



The Effectiveness of Unified Protocols for Transdiagnostic Treatment on Improving Mental Health of Bilingual Female Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The present research is conducted to determine the effectiveness of Unified protocols for Transdiagnostic Treatment of Emotional Disorders in Children and Adolescents (UP-A) on empathy and perceived social support, in bilingual middle school students. The statistical population of this study was comprised of bilingual students who studied of Tehran International School in the academic year of 2021-2022. A purposive method was used to select a sample of 30 students, and then they were randomly divided into two groups, experimental and control groups, each of 15 students. A semi-experimental research method with a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up test design was used for both experimental and control groups. The experimental group received family-centered psycho-education based on emotion regulation between the pre-test and post-test. Two questionnaires, the EmQue-CA and MSPSS were employed, to measure empathy and perceived social support, respectively. A mixed variance analysis with repeated measures was the technique for data analysis. The results indicated that there were significant differences in the scores of empathy and perceived social support of the students between the two groups in post-test and follow-up test compared to the pre-test ($p < 0.05$). Considering the vulnerability of adolescents to psychological harm due to difficulties regulating emotions, UP-A programs with an emphasis on emotion regulation can be particularly suitable for the effective prevention of a wide range of psychological disorders and seems effective in enhancing student empathy and perceived social support. Therefore, implementing UP-A in schools would be a wise preventive measure against emotional problems of adolescents.

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Introduction

Adolescence is a period characterized by numerous biological, social and psychological changes, including an increase in emotionality and changes to the brain's development (Rapee et al., 2019). Lack of emotional regulation in adolescents can give rise to a variety of mental illnesses, such as anxiety, depression, drug abuse, and eating disorders (Sloan et al., 2017). Adolescents are highly sensitive to social stimuli and extremely reactive to peer influence and evaluation as a result of changes in their social/emotional network (Somerville, 2013). This can make them struggle with empathizing with others as their focus on their own thoughts and feelings can make it difficult for them to understand and recognize the emotions and perspectives of others. Also self-criticism, which is one of the risk factors in this period, has a positive relationship with rumination and weakening in interpersonal and intrapersonal networks of adolescents (Gadassi Polack et al., 2021).

Empathy, which is an important prerequisite for the development of social relationships in adolescence and one of the expected outcomes of education (Park et al., 2021), enables people to connect emotionally with each other, mainly by sharing experiences and feelings (Meyza et al., 2017; Riess, 2017; Weisz & Zaki, 2018) and the lack of this ability can cause serious problems in interpersonal relationships and social challenges for teenagers (Khosravi & Mohamadi, 2016). On the other hand During adolescence, the cognitive control network is not yet fully developed, making it challenging for most teenagers to manage their emotions and impulses (Albert et al., 2013; Casey et al., 2011). This can lead to a desire for new experiences, including risky behaviors such as drug use and reckless driving, which, along with parental concern, can lead to conflict between parents and their adolescent children as parents try to protect their children from harm (Berk, 2022). It is shown that improving the communication between adolescents and caregivers, teaching emotion regulation skills to adolescents, and providing tailored support to female adolescents in managing negative emotions can help reduce subsequent suicidal thoughts and behaviors among adolescents (Choe et al., 2023). Also according to (Lardier Jr et al., 2018), young individuals who have access to various forms of support, including family-centered values (like strong family bonds) and positive social networks, are less inclined to engage in risky behaviors, such as substance abuse, instead, they tend to prioritize academic success and involvement in social activities. Adolescents who struggle with regulating their emotions have difficulties with social functioning and may not benefit from support as much as others (Marroquín, 2011). Perceived social support refers to an individual's emotional level and satisfaction with the understanding, respect, and support received from others (Xiang et al., 2020). Adolescents' psychological performance (Chan et al., 2022) and even physical health (Barth et al., 2010; Uchino et al., 2012; Woods et al., 2021) can be enhanced by social support. According to (Xiang et al., 2020), having a presence on social networks can lead to positive social experiences, resulting in increased happiness and an overall improvement in the quality of life, including hope. When individuals perceive support from important people in their lives, they tend to be happier, more confident, and optimistic (Freeman & Rees, 2010; Karademas, 2006), and the negative effects of stress are lessened (Frey & Röthlisberger, 1996; Shaheen et al., 2019). To improve peer relationships, it is crucial to receive social support from families and implement school programs that promote group dynamics among adolescents (Shaheen et al., 2019).

