

Teaching a Research-Informed School Counseling Intervention to Practicum Students to Impact Competencies, Imposter Syndrome, and Self-Efficacy

School counselors-in-training (SCIT) have unique needs related to their counseling skill development, which may be addressed through scaffolded learning experiences during practicum field work. In this brief, we propose that course instructors can best meet the needs of SCIT in practicum by teaching SCIT to implement the True Goals curriculum during their practicum experiences. We describe this approach as well as the results of a mixed methods study across three universities exploring practicum SCIT' levels of counseling skill development and self-efficacy in response to the curriculum. Participants expressed a stronger foundation as a school counselor, development of fundamental counseling skills, and how the process of delivering the intervention provided an opportunity for personal critical reflection. Implications for counselor education regarding school counseling training are discussed, including using the curriculum in fieldwork to support students.

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Introduction

School counselors offer a wide range of preventive and responsive services to students through individual, group, classroom, and school-wide programs (ASCA, 2023). To develop the skills needed to carry out such services, school counselors-in-training (SCIT) benefit from structured learning experiences regarding implementing evidence-based practices (Ohrt et al., 2016; Zyromski et al., 2018). As SCIT engage in such learning, they may struggle with self-efficacy and the imposter phenomenon (IP), which is characterized by feelings of inadequacy despite clear evidence of their competence (Bandura, 1977; Perry et al., 2020). Structured supervision and course requirements during practicum provide opportunities for trainees to develop essential problem-solving skills and critical thinking to overcome IP (Lietz et al., 2014). These opportunities help SCIT develop their professional identity and enhance their self-efficacy, which may be a critical factor in counseling performance and the frequency of school counseling programmatic service delivery (Bodenhorn & Skaggs, 2005; Mullen & Lambie, 2016). Structured support through supervision can play a crucial role in helping SCIT gain self-efficacy and competence in delivering comprehensive school counseling programs (Bodenhorn & Skaggs, 2005; Clarke et al., 2024; Mullen & Lambie, 2016; Sweeney & Creaner, 2014).

Furthermore, Zyromski and colleagues (2018) emphasized the need for evidence-based practices to be implemented by both practitioners and counselor educators to help train school counselors in providing interventions for K-12 students. However, they noted that some counselor educators may lack the awareness or training needed to effectively implement these practices in school settings. By focusing on a research-based curriculum, counselor educators can identify programs and interventions that may be beneficial for SCIT development and begin to integrate similar programs into their training programs.

Despite the value of structured support through supervision in practicum and internship, course instructors often do not utilize a specific curriculum to guide student development. The True Goals Intervention (Martin, 2021) offers a structured, flexible curriculum that focuses

on setting goals, which is a key responsibility of school counselors (ASCA, 2021). True Goals contains ten principles that school counselors can use to guide K-12 students through the steps in 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 (Martin, 2021). Each of the ten principles is well supported

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by the goal-setting and motivation literature, and they are delivered as a series of lessons as a function of the school counseling program (Martin, 2021).

According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001), goal setting brings energy and direction toward motivational outcomes (Bandura, 2001; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Further, individuals exercise their sense of agency and build self-efficacy through goal setting, goal pursuit, and self-reflection (Locke, 2001; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Thus, the aim of True Goals is to guide K-12 students through the goal setting and goal-achievement process in a way that fits the specific needs of the students according to their location and setting (Martin, 2021), which leads to student gains in motivation, self-knowledge, self-direction, positive relationships, and social self-efficacy (Martin, Choi, et al., 2022; Martin, Cunningham, et al., 2022; Zyromski et al., 2018).

Although the impact of True Goals on K-12 student outcomes has been previously studied, no found research has explored whether training SCIT in True Goals in practicum enhances SCIT' feelings of self-efficacy and competency, while also reducing their experiences of impostor syndrome (Martin, Choi, et al., 2022; Martin, Cunningham, et al., 2022; Zyromski et al., 2018). Currently, there is a gap in research examining how the delivery of curriculum during practicum impacts the professional identity development and learning experiences of SCIT. To address this gap, we employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate how training SCIT in the use of True Goals, a research-supported school counseling curriculum, impacted their self-efficacy, competence, and experiences of imposter syndrome during their practicum.

Description of Teaching Strategy and Application to Counselor Education

To strengthen SCIT's self-efficacy and competence, as well as reduce the occurrence of imposter phenomenon, our proposed teaching strategy is teaching students the True Goals curriculum in a school counseling practicum course. In doing so, instructors can deliver an evidence-based curriculum that provides a structured learning opportunity with supportive supervision. SCIT may benefit from learning how to deliver and implement such a curriculum while learning to become school counselors.

