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## Do drama activities based on Gospel stories affect aspired moral identity? Evaluation of the Impact of an Intervention in a Secondary School Classroom

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# Do drama activities based on Gospel stories affect aspired moral identity? Evaluation of the Impact of an Intervention in a Secondary School Classroom

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## Abstract

This study evaluated the effect of drama activities based on Gospel stories on the aspired moral identity of secondary school students. Seventy 13-year-old students at a gymnasium in Nicosia, divided into an experimental and a control group, were taught the same four Gospel stories, but only the intervention group participated in drama activities. The experimental group students wrote down their impressions in a small text. All the participants took “The Value Clarity Questionnaire” (VCQ) to measure the results before and after the study. The experimental group’s pre-test VCQ score was significantly higher than the control group’s, while both groups’ post-test scores showed significant improvement. Interestingly, the control group also benefited from teaching Gospel stories and improved in areas with lower scores than the experimental group before the study. Most students found drama activities more engaging and effective in encouraging them to reflect on their values and identify the person they want to be. The findings suggest that drama activities based on Gospel stories can positively impact students’ value clarity. This is important because value clarity is linked to a life consistent with one’s values, well-being, and improved self-esteem. This small study could be expanded and contribute to a greater understanding of how drama activities in religious education classes can assist students in forming their aspired moral identity.

**Key words:** *Gospel stories, drama activities, moral identity, Value Clarity Questionnaire*

## Introduction

One of my 13-year-old students recently realized the remorse, regret, and inner turmoil caused when values and behavior conflict. She confessed: “*Nowadays, anyone who tells the truth is a “snitch”. Although if I hide the fact that my life does not match what I believe in, this will eat me inwardly, and I will suffer. But rather than react and confess the truth, I prefer to stay closed off*”.

Following our values can significantly enhance well-being (McLoughlin, Stapleton, Pendrous, Oldham, & Hochard, 2022). Engaging in behavior consistent with our most cherished beliefs and principles, we feel a sense of harmony, purpose, and fulfillment (Sagiv, Roccas, Ciecuch, & Schwartz, 2017). We present a genuine version of ourselves to the world, boosting our self-esteem and self-respect. Living in alignment with our values enables us to be authentic and maintain our integrity. It provides a dependable framework and a stable foundation, direction, and purpose, which can contribute to increased resilience in the face of adversity. Furthermore, consistently adhering to our values can inspire and positively affect others.

The Religious Education course and teacher-student and student-student interactions can empower children to reflect, lead them to self-awareness, and discern what truly matters for a fulfilling life. Biblical stories, especially Gospel stories, provide abundant examples of virtue, values, and spiritual struggle (Achituv & Lichtenstein, 2023). They are a moral reflection guide to cultivating virtues in a phronesis manner and forming an aspired moral identity.

This paper describes an intervention in Religious Education classes that I teach that involves engaging students in drama activities based on specific scenes from Gospel stories and examines how this affects their level of value clarity and, therefore, their aspired moral identity. In the public Gymnasiums of Cyprus, the second-grade Religion Education curriculum centers on studying Gospel stories. The intervention was created in a manner that facilitates and does not impede the curriculum’s objectives.

## 1. Background

### 1.1 Value clarity

Defining values can be a challenging task. Values are the fundamental principles, beliefs, and ideals that shape our decisions and actions, guiding us as a moral compass to what is important and meaningful in life. They are deeply ingrained and developed through personal experiences, cultural upbringing, societal influences, and reflection. Values provide a framework for evaluating situations and making decisions. They are essential in defining who we are and what we stand for. They assist us in prioritizing what is most important to us and guide our interactions with others. Values are “qualities of character we aspire to embody in pursuit of our goals” (McLoughlin et al., 2022, p. 4).

Our values should not be influenced by aversive control or social approval and must remain independent of others’ opinions and desires. People who firmly grasp their values are less likely to conform to others (McLoughlin et al., 2022).

To consistently uphold and adhere to our values, it is unquestionably necessary to understand what these values are. Values clarification is a dynamic process in which individuals determine what they consider essential to their lives and shape their aspired moral identity. Clarification of values is necessary for individuals to define, comprehend, and prioritize their values and beliefs. It involves self-examination, exploration, and expressing the individuals' true values, while its primary objective is to enhance self-awareness and direct individuals to make choices that match their fundamental values.

Values clarity is a valuable tool for people seeking to live more authentically and ethically by aligning their actions with their deeply held values and beliefs. It can be facilitated through various methods, including journaling, guided exercises, group discussions, and conversations with mentors or counselors. Because value clarification can be developed, education is crucial in helping students discover and hold up to their values.

A school's vision and mission go beyond imparting knowledge and skills. They aim to shape students' character and foster a love for what is beautiful, genuine, and authentic. Education's primary objective is to create a school environment where students naturally cultivate virtues and values. Existing curriculum subjects could be used to teach character, including virtue perception and reasoning, through intentional educational efforts (Harrison, Burn, & Moller, 2020). Values make our lives meaningful. Virtue leads to actualizing human beings and fulfilling life's purpose (Arthur, 2021). Teachers discreetly support students to be open-minded and self-determined, to seek a life purpose, and to pursue peak experiences - the "ultimate meaning in life" (Kristjánsson, 2016, p. 714). They are called upon to perform a high and sacred task, to create opportunities for their students to experience "the ideals of truth, beauty and goodness" and "emotions of aesthetic ecstasy and moral and intellectual elevation" (Kristjánsson, 2016, p. 714).

## **1.2 Drama activities in Religious Education courses**

The benefits of enriching teaching with drama activities have been repeatedly demonstrated; therefore, we will not elaborate further. The connection of moral education with drama activities is successfully tested from kindergartens to high schools (Gervais, 2006; Koukounaras-Liagis, 2010). In particular, the Gospel stories are easier to understand when taught interactively through drama activities. Understanding the time's culture, society, traditions, beliefs, and religious customs helps the students comprehend the stories and become more literate about the Gospels, their language, and their settings. Unlike a catechetical system, which seeks students' faith responses, the teaching of scripture should follow an inclusive educational approach (Grajczonek, 2003).

