



Effectiveness of Group Cinematherapy for Nonclinical Adolescents: Strengths-Based Recommendations for Future Research

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ABSTRACT

Cinematherapy involves the intentional watching and discussion of films for their therapeutic value. Thus, it is a technique commonly used in counseling, coaching or psychotherapy settings. While its effectiveness with clinical populations across all ages has been well-documented, its effectiveness with nonclinical samples is less understood. To this end, a systematic literature review was completed to assess the state of the literature regarding cinematherapy applications with non-clinical populations. The initial review was completed in 2023 as part of an educational effort about cinematherapy. The database created for this project was searched more recently for nonclinical studies with adolescents, working from the rationale that cinematherapy effectively encourages identification with film protagonists, and this identification, in turn, encourages the integration of character strengths into the viewer's identity. Because adolescents (12-18 years old) generally grapple with identity issues, it was hypothesized that cinematherapy based on positive psychology would be effective for this population. An initial study sample size of $n=28$ group interventions was culled down to $n=8$ studies which focused on nonclinical adolescents, mostly from Indonesian junior high schools. Interventions were mostly based on classical guidance, targeting psychosocial issues like prosocial behavior ($n=4/8$ studies). However, academic and social anxiety ($n=2/8$), and problem-solving ($n=1/8$) and self-confidence issues ($n=1/8$) were also common targets. No studies relied on positive psychology as a guiding framework, limiting understanding of how a non-pathologizing, strengths-focused approach would significantly improve treatment targets established for these studies compared to as-is condition. However, results suggest that cinematherapy is effective for nonclinical adolescents, though more standardized treatment methods and documentation are needed to understand the full effect of the intervention.

Keywords: Cinematherapy, Positive Psychology, Problem-Solving, Self-Confidence, Psychosocial Interventions, Nonclinical Adolescents

INTRODUCTION

Cinematherapy is a counseling, coaching or psychotherapeutic technique where films are watched and analyzed for themes of therapeutic value. Evolved from bibliotherapy, which purports to do the same, albeit with books, cinematherapy also derived some of its symbolic and thematic richness from early 20th century surrealistic films. Likewise, the 1950s saw a resurging interest in the psychological value of cinema, with what became known as "screen psychiatry" (Dworkin, 1954). Certainly, this trend is most evident in the thrilling psychological conundrums explored by Alfred Hitchcock in *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. However, it was not until the early 1990s that the term "cinematherapy" officially arose, with the release *Reel Power: Spiritual Growth Through Film* by Marsha Sinetar. Likewise, psychologist Birgit Wolz expanded on Sinetar's work in *E-Motion Picture Magic* (2004), where Wolz discussed the therapeutic value of films across a range of themes like resilience and grief. Research in the field seems to have "taken off" in the early 2000s, with numerous studies assessing the effectiveness of cinematherapy for anxiety and depression in children and adults alike, with modest success overall.¹ Because cinematherapy is more so a technique, rather than a therapeutic framework, films can be selected and analyzed guided by theories such as Erikson's family cycle, implemented by Sim, Park, Kim, &

¹ Discussed in the book, *Cineterapia: Película Como Metáfora* (Ediciones Pluma Verde, 2023), by RL.



Kim (2013) in *group reminiscence cinematherapy*, an intervention developed by the authors to manage depression in older Korean adults living in nursing homes. Group Reminiscence Cinematherapy was later adapted by Batubara, Sari, & Eagle (2020) for an Indonesian sample of older adults with self-esteem problems with similar effects, supporting the cross-cultural impact of films as well.

Because there is a breadth of films that address personal issues and strengths with mostly heroic—or appropriately introspective—outcomes, cinematherapy is particularly well-suited for concerns addressed by positive (or strengths-based) psychology. Rather than focus on healing pathology, positive psychology aims to build on a person's natural strengths and potential abilities. Thus, improved creativity, problem-solving, resilience and altruism are some of the values championed by positive psychology. In the paper, "Character strengths in cinematherapy: Using movies to inspire change, meaning, and cinematic elevation," Niemec (2020) argued that uplifting feelings evoked by climatic cinematic moments strengthen the viewer's identification with a character, encouraging them to internalize strengths that will help them resolve conflicts in daily living. In turn, this ability to foster positive identification with a character makes positive cinematherapy ideal for work with adolescents (ages 12 to 18 years old), who, according to Erikson's Stages of Development, are mostly battling with issues related to identity vs role confusion.

