Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.
WHAT DO I WANT TO DO
AND HOW DO I GET THERE?
A possible selves approach to motivation in education

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the Degree
of Doctor of Clinical Psychology
at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

LUCIA JAZMIN MUÑOZ LARROA

March, 2013
ABSTRACT

Although access to education is young person’s right, the rates of school disengagement in industrialised nations such as New Zealand continues to be a matter of concern. Research that provides new information on how the schools and government departments can reach out to those students at risk is needed. In order to modify a student’s school disengagement pathway it is crucial to identify students at risk (Study 1) and intervene (Study 2). The possible selves theory has been found useful to approach students’ motivation. The theory suggests that the students’ visions of themselves in the future act as a cognitive schema through which they interpret the relevance of present events, such as their performance at school. In turn, student’s ability to see an alignment between their visions of their future and the outcomes offer by school qualifications or skills learnt has the potential to enhance their school engagement. In the first study an alternative measure of school engagement was developed to aid in the identification of at-risk students. Unlike other measures of school engagement, the Goals and Perception of School Scale (GPSS) focuses on the students’ view of their future, the role that they perceive school has on it, and their perception of school. The exploratory factor analysis conducted revealed the presence of the predicted three component structure, corroborating a strong relationship between having goals and school engagement. In this study, participants who reported having education-related goals (e.g., “I intend to get NCEA level 3”) were found to have higher school engagement scores. Thus, these findings support the idea that school engagement is enhanced by the alignment between students’ personal goals (the students’ vision of themselves in the future) and the outcomes offered by school (skills and qualifications). In addition, those who reported short-term academic goals were less likely to report in-school misbehaviour. Therefore, without having to ask about school performance and in-school behaviour the Goals and Perception of School Scale is a measure of school engagement which can aid the early identification of those students who are disengaging from school.

In a subsequent study a possible selves intervention was adapted and delivered as a school workshop. The Possible Selves Workshop was found to be a feasible brief group intervention, that
targets 14 to 15 year-olds consisting of four 60-minute weekly sessions. The content of the intervention includes the adolescents’ identification and enhancement of their possible selves. In addition, it also included psycho-education, goal-setting and problem solving skills training to facilitate the students’ pursuit of their long-term goals. The intervention provides a suitable environment to discuss the relevance of the outcomes offered by school with regards to the students’ vision of their future. The results of this study revealed an improvement on participants’ academic possible selves and plausibility of the strategies being enlisted to pursue the academic possible selves after the intervention. This change was particularly noticeable in participants who had lower baseline scores on school engagement and self-efficacy. Furthermore, there was also an improvement in the time that participants reported doing homework or studying, and on their perceived efficacy and endurance on these activities.

Although the workshop showed promise as an intervention there was not quantitative evidence to demonstrate that the improvement in participants’ possible selves translates into greater school engagement (as measured by the scales utilised) and performance (i.e., better grades and harder work). The limitations of this study and suggestions for further research on the efficacy of this intervention are discussed. The studies that comprise this research contribute towards more effective identification and prevention of school disengagement and propose the Possible Selves workshop as a potentially effective intervention that needs to be investigated further.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This journey has not been an easy one. In my darkest moments, when desperation sat beside me, when the end of this task seemed to get farther rather than closer, when I saw life and joy in the distance while I typed harder in my computer, when I was sad and cried. You were there. Sometimes not knowing what I needed, and fearing doing the wrong thing, you were there. You have proof read my assignments, and when I attempted to throw in the towel, you handed it back to me. You insisted in taking breaks, you cooked dinner and made me laugh; and I still don't know how you managed to do all that when I was not an easy person to have around. But you were there. You have been there all along, loving me. And it is because of the love I felt that I can now conclude this journey. Gracias amore, gracias Carlos for being there for me. This doctorate belongs to you and to all the people that generously helped me.

Very special thanks to Professor Ian Evans who more than a supervisor has been a mentor. He believed in me and in this project from the moment I presented it to him. Since then he has given me his unconditional support and has fought many battles with me to make this project happen. I certainly could not have done this without his wisdom, his enthusiasm, strength and commitment. I would also like to thank my second supervisor Ruth Tarrant for her insightful suggestions and support.

Thanks to my parents who believe in education, who have fought for a society in which quality education becomes a right of all young people, rather than the privilege of some. Thanks to my parents who believed in my dream of becoming a clinical psychologist, and whose financial aid allowed me to complete my training when scholarships or any other financial support were declined for this project. This research was solely funded by a Studylink loan, my part-time and at times full time jobs, and my parents’ help. I would also like to thank my sister whose friendship and camaraderie grounds me, connecting me with my roots and who reminded me why I have chosen to become a therapist.
Thanks to my dear friends Katrina and Chris who also believed in me. They trusted me with the most important job (looking after their two little girls) a part-time job which flexibly let me comply with my university commitments (which also represented an important financial support). They cheered me on, they listened to my rants, they took me out to party (sometimes against my will but always good for my health), to do yoga, and cuddled me when I felt weak.