Most students enjoy drama activities, which allow them to participate actively in learning. Through these activities, students learn effortlessly through experiential approaches (Koukounaras-Liagis, 2010a). They put themselves in the hero's shoes and develop empathy when performing a role (Constantinidou, 2022; Edmiston, 2000). The drama activities help the students experience the heroes' emotions, reflect on their motives and thoughts, and live the critical dilemmas they faced (Clement, 2021; Grajczonek, 2003). The main characters' conflicts become the students' conflicts (Rai,

2014). Drama helps students relate aspects of their own lives to those of the characters and draw lessons from the studied stories.

In addition, drama activities enrich the lesson, increase students' interest, and motivate them (Gervais, 2006). Students who otherwise find a class dull and unattractive learn naturally and effortlessly with their active involvement in drama activities. To perform in a drama activity, they must comprehend the plot, the characters, and the interactions. Furthermore, drama activities usually require teamwork and eliminate the fear of expression in front of others (Winston, 2005). Through drama activities, emotions, thoughts, and the body can be engaged in a social context that fosters moral questioning (Gervais, 2006). Everyone can be involved, including the teacher(s) and students. No one is a passive observer waiting for their turn, and everyone has an equal chance to participate in the ongoing development of the drama. Students are encouraged to articulate their thoughts, defend their positions, engage in debate, offer suggestions, and provide justifications (Grajczonek, 2003).

In the literature, there have been several suggestions to integrate drama activities, theater, or theatrical play with Religious Studies courses in Greek schools (Constantinidou, 2022; Koukounaras-Liagis, 2010a, 2010b, 2011; Ladopoulos, 2019; Mparlos, 2018). However, there are fewer examples of this integration in Cyprus (e.g., Hadjioannou & Stephanis, 2023).

According to Koukounaras-Liagis (2011), Theatre in Education programs can effectively change students' attitudes towards diversity in religious courses. The author successfully implemented these programs in Religious Education courses and found that students actively participated, critiqued, argued, compared, and made choices while developing their social skills. All students could participate, collaborate, negotiate, and take responsibility regardless of their religious affiliation. Incorporating performance and drama techniques in Religious Education courses can be an inclusive approach that respects students' cultural and religious identities while avoiding indoctrination or creating religious divisions.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Purpose and research question

This pilot study was designed to evaluate the impact of intervention with drama activities (based on Gospel stories) on aspired moral identity.

The pilot study aimed to address the following research questions:

What impact do drama activities (such as conscience alley, hot seating, or voices in the head) based on selected Gospel stories have on aspired moral identity?

How could drama activities based on Gospel stories affect how children reflect on their moral identity?

## 2.2 Participants

The study group consisted of secondary school students (second year) attending the subject of Religious Education at a public Gymnasium in Nicosia, Cyprus. The researcher and author of this study was the teacher of Religious Education in both the control and intervention groups for the school year 2022-23. The intervention group consisted of two classes of 18 and 20 students. The control group comprised two other classes of 19 and 20 (13 years old). Two students did not agree to participate in the research. Five other students were absent from school and missed some lessons and the post-test. Finally, the intervention and control groups consisted of 35 students each. Intervention Group (N = 35, 17 boys and 18 girls, 13 years old) and Control Group (N = 35, 15 boys and 20 girls, 13 years old).

## 2.3 Research tools:

(a) *The Value Clarity Questionnaire* (McLoughlin et al., 2022, p. 37), translated into Greek, was used as a pre-test and post-test (quantitative data). The VCQ gauges how soundly individuals comprehend and express their values. It does not evaluate valued actions, rank, or specify valued domains or phenomena. Instead, it measures the clarity with which respondents understand their values. Research indicates that the VCQ has excellent model fit, test-retest reliability, and criterion validity, confirming its ability to measure value clarity rather than valued action. The tool consists of seven questions answered on a five-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Every item takes a score from 1 to 5. No item needs a reverse score. The sum of the seven items' scores is the VCQ score for each participant. That is, a participant may take a VCQ score from 5-35. The VCQ's reliability and validity were examined and confirmed by McLoughlin et al. (2022), who conducted a research study with 468 students from the UK with a mean age of 13.92 (SD age =1.50).

(b) *Small text written by students.*

For the second research question, the students reflected on the drama activities they were engaged in and wrote a small text after the end of the intervention in December 2022. They evaluated the drama activities and their impact on their aspirational moral identity. The students were given three guiding questions but were mainly encouraged to express their thoughts and impressions freely by writing a brief paragraph. The guiding questions were: What were your thoughts on the lesson incorporating drama activities? Did the drama activities aid in your comprehension of the character's inner struggles and dilemmas in the Gospel stories? In what way do you believe drama-enriched lessons could potentially impact your perspective on values, and what holds significance to you?

## 2.4 Procedure and Analysis

The research was conducted for four weeks (2 x 40' lessons per week), from mid-November to the center of December 2022. The intervention was implemented in two Religious Education classrooms at a secondary school in Cyprus with 13-14-year-old students. Another two Religious Education classrooms were chosen to be the control group. Any changes in the experimental group were tested with a pre-test and a post-

test. However, the existence of the control group was deemed necessary to rule out any other factors (such as the teaching of the Gospel stories) that might have changed the aspired moral identity and to isolate the drama activities' effect.

The control and experimental groups completed "The Value Clarity Questionnaire" (VCQ) as a pre-test at the beginning of the research procedure. The experimental and control groups attended 4x40' lessons (1a, 2a, 3a, 4a) discussing four Gospel stories. Additionally, the experimental group had another 4x40' lessons engaging in drama activities (1b, 2b, 3b, 4b) focused on the Gospel stories characters' values, thoughts, motives, and actions. As a result, the experimental group spent twice as much time as the control group studying specific Gospel stories. A more analytic description of the intervention with drama activities is given below. The two groups completed the same VCQ as a post-test a month later. In addition, the experimental group wrote a small text to evaluate the drama activities and their possible impact on them. The quantitative data obtained from the participants were analyzed with SPSS 26 using descriptive statistics, the Mann-Whitney U Test, and the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test. Qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis.

## 2.5 Ethical Considerations:

- Parental and student-informed consent was sought in writing. Students were also informed verbally about the study's purpose, consent, procedure, and duration (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p. 216). Adequate information was also provided about how the research will be used and reported and its benefits. They were reassured that they had the right to decline to participate or withdraw at any time (APA, 2017).
- Drama activities are part of standard teaching procedures. Enriching teaching with drama activities is an approved and applaudable pedagogical method. The control group missed the opportunity to participate in these beneficial and pleasant drama activities during the research procedure. This disadvantage was overcome when lessons with drama activities were designed for the control group after the research.
- Some students might have felt obliged to participate in the research since the researcher was the teacher of the class. Therefore, alternative schoolwork was provided to the students who felt uncomfortable engaging in the drama activities or were unwilling to fill out the questionnaires or write a small text about the drama activities. They were assured that participating in the research was not compulsory, with no consequences for their grades.
- There were not any children with disabilities in the two selected classes. Three children had learning difficulties like dyslexia and ADHD. The lessons were differentiated, containing activities to meet the learning needs of these children as well.

