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Students’ perceptions of success in English as indicated by their learning goals

Abstract
Setting goals and working towards achieving them are life skills that facilitate success in a wide diversity of contexts. Goal setting has also been shown to be a useful tool to support student learning in school contexts. This paper investigates the nature of learning goals independently chosen by a group of 8-9 year old student participants in a research study designed to support the development of their intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 1983, 1993). Whilst there is evidence that these students, identified as low achievers in English, developed considerable skills in Higher Order Thinking tasks using the Revised Bloom’s taxonomy, (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001), their learning goals in English remained concrete and measurable in nature. The discussion that is generated as a result of this data seeks to identify the constructs that may have impacted on the students’ perceptions of what constituted success in English. Finally, this question is considered, ‘Is the current emphasis by schools and their communities on the decoding and encoding skills required for independent learning in English promoting the perception that students who cannot read and write sufficiently accurately for their age and stage, also cannot think?’

Keywords
Intrapersonal intelligence
Goal setting
Differentiation
Student perceptions of literacy success

Goal setting is common practice in a diversity of cultures, contexts and circumstances and reflects the personal values and aspirations of those engage in the practice. It has many advocates in the educational arena also. Lepani (1995) believes that students’ capacity to set goals provides them with the opportunity to access and develop skills in four principles, lifelong learning, learning to learn, customizing global learning and directing one’s own learning. She believes that these principles enhance the capacity of the human mind. Gardner (1999, p.113) also recognizes their importance. He states, ‘goals must come first and they must be kept in mind.’ Greenwald (2000) finds Problem Based Learning an effective process in the science classroom. The students were required to take the major responsibility for the content and process, i.e. what is
learnt and how. In order to establish this practice initially, Greenwald finds it important to highlight the individual nature of thinking and learning, for each student to establish knowledge of their own individual learning preferences and for them to decide what they wanted and needed to know to be able to take each step of the way. He found that goal-setting was one effective method of doing this.

Kaplan & Maehr (1999) discuss goal setting in the context of promoting higher achievement in the performance of African American students. They discovered that student achievement goals, those that aimed at improving individual progress in learning, were more successful at promoting well-being and academic success than ‘ego goals’. They identified ‘ego goals’ as those that were constructed and pursued in order to excel, with the purpose of beating or ‘besting’ others. Oppenheimer (2001) agreed that research studies had assisted in identifying that the characteristics of the most successful goals were the same as those for achievement goals. Those studies found that goals are motivational and lead to increased performance when they are specific, moderately difficult, accepted by the individual and when feedback is provided regarding progress toward achievement of the goals. Educationalists from diverse areas such Bloom and Krathwohl (1964), and Ellison (1992) advocated students’ writing specific learning objectives. This type of goal setting is evidenced in the SMART goal setting process utilized by McGrath & Noble. (2003) as part of their program designed to develop resilience in students.

Bandura (undated) believes that appropriate, challenging goals sustain and increase student motivation. Their achievement of their goals is largely due to personal influence as opposed to outside influences. Others cannot realistically regulate the time or manner in which personal goals are pursued. Motivation based on goal setting involves a comparative cognitive process, which then determines that self-satisfaction is conditional on achieving the set goal. It is this self-satisfaction that drives people to persist in their efforts and moderate their behaviours in order to achieve their goals. Much of the value of goal setting in an educational context lies in the fact that this intrinsic reward of self-satisfaction is frequently of much more value and importance than any extrinsic reward or punishment. This wide-ranging support for student goal setting led to its inclusion as one of the strategies in a program designed to develop intrapersonal intelligence in students who were participants in a recent research study.

The Study
The purpose of the main research study (Sellars, 2003) was to provide evidence that a program of skills and strategies designed to nurture and develop intrapersonal intelligence as defined by Gardner (1983,1993) in individual students would provide evidence that the students had the capacity to develop accurate self knowledge and use the knowledge to impact positively on their academic performance in the classroom. Specifically, the ten month research project sought to provide evidence that the students would increasingly demonstrate an increase in self-directed learning strategies, have improved self-monitoring skills, and have developed deeper self-awareness of themselves as learners as a result of the intervention strategies. This paper discusses one aspect of the intervention program, the achievement goals set by students as personal learning goals. Although it was not within the scope of the study to examine the nature of the goals set by the students, the characteristics of the goals
that students nominated raised some interesting questions. The intervention was implemented to support the group of twenty-seven students, aged eight and nine years old, who were assessed as low achievers in literacy. The setting was a large Catholic systemic school serving a rural community and the students’ major difficulties were identified in the results of a range of diagnostic tests, running records, teacher observations and assessment of work samples.

