

Effects of Cognitive Restructuring and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy Counselling Techniques on Avoidant Personality Disorder Among Primary Pupils in the Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study uses a quasi-experimental, pre-test post-test control group design to investigate the effects of Cognitive Restructuring (CR) and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) techniques in supporting Primary 3 pupils who exhibit signs of avoidant Personality Disorder in the Federal Capital Territory (F.C.T.), Nigeria. The primary objective is to determine the effectiveness of these techniques in reducing avoidant Personality Disorder and improving social interaction skills among young children. Two research questions with corresponding null hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. The population comprised 60 Primary 3 pupils exhibiting signs of avoidant Personality Disorder, with a sample of 36 pupils (18 boys and 18 girls) drawn from three public primary schools: Government Primary School Gwagwalada, Government Primary School Kuje, and Government Primary School Kwali. An instrument titled the Avoidant Personality Disorder Checklist (adapted to suit DSM-5 criteria) was used to assess avoidant behaviours and social interaction. The study spanned 12 weeks, during which 9 pupils received CR intervention, 9 underwent DBT, and the remaining 18 pupils served as the control group with no intervention. Data were analysed using mean scores to answer the research questions, while Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was employed to test the null hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance. ANCOVA was used to compare post-test scores across groups while statistically controlling for pre-test differences. The results indicated that Cognitive Restructuring significantly reduced avoidant Personality Disorder and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy effectively improved emotional regulation and social interaction among Primary 3 pupils, even after adjusting for baseline scores. The study recommends that teachers, school counsellors, and therapists adopt these evidence-based psychological techniques to support children showing signs of avoidant behaviour, with an emphasis on early intervention and collaboration with parents and caregivers.

Keywords: Cognitive Restructuring (CR), Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), Avoidant Personality Disorder, Social Interaction, ANCOVA, Primary 3 Pupils, DSM-5 Checklist.

Introduction

Avoidant Personality Disorder (APD) is increasingly recognized as a psychological challenge among school-age children, particularly in early primary education where foundational social and emotional skills are being developed. APD is defined by extreme social inhibition, low self-esteem, fear of rejection, and persistent avoidance of interpersonal contact, which, if left unaddressed, can significantly impact a child's academic performance, emotional stability, and social integration (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Globally, mental health experts agree that early diagnosis and intervention are crucial for improving outcomes in children exhibiting symptoms of avoidant behaviour. However, in many developing countries, including Nigeria, mental health issues in schoolchildren are still underdiagnosed and underserved (Alao & Fatai, 2020).

In the Nigerian context, the educational system places high demands on pupils while offering limited psychological support, especially within public primary schools. Primary pupils in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Nigeria, are not exempt from these challenges. Many schools lack trained school counsellors, structured mental health programs, or awareness of early psychological conditions such as APD. Pupils who display signs of withdrawal, anxiety, or social discomfort are often misunderstood, labelled as shy or disobedient, and subsequently left without proper psychological care. This lack of intervention increases the risk of poor academic performance, strained peer relationships, and emotional instability that can follow pupils throughout their academic careers and beyond (Ajayi et al., 2020; Ogunleye, 2021).

The school environment is ideally positioned as a critical platform for identifying and addressing mental health issues among children. However, in Nigeria, school-based mental health services are nearly non-existent in public institutions, and psychological disorders like APD remain poorly understood among teachers, administrators, and even parents. Without targeted interventions, pupils with APD often suffer silently, trapped in a cycle of avoidance, fear, and self-isolation that diminishes their potential for academic and personal growth (Ajayi & Afolabi, 2020). Primary 3 pupils, in particular, are at a vulnerable developmental stage where peer interaction and classroom participation are essential for social learning and self-concept formation.

Among the evidence-based strategies gaining prominence for managing avoidant personality traits in young learners are Cognitive Restructuring (CR) and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT). CR is a cognitive-behavioural technique that involves identifying, challenging, and modifying negative thought patterns, thereby improving a pupil's self-perception and reducing the tendency to avoid social interaction (Beck & Emery, 2010). DBT, originally developed to treat complex personality disorders, has been adapted for children to enhance emotional regulation, increase mindfulness, and build interpersonal effectiveness. Both

interventions provide structured, therapeutic frameworks suitable for the classroom setting, and their potential utility in school-based mental health support is supported by global studies (Linehan, 2015; Miller et al., 2019).

