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Grade-Level Differences in Future-Oriented Self-Concept During Early Adolescence: Potential Relevance to School Nursing

Abstract

The middle school and early high school years are a time of significant development, including an increasing ability to envision oneself in the future. Little is known about how adolescents' future-oriented self-concept (i.e., possible selves) differs across grade levels, although this knowledge may aid in establishing rapport with students and building effective health-promotion and risk reduction interventions. Therefore, this study explored grade-level differences in hoped for and feared possible selves in a sample of 6th – 9th grade students ($n = 2,498$; $M_{\text{age}} = 12.72$, $SD = 1.15$; 51.3% female). Findings suggest that adolescents list a variety of possible selves, and the content differs according to grade-level. These findings offer helpful insight for intervention work aimed at improving student outcomes and preventing risk behavior. Understanding what adolescents hope and fear for themselves in the future may be particularly beneficial for school nurses in identifying the unique challenges students experience and tailoring health-promotion efforts.

Keywords

possible selves; adolescence; school transitions; School nursing

Adolescence is an important developmental stage for considering one's future self. Adolescents often consider numerous personal possibilities, from different potential occupations to more abstract outcomes like happiness or loneliness. Understanding how adolescents view their futures may be beneficial for interventions aimed at improving student outcomes and preventing risk behavior. Health promotion and risk reduction interventions should consider whether the values that are promoted therein correspond to who adolescents believe they can be and what they can accomplish; incongruence between contextual cues and perceptions of the self will not promote effective action (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). School nurses are in a unique position to intervene; school nurses provide health-related education and services with individual students, in group settings with students and staff, and are also responsible for coordinating with other school professionals to maximize the educational experience of students by promoting health and well-being (National Association of School Nurses [NASN], 2011). Recognizing what type of future selves are salient to adolescents may help in connecting with adolescents, establishing rapport and providing optimal health counseling (Golsäter, Lingfors, Sidenvall, & Enskär, 2012). Additionally, an understanding of grade-level differences in adolescents' future-oriented self-concept may aid in identifying the unique challenges that students experience across the middle school and early high school years, thereby enhancing group-based interventions. Indeed, previous research suggests that interventions that consider the interface of context and the self-concept can be particularly powerful for promoting positive outcomes (Oyserman & Destin, 2010).

The study of future-oriented self-concept has been advanced by possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves are images of the self in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986). They can include a varied array of self-projections and be positive or negative, thereby indicating what one hopes, expects or fears becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves are believed to motivate action, with hoped for selves driving behavior aimed at achieving these outcomes and feared selves providing possibilities to avoid (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Previous research suggests that positive possible selves may be associated with success and well-being (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006), while negative possible selves may be associated with health risk behavior (Pierce, Schmidt, & Stoddard, 2015).

Exploring grade-level differences in possible selves may be particularly important during early adolescence, which is a period marked by significant social and contextual changes (Eccles, Midgley, et al., 1993). Situational transitions, or periods between stable states marked by external change, are subject to individuals' perceptions of the transition (Chick & Meleis, 1986). According to Chick and Meleis (1986), "perception of the transition will reflect how the associated role ambiguity and threat to self-concept are experienced" (pp. 239). Although transitions may be experienced in different ways depending on the event and the individual, the established structure of the middle and high school education systems ensure that transitions through middle school and into high school are somewhat consistent and expected. Yet, these changes can have a profound impact on adolescents' self-concept and visions of their future (Benner, 2011; Nurmi, Poole, & Kalakoski, 1994). The transition into middle and high school may represent a symbolic shift from childhood into adolescence by introducing students to novel contexts, new demands and new social structures. Each grade-level change is also accompanied by a new teacher and classroom structure, which can impact attitudes, behavior and motivation (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Previous research suggests that middle and high school environments may not match the developmental needs of the adolescent, and the poor fit between adolescents' developmental stage and the school environment may result in decrements to motivation, success, well-being, and perceptions of one's skills and abilities (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Eccles, Midgley, et al., 1993; Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, et al., 1993).

Previous research suggests that there are age-related changes during adolescence in perceptions of competence in various self-concept domains (e.g., job competence, romantic appeal, and physical appearance; Young & Mroczek, 2003) as well as differences in hopes and fears based on age (Nurmi, 1987; Seginer, 1992). For example, Nurmi (1987) found 11 year old adolescents reported fewer education-related hopes compared to 15 and 18 year old adolescents. However, few researchers have explored these differences within the framework of transitions. Environmental and social changes may heighten certain hopes and fears, making particular possible selves more salient. Grade-level transitions, in particular, may impact possible selves (Anderman, Hicks, & Maehr, 1994; Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993; Fraser & Eccles, 1995a). For example, Fraser and Eccles (1995a) found that adolescents mentioned fewer possible selves related to academic hopes and fears in 8th grade compared to 7th grade. Yet, to our knowledge, previous work has not explored grade-level changes across the various types of possible selves adolescents mention. Importantly, salient possible selves interact with context to "evoke identity-congruent behavior and

cognitive processes” (Oyserman & Destin, 2010, pp. 1011). Extending this concept to nursing interventions is critical; interventions that are antithetical to who adolescents believe they can become may not be particularly effective. The present study, therefore, explored whether grade level was associated with the varied content of possible selves across 6th through 9th grades.

