

Identifying and Ranking Core Elements of Counseling-Based Interventions that Enhance Student Self-Belief and Motivation

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to identify and rank the core elements of counseling-based interventions that effectively enhance student self-belief and academic motivation. This study employed a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design. In the qualitative phase, an extensive literature review was conducted until theoretical saturation was reached, and findings were analyzed using NVivo 14 to identify core components of counseling-based interventions. Seven main themes were extracted and used to construct the quantitative instrument. In the quantitative phase, a structured survey was administered to 260 university students in Morocco, who rated each identified element on a five-point Likert scale. Descriptive statistics and ranking analyses were conducted using SPSS-26 to determine the relative importance of each intervention component. Statistical analysis revealed significant differences in the perceived importance of counseling components, with cognitive empowerment strategies receiving the highest mean ranking ($M = 4.70$), followed by emotional regulation and support ($M = 4.60$), behavioral activation ($M = 4.50$), and supportive counseling relationship ($M = 4.30$). Social and environmental influences demonstrated moderate importance ($M = 4.10$), while identity and self-concept development ($M = 3.90$) and intervention structure and delivery quality ($M = 3.80$) ranked lower but remained positively evaluated. The ascending ranking pattern indicated that internal psychological processes were prioritized above structural or contextual supports. The study concludes that cognitive and emotional components form the strongest foundation for effective counseling-based interventions aimed at enhancing student motivation and self-belief, while relational, social, identity-related, and structural elements play complementary but essential supporting roles. The results provide a practical, evidence-based hierarchy to guide the development and refinement of counseling programs in educational settings.

Keywords: Counseling-based interventions; student motivation; self-belief; academic engagement; cognitive empowerment; emotional regulation; mixed-methods research.

1. Introduction

Counseling-based interventions have become a cornerstone of contemporary educational practice as schools and universities work to foster students' psychological well-being, academic resilience, and motivational growth. In an increasingly complex academic landscape, students face challenges that extend beyond content mastery, including emotional distress, identity conflicts, career uncertainty, learning barriers, and social pressures. Research across global educational contexts demonstrates that structured counseling interventions—whether group-based, individual, preventive, or developmental—play a pivotal role in shaping students' self-belief, motivation, and adaptive functioning (Zeng & Ka, 2025). As educational systems shift toward learner-centered paradigms, the emphasis increasingly falls on empowering students psychologically so that they can confidently participate in academic tasks and manage the personal obstacles that arise during their developmental journey. This has heightened the importance of identifying the specific elements within counseling interventions that most significantly influence student motivation and self-belief.

The landscape of group counseling is especially prominent in recent scholarship. Group-based formats offer opportunities for shared experiences, peer modeling, socio-emotional learning, and collective problem-solving. Research has shown that group counseling programs designed to help students discover passions and cultivate enthusiasm—such as counseling modules that ignite academic engagement—can fundamentally reshape student motivation in classrooms (Anindita et al., 2025). Similarly, the use of self-talk techniques in group settings has demonstrated strong effects in reducing procrastination behaviors among adolescents, especially those who have experienced traumatic disruptions such as post-disaster environments (Annisa et al., 2024). These findings contribute to a growing body of evidence suggesting that group counseling modalities may be uniquely well-suited to fostering motivation through structured reflection, cognitive reframing, and supportive peer interactions.

Educational guidance and counseling also contribute to the broader developmental process by supporting emotional stability and resilience. Holistic reviews on group counseling highlight how interventions in high school settings can strengthen both personal growth and academic functioning, providing students with a framework to develop emotional awareness, goal setting, and improved academic

habits (Asadi & Mede, 2024). At the same time, the growing need to prevent and address school-based bullying has further intensified interest in counseling as a preventive tool. Programs designed to detect and respond to bullying behaviors demonstrate how counseling interventions can both reduce victimization and create safer educational environments (Bahauddin et al., 2025). These intervention models are grounded in psychological principles that cultivate empathy, emotional regulation, and social responsibility, which in turn reinforce academic motivation by enhancing students' sense of belonging and safety.