Social communication relies heavily on language, which plays a critical role in developing, expanding, and altering social relationships (Tosuncuoglu & Ignatkina, 2020). Bilingual individuals often face the challenge of learning or communicating in a language that is not their mother tongue, leading to difficulties such as misreading, changes in accent, or switching to their native language when stressed, fatigued, or struggling to find the right words (Meuter, 2009). These factors combine to create a challenging educational experience for bilingual

students. The shared native language of individuals can play a crucial role in establishing close relationships and creating support networks. Case studies on bilingual students (Jankowska, 2019) suggest that neglecting the perspectives of bilingual students and their parents can be detrimental, resulting in negative impacts on not only their academic performance but also their self-assurance, self-respect, and overall psychological health, underscoring the importance of fostering more open communication with these individuals.

Effective emotion regulation is linked to enhanced social functioning, such as greater peer acceptance (Buckley & Saarni, 2009), and is crucial for teenagers to overcome the challenges of their developmental stage (Riediger & Klipker, 2014). Teaching emotion regulation skills can help prevent or alleviate symptoms of psychological disorders, as noted by (Sloan et al., 2017). Additionally, adolescents who are able to respond flexibly to changing emotional situations through emotion regulation tend to have better mental health outcomes (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010; Sandhu & Kapoor, 2013). UP-A¹ (Ehrenreich-May et al., 2017) is based on a theoretical model called Meta diagnosis and is designed for adolescents. The UP-A is an effective approach for individuals with depressive and/or anxiety disorders (Ito et al., 2023), and has the potential to improve mental health outcomes and quality of life, especially for anxiety and depression (Carlucci et al., 2021; Osma et al., 2022). Studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of UP-A in reducing emotional symptoms in teenagers (Sandín et al., 2020), and adolescents have provided positive feedback regarding the UP-A program, indicating their satisfaction with its ability to help them cope with various aspects of life and receive education (García-Escalera et al., 2020). Additionally, teaching emotion regulation strategies, which are part of the Unified Protocol, has been found to be effective in strengthening the perception of social support (Kitahara et al., 2020).

Adolescent mental disorders are often underdiagnosed because many adolescents do not seek help and consequently will not receive intervention (Jorm, 2012), and this can lead to negative long-term consequences (Bohman et al., 2010; Choe et al., 2023; Clayborne et al., 2019). Given the prevalence of emotion-related problems in middle school students and their potential impact on academic performance, social relationships, and mental health in adulthood, early diagnosis and preventive education on emotion regulation are crucial. Teaching adolescents to regulate their emotions by taking advantage of their flexibility and malleability in this age period can be fruitful in improving their mental health and, as a result, the health of the future adults of the society. However, structured educational measures in this field are not currently implemented in Iranian schools. The study aims to teach adolescents emotional regulation using the UP-A and to examine its effects on empathy and perceived social support. The study also proposes to implement this program in Iranian schools, as it can improve the mental health and well-being of adolescents.

Method

The study aimed to assess the efficacy of a trans-diagnostic treatment program on bilingual adolescent females attending secondary school using a semi-experimental pretest-posttest design with a control group and a 1-month follow-up. To estimate the sample size G-power software was used. The study was conducted in academic year 2021-2022 and included 30 adolescent females aged 14-15 years who were selected from secondary section of Tehran International school using purposive sampling and randomly assigned to either the experimental or control group. Inclusion criteria required participants to be bilingual and attending secondary school, while exclusion criteria included missing two or more training

¹ Unified Protocols for Transdiagnostic Treatment of Emotional Disorders in Children and Adolescents

sessions, having passed similar training, or receiving psychological services, suffering from an acute psychiatric disorder, or medical condition that prevented them from participating in regular exercise sessions. Both groups completed questionnaires at the beginning and end of the course, with a follow-up assessment conducted one month after the program's completion. The UP-A program, which is based on cognitive-behavioral education, schema therapy, and mindfulness, was delivered in 15 sessions, with weekly group meetings, assignments, and exercises related to each session. Parents of participants in the experimental group attended four 1-hour training sessions during the program's duration, while the control group did not receive any training. The program is designed by (Ehrenreich-May et al., 2017), which is an extension to the program designed by (Barlow, 2017). The intervention program emphasizes the functional relationships of trans-diagnostic elements such as thought, behavior, emotion, and physiology and consists of eight main sections for adolescents and a special section for parents. The content of training sessions for students and parents is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Tools