## 2.6 The intervention

The following is a brief description of the implemented drama intervention. Despite challenges, the characters in the selected scenes from the Gospel stories act in a value-consistent manner. The Gospel stories studied in the Second Grade Gymnasium Religious Studies course are found in a textbook assigned by the Cyprus Ministry of Education,

Sport, and Youth. The book, written by Tsananas and Mparlos in 2006, was previously used in Greek secondary schools as directed by the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. While it has been replaced in Greece since 2016, it is still used in the Gymnasium of Cyprus.

**1<sup>st</sup> Scene:** John the Baptist preaches in the desert boldly without fear that he may displease the Pharisees or King Herod. He dares to accuse King Herod of committing adultery and taking his brother's wife (Luke 3:19-20, Tsananas & Mparlos, 2006, pp. 45-46).

Students played the "**Hot Seating**" drama activity (Koukounaras-Liagis, 2010b; Neelands & Goode, 2015). One of the students played John the Baptist's role. The other students asked him what he thought when he defended his values, risking his life. "*How did you dare accuse the King himself?*" "*Didn't you know he had the power to imprison you or take your life?*" "*King Herod made a sin; why did you have to pay for his faults? You had an extremely ascetic life with deprivations, offered yourself to God, and helped many people with your preaching; why end your life in prison?*" John Baptist (presented by a student) expressed his thoughts, fears, and dilemmas. "*I might be a fool, throwing myself in the lion's mouth; what am I expecting? King Herod will devour me!*" "*People come from all the sites of Israel to listen to the Lord's word, to find comfort, to confess their sins, and to ask for forgiveness; do I have the right to risk my life?*" "*My Lord chose me to be his prophet, to speak the truth, and to lead his people; how can I shut my eyes and pretend not to see this sin?*" "*If I silence myself to save my life, I will be rightfully accused of cowardice. Who will be left to teach people God's will?*"

**2<sup>nd</sup> Scene:** Peter, Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee leave their boat and nets, their only means of livelihood, to follow Jesus (Mark 1:18, Tsananas & Mparlos, 2006, p. 51). Relatives and neighbors might be surprised and consider their actions reckless and foolish.

The students played "**Voices in the Head**" (Koukounaras-Liagis, 2010b; Neelands & Goode, 2015). The class is divided into two groups, representing the characters' conflicting thoughts. Some of the thoughts of Peter and Andrew, John, and Jacob shout, calling them to follow Jesus; at the same time, others urge them to refuse his invitation. "*We found inner peace near Jesus.*" "*He invites us, the illiterate fishermen, to become his disciples!*" "*He is the Messiah our ancestors have been waiting for centuries.*" "*Let us follow Him, but where shall we live? How will we find food? What will become of our families?*" "*Our relatives and friends laugh at leaving them behind to follow This New, unknown Master.*" "*We will leave it all; we will abandon the boat, the nets, and our family. To live close to the Lord is worth every sacrifice.*"

**3<sup>rd</sup> Scene:** Matthew leaves his customs office (Matthew 9:9, Tsananas & Mparlos, 2006, p. 51). Students play "**Voices in the Head**" (Koukounaras-Liagis, 2010b; Neelands & Goode, 2015). He gave up a sure source of wealth to follow Jesus and, since then, has lived a life of deprivation. The voices of his conscience show him the magnitude of the difficulties he will face and the extraordinary privilege of being a disciple of Christ. "*How dare I quit my job and leave a secure income? Will I now be able to live in poverty?*" "*Neighbors and friends criticize me for distributing my money to the poor. How could they understand my remorse since I earned all this through steals and frauds?*" "*How much love*



*I found near the Lord! All the world's riches cannot be compared with the heavenly goods of the Kingdom of God.” “I gave it my all, yet now I feel prosperous.” “Finally, I can fight for what is truly important in my life.”*

**4th Scene:** Jesus preaches in his hometown, Nazareth. His listeners are astonished and react hostilely to him. They act like a mob, attacking and attempting to kill him (Luke 4:29-30, Tsananas & Mparlos, 2006, p. 55). Indeed, some would admire Jesus and believe his words. Nevertheless, they did not dare to differentiate themselves from the crowd. The students play **“Conscience Alley”** (Koukounaras-Liagis, 2010b; Neelands & Goode, 2015). The whole class is divided into two groups. They represent the different thoughts of an inhabitant of Nazareth who believed in Jesus and was afraid to take his place and defend him. *“What are they doing? They are trying to throw him over the cliff! Why? What wrong has he done?” “He is a prophet! He is the Messiah! He is the Son of God! I want to protest and stop them. I want to protect Him. But how? There are many; I am only one! I cannot act by myself! They might get mad at me! They might attack me! It is better to stay calm and silent. I will leave. I do not want to witness this crime!”*

### 3. Findings

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and nonparametric tests because the data was not normally distributed. The z-scores of skewness and kurtosis are larger than 1.96 ( $p < .005$ ) for some of the variables for both control and experimental groups, and therefore, the data was not considered normal (Roussos & Tsaousis, 2020). The nonparametric Wilcoxon test was consequently preferred over the paired sample t-test.