Career development remains another important dimension of student motivation, particularly as students navigate transitions into adulthood. Studies exploring the influence of career counseling on academic motivation and career awareness reveal that early exposure to career planning can improve students' clarity of future goals and strengthen their commitment to academic engagement (Enwere & Chijioke, 2025). This relationship between meaningful career guidance and academic drive is further supported by research on self-regulation, motivational beliefs, and career decision-making processes, all of which point to counseling services as essential mechanisms for helping students align academic behaviors with long-term aspirations (Zeng & Ka, 2025). Motivation is significantly strengthened when students feel they have direction and purpose.

Academic motivation is deeply intertwined with emotional well-being and self-regulation. For example, self-regulated learning strategies have been shown to reduce procrastination, improve academic outcomes, and help students overcome psychological barriers that inhibit optimal functioning (Fatmala, 2025). The transition into adulthood—including readiness for marriage, family life, and broader social roles—also influences the emotional complexity of the student experience. Counseling programs that address self-preparation for marriage and family life have demonstrated improvements in decision-making, self-awareness, and readiness for relational responsibilities (Hamzah, 2025). These interventions help students manage emotional complexity and cultivate internal stability, both of which are fundamental to maintaining strong academic motivation.

Counseling interventions rooted in psychological development also appear essential for building student resilience. Meta-analytic evidence shows that school-based group counseling significantly improves mental health outcomes and academic functioning among adolescents in

various cultural settings, suggesting that counseling interventions are effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression, academic stress, and relational conflicts (Lin et al., 2025). This is particularly important, as emotional challenges frequently compromise motivation and self-belief, resulting in diminished engagement and academic withdrawal. In parallel, counseling programs for students with learning difficulties demonstrate that self-regulation strategies substantially improve performance and emotional stability, further emphasizing the value of targeted counseling approaches in supporting motivation (Kim et al., 2025).

Perceptions of counseling services, however, can influence their effectiveness. Research on student misconceptions regarding school counseling highlights ongoing challenges such as uncertainty about counselor roles, stigma surrounding counseling participation, and limited understanding of the benefits of guidance services (Mahaly et al., 2025). These misconceptions can hinder student engagement with counseling, and consequently limit opportunities for motivational growth. Similarly, virtual counseling services have gained prominence, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies of virtual counseling for cyberbullying victims show that online platforms can provide a crucial lifeline by supporting emotional resilience and academic functioning during times of crisis (Mahmood & Kaló, 2024). These findings underscore the importance of making counseling services accessible and flexible, especially for students facing emotional adversity.

Self-esteem and self-concept represent core psychological constructs that shape motivation. Group counseling interventions aimed at enhancing self-esteem, particularly among students who experience body shaming, have been shown to produce significant improvements in self-perception and academic engagement (Nashwa & Zuhara, 2025). Similarly, sociodrama-based education has demonstrated effectiveness in strengthening self-concepts and social competence in secondary school students, providing experiential learning environments that promote internal confidence and emotional expression (Veryanto et al., 2025). These interventions contribute directly to the development of motivational patterns that sustain long-term academic effort.

Technology-based counseling models have also contributed to the evolution of motivational interventions. For instance, the integration of gamified mobile systems and virtual reality therapy in counseling has been shown to

enhance accessibility, engagement, and student motivation by offering interactive and immersive support environments (Prasetyaningrum et al., 2025). As many students struggle with the influence of social media, guidance services addressing media use behaviors have become increasingly relevant. Studies examining preventive efforts in counseling services related to social media use demonstrate that early detection and intervention can reduce risk behaviors and improve emotional adjustment, thereby reinforcing academic motivation (Pratiwi & Rahmawati, 2025).

Academic achievement is not only a cognitive process but also a product of emotional and social experiences. Counseling interventions tailored toward students with learning difficulties demonstrate measurable improvements in academic performance and functioning, indicating that counseling plays a role in academic self-efficacy building and emotional resilience development (Qodaria & Harsiwi, 2024). Systematic reviews of counseling for children with learning disabilities further reinforce this view, showing that structured counseling programs can significantly improve attention, motivation, self-regulation, and adaptive behaviors (Rathore, 2024). These outcomes reflect the central role of counseling in helping students overcome barriers that might otherwise impede academic success.