The research employed two questionnaires, the EmQue-CA (2017) and MSPSS (1988), to measure empathy and perceived social support, respectively. The EmQue-CA (Overgaauw et al., 2017) is a revised version of the Children and Adolescent Empathy Questionnaire initially designed by (Rieffe et al., 2010) to assess empathy in children and adolescents. The questionnaire comprises 17 items that measure cognitive empathy, emotional empathy, and social empathy on a three-point Likert scale. Scores range from 0 to 34, with higher scores indicating greater empathy. The EmQue-CA (2017) has been validated in Iran by (Khosravi Larijani et al., 2021), who used confirmatory factor analysis, exploratory factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha coefficient to examine the questions of the questionnaire, and the content, form and criterion validity of this questionnaire were evaluated as appropriate. The fit indices of the confirmatory factor analysis indicated the appropriate fit of this model and the tool explained a total of 48.81 of the variance of empathy between children and adolescents. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the present instrument was 0.72 and the findings confirmed the validity and reliability of the Persian version of the Empathy Questionnaire (Khosravi Larijani et al., 2021).

The MSPSS (1988) is a 12-item questionnaire developed by (Zimet et al., 1988) to assess perceived social support from family, friends, and important individuals in one's life. Participants indicate their level of agreement on a five-point scale ranging from one (completely disagree) to five (completely agree). The internal reliability of the MSPSS (1988) was reported by (Bruwer et al., 2008) to be 86% for the entire questionnaire and between 86% and 90% for its subscales in a sample of 788 high school students. The reliability of the scale was reported by (Salimi et al., 2009) using Cronbach's alpha coefficient for three dimensions of social support received from family, friends, and important people in life as 89%, 86%, and 82%, respectively.

Ethical Considerations

In this study, the principle of confidentiality of personal information was strictly adhered to. Participants were provided with a unique code and were not required to disclose their names when responding to the questionnaire, ensuring the confidentiality of their information. Prior to the study, participants were informed about the topic, duration, and conditions of the

research. Participation in the study did not involve any financial burden for the participants. Information about the research and its execution conditions was provided to the participants, and they were assured of their ability to withdraw from the study at any stage.

The study is approved by the Research Ethics Committees of Faculty of Psychology and Education of University of Tehran (Code: IR.UT.PSYEDU.REC.1401.057).

Table 1. Adolescents' Sessions

Section Title	Session	Objectives
Establishing and sustaining motivation	1	Familiarizing the teenager with the course concepts and structure
	2	Identifying the three primary issues affecting teenagers, assessing the severity of each, and establishing SMART goals pertaining to these issues Bolstering the teenager's drive to make a change and actively involving them in the course
Acquaintance with emotions and behaviors	3	Commencing instruction on emotion recognition skills by providing training on emotions, their function, and how they affect behavior
	4	Presenting the three components that comprise emotional experience
	5	Addressing the reinforcement and perpetuation of learned behavior
Conducting emotion-based behavioral experiments	6	Presenting the concepts of opposite action and emotion-oriented behavioral experiments, which involve performing actions that are opposite to the current emotional state and conducting experiments to explore the relationship between emotions and behavior
	7	Identifying enjoyable activities that are appropriate for adolescents to use in emotion-oriented behavioral experiments
Mindfulness of bodily sensations	8	Defining physiological or physical sensations and their correlation with intense emotions
		Identifying emotions and associated sensations through body scanning exercises
		Conducting sensory encounters to enhance awareness of bodily sensations
Developing flexible thinking skills	9	Presenting the concept of flexible thinking by introducing automatic and alternative interpretations
	10	Educating on common intellectual traps
Cultivating awareness of emotional experiences	11	Introducing the rationale for being aware of the present moment and engaging in related activities
		Introducing the rationale for non-judgmental awareness and performing activities that promote non-judgmental awareness
	12	Introducing generalized emotional experiences and practicing mindfulness and non-judgmental awareness in specific situations, identifying and addressing any avoidance behaviors that may be subtle or concealed
Encountering emotions in specific situations	13	Initiating adolescent emotional behavior training while reviewing previously acquired skills
	14	Encouraging adolescents to review their emotional reactions to situations that may lead to maladaptive behavior and practicing adaptive emotional responses in those situations
Sustaining progress and maintaining accomplishments.	15	Revision of the acquired skills that the adolescent consider as beneficial Assessing the progress by discussing changes in grades Developing a plan for continued application of learned skills after the course.

