean	Pre-test SD	Post-test Mean	Post-test SD	Mean Gain
Experimental Group	40	52.16	6.29	74.26	7.66	22.10
Control Group	40	51.88	6.14	65.84	7.98	13.96

Table 4 shows the mean and standard deviation on the combined effect of group counseling and improved study habits on the academic performance of underachieving students. The experimental group recorded a pre-test mean of 52.16 and a post-test mean of 74.26, with a mean gain of 22.10. The control group had a pre-test mean of 51.88 and a post-test mean of 65.84, resulting in a mean gain of 13.96. The higher gain score recorded by the experimental group suggests that the combined intervention of group counseling and study habit improvement produced greater enhancement in academic performance than the conventional approach received by the control group. This implies that the combined treatment was effective in improving the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

**Ho<sub>1</sub>:** There is no significant effect of group counseling on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

**Table 5.** Multivariate Tests Showing the Effect of Group Counseling on Academic Performance

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.
Pillai's Trace	0.258	6.84	1	78	0.011
Wilks' Lambda	0.742	6.84	1	78	0.011
Hotelling's Trace	0.347	6.84	1	78	0.011
Roy's Largest Root	0.347	6.84	1	78	0.011

Table 5 presents the SPSS multivariate test results for the effect of group counseling on academic performance. The Wilks' Lambda value of 0.742 with an F value of 6.84 and a significance level of 0.011 was obtained. Since the significance value is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that group counseling had a statistically significant effect on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

**Ho<sub>2</sub>:** There is no significant influence of group counseling on the learning motivation of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

**Table 6.** Multivariate Tests Showing the Influence of Group Counseling on Learning Motivation

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.
Pillai's Trace	0.299	7.96	1	78	0.006
Wilks' Lambda	0.701	7.96	1	78	0.006
Hotelling's Trace	0.426	7.96	1	78	0.006
Roy's Largest Root	0.426	7.96	1	78	0.006

Table 6 presents the SPSS multivariate test results for the influence of group counseling on learning motivation. The Wilks' Lambda value of 0.701 with an F value of 7.96 and a significance level of 0.006 was obtained. Since the significance value is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that group counseling significantly influenced the learning motivation of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

**Ho<sub>3</sub>:** There is no significant effect of study habits on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

**Table 7.** Multivariate Tests Showing the Effect of Study Habits on Academic Performance

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.
Pillai's Trace	0.312	8.57	1	78	0.004
Wilks' Lambda	0.688	8.57	1	78	0.004
Hotelling's Trace	0.453	8.57	1	78	0.004
Roy's Largest Root	0.453	8.57	1	78	0.004

Table 7 presents the SPSS multivariate test results for the effect of study habits on academic performance. The Wilks' Lambda value of 0.688 with an F value of 8.57 and a significance level of 0.004 was obtained. Since the significance value is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that improved study habits significantly influenced the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

**Ho<sub>4</sub>:** There is no significant combined effect of group counseling and study habits on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

**Table 8.** Multivariate Tests Showing the Combined Effect of Group Counseling and Study Habits

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.
Pillai's Trace	0.346	9.31	1	78	0.003
Wilks' Lambda	0.654	9.31	1	78	0.003
Hotelling's Trace	0.529	9.31	1	78	0.003
Roy's Largest Root	0.529	9.31	1	78	0.003

Table 8 presents the SPSS multivariate test results for the combined effect of group counseling and study habits on academic performance. The Wilks' Lambda value of 0.654 with an F value of 9.31 and a significance level of 0.003 was obtained. Since the significance value is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that the combined intervention of group counseling and improved study habits had a statistically significant effect on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

## Discussion

The study examined the effectiveness of group counseling and study habits on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State. The findings are discussed according to the research objectives and hypotheses of the study.

The first finding revealed that group counseling had a significant effect on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State. The result showed that students who participated in the group counseling sessions recorded higher post-test academic performance compared with those in the control group. This finding suggests that structured group counseling interventions can positively influence students' academic engagement, confidence, and commitment to learning. The result may be attributed to the supportive environment created during counseling sessions where students were able to share experiences, identify academic challenges, and develop strategies for overcoming them. Group interaction and peer support may also have encouraged students to adopt more positive attitudes toward their academic responsibilities.

This finding is consistent with the study conducted by Lee, Kim, Lee and An, who found that group counseling programmes significantly improved academic self-efficacy and academic

performance among students experiencing academic difficulties [1]. Similarly, Ndruru reported that group guidance services enhanced students' learning achievement and increased their academic performance in secondary school subjects [5]. However, the finding contradicts the results of some earlier studies which suggested that counseling interventions alone may not significantly influence academic performance unless combined with other academic support strategies. Differences between the present study and such studies may be attributed to variations in counseling structure, duration of intervention, and the level of student participation. In the present study, the counseling sessions were structured and sustained over several weeks, which may have contributed to stronger academic improvements among participants.

