

Empty Chair: A Humanistic-Communicative Strategy for Addressing School Bullying

Empty Chair: Strategi Humanistik-Komunikatif dalam Mengatasi Bullying di Sekolah

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Abstract:

Bullying remains a critical issue in schools due to its detrimental effects on students' emotional well-being, social relationships, and academic engagement. This study aimed to examine the implementation of the Empty Chair technique as a humanistic-communicative strategy for addressing bullying at SMA Manbail Huda Tuban. A qualitative case study design was employed. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with two school counselors and six students, and document analysis. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings revealed that the implementation of the Empty Chair technique progressed through four interconnected stages: reflective dialogue, perspective-taking, humanistic communication, and behavioral transformation. These stages created a safe communication space that enabled students to express suppressed emotions, enhance self-awareness, develop empathy, and improve interpersonal communication. The intervention contributed to a reduction in verbal bullying, greater understanding of others' perspectives, and the development of more reflective and humanistic communication patterns. This study concludes that the Empty Chair technique functions not only as a therapeutic intervention within Gestalt counseling but also as a humanistic-communicative strategy for fostering a safer, more inclusive, and supportive school environment

Keyword: *Empty Chair; bullying; humanistic communication; Gestalt counseling; case study.*

Abstrak:

Bullying masih menjadi permasalahan serius di lingkungan sekolah karena berdampak terhadap perkembangan emosional, hubungan sosial, dan keberhasilan belajar peserta didik. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis penerapan teknik *Empty Chair* sebagai strategi komunikatif-humanistik dalam mengatasi bullying di SMA Manbail Huda Tuban. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Data diperoleh melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam terhadap dua guru bimbingan dan konseling serta enam peserta didik, dan dokumentasi. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan model interaktif Miles dan Huberman melalui reduksi data, penyajian data, serta penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penerapan teknik *Empty Chair* berlangsung melalui empat tahapan utama, yaitu *reflective dialogue*, *perspective-taking*, *humanistic communication*, dan *behavioral transformation*. Proses tersebut mampu membangun ruang komunikasi yang aman sehingga peserta didik lebih berani mengekspresikan emosi, meningkatkan kesadaran diri, mengembangkan empati, serta memperbaiki pola komunikasi interpersonal. Perubahan tersebut ditunjukkan oleh berkurangnya perilaku bullying verbal, meningkatnya kemampuan memahami perspektif orang lain, serta tumbuhnya komunikasi yang lebih reflektif dan humanis. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa teknik *Empty Chair* tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai teknik terapeutik dalam konseling Gestalt, tetapi juga sebagai strategi komunikatif-humanistik yang berkontribusi dalam menciptakan lingkungan belajar yang aman, inklusif, dan kondusif.

Kata Kunci: *Empty Chair; bullying; komunikasi humanistik; konseling Gestalt; studi kasus.*

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INTRODUCTION

Bullying remains one of the major challenges faced by Manbail Huda Senior High School, Tuban, in fostering a safe and conducive learning environment. Preliminary interviews with the school counseling teacher revealed that bullying continues to occur in various forms, particularly verbal ridicule, intimidation, and degrading behaviors among students. Although the school has implemented preventive measures through verbal warnings, counseling, and guidance for perpetrators, such behaviors frequently recur when supervision is limited. At the same time, many victims choose to conceal their experiences due to fear, shame, or concerns about experiencing further victimization after reporting the incidents. This phenomenon reflects a broader educational challenge, as bullying continues to undermine students' psychological well-being, interpersonal relationships, and academic engagement in many educational settings. Victims often experience anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, and declining learning motivation, while perpetrators are at risk of developing persistent aggressive behaviors if appropriate interventions are not provided. Consequently, bullying not only harms the individuals directly involved but also disrupts the creation of a safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environment, which is essential for successful educational processes (Lestari et al., 2021; Nur et al., 2022).