Family environment and social support systems influence educational engagement. Research analyzing the effects of broken families on student academic engagement reveals that students from unstable family backgrounds often require additional counseling support to maintain motivation and emotional well-being (Revielyn et al., 2025). Cognitive-behavioral approaches for addressing perfectionism among university students have also shown promise in supporting mental health and academic adjustment, suggesting that counseling interventions reduce maladaptive thought patterns that undermine motivation (Robinson et al., 2024). In parallel, literature evaluating school counseling programs demonstrates significant positive impacts on student well-being, suggesting that counseling is essential to sustaining healthy academic environments (Simbolon & Purba, 2022).

Self-esteem and achievement are frequently linked through psychological and sociocultural pathways. From an Islamic counseling perspective, research shows that self-esteem significantly influences academic achievement, highlighting the importance of culturally contextualized counseling approaches that integrate students' belief systems and values (Suhertina, 2024). Strategic counseling interventions have also shown effectiveness in helping students overcome learning barriers, particularly when

implemented through structured school-based frameworks that promote consistency and follow-up (Susilowati & Suryadi, 2025). Complementing these findings, survey-based studies show that value counseling is increasingly needed among higher education students, particularly regarding ethical development and moral reasoning, both of which contribute to academic purpose and motivation (Swargiary, 2023).

Peer counseling has been found to be especially influential in shaping motivation. Peer-counseling models addressing substance abuse and addiction show that peer support enhances accountability, emotional connection, and openness to counseling processes (katas et al., 2023). Interventions involving peer modeling also increase self-efficacy in children and adolescents by promoting confidence through shared learning experiences (Yuniarti et al., 2023). Similarly, rational emotive behavioral counseling has demonstrated significant effectiveness in strengthening self-regulated learning among vocational students, helping them manage emotions and engage more proactively with academic tasks (Yuningdartie, 2023). In addition, peer counseling frameworks aimed at reducing juvenile delinquency show that shared understanding and positive peer dynamics can play a powerful role in fostering behavior change and academic motivation (Yunita & Uda, 2025).

Counseling interventions using existential-humanistic approaches have shown strong benefits for bullying survivors, helping them reinterpret meaning, recover agency, and reestablish self-confidence (Wahyudi et al., 2025). Similarly, crisis intervention and mediation services in schools have been identified as essential tools for building resilient educational communities capable of responding effectively to psychological distress, academic disruptions, and interpersonal conflict (Ajuwon et al., 2024). These findings converge on the idea that counseling acts as a stabilizing force within educational systems, enabling students to cope with adversity and remain motivated despite external pressures.

Collectively, this diverse body of research underscores that counseling-based interventions can significantly enhance students' self-belief, motivation, academic functioning, and emotional resilience. Despite the variety of intervention formats—ranging from group counseling to technology-assisted guidance, cognitive-behavioral interventions, career counseling, peer support programs, and culturally informed counseling—there remains a lack of clarity about the core elements that most strongly influence motivational outcomes. To address this gap, the present

study identifies and systematically ranks the core elements of counseling-based interventions that enhance student self-belief and motivation, aiming to provide an evidence-based framework for designing more effective educational counseling programs.

The aim of this study is to identify and rank the core elements of counseling-based interventions that enhance student self-belief and motivation.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design consisting of two phases. The first phase was qualitative and aimed at identifying the core elements of counseling-based interventions that contribute to enhancing student self-belief and motivation. This phase relied exclusively on an extensive literature review, systematically conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved. No human participants were involved during this qualitative phase.

The second phase adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to rank the identified elements. The study population consisted of university students in Morocco. Using convenience sampling, a total of 260 participants were recruited. Eligibility criteria included being currently enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate program and having experience with at least one counseling-based educational or psychological support service offered by their institution. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained from all students prior to data collection.

2.2. Measures

In the qualitative phase, data were gathered through a structured, multi-stage literature review focusing on counseling-based interventions aimed at improving student motivation, academic engagement, self-efficacy, and related psychological constructs. Databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, ERIC, and Google Scholar were systematically searched. Articles were selected based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Data extraction continued until no new conceptual categories emerged, indicating theoretical saturation.

For the quantitative phase, a researcher-designed questionnaire was constructed using the final set of qualitative themes. Participants rated the importance of each

identified intervention element using a five-point Likert scale (1 = very low importance to 5 = very high importance). The survey was administered electronically through a secure online platform to ensure broad accessibility and higher response rates among Moroccan university students.

