





## The Role of School Life Quality in Predicting Adolescents' Learned Helplessness with the Mediating Role of Assertiveness

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The current study was conducted to determine the role of school life quality in predicting the learned helplessness of adolescent students with the mediating role of assertiveness.

**Methods and Materials:** The research population consisted of all 8th-grade male students in Birjand city during the 2023-2024 academic year, totaling 2514 students. According to the Krejcie and Morgan table and using a multi-stage cluster sampling method, 335 students were selected as the sample. The data collection tools were the Williams and Button (1981) School Quality of Life Questionnaire, the Gambrell and Richie (1975) Assertiveness Scale, and the Quinless and Nelson (1988) Learned Helplessness Scale. Pearson correlation coefficient test and structural equation modeling approach were used for data analysis. SPSS -26 and Smart PLS-3 software were used for data analysis.

**Findings:** All direct path coefficients relating school life quality to assertiveness were positive and significant with learned helplessness being negative and significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). Moreover, the results showed that the model of the relationship between assertiveness and learned helplessness was negative and significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). Finally, the bootstrap test results indicate that the indirect path coefficient between school life quality and learned helplessness through the mediating variable of assertiveness is significant at the alpha level of 0.01 ( $p < 0.01$ ). In other words, the proposed research model has an acceptable fit at the 0.01 level of significance. The quality of school life, through the mediating variable of assertiveness, has the ability to indirectly predict the level of learned helplessness in adolescents, and improving the quality of school life, and consequently increasing the level of adolescent assertiveness, facilitates the reduction of their learned helplessness.

**Conclusion:** Based on the research findings, it is possible to predict adolescents' learned helplessness through the variables of school life quality and assertiveness. Therefore, the results of the research provide a basis for conducting extensive studies aimed at improving the quality of life in schools and strengthening adolescents' assertiveness.

**Keywords:** School life quality, Assertiveness, Learned helplessness, Adolescents.



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## 1. Introduction

Among the concepts discussed in the field of psychological pathology is learned helplessness. Learned helplessness broadly refers to the perception of uncontrollability over events and represents the most negative state of self-perception (Prihadi et al., 2018). In a state of learned helplessness, individuals are unable to exert any control over their circumstances or living environment (Wei & Chen, 2022) and believe that their efforts and endeavors have no impact on their future or progress (Ibrahim Ibrahim Khodair, 2023). Learned helplessness occurs when an individual learns that their behavior is independent of a situation. According to Seligman's theory (1975), when a person faces various educational, social, and cultural failures, they feel incapable of controlling environmental conditions, rendering their efforts and responses ineffective (Moreland et al., 2015). Typically, learned helplessness is a threat to an individual's sense of control, often generating intense activity aimed at regaining control. In fact, individuals suffering from learned helplessness, as a result of past experiences like constant, long-term failures and reprimands, conclude that effort is not correlated with progress (Moreland et al., 2015; Prihadi et al., 2018; Raufelder & Kulakow, 2021; Wei & Chen, 2022; Wu & Tu, 2019). Hence, due to the characteristics present in individuals with learned helplessness, it can also impact the educational conditions of students in schools (Prihadi et al., 2018; Raufelder & Kulakow, 2021).

Students play a crucial role in managing the country's future, thus their physical and mental health directly relates to the future health of society (Parsakia, 2023). Given that one of the main indicators of mental health in life is quality of life (Li & Li, 2022; Poursardar N et al., 2013), the World Health Organization has recently highlighted the importance of students' quality of life in school and its resulting outcomes, calling for countries to improve behavioral management in schools and enhance student health through school quality of life (Taghipour et al., 2019; Taziki et al., 2021; Waters et al., 2011). Quality of life is individuals' perception of their position in life within the cultural and social context in which they live (Elliott-Sale et al., 2021). Similarly, school quality of life refers to the overall well-being and satisfaction of students from both positive and negative aspects rooted in school activities (Johnson et al., 2011; Maba, 2022). The adolescent period, a transition to adulthood, is spent in schools; therefore, the quality of life of adolescent students in schools is of significance (Button

