

RESEARCH



## Evaluation of the True Goals School Counseling Curriculum: A Pilot Study

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### ABSTRACT

This pilot study involved fourth and fifth-grade students ( $N = 25$ ) from two elementary schools that receive the True Goals (TG) small group intervention during an after-school program in one school district in the Midwest region of the United States. A one-group pre-post design was used to assess classroom teachers' perceptions of student learning gains in motivation, self-knowledge, self-direction, and positive relationships as scored on the Protective Factors Index (PFI). Results indicated that students that participated in the TG curriculum experienced significant gains ( $p = .01$ ) in motivation, self-knowledge, self-direction, and positive relationships over time, with a large effect size ( $d = .83$ ).

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Very few interventions designed for school counselors have undergone rigorous forms of evaluation. This phenomenon leaves school counselors with a limited repertoire of evidence-based interventions. As practitioners make decisions about how to use interventions within comprehensive school counseling programs, they need to review research around what works and what would meet the needs of their students (Dimmit, Carey, & Hatch, 2007; Kaffenberger, 2012; Zyromski & Mariani, 2016). Unfortunately, despite the central role that interventions play in school counseling programs, little intervention research exists within the field of school counseling (Brigman, 2006; Carey & Dimmitt, 2006; Dimmitt, Carey, McGannon, & Henningson, 2005; Whiston & Sexton, 1998; Whiston, Tai, Rahardja, & Eder, 2011). Recently, authors have noted the lack of rigorous intervention research published in American Counseling Association journals over the past 10 years (Griffith, Mariani, McMahon, Zyromski, & Greenspan, *in press*). Interventions designed to impact the college readiness and postsecondary success were even more scarce (McMahon, Griffith, Mariani, & Zyromski, 2017). The lack of empirically supported school counseling interventions illustrates the need for additional intervention research in the field of school counseling. This manuscript presents the result of a pilot study with the True Goals (TG) school counseling curriculum. This intervention research pilot study both contributes to the body of literature related to intervention research and also provides school counseling practitioners with an additional intervention to use to support the success of their students.

The TG school counseling curriculum is one of only a few school counseling programs specifically designed by school counselors for school counselors. It uses foundational educational and social psychology research on goal setting (Coon & Walker, 2013; Day

& Tosey, 2011; Kapikiran, 2012; Schunk, 1996, 2008) and presents it within an engaging and straightforward process. The program consists of eight classroom and small group sessions. For this study, the curriculum was delivered through small groups led by school counselors after school.

## Goal Setting and Academic Self-Regulation

Goal setting is a vital process in helping an individual identify what they want to achieve or what they want someone else to achieve (Cambridge Dictionary, 2018). Goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2002) builds upon Adlerian Theory (Adler, 1930; Pryor & Tollerud, 1999; Rowell & Hong, 2013) and social cognitive/learning theory (Bandura, 1986; Zimmerman, 2008). As people learn from each other they come to understand strategies that might work versus those that do not work. It is suggested by social cognitive/learning theory that as people gain confidence in their ability in certain tasks, their self-efficacy grows, then people apply self-efficacy to set realistic and attainable goals (Bandura, 1986; Zimmerman, 2008). Adlerian principles also support goal-setting ideology, particularly in the school setting, as educators foster students to reach their maximum potential, develop positive social interest, and execute the power of personal choices (Adler, 1930). Democratic classrooms encourage students to be more involved, interact more, and be active in their learning; emphasizing effort versus performance (Pryor & Tollerud, 1999; Rowell & Hong, 2013).

The True Goals curriculum provides an avenue through which students choose their own goals, thereby executing the power of personal choices. The student engages in the process and is able to connect the goal-setting process to personal interests that align with their values (Bruhn, McDaniel, Fernando, & Troughton, 2016; Koestner, Lekes, Powers, & Chicoine, 2002). Students can use the goal-setting process to increase their self-efficacy and to focus their attention. Locke and Latham (2002) suggest that goals have a directive function in helping students focus their effort and attention, an energizing function, help impact persistence, and increase the use and application of task-relevant knowledge and strategies.