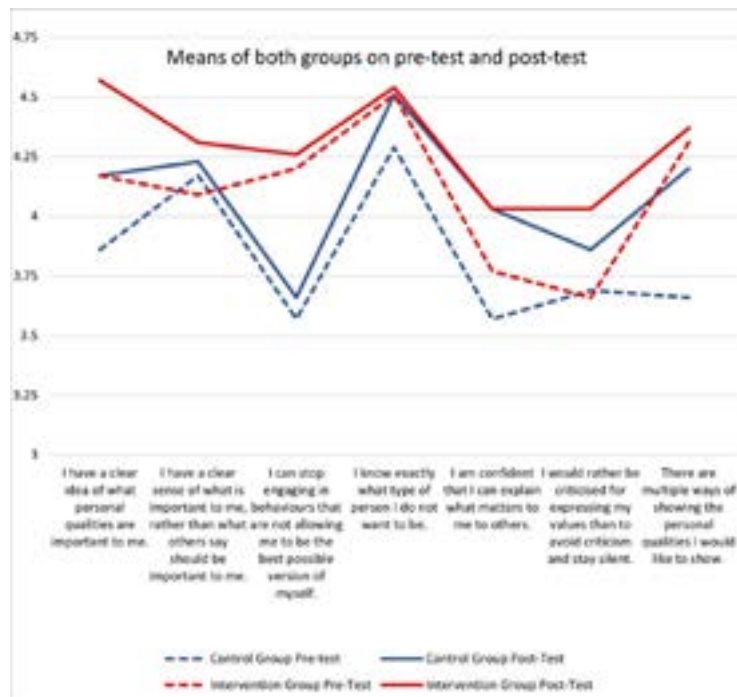


Chart 1. Means of the scores of each item on the pre- and post-tests for both groups

Chart 1 presents the means of both groups' pre-test and post-test items. The red color is used for the results of the intervention group, while the blue is for the control group. The means of post-test items are depicted with a continuous line, while the means of pre-test items are displayed with a dashed line.

### 3.1 The control and experimental groups differed significantly at the VCQ pre-test.

A primary observation (Chart 1) is that even before teaching the Gospel stories, the control group had a lower mean than the intervention group at almost every component of the VCQ. A Mann-Whitney U test confirmed this. The VCQ total pre-test scores of the control group were significantly lower ( $Mdn = 26.00$ ,  $n = 35$ ) compared to the intervention group's ( $Mdn = 30.00$ ,  $n = 35$ ),  $U = 415.00$ ,  $z = -2.33$ ,  $p < .05$ , with a small (according to Cohen, 2018) effect size of  $r = .28$ .

**Table 1.** The mean for each item of the VCQ for the control and the intervention groups

	Control group N = 35					Intervention group N = 37				
	Pre-test		Post-test		Dif.	Pre-test		Post-test		Dif.
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.		Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	
1. I have a clear idea of what personal qualities are important to me.	3.86	.69	4.17	.79	+ .31	4.17	.66	4.57	.66	+ .40
2. I have a clear sense of what is important to me, rather than what others say should be important to me.	4.17	.99	4.23	.65	+ .06	4.09	1.15	4.31	1.02	+ .22
3. I can stop engaging in behaviours that are not allowing me to be the best possible version of myself.	3.57	1.09	3.66	1.14	+ .09	4.20	.80	4.26	.78	+ .06
4. I know exactly what type of person I do not want to be.	4.29	.93	4.51	.89	+ .22	4.51	.78	4.54	.85	+ .03
5. I am confident that I can explain what matters to me to others.	3.57	1.09	4.03	.89	+ .46	3.77	1.03	4.03	1.07	+ .26
6. I would rather be criticised for expressing my values than to avoid criticism and stay silent.	3.69	1.30	3.86	1.03	+ .17	3.66	1.40	4.03	1.04	+ .37
7. There are multiple ways of showing the personal qualities I would like to show.	3.66	1.08	4.20	1.02	+ .54	4.31	.80	4.37	0.73	+ .06
<b>Total Score</b>	<b>26.80</b>	<b>3.86</b>	<b>29.00</b>	<b>3.78</b>	<b>+2.20</b>	<b>28.71</b>	<b>4.02</b>	<b>30.11</b>	<b>3.92</b>	<b>+1.40</b>

### 3.2 The experimental and control groups' total post-scores did not differ significantly.

Accordingly, a Mann-Whitney U test was run to compare the two groups' post-test scores. It revealed a non-significantly lower total post-score for the control group ( $Mdn = 29.00$ ,  $n = 35$ ) compared to the total post-score of the intervention group ( $Mdn = 31.00$ ,  $n = 35$ ),  $U = 453.00$ ,  $z = -1.18$ ,  $p = .060$ , with a small effect size of  $r = .22$ .

### 3.3 The score for each VCQ item and the total score increased for both groups.

Chart 1 shows an increase in the control and intervention groups' post-score on each item of VCQ. The degree of this increase is depicted in Table 1, which presents the mean for each item of the pre-test and the post-test for each group. For the intervention group, the rise of the mean scores of the first and sixth items was more considerable; for the control group, the mean scores of the seventh and fifth items increased the most.

Table 2. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Tests for the Intervention Group

	Median Pre-Test	Median Post-Test	z	Sig.	r
1. I have a clear idea of what personal qualities are important to me.	4.00	5.00	-3.30	.001*	.39
2. I have a clear sense of what is important to me rather than what others say should be important to me.	4.00	5.00	-.98	.329	-
3. I can stop engaging in behaviours that are not allowing me to be the best possible version of myself.	4.00	4.00	-.54	.593	-
4. I know exactly what type of person I do not want to be.	5.00	5.00	-.24	.813	-
5. I am confident that I can explain what matters to me to others.	4.00	4.00	-1.42	.156	-
6. I would rather be criticised for expressing my values than to avoid criticism and stay silent.	4.00	4.00	-1.77	.076	-
7. There are multiple ways of showing the personal qualities I would like to show.	5.00	4.00	-.57	.564	-
Total Score	30.00	31.00	-2.65	.008*	.32

### 3.4 Only the first item score and the total VCQ score increased significantly for the intervention group.

As seen from Tables 2 and 3 with the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Tests results for each of the two groups, the first item is the only item for which both groups have a statistically significant increase compared to the pre-test. A Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test revealed that the intervention group's post-test score for the item "I have a clear idea of what personal qualities are important to me" was significantly higher ( $Mdn = 5.00$ ,  $n = 35$ ) compared to the pre-test score ( $Mdn = 4.00$ ,  $n = 35$ ),  $z = -3.30$ ,  $p = .001$ , with a moderate effect size ( $r = .39$ ).

Although the scores of the experimental group on the individual VCQ items have not significantly increased after the intervention, the rise in the overall score of the VCQ is statistically significant. A Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test revealed that the intervention group's total post-test score was significantly higher ( $Mdn = 31.00, n = 35$ ) compared to the pre-test score ( $Mdn = 30.00, n = 35$ ),  $z = -2.65, p < .05$ , with a moderate effect size ( $r = .32$ ).