2.3. Data analysis

Qualitative data derived from the literature review were analyzed using NVivo 14, which supported systematic coding, categorization, and theme generation. Open, axial, and selective coding procedures were applied to identify recurring patterns and unify them into a coherent set of core intervention elements linked to self-belief and motivation.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions) were computed to summarize participants' responses. To rank the identified elements, mean scores were calculated and ordered from highest to lowest importance. Additional inferential analyses, such as exploratory factor analysis (EFA), were conducted where appropriate to validate the dimensional structure of the

intervention elements. Internal consistency reliability was examined using Cronbach's alpha to ensure the robustness of the measurement tool.

3. Findings and Results

The qualitative phase of the study aimed to extract core elements of counseling-based interventions that strengthen student self-belief and motivation. Using an extensive literature review as the sole data source, relevant theoretical, empirical, and applied studies were gathered and coded using NVivo 14. Through iterative cycles of open, axial, and selective coding, patterns and conceptual linkages were identified until theoretical saturation was reached. The analysis yielded seven overarching themes representing foundational components of effective counseling-based interventions for enhancing students' motivational and self-belief systems. These themes include emotional, cognitive, behavioral, relational, environmental, and developmental elements that collectively contribute to shaping robust self-confidence and sustained motivation in educational contexts.

Table 1

Main Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts

Category (Theme)	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Cognitive Empowerment Strategies	1.1 Self-Efficacy Enhancement	belief restructuring; confidence-building prompts; mastery-based feedback; task accomplishment tracking
	1.2 Cognitive Reframing Skills	reframing negative thoughts; challenging cognitive distortions; alternative perspective training; thought–emotion linkage awareness; cognitive flexibility cues
	1.3 Growth Mindset Activation	praising effort over ability; incremental learning framing; resilience messaging; failure-as-feedback framing; mindset journaling
2. Emotional Regulation and Support	2.1 Emotion Awareness Training	labeling emotions; emotional triggers identification; reflective emotional journaling
	2.2 Stress and Anxiety Management	relaxation routines; breathing techniques; grounding exercises; cognitive–emotional balancing
	2.3 Self-Compassion Development	positive inner dialogue; self-kindness scripts; acceptance practices; reducing self-criticism
3. Behavioral Activation and Academic Engagement	3.1 Goal Setting and Action Planning	SMART goals; progress monitoring; accountability structures; priority sequencing; micro-task planning
	3.2 Study Skills and Habit Formation	learning routines; distraction management; structured study schedules; reinforcement strategies
	3.3 Motivation Maintenance Techniques	reward systems; effort recognition; motivational reminders; self-monitoring dashboards
4. Supportive Counseling Relationship	4.1 Empathic Communication	active listening; emotional attunement; paraphrasing techniques; validating student feelings
	4.2 Collaborative Counseling Alliance	shared goal formulation; mutual trust-building; role clarification; co-created intervention plans
	4.3 Cultural Sensitivity and Respect	respecting identity; contextualized guidance; inclusive language use
5. Social and Environmental Influences	5.1 Peer Support Enhancement	peer mentoring; cooperative learning groups; positive role modeling

	5.2 Academic Environment Optimization	supportive classroom climate; teacher encouragement; resource accessibility; feedback culture
	5.3 Family Engagement and Support	parental encouragement; home learning routines; emotional reinforcement from family; communication pathways
	6.1 Positive Identity Formation	exploring strengths; personal value clarification; identity-affirming narratives
6. Identity and Self-Concept Development	6.2 Motivation Through Purpose Clarity	long-term vision building; career goal alignment; meaning-making activities; intrinsic motivation triggers
	6.3 Resilience and Perseverance Building	coping skills; persistence reinforcement; dealing with setbacks; adaptive beliefs
	7.1 Session Design and Structure	structured session flow; clear objectives; time management; activity sequencing
7. Intervention Structure and Delivery Quality	7.2 Intervention Accessibility and Flexibility	flexible scheduling; multimodal delivery; online–offline integration; accessibility supports
	7.3 Counselor Competency and Professionalism	ethical practice; professional knowledge; intervention consistency; ongoing training

The first major theme, Cognitive Empowerment Strategies, encompasses the cognitive mechanisms through which counseling-based interventions strengthen students' internal belief systems and motivational resources. This theme includes three subcomponents—self-efficacy enhancement, cognitive reframing skills, and growth mindset activation. Collectively, these elements help students develop a stronger sense of competence by restructuring unhelpful beliefs, reinforcing confidence through mastery-based feedback, and promoting consistent tracking of accomplishments. Cognitive reframing equips learners with tools to challenge distorted thinking patterns, reinterpret setbacks more constructively, and cultivate cognitive flexibility. Growth mindset activation further supports motivation by encouraging effort-based evaluations, normalizing failure as an instructional opportunity, and embedding resilience-promoting messages. Together, these cognitive strategies create a mental framework that empowers students to believe in their capabilities and sustain long-term motivation.