Table 2. Parents' Sessions

Section Title	Session	Objectives
Orientation	1	Introducing parents to the course's concepts and structure Having parents prioritize adolescents' main issues and identifying barriers to consistent course participation, motivating parents to make a change, and actively engaging them in the course
	2	Raising parents' consciousness of their emotional reactions to adolescent distress and challenges
Parenting	3	Familiarizing parents with four ineffective emotional parenting behaviors and an effective approach for responding to adolescent discomfort
	4	Delving deeper into each emotional parenting behavior and its corresponding effective parenting behavior

Results

Among the 30 students who entered the study according to the inclusion criteria, the data of one student was excluded from the study because the number of absences was more than two sessions, and finally the data of 29 participants were analyzed. The participants in this research were 14–15-year-old female students, the average age of the experimental group was 14.69 years ($SD=0.28$) and that of the control group was 14.72 years old ($SD=0.24$).

To perform mixed repeated measurement variance analysis, the initial conditions of the test were examined. The first assumption is that the dependent variable should be measured continuously, which is satisfied in this research as the dependent variables have an interval scale. The second assumption is that the independent variable should have at least two dependent groups, indicating that the same subjects should be assigned to different experimental conditions. In this study, the independent variable has three levels: pre-test, post-test, and follow-up, thus meeting this assumption. The third assumption is that the scores of different subjects should be independent from each other. In this research, the subjects were randomly assigned to groups, and there was no relationship between the subjects of the control and experimental groups, satisfying this assumption as well. Furthermore, the normality of distribution was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test, the homogeneity of variances was examined using the Levine test, and the homogeneity of covariances was evaluated using Box's M test. All of these assumptions were met. Additionally, the skewness and kurtosis of the data were checked to ensure that there were no significant outlier data. Based on the significance of Machli's Test of Sphericity ($p<0.05$) as indicated in Table 3, the Greenhouse-Geisser correction was employed to analyze the results.

Table 3. Mauchly's Test of Sphericity

Within Subjects Effect	Mauchly's W	Approx. Chi-Square	df	P	Epsilon		
					Greenhouse-Geisser	Huynh-Feldt	Lower-bound
Empathy	0.380	25.157	2	0.000	0.617	0.656	0.500
Social support	0.288	32.355	2	0.000	0.584	0.617	0.500

Table 4 presents difference of the averages in each group and in the three stages of the test and Table 5 provides the descriptive statistics for the study.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics

Group	Stage	Empathy		Social support		N
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Control	Pre Test	20.29	6.977	35.07	9.683	14
	Post Test	20.57	7.293	34.64	10.412	14
	Follow up	20.43	6.813	35.07	10.374	14
Experiment	Pre Test	22.60	5.180	46.20	8.736	15
	Post Test	26.13	6.312	50.47	6.833	15
	Follow up	26.47	6.368	50.53	7.472	15

Table 5. Tests of Within-Subjects Effects

Source		df	F	P	
Stage*Group	Greenhouse-Geisser	Empathy	1.235	5.674	0.017
		Social support	1.168	10.213	0.002

This means that the variables of the study show a significant difference between the test group and the control group. Therefore, the psychological training was effective in increasing empathy and perceived social support in the experimental group.

To investigate the interaction of two factors (stage and group), simple main effects were calculated for each factor. The effect of the between-subject factor (group) in each stage of the intervention (pre-test, post-test, and follow-up) was examined using an independent t-test, as the control and experimental groups were independent from each other. Levene's test for both the post-test and the follow-up test showed values greater than 0.05 for both variables, empathy and perceived social support, and the difference between the experimental and control groups was statistically significant in both the post-test and the follow-up test ($P < 0.05$), as shown in Table 6. The normality of distribution was assessed using Levene's test, and the homogeneity of variances was examined using Box's M test. The skewness and kurtosis of the data were also checked to ensure that there were no significant outlier data. The findings suggest that psychological training was effective in increasing empathy and perceived social support in the experimental group.

Table 6. Independent Samples Test

Variable		stage	Levene's Test	T-test of Means
			Sig.	P (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	Empathy	Post Test	0.984	0.037
		Follow up	0.898	0.020
	Social support	Post Test	0.054	0.000
		Follow up	0.071	0.000

To investigate the simple main effects for the within-subject factor (test stage), a within-subject variance analysis was conducted for each group. The analysis included the difference in the mean variable scores between the three stages of the test separately for each group (experiment and control). The results showed that the difference was significant in the experimental group ($p < 0.05$) and non-significant in the control group ($p > 0.05$), as indicated by the Greenhouse-Geisser indicator. The normality of distribution was assessed using Levene's test, and the homogeneity of variances was examined using Box's M test. The skewness and kurtosis of the data were also checked to ensure that there were no significant outlier data. These

findings suggest that the intervention had a significant effect on the experimental group, but not on the control group.