Although bullying is commonly perceived as a form of aggressive behavior, it fundamentally represents a failure of interpersonal communication characterized by the absence of empathy, mutual respect, and perspective-taking. In most cases, bullying manifests through verbal communication, including ridicule, humiliation, negative labeling, threats, and other forms of degrading expressions that undermine individual dignity. Therefore, addressing bullying should not merely focus on eliminating aggressive behaviors but also on transforming destructive communication patterns into humanistic, dialogical, and empathetic interactions. One promising approach is the *Empty Chair* technique within Gestalt counseling. This technique provides individuals with opportunities to express their thoughts, emotions, and unresolved experiences through reflective dialogue, thereby enhancing self-awareness, empathy, perspective-taking, and healthier interpersonal relationships. Accordingly, *Empty Chair* should not only be viewed as a therapeutic counseling technique but also as a communicative strategy capable of fostering positive social interactions within educational settings.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of the *Empty Chair* technique in addressing students' psychological and emotional problems. Rangkuti (2022) reported that the technique significantly improved the self-confidence of bullying victims by strengthening their social competence, self-acceptance, and willingness to express opinions. Likewise, Hodroar and Abdul (2022) found that *Empty Chair* effectively facilitated the rehabilitation of bullying victims by reducing trauma and restoring self-confidence. Similarly,

Maulana (2021) showed that the technique significantly reduced students' test anxiety through reflective dialogue and active participation. Despite these encouraging findings, existing studies have primarily emphasized the psychological outcomes of the intervention while paying limited attention to the communicative processes underlying behavioral transformation. Consequently, the potential of *Empty Chair* as a humanistic-communicative strategy that promotes empathetic dialogue, perspective-taking, and the reconstruction of interpersonal relationships in addressing school bullying remains insufficiently explored. This gap highlights the need for further investigation into the communicative mechanisms through which the technique facilitates conflict resolution and behavioral change.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze the implementation of the *Empty Chair* technique as a humanistic-communicative strategy for addressing bullying in school settings. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on the psychological effectiveness of the technique, this research examines how *Empty Chair* facilitates reflective dialogue, empathy, and perspective-taking as communicative mechanisms for resolving interpersonal conflicts among students. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically by extending the application of Gestalt counseling from a humanistic communication perspective and practically by providing an alternative dialogical and participatory strategy for bullying prevention and intervention, thereby supporting the development of safer, more inclusive, and more sustainable learning environments.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of the implementation of the Empty Chair technique in addressing school bullying by exploring participants' experiences, interactions, and meaning-making processes within their natural settings. The case study design was adopted to provide a comprehensive investigation of a specific phenomenon within a single research context, thereby offering a detailed understanding of how the Empty Chair technique functions as a humanistic-communicative strategy at Manbail Huda Senior High School, Tuban (Nurahma & Hendriani, 2021). In qualitative research, the researcher served as the primary instrument (key instrument), directly engaging in data collection, interpretation, and analysis to ensure a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Ultavia, 2023).

The study utilized both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with two school counselors and six eleventh-grade students who had participated in counseling sessions employing the Empty Chair technique. In addition, participant observations were conducted during counseling sessions to capture the communication dynamics and interpersonal interactions that emerged throughout the intervention process. Secondary data consisted of school documents, counseling program

records, activity reports, and relevant scholarly literature concerning the Empty Chair technique, Gestalt counseling, school bullying, and qualitative research methodology to support the interpretation of the research findings (Pratama et al., 2024; Inadjo et al., 2022).

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Participants

Code	Participant Category	Role and Relevance to the Research	Number
BK-1	School Counselor	Responsible for counseling services and the implementation of the <i>Empty Chair</i> technique in bullying intervention.	1
BK-2	School Counselor	Experienced in handling bullying cases and facilitating <i>Empty Chair</i> counseling sessions.	1
S-1	Grade XI Student	Participated in <i>Empty Chair</i> counseling related to bullying experiences.	1
S-2	Grade XI Student	Participant involved in the implementation of the <i>Empty Chair</i> technique for bullying intervention.	1
S-3	Grade XI Student	Participant who provided reflective insights into the communicative process during counseling.	1
S-4	Grade XI Student	Participant involved in <i>Empty Chair</i> -based bullying intervention.	1
S-5	Grade XI Student	Participant who completed all stages of the <i>Empty Chair</i> counseling process.	1
S-6	Grade XI Student	Participant who described behavioral and communicative changes following the counseling sessions.	1
Total	Research Participants		8

Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation enabled the researcher to directly examine the implementation of the Empty Chair technique and the interactions between counselors and students throughout the counseling process (Hasanah, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were employed to provide a flexible yet systematic framework for exploring participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding the implementation of the Empty Chair technique (Rani, 2023). Documentary evidence, including counseling program documents, activity reports, and other relevant institutional records, was analyzed to complement and triangulate the observational and interview data (Aisyah, 2025).