The second theme, Emotional Regulation and Support, reflects the emotional foundation necessary for motivation and self-belief to flourish. Counseling-based interventions often begin by enhancing emotional awareness, helping students identify, label, and reflect on their emotional experiences. Stress and anxiety management techniques—including breathing exercises, grounding methods, and relaxation routines—provide students with practical tools to manage physiological and psychological distress that could hinder motivation. Another subtheme, self-compassion development, encourages students to adopt kinder internal dialogue, reduce self-critical tendencies, and practice acceptance during academic challenges. These emotional regulation processes enable students to maintain emotional

stability, cope more effectively with academic pressure, and engage more confidently in learning tasks that demand persistence and self-assurance.

Behavioral Activation and Academic Engagement emerged as a central theme highlighting the action-oriented strategies that reinforce motivation. The first subtheme, goal setting and action planning, emphasizes practices such as SMART goals, progress monitoring, and the use of micro-task planning to break down complex objectives. These practices help students maintain direction and structure in their academic pursuits. Study skills and habit formation focus on establishing consistent routines, managing distractions, and reinforcing productive behaviors. Motivation maintenance strategies further sustain long-term engagement through reward systems, motivational reminders, and self-monitoring tools. Together, these behavioral practices empower students to translate motivation into tangible academic action, making them active participants in their learning process.

A strong Supportive Counseling Relationship emerged as a foundational theme underscoring the relational aspects of effective interventions. Empathic communication—including validating emotions, active listening, and emotional attunement—creates a trusting environment where students feel safe expressing vulnerabilities. The collaborative counseling alliance builds on this trust by establishing shared goals, clarifying roles, and co-designing intervention pathways. Cultural sensitivity and respect further ensure that guidance is inclusive, identity-conscious, and contextually meaningful for diverse learners. This relational ecosystem strengthens students' motivation and self-belief by making them feel understood, valued, and fully included in the counseling process, thereby increasing the impact of all subsequent intervention strategies.

The fifth theme reflects the broader social and environmental context influencing students' motivation and sense of self. Peer support enhancement highlights the importance of mentoring structures, cooperative learning, and positive peer role models who reinforce confidence and academic engagement. Academic environment optimization focuses on creating supportive classroom climates characterized by constructive feedback, teacher encouragement, and accessible resources. Family engagement emphasizes the crucial role of emotional reinforcement, parental encouragement, and effective communication channels at home. These interconnected social ecosystems operate as external motivators that strengthen students' internal belief systems, demonstrating that self-belief and motivation are shaped not only by individual factors but by relationships and environmental conditions surrounding the learner.

Identity and Self-Concept Development emerged as a critical psychological theme, capturing the deeper sense of personal meaning and direction that fuels motivation. Positive identity formation involves helping students recognize their strengths, clarify their values, and construct narratives that reinforce a confident sense of self. Motivation through purpose clarity fosters intrinsic motivation by aligning academic goals with long-term aspirations and meaningful life purposes. Resilience and perseverance building equips students with coping strategies, adaptive beliefs, and the ability to withstand setbacks without losing confidence. Through these processes, students develop a strong internal sense of purpose, which significantly

enhances their self-belief and drives sustained engagement in learning.

The seventh theme focuses on the structural and professional foundations that ensure the effectiveness of counseling-based interventions. Session design and structure emphasize the importance of organized session flow, clear objectives, and carefully sequenced activities that guide students through the intervention process. Accessibility and flexibility highlight the need for adaptable formats—including multimodal delivery and flexible scheduling—to accommodate diverse student needs and learning contexts. Finally, counselor competency and professionalism ensure that interventions are delivered ethically, consistently, and with up-to-date knowledge. High-quality structural design and professional execution amplify the overall impact of the intervention and ensure the reliability of its motivational and self-belief outcomes.