Cinematherapy has already been proven effective with clinical adolescent populations. Bierman, Krieger, & Leifer (2003) found that a group of 15 adolescent girls staying in a residential treatment facility benefitted from year-long, weekly sessions of psychodynamic cinematherapy, with films that mostly addressed parental or family issues. Likewise, Carroll & Scher (2018) found that $n=10$ sessions of strengths-focused, non-directive cinematherapy were effective at improving self-esteem in a sample of 7 adolescents (aged 13-18 years old) diagnosed with autism. "On the wing" of these findings, the question arises: how effective is cinematherapy for non-clinical adolescent populations?

METHOD

An initial, non-systematic literature review was performed in July 2023 with intentionally broad criteria to more readily identify trends in cinematherapy research. This literature review was completed as part of *Cineterapia: Película Cómo Metáfora* (2023), an independent research project about cinematherapy which produced an eponymously titled book. The initial search was completed in Google Scholar with the search term: "cinematherapy," range: "any time," producing $n=1980$ results. Only peer-reviewed articles were selected for further review; dissertations, books, papers fully unavailable in English, or otherwise irrelevant results were excluded from the analysis. Based on potential relevance, $n=122$ studies were selected for further review; after applying the full exclusion criteria, the pool dwindled to $n=34$ studies, two of which qualitative and thus excluded from the analysis. Clinical and sociodemographic data was extracted from the remaining $n=32$ studies ($n=28$ group interventions), to understand how cinematherapy techniques were applied and how effective they were at improving clinical and psychosocial treatment targets.

For the purposes of the current study, the original study database was searched for studies focused on non-clinical adolescent samples. After excluding three studies due to unknown sample size and age range ($n=1$) and irrelevance of scope ($n=2$), total of $n=9/28$ studies were selected for further review. Two of these studies were found through a more recent literature review that was conducted in August 2026 to identify more recent studies or studies increasingly relevant to nonclinical adolescent populations using the search term "cinematherapy for junior high school students" on Google Scholar, which produced 821 results. The same exclusion criteria were applied, and so ultimately $n=2$ new studies were included in this study.

Once the final sample of $n=8$ studies was identified, method and results sections were reviewed for relevant sociodemographic and experimental variables, noted descriptively in Table 1 and 2.

RESULTS

Included studies ($n=8$) were all based in Indonesia and evaluated cinematherapy within a school setting. While $n=3$ studies assessed cinematherapy with a high school sample, the bulk of them assessed cinematherapy's effectiveness as a small-group or classroom-based counseling intervention with 8th graders. No studies included



mean age, gender, or other descriptive statistics in the results. Sample sizes ranged from 7 to 35 students and addressed several psychosocial targets such as social anxiety (Rimonda, Wibowo, & Jafar, 2018), academic anxiety (Rimonda, Bulantika, Latifah, Khasanah, 2020), and achievement motivation (Sutardi, 2018). A summary of key findings can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Counseling Group Cinematherapy Interventions for Students in Grades 7-12 (N=8 Studies)

Authors	Sample	Psychosocial Target	Cinematherapy Framework	Frequency and Duration	Film Theme	Outcome
Herfidawati, Wibowo, & Purwanto (2021)	N=30 high school students (n=10 across 3 groups), grades 11 and 12 (Vocational High School, Indonesia)	Non-clinical antisocial behavior	Social Modeling (vs. Role Playing vs. Combined); No control specified.	5 sessions, twice weekly for 45 minutes	Prosociality (Film titles not shared)	Effective at improving prosocial behavior, but no significant difference between groups.
Khoiri, Suroso, Farid (2023)	N=22 students (20 controls), both from 8 th grade classes, SMP Muhammadiyah 2 Surabaya City, Indonesia	Non-clinical antisocial behavior	Classical guidance vs. No-Treatment Controls (Post-Only)	3 sessions in 1 week, 90 minutes each	Prosociality (<i>It Turns Out, Changed, Final Exam</i>)	Improved understanding of prosocial behaviors after intervention.
Khusumadewi & Juliantika (2018)	N=9 high schoolers (10 th graders), Indonesia	Non-clinical low empathy	Classical guidance (Pre-Post)	5 sessions, unknown duration, possibly weekly	Prosociality (Film titles not shared)	Improved empathetic concern over characters, others in general.
Maretha, Susanti, & Sari (2020)	N=8 junior high school students (8 th grade), SMPN 1 Gondanglegi Malang Regency, Indonesia	Altruistic attitudes	Symbolic Modeling (Pre-Post)	6 sessions, 1 hour each, possibly weekly	Prosociality (<i>Rumah Without a Window, Blink and Pencil</i>)	Significant improvement in altruistic attitudes at post-test.
Rimonda, Bulantika, Latifah, Khasanah (2020)	N=7 junior high school students from SMP Metro I, Indonesia	Academic anxiety	CBT (Pre-Post)	4 weeks, 90 minutes each, once or twice a week	Problem-Solving and Self-Confidence (Film titles not shared)	Effective at helping students reframe problems, gain self-mastery.
Rimonda, Wibowo, & Jafar (2018)	N=14 high school students, SMK 2 Semarang, Indonesia	Social anxiety	CBT vs. Self-Talk vs. Combined CBT and Self-Talk (Pre-Post)	6 bi-weekly sessions, 90 minutes each	Problem-Solving (Film titles not shared)	Both were effective at reducing social anxiety, but CBT +