et al., 2013; Salminen et al., 2014). Accordingly, school quality of life is one of the most significant factors affecting adolescents' mental health. School quality of life, a concept that can be enhanced through the design of educational methods, reflects the level of students' satisfaction with their daily life in school (Erlianti et al., 2023; Maba, 2022; Oladele, 2014; Raufelder & Kulakow, 2021). It impacts both formal and informal aspects of school and is influenced by society, individual experiences, and peer relationships (Li et al., 2011). According to the findings of previous studies, school quality of life is positively related to better student learning, positive attitudes towards school, academic success, academic progress, acceptance of responsibility and commitment towards school tasks, a sense of belonging to school, academic self-concept, psychological well-being, academic enthusiasm, increased motivation for activity and achieving results, and happiness, and negatively related to the emergence of deviant behaviors and academic burnout (Button et al., 2013; Erlianti et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2011; Kelly et al., 2016; Larashati et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2020; Li et al., 2011; Maba, 2022; Oladele, 2014; Raufelder & Kulakow, 2021; Salminen et al., 2014; Yoong et al., 2015).

Assertiveness is a component that effectively interacts with the living environment (Keramati et al., 2015). The ability to assert is conducive to improving students' living conditions in school (Bar-On, 2000). Alberti & Emmons (2017) define assertiveness as a component of social competence that helps individuals cope with daily life challenges and problematic situations. Moreover, assertiveness refers to the ability to be explicit in expression and decisive in behavior (Yousefi & Hashemian Nejad, 2021; Zarenezhad et al., 2019). In contrast, lack of assertiveness includes failing to claim one's rights and expressing one's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in an appropriate, direct, and honest manner (de Loeff et al., 2022; Ghoreishi Rad & Pour JabbarAkhouni, 2019). Individuals with high assertiveness have better conditions in all components of self-esteem, interpersonal interactions, communication skills, decision-making power, initiative, and mental health, and are distant from social anxiety. Conversely, those with assertiveness deficiencies experience guilt, distrust, and dominance in their social relationships and exhibit fear, anxiety, and depression in their behavior (Ansari et al., 2021; Dijkstra & Barelds, 2008; Ghoreishi Rad & Pour JabbarAkhouni, 2019; Jafar Bahadori Khosroshahi et al., 2013; Pourseyed et al., 2019). Assertiveness is a variable that operates in line with

improving self-confidence and acquiring progress related to individual effort (Pourseyed et al., 2019). Research results indicate that lack of assertiveness or weakness in assertiveness is directly related to learned helplessness. Additionally, research has confirmed a positive relationship between assertiveness and academic progress, improved quality of life in women, stress reduction, reduced anxiety and depression, and improved student quality of life, self-esteem, confidence, empathy, and improved communication skills (Abedini et al., 2022; Bar-On, 2000; Kazami et al., 2014; Keramati et al., 2015; Lackner & Gurtman, 2005; May & Johnston, 2022; Snell et al., 1993; Yousefi & Hashemian Nejad, 2021; Zarenezhad et al., 2019).

Given the above explanations, it seems that improving the quality of life in school could be related to and potentially reduce learned helplessness in adolescent students. It is also conceived that school quality of life, through the mediating role of assertiveness, could negatively relate to learned helplessness. Furthermore, a review of the literature indicates that to date, no research has examined the role of school quality of life in adolescent students' learned helplessness. Therefore, considering the hypothesis posed and the existing research gap, the present study aims to investigate the role of school quality of life in predicting learned helplessness in adolescents with the mediating role of assertiveness.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study is descriptive and correlational. The research population consisted of all 8th-grade male students in Birjand city during the 2023-2024 academic year, totaling 2514 students. Based on the Krejcie and Morgan sampling table and using a multi-stage cluster sampling method, 335 students were selected as the sample size, who completed the distributed questionnaires. It is worth mentioning that the questionnaires were printed and filled out by students under the supervision of the research authors, through school principals and educational deputies. Based on the multi-stage cluster sampling conducted, three middle schools were randomly selected from each geographical area of Birjand city (4 areas approved by Birjand municipality), and from each school, two 8th-grade classes were selected; then, according to the list of students, 14 students from each selected class randomly completed the questionnaires.