Muchas gracias a Maria Ulloa, who lent me her car so I could deliver the workshop in the different schools. But most importantly, she has been my mentor and inspiration. She has been the best clinical teacher and role model I could ever have. She has also been my companion and an amazing friend. I take all our endless conversations close with me.

Thanks to my friend Renee Feith who designed the possible selves tree template, without a doubt the coolest component of this research. Thanks to Jake and the boys for all their love and support.

Thanks to Catherine and Tony Vile and the duo of Adam Hollando and Sonali de Silva for hosting me and feeding me while I was out of town in block courses in Auckland. Special thanks to Adam for prepping me for my interviews, his invaluable advice made a difference in my performance.

Thanks to my friend Lyn who generously hosted me and offered me a lift when we were taking block courses in Palmerston North. Her strength and determination have been inspirational, her support and love have been food to my soul.

Thanks to Chris Boswell Fine Catering for the financial contribution to provide snacks given to the participants of this research.

Thanks to my dear friend Arna Mitchell for helping me collect data for my first study and for standing up for me when no one did.

Thanks to Jess Mills who was the research assistant collecting the feedback from the participants, also many thanks to Tia Narvaez and Luisa Ulloa who assisted me as independent raters.
Thank you to the staff of the different schools who gave their time and helped me in the organisation of the workshops. Thanks to all my participants for opening up to me. This research would be nothing without you.

Many thanks to my field supervisors Rebecca Webster, Kerstin Kramar, and Kara Mihaere. I have no way to give back to you all the time and effort you have put into my learning. Special thanks to Kara who stood beside me and opened me the doors to the beautiful Māori culture. Likewise thanks to all the loving people of Te Whare Marie; Raewyn, Tai, Maire, Kirsten, Jayne, Richard, Peter, Karen, Max, Allastair, Louise, Tina, Key, Gloria, Te Wera, Sue, Selena, Rose, Jasmine, Vicky, Mal, Helen, Tua, Matua Hemi, Matua Kuni, Whaia Mere, Dess, and John.

Thanks to Kasia Madriesvksa for the emotional and academic support in the internship process. Thanks for validating my experience and couching me throughout.

Thanks to Kate Clarkin for playing a client in one of my role playing exercises.

Thanks to Anna Reynolds for her unconditioned support, reading my assignments, and passing on tips for the exam process. Thanks to Bret Hunt for his always precise statistical advice. Thanks to Gunar and Jackie for their tips, and thanks to all the girls from the lab for the very needed peer support.

Thanks to Patricia Ford for keeping me sane.

Thanks to my friends Roger and Glynis, Don Gareth and Doña Helen for making me laugh.

As the reader can see I have been extremely privileged to have being accompanied and sometimes carried by the love of family and friends.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ...................................................................................................................... iii  
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................ v  
TABLE OF CONTENTS ...................................................................................................... ix  
PREFACE .................................................................................................................. xvii  
CHAPTER 1 ..................................................................................................................... 1  
Section 1: The challenge of staying at school ............................................................... 3  
Drop out and school disengagement: The social problem .............................................. 3  
Drop out Research ............................................................................................................ 6  
Drop out Research in New Zealand ................................................................................... 8  
Section 2: Motivation ......................................................................................................... 12  
Possible Selves Theory ....................................................................................................... 16  
Possible Selves in the School Context ............................................................................... 21  
Possible Selves Programme .............................................................................................. 27  
Section 3: What kind of intervention? .............................................................................. 29  
Strengths-based approach to working with adolescents .................................................. 32  
CHAPTER 2 : THE GOALS AND PERCEPTION OF SCHOOL SCALE ......................... 37  
Pilot Survey .................................................................................................................... 40  
Participants ..................................................................................................................... 40  
Measures ......................................................................................................................... 41  
Procedure ....................................................................................................................... 43  
Results ............................................................................................................................. 44  
Discussion ....................................................................................................................... 55  
CHAPTER 3 : POSSIBLE SELVES WORKSHOP .......................................................... 59  
Rationale .......................................................................................................................... 59
Method ........................................................................................................................ ................ 63
The possible selves workshop ................................................................................................. 72
The follow-up ......................................................................................................................... 75
Results ..................................................................................................................................... 76
School engagement and self-efficacy ...................................................................................... 77
Maths and English .................................................................................................................. 79
Possible selves measure ....................................................................................................... 80
Diary mood rating and study-time ......................................................................................... 81
Gender ..................................................................................................................................... 83
Attrition .................................................................................................................................... 84
Possible selves ....................................................................................................................... 88
Summary ................................................................................................................................. 101