To deliver the True Goals curriculum in a school counseling practicum course, we recommend that instructors provide SCIT six hours of training on how they ought to implement the True Goals curriculum at their practicum sites. These six hours of training may be broken up across two class sessions. Such training should include an overview of the ten principles of True Goals, with special attention given to how Principle 1 (It Is All About You), Principle 2 (Write a Goal or Three) and Principle 3 (Rate Yourself) can often be combined into the first session of their time with K-12 students at their practicum site in about 30-minutes. The training should also review the remainder of the ten principles, noting Principle Seven (Identify Your Influences)

and Principle Eight (Figure Out Who Else Can Help) can be combined, and Principle Nine (Look for Patterns) and Principle Ten (Celebrate Your Learning) can also be combined during two separate 30-minute sessions with the students. In all, True Goals can often be delivered across six meetings with K-12 students.

In introducing SCIT to the True Goals curriculum, we recommend teaching SCIT how to use the True Goals Student Workbook to facilitate their interventions at their practicum sites. Moreover, the True Goals school counseling curriculum has been used with diverse populations successfully (Martin, Choi, et al., 2022; Martin, Cunningham, et al., 2022). As instructors teach students the curriculum, they ought to emphasize that it is a flexible approach for working with diverse populations in a way that increases inclusivity and empowers K-12 students to control their goal-setting priorities, instead of having those driven by adults in the building, which is a common mistake in PK-12 environments.

Instructors encourage SCIT to work with their site supervisors to determine which curricular constructs are priorities to assess as a pre-post evaluation tool to measure the impact of their True Goals intervention across time. Beyond these parameters, we encourage instructors to allow SCIT to implement the True Goals curriculum in a way that fits their sites, as an individual, small group, or classroom intervention. The student workbook is a guide to help facilitate sessions, often with visuals for students to more easily engage in the material. Throughout the semester, instructors should provide SCIT check-ins regarding their implementation process of the curriculum and deliver subsequent supervision to support their efforts.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When implementing the True Goals curriculum in practicum, instructors should consider the ethical implications of requiring a specific curriculum in a certain format. For example, in this study, participants were able to utilize the curriculum with individuals, groups, or classrooms. Some school districts have specific guidance and regulations on the use of specific curriculum, which may need to be approved. Therefore, it is important to send an email out to all the site supervisors, letting them know that this intervention is an expectation of the program and may benefit their K-12 students. Providing forms of communication through which site supervisors can contact the instructor is helpful for answering any questions or concerns that may arise. Further, if the course instructor is not the Field Experiences Coordinator for the school counseling track, it would be important to go through the Field Experiences Coordinator to approve the True Goals intervention and pre/post assignment as well.

DEMONSTRATED REFLEXIVITY

Counselor educators utilizing True Goals in a practicum course need to consider their bias towards delivery methods and goal setting. We recommend that counselor educators reflect upon their beliefs and bias related to individual, group, and classroom delivery before implementing True Goals in practicum coursework. For example, prior to teaching, a counselor

educator ought to consider their bias around building levels being unable to engage in a particular delivery method or having restricted access to certain student populations. Through bias reflection, the counselor educator can prevent or weaken preferential treatment or feedback related to the mode of delivery of this curriculum to students. Counselor educators also would benefit from reflecting on their own beliefs related to goal setting, particularly related to the types of goals K-12 students should establish. This notion is especially relevant because the True Goals curriculum highlights the importance for K-12 students to set their own goals related to their own desires, instead of goals being pre-established for K-12 students.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Suggested resources to implement the True Goals curriculum in a school counseling practicum course include the *True Goals School Counseling Curriculum Facilitator Guide and Student Workbook* (Martin, 2021), course assignment, and assignment rubric (see page for resources: <https://bit.ly/tpbtruegoals>). Practicum instructors can also adapt the True Goals training detailed below and encourage SCIT in practicum to work with their site supervisors to ensure that, as K-12 students set goals, pathways for achieving those goals are created whenever possible, even if systemic change is required. We recommend that instructors provide multiple avenues to check for understanding of SCIT in practicum during the training via interactive learning activities with sticky notes, verbal feedback, and processing groups. Doing so can help adjust the training content for differentiated learning.