To conduct the research, permission was obtained from the education department of Birjand city to administer the

questionnaires to the sample. After obtaining permission from the education department and explaining the objectives to the participants, consent was obtained, and confidentiality of the information was assured.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. School Quality of Life

This questionnaire contains 39 items aimed at assessing students' quality of life in school across various dimensions (general satisfaction, negative emotions, relationship with teachers, opportunities, progress, adventure, and social cohesion). It is scored using a 5-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). In Soltani Shal et al.'s (2011) research, the convergent validity of the School Quality of Life Questionnaire was confirmed by examining its correlation with the General Self-Efficacy questionnaires and the Adolescents' Adjustment Scale. Its reliability, or trustworthiness, was calculated using Cronbach's alpha method, resulting in 0.85. In Heidari's (2015) study on students from Khomeinishahr, reliability coefficients for general satisfaction were 0.79, negative emotions 0.84, relationship with teacher 0.77, opportunities 0.73, progress 0.81, adventure 0.78, social cohesion 0.84, and for all questions 0.88. According to this research, the School Quality of Life Questionnaire has good validity and can be used to assess school quality of life among middle and guidance school students in the Iranian population (Haj Seyed Javadi et al., 2018; Taziki et al., 2021). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient obtained for this questionnaire's reliability is 0.90, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) index for determining convergent validity of the questionnaire is 0.65.

#### 2.2.2. Learned Helplessness

This questionnaire contains 27 items aimed at assessing specific domains of learned helplessness in individuals. It is scored on a 5-point Likert scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree). Quinless and Nelson (1988) reported the validity of this questionnaire as 0.79 and Cronbach's alpha reliability as 0.86. Through Varimax rotation and exploratory analysis, five main factors were identified for this scale, including internal-external, stability-instability, global-specific, control over inability to control, and personal choice in situations where an individual voluntarily participates (Ibrahim Ibrahim Khodair, 2023; Prihadi et al., 2018). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient for

the Learned Helplessness Questionnaire is 0.85, and the AVE for determining convergent validity is 0.77.

2.2.3. *Assertiveness*

This questionnaire consists of 40 items aimed at assessing an individual's assertiveness level. It measures three dimensions of assertiveness: discomfort in being assertive, likelihood of engaging in assertive behavior, and recognition of assertiveness. Scoring is done on a 5-point Likert scale (from very little to very much). Lower scores indicate problems with assertiveness. Gambrell and Richie (1975) believe there is a high correlation between the items of this test, indicating its validity. The factor validity of various items ranged from 0.39 to 0.70, and the test's reliability coefficient was reported as 0.81. In Iran, to estimate the validity of the Assertiveness Test, a preliminary study was conducted online on 30 students, resulting in a calculated alpha coefficient of 0.76, which is acceptable. Experts from the University of Educational Sciences and Psychology of Allameh Tabataba'i and the University of Isfahan in 1995

and 1996 examined and confirmed the content validity of this test (Keramati et al., 2015). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient obtained for this questionnaire's reliability is 0.93, and the AVE for determining convergent validity is 0.80.

2.3. *Data analysis*

After collecting the questionnaires, the numbering process began, and statistical tests and the related structural model design were conducted using SPSS version 26 and Smart PLS version 3 software.

3. **Findings and Results**

Descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation, score range, skewness, and kurtosis of the research variables are presented in Table 1. To provide the necessary scientific conditions for subsequent analyses, a correlation matrix between the variables under study in this research was initially calculated, with these coefficients presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Findings and Correlation Matrix Among Research Variables*

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3
1- School Life Quality	163.46	24.622	-0.553	-0.741	1		
2- Assertiveness	139.31	28.974	0.699	-0.609	0.456**	1	
3- Learned Helplessness	75.50	15.294	-0.401	1.556	-0.474**	-0.483**	1

\*\*p<0.01

Table 1 shows the Pearson correlation results for examining the relationship between school life quality and assertiveness with learned helplessness, along with the mean and standard deviation of the scores. Based on the results obtained from Table 1, the calculated correlation coefficients between school life quality and assertiveness with learned helplessness were negative and significant at the alpha level of 0.01 (p<0.01). Thus, it can be concluded that there is an inverse relationship between school life quality and assertiveness with learned helplessness among students.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test size for all three variables is above 0.6, indicating that the correlation matrix has the necessary adequacy. The Bartlett's test of sphericity is used to test the hypothesis that the correlation matrix is an identity matrix; since the significance level related to the Bartlett test is less than 0.05, the identity of the correlation matrix is rejected.