The quantitative phase aimed to prioritize and rank the core elements identified in the qualitative stage by assessing their perceived importance among students. A structured survey containing the finalized elements was administered to 260 Moroccan university students, who rated each element on a five-point Likert scale. This phase served to convert qualitative thematic insights into measurable indicators and determine the relative salience of each element. The analysis, conducted using SPSS-26, generated descriptive statistics and mean scores that enabled systematic ranking of the intervention elements. These results offer evidence-based guidance for educators and counselors seeking to design student-centered motivational counseling frameworks.

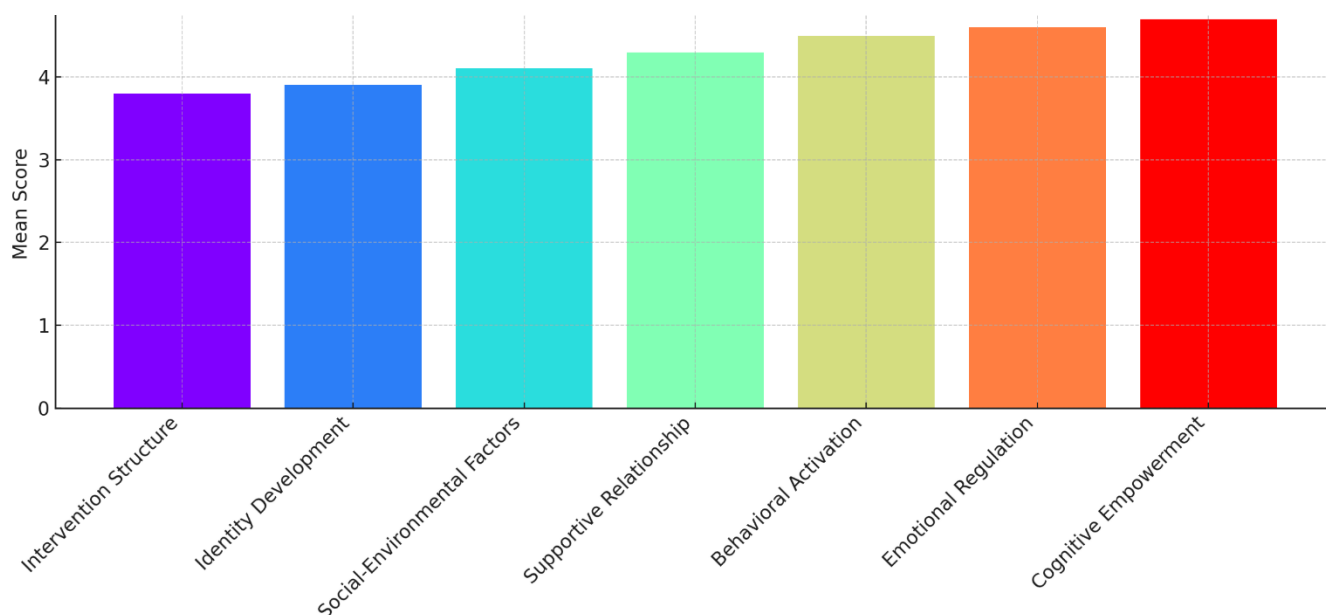
Table 2

Ranking of Core Elements of Counseling-Based Interventions

Rank	Theme / Core Element	Mean Score
1	Cognitive Empowerment Strategies	4.70
2	Emotional Regulation and Support	4.60
3	Behavioral Activation and Academic Engagement	4.50
4	Supportive Counseling Relationship	4.30
5	Social and Environmental Influences	4.10
6	Identity and Self-Concept Development	3.90
7	Intervention Structure and Delivery Quality	3.80