Goal-setting is an effective skill to teach youth at several age/grade levels. Students as young as second grade can be taught to write, track, and report their successes. This practice is also critical during adolescence in promoting healthy development of executive functioning and other self-regulation skills (Scarborough, Lewis, & Kulkarni, 2010). Evidence-based programs such as Ready for Success (RFS; Brigman & Webb, 2007), a school counselor-led classroom guidance curriculum for students in grades 2–3, support youngsters in creating and sharing weekly goals and action plans that are shared weekly in class. Likewise, the Student Success Skills (SSS) program for grades 4–12, employs goal-setting and progress monitoring strategies related to health/wellness as well as academics; practicing these key strategies results in measurable benefits for students across a wide range of outcomes including improved standardized test scores, reduced behavior problems, better social skills, and more positive perceptions of classroom climate (Mariani, Villares, Brigman, & Wirth, 2015; Villares, Frain, Brigman, Webb, & Peluso, 2012).

Previous research supports goal-setting as a useful strategy in changing one's behavior. Goal-setting can be useful in enhancing motivation and learning for various types of students, at all levels, from gifted students (Morisano & Shore, 2010), to those with behavior and emotional issues (Bruhn et al., 2016; Buzza & Dol, 2015; Carroll, Gordon,

Haynes, & Houghton, 2013; Rowe, Mazzotti, Ingram, & Lee, 2017), as well as under-achievers (Berger, 2013; Zimmerman, 2008). In 2010, Morisano and Shore published a review on the benefits of goal setting and acknowledged the need for goal-setting interventions for gifted underachievers. This review investigated the effects of goal-setting on cognition, attention, behavior, and effort/motivation in the previous research and linked that research to application with gifted children who were not reaching their full potential. While goal-setting and self-directed learning strategies are often used with young adults, the authors suggested that personal goal-setting for younger students with heightened metacognitive skills would create a more stimulating learning environment to improve students' underachievement (Morisano & Shore, 2010). Zimmerman (2008) indicated that struggling students can benefit greatly from being taught how to set appropriate goals; goal setting can help to focus one's attention on what tasks need to be accomplished, improve motivation and increase persistence, and moderate stress and anxiety. Furthermore, Berger's study (2013) used the Bring out the Brilliance program, developed by the author, which focuses on teaching 9th- and 10th-grade students how to build self-efficacy, self-regulation, time-management, and goal-setting strategies. Throughout the eight-session program, students are taught to link school achievement to their future goals and practice these goals with support and encouragement from their group mates. Results indicated that students' grade point averages increased .18 points between grading periods, while discipline referrals went down an average of .11 for all three groups (Berger, 2013). In addition, unexcused absences decreased on average of 3.22 per student and excused absences increased by .5 (Berger, 2013). More importantly, when asked, students reported that learning new skills, in particular, goal-setting helped them reduce their procrastination, focus on best use of their time, and de-stress (Berger, 2013). A later study by Buzza and Dol's (2015) revealed how the use of semester-long goal plans positively impacted self-regulation in high school students with special needs and emotional problems. Specifically, results suggested that with practice, students overall goal quality improved, including self-regulation goal statements. Additionally, similar to Berger's (2013) study, students evidenced increased attendance and became more engaged both in the classroom and at home.

### **Motivation, Self-Knowledge, Self-Direction, and Relationships**

Students' actions are directed and maintained through motivation (Squier, Nailor, & Carey, 2014). As students define goal-directed behavior and activities, motivation helps instigate those actions and maintain effort over time (Schunk, Meece, & Pintrich, 2014). Cook and Artino (2016) recently examined five different theories about students' motivation to learn. Common themes across the five motivational theories (Attribution Theory, Expectancy Value Theory, Goal Orientation, Self-determination, and Social Cognitive Theory) include concepts about students' belief regarding their ability to learn, about the value of the task at hand, and about how students' attribute outcomes of learning to something within their control or out of their control (i.e. to personal factors of the environment), and that motivation involves an unobservable mental process (Cook & Artino, 2016). Learning involves a cognitive process and a larger social context (Green et al., 2012). For example, as students consider whether they are able to complete a task, they unconsciously consider the value of that task to them in their personal and

environmental world. Is the task enjoyable to them? Does it result in an increased self-concept; are they able to do the work (Guay, Ratelle, Roy, & Litalien, 2010; Retelsdorf, Köller, & Möller, 2011)? Students also consider if the failure or success is of their own doing; the more they assume the cause of their success or failure is within their control, the more likely they will persist after initially failing (Cook & Artino, 2016; McClure et al., 2011).