The Method

The goal setting process itself was initially challenging, as might be expected. The students were introduced to the SMART goals contract (McGrath and Noble, 2003) as it provided students with detailed guidelines. It established a step-by-step procedure for setting goals and prompted students to consider the details. Students were required to state why they had chosen their goal and the strategies that they may be able to use to achieve the goal. Despite the considerable detail, the contract remained flexible and was able to be adjusted or reassessed. The process of nominating a goal, determining why the particular goal is of importance, considering which strategies would be most supportive, selecting the attitudes and values that were the most meaningful and personally determining a way the SMART goal-setting strategy was implemented, served as a tool to assess the development of the students’ intrapersonal intelligence.

Some additional information relating to the intervention program may be significant. In addition to competency in defining achievement goals, the intervention activities purposefully sought to promote increased student skills in articulating their individual strategies for achieving their goals, increased engagement and on task times, more purposeful organizational skills and an increase in their understanding of their relative learning strengths and limitations as defined by Gardner’s (1983, 1993) intrapersonal intelligence. Measuring success (or lack of success) was not highlighted as part of the intervention. Students were not assessed at any point in the program in terms of standardized reading or spelling tests to determine reading or spelling ages. There was no procedure that measured one student’s performance against that of another. The standard SMART acronym in which the M denotes measurable was rejected in favor of the SMART acronym variation in McGrath and Noble (2003) in which the M denotes meaningful. Where practical and appropriate, open ended questioning and discussion was employed in the general teaching and learning activities. Initially, students were supported in customizing activities in order to allow each of them to utilize their relative strengths to support development in areas of relative limitation. Students’ self-monitoring processes and reflections were recorded in their reflective journals and these provided evidence of the students’ developing understanding of themselves as learners.

Various activities, one of which is detailed below, that were designed and implemented throughout the study required students to engage in analyzing, evaluation and creating. Some of these were particularly popular and created a new, refreshing dynamic in co-operative group work and whole group interaction. As the students were struggling code-breakers (Winch et al, 2004.), it was important for the confidence and motivation that the activities did not overly stress that particular role of the reader, but instead provide access to the other roles of the reader, those of text participants, text user and text analyst (Luke & Freebody, 1999) which are so frequently not available to students who cannot use cueing systems competently. The
following interaction is one example of such an activity. Students were taught how to use cubes with question starters from each level of Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2000) to develop customized questions for a diversity of texts and to develop strategies in order to successfully access information with which to formulate answers, both for themselves and others.

In order to allow students to participate in the four roles of the reader (Luke & Freebody, 1999) the texts were intermittently read independently, listened to independently on headphones, read as group readers or modeled by the colleague teachers. By facilitating this type of access to a variety of texts for students with limited decoding competencies, it was possible to engage students in a range of thinking skills that both challenged and enriched their existing competencies in areas of language and literacy. The implementation of these strategies and the employment of resources such as these encouraged students’ engagement in the roles of text participant, text user and text analyst. It offered them regular, sustained opportunities to demonstrate their capacities to think critically and creatively, to use their prior knowledge in a meaningful learning context and to escape the tedium and struggle of their limitations as code breakers.

The Findings
Initially, none of the students was able to complete the SMART contract without assistance. Three students were confident to complete one section at a time after receiving reassurance and further explanation of the requirements. The remainder was not able to attempt the task without one-to-one support from an adult. Ten students were identified as having extreme difficulty and required one-to-one assistance in order to complete the goal contract. There were several areas of difficulty for this group of students. They found the contract difficult to read. When it was read aloud to these students, they still found it difficult to determine what exactly the task required. When the task was explained and some understanding reached on an individual basis, making a decision about the goal itself became the problem. Nine of these ten students found decision-making about a learning goal in a classroom situation very challenging. Only one of the students was happy to decide on a goal for himself.

It was observed that these other nine students would have been more comfortable if the teacher had taken responsibility for determining the goals on their behalf. After further interaction on a one–to- one basis, two more of these students were able to set a goal. The remaining seven established their goals after further, substantial discussion. These discussions took place as individual teacher/ student meetings over a period of days. Developing specific goals also proved to be a challenge, even for the remaining seventeen who were confident to read and set goals for themselves. Having been directed to set a goal that they would like to achieve in English, there were many instant responses, but these were non-specific in nature. Consequently, the meaning of specificity needed to be explored and then applied to each of the ideas that the students had offered regarding their own goals. Each student, having decided on a goal that they had never previously accomplished in Literacy and Language, completed the details on the SMART goal format (McGrath and Noble, 2003).