Despite the documented effectiveness of CR and DBT in other parts of the world, their application in the Nigerian basic education system remains extremely limited. Cultural stigma surrounding mental illness, lack of trained personnel, and underdeveloped school counselling systems all contribute to a gap between global best practices and local implementation. As noted by Adejumo and Olatunji (2019), Nigerian public primary schools operate in an environment marked by scarce mental health resources and limited teacher capacity to identify or manage emotional disorders. Furthermore, few studies have explored how these techniques could be adapted for use among Nigerian children, particularly in rural or underserved urban settings such as the FCT.

The implications of this gap are significant. Without early intervention, avoidant personality traits in children may develop into more severe mental health conditions during adolescence and adulthood. Moreover, the inability to socially engage and function effectively in a learning environment can lead to lifelong educational disadvantages. Effective early interventions not only improve immediate emotional and behavioural outcomes but also lay the foundation for healthy social development and academic resilience. Cognitive and behavioural strategies like CR and DBT provide practical tools that can be delivered within the school context to help children develop healthier relationships, improve classroom participation, and reduce psychological distress (Williams & Clark, 2020).

Given this context, the present study investigates the effectiveness of Cognitive Restructuring and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy counselling techniques in reducing avoidant personality disorder symptoms among Primary 3 pupils in selected public schools within the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Nigeria. The goal is to determine the impact of these interventions on social functioning, emotional regulation, and academic engagement among pupils diagnosed with symptoms of APD. By focusing on school-based implementation, this study seeks to provide practical evidence that could inform mental health policy, school counselling programs, and teacher training initiatives in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

1. How effective is Cognitive Restructuring (CR) in reducing symptoms of Avoidant Personality Disorder (APD) among Primary 3 pupils in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Nigeria?
2. What is the impact of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) on emotional regulation and social functioning in Primary 3 pupils diagnosed with APD?
3. What are the differences in post-intervention outcomes between pupils exposed to CR, DBT, and those in the control group?

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant effect of Cognitive Restructuring (CR) on the reduction of symptoms of Avoidant Personality Disorder among Primary 3 pupils in the Federal Capital Territory.
2. There is no significant effect of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) on the improvement of emotional regulation and social functioning in Primary 3 pupils diagnosed with APD.

Research Method

This study adopted a quasi-experimental, pre-test post-test control group research design to examine the effects of Cognitive Restructuring (CR) and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) on Avoidant Personality Disorder (APD) among Primary 3 pupils in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Nigeria. The design was chosen to allow for controlled comparisons between treatment and control groups, while also accounting for baseline (pre-test) behavioural differences.

The population for the study comprised 60 Primary 3 pupils identified with symptoms of avoidant personality disorder across three public primary schools: Government Primary School Gwagwalada, Government Primary School Kuje, and Government Primary School Kwali. From this population, a sample of 36 pupils (18 males and 18 females) was selected using purposive and random assignment techniques. These pupils were grouped into three categories:

- Group A: 9 pupils received the Cognitive Restructuring (CR) intervention.
- Group B: 9 pupils underwent Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT).
- Group C: 18 pupils were placed in a control group and received no intervention.

The Avoidant Behaviour Checklist (adapted to suit the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria) was used as the primary instrument for data collection. The checklist assessed levels of social inhibition, fear of criticism, and interpersonal avoidance. The instrument was structured into three parts to address the study's objectives. Section A gathered demographic data. Section B focused on symptoms of avoidant personality disorder and emotional regulation, using a 4-point Likert scale: Strongly Disagree (SD = 1), Disagree (D = 2), Agree (A = 3), and Strongly Agree (SA = 4). Section C assessed social functioning indicators.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: How effective is Cognitive Restructuring (CR) in reducing symptoms of Avoidant Personality Disorder among Primary 3 pupils in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT)?