Authors	Sample	Psychosocial Target	Cinematherapy Framework	Frequency and Duration	Film Theme	Outcome
						Cinematherapy slightly more so at post-test and follow-up.
Jati, Pratiwi, & Abdillah (2024)	N=30 junior high students (8 th grade), SMP Negeri 1 Samarinda, Indonesia	Self-confidence	Classical guidance (Pre-Post Test)	7 meetings total, 4 of these with cinematherapy techniques	Self-confidence, optimism, objectivity, rationality (Film titles not shared)	Significant improvements in self-confidence pre-post intervention. The objective aspect was the most increased, from 60% to 75%.
Sutardi (2018)	N=70 eighth graders (n=30 experimental, 30 controls) from Nughraha Private Junior High School and Soreang Public Junior High School	Achievement motivation	Classical Guidance vs. No Intervention	Unknown, but possibly 6 sessions for each film watched	Achievement and Motivation (<i>Laskar Pelangi</i> , <i>Sang Penimpi</i> , <i>Semesta Mendukung [Mestakung]</i> , <i>Sang Pencerah</i> , <i>Negeri Lima Menara</i> , <i>Cahaya dari Timur [Beta Maluku]</i>)	Improved motivation, only in 4/10 assessed components: (1) negative reaction to failure, (2) anxiety against possibility of failure, (3) assistance or sympathy towards other people's struggles, (4) positive reactions to achievement.

Notes: 1) Christiana, Purwoko, Nuryono, Arafa, & Octarine (2022, p. 214) define “classical guidance” as “a form of assistance provided by the counseling teacher to students with the aim that students are able to understand the phenomena of the problems that occur, so as to find a deeper understanding (...).” However, excluded due to pre-adolescent sample. 2) Habsyah (2019) Excluded due to unknown sample size and age range, both which are significant mediators of social skills. 3) Kangas, Cook, & Rule (2017) Excluded due to out of scope (content analysis study). 4) Solihatun, Fitriyanti, & Lestari (2020) Excluded due to university student population. No significant differences between pre-post variables after 1 session. 5) Additional search conducted on 8-11-26 using term “cinematherapy for junior high school students” (821 results). Wu (2008) excluded due to thesis. Maya (2016) excluded due to non-experimental study. Wallace (2025) Excluded due to thesis. Aprilyaningtiyas, Indreswali, & Ramli (2025) Excluded due to out-of-scope study. Other papers excluded due to duplicate, non-studies, dissertations, or non-cinematherapy focus.

Group Cinematherapy for Prosocial Behavior

The bulk of these studies ($n=4/8$) attempted to improve “prosocial behavior.” The first of these studies, Khusumadewi & Juliantika (2018), targeted non-clinical “low empathy” behaviors through cinematherapy based on classical guidance, essentially a phenomenological counseling intervention that attempts to improve

understanding of the nature (and experience) of common psychosocial problems. The authors used a pre-posttest design to measure the effectiveness of the intervention across five sessions of unknown frequency and duration (though possibly weekly) with a group of $n=9$ tenth graders, following a pre-experimental, one-group, pre-posttest design. An unnamed empathy scale was used to collect data. Students who scored < 90.55 (low empathy) were selected for the cinematherapy intervention. While the movies used were not described, themes addressed caring for others, solidarity with friends, cooperation and helping others. No formal statistical analyses were conducted at post-test, but all students showed observable increases in scores (Range: $+17-28$), suggesting functional improvements in empathetic concerns over movie characters and fellow students in general (p. 568). The authors also considered progressive increases in curiosity and discussion as marks of pragmatically effective cinematherapy sessions.