Assessment Methods Used to Assess Student Learning

To formally assess the value of teaching the True Goals curriculum to SCIT in practicum, we conducted a mixed methods study with a convergent design, which involves qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis before being merged into the findings (Creswell & Clark, 2021). The objective of our study was to evaluate the impact of the True Goals school counseling intervention on SCIT's (a) competency levels, (b) imposter syndrome, and (c) self-efficacy among graduate-level students enrolled in a school counseling practicum course. Our guiding research question was: "How does training in the True Goals practicum curriculum influence students' professional competence, experiences of imposter syndrome, and self-efficacy?" Participants were SCIT enrolled in practicum classes at three different universities across the Midwest and Western United States in the same semester. In previous semesters, the instructors had assignments within the syllabus requiring students to collect pre-and-post evaluation data related to an intervention they conducted at their sites. At two of the universities involved in the study, in previous years, True Goals had been a required intervention for the students to conduct at their practicum sites, in partnership with their site

supervisors and school staff. The course instructors had anecdotally noted that students in past years had benefited from a structured intervention to conduct at their sites. This study then evolved from the normal educational practices conducted at these universities in their practicum courses to using True Goals for SCIT to apply as an intervention at their sites to enhance their professional development.

We used a one-group pre-post quantitative design (O-X-O) to evaluate student changes in professional competency, and for self-efficacy, we used the Counselor Competencies Scale-Revised (CCS-R; Lambie et al., 2018) and the School Counselor Self-Efficacy Scale (SCSE; Bodenhorn & Skaggs, 2005). Initially, the scales included the Clance Imposter Syndrome scale; however, participants received an incomplete scale in the survey, so this construct was only explored qualitatively. As part of the mixed-methods approach, the research team utilized Yin's multiple-case study design to collect qualitative data simultaneously at three different institutions (2018) through semi-structured interviews. In these interviews, we explored the changes SCIT experienced in learning about the True Goals curriculum and how doing so interacted with potential imposter syndrome, competency levels, and self-efficacy levels.

QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENTS

The SCSE is a 43-item scale which includes five subscales: personal and social development, leadership and assessment, career and academic development, collaboration, and cultural acceptance, which the scale was normed with master's-level students (and others), with a population composed of mostly White women (Bodenhorn & Skaggs, 2005). The CCS-R is a 23-item instrument comprised of two factors: (a) counseling skills and therapeutic conditions and (b) counseling dispositions and behaviors. Norming of the instrument was completed with counseling students in a CACREP-accredited program, and the scale was completed by their practicum supervisors (Lambie et al., 2018). Thus, the SCSE and CCS-R aligned well with the purpose of this study.

We utilized a single, group pretest/posttest research design to evaluate student changes in professional competency and school counselor self-efficacy. Using SPSS (Version 27), we conducted a preliminary analysis of the data using one-way between groups ANOVAs to assess score differences according to gender and race on the SCES and CSS-R scales and subscales to ensure that these two covariates did not have a confounding effect on the dependent variable. Subsequently, we conducted paired samples t-tests to compare the mean pre- and post-test scores of the participants for each scale and subscale. Cases were excluded listwise for each scale so that only participants with fully completed pre- and post-test scales were included in the analysis for each, resulting in 23 paired samples. We utilized a p value < 0.5 as a cutoff for statistical significance. We calculated treatment effect size using Cohen's d for each mean difference gain score as an indicator of the relative strength of each gain. Cohen's (1988) recommendations for interpreting effect size were applied. We summarized these results in Table 2.

Table 2
Paired Samples T-Test Results

	Gain Score (Post – Pre)	t	DF	p	d
CCS-R Skills and Therapeutic Conditions	.40	4.05	22	<.001*	.84**
CCS-R Dispositions and Behaviors	.38	3.06	22	.003*	.64
SCSE Personal and Social Development	.41	3.33	22	.002*	.69
SCSE Leadership and Assessment	.55	4.79	22	<.001*	1.00**
SCSE Career and Academic Development	.42	4.52	22	<.001*	.94**
SCSE Collaboration	.41	4.16	22	<.001*	.87**
Cultural Acceptance	.51	4.11	22	<.001*	.86**
SCSE Total	.45	5.40	22	<.001*	1.13**

