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Tammie Knick

Minnesota State University - Mankato

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WhyTry? A Program Evaluation

Tammie Knick, LSW, MSW Student
Sioux Trails Mental Health Center &
Gibbon-Fairfax-Winthrop Middle School

Introduction

In Minnesota, one out of every five students fail to graduate from high school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Long before students decide to drop out of school, a host of risk factors or early predictors undoubtedly emerged in childhood. The purpose of this research pilot project was to determine the efficacy of the *WhyTry?* program in helping to reduce some of those risk factors such as:

- Truancy
- Behavior problems in school
- Low academic achievement
- School disengagement

The *WhyTry?* Program uses a strengths-based approach to help youth overcome their challenges and improve their outcomes at school. *WhyTry?* is based on sound empirical principles and uses (Moore, 2001):

- Solution Focused Brief Therapy
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
- Social and emotional learning strategies
- A series of 10 visual analogies
- Experiential activities
- Videos and music with positive lyrics

Program Description

The *WhyTry?* program uses a series of ten pictures or visual analogies. Each visual teaches a specific principle and is reinforced through music, videos, and physical activities related to the principle. The major learning styles — visual, auditory, and body-kinesthetic—are utilized throughout the program. The goal of the *WhyTry?* program is to help youth answer the question “Why try in life when they are frustrated, confused, or angry with life’s pressures and challenges” (Moore, 2001, p. 9) The *WhyTry?* program teaches youth that trying hard in life and putting effort into challenges at home, at school, and with peers is worth the effort. The principles include (Moore, 2001):

- ? **The Reality Ride** - staying on track to achieve goals
- ? **Tearing Off Your Label** - focusing on strengths
- ? **The Defense Mechanisms** - using positive coping skills
- ? **Climbing Out of the Pot** - peer pressure
- ? **Jumping Hurdles** - problem solving
- ? **Desire, Time and Effort** - importance of time and commitment
- ? **The Motivation Formula** - turning challenges into positive opportunities
- ? **Lift the Weight** - self discipline
- ? **Getting Plugged In** - importance of having support systems
- ? **Seeing Over the Wall** - accumulation of all analogies to reach goals

Literature Review

Others who have implemented the *WhyTry?* program with youth have reported the following outcomes:

- Ω Granite School District in Utah, September 2003 - significantly improved understanding of key social and emotional principles, including self-motivation, consequences, peer pressure, and obeying laws and rules (Gee).
- Ω Los Angeles County Office of Education, October 2003 - less attendance problems, lower negative attitude toward teachers and school, and a higher locus of control indicating they were more personally responsible for their behavior (Eggett).
- Ω Alpine School District in Utah, December 2003 - increased grade point averages, increased attendance records, fewer incidents of failure, and higher graduation rates (Bushnell & Card).
- Ω Yakima School District Learning Center, March 2007 - 33% increase in the cumulative GPA (Walker).
- Ω South Los Angeles Resiliency Project, April 2008 - resiliency increased specifically a significant positive change was found in the students’ willingness to “keep trying to succeed” (Acuña, Vega, Meza, Marquez, & Vera).
- Ω California therapeutic residential home, 2008 - self-efficacy improved, optimism about accomplishing challenging tasks increased, and decreases in internalizing behavior, social problems, attention problems, thought problems, rule-breaking behavior, and aggressive behavior (Baker).

References

Available upon request

Research Questions

1. Will students’ behavior in the classroom improve by participating in the program?
2. Will students’ grades improve as a result of participating in the program?
3. Will students attend school more regularly by participating in the program?
4. Will students develop a more positive perception of their future?