Figure 1

Ranking of Core Elements of Counseling-Based Interventions



The ranking results show that Cognitive Empowerment Strategies emerged as the highest-priority element, achieving the top mean score ($M = 4.70$), indicating that students place considerable value on interventions that strengthen thinking patterns, self-efficacy, and mindset development. Emotional Regulation and Support followed closely ($M = 4.60$), highlighting the essential role of emotional coping and self-compassion practices in motivating learners. Behavioral Activation and Academic Engagement ranked third ($M = 4.50$), underscoring the importance of structured habits, goal setting, and actionable study routines. Elements involving relational dynamics—captured under the Supportive Counseling Relationship—also scored strongly ($M = 4.30$), showing the importance students attribute to empathy and collaboration in counseling settings. Social and Environmental Influences were moderately prioritized ($M = 4.10$), demonstrating that peer, family, and academic climate factors remain relevant but slightly secondary. Meanwhile, Identity and Self-Concept Development ($M = 3.90$) and Intervention Structure and Delivery Quality ($M = 3.80$) received lower—but still positive—scores, indicating their supportive rather than primary role in driving motivation and self-belief enhancement.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed a clear hierarchy of counseling-based intervention components that influence students' self-belief and motivation, offering one of the most structured examinations of this topic to date. The ranking results demonstrated that Cognitive Empowerment Strategies—including cognitive reframing, growth mindset development, and self-efficacy enhancement—emerged as the highest-impact theme. This strong prioritization aligns with previous research emphasizing the central role of cognitive restructuring and thought management in improving academic functioning and emotional balance among students (Kim et al., 2025). Similar conclusions were drawn in meta-analytic work on the effectiveness of self-regulation-based interventions for students with learning difficulties, which showed that cognitive strategies significantly improve task initiation, academic persistence, and internal motivation (Lin et al., 2025). These findings reinforce that students' belief in their capabilities and their ability to analyze challenges from adaptive perspectives are foundational to building stable and enduring motivation.

The prioritization of Emotional Regulation and Support as the second-highest element further highlights the importance of emotional foundations in motivational development. Emotional stability, particularly the ability to identify, label, and manage emotions, has been consistently

linked to improved academic functioning in counseling-based interventions (Asadi & Mede, 2024). The results of the present study are consistent with evidence that group counseling programs that focus on emotional processing—such as reducing body-shaming effects or addressing trauma-induced anxiety—substantially increase self-esteem, which subsequently enhances academic motivation (Nashwa & Zuhara, 2025). Furthermore, emotional regulation skills create psychological safety and internal calm, both of which are essential for students to engage meaningfully with academic tasks. As noted in value counseling research, emotional grounding also strengthens moral reasoning and motivation toward self-improvement (Swargiary, 2023). This reinforces that emotional regulation is not only a mental health goal but also a motivational catalyst.

The third-highest theme, Behavioral Activation and Academic Engagement, reflects the importance of action-oriented mechanisms such as study routines, goal-setting structures, and motivation maintenance strategies. The significance of these behavioral components aligns with evidence from interventions targeting procrastination, where structured behavioral techniques such as self-talk, monitoring, and task segmentation helped students regain control over academic behaviors and strengthen persistence (Annisa et al., 2024). Similarly, programs promoting organized study habits, goal-directed planning, and psychotherapeutic strategies to reduce avoidance have been found to improve academic engagement and reduce dysfunctional coping, confirming the current study's ranking of behavioral activation as a central element (Fatmala, 2025). These findings collectively demonstrate that cognitive and emotional improvements must be translated into action through structured behaviors to produce sustained academic motivation.

The middle-ranking position of the Supportive Counseling Relationship reflects its role as both a mediator and a strengthening force in student motivation. The importance of empathic communication, collaborative alliance, and culturally sensitive approaches is strongly supported by previous scholarship. Counseling relationships grounded in empathy and mutual trust promote students' willingness to engage deeply with interventions, share personal challenges, and internalize feedback (Ajuwon et al., 2024). Similarly, counseling models designed to address misperceptions and clarify the counselor's role have been found to remove psychological barriers to help-seeking, improving engagement and outcomes (Mahaly et al., 2025). Research also highlights that supportive counselor-student

interactions can instill a sense of safety that facilitates cognitive and emotional change (Bahauddin et al., 2025). Thus, while the relationship itself ranked below cognitive and emotional components, it remains a critical mechanism through which all other counseling strategies can operate effectively.