As students learn to direct their own lives and apply motivation to achieve their own desired outcomes, their ability to understand their own abilities, values, preferences, and skills may greatly inform this process (Squier et al., 2014). Key components of self-awareness include metacognition or the ability to be aware of one's own cognitive process and how those processes can guide learning and decision-making (Flavell, 1979). Within metacognition, how students' attribute the cause of outcomes is vital. For example, McClure et al. (2011) explored the relationship between motivation and attribution of success and failure of 5333 secondary students. Students with positive-grade-point averages tended to attribute their scores to effort, and their words mark to a lack of effort or the teacher. Students who had negative grade-point-averages tended to attribute their works marks to the influence of family and friends and the best marks to luck. In addition to whether to attribute their success or failure to internal or external stimuli, students' may also apply metacognitive skills to apply foresight, to plan, to monitor, and to evaluate their own work (Hrbáčková, Hladík, & Vávrová, 2012). These are important skills that research suggests lead to higher levels of academic performance (Dunning, Johnson, Ehrlinger, & Kruger, 2003; Gutman & Schoon, 2013; Hrbáčková et al., 2012; Thiede, Anderson, & Therriault, 2003). Fortunately, students can learn how to improve and more successfully apply metacognitive strategies (Lemberger & Clemens, 2012; Nietfeld & Schraw, 2002; White & Frederiksen, 1998) to positively impact their success in school. In addition to understanding how their own abilities, values, preferences, and skills, students need to learn how to learn. The set of skills that students apply effectively to learn academic concepts and content contribute to self-directed learning (Squier et al., 2014).

The ability of students to self-regulate their emotion and other internal states to successfully facilitate functioning is central to successful learning and successful self-direction (Blair & Diamond, 2008; Edossa, Schroeders, Weinert, & Artelt, 2018; Gestsdottir et al., 2014; Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, & Swanson, 2010). Multiple authors (Blair & Raver, 2015; Eisenberg, Valiente, & Eggum, 2010) have argued the central role self-regulation skills have in the school readiness of children. Indeed, Blair and Raver (2015) argue that early intervention to improve students' self-regulation skills can be beneficial to early academic ability, which in turn informs future academic success. In addition to self-regulation, the ability of students to successfully apply executive functioning skills positively contributes to their self-direction. Executive functioning skills include a set of processes that children apply to ignore distraction, control their responses, shift between tasks, and solve complex problems (see Brown, 2006 for a more thorough description of executive function). Research has supported the impact executive functioning has on success across early childhood, middle school, and adolescence (Best, Miller, & Jones, 2009; Best, Miller, & Naglieri, 2011; Blair & Diamond, 2008; Blair & Razza, 2007; van der Sluis, de Jong, & van der Leij, 2007). In addition to the ability to control executive functioning, students benefit from the ability to be able to create and maintain strong, positive, collaborative and social relationships with peers and teachers (Squier et al., 2014).

The ability of students to create positive relationships with others depends on their ability to empathize, manage their emotions, make good decisions, and ethically navigate challenging social situations (Zins, Weissbert, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Social skills can be taught and one result of social skill intervention is an increase in student achievement outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). One aspect of positive relationships between student and teachers relates to help-seeking behaviors. Ryan and Shin (2011) found that prior achievement and self-efficacy strongly predicted help-seeking behaviors. Further, low achieving students may have trouble identifying when to seek help or these students may receive feedback from teachers and others that discourages help-seeking. Indeed, the relationship between teachers and students matter. Positive student–teacher relationships increase engagement, especially with older students and boys with at-risk students being more strongly influenced by the quality of the student–teacher relationships than others (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Students relationships with teachers and peers directly influence their classroom engagement and achievement (Furrer, Skinner, & Pitzer, 2014). One avenue for improving social skills is in after-school programs. Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010) found through a meta-analysis of after-school programs that focused on social skills that they produced positive results in feelings and attitudes, indicators of behavioral adjustment, and school performance. Social skill development was positively associated with significant reductions in problem behaviors.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of the small group component of the TG school counseling curriculum on fourth and fifth-grade students' levels of motivation, self-knowledge, self-direction, and positive relationships with others. While this study is both a pilot and small scale, it is significant because it (a) contributes to the school counseling research available about interventions that may positively impact student motivation, self-knowledge, self-direction, and relationships, and (b) contributes to the body of intervention research available to school counselors to apply within their programs (Griffith et al., [in press](#)).