The second of these studies, by Maretha, Susanti, & Sari (2020) aimed to improve altruistic attitudes in a group of $n=8$ eighth graders, using cinematherapy based on *symbolic modeling*, a psychotherapeutic and coaching method developed by James Lawley and Peggy Tompkins. Essentially, symbolic modeling is an extension of “clean language,” a questioning technique like paraphrasing, where the therapist uses the client’s exact words to encourage deeper reflection about their issues. In symbolic modeling, the line of questioning evolves from one metaphor to the next, leading the client to greater insight about their deep-seated issues. The authors applied the one-hour intervention weekly for six weeks, following a pre-posttest design. Altruistic attitudes were assessed through an unnamed altruistic attitudes measure. Each meeting had specific treatment goals: the first two fostered good rapport between the trainer and the students, with cinematherapy formerly starting in meeting no. 3. The first film screened was *Rumah Without a Window*, which addresses empathy and “belief in a just world” (p. 57). The students were then invited to discuss the film through discussion sheets for reflection about the film’s contents, self-reflection or reflection on experiences. The trainer then encouraged the students to apply what was learned in everyday life. Likewise, “implementation and experience management activities” were implemented by showing the film, *Blink and Pencil* which addressed the theme of social responsibility. Students responded “enthusiastically” to the cinematherapy-focused meetings, describing these meetings as “not boring” (p. 58). Movie data for the fifth session was unavailable. However, the authors noted a significant improvement in altruistic attitudes according to a Wilcoxon Sign-Rank Test ($0.012 p < .05$) at the end of the intervention.

The third of these studies was completed by Herfidawati, Wibowo, & Purwanto (2021), who defined prosocial behavior as “a voluntary action done with the aim of benefitting others” (p. 100), with a sample of 30 high schoolers divided in three groups of $n=10$ eleventh (and twelfth) graders from a vocational high school. The authors attempted to decrease non-clinical antisocial behavior through $n=5$ sessions, given twice weekly, 45 minutes each. The intervention was primarily based on social modeling, incorporating either cinematherapy or role-playing techniques (or a combination of both). The Prosocial Tendencies Measure (Carlo & Randall, 2002) was used to measure students’ prosocial behaviors based on six components: anonymous, public, altruism, emotional, compliant, and dire ($\alpha=0.805$). While both groups succeeded at improving prosocial behavior in the high school students, there was no significant difference between either group or between both groups and the combined intervention (the three produced a $Z=2.81$, $p < 0.05$ on a Kruskal-Wallis test), supporting either intervention’s efficacy within the given timeframe. However, though non-statistically significant, the combined cinematherapy and role-playing intervention produced the highest means on the Wilcoxon Test ($M=73.7$, $SD=7.81$) at post-test, followed by the role-playing-only intervention ($M=73.4$, $SD=9.41$) and lastly, the cinematherapy-only intervention ($M=71.8$, $SD=10.14$).

The fourth and last of these studies, completed by Khoiri, Suroso, & Farid (2023), also addressed non-clinical “antisocial behavior” in $n=22$ eighth graders versus $n=20$ eighth grader no-treatment controls. Antisocial behavior, in this case, referred to “selfish” or non-collaborative behaviors between students. In any case, the cinematherapy intervention, based on the classical guidance paradigm, was administered as $n=3$ sessions, 90 minutes each, over the course of one week, while controls received no treatment at all. The authors reported improved understanding of prosocial behaviors after the intervention, along with significant differences between groups according to an independent sample t-test ($t=1.795$, sig. $p=0.04$) completed at post-test. Furthermore, $n=7$ who received cinematherapy “dominated” the Very High (Prosocial) categorization vs. controls, who had none in this category. The students watched and discussed three films: *It Turns Out*, *Changed*, and *Final Exam*. Additionally, every session began with a relaxation exercise guided by the trainer.



Cinematherapy for Problem-Solving

Two studies ($n=2/8$) directly addressed improved problem-solving ability as a target outcome of cinematherapy for adolescent students. The first of the studies, by Rimonda, Wibowo, & Jafar (2018), assessed the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral group counseling services implementing cinematherapy and self-talk techniques to reduce social anxiety in $n=14$ students, through an experimental study that followed a repeated measures design. The Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (SASA; La Greca & Lopez, 1998) was used to determine the level of social anxiety pre-post intervention and at follow-up. The intervention itself consisted of $n=6$ meetings, once or twice weekly, 90 minutes each. Though the total $n=14$, groups were divided into $n=2$ experimental groups, with $n=7$ students. Group A received the CBT-based group counseling intervention using cinematherapy techniques, while Group B received the CBT-based group counseling intervention using self-talk techniques. Mixed ANOVA results showed no differences in effectiveness between combined CBT group counseling meetings with either technique ($F(1,10) = 0.701, p < 0.05$). However, group interaction effect tests showed that cinematherapy techniques were “superior” to self-talk because the former produced “more benefits” at follow-up (Rimonda, Wibowo, & Jafar, 2018, p. 149). Likewise, the magnitude of the value of social anxiety reduction was slightly larger for the cinematherapy condition.