To examine the mediating role of assertiveness in the relationship between school life quality and learned helplessness, structural equation modeling using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) method and Smart PLS software was utilized. It is worth mentioning that in the current model, for the variables of assertiveness and learned helplessness, the method of question bundles was used. Since these questionnaires lack components, using question bundles instead of individual questions increases the validity of indicators, reduces the number of estimated parameters, creates indicators with approximately normal distribution, and improves model fit with the data.

Accordingly, the variables of assertiveness and learned helplessness were divided into 5 and 3 factors, respectively, based on the number of questions in the questionnaires.

**Table 2**

*AVE Values and Reliability Indices*

Variable	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
School Life Quality	0.651	0.928	0.907
Assertiveness	0.800	0.952	0.938
Learned Helplessness	0.775	0.911	0.855

Reliability coefficients and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values are shown in Table 2. All constructs in the model have high composite reliability and exceed the threshold of 0.6 introduced by Fornell and Larcker (1981), indicating high internal reliability of the research data. The

Cronbach's alpha value is above 0.7, indicating acceptable reliability. Also, the Average Variance Extracted for all latent variables is more than 0.5, showing suitable convergent validity of the model.

**Table 3**

*Fornell and Larcker Matrix for Examining Divergent Validity*

	School Life Quality	Assertiveness	Learned Helplessness
School Life Quality	0.807		
Assertiveness	0.486	0.894	
Learned Helplessness	-0.497	-0.489	0.880

According to the results in Table 3, the square root of the average shared values of the latent variables in the current research, located in the main diagonal cells of the matrix, is greater than the correlation values among them, located in the lower and right cells off the main diagonal. This means that each construct in the research model interacts more with its own indicators than with other constructs, indicating suitable divergent validity and a good fit of the research measurement models. Based on reliability, convergent validity, and divergent validity results, it's observed that the measurement models of the structural equation model of the research adequately measure the research's latent variables. Thus, the fit of the research's structural model is subsequently examined.

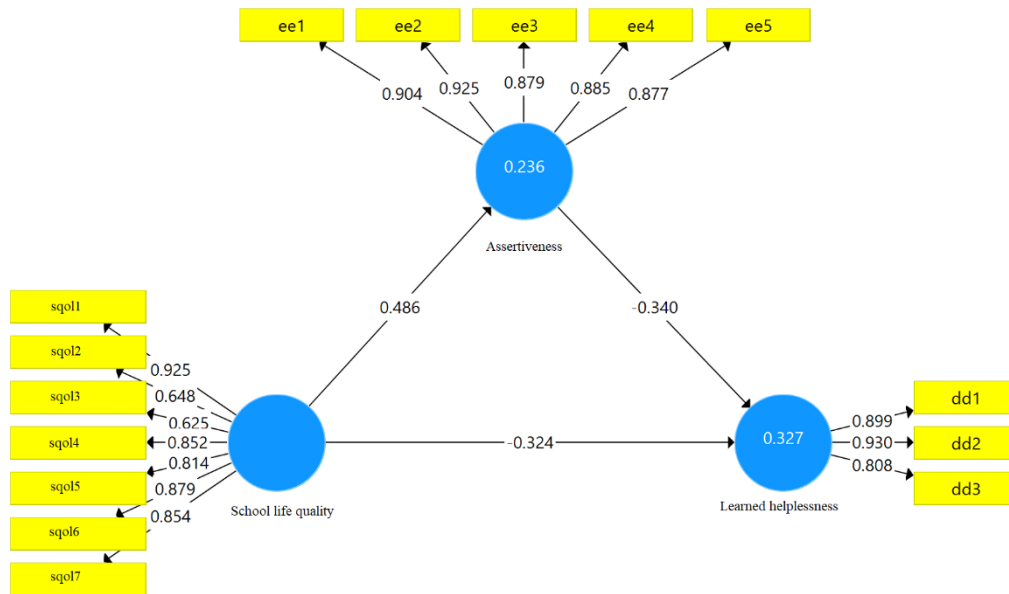
The first criterion for examining the fit of the structural model is the coefficients related to the endogenous (dependent) variables of the model. This criterion indicates the effect of an exogenous variable on an endogenous