Data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Rijali, 2018). Data reduction involved selecting, organizing, and focusing the collected data according to the research objectives to facilitate meaningful interpretation (Spradley & Miles Huberman, 2024). Subsequently, the data were presented in a narrative format to identify emerging themes,

relationships, and patterns within the dataset (Hasanah, 2016). Finally, conclusions were continuously drawn and verified throughout the analytical process to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Genta Mulia, 2024).

RESULTS

The findings revealed that the *Empty Chair* technique was implemented at Manbail Huda Senior High School, Tuban, through small-group counseling sessions lasting approximately 20–30 minutes and involving six students. At the beginning of the intervention, most participants exhibited defensive attitudes, were reluctant to acknowledge their involvement in bullying behaviors, and experienced difficulties expressing their emotions. After the counselor explained the objectives and procedures of the *Empty Chair* technique, the counseling atmosphere gradually became more open and supportive. Students acting as victims were invited to engage in a symbolic dialogue with an empty chair representing the perpetrator, enabling them to express feelings of anger, disappointment, fear, and sadness that had previously remained unspoken. Conversely, students assuming the role of perpetrators were asked to exchange positions and imagine themselves as victims. This reflective dialogue enabled participants to recognize emotional experiences that they had never fully understood before. As one school counselor explained, *“Initially, the students tended to remain silent and refused to talk, but after they understood the purpose of the technique, they gradually became willing to express what they had been feeling. That was when the reflective process began.”* These findings indicate that the *Empty Chair* technique functions as a safe communication space, facilitating the development of emotional awareness through reflective dialogue.

The second major finding demonstrates that the most substantial changes occurred when students were encouraged to adopt the perspectives of others (*perspective-taking*). Through role exchange, students who had engaged in bullying were invited to imagine themselves as victims, resulting in emotional responses such as guilt, regret, and empathy toward those they had harmed. This process was evident across various forms of bullying identified in the school, including verbal harassment, extortion, and vandalism of peers’ belongings. One counselor stated, *“There was a student who used to force his classmates to hand over their pocket money. After participating in the Empty Chair session, he cried and admitted that he had only then realized that his actions had made his friend afraid to come to school. Without any encouragement, he apologized to the victim.”* The counselor further explained that students involved in vandalism gradually recognized that acts such as writing on desks, damaging books, or hiding classmates’ belongings constitute forms of non-verbal bullying capable of causing emotional harm. These findings suggest that the *Empty Chair* technique not only provides opportunities for emotional expression but also promotes empathy by enabling students to understand conflicts from the perspectives of others.

Overall, the findings indicate that the implementation of the *Empty Chair* technique produced moderate yet meaningful behavioral changes, particularly in students' interpersonal communication. School counselors observed that, following the counseling sessions, students became more cautious in their choice of words, reduced verbal teasing, and demonstrated greater awareness of how their speech could affect the feelings of others. Although severe bullying cases were relatively uncommon at Manbail Huda Senior High School and some students still perceived verbal teasing as harmless joking, the *Empty Chair* technique contributed positively to fostering more humanistic patterns of communication. As one counselor remarked, *"The changes were not immediate or dramatic, but the students became more aware that their words could hurt others. They started thinking before they spoke."* These findings suggest that the effectiveness of the *Empty Chair* technique extends beyond emotional conflict resolution by facilitating reflective communication, strengthening empathy, and encouraging behavioral transformation that supports the development of a safer and more inclusive learning environment.

Table 2. Synthesis of the Findings on the Implementation of the *Empty Chair* Technique

Strategic Stage	Process	Observed Change	Meaning of the Finding
Reflective Dialogue	Students engaged in symbolic dialogue with an empty chair representing another person.	Participants began expressing emotions that had previously been suppressed.	Development of emotional awareness .
Perspective-Taking	Perpetrators and victims exchanged roles through simulated dialogue.	Feelings of guilt, regret, and understanding of others' emotions emerged.	Development of empathy .
Humanistic Communication	Students adopted more open, respectful, and reflective communication patterns.	Verbal bullying decreased, and peer interactions became more positive.	Transformation of interpersonal communication.