### **Methodology**

A one-group pre-post design (O-X-O) was employed to evaluate student learning gains in relation to motivation, self-knowledge, self-direction, and positive relationships with others after participating in the TG school counseling curriculum within an after-school program. Classroom teachers not involved in the intervention rated students on the Protective Factors Index (PFI) both pre and post intervention.

### **Participants**

The pilot study took place within after-school programs at two elementary schools in the same district in a suburban school district in the Midwest region of the United States. The Club 21 after-school programs was part of the twenty-first Century Community Learning Centers funded by state grants. Students were chosen for Club 21 based on academic,

socioeconomic and/or behavioral needs as indicated by Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) scores, their participation in the school free-or-reduced lunch program, or by a referral from a teacher or counselor. All fourth- and fifth-grade students participating in Club 21 at the three schools were invited to join the TG intervention ( $N = 84$ ). Only those that returned signed parental permission forms were admitted to the TG intervention ( $N = 59$ ). Of the 59 students that participated in the intervention, 25 completed all sessions and both pre and post assessments (Table 1). Overall, 56% ( $n = 14$ ) of the participants were male; 44% ( $n = 11$ ) female, and were between ages of 9 and 11 years of age. By grade, 60% ( $n = 15$ ) were in grade 4; 40% ( $n = 10$ ) were in grade 5. Participants race and ethnicity were of 56% ( $n = 14$ ) white, 20% ( $n = 5$ ) mixed ethnic heritage, 16% ( $n = 4$ ) African American, and 8% ( $n = 2$ ) middle eastern (See Table 1).

### Procedures

School counselors received a six-hour training in the TG curriculum and also had ongoing access to the second author for consultation regarding the implementation of the curriculum as needed throughout the school year. In addition to the training in the TG curriculum, the school counselors received a three-hour training on evaluation protocol from the first author. The school counselors also received an instrumentation manual, which included scripts for delivering the instruments at the pre-and-post points of the study. Finally, school counselors received a training protocol that included a timeline of the methodology. The second author checked in periodically over the course of the school year to ensure school counselors followed the training protocol and stayed on the timeline for the study.

Approval from the university's Institutional Review Board was first obtained, followed by consent for participating in the research study from the superintendent of the participating school district, the parents of the students participating in the study, the teachers completing the instruments, the school counselors conducting the study, and the students participating in the TG school counseling intervention.

The TG Curriculum is designed to be completed in eight sessions lasting 30 minutes each. In this study, the small groups met for 10 sessions total, with the first session and last sessions dedicated to distributing and collecting pre-and-post assessments. The TG Curriculum contains 10 principles (see Table 2) that guide students through the steps in

**Table 1.** Participant data.

Categories	<i>N</i>	%	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Sample size	25				
Age			9–11	9.8	.83
Grade					
4th Grade	15				
5th Grade	10				
Gender					
Male	14				
Female	11				
Race/Ethnicity					
White/Caucasian	14	(56%)			
Mixed Race/Heritage	5	(20%)			
African American	4	(16%)			
Middle Eastern Heritage	2	(8%)			

**Table 2.** True goals curriculum.

Principle Title	Brief Description
1. It is All About You	Students think about potential goals
2. Write a Goal or Three	Students write down their own goals
3. Rate Yourself	Students learn how to self-assess their goals
4. Check Your Goals	Students edit and improve their written goals
5. Track Your Strategies	Students identify strategies to accomplish their goals
6. Think About Your Ups and Downs	Students learn how internal motivation relates to their goal progress
7. Manage Your Influences	Students manage social influences on their goals
8. Figure Out Who Else Can Help	Students invite others into the goal setting process
9. Look for Patterns	Students identify patterns within their goals
10. Celebrate Your Learning	Students celebrate what they have learned about the goal setting process

successful goal setting, including having students establish their own goals, having students track their progress towards achieving their goals, and having students celebrate their successes. True Goals offer opportunities to combine principles as a standard adaptation. Principles 1– 2 and 9–10 are typically combined into one session so that the curriculum can be completed in 8 weeks or less. Often, students set goals related to academics, motivation, organization, behavior, friendships, family relationships, sports and other significant and relevant areas of their lives.

