



***My Guide Inside* 2018 and 2021 Focus Groups: Retrospective Evaluation Report**

By Kathy Marshall Emerson, Executive Director
National Resilience Resource Center

This report explores the longitudinal impact of a sample of high school students learning the basic principles of how they operate from the *inside-out*. The two focus groups were conducted three years apart in 2018 and 2021. Unexpectedly the global COVID-19 pandemic started in this period. A small pilot of the *My Guide Inside* curriculum was conducted in a British Columbia school in 2018. This evaluation documents outcomes as these participating students transitioned to university life, navigated constant change and laid career plans.

Historical Context

Mental well-being was a top student concern for some years at Gulf Islands Secondary Schools (GISS) on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, Canada. In spring 2017 a group of secondary students voluntarily led a student GISS Wellness Committee to raise awareness of the need for improved student mental, emotional and social well-being. They organized a whole-school Wellness Day—a huge undertaking with 34 workshops and 43 facilitators.

The following autumn they worked with Sarah Hook-Nilsson, Director of GISS Connecting Generations Program, to initiate a peer counseling program. The student Wellness Committee met over two months to determine requirements for a peer counseling course. By December 2017, the course was scheduled and

students selected *My Guide Inside (MGI)* as the curriculum. Instructor Christa Campsall, co-author of *MGI*, and GISS Special Education Team Chair, revived a school board approved course, *Peer Counseling 11/12* and arranged two academic credits.

Twelve students, including most planners, enrolled in the 30 hour course. Ten were in grade 12, one in grade 10, and one in grade 9. Weekly 60-minute lunch period classes and two half day weekend sessions were scheduled from December 2017 through May 2018. The *MGI* Level III text was followed. Each chapter story was introduced, read, discussed, and written about in each student's journal. Selected assignments were undertaken. During the week students conducted real life applications for every chapter and reported outcomes to the class.

The instructor met mid-term with all students individually. She explained the structure needed for a Peer Counseling service and created student tasks so the student body would know the Peer Counseling service was safe. Students made PSAs and posters to share *MGI* knowledge to help their peers. They also promoted student use of the GISS Peer Counseling service. A grant provided *MGI* Learner Books I, II, and III to each class member for class study and also to use in their first peer counseling experiences with younger students. The Student Wellness Committee evolved into GISS Peer Counselors.

MGI Focus Group I – May 17, 2018

Ten of the original 12 students from the GISS class using the *MGI* Level III secondary curriculum participated in the initial focus group conducted in 2018. Nine participants were in grade 12 and one in grade 10.

Kathy Marshall Emerson, Executive Director of the National Resilience Resource Center (NRRC) and co-author of *MGI* learner books and teacher manuals, conducted this online recorded 25 minute 2018 focus group during the school day. A semi structured interview format was used. She had no previous contact with, or information about these students. Students gathered in a GISS meeting room; Kathy was in Minnesota, USA. Brett Chitty, near Cambridge, UK, filmed the discussion. (See References for link.)

The purpose was to document student outcomes from the pilot 2018 *MGI* principles-based learning. In general at this early point students described improvements in their own health and well-being and relationships with others. Their very early experience as peer counselors in training was intentionally not assessed.

NRRC is grounded in understanding that people *learn, live* and then *share* what is valuable to them. This perspective undergirded the focus group process. It appears these students *learned* and *lived* *MGI* lessons and went on to *share* their early knowledge with other students, parents or friends. Samples of this *inside-out* personal change process are evident in these 2018 student statements reported by Marshall (2021, p. 81).

- “I am able to stay calm and think things through more clearly before immediately getting stressed out or frustrated which is really helpful especially in high school.”
- “This learning made a huge difference within my rowing capabilities and my successes.”
- “It’s great to see the outcome within friends and really know [I can] support them properly.”
- “The single most important thing – I am a lot less judgmental of people and I feel more compassion.”
- “I am no longer as afraid to think about stressful things because I can approach it in a more unbiased way rather than actively trying to not think about things or push things back.”
- “I have become very focused in a direction that has helped me mentally and physically. My overall health has improved a lot and my mental wellness as well.”
- “A lot more internal things have been happening ... my relationships with my parents have been a lot better and with my friends as well. Overall, I have been a lot happier.”
- “We miss the most important piece of education, which is teaching one person about themselves, about their thought and ... their emotions and how they have the ability to change. This is what this [learning] enables you to do.”

- “I think if this were taught we would be able to be more successful students and also be more fulfilled in our every day because we have the capacity to change and that’s critical.”

MGI Focus Group II – July 16 , 2021

Kathy Marshall Emerson also conducted the online three year follow-up *MGI Focus Group*. By this time, the students had graduated, moved geographically for university study, employment and more.

One student volunteered to contact the 2018 *MGI Focus Group* participants. Six could not be reached or did not respond. Six students (50%) participated in the *MGI 2021 Focus Group II*. One of these participants submitted written answers to questions. Another had online transmission problems; his answers were clarified in writing. The students were at various locations; Kathy was at her Minnesota, USA office. Christa and Bob Campsall anonymously recorded the discussion from Salt Spring Island in British Columbia, CA.