As each initial goal was achieved, students continued the process. Achievable goals continued to be brainstormed with groups of students and a list compiled of these
ideas. This was then displayed in the classrooms as a reference for those students who were uncertain of what they would like to set as their next goal. There was no compulsion to set one of the resultant goals or to be in any way competitive. Students were also actively encouraged to review the progress of their goals and to adapt them or to change them where necessary. Goals that were longer-term might be broken down into smaller steps, with the progress recorded on a footstep, which could then form part of the ‘running record’ on the Steps to Success Display Board. This display was an important strategy for students as it was student initiated and indicated that students became extremely committed to their goals, even if they realize that these particular goals could not be realistically achieved in the short term. Interestingly, at the conclusion of the study two thirds of the students had two goals in progress simultaneously. This situation developed because many of the students had set another, longer, short-term goal, for example, the goal of qualifying for a pen license. As this was not as readily achieved as some of the other goals, these students decided not to abandon that specific goal, but to continue to work towards it, setting an additional shorter term goal to work towards in the interim.

The colleague teachers summarized their records of the students’ goal setting skills in the Literacy and Language area at the conclusion of the study and rated the students using the following pre-determined criteria.

Rating 1. Needs teacher to help define ideas and write as a goal. This rating was recorded for students who could not independently formulate their goals. These students needed prompting to set a new goal and also needed help completing each section on the SMART Goal Contract (McGrath and Noble, 2003).

Rating 2. Beginning to define ideas and set goals independently. Students who did not require prompting to set a new goal or assistance in deciding the general area in which they wanted to achieve, but could not complete the goal-setting process on the SMART Goal Contract (McGrath and Noble, 2003) independently. These students had difficulties making their goals specific and needed assistance in not more than two other sections of the SMART Goal Contract (McGrath and Noble, 2003).

Rating 3. Has well defined ideas but needs support in formulating these on the SMART Goal Contract (McGrath and Noble, 2003). Students who demonstrated independence in determining their own goals, learning strategies and time frames but were not able to make the goals specific enough without teacher assistance were recorded as rating 3 points.

Rating 4. Independently formulates goals and monitors progress. The students who were able to complete the SMART Goal Contract (McGrath and Noble, 2003) independently, needed no prompting to set new goals and kept their own informal or formal records of their progress were rated in this category.

Rating 5. Independently sets and monitors progress of goals. Is able to think ahead and formulate future goals. The students in this category not only exhibited all the skills of the students who rated four, they also planned their future goals in advance of the completion of the current goal and anticipated their learning needs.

All the students had made progress in defining new goals in English. The results are recorded as Graph 1.

Graph 1 Teachers’ Observations of Student Skills in Setting Goals in English at the conclusion of the Study
Discussion
Further investigation into the nature of the achievement goals that students had set for themselves revealed that all the set goals, achieved or not, were of a concrete and measurable nature and related specifically to basic skills in literacy. These included goals related to learning spelling words for spelling tests, practicing handwriting in order to earn a red or blue pen license (students generally wrote in pencil), reading pre-determined numbers of books and completing some elementary writing tasks.

While further exploration into the reasons for the students’ choices of learning goals was outside the scope of this study, these observations do present an interesting situation that merits reflection by educators of students in similar contexts. The desire to be permitted to use pen in books (especially a red pen!) may be easily understood as a student goal for learners of this age. However, the success in spelling tests was not significantly reflected in students’ writing and the lack of discrimination in the complexity and quality of reading material that comprised the actual reading goals is perplexing. One question that remains unanswered is ‘Why exactly did the students formulate their goals in this manner when much of the successful intervention was focused on developing awareness and skills in the higher order cognitive processes (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2000)?’ Fig.1 indicated that it was not because the students ultimately lacked the skills to set their own learning goals.

The teachers’ observations, as recorded by the teacher/researcher and the teachers, the assessment data and the teachers’ anecdotal records indicated that the students readily engaged in many of these intervention activities designed to develop higher order thinking and more complex literacy skills. The students remained engaged for increasingly longer periods of time and demonstrated considerable competency in these tasks compared to those involving the basic tasks in literacy, many of which focused on decoding and encoding. There is evidence that these higher order thinking activities facilitated successful learning in some areas of literacy, but this was not reflected in the nature of the goals they set. This led to the question ‘Might the students associate success and competence in language and literacy primarily with
such things as lists of correct spellings learnt expressly for the weekly test, checking off books on a reading scheme, writing to order and acquiring red and blue pen licenses?” ‘Why was all the richness of thinking, learning and reflection that was in evidence not reflected in the nature of the students’ goals?