**Reflects statistically significant level*

***Reflects large effect size*

QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENTS

In addition to the quantitative assessment, we also used qualitative exploration to understand the potential impact of the True Goals curriculum on SCIT in practicum. A member of the research team not affiliated with the participants' university conducted semi-structured interviews virtually, lasting 45-60 minutes. The interview protocol included questions that reflected constructs from the CCS-R, hoping to highlight the participants' experiences implementing the True Goals curriculum and their reflections on self-efficacy, imposter syndrome, and leadership and advocacy. The qualitative analysis team (first, second, third, fifth, ninth and tenth authors) was made up of three faculty members and three doctoral students. They conducted the analysis using individual and group processes. The team met to decide how to begin the coding process and assign pseudonyms for participants. Each member of the qualitative analysis team individually reviewed the four interview transcripts and coded on the same document by highlighting statements and adding comments to documents. Each member kept independent notes and summarized their initial codes and impressions of the interview data. Although the sample size was small ($n = 4$), saturation occurred, as the participants provided similar views on their experiences in implementing the True Goals curriculum and its impact on their professional growth. After their initial review, the qualitative analysis team reconvened to discuss their codes and create a table that showed connections between coded quotes from participants. Each team member then reviewed the collective codes and quotes to further develop themes and subthemes.

We identified three overarching themes using each team member's summarized notes, team member reflection, and open discussion: (1) professional foundation, (2) counseling development, and (3) critical reflection process. We utilized trustworthiness strategies outlined by Goodman-Scott and Cholewa (2023), including member checking transcripts with each participant after the interview and before the coding process and discussing our experiences as educators and doctoral students. We use direct participant quotes within the findings section that follows to illuminate our themes.

Findings

PROFESSIONAL FOUNDATION

Delivering the True Goals curriculum to SCIT in practicum may help foster fundamental counseling skills and professional identity development for SCIT by fostering self-efficacy. We found significant differences in pre-test and post-test scores for all subscales of the CCS-R, which represented statistically significant increases in perceived professional competency. This result aligns with the qualitative findings of this study, in which participants expressed increases in self-efficacy and confidence over time when delivering this curriculum, as the curriculum served as a professional foundation for them to grow. Because instructors provided SCIT with this adaptable curriculum during their first clinical experiences in schools, participants reported feeling more confident working with students because they felt they had a framework for individual, group, and/or classroom sessions. For example, Morgan explained how using True Goals as a framework “remedied those anxieties that I was having before” practicum about what to say and what to work on with students when she was feeling out of her element with a different age group. Building these foundational skills can help influence SCIT's perspectives regarding their self-efficacy as a counselor as well as help reduce the impacts of imposter syndrome. By providing practicum SCIT with this guidance and experiential learning, participants reported increased levels of self-efficacy in counseling, which is demonstrated in both qualitative and quantitative results of this study.

COUNSELING DEVELOPMENT

Study participants also had statistically significant increases in self-reported counseling skills, dispositions, behaviors, and ability to create and maintain therapeutic conditions, which directly assists SCIT in development across delivery modalities (Mullen & Lambie, 2016). In qualitative interviews, participants illustrated how they developed their direct and indirect school counseling skills. Carter shared, “I really wanted them to decide their goals for themselves and just be there for support.” Similarly, another participant, Taylor, described that True Goals

taught her “to help kids to set their own goal that was not set by me or influenced by me.” Respecting students’ voices and their needs was also manifested in adapting curriculum during sessions. Participants also highlighted specific counseling skills they were able to practice using True Goals. One common topic centered around goal setting and monitoring students’ progress. Participants reported having opportunities to use other skills such as reflection, summarization, and refocus in the process of implementing True Goals. Morgan used the curriculum as a tool for gentle confrontation, stating, “because their behavior wasn’t matching their goal, and so just kind of pointing out the discrepancy there.” The structure of True Goals provided students with opportunities to practice counseling skills, like challenging.

Participants also noted an increase in self-efficacy related to their skills related to collaboration and consultation, a noteworthy finding given that many SCIT may have limited exposure to experiential practices in these domains in their coursework (Cholewa et al., 2020). Participants described feeling empowered to make changes and advocate at the individual and systemic level for themselves and their students. Participants described how True Goals created moments for collaboration and consultation with teachers. Taylor shared, “I was able to touch base a little bit with the teachers. I think having that communication with the teacher from the school counselor, me, was sort of a new skill.” Some participants used students’ progress on their True Goals as evidence to support their work. Morgan, for instance, shared, “I checked in with this student, and they rated themselves, and they gave themselves a 5. I mean, that’s just data. And that’s evidence that I can share with my supervisor.” The need for SCIT to be equipped with leadership and advocacy skills is a consistent theme in school counseling literature as well as one that emerged in participants’ experiences learning True Goals in practicum (Li & Peters, 2022; Perry et al., 2020; Young et al., 2015).