CHAPTER 4 : POSSIBLE SELVES WORKSHOP OBSERVATIONS ............................................ 102
Ground Rules and group process .......................................................................................... 102
Possible Selves Tree ............................................................................................................. 107
Student branch ...................................................................................................................... 108
Area of interest branch ........................................................................................................ 110
Participant Feedback .......................................................................................................... 115

CHAPTER 5 : BRIEF CASE STUDIES ...................................................................................... 119
Julia: Setting 1 ....................................................................................................................... 120
Intervention evaluation ......................................................................................................... 121
Discussion ............................................................................................................................. 123
Tama Setting 2 ...................................................................................................................... 125
Intervention evaluation ......................................................................................................... 126
Discussion ............................................................................................................................. 129
Anna: Setting 3 ...................................................................................................................... 132
Intervention evaluation ......................................................................................................... 133
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Goals and Perception of School Scale Original Item Pool .............................................41

Table 2 Goals and Perception of School Scale Descriptive Statistics and Alpha Coefficients.................................................................45

Table 3 Goals and Perception of School Scale Component Factor Loadings.................................................46

Table 4 Factor Loadings for Exploratory Factor Analysis with Varimax Rotation of Goals and Perception of School Scale, Three Factor Solution (17 items included)............................................48

Table 5 Factor Loadings for Exploratory Factor Analysis with Varimax Rotation of the Goals and Perception of School Scale, Three-Component Solution.........................................................50

Table 6 Inter-rater reliability analysis of the Next Year Possible Selves variables................70

Table 7 Descriptive statistics of the NYPS variables for males and females at Time 1 ...........84

Table 8 Descriptive Statistics for the Next Year Possible Selves variables for the High-School Engagement and Low-School Engagement groups, at Time 1 (Pre-intervention), Time 2 (Post-intervention), and Time 3 (Follow-up).................................................................90

Table 9 Descriptive Statistics for SES, GPSS, CPSE, Maths and English for the Responder Group at Time 1 and Time 3.................................................................96

Table 10 Descriptive statistics for Study Time and Mood Rating variables at three points in time for the Responder Group..................................................................................................99

Table 11 Ground rules elicited by the participants during the first session of the intervention per setting..........................................................................................................................103

Table 12 Actions that enhance growth as a student: themes identified from the participants’ student branch in the Possible Selves Tree...............................................................109

Table 13 Fear category frequency as mentioned by participants in the Possible Selves Tree task across settings......................................................................................................................112

Table 14 Support category frequency as mentioned by participants in the Possible Selves Tree task across settings......................................................................................................................113

Table 15 Frequency with which the workshop components were reported by participants as the most important..............................................................................................................115

Table 16 Least useful components as reported by participants................................................116
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Distribution of School Engagement Scales scores................................................................. 42
Figure 2. Distribution of the Goals and Perception of School Scale scores........................................ 44
Figure 3. Eigenvalues and number of factors scree plot for the Goals and Perception of School Scale ........................................................................................................................................ 47
Figure 4. Distribution of the GPSS Affect Subscale scores............................................................... 51
Figure 5. Distribution of the GPSS Short-Term Academic Goals Subscale scores. ......................... 52
Figure 6. Distribution of the GPSS Long-Term Goals Subscale scores. ............................................ 52
Figure 7. Intervention’s components and proposed pathway............................................................. 62
Figure 8. Timeline of the Possible Selves Workshop study................................................................. 64
Figure 9. Distribution of the SES GPSS CSES scores at Time 1....................................................... 78
Figure 10. Distribution of the self-reported performance in Maths and English assignments at Time 1. ........................................................................................................................................... 79
Figure 11. Distribution of the Next Year Possible Selves variables at Time 1.................................... 81
Figure 12. Distribution of the average Mood Rating and Study-Time reported in the diaries during Week 5........................................................................................................................................ 82
Figure 13. Self-efficacy in the completion and non-completion groups............................................ 85
Figure 14. Possible Selves in the completion and non-completion group......................................... 86
Figure 15. Total Possible Selves enlisted by participants at Time 1 and Time 2 for the High-School Engagement and Low-School Engagement groups........................................................................ 89
Figure 16. Total Academic Expected Possible Selves enlisted by participants at Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3 for the High-School Engagement and the Low-School Engagement groups.................. 91
Figure 17. Strategies to attain academic expected possible selves enlisted by participants at Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3 for the High-School Engagement and the Low-School Engagement groups... 92
Figure 18. Level of Plausibility of the strategies enlisted by participants at Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3 for the High-School Engagement and the Low-School Engagement groups................. 93
Figure 19. Balance between expected and to be avoided possible selves enlisted by participants at Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3 for the High-School Engagement and the Low-School Engagement groups.