**Table 3.** Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Tests for the Control Group

	Median Pre-Test	Median Post-Test	z	Sig.	r
1. I have a clear idea of what personal qualities are important to me.	4.00	4.00	-2.18	.029*	.26
2. I have a clear sense of what is important to me rather than what others say should be important to me.	5.00	4.00	-0.41	.682	-
3. I can stop engaging in behaviours that are not allowing me to be the best possible version of myself.	4.00	4.00	-.31	.760	-
4. I know exactly what type of person I do not want to be.	5.00	5.00	-1.35	.174	-
5. I am confident that I can explain what matters to me to others.	4.00	4.00	-2.16	.031*	.26
6. I would rather be criticised for expressing my values than to avoid criticism and stay silent.	4.00	4.00	-1.21	.227	-
7. There are multiple ways of showing the personal qualities I would like to show.	4.00	5.00	-2.92	.003*	.35
Total Score	26.00	29.00	-3.81	.000*	.45

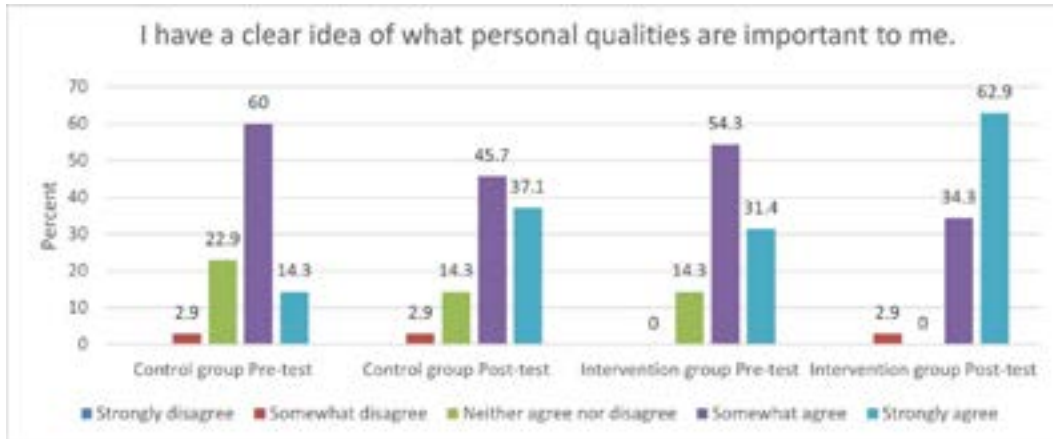
### 3.5 Three VCQ item scores and the total VCQ score increased significantly for the control group.

More impressive were the changes for the control group. Table 3 shows that three items (the seventh, the first, and the fifth) presented significant growth. The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test displayed a significantly higher post-score for item 7, “*There are multiple ways of showing the personal qualities I would like to show*” ( $Mdn = 5.00, n = 35$ ), than the pre-score ( $Mdn = 4.00, n = 35$ ),  $z = -2.92, p = .003$ , with a moderate effect size ( $r = .35$ ). A higher post-score was reported for the item “*I have a clear idea of what personal qualities are important to me*” ( $Mdn = 5.00, n = 35$ ) compared to the pre-test score ( $Mdn = 4.00, n = 35$ ),  $z = -2.18, p < .05$ , with a small effect size ( $r = .26$ ). Another significant increase was noted for the item: “*I am confident that I can explain what matters to me to others*”. The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test estimated a higher post-score ( $Mdn = 4.00, n = 35$ ) than the pre-score ( $Mdn = 4.00, n = 35$ ),  $z = -2.16, p < .05$ , with a small effect size ( $r = .26$ ).

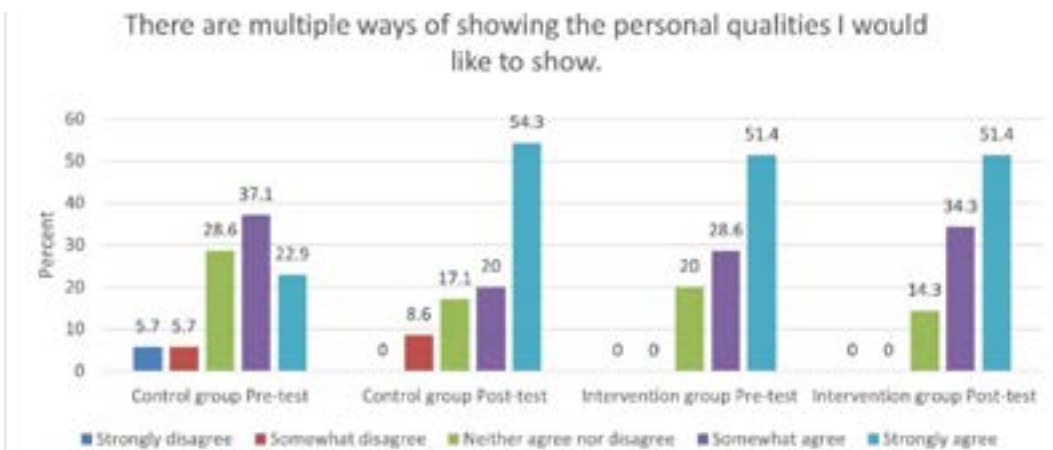
It is noticeable that the overall VCQ post-score for the control group grew significantly ( $Mdn = 5.00, n = 35$ ) compared to the pre-score ( $Mdn = 4.00, n = 35$ ),  $z = -3.81, p < .001$ , with a moderate (almost strong) effect size ( $r = .45$ ). The increase in the control group's total score is greater than that of the intervention group's.

Below are the graphs with the frequencies of the answers in percentage for the questionnaire items that showed a statistically significant increase according to the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Tests. The frequency graphs for the remaining items are presented in the Appendix.