The second study, by Rimonda, Bulantika, Latifah, Khasanah (2020), also assessed the effectiveness of a CBT-based group counseling intervention, albeit to decrease academic anxiety in a sample of $n=7$ students through an experimental pre-posttest study. Cinematherapy was conducted in $n=4$ meetings, 1-2 x week, 90 minutes each. Subjects were selected from SMPN 1 Metro, a junior high school, through purposeful sampling. An unnamed anxiety scale was used alongside The Achievement Emotions Questionnaire (AEQ; Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2006) to collect pre-post data. According to Wilcoxon Test Results, anxiety levels were significantly reduced from high (pretest, $M=97.16, SD=4.31$) to low ($M=32.14, SD=4.95$) after the cinematherapeutic intervention.

Cinematherapy for Self-Confidence

Jati, Pratiwi, & Abdillah (2024) assessed the effectiveness of a classical guidance intervention that incorporated cinematherapy techniques on self-confidence levels for $n=30$ students. Authors used a pre-posttest-follow-up design to assess changes across $n=7$ total meetings (4 applied cinematherapy). While movie titles were not included in the study, films addressed self-confidence, the importance of optimism and objectivity, as well as of being a “rational person” (p. 2387). Normality tests were positive for a normal distribution ($p > 0.05$), supporting validity of results for the sample. M pre-test=91.7 significantly increased to 113.5 at post-test ($t(29) = -8.481, p=.000$), suggesting that the intervention was effective at improving self-confidence among the junior high school sample. While aspects showed significant improvement, the importance of optimism and objectivity showed the highest increase at post-test, from 57% to 70% and from 60% to 75%, respectively, pointing to the importance of both values in self-confidence cinematherapies.

Cinematherapy for Achievement and Motivation

Improved achievement and motivation were the subjects of a cinematherapy intervention for $n=70$ junior high school students in a study by Sutardi (2018). Thirty of these eighth graders were assigned to a no-treatment control condition, while the remaining 30 were assigned to the experimental one. Students watched six films, presumably over the course of six weeks, though information about treatment frequency and duration was not included in the study. Data was collected through an unnamed measure.

Nevertheless, an ANCOVA found a significant improvement in overall achievement motivation, a “relatively stable” personality trait, at post-test, with specific improvements in (1) anxiety about failure, (2) satisfaction with outcomes, (3) disappointment over failure, and (4) guiding drive. The program also reportedly improved consistency when giving responses related to achievement motivation (p. 72). However, the author noted no significant changes within 6/10 dimensions: need to attain results, engaging in activities to obtain results, intensity of achievement-related anxiety, overcoming obstacles that come from within oneself, overcoming obstacles that come from outside oneself, and (6) intensity of the desire to achieve the “very best” results (Table 2).



Table 2. Summary Cinematherapy Post-Test Improvements in Achievement and Motivation (Sutardi, 2008)

Improvements	Unchanged
Anxiety about failure	Need to attain results
Satisfaction with outcomes	Engaging in activities to obtain results
Disappointment over failure	Intensity of achievement anxiety
Guiding drive	Overcoming obstacles from within/out oneself

The author further noted that cinematherapy's impact "only raised" the overall achievement motivation mean by 0.26 above "the ideal mean," reaching an $M=45.26$ ($SD=17.55$), the high variability of standard deviation scores attributed to cinematherapy's effectiveness in 4/10 domains (p. 74). The author contextualized the results within the affective arousal model component of McClelland's achievement-motivation theory (1963), which states that affect underlies motivation because it plays an important role in behavioral regulation through common sense, and because it goes beyond physiological needs to address fantasy or imagination, both of which are addressed through the emotional arcs of the six inspirational films.