variable and considers values of 0.19, 0.33, and 0.67 as the benchmark for weak, medium, and strong values, respectively. According to the results, the obtained values indicate the appropriateness of the structural model fit of the research. The second criterion for examining the fit of the structural model of the research is the values of the model's endogenous variables. This criterion determines the predictive power of the model. Values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 for this criterion respectively indicate weak, medium, and strong predictive power regarding the related construct. Based on the results, the values related to all endogenous variables are more than 0.15, indicating the model's strong predictive power. Additionally, the GOF (Goodness of Fit) criterion was used to evaluate the overall model fit, where values of 0.01, 0.25, and 0.36 respectively represent weak, medium, and strong GOF values, thus achieving a value of 0.396 for GOF indicates the overall fit of the research model.



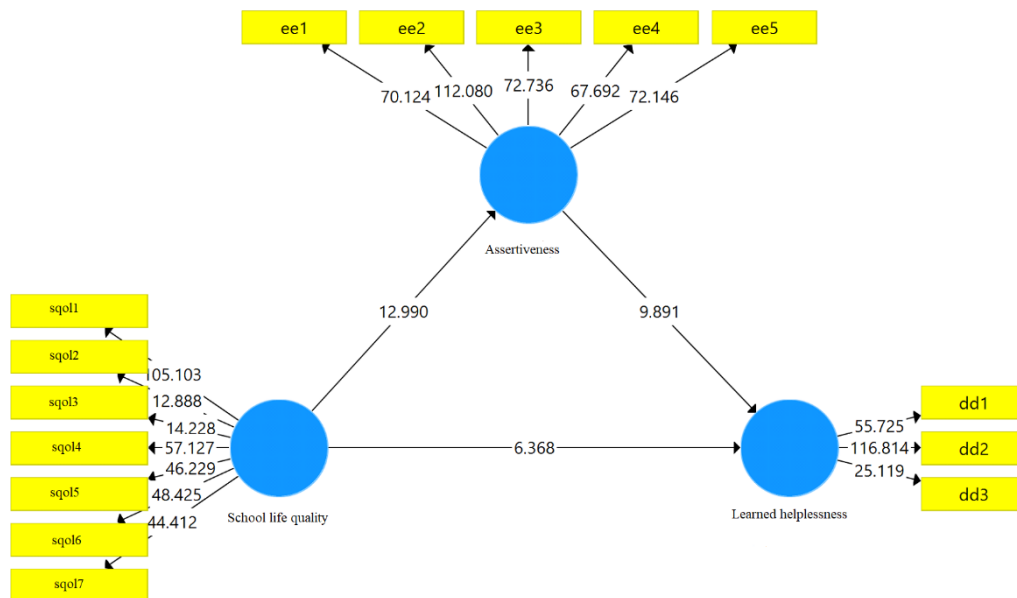
**Figure 1**

Model with Beta Values



**Figure 2**

Model with T-Values



The numbers on the paths represent the t-value for each path. To assess the significance of the path coefficients, the t-value for each path must exceed 1.96. In this analysis, the

t-value for all paths exceeds 1.96, and therefore, they are significant at the 95% confidence level.

**Table 4**

*Direct and Indirect Path Coefficients of the Research Model*

Path from → to	Beta	t-Statistic	Significance Level	Hypothesis Test Outcome
School Life Quality → Assertiveness	0.486	12.990	0.01	Confirmed
School Life Quality → Learned Helplessness	-0.324	6.368	0.01	Confirmed
Assertiveness → Learned Helplessness	-0.340	9.891	0.01	Confirmed
School Life Quality through Assertiveness → Learned Helplessness	-0.165	7.429	0.01	Confirmed

According to the results in Table 4, all direct path coefficients related to the relationship between school life quality and assertiveness are positive, and with learned helplessness, they are negative and significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). Additionally, the relationship between assertiveness and learned helplessness is negative and significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). The bootstrap test results also indicate that the indirect path coefficient between school life quality and learned helplessness through the mediating variable of assertiveness is significant at the alpha level of 0.01 ( $p < 0.01$ ).