At the three year point student experiences were robust. Sample composite statements paint a portrait of each 2021 focus group participant’s experiences:

- **“The principles are ... universal and definitely ingrained just in a way that I live my life.** ... I almost don’t even need to go back and reflect specifically because it’s something that applies to every aspect of my reality. The fundamental spirit of what we were learning from *My Guide Inside* is both awareness of self and compassion for others. ... there was so

much [pandemic] panic so instantly. I was definitely really grateful to just feel really solidly grounded and being able to have that effect on my family too and being able to have the compassion and understanding that other people are going through a very tough time, especially the people that were in a degree of isolation and reach out to them. These are such critical aspects of how to live a really powerful daily life. So, it was magnified during the pandemic for sure.

Holding the space for the self – that was the biggest thing that the pandemic actually gave me. ... Yeah, the difference has been incredible. I can first, right off the bat in the morning ground myself, and then face all those goals from a mindset of clarity ... with the natural innate desire to hold space for other people. You are able to see other people much more clearly, your relationships are a lot more harmonious, and the day just flows generally more harmoniously.”

- **“I think something that has carried over for all three years, has been definitely just continuous change.** Living in different places, going to different schools learning different things. Change is the most consistent thing. So I think just practicing and remembering that you have to check in with yourself. ... And I think that, for me, is the most important especially since everything is changing very fast for everybody. I think just the opportunity to allow ourselves to really learn even if we mess up, even if we feel we aren’t where we are supposed to be, just giving ourselves the freedom to try again,

to learn, and to understand that things change and we can change with them.

[The *MGI* class] was something we all took to heart and we all considered important for ourselves and our community. I think that made a huge difference.

Honestly, the pandemic has re-shaped what I had planned for the future. Originally I was just majoring in History, but now I am looking to switch universities and double major in History and Fine Arts, which is kind of scary, but I'm very excited. So pretty much just prepping for that change that's already on its way. I think for myself, that's the most noteworthy thing.”

- **“In my opinion the principles have been absorbed so instead of me going back looking at the books it's in my brain now** so I just go and check in with myself as a routine and it just is second habit whenever I feel I am really in a bad mood I just try to take a step back and try to understand what is going on. I feel like I learned a lot from doing that course [*MGI*] three years ago. That's so crazy. ... it's just intertwined with my life now.

At work during the pandemic ... I really noticed an increase in mental health problems and people really struggling ... my family as well. ... I would reach out and just make sure that they were ok ... there's definitely going to be a lot of people that have trauma from this alone and it's going to be hard. I am glad that I have this background that I can take and help other people. ... I have these tools now ... if they want advice or just a friendly person to

listen, which mostly that's just what they're looking for, I can be there and I can be present and I can help in the smallest way but it goes a long way as well.

I'm furthering my education. ... so that I can work in hospitals, in the pharmacies in hospitals, maybe even working with chemo patients. It definitely changed from audio engineering but I have that under my belt.”

- **“After high school I went to Armenia and studied in an international program ... these [*MGI*] things that we learned really enabled me to know the best way to approach people** who have never had the opportunity to talk about themselves ever. So that was an experience that was super, super deep to me. And I think that also carries over to Coronavirus and the calendar year that we had in lockdown. It was a strange year, even for family and friends; people expressed themselves in different ways.

I saw there's a lot of people that don't even [speak] about our feelings, how we're doing, talking about how each other is doing ... and there's obviously a lot of stereotypes, toxic masculinity, different kinds of negative images that are portrayed on people of all kinds all over the world. ... Because I was also involved in [*MGI*] peer counseling—where I would study [in Armenia] I had those conversations. The *MGI* kind of teaching, where you sit in a circle, [had] this kind of feeling that we're all the same—we're all equal and we're all learning together. There's no hierarchy. So I remember that also being very comforting.

I'm planning to pursue a major in International Relations, and minor in

Music. It's been incredibly difficult for everybody; online classes were not what university is about so I am looking forward to meeting my profs and meeting people and being in that environment. So that's my plan. Yeah, I'm doing really well."

- **"I'm grateful I had had this — I guess — psycho-educational experience prior to this global [pandemic].** ... As the pandemic began, I started to realize the importance of holding compassion and space for myself and where I was at emotionally. When I was able to do that ... I was suddenly able to hold so much more kindness for other people and extend gratitude to them and kindness on a deeper level. ... I've really started to realize and live the importance of having a common and shared humanity. [Our *MGI* class] was warm, it was human and it might sound a little bizarre but, for context, I am studying psychology at university, and a lot of what I learn is cold and sterile. It is not personal, it is distant; it medicalizes and dehumanizes the lived experiences of individuals. That results in very difficult circumstances and decreases, I think, the ability for people to learn and also have a deeper more human understanding of people's experiences.