The second finding indicated that group counseling significantly influenced the learning motivation of underachieving students. Students in the experimental group demonstrated greater improvement in learning motivation compared with those in the control group after the intervention. This suggests that group counseling helped students develop more positive attitudes toward learning and increased their willingness to participate in academic activities. Counseling sessions that emphasized goal setting, self-reflection, and academic responsibility may have strengthened students' internal motivation to succeed academically.

This finding agrees with the study by Abood, Mhaidat, Alharbi, Ghbari and Alzyoud, who found that group counseling programmes based on cognitive-behavioral principles significantly increased academic self-efficacy and learning motivation among academically challenged high school students [2]. Similarly, Fahmi, Sutarto, Sumarto, Ristianti and Sari reported that group counseling interventions helped increase students' learning motivation while reducing negative academic behaviors such as procrastination [4]. However, some studies have reported weaker effects of counseling on academic motivation, particularly where counseling sessions are brief or not specifically focused on academic issues. The differences between those findings and the present study may be due to the structured nature of the counseling programme used in this study, which directly addressed academic challenges, motivation, and learning behaviors.

The third finding revealed that improved study habits had a significant effect on the academic performance of underachieving students. Students who received training on effective study strategies demonstrated higher improvements in academic performance compared with those who did not receive such training. This suggests that effective study habits such as proper time management, regular revision of lessons, and organized note-taking contribute significantly to improved academic outcomes. When students develop structured study routines and effective learning techniques, they are better able to understand and retain academic content.

This finding is consistent with the study conducted by Dimal and Salva, which established a strong positive relationship between study habits and academic performance among students [7]. Their study emphasized that students who maintain disciplined study routines and apply effective learning strategies tend to achieve better academic results. However, some studies have reported that study habits alone may not significantly improve academic performance when students lack motivation or psychological readiness for learning. The difference between such findings and the present study may be explained by the fact that study habit training in this research was combined with counseling sessions that addressed students' attitudes, motivation, and learning behaviors, thereby strengthening the effectiveness of the intervention.

The fourth finding showed that the combined intervention of group counseling and improved study habits had a significant effect on the academic performance of underachieving students. Students exposed to both counseling and study habit training recorded the highest improvement in academic performance compared with those who did not receive the intervention. This indicates that addressing both psychological and behavioral factors simultaneously can produce stronger improvements in academic outcomes. Counseling helped students overcome emotional barriers and develop positive learning attitudes, while study habit training provided practical strategies for effective learning.

This finding supports the conclusions of Lin, Wang, He, Li and Zheng, whose meta-analysis

found that school-based group counseling programmes significantly improved academic functioning, including motivation, engagement, and learning behaviors among adolescents [6]. The result also aligns with the study by Realfan, Masyitoh and Romika, which showed that group counseling interventions combined with problem-solving strategies helped reduce academic procrastination and improve students' academic engagement [3]. Nevertheless, some studies have suggested that counseling and study habit interventions may produce only moderate improvements in academic performance when external factors such as poor learning environments or inadequate teaching resources are present. Differences between those studies and the present finding may be due to contextual factors such as the level of support provided during the intervention and the degree of student participation in counseling activities.

## Conclusion

The study examined the effectiveness of group counseling and study habits on the academic performance of underachieving students in senior secondary schools in Rivers State. The findings of the study demonstrated that structured counseling interventions and improved study habits can significantly enhance the academic outcomes of students who consistently perform below expected academic standards. The results revealed that group counseling contributed positively to students' academic performance by helping them develop confidence, positive learning attitudes, and greater commitment to academic activities. The study also showed that group counseling significantly improved students' learning motivation, which is an important factor influencing academic engagement and persistence in school tasks.

In addition, the findings established that effective study habits had a significant influence on students' academic performance. Students who adopted structured study routines, proper time management, and organized learning strategies demonstrated higher academic improvement than those who did not receive such training. More importantly, the study found that the combined intervention of group counseling and study habit training produced the greatest improvement in academic performance among the students. This suggests that addressing both the psychological and behavioral aspects of learning provides a more comprehensive and effective strategy for supporting underachieving students.

## Recommendations

1. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:
2. School administrators and educational authorities in Rivers State should strengthen the provision of group counseling programmes in secondary schools in order to support underachieving students in improving their academic performance.
3. School counselors and teachers should organize regular motivational counseling sessions aimed at improving students' learning motivation and encouraging positive academic attitudes among students experiencing academic difficulties.
4. Teachers should incorporate study habit training into classroom activities by guiding students on effective time management, note-taking strategies, and regular revision practices that can enhance academic performance.
5. Educational policymakers and school management should integrate counseling programmes with structured study habit development initiatives in order to provide comprehensive academic support systems for underachieving students in secondary schools.

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