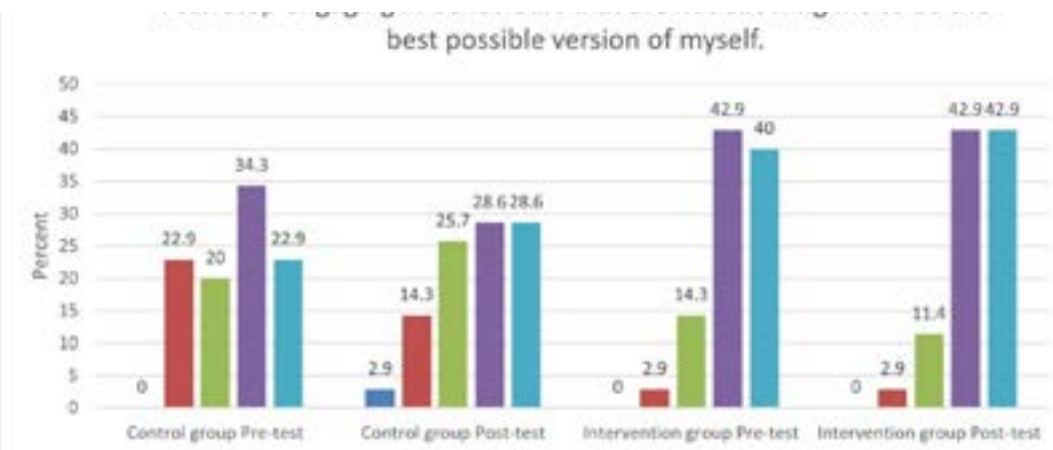
**Chart 2.** Frequencies in percentages for item 1: Significant increase for the intervention group



**Chart 3.** Frequencies in percentages for item 7: Significant increase for the control group



**Chart 4.** Frequencies in percentages for item 5: Significant increase for the control group



### **3.6 Drama activities helped students reflect on their moral identity.**

Even though a clear impact of the drama activities on students' aspired moral identity is not evident from the quantitative data, the students' small texts attest to it. *"I think the drama activities helped me quite a bit. They influenced me; I think with what we did, I have become a better person. I stepped into the heroes' shoes and understood how they felt". "The drama activities influenced how I think about my character. Now, I understand how important it is to have and defend values". "I was puzzled by the drama activities. I was forced to put myself in the heroes' shoes and think about their feelings at certain moments. I thought, "If I were in their place, what would I do?" "With the drama activities, Gospel stories influenced me the most. I became aware, and I became a better person".*

The Gospel stories' portrayal of characters' inner struggles through drama activities caused the students to contemplate their values, what they deem important in their lives, and whether they possess the bravery to uphold those values when challenged by others, and if they have the strength to defend them.

### **3.7 Some students became more determined to defend their values, while others did not.**

The quantitative data show an almost significant increase for the item: *"I would rather be criticized for expressing my values than to avoid criticism and stay silent."* Indeed, some students expressed their decisiveness to preserve their values. *"I find that drama activities for Gospel stories can positively influence my own beliefs and feelings. I want to be able to defend my values vigorously when others underestimate and disrespect them."* *"I want to be able to defend my values with the same mental vigor when others mock or reject them because they are significant."* *"The drama activities helped me understand better the inner struggle of the characters of the Gospel stories because we had to put ourselves in their place and think as they thought."*

Very few students hesitate to declare their determination to hold onto their values no matter what it costs. *"I wish I could defend my values with the same mental fortitude as the characters in evangelical stories. For me, it is challenging. But I try not to be influenced to follow my values when others don't believe in me, mock me, and reject my values."* *"I wish I could defend my values, but I believe that, in some cases, I would not. Many say that they will defend their values, but this is not generally being implemented."* *"I find that upholding and defending your views and values is not frequent enough nowadays. There are many reasons, but one is the fear that others will reject and mock them."* *"I would love to express my opinions and ideas without fear that others might reject me and leave me alone. I want to be able to defend myself at critical moments when I know I won't have someone to help me stand when others throw me down."*

### **3.8. Drama activities may have a future effect on students.**

All the students described the lessons with drama activities as "more vivid," "livelier," and "more comprehensible." Some accepted that it was a trigger to think. *"Drama activities helped me realize that even the saints, perhaps, had second thoughts. They faced dilemmas*

until they took final decisions consistent with their values.” “Drama activities were a way to express ourselves freely and share our thoughts. They make me wonder, “What would I do if I were in the position of the main character?” I’m not sure.” Some students declared that nothing changed about the way they think about aspired moral identity. They already had an apparent image of the person they wanted to be. “I enjoyed the drama activities; they made the lesson livelier. But I don’t think they influenced how I feel about values and what’s important to me.” Some others look at the possibility of a future benefit from drama activities based on a Gospel story. This possibility is confirmed by Achituv and Lichtenstein’s study (2023, p. 192) which observed a remembrance of Bible stories from childhood that are meaningful later in life “mainly related to the social and value-centered messages of these stories.”

*“The drama activities were very innovative and made our lesson more interesting. However, I don’t think they made me change my thinking; it doesn’t change how you feel so soon. However, I was faced with some dilemmas, and I was puzzled. Perhaps later in life, when I grow up, I will remember the attitude of some of these characters and their words, and they will protect me in my life.”*

#### 4. Discussion of findings

The study presented here is a pilot study. Even though the quantitative data did not demonstrate an apparent overall effect of the planned drama activities (based on Gospel stories) on students’ intended moral identity, the process is not pointless and useless. The problematic points highlighted can determine future research. Implementing the drama activities intervention on a large sample and for a more extended period might have given more spectacular results. Analyzing the characters’ inner struggles in the gospel stories positively affected the students’ aspiring moral identity. Though not as clear from the quantitative data, the contribution of drama activities to this positive effect was more distinct from the students’ statements in the small text they wrote.

If we examine the reasons for the subtle increase in the overall VCQ score of the experimental group, we should concentrate on the high pre-scores of the experimental group. If a 5-point rating was given from the beginning, there was no way to depict any other improvement.

Although the findings are not sufficiently enlightening about the effect of the intervention on students’ intended moral identity, they prove encouraging for the level of clarification of values that students are presented to have.

According to the results of the students’ self-reports, they have a clear image of the qualities of the character they do not wish to have. On the other hand, they are aware of the characteristics they want to embody, and this awareness became even stronger after the lessons about the Gospel stories (with and without the intervention).

It could be argued that Gospel stories send very loud messages and that their usual teaching, even without drama activities, greatly influenced the control group. Teaching

and more extended discussions with the control group have helped improve the verbal explanation of values (item 5) and various ways to express them.

The increase (.37) in the average from  $M = 3.66$  to 4.03 for the intervention group was noticeable but not statistically significant for point 6: “*I would rather be criticized for expressing my values than to avoid criticism and stay silent*”, while the control group showed an increase only (.17), from  $M = 3.69$  to 3.86. It could be somewhat arbitrarily assumed that the examples of the characters in the Gospel stories who vigorously defended their values contributed to this change. However, there are some students expressing hesitation and even fear to assert their values when it costs. Adolescents must recognize how social and cultural influences affect their values and decisions (Mosconi & Emmett, 2003), even if they’re not prepared to defend those values.