There needs to be further implementation of the [*MGI*] program ... in our school systems, in our society. We do not give young people an education about mental health, about mental wellness, about the experience and the importance of the relationship with themselves. And then we go out into the world, we go to university and we may have the academic skills, we may have the professional skills, but there often is a discrepancy with the ability to

understand ourselves and the ability to understand others in these new environments. I really think without providing a strong foundational education like *My Guide Inside*, we disservice the youth we are putting forward into the world.

If you do not understand yourself then you are not able to get to a place of wellness and self-compassion, and extending kindness and gratitude to yourself and others. You're not going to be able to study and contribute everything you have to offer.

I have been studying psychology and I'm hoping to continue my studies at a graduate level. I'm really hoping to be able to go into research which aims to provide an evidence base to give historically marginalized groups representation and also data to support their lived experience. I really hope to be able to bring compassion into the research."

- **"After I graduated high school, I have evolved and grown so much as an individual.** I am currently working toward gaining my nursing degree. I have found the Three Principles to be very useful throughout my life and educational journey so far. Learning about the Principles helped me realize how important it is to be self-aware. ... being taught about the Principles has led me to be self-aware and has allowed me to progress in breaking my own implicit biases.

My "staying power" would have to be the idea of self-awareness. I practice self-awareness every single day whether it is in my nursing practice or everyday life. I have

found self-awareness to be a very valuable tool for recognizing when I need to prioritize self-care. I developed this through practicing to identify the things that hold me back from being the best version of myself. In my life, self-awareness is being able to notice my own strengths, but also noticing when my physical and mental well-being is off track.

During the pandemic, I found that I had to rely on my own motivation and self-guidance more than I ever have before. Being confined to my own personal bubble made me realize how lucky I am to live the life that I do. Throughout the pandemic, I had to remind myself frequently that I am in control of my own productivity. I had to prioritize self-care and exercise more than ever before because I found myself feeling isolated. The *MGI* principles helped me realize that I am in control of how I conquer each day. This idea guided me in making each day of the pandemic easier.

[As I think back on our class] Christa taught in such an elegant, thought provoking, and kind manner. She shared stories, had planned activities, and facilitated important conversations throughout our sessions. Each week I looked forward to meeting with the *MGI* group and engaging in meaningful conversations. Our group was very connected, and each member of the group contributed immensely to the quality of our learning. We all felt comfortable sharing personal stories because we knew that the *MGI* group was a safe place to be vulnerable.

I am very grateful to have been a part of the focus group. *MGI* has taught me many valuable [lessons] which I use frequently in my life and my nursing practice.”

Implications

Impressively students by 2021 had become confident in knowing how to naturally keep themselves in a healthy calm state of mind. Furthermore, they did so during the very difficult time of the global pandemic and widespread isolation. It is especially striking that they also report being in service to others ... listening, caring, contacting and supporting fellow students, family members, customers, and others in this period of distress. In one sense this might be thought of as maintaining their own *health as helpers* and also serving as *natural peer counselors* in very traumatic times.

The depth and detail of responses is noteworthy. The mention of the *MGI* principles becoming *ingrained* is remarkable given the brevity of a two-credit academic high school course three years prior. Furthermore, these students frequently report their success in navigating constant global and personal change including significantly modifying professional goals, academic degrees and even changing universities.

While this is a three year report from 50% of the original class—six students—it gives evidence that once these students naturally began to *learn* how they operated from the inside-out they *lived* the understanding, and instinctively *shared* it with others in natural ways.

It bears noting that these students had no formal additional training beyond the *MGI* class. They experienced life lessons through the lens of the “safe” and comfortable high school *MGI* class. There may be real value in considering how

future *MGI* students, upon high school graduation, might be regularly encouraged to continue such learning lifelong by exploring globally available educational Three Principles resources and programs.

Additionally, it may be important to maintain contact with these students post pandemic in hopes of conducting a third focus group at the six year mark. That could be an opportunity to assess one aspect of the *MGI* pilot course not explored in the first two focus groups.

After all eight *MGI* chapters were completed, the last six class periods opened with brief audio or video clips followed by individual student comments and group “check-ins” followed by some instructor guidance. Four of the sessions featured clips of author Sydney Banks discussing selected aspects of the Three Principles. While students in Focus Group II did mention the importance of checking their own state of mind regularly, we do not know to what extent the use of the Banks audio discussions may have impacted student outcomes.

Finally promising longitudinal three year focus group outcomes, especially in the context of an unanticipated global pandemic, underscore the importance of establishing K-12 classes teaching students to tap their own natural mental health and well-being. The valuable benefits may be realized lifelong.

Selected Supportive Resources:

Marshall K. (2021) Discovering Resilience and Well-being in School Communities. In: Nabors L. (eds) *Resilient Children*. Springer Series on Child and Family Studies. Springer, Cham.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81728-2_5

Read free at <https://rdcu.be/cMsYf>

Aust B. (2013) *The essential curriculum: 21 ideas for developing a positive & optimistic culture*. <https://www.amazon.com/Essential-Curriculum-TM-developing-optimistic/dp/1489532684>

A quick guide for administrators and leaders.

My Guide Inside,

<https://www.myguideinside.com/>

Comprehensive site with student curriculum, teacher manuals, professional development and more.