DISCUSSION

Based on reports of cinematherapy's effectiveness for managing clinical symptoms across the human lifespan, a general literature review was conducted to assess cinematherapy's effectiveness for psychosocial issues in a non-clinical adolescent population. According to Niemec (2020) cinematherapy encourages identification with the film's characters, so it was hypothesized that it would be particularly effective for adolescents, due to the identity issues typically faced during this developmental stage. However, extant literature is focused mainly on clinical populations (see López, 2023, for full-scope review and discussion). Thus, this more generalized review was conducted primarily to assess the current state of the literature.

Issues and Future Directions

Most studies lacked basic descriptive statistics such as mean age and gender of the student groups, evoking concern over methodological rigor for cinematherapy-based studies. The lack of descriptive sociodemographic data also limited insights into how the sample may have responded to cinematherapy as a classical guidance intervention. For instance, sex-based differences in socialization can mediate how some themes, such as early marriage, are interpreted (i.e. Christiana, Purwoko, Nuryono, Arafa, & Octarine, 2022). Indeed, a study by Youth Voices Research (2020, p. 3) found that Indonesian youth "navigate complex and conflicting norms regarding gender and sexuality," underscoring the importance of acknowledging gender as a sociodemographic variable. As such, future studies would benefit from including sociodemographic data along with other descriptive statistics, for greater comprehension of the intervention's context. Despite this issue, the current review "opens the floor" to updated discussion about strengths-based approaches to cinematherapy. Somewhat surprisingly, all research studies which met inclusion criteria were conducted exclusively in Indonesia, somewhat limiting generalizability of results. While this level of research activity is certainly positive for Indonesian populations, it also provides opportunity for greater cross-cultural validity testing of cinematherapy.

It was also surprising to find that, while the treatment aims under study pertained mostly to character strengths, positive-psychological or strengths-based approaches to cinematherapy were not used. Two studies, however, acknowledged the psychotherapeutic component of the intervention by joining cinematherapy to cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy (CBT). Both interventions, by Rimonda et al. (2018, 2020) found improvements in social and academic anxiety after the meetings, supporting the validity of cinematherapy as a counseling technique for Indonesian middle school students. A common thread across study discussions was the idea of students finding the intervention more enjoyable than classical guidance without cinematherapy. Thus, it is possible that cinematherapy improved engagement with the cognitive-behavioral aspect of the intervention. It is also possible that the audiovisual nature of the media makes the topic more accessible by explaining it in "real-world" terms, easy to grasp "in real time," as the movie is discussed. Certainly, students with autism and ADHD respond positively to learning interventions based on audiovisual media, which tends to sustain attention through



multisensory outputs (i.e. sight, sound, and engaging storylines, among others) that engage more fully an “under-stimulated” brain. In any case, strengths-based approaches would have also been appropriate for these issues due to their focus on inner wisdom as a natural, accessible strength or skill: future research can compare both CBT and positive-psychological cinematherapy for effectiveness. It is also worth considering that cognitive-behavioral approaches, while the “golden standard” of psychotherapy, are most effective for clinical anxiety and depression. Non-clinical populations might not clearly see the logic or the merit of some issues discussed through this lens. In contrast, strengths-based approaches adopt a clearly non-pathologizing view of human experience, potentially fostering greater rapport and understanding.

Strengths-Based Cinematherapy as a Potential Standard for Non-Clinical Student Populations

Psychosocial functioning was a common treatment aim across the nine studies reviewed. It should be said that evidence for cinematherapy’s effectiveness with children and adolescents is well-documented in the clinical literature. During the review, otherwise relevant studies were passed along due to their out-of-scope focus, but many of these studies also supported cinematherapy’s effectiveness for nonclinical purposes in students from K-12. One of these studies, Christiana, Purwoko, Nuryono, Arafa, & Octarine (2022), found that cinematherapy was effective for improving understanding of the risks of early marriage in a group of elementary school students. Likewise, the current body of reviewed studies addressed strengths-based issues like self-confidence, problem-solving, and low “prosocial behaviors” such as altruism and cooperation. In most cases, classical guidance counseling interventions that incorporated cinematherapy techniques were effective at improving treatment aims. However, the sample size across studies was often small and treatment variables such as intervention frequency and duration were not consistently reported (i.e. Sutardi, 2018), which can limit understanding of how cinematherapy can be most effectively implemented in a school counseling setting. The study by Khoiri, Suroso, & Farid (2023) added a relaxation technique prior to the cinematherapy intervention, which could have significantly mediated anxiety levels during the meeting, but it was not considered as a moderating variable, potentially limiting validity of results. Similarly, a study by Herfidawati, Wibowo, & Purwanto (2021), while relevant, did not include a non-treatment control in their study, limiting the scope of comparison. They also found that, though still statistically effective, the cinematherapy-only condition generated the least impact compared to role-play only and combined interventions. It is possible that the “active” component of role-playing—which is essentially becoming an actor—allows for a more cohesive integration of film experience and application. It is also possible that the movies themselves influenced these outcomes, though it is unclear if different movies were selected for each group: neither film names nor intervention protocols were shared, save for one study (Maretha, Susanti, & Sari, 2020). In any case, a more standardized administration protocol can help address some of these consistency conundrums.