CRITICAL REFLECTION PROCESS

Furthermore, participants described how they used the True Goals curriculum to navigate ever-changing levels of confidence and IP for SCIT. As growth is not linear, participants described the ups-and-downs related to their time in practicum. All four participants noted a spectrum of emotions that varied greatly and cycled from high to low or low to high confidence. Carter mentioned high levels of IP in the first few weeks of practicum. In contrast, Taylor initially experienced high levels of confidence based on their previous educator experience and then experienced dips in confidence and IP from the shift from a teacher to a school counselor mindset. She described this, saying, “I think I was initially very confident, and then I was very unconfident ... I got knocked down a few pegs, like I just need to grow and learn. And I think that is good, and now that the group is over, I think I saw my growth to adjust my ability to learn, and that boosts my confidence as a counselor that I can learn and do things differently than I did in the classroom.” Using True Goals helped participants build confidence in not only their skills but in their professional judgement and identity, which further strengthened their overall impression of their professional self-efficacy and abilities.

Implications and Future Directions

By providing this curriculum to SCIT during this stage of their development, participants also described how the True Goals curriculum provided a professional foundation for them to grow upon by providing a framework for multiple delivery modalities (e.g., individual counseling, group counseling, and classroom lessons). This finding further aligns with research regarding SCIT's desires for gaining experience in group work to increase feelings of self-efficacy (Flasch et al., 2016). Additionally, True Goals proved a strong learning tool for participants to better understand research-based practices and data-driven interventions, which is a necessary component of the professional identity of school counselors (Zyromski et al., 2018). By providing students with this structured experiential learning, SCIT can be the bridge between theory and practice, which can also help improve feelings of self-efficacy (Flasch et al., 2016).

LIMITATIONS

While this study provided valuable information about the impact of implementing True Goals with SCIT, there were some limitations within the qualitative portion of this study. First, there was a small sample size ($n = 4$) of participants who participated in semi-structured interviews, despite broad efforts to recruit more students. Additionally, the total number of participants was small ($N = 23$), which also provided a limitation for statistical analysis. Secondly, participants from only two universities completed interviews. In addition, the current study did not include control groups of SCIT who did not receive the training, which poses a challenge to fully understanding the impact of this teaching strategy, as factors other than True Goals training may have contributed to SCIT growth. Finally, the participants' demographics in both the quantitative and qualitative data collection stages did not fully represent the full range of student identities at the three sites. However, the sample was skewed toward female and White participants, which is representative of ASCA professional membership.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Within the realm of counselor education, the results of this mixed-methods study provide implications for school counselor preparation around student development. Future directions may include the utilization of specific assignments, curriculum, and training with an emphasis on increasing self-efficacy in a broad range of counseling skills. Other researchers have noted similar needs related to implementation of an in-class problem-based learning activity for counseling students (Casado Pérez & Witherspoon, 2019). Such learning activities can consist of the possible benefits of providing a research-based curriculum such as Student Success Skills or Kelsos's Choice (see Abel et al., 2018; Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2015; Mariani & Silvestro, 2020), in a formative field experience (e.g., practicum) to help students develop self-efficacy, professional identity, and combat feelings of imposter syndrome. The

results demonstrated that students not only benefited from being exposed and trained on research-based interventions, but then, being able to implement the intervention, supported their self-efficacy. Other researchers noted how hands-on or “experimental” training allowed school counseling students to work through challenges which then increased their confidence when working with English Learners (Shi et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the benefits of structured support in delivering research-based curriculum are not exclusive to those in graduate school, as professional development of practicing school counselors can also be considered. Professional development in research-based curriculum and goal setting may benefit practicing school counselors in their self-efficacy and counseling skills. For example, Perry and colleagues (2020) discovered that advocacy training impacted self-efficacy for practicing school counselors. Further inclusion of training in goal setting may be pivotal to school counselors, given ASCA mindsets and behaviors for school counselors to facilitate short- and long-term goal setting with students (e.g., B-LS 7 and B-SMS 5; ASCA, 2021). Additionally, counselor educators may consider future directions related to the timing of this teaching strategy in practicum or internship. Overall, the results from this mixed methods study point to the benefits of including structured experiences in implementing research-based interventions during SCIT training programs, particularly during practicum, when SCIT have their formative experiences in schools.

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