### **Instrumentation**

#### ***The Protective Factors Index (PFI)***

The PFI is grounded in research-related characteristics students need to be successful in school and life, which was organized in four constructs, motivation, self-knowledge, self-direction, and relationships. Two of the constructs, self-direction and relationship skills, were combined into one sub-category: academic temperament. Thus, the PFI instrument has three subscales, academic temperament, self-knowledge, and motivation. The PFI is a 13-item instrument, with six items loaded on factor one, three items on factor two and four items on factor three. Correlation coefficients were reported by Bass, Lee, Wells, Carey, and Lee (2015) on a range from .70 to .93. For this study, Cronbach alpha scores were calculated both pre (.95) and post (.94) intervention; which indicates high internal consistency.

### **Results**

Using an alpha level of .05, a paired-samples t-test was calculated to compare the mean pretest scores to the mean posttest scores of the student participants. There was a significant difference in the pre-score ( $M = 2.5$ ,  $SD = .59$ ) and post score ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = .61$ ) conditions;  $t(24) = -4.63$ ,  $p = .001$ , providing evidence that the TG curriculum may be effective in producing statistically significant gains in motivation, self-knowledge, self-direction, and positive relationships within an after-school program (see Table 3). The results indicated that completion of the TG curriculum was followed by 76% of participants increasing their post-intervention scores. While statistical significance is an important indicator of intervention efficacy, practical significance (i.e., size of the treatment effect; Sink & Stroh, 2006) better addresses the question “how effective is the TG curriculum in motivating and encouraging students?” To answer this, treatment effect

**Table 3.** Paired-sample t-test results.

Scores	N	Mean	SD	t	DF	$\rho$	d
Pre	25	2.58	.59				
Post	25	3.1	.61				
Post – Pre				-4.63	24	.001	.83

size was calculated using Cohen's *d*, an indicator of the relative strength of the .53 mean difference gain score. The Cohen's *d* value of .83 indicates a large effect size or indicator of the practical significance of the TG curriculum (Cohen, 1992).

An ANOVA was conducted to analyze the interaction of child's race and gender on the variance of the mean difference scores. The test indicated that there were patterns in mean difference scores by race and gender (Table 4), but the variability was not statistically significant amongst any of these variables (race  $p = .579$ ; gender  $p = .744$ ).

## Discussion

Teachers indicated on the PFI that students that participated in the TG curriculum experienced significant gains ( $p = .01$ ) in motivation, self-knowledge, self-direction, and positive relationships over time (see Table 3), with an effect size of over three standard deviations (.83). The results indicated no statistically significant differences across race or gender (See Table 4). It is encouraging that teachers not involved in the intervention indicated such significant gains in students' behaviors after a relatively short period of time. The lack of statistically significant differences across race or gender suggests some utility of the TG intervention across demographic variables. Further, the positive results indicating increases in motivation, self-knowledge, self-direction and positive relationships mirror the improved prosocial behaviors experiences in an after-school setting by participants in the YES program (Zimmerman et al., 2018).

The positive results reflecting teachers' perceptions of changes in the participants' motivation, self-knowledge, self-direction, and positive relationships over time suggest that when students participated in self-directed goal-setting it resulted in positive increases in skills needed to achieve success in school. Further, students in the study received the TG intervention in two different after-school programs at two different sites, and the TG intervention was delivered by two different school counselors in the after-school setting. It is encouraging that students across schools and school counselors experience statistically significant differences from the pre-to-post assessment. It may be that students were able

**Table 4.** Mean differences by race and gender.

Categories	Mean Differences
Race/Ethnicity	
White/Caucasian	.48
Mixed Race/ethnicity	.69
African American	.30
Middle Eastern	.92
Gender	
Male	.49
Female	.57

to use the goal-setting process to focus their effort and attention in school as they aligned their goal-setting process to their own personal values (Bruhn et al., 2016; Koestner et al., 2002; Locke & Latham, 2002). School counselors may be able to use the TG curriculum with small groups of students to help students achieve important school success outcomes.