Behavioral Transformation	Changes in Students	Contributed
	students' behavior became more careful to bullying following participation in their speech and prevention within the in the <i>Empty Chair</i> showed greater school environment. sessions. respect toward their peers.	

Table 2 illustrates that the implementation of the *Empty Chair* technique in addressing school bullying progressed through four interconnected stages that collectively formed a process of behavioral transformation. The intervention began with **reflective dialogue**, which provided students with a safe opportunity to express previously suppressed emotions and develop **emotional awareness**. This was followed by **perspective-taking**, during which participants were encouraged to view the conflict from another person's perspective through role exchange, fostering feelings of guilt, regret, and empathy toward victims. These experiences subsequently evolved into humanistic communication, characterized by more respectful, reflective, and empathetic interactions among students. Ultimately, these communicative changes culminated in behavioral transformation, reflected in reduced bullying behaviors—particularly verbal bullying—increased personal responsibility, and more positive peer relationships within the school environment. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the effectiveness of the *Empty Chair* technique lies not only in facilitating emotional conflict resolution but also in promoting humanistic communication through a sequential process of reflection, perspective-taking, empathy development, and sustainable behavioral transformation. This mechanism highlights the potential of the *Empty Chair* technique as a humanistic-communicative strategy for creating safer, more inclusive, and more supportive educational environments.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the implementation of the *Empty Chair* technique at SMA Manbail Huda Tuban began with a process of **reflective dialogue**, in which students were provided with a safe opportunity to express their experiences, thoughts, and emotions through symbolic interaction with an empty chair. This finding suggests that the effectiveness of the *Empty Chair* technique does not primarily lie in the physical use of the chair itself, but rather in its capacity to create a safe communication space that enables students to articulate their emotions without fear of judgment or social pressure. At the beginning of the intervention, most participants exhibited defensive attitudes, were reluctant to acknowledge their involvement in bullying behaviors, and experienced difficulty expressing their genuine feelings. However, after the counselor explained the objectives and procedures of the *Empty Chair* technique, the

counseling atmosphere gradually became more open and supportive. Participants began to articulate feelings of anger, disappointment, sadness, fear, and regret that had previously remained unexpressed. These findings demonstrate that reflective dialogue constitutes a fundamental stage in fostering emotional awareness, which subsequently serves as a prerequisite for behavioral change.

From the perspective of Gestalt counseling, the *Empty Chair* technique is designed to help individuals resolve unfinished business, namely unresolved emotional experiences that continue to influence present behaviors. Through symbolic dialogue with an empty chair, individuals are encouraged to revisit previously suppressed emotions and express them openly, thereby achieving greater self-awareness and emotional integration. Accordingly, the findings of this study suggest that reflective dialogue functions not merely as a communication medium but also as a process of reconstructing emotional experiences. When students communicate with symbolic representations of either the perpetrator or the victim of bullying, they reconstruct the previously fragmented relationship between cognition, emotion, and social experience. This process of emotional integration becomes the initial catalyst for behavioral transformation, as participants gradually recognize the underlying conflicts that have shaped their thoughts, emotions, and actions.

The findings further reveal that students found it considerably easier to express their emotions when they were not required to confront the actual person involved in the conflict. This phenomenon reinforces the assumption that the primary barrier to conflict resolution in schools is often not a lack of communication skills, but rather feelings of fear, shame, and anxiety that inhibit honest emotional expression. Within this context, the empty chair functions as a symbolic medium that minimizes interpersonal pressure, allowing participants to communicate more freely and authentically. Consequently, the *Empty Chair* technique transforms communication that is initially characterized by avoidance and emotional suppression into a process of reflective communication. This transformation is particularly significant because bullying should not be understood merely as aggressive behavior but also as a manifestation of dysfunctional interpersonal communication. Therefore, creating a psychologically safe communication environment constitutes a critical foundation for developing emotional awareness while simultaneously facilitating social reconciliation among students.