Table 7. Pairwise Comparisons

(i)stage	(j)stage	P	
		Empathy	Social support
1	2	0.011	0.009
	3	0.003	0.001
2	1	0.011	0.009
	3	1.000	1.000
3	1	0.003	0.001
	2	1.000	1.000

Based on the results presented in Table 7, it can be confirmed that the experimental group showed significant differences between stages 1 and 2 (pre-test and post-test) and between stages 1 and 3 (pre-test and follow-up) for both empathy and perceived social support. However, there was no significant difference between stages 2 and 3 (post-test and follow-up). This indicates that the educational intervention was effective in the post-test and that these changes persisted in the follow-up test, one month after the end of the training.

Discussion

This study was conducted with the aim of investigating the effectiveness of the unified transdiagnostic treatment program on increasing the empathy and perceived social support of bilingual adolescent students. This program includes education and training in the field of emotion regulation, which helps adolescents to be aware of their emotional experiences, learn flexible thinking and practice on behavior reconstruction. The results showed that the psychological education program significantly increased the perceived empathy and social support of adolescents in the experimental group compared to the control group, which was in line with the results of prior literature on UP-A. The research conducted by (Sandín et al., 2020) supports the current study's findings, which showed the effectiveness of UP-A by using an integrated meta-diagnostic program for Adolescents to reduce the emotional symptoms of adolescents. The results also align with the results obtained by previous studies in the treatment of mood and anxiety disorders with UP-A (Ghasemzadeh & Naghsh, 2020; Grossman & Ehrenreich-May, 2020; Hague et al., 2015; Ito et al., 2016; Talkovsky et al., 2017). In the research of (García-Escalera et al., 2020) also the ratings by Adolescents showed average satisfaction with the UP-A program.

Finding suggests that implementing psychoeducation as a program in schools can be beneficial in promoting social-emotional well-being among students. It is an evidence-based psycho-education intervention that educates people about their psychological experiences and treatments available to them, and encourages personal self-discovery and growth. Applying UP-A as a school program can provide individuals with the skills to deal with their problems and stressful situations, and therefore can prevent emotional problems in the future.

It is to mention that the study was limited by the use of self-report questionnaires, which may be subject to response bias and social desirability bias. It is therefore recommended that future studies use multiple methods of data collection. This can include the use of objective measures, such as behavioral observations, to supplement self-report measures. Additionally, the study was conducted in a specific context and with a specific population (bilingual adolescent students), which may limit the applicability of the results to other populations. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study provide valuable insights into the potential benefits of UP-A as an intervention for improving social and emotional well-being

among bilingual adolescent students. Future studies with more diverse samples are needed to further explore the effectiveness of UP-A and to identify the specific factors that may influence the outcomes of this intervention.

Conclusion

The UP-A program stands out as a particularly valuable resource for bilingual students in monolingual school environments. It addresses the multifaceted challenges they face, from language barriers to cultural integration. By equipping adolescents with emotion regulation skills, the UP-A not only reduces stress but also enhances coping strategies, thereby improving their mental health and academic performance. Furthermore, it aids in identity formation and cultural assimilation, fostering self-awareness, self-acceptance, and a sense of belonging. The program's emphasis on empathy development is especially noteworthy, as it empowers students to understand and communicate effectively across cultures, which is essential for building strong relationships and a supportive social network. Reflecting on these points, the UP-A has demonstrated effectiveness in improving perceived social support and empathy among adolescent female students. It provides essential knowledge and skills for managing mental health, leading to stronger social connections and overall well-being. Future studies could investigate the long-term effects of the UP-A program on bilingual students' academic achievements and mental health over several years.

Declarations

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, SG. & SSH. Methodology, ZN. Software, SSH; validation, SSH, SG. & ZN; writing—original draft preparation, SSH, ZN & SG; writing—review and editing, SG & ZN; project administration, SG & ZN.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in full compliance with ethical guidelines and principles. All participants provided informed consent, and their confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the relevant ethical committee, ensuring adherence to ethical standards throughout the study.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest in this study.

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