Method

Participants

This secondary data analysis utilized data collected as part of the Coordinated Community Student Survey (C2S2). C2S2 is a school-based survey focused on understanding the needs and strengths of students across 26 urban, suburban, and rural schools within a Midwestern county. All 4th through 12th grade students in 26 schools were invited to participate in the spring of 2012. Over 8,321 4th through 12th grade students completed the survey. This represents approximately 11% of school-aged youth living in the community.

For the current study, we focused on 6th – 9th grade students who completed the online version of the survey. This subsample consisted of 2,498 students. ($M_{\text{age}} = 12.72$, $SD = 1.15$; 75.8% White; 51.3% female). Most students were in 6th–8th grade, with 35.1% in 6th grade ($n = 877$; $M_{\text{age}} = 11.63$, $SD = .54$), 29.1% in 7th grade ($n = 727$; $M_{\text{age}} = 12.63$, $SD = .58$), 26.5% in 8th grade ($n = 662$; $M_{\text{age}} = 13.61$, $SD = .66$), and 9.3% in 9th grade ($n = 232$; $M_{\text{age}} = 14.53$, $SD = .85$).

Procedure

Research staff administered the survey to students during school hours in the spring of 2012 in either a paper-pencil or internet-based format. Items capturing hoped-for and feared possible selves were only included in the internet version of the survey. Participation in the study was completely voluntary and no compensation was provided to participants. Parental consent and student assent were required for participation. The parent study (C2S2) was approved by the school district’s Department of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment and Michigan State University Institutional Review Board.

Measures

Grade-level—Participants’ grade level was recorded by study administrators.

Hoped for and feared possible selves—Adolescents’ hoped for and feared possible selves were measured qualitatively using an open-ended prompt (hoped for: *What are four things you hope to be true of you when you are a young adult, or that you most want to become by the time you are a young adult?*; feared: *What are four things you do not want to be true of you when you are a young adult, or that you most want to avoid becoming by the time you are a young adult?*; Fraser & Eccles, 1995a; 1995b; Oyserman, 2004a). For hoped for and feared possible selves, each response listed by participants was originally coded into one of 18 or one of 16 categories, respectively. Fifteen of the hoped for and feared possible selves categories were based off of existing coding schemes (Fraser & Eccles, 1995a; 1995b; Oyserman, 2004a), while three new hoped for possible selves categories (i.e., religiosity,

military service, other) and two feared possible selves categories (i.e., lack of religiosity and other) were created by coders. All responses were coded by the second and third authors (JP and CS; hoped-for: $\kappa = 0.93$; feared: $\kappa = 0.97$) who were blind to participants' grade level. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed until a final category was agreed upon. For the current analyses, similar categories were collapsed.

Data Analytic Strategy

Possible selves were coded to determine whether they were ever mentioned (1= yes, 0=no). All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 22. Listwise deletion was utilized; thus, sample size varies according to missing data for hoped for and feared possible selves. Contingency tables were assessed with corresponding chi-square (χ^2) significance tests to determine whether differences were present between grade levels in frequency of ever mentioning each possible selves category. Standardized residuals were assessed to determine the source of significant omnibus results. Standardized residuals provide information regarding discrepancies between the actual observed counts and the expected counts based on marginal frequencies. Thus, we discuss significant differences in terms of deviations from what would be expected by chance (Sharpe, 2015).

Results

Numerous hoped for and feared possible selves were identified and coded. As seen in Table 1, hoped for possible selves most often included occupational success, prosocial values, academic success, interpersonal success, and health and well-being. Grade-level was associated with the endorsement of several hoped for selves. The frequency of mentioning health and well-being, general success, interpersonal success, mature/honorable traits, and independence/confidence traits increased across grade levels. In particular, more 8th and 9th grade students mentioned health and well-being than expected by chance ($z = 2.0$ and 3.1 , respectively), while fewer 7th grade students mentioned this hope than expected by chance ($z = -2.0$). Fewer 6th grade students mentioned general success than expected by chance ($z = -3.4$), while more 8th and 9th grade students mentioned this hope than expected by chance ($z = 3.1$ and 2.9 , respectively). Though marginal, differences among interpersonal success hopes were driven by more 8th grade students mentioning this hope than expected by chance ($z = 1.9$). Fewer 6th grade students mentioned mature/honorable traits than expected by chance ($z = -3.6$), while more 8th and 9th grade students mentioned mature/honorable traits than expected by chance ($z = 3.3$ and 4.0 , respectively). Finally, a similar pattern was found for independence/confidence traits, with fewer than expected 6th grade students mentioning this hope ($z = -2.2$), and more than expected 8th and 9th grade students mentioning this hope ($z = 2.2$ and 3.0 , respectively).