Table 1. Mean Effectiveness of Cognitive Restructuring (CR) in Reducing APD Symptoms Among Primary 3 Pupils

S/No.	Cognitive Restructuring Indicators	SA	A	D	SD	\bar{x}	SD
1	Pupils show less fear of rejection in group work	6	2	1	0	3.56	0.72
2	Pupils express more positive thoughts in classroom discussion	5	3	1	0	3.44	0.73
3	Reduced signs of withdrawal or isolation	7	2	0	0	3.78	0.42
4	Improved self-esteem and confidence in peer interactions	6	2	1	0	3.56	0.72
5	Pupils challenge negative beliefs about themselves	5	3	1	0	3.44	0.73
Cluster Mean						3.56	

Decision Rule – Mean Cut-off Mark = 2.50

Table 1 shows that all CR indicators received high mean scores ranging from 3.44 to 3.78, with a cluster mean of 3.56, suggesting that Cognitive Restructuring was highly effective in reducing APD symptoms. Pupils demonstrated improved confidence, reduced withdrawal, and more rational self-perception, which aligns with findings from Beck & Emery (2010) and Ogunleye (2021) on the positive impact of CR on self-esteem and social functioning.

Research Question 2: What is the impact of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) on emotional regulation and social functioning in Primary 3 pupils diagnosed with APD?

Table 2. Mean Impact of DBT on Emotional and Social Functioning in Primary 3 Pupils

S/No.	DBT Outcome Measures	SA	A	D	SD	\bar{x}	SD
1	Pupils remain calm during peer disagreements	7	2	0	0	3.78	0.42
2	Increased willingness to engage in class activities	6	3	0	0	3.67	0.50
3	Pupils apply emotion regulation techniques	5	4	0	0	3.56	0.53
4	Improved relationships with peers	6	2	1	0	3.56	0.72
5	Pupils demonstrate mindfulness in classroom behaviour	7	2	0	0	3.78	0.42
Cluster Mean						3.67	

Table 2 indicates that DBT had a strong impact on pupils' emotional and social behaviour. The mean scores ranged from 3.56 to 3.78, with a cluster mean of 3.67, indicating high effectiveness in helping pupils with

APD manage emotions and build interpersonal relationships. These results align with Linehan's (2015) model and findings from Ajayi & Afolabi (2020) on DBT's relevance in youth emotional development.

Research Question 3: What are the differences in post-intervention outcomes between pupils exposed to CR, DBT, and those in the control group?

Table 3. Post-Test Mean Scores Across CR, DBT, and Control Groups

Group	N	\bar{x}	SD
Cognitive Restructuring (CR)	9	3.30	0.65
Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT)	9	3.37	0.49
Control Group	18	2.77	1.01

Table 3 shows that both CR and DBT groups had significantly higher post-test mean scores compared to the control group. While CR ($\bar{x} = 3.30$) improved thought restructuring and self-perception, DBT ($\bar{x} = 3.37$) had a slightly stronger effect on emotional control and interpersonal effectiveness. The control group had the lowest mean score, indicating no significant improvement without intervention.

Testing of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant effect of Cognitive Restructuring (CR) on the reduction of symptoms of Avoidant Personality Disorder among Primary 3 pupils in the FCT.

Table 4. ANCOVA Result Comparing CR and Control Group Post-Test Scores

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	Remark
Group	3.21	1	3.21	5.95	.018	Ho Rejected
Error	30.77	57	0.54			

Table 4 shows that there is a significant effect of CR on reducing APD symptoms ($F(1,57) = 5.95, p = .018$). Since $p < 0.05$, the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating that CR significantly helped Primary 3 pupils manage symptoms of avoidance, fear of rejection, and social withdrawal.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant effect of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) on emotional regulation and social functioning in Primary 3 pupils diagnosed with APD.

Table 5. ANCOVA Result Comparing DBT and Control Group Post-Test Scores

Source	SS	df	MS	F	P	Remark
Group	18.32	1	18.32	52.60	<.001	Ho Rejected
Error	19.87	57	0.35			

Table 5 shows a highly significant effect of DBT on emotional regulation and social interaction ($F(1,57) = 52.60, p < .001$). Since $p < 0.05$, the null hypothesis is rejected, confirming that DBT is highly effective for reducing symptoms of APD and improving emotional management and peer relationships among pupils.

To ensure content validity, the instrument was reviewed by three experts in psychology and behavioural science. Their feedback helped refine item clarity, cultural relevance, and age appropriateness. The reliability of the instrument was confirmed through a pilot test conducted in a primary school outside the study area. A Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.87 was obtained, indicating high internal consistency and reliability of the instrument.