Methodology and Data Sources

The pilot project took place at GFW Middle School from March - June of 2010. The population of students selected to participate in the program had to meet one or more of the following criteria by the end of the first semester of the school year:

- ✓ Were failing academically as indicated by failing three or more classes
- ✓ Were frequently absent from school as indicated by seven or more absences
- ✓ Were displaying inappropriate behaviors as indicated by two or more behavior incident reports

A convenient, purposeful sampling method was used to randomly select 14 students from a pool of 27 who met participation criteria. The sample contained the following demographics:

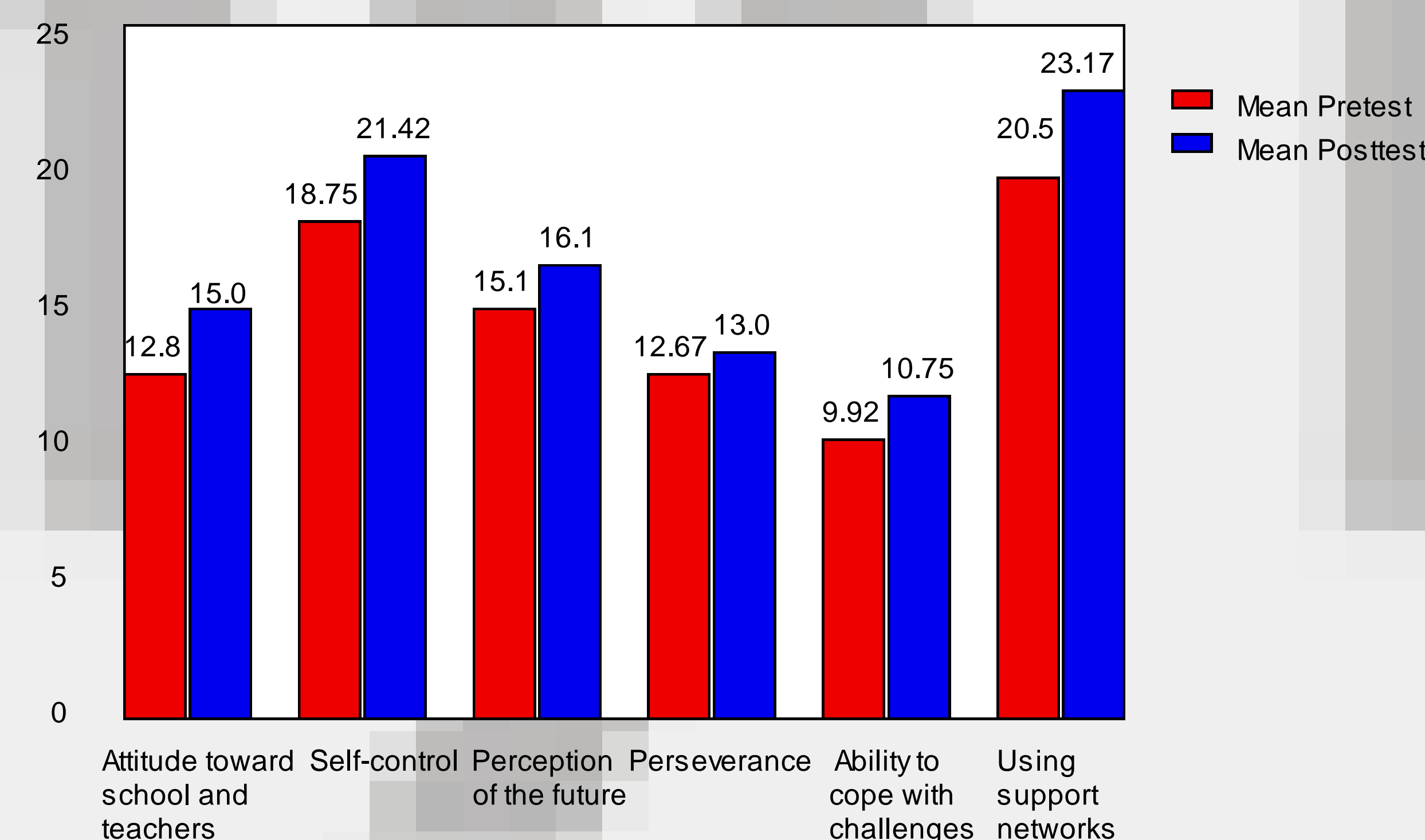
- ✓ Gender - ten males, four females
- ✓ Grade level - nine 7th graders, five 8th graders
- ✓ Race / Ethnicity - eleven Caucasians, two Hispanics, One African American
- ✓ Disability - five who received special education services