On the contrary, the frequency of mentioning extracurricular success and occupational success decreased across grade levels. Specifically, 6th grade students mentioned extracurricular success more than expected by chance ($z = 2.0$), while 8th and 9th grade students mentioned it less than expected by chance ($z = -2.0$ and -2.6 respectively). More 6th grade students mentioned occupational hopes than expected by chance ($z = 3.6$), while

fewer 8th and 9th grade students mentioned these hopes than expected by chance ($z = -3.3$ and -3.5 , respectively).

Some differences appeared to be specific to a certain grade-level. Fewer 8th grade students mentioned hoped for physical traits than expected by chance ($z = -2.6$). More 9th grade students mentioned hoped for wealth ($z = 2.0$) than expected by chance.

As seen in Table 2, the most frequently mentioned feared possible selves categories included non-normative and delinquent behavior, negative personality traits, immature/dishonorable traits, poor health and well-being, and poverty. The frequency of mentioning general failure, immature/dishonorable traits, and dependence/lack of confidence increased across grades. For fears associated with general failure, differences appeared to be driven by more 9th grade students than expected mentioning this fear ($z = 2.9$) and marginally fewer than expected 6th grade students mentioning this fear ($z = -1.9$). Fewer 6th and 7th grade students ($z = -2.7$ and -2.9 , respectively) and more 8th and 9th grade students ($z = 3.8$ and 3.6 , respectively) mentioned immature/dishonorable traits than expected by chance. Differences associated with dependence/lack of confidence fears were driven by fewer than expected 6th grade students mentioning this fear ($z = -2.1$) and more than expected 9th grade students mentioning this fear ($z = 3.6$). On the contrary, fears related to non-normative behavior and delinquency decreased. However, this was driven by fewer than expected 9th grade students mentioning this fear ($z = -2.2$).

Like the hoped for possible selves, some differences appeared to be grade-level specific. More 8th grade students mentioned concerns regarding academic failure than expected by chance ($z = 2.1$), while more 9th grade students mentioned fears associated with failed family-oriented goals ($z = 4.1$) than expected by chance.

Discussion

Although exploratory, these findings suggest important grade-related differences in what future selves are salient among adolescents. Researchers have found age-related changes across adolescence in perceptions of competence related to various self-concept domains (e.g., romantic appeal; Young & Mroczek, 2003) and age-related differences in salient hopes and fears (e.g., education-related hopes; Nurmi, 1987; Seginer, 1992). Yet, to our knowledge, few studies have explored grade-related differences in possible selves (Anderman et al., 1994; Fraser & Eccles, 1995a). These studies focused specifically on academic hopes and fears. In contrast, the present study explored grade-related differences in the range of salient possible selves that adolescents mention.

The transitional period from 8th to 9th grade may represent a poignant turning point for adolescents and imbue possible selves with new and unique content. Particularly interesting is the high fear of academic failure among 8th grade students. This may indicate an area of unique concern for school nurses and administrators; by bolstering students' confidence prior to the high school transition, students may withstand this turning point in a way that promotes well-being and success (Benner, 2011). Indeed, previous research suggests that academic attitudes and self-concept may improve after the transition to high school,

although performance and engagement decline (Benner, 2011). Health and well-being appeared to be a salient hope among 8th and 9th grade students, which may aid school nurses in addressing health-related concerns. However, younger middle school students (i.e., 6th and 7th grade students) did not seem particularly concerned with health and well-being, which may present a challenge for those promoting health-related changes. Health promotion efforts may be particularly effective among 8th and 9th grade students when they are receptive to health-related messages; however, health promotion interventions for 6th and 7th grade students may be best tailored to increase its importance for youth. Additionally, the lower than expected concern regarding non-normative and delinquent behavior among 9th grade students may coincide with an increase in resistance to peer pressure during middle adolescence (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). It may also provide an important area for intervention if feared selves promote avoidance behavior; not fearing delinquency may lower an adolescent's guard from non-normative behavior.