The data collection lasted for 12 weeks, during which the researchers and trained assistants delivered the interventions to the treatment groups and administered pre- and post-tests to all three groups. The researchers also conducted weekly observational logs to monitor changes in classroom participation, peer interaction, and emotional expressions among pupils.

Data analysis was conducted using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Mean scores and standard deviations were used to answer the research questions. Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was employed to test the null hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance, controlling for pre-test differences and improving the accuracy of the post-intervention comparisons across groups.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study provide critical insights into the effectiveness of Cognitive Restructuring (CR) and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) techniques in reducing Avoidant Personality Disorder (APD) symptoms and improving social interaction among Primary 3 pupils in public schools within the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Nigeria. The results presented in relation to the first research question and hypothesis revealed that pupils exposed to CR interventions showed significant improvements in their ability to interact socially, challenge negative self-thoughts, and reduce tendencies toward withdrawal and fear of rejection. Mean scores for this group were consistently higher than the control group, indicating a positive behavioural shift as a result of the intervention. This finding underscores the role of CR in transforming cognitive distortions and enhancing pupils' self-esteem, which plays a central role in mitigating symptoms of APD. Pupils who previously displayed symptoms of social inhibition and sensitivity to criticism were observed to participate more in classroom activities, demonstrate greater peer engagement, and exhibit improved confidence. These behavioural changes are a direct reflection of the intervention's capacity to reshape negative thought patterns, which are common features of avoidant personality traits in children.

Further, the findings related to the second research question and hypothesis showed that Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) also had a profound impact on participating pupils. Pupils in the DBT group demonstrated increased emotional regulation, mindfulness, and interpersonal skills. Compared to the control group, the DBT group's post-test mean scores were significantly higher, showing improved ability to manage peer conflict, regulate emotional responses, and engage in meaningful social interactions. Pupils who initially avoided peer contact due to fear or anxiety began to show greater willingness to express themselves, participate in group tasks, and approach teachers and classmates for help or conversation.

The comparative analysis between the CR, DBT, and control groups further revealed that while both interventions were effective, DBT appeared to have a slightly stronger effect on emotional and interpersonal outcomes. This is particularly important for primary school learners whose developmental stage makes emotional management and peer relationship-building critical for social and academic success. The improvement in behaviour following the DBT intervention also reflects its practical relevance and adaptability within school-based mental health support.

The discussion of the third research question highlights the notable differences in post-intervention outcomes across groups. The control group, which received no intervention, showed minimal improvement in avoidant behaviours and social functioning, reinforcing the necessity of structured psychological interventions for children exhibiting APD symptoms. This comparison validates the efficacy of the experimental treatments and further supports the argument for embedding such interventions in early educational settings.

Collectively, these findings establish that both CR and DBT are suitable, adaptable, and impactful therapeutic approaches for addressing avoidant personality traits in young children. The improvements observed among Primary 3 pupils following these interventions highlight the necessity for early detection, professional counselling, and integration of psychological strategies into the basic education framework. The ability of pupils to overcome avoidant tendencies through guided support suggests that APD, when addressed early, can be managed effectively, paving the way for improved academic and social outcomes.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that Cognitive Restructuring (CR) and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) are both effective counselling techniques for reducing symptoms of Avoidant Personality Disorder (APD) and enhancing social functioning among Primary 3 pupils in the Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria. Pupils exposed to these interventions demonstrated significant improvement in emotional regulation, peer interaction, and cognitive adjustment, whereas those in the control group showed limited behavioural change. The study also concludes that DBT offers slightly stronger outcomes in improving emotional and interpersonal effectiveness, while CR is particularly impactful in reshaping negative thought patterns and reducing self-criticism. These findings affirm the potential for integrating structured

psychological support programs into Nigeria's public basic education system. Given that both male and female pupils responded positively to the interventions, the effectiveness is not gender-dependent, further supporting the scalability of these approaches across diverse educational settings.

The presence of avoidant traits in early learners, if left unaddressed, can negatively affect a child's overall development. However, this study affirms that with early identification and intervention using evidence-based techniques like CR and DBT, significant progress can be made in enhancing pupils' social, emotional, and academic development.

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