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**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  
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## 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.

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## PREFACE

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.

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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.