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The current research aimed to investigate the role of school life quality in predicting learned helplessness among adolescents with the mediating role of assertiveness. The results demonstrated that the proposed model of the research is significantly well-fitted at the 0.01 level of significance. In other words, assertiveness mediates the relationship between school life quality and learned helplessness in adolescents; thus, the research hypothesis that school life quality plays a role in learned helplessness through assertiveness is confirmed.

The findings indicate a significant and negative relationship between school life quality and learned helplessness. This means that as the quality of school life for adolescent students improves, it leads to a reduction in learned helplessness and vice versa. This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies (Button et al., 2013; Erlianti et al., 2023; Fais, 2017; Johnson et al., 2011; Kelly et al., 2016; Larashati et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2020; Li et al., 2011; Maba, 2022; Moreland et al., 2015; Oladele, 2014; Prihadi et al., 2018; Raufelder & Kulakow, 2021; Salminen et al., 2014; Wei & Chen, 2022; Wu & Tu, 2019; Yoong et al., 2015), suggesting that school life quality is an effective factor in reducing learned helplessness. These studies found that improving the quality of life for adolescent girls leads to better stress management and challenging situations, thereby reducing learned helplessness. Moreover, improving the quality of life of

nurses towards better job conditions can be considered a significant factor in reducing their learned helplessness. Furthermore, they confirmed a negative relationship between patients' quality of life and their learned helplessness. On the other hand, improving mental health is another outcome of improving quality of life among students, leading to a reduction in unhealthy feelings and beliefs such as fear of failure and negative self-perception, which are some of the predisposing factors for learned helplessness.

Moreover, the research findings indicate a significant and negative relationship between assertiveness and learned helplessness in adolescents. This suggests that as adolescents' assertiveness in the school environment increases, their sense of learned helplessness decreases. Supporting this finding, research showed that assertiveness as an individual ability reduces fear of failure and, consequently, by increasing motivation, reduces the sense of learned helplessness in individuals (Wei & Chen, 2022). Assertiveness in academic environments improves personality and academic adjustment, thereby reducing thoughts and behaviors stemming from learned helplessness (Raufelder & Kulakow, 2021). The positive impact of assertiveness on reducing fear of failure and increasing self-confidence and self-esteem among youth (Prihadi et al., 2018; Wu & Tu, 2019). Moreover, academic motivation, as a barrier to learned helplessness, increases due to improved assertiveness. Research found that assertiveness in adolescent students acts as an effective factor in reducing anxious and negative thoughts, depression, personal worries, and internal suppression, thereby reducing the sense of learned helplessness. Additionally, research has confirmed the positive impact of assertiveness and courage on stress management, self-regulation, and resilience (Moreland et al., 2015; Prihadi et al., 2018; Raufelder & Kulakow, 2021; Wei & Chen, 2022; Wu & Tu, 2019) as factors that reduce learned helplessness. Psychological well-being and increased participation motivation are considered effective factors in reducing learned helplessness which are enhanced by improving assertiveness (Prihadi et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the research findings indicate that assertiveness plays a mediating role in the relationship between school life quality and learned helplessness among adolescents. This indicates that school life quality, through the mediating variable of assertiveness, has the ability to indirectly predict the level of learned helplessness in adolescents, and improving school life quality, and consequently increasing the level of adolescent assertiveness, facilitates the reduction of their learned helplessness.

## 5. Limitations & Suggestions

Therefore, by raising awareness and explaining methods to improve school life quality and also helping adolescents improve their assertiveness, a significant step can be taken towards reducing learned helplessness in this sensitive age group. Hence, it is essential that policies of governing organizations, especially the Ministry of Education, consider school life quality as an important factor. Additionally, improving assertiveness as a psychological component requires the cooperation of psychologists and counselors with schools. Therefore, another suggestion of this research is that more interaction between psychological experts and schools, which are centers of education and training, should be established. It is also recommended that future research should include adolescent girls in the sample to explore the relationship between variables and to conduct a comparison between genders.

Like all research, this study faced certain limitations, including some students' reluctance to complete the questionnaires or tampering with them, and the lack of control over gender effects.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethics Considerations

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

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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## Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed equally.

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