Example of a Strengths-Based Intervention: *Detection of Di Renjie* (2020)

While more research is needed to determine the validity of the proposed cinematherapy exercise for problem-solving, strengths-based cinematherapy approaches can more effectively address treatment aims frequently cited in nonclinical education contexts. Along with being “enjoyable, engaging, and empowering,” a movie that works with strengths-based themes also meets four criteria: 1) Portrays a character strength; 2) Depicts obstacles, conflicts, adversity or struggles faced by a character through strength; 3) Illustrates how to overcome these obstacles and “build or maintain the strength”; 4) Is generally uplifting in tone or addresses the human condition (Niemec, 2020). Based on the primary concerns identified through these nine studies, a potential “positive psychology movie,” *Detection of Di Renjie* (2020, dir. Francis Nam) is presented for the benefit of future researchers and practitioners seeking to apply an intervention.

Di Renjie (630-November 11, 700 CE) was a historical Tang dynasty magistrate iconic for his powers of deduction. His feats inspired the *gong’an* detective fiction genre that emerged during the Song dynasty and became increasingly popularized onwards the Ming era. However, he remains a highly popular figure in fiction. He inspired the television series: *Amazing Detective Di Renjie* (2004), along with three sequels, though these are likely better suited for adults due to the slow-paced, complicated nature of the plotlines. In contrast, the movie presented here, *Detection of Di Renjie* (2020), is somewhat better suited for adolescents (and young adults), due to its short duration (1h, 33 min) and relatively straight-forward plot which balances engaging fast-paced action with more reflective moments and dynamic problem-solving skills.

According to IMDB:

In Empress Wu's reign, there are several bizarre deaths in the capital city of Chang'an. The rumors of the Martyrs Shrine's "Flying Goddess Mural" murder case are getting worse. Di Renjie is ordered to investigate the case. He cracks the mystery of the mural based on the characteristics of the Flower Sermon, which leads to the murderer, Li Luoyu. Soon after, Li Luoyu commits suicide. After multiple investigations, Di finally finds out the true murderer.

The nature of the “who did it” plot creates opportunities to observe, in real time, how an acknowledged expert in detection thinks through a problem—often through sheer logic, other times through intuition—to reach accurate conclusions in unexpected ways. These are positive character strengths that adolescents struggling with achievement motivation, low self-confidence or problem-solving ability can integrate into their self-concept (or problem-solving repertoire) in a dynamic, engaging way. Prosocial behavior is also encouraged since both altruistic behaviors and family issues are addressed. Furthermore, because the movie maintains an upbeat, optimistic tone throughout its presentation, achievement and motivation issues unchanged by cinematherapy, such as “engaging in activities to obtain results” (Sutardi, 2018), can be effectively targeted with strengths-based cinematherapy with *Detection of Di Renjie* due to the balanced presentation of action and reflection, logic and hunches, as equally important problem-solving skills.

A possible question to address through this film is: “How can established theoretical systems help us solve problems more effectively?” Around the 50-minute mark, Di Renjie is bitten by a snake, and so he, along with his partner, Lady Xie (a solid role model of action and intelligence in her own right), must head towards the House of Poisons to find an antivenom for Di. Once at the House of Poisons, Di Renjie must use his deduction prowess to figure out how to open the door leading to the antivenoms. A puzzle-like system based on *Wuxing* (“The Five Principles”) keeps the gate locked. By thinking of how the element-based symbols relate to each other, he figures out the proper combination to access the antivenom. Of course, how Di Renjie approaches problem-solving can and should be the focus of the debate itself. However, his previous knowledge and application of *Wuxing*, a system of knowledge still used in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and *feng shui*, facilitated the insights that solved the puzzle. Thus, pairing the movie with a strengths-based exercise, i.e. “How can we integrate the Five Principles for everyday problem-solving?”, can be engaging and helpful.