These findings are consistent with those reported by Hidroar and Muhid (2022), who demonstrated that the *Empty Chair* technique effectively enables victims of bullying to express suppressed negative emotions, thereby reducing psychological distress and enhancing self-awareness. Similarly, Hidayat and Anisa (2021) argued that the technique provides a secure expressive space through which individuals reconnect cognitive and emotional dimensions that

have become fragmented due to traumatic experiences. Furthermore, Sulistiana et al. (2025) found that the implementation of the *Empty Chair* technique significantly improved students' self-esteem and reflective capacity following several counseling sessions. Collectively, these studies suggest that the effectiveness of the *Empty Chair* technique is largely attributable to its ability to facilitate reflective processes that encourage individuals to recognize and reconstruct their emotional experiences in a more meaningful manner.

Despite these similarities, the present study offers a distinct conceptual contribution to the existing literature. Previous studies have predominantly emphasized the therapeutic effectiveness of the *Empty Chair* technique in enhancing self-esteem, alleviating trauma, or reducing students' anxiety. Their primary focus has generally been placed on psychological outcomes rather than on the communicative mechanisms through which these outcomes are achieved. In contrast, the present findings demonstrate that behavioral transformation originates from the development of reflective dialogue, which functions as a form of humanistic communication. Reflective dialogue, therefore, should not be viewed solely as a therapeutic exercise but rather as a communicative process that enables students to develop emotional awareness through symbolic interaction. This perspective extends the theoretical function of the *Empty Chair* technique beyond its traditional role as a Gestalt therapeutic intervention by positioning it as a communicative strategy that facilitates self-awareness through dialogical experience.

From an educational perspective, these findings have important implications for bullying intervention within school settings. Conventional responses to bullying generally rely on punitive approaches, including disciplinary sanctions, verbal reprimands, and administrative punishment. Although such measures may temporarily suppress undesirable behaviors, they frequently fail to address the underlying emotional conflicts that sustain aggressive behavior. The present findings demonstrate that meaningful behavioral change begins when students are provided with opportunities to express their emotions openly and reflect upon their experiences within a psychologically safe environment. Consequently, anti-bullying interventions should move beyond behavior control and instead prioritize the development of emotional awareness through reflective and empathetic communication processes.

Conceptually, this study proposes that reflective dialogue constitutes the foundational mechanism underlying behavioral change through the *Empty Chair* technique. The emotional awareness developed during this initial stage serves as the basis for the subsequent emergence of perspective-taking, which ultimately promotes empathy and transforms interpersonal communication among students. Accordingly, the findings suggest that the effectiveness of the *Empty Chair* technique should not be understood as an immediate therapeutic outcome but

rather as a gradual communicative process. This process begins with the establishment of a safe communication space, evolves into reflective dialogue, fosters emotional awareness, and ultimately contributes to the transformation of interpersonal relationships within the school environment. This conceptual framework enriches the Gestalt counseling literature by positioning reflective dialogue as the principal mechanism that bridges psychological intervention with the development of humanistic communication in educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the *Empty Chair* technique has a broader function than merely a therapeutic tool within Gestalt counseling, namely as a **humanistic-communicative strategy** for addressing school bullying. The synthesis of findings indicates that its effectiveness operates through a staged process, beginning with the formation of *reflective dialogue* as a safe communication space, followed by *perspective-taking* that enables students to understand the emotional experiences of others, which then fosters *empathy* and *self-awareness*, and ultimately leads to *behavioral transformation* in communication patterns. This transformation is not only reflected in the reduction of bullying behavior but also in the development of more reflective, dialogical, and humanistic interpersonal communication among students. Accordingly, this study extends the conceptualization of the *Empty Chair* technique by positioning it as an approach that integrates Gestalt counseling principles, humanistic communication, and character education in building a safer, more inclusive, and relationship-oriented learning environment.

The findings of this study have theoretical implications in strengthening the perspective that the effectiveness of the *Empty Chair* technique is not solely determined by emotional conflict resolution processes, but also by reflective communication mechanisms that foster emotional awareness, empathy, and the ability to understand others' perspectives. Practically, these findings may serve as an alternative strategy for school counselors and educators in developing more dialogical, participatory, and preventive approaches to bullying intervention, rather than relying solely on punitive measures. However, this study is limited to a single research site with a relatively small number of participants, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve participants from diverse educational levels and school contexts, apply mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to examine the sustainability of behavioral change, and explore the integration of the *Empty Chair* technique with social-emotional learning programs, character education, and language learning approaches oriented toward enhancing empathic communication.

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