It is unlikely that there is a single answer. These decisions may be associated with developmental age and stage. Students themselves may have needed to be able to have measurable tasks, not in classroom teaching and learning, but in the goals they managed themselves. It may be that students developed quite sophisticated, accurate self-knowledge as learners and recognized that these areas were, for them, areas of relative limitation and required sustained effort. If this is the case then the intervention, although recognized as having a positive impact in terms of the research questions investigated, may be even more successful than originally thought. Indeed, the students may have been overly influenced by the suggestions that the group had compiled as the result of the brainstorming activity intended to scaffold their efforts.

However, there is the possibility that students were defining literacy success in a rather narrow fashion. Much of the students’ school experiences of language and literacy prior to the intervention program had mainly been concerned with the development, correct use and measurement of their code breaking skills, basic comprehension and correct conventions. The students may have regarded any activity in which independent reading (code breaking) did not occur, as irrelevant to their literacy progress.

Previous intervention activities and programs in which the students had been involved had been developed using a deficit model. These programs required students to have continued exposure to and engage in increasing quantities of activities that were based around the areas of knowledge and competencies in which they demonstrated the least competencies. The intervention activities in this study presented written texts in a new light. With appropriate support, texts no longer became viewed as symbols of the students’ incompetence. They could be dipped into for desired information; they contained ideas for discussion and provided the basic materials that promoted and produced much deep understanding of a diverse range of issues. Whatever the nature of the difficulties that resulted in the impaired progress of these students in the areas of encoding and especially decoding, it did not appear to substantially impair their capacities to think critically about written and oral texts if the content was made available to them.

Perhaps the most daunting consideration for educators is the possibility that these students and others in similar literacy programs have not been consistently engaged in educational experiences that consistently advertise and promote the true nature of literacy and language competencies and inform students that authentic literacy competencies lie chiefly within the ‘other’ roles of the reader (Luke & Freebody, 1999). Once past the beginning years, there is increasing emphasis on the capacities of students to read for themselves. In our efforts to ensure students become independent decoders and encoders, do we unwittingly over-stress this particular aspect of literacy? Could it be that the concentrated, widespread efforts of educators to implement programs that promote, analyze, measure and report on students as code breakers, especially in the early years of schooling, have resulted in a rather distorted
view of what it is to be truly literate? Students do need to be aware that the role of the
code breaker is important and facilitates independent access to texts. However, they
also need to be aware that decoding and encoding skills are merely the keys to
unlocking the diversity of knowledge, purposes, issues, interpretations and
opportunities for self expression that are the heart of being literate. At worst, are well-
intentioned educational endeavors resulting in an acceptance of the erroneous idea
that students who experience difficulties in developing code breaker skills are not
capable of successfully engaging in other roles of the reader, those that require more
complex cognitive processes, with any degree of competence?

It is indisputably desirable and advantageous for all students to develop the skills to
decode accurately and fluently on an independent level. However, in this increasingly
technological and rapidly changing society, it may be that the balance between
teaching for these basic, measurable skills and facilitating the development of the
complex cognitive process required for authentic engagement in literacy learning in
the wider sense, may need to be constantly adjusted. As cognitive scientists make new
discoveries about the working of the brain and how a variety of previously
unidentified physical and neurological conditions can impair normal development of
some areas of learning, there is increasing pressure on educators to revise and adjust
their pedagogy. If it were possible to offer students who have sustained difficulties in
basic skills some support in their roles as code breakers, minimize the focus on this
and other fundamental roles as prerequisites to accessing other aspects of literacy
learning, it may be possible to maintain students’ interest and engagement in this vital
area of knowledge until such time as students become capable of establishing
themselves as independent decoders and encoders. It may even be that engaging
students in the roles of text participants, text users and text analysts could motivate
students to persevere and overcome their limitations as code breakers. Further study
in this area may contribute significantly to the promotion of literacy skills for all
students. However, for this to be authentic, various aspects of current practices would
require a new conceptual basis and the pedagogical beliefs that are evidenced in
mandatory standardized testing such as the NSW Basic Skills Testing would need to
undergo considerable transformation.

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