The next thematic category, Social and Environmental Influences, captured elements such as peer support, family engagement, and supportive academic climates. Although ranked slightly lower than internal psychological processes, the theme remains highly influential. Its relative positioning corresponds with evidence showing that students from disrupted home environments or negative peer contexts—such as those from broken families—experience diminished academic engagement unless supported by targeted counseling interventions (Revielyn et al., 2025). Peer counseling programs designed to mitigate substance abuse, delinquency, and maladaptive social behaviors also demonstrate the value of peer-driven motivation and positive modeling (katas et al., 2023; Yunita & Uda, 2025). Social modeling studies similarly show that peer and community reinforcement can elevate self-efficacy and shape motivational direction (Yuniarti et al., 2023). These collective findings reinforce the present study's results that social and environmental factors play a supporting, yet vital, role in enhancing student motivation.

Identity and Self-Concept Development ranked lower relative to cognitive and emotional themes, which is an intriguing result given the theoretical importance of identity in adolescent development. Nevertheless, existing research partially explains this ranking. Programs designed to improve self-esteem—such as sociodrama-based education or CBT-based self-concept enhancement—have consistently produced improvements in confidence and motivation, but often as secondary outcomes rather than immediate drivers of academic behavior (Veryanto et al., 2025). Similarly, rational-emotive behavioral counseling interventions, which strengthen self-regulated learning through identity- and belief-focused strategies, tend to produce motivational changes over longer intervention periods rather than immediate effects (Yuningdartie, 2023). Therefore, while identity development is crucial for long-term psychological development, cognitive and emotional components may exert more immediate influence on daily academic motivation, explaining its relative ranking.

Finally, Intervention Structure and Delivery Quality received the lowest ranking of the seven themes, despite being essential for practical implementation. This does not

imply that structure is unimportant; rather, it suggests that structural elements serve as facilitators rather than direct motivators. Previous work on virtual counseling programs for cyberbullying victims demonstrates that while accessibility and flexibility enhance engagement, it is the emotional and cognitive content that drives motivational transformation (Mahmood & Kaló, 2024). Gamified and technology-based counseling tools have also been shown to increase participation and engagement, but the motivational impact arises primarily when these tools deliver meaningful cognitive, emotional, and behavioral intervention components (Prasetyaningrum et al., 2025). Similarly, studies evaluating school counseling systems emphasize that structure improves consistency and reach but is not independently predictive of motivational change (Simbolon & Purba, 2022). The current ranking therefore aligns with literature indicating that structure shapes delivery quality, whereas core psychological components drive motivation.

Taken together, the current findings provide a comprehensive and empirically supported ranking of the elements that most effectively enhance student self-belief and motivation. Consistent across the literature is the idea that psychological transformation—particularly cognitive and emotional—emerges as the most powerful predictor of academic motivation. At the same time, counseling relationships, social influences, and technological structures serve as crucial supports that enable psychological change to take place. These results contribute significantly to existing scholarship by offering a clear hierarchy of intervention components that can guide the design of evidence-based counseling programs across diverse educational settings.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the quantitative phase relied on self-report surveys, which may be influenced by response bias, social desirability, or individual differences in self-perception. Second, the sample was limited to university students from Morocco, which may affect the generalizability of findings to secondary school populations or students from different cultural, socioeconomic, or educational backgrounds. Third, the qualitative phase relied exclusively on literature review rather than interviews or focus groups, which may have limited the depth of emergent insights. Finally, the ranking method relies on perceived importance rather than objective behavioral outcomes, meaning that high-ranked components may not always produce the strongest measurable academic changes in practice.

Future research should expand sampling across diverse cultural and educational contexts to enhance the generalizability of findings. Longitudinal studies that examine how counseling components influence motivation over time would provide stronger causal evidence. Mixed-methods research incorporating student interviews or counselor perspectives could deepen understanding of individual experiences with specific intervention components. Experimental designs comparing different combinations of counseling strategies would also help determine which elements are most effective in real-world settings. Additionally, future studies should explore digital and hybrid counseling models to determine how technology-mediated interventions influence student motivation compared to traditional face-to-face approaches.

The ranking of counseling elements provides educators, school counselors, and policymakers with a structured framework for designing effective counseling programs. Practitioners should prioritize cognitive and emotional components as core intervention pillars, while using behavioral strategies to translate psychological gains into academic action. Schools should invest in strengthening counselor–student relationships and enhancing social support systems to reinforce motivation. Finally, ensuring flexible, accessible, and culturally responsive delivery structures can enhance the implementation success of counseling interventions.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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