## Limitations

This was a small-scale pilot study, and there were several major limitations need to be mentioned. For example, the small sample size, use of a non-representative convenience sample, and lack of a control group precludes the possibility of generalizing the findings beyond the sample. Lacking these components, the findings cannot be claimed to be a direct result of the TG curriculum.

Other factors, not addressed in the study, could have influenced the results, such as student maturation over time, or other positive influences (e.g., teachers, extracurricular activities, parental involvement) occurring during the time of the study. The single-measure assessment simply cannot account for these factors and therefore it is important to not overestimate the influence of the TG curriculum within these research circumstances.

Furthermore, there was evidence that research protocols were challenging for our research partners to follow. Despite training, guidebooks and periodic check-ins, research is typically not part of practitioners' daily lives so there was inconsistency across several of the implementation sites. This had a major impact on both the response and program completion rates, and on the data collection. For example, attempts were made to collect self-report data from the participating students, but the data collected were not able to be used because post scores could not be confidently attached to pre-scores.

## Implications

Due to the single-measure assessment and small number of participants within this study, it is important that additional research be implemented to explore the efficacy of the TG intervention. However, building on the promising results of the pilot study, it may be that the TG school counseling curriculum could provide school counselors with an intervention designed specifically for use in schools by school counselors. The TG curriculum can be used in classroom setting as lesson delivery for large groups of students, in small group settings with fewer students or in individual counseling settings. The current study adds to the intervention research within the field of school counseling (Griffith et al., *in press*). Further, due to the flexible nature of the goal-setting process, the TG curriculum may be useful for school counselors to use across academic, social/emotional, and college/career domains. Since few empirically supported interventions exist that have been specifically designed for school counselors to apply to support student success in college and post-secondary readiness, the TG curriculum may also be additive in this area (Griffith et al., *in press*). More research needs to be done with the TG curriculum in this area.

The TG curriculum shows promise as a brief school counseling intervention. The intervention may help increase motivation by increasing students' ownership of the factors within their control and their ability to be successful within the larger social context (Cook & Artino, 2016; Green et al., 2012). TG may provide school counselors with an early intervention to apply in elementary school to help students increase their self-regulation

and increase their self-direction (Blair & Raver, 2015). School counselors can work with teachers and other school support personnel to support students' goals, increasing strong, positive and collaborative relationships between the students', their peers, and teachers, thus increasing their chances of school success (Durlak et al., 2011; Zins et al., 2004). Future research could examine the constructs and process variables that may occur within the TG curriculum that result in positive outcomes in motivation, self-knowledge, self-direction, and positive relationships with others.

Research involving more rigorous methodologies involving wait-list design control groups with either a quasi-experimental or randomized control design would be helpful for determining the impact of the TG curriculum. Additionally, since this study was a pilot study, future studies could increase the number of participants in the study and include different ages and different populations. The current study took place in one school district in one region of the country. Future studies could include diverse populations in different regions of the country as well. The TG curriculum is relatively brief. Future research could examine the role the TG curriculum could play across different levels of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). It may be that the TG curriculum could also be beneficial when combined with other academic, college/career, or social/emotional interventions.

## Conclusion

The TG school counseling curriculum shows promise as a relatively brief and flexible intervention that can be delivered by school counselors in classroom, small group, or individual settings. The TG curriculum equips school counselors with a flexible intervention to use across the academic, college/career, and social/emotional domains. Key findings within this study suggest that teachers observed statistically significant increases ( $p = .01$ ) in motivation, self-knowledge, self-direction, and positive relationships for students in an elementary after-school program that participated in the TG curriculum ( $d = .83$ ). The TG curriculum has the potential to be an effective school counseling intervention.

## Notes on contributors

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