## 5. Strengths and limitations of the research

### 5.1 Strengths of the design

- The research tool VCQ was assessed for “concurrent validity, discriminant validity, internal reliability, test-retest reliability, predictive validity, and incremental criterion validity” (McLoughlin et al., 2022).
- The data were obtained from two comparable groups (the intervention and control groups had the same number, age, and subjects taught by the same teacher).
- The intervention was designed as part of the teaching procedure. The drama activities were based on Gospel stories indicated by the curriculum. Enriching lessons with drama activities is widely considered beneficial and fun; therefore, the parents did not hesitate to consent, and most children enjoyed participating.

### 5.2 Limitations of the design

- The intervention group had high pre-test scores.
- The VCQ was translated from English to Greek. The tool has not been revalidated in Greek or in the context of Cyprus. Future research can be employed to examine the tool’s reliability and validity using an adequate sample size.
- Data were collected from self-reports. There may be errors due to misunderstanding some questionnaire items, an inability to self-assess, or a desire to present a better self-image.
- A semi-structured interview with focus groups might have been more appropriate for collecting qualitative data. Permission for interviews was not granted because focus groups would have been designed during school at the expense of lesson time. The written text was an alternative, a less preferable solution.
- This research is a pilot study. The sample was small. The sample choice was not random but convenient. The sample consisted of students whom the researcher teaches. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized.



- The time of the investigation was limited. The changes in the declaration of values might not be observed so soon. The Gospel stories chosen were those that were to be taught in November according to the curriculum of the Second Gymnasium. The research was designed in a way that did not disrupt the children's curriculum. Perhaps some other Gospel stories would have better favored the clarification of values.

## 6. Summary and recommendations

This pilot study attempts to estimate the effect of certain drama activities based on Gospel stories on aspired moral identity. It also provides information about how drama would help children reflect on their moral identity.

An intervention with drama activities based on Gospel stories was designed and implemented in a secondary school in Nicosia (Cyprus). The sample consisted of students who attended the Religious Education course taught by the researcher. The students were divided into experimental and control groups for the research. All the students were taught the same four Gospel stories, and the intervention group was additionally engaged in drama activities. Both groups completed the *Virtue Clarity Questionnaire* (McLoughlin et al., 2022) as a pre-test and a post-test. After the intervention, the experimental group wrote a short text to reflect on the impact of drama activities on their learning and moral identity.

Nonparametric tests revealed that the experimental group had a significantly higher total VCQ pre-test score than the control group. Both groups significantly increased the post-test score compared to the pre-test. However, the difference between the total post-scores of the two groups did not prove significant. The post-score for the item “*I have a clear idea of what personal qualities are important to me*” was significantly higher than the pre-test score for both groups. The findings indicated that the control group benefited from teaching the Gospel stories and increased the score of some components of the VCQ, which were lower than the experimental group at the pre-test. Most students declare their preference for drama activities that add life to the lessons. They confirmed that drama activities made them considerate about values and the type of person they wanted to be. Some doubted the possibility of character change due to some drama activities without ruling out this happening in the future.

Although it does not emerge clearly from this study, drama activities based on Gospel stories could have a beneficial effect on clarifying the values that students consider significant for them.

### ***Recommendations for further studies:***

- A future investigation into the type and content of drama activities included in the intervention should precede.
- In a future redesign of the research, it would be helpful to have an instrument that measures the degree and type of each student's involvement in drama activities and to make a correlation between students' involvement in drama activities and their post-test scores.

- 13-14-year-old students might not comprehend the questionnaire items similarly. An identical discussion with all the involved groups about the meaning of the items of the Value Clarity Questionnaire would reduce misunderstandings.
- A larger sample for the study may demonstrate the effect of drama activities more clearly.
- The intervention time could be extended to a semester or even a year.

Incorporating drama activities into Religious Studies classes can significantly enhance the teaching experience. Students eagerly participate in drama activities and have the chance to express themselves, develop empathy, deeply contemplate values, and envision their aspired moral identity. Enriching the teaching of a Gospel story with drama activities allows students to experience the inner conflicts, moral dilemmas, and spiritual struggles of characters who serve as role models. Future research could investigate the most impactful types of drama activities on students' moral identity and the benefits of consistently implementing drama activities in the Religious Studies course.