Data measurement tools used for pretest and posttest:

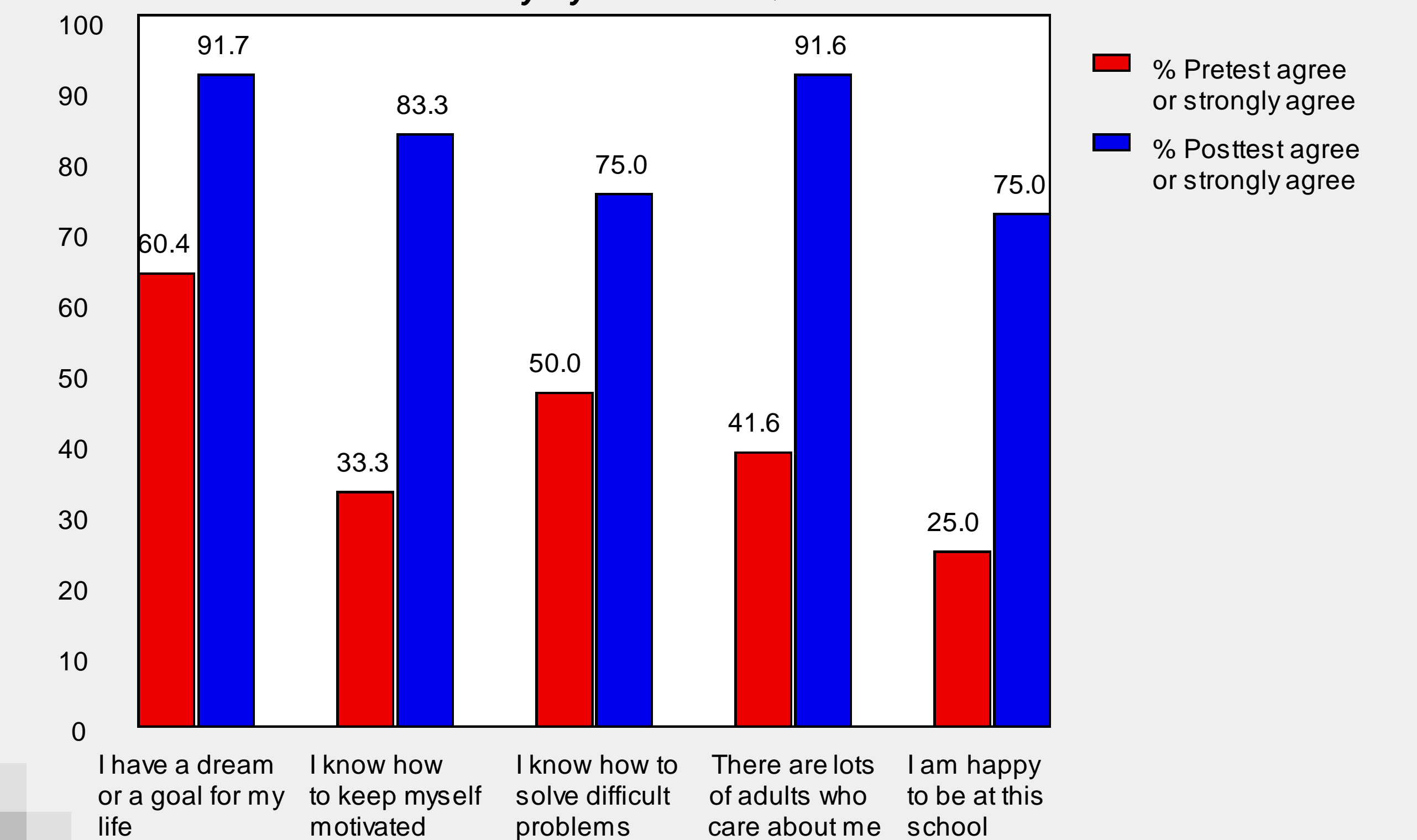
- ✓ *WhyTry?* measure titled My Beliefs
- ✓ Behavior Rating Index for Children (BRIC)
- ✓ Attendance reports
- ✓ Report cards
- ✓ Discipline reports