Figure 20. School Engagement scores at Time 1 and Time 3 for the Responder Group.

Figure 21. Self-Efficacy scores at Time 1 and Time 3 for the Responder Group.

Figure 22. Self-reported Maths and English performance at Time 1 and Time 3 for the Responder Group.

Figure 23. Weekly average reported Study Time in minutes at three points in time for the Responder Group.

Figure 24. Weekly average reported Mood Rating at three points in time for the Responder Group.

Figure 25. Julia’s scores in the SES, GPSS and SE measures across time.

Figure 26. Julia’s scores in the Next Year Possible Selves measure across time.

Figure 27. Tama’s scores in the SES, GPSS and SE measures across time.

Figure 28. Tama’s scores in the SES, GPSS and SE measures across time.

Figure 29. Anna’s scores in the SES, GPSS and SE measures across time.

Figure 30. Anna’s scores in the Next Year Possible Selves measure across time.

Figure 31. Histograms of the GPSS Items Before and After Transformation.

Figure 32. Histograms of the GPSS Subscales.
LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A: Tables and Figures ....................................................................................................156
Appendix B Information Sheet Study 1 ..........................................................................................159
Appendix C Facebook Add Study 1 (text only version) .................................................................161
Appendix D Descriptive statistics of the Goals and Perception of School Subscales (13-item scale) ..............................................................................................................................162
Appendix E Individual Information Sheet Study 2 ...........................................................................163
Appendix F Parent or Guardian Information Sheet Study 2 ............................................................166
Appendix G Individual Consent Form Study 2 ................................................................................168
Appendix H Parent or Guardian Consent Form Study 2 .................................................................169
Appendix I Next Year Possible Selves ..........................................................................................170
Appendix J School Engagement Scale ...........................................................................................172
Appendix K Goals and Perception of School Questionnaire ...........................................................173
Appendix L Children’s Self-Efficacy Scale .......................................................................................174
Appendix M Four-Line Diary ...........................................................................................................176
Appendix N Participant’s Feedback Form ........................................................................................177
Appendix O Study 2 descriptive statistics for the measures of school engagement and self-efficacy. ...........................................................................................................................................................178
Appendix P Study 2 descriptive statistics for the self-reported performance in Math and English...181
Appendix Q Study 2 descriptive statistics for the Next Year Possible Selves variables. ...............182
Appendix R Study 2 descriptive statistics for the Diary Study Time and Mood Rating variables. ...183
Appendix S Normality and Independence.......................................................................................184
Appendix T Participant Certificate of Attendance ............................................................................186
Appendix U Participant’s Personal Letter: Example 1 ....................................................................187
Appendix V Participant’s Personal Letter: Tama ............................................................................188
Appendix W Possible Selves Tree Example ....................................................................................189
I come from a country in which access to education is a privilege, and access to good quality education is only possible for a few. It is in this kind of context when we are able to see in full the impact that the lack of access to education has, as it is in this kind of environment where poverty and violence grow. I believe that education should be a right and not a privilege and that it is up to us as adult members of the society to ensure that this is the case. Interestingly, even in societies in which a huge amount of resources are put in place to ensure that the youth have access to it, many young people choose to leave school early.

In my experience as a teacher it was surprising to find that even among the most privileged students some did not appreciate school. Making the content of my subject relevant to my student’s current interests was a constant challenge as a teacher. It was clear to me then that some of my students could not see the link between high school and their personal life goals, which made their perception of school fragile. However, it was until I arrived to New Zealand that, at an honours level class at Victoria University of Wellington, I was randomly assigned to investigate and present to the class the possible selves theory of motivation. It was a blind date that turned out to be an amazing journey.

I was then very fortunate to meet Professor Ian Evans at Massey University who had worked extensively on the topic of school drop-out and who decided to embark with me in this journey that now comes to a conclusion. This project was born and grown in an environment of cooperation, inclusion, and knowledge that Professor Evans has developed at CHERUBS lab. In this environment I benefitted from the discussion of ideas and the experience of my fellow students.

The possible selves theory of motivation helped me make sense of my observations of student’s cognitions, behaviour, and perception of school. Thus, I felt thrilled with the idea of being able to contribute from the psychological perspective to a social problem that I had experienced closely; the problem of school disengagement.