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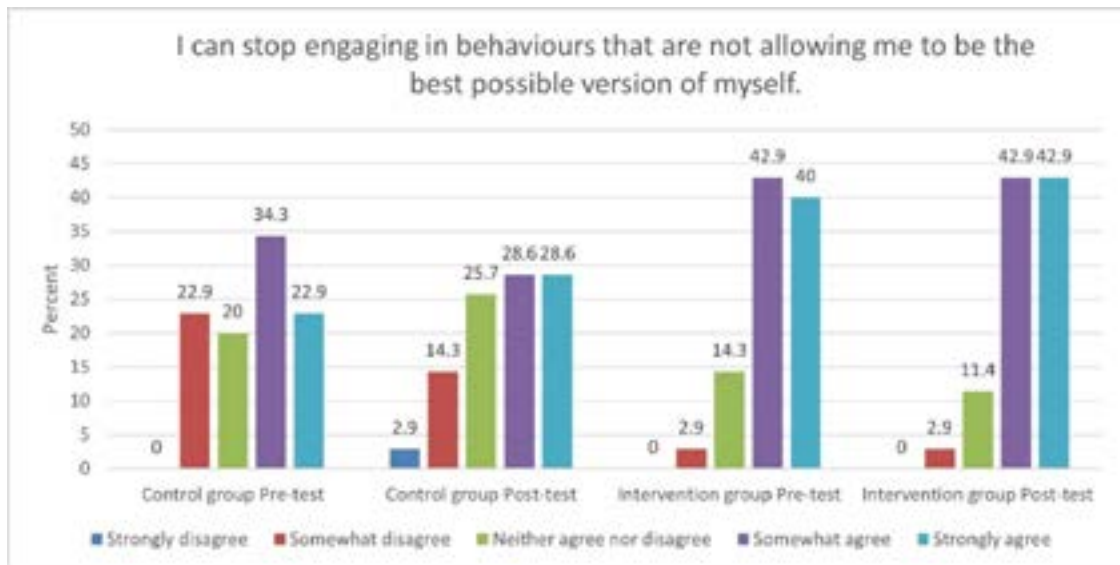
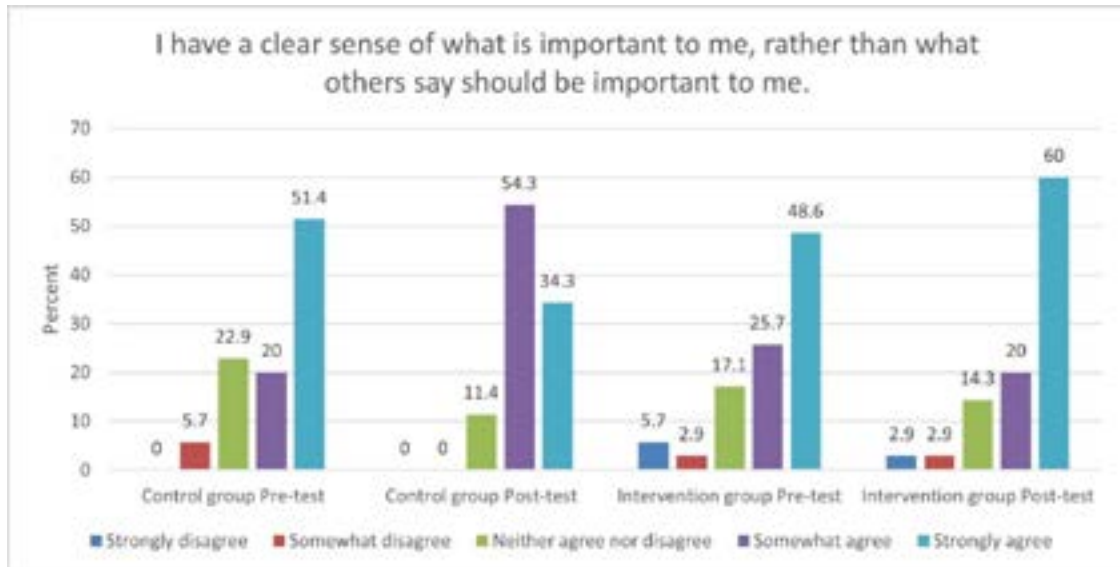
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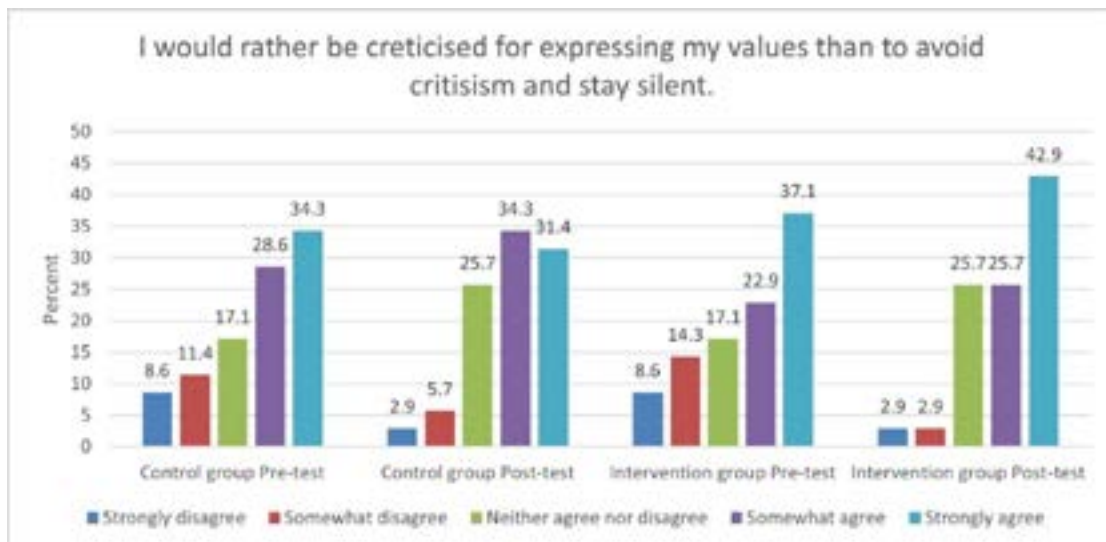
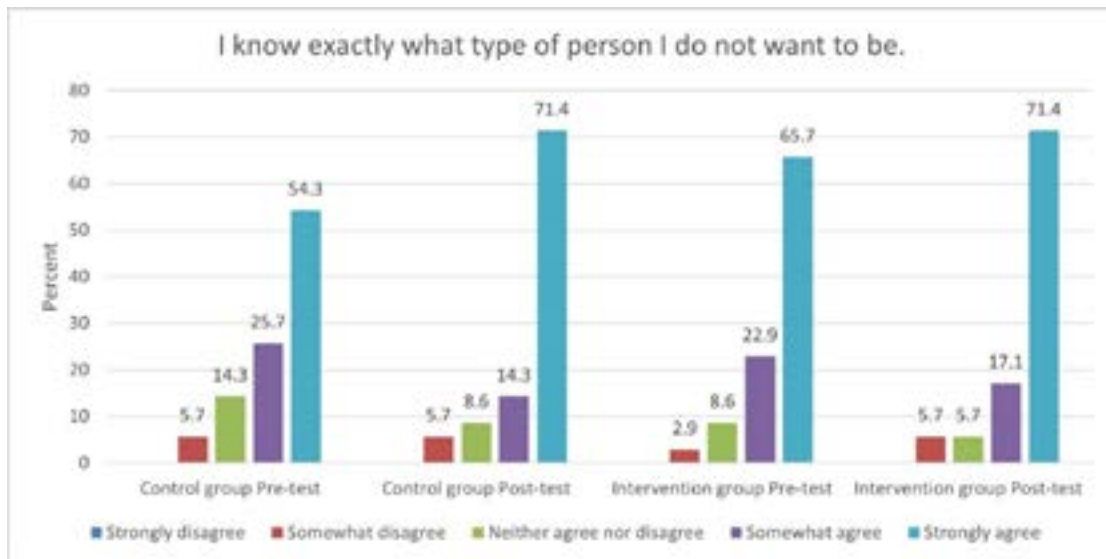
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## Appendix:

Charts of frequencies in percentages (not included in the main text) of the VCQ items. Pre- and post-test scores for the control and intervention groups.





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