Table 3. Strengths-Based Exercise Based on *Detection of Di Renjie* (2020)

Movie	Exercise	Themes
<i>Detection of Di Renjie</i> (2020)	(1) Show either complete movie or “The Five Principles” scene if focusing on how systems of thought like <i>Wuxing</i> can help solve problems in unusual ways. (2) Sample guiding question: “We saw how Di Renjie figured out the puzzle by realizing that the gate posts were arranged according to the Five Principles, a system of thought that explains how the elements of nature (fire, wood, water, earth, air) behave and interact in various ways. (a) How can learning about these	<u>General</u> → Problem-solving → Creative or flexible thinking → Preparing during “down” times → Importance of study for readiness to solve problems → Attention and memory issues and suggestions <u>Specific to <i>Wuxing</i> Elements</u> Wood: Growth, renewal; Spring and trees; Ambition and competitiveness; Visualizing; Anger, Kindness



	systems (theories, frameworks, etc.) help us solve problems? (b) How can learning to “flow like water” help us address a frustrating situation? (3) Present the five elements and their properties and ask the students if they identify with a particular element when trying to solve a problem. Ask what would happen if they were to act like another element, i.e. metal instead of fire, to address an issue they have a hard time managing.	Fire: Illumination, rising, warmth, transformation; Summer; Charisma, expression, passion, “having heart”; Anxiety, Joy Earth: Stabilizing, nurturing and centering; Mountains and Fall; “having the stomach for something”; Righteousness, Grief Water: Descending, flowing, yielding; Rivers and Winter; Adaptation; yin and reflection; Fear vs. Joy
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Study Limitations

The current study represents a bona-fide effort to understand the effectiveness of cinematherapy for a nonclinical adolescent population. Due to its exploratory nature, the literature review undertaken for this study, while diligently observant of search terms, inclusion/exclusion criteria and study methods, cannot be considered properly “systematic” due to the openness of the search terms “cinematherapy for nonclinical adolescents” and “cinematherapy for middle school students” instead of “cinematherapy for [a specific issue]” and search criteria used (i.e. “any time” instead of delimiting studies from the past five years). While this slightly limits methodological precision (for instance, PRISMA flow diagrams, while known to the author, were not considered for this study), the trade-off allowed for a wider range of studies to be identified, encouraging future study of research questions related to cross-cultural validity and authentic cultural differences mediating the effectiveness of cinematherapy in the school setting.

Some limitations, like lack of age and gender comparisons, stem from the studies themselves: Unfortunately, no studies reported sociodemographic data beyond grade level and school location, limiting the range of interpretation for these results. While one can theoretically deduce age ranges for each grade, the peculiarities of the Indonesian school system are unknown to the author, further limiting the direction and depth of the discussion. Future studies with Indonesian samples are encouraged to include this information, and to address cross-cultural issues as possible.

Cinematherapy is a highly adaptive therapeutic technique, so it can be successfully integrated within any given framework, from CBT to classical guidance. Given that most issues addressed have been successfully addressed through positive/strengths-based psychology (i.e. Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, essentially the founder of the positive psychology movement, broke ground with his studies of creativity and flow), it was surprising that no cinematherapy studies used a strengths-based approach for their interventions. This also limited any understanding of a strengths-based cinematherapy intervention in a nonclinical, non-Western context; however, it did identify a need for more research in the field of cinematherapy, particularly following a positive psychology model based on non-pathology and strengths-building. To this end, it would also be helpful for future studies to consistently document the movies used for cinematherapy, since only 1/9 studies (Khoiri, Suroso, & Farid, 2023) named the films. A consistent documentation of films would expand the repertoire of film recommendations available to cinematherapists across cultural contexts, while also allowing for a more systematic analysis of relevant themes addressed by the medium.



CONCLUSION

A wide-range systematic review of the literature related to cinematherapy's effectiveness for nonclinical adolescents suggests that cinematherapy is a useful adjunct to other models such as classical guidance and CBT. All studies found improved psychosocial behaviors and understandings at the end of the intervention course. Most studies addressed "prosocial behavior" as a desired intervention outcome for junior high schoolers, suggesting that a positive psychology-based cinematherapy intervention would be of benefit for adolescents with these nonclinical, but still relevant, developmental issues. Adopting a strengths-based approach to the study and development of cinematherapy interventions can clarify factors mediating cinematherapy's success with adolescent students and other populations.

Ethical Considerations

RL authored *Cineterapia: Película Como Cineterapia* (2023, Ediciones Pluma Verde). No other conflicts of interest to disclose. No financial support was received for the completion of this study.

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