Variable	Pre	SD	Post	SD	Mean Change	t	P
Grade Point Average	1.71	0.51	1.86	0.44	0.15	-1.09	0.29
WhyTry Measure	91.08	12.82	106.17	17.04	15.08	-2.61	0.02 *
BRIC	32.5	4.52	28.67	4.19	-3.83	2.3	0.01 *
Behavior Reports	2.42	2.31	2	2.41	-0.42	0.9	0.4
Attendance	17.42	9.27	26.33	18.96	8.92	-2.16	0.05

WhyTry? Measure Questions Sorted By Constructs



Five of the WhyTry? Measure Questions



Findings

The following outcomes were produced by the pretest and posttest data measures:

- ♦ The average student GPA did increase by 11 percent from 1.71 at pretest to 1.86 at posttest. Eight out of the twelve students did improve their GPA. Individual tests revealed that two students significantly increased their GPA, one by .81, a 55 percent difference and the other by .86, a 66 percent difference.
- ♦ The average score on the *WhyTry?* measure did increase from 91.08 at pretest to 106.17 at posttest indicating an increase in students’ beliefs about themselves with regards to their attitude toward school and teachers, self-control, perceptions of their future, perseverance, ability to cope with challenges, and using support networks.
- ♦ All areas improved on the My Belief measure but the three areas in which the students’ showed the most improvement were self-control from 18.75 at pretest to 21.42 at posttest, perseverance from 12.67 at pretest to 13.0 at posttest, and using support network from 20.5 at pretest to 23.17 at posttest.
- ♦ The average score on the BRIC did change from a pretest total of 32.5 to a posttest total of 28.67 indicating students’ behavior problems in the classroom did decrease by 13 percent. The student behaviors listed on the BRIC that were most improved included: feeling happy and relaxed, paying attention in class, finishing a job or task, and controlling their temper.
- ♦ The average number of Behavior Incident Reports did decrease by 20 percent from a pretest score of 2.42 to a posttest score of 2.0 indicating less behavior problems.
- ♦ The average number of hours a student was absent from school actually increased from 17.42 at pretest to 26.33 at posttest indicating students’ attendance did not improve overall. However, two students did significantly improve their attendance, one improved by 92 percent and the other improved by 56 percent.
- ♦ Overall, one student did improve significantly in three of the five measures. Four additional students showed improvement in two of the five measures.

Future Implications and Recommendations

When compared to other studies of the *WhyTry?* program, the present study produced similar outcomes such as increased grade point averages, decreased behavior problems, improved self-efficacy, and an increased willingness to persevere. In addition, the present study did increase student’s positive perception of the future. However, the present study was not consistent with other studies with regards to having a positive outcome related to attendance as students from the present study did not increase their attendance. Based on the findings of this evaluation, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Implement the *WhyTry?* program at GFW Middle School next year and expand the program to GFW High School and Elementary School.
- Use a control group for future implementations to increase the validity of the study.
- Use the *WhyTry?* Fidelity Checklist to ensure the variables are isolated and can be measured as intended. Fidelity also allows for replication of the study, which in turn will strengthen the results of research.
- Follow the present study student participants through to high school and provide continued support to ensure they graduate.
- Ensure school staff are knowledgeable about the program and enlist their support for future implementations.
- Improve program assessment plan by locating other measures that have the potential to more accurately gather data.