The present study has several strengths including a large sample of adolescents and the use of open-ended responses, which provides unique insight into the words of the participants. Limitations of this study should be noted. The county from which this sample was drawn predominately places 6th grade students in the middle school with 7th and 8th grade students. However, a minority of schools (approximately 30%) in this district maintain 6th grade in the elementary school setting. We were unable to remove any elementary school-based 6th grade students due to concerns regarding deductive disclosure. Future research would benefit from studies that recruit middle school students specifically. Our sample included predominantly White (82%) students from one Midwestern community who had obtained written parental consent for survey participation. Therefore, our findings may not be generalizable to youth as a whole. Additional studies that include youth from other geographic areas and other racial and ethnic groups would broaden our understanding of possible selves during adolescence. Measurement of the self-concept is elusive; different forms of measurement can influence the aspects of the self-concept that are salient in a particular context and time (Oyserman, 2004b). Thus, the same results may not be obtained if a different measure is used. Furthermore, our coding scheme necessarily diverged from what has been found in previous research. The categories used in the present study should be explored in future research. Limitations notwithstanding, the findings provide important insight into the developing self-concept and future self at a time when adolescents are exploring who they are and who they hope to become.

School Nursing Implications

School nurses have been called on to fulfill multiple roles, including providing individualized care plans, administering education in group based settings to students and staff, as well as coordinating with other school professionals to maximize student health and promote thriving in the education environment. School nurses monitor children's adaptation to environmental changes and stress in order to optimize health and to establish a unique helping relationship with children that is set apart from the school-based authoritative relationships the child has come to expect (Wold & Dagg, 2001). Although the transitions experienced across 6th through 9th grades are anticipated and structured, they can still be experienced as stressful and impact visions of oneself in the future. Nurses can evaluate

student functioning across grade-level transitions and how this is reflected in adolescents' possible selves to promote optimal adjustment and well-being (Chick & Meleis, 1986). School nurses should be prepared to discuss hoped and feared possible selves with students and to situate these elements of the future-oriented self-concept in messages regarding health and well-being. For example, it may be useful to address and temper feared academic failure among 8th grade students or feared delinquency among 7th grade students (Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Pierce et al., 2015). Alternatively, it may be important to build countervailing positive hoped for selves to motivate action and encourage students to view themselves as capable of avoiding negative outcomes (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Furthermore, establishing a relationship composed of mutual trust and respect relies on building rapport and understanding children's unique challenges, hopes and fears. Understanding how the future-oriented self-concept shifts across grade levels may aid school nurses in meeting adolescents where they are and optimizing patient-centered health dialogues that promote health and wellness (Golsäter et al., 2012).

School nurses can play an important role in providing one-on-one education and counseling based on an individual student's hopes and fears for their future. Yet, school nurses should also work with other school personnel to make changes that benefit the health and well-being of students as a whole (Lineberry & Ickes, 2015). Previous research has shown the merits of interventions aimed at reinforcing positive possible selves among students (Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002). A general understanding of students' hopes and fears can help tailor health promotion programs for broader groups (i.e., 6th grade students) and assist nurses with developing educational initiatives in coordination with other school professionals.

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Table 1
Hoped For Possible Selves Coding Categories, Frequencies, and Differences by Grade-Level

Category	Subcategory ^a	Example	6th Grade (N = 777) % (n)	7th Grade (N = 610) % (n)	8th Grade (N = 620) % (n)	9th Grade (N = 209) % (n)	Total (N = 2216) % (n)	χ^2
Academic Success			26.4 (205)	29.0 (177)	29.8 (185)	30.6 (64)	28.5 (631)	2.80
	Academic Goals	"Go to college"						
	Academic-related Traits	"Smart"						
Health and Well-Being		"Healthy"	18.1 (141)	17.2 (105)	24.5 (152)	30.6 (64)	20.8 (462)	25.47***
Physical Traits		"Be attractive"	8.9 (69)	10.0 (61)	5.2 (32)	8.1 (17)	8.1 (179)	10.81*
Extracurricular Success		"Make varsity"	18.0 (140)	17.4 (106)	12.1 (75)	8.1 (17)	15.3 (338)	19.70***
General Success		"Be good at what I do"	10.7 (83)	13.9 (85)	20.3 (126)	23.4 (49)	15.5 (343)	36.03***
Wealth		"Be rich"	14.2 (110)	13.6 (83)	11.1 (69)	18.7 (39)	13.6 (301)	7.99*
Interpersonal Success			22.4 (174)	23.3 (142)	29.0 (180)	30.6 (64)	25.3 (560)	12.50**
	Interpersonal Goals	"Have lots of friends"						
	Interpersonal-related Traits	"Funny"						
Occupational Success			57.0 (443)	51.8 (316)	39.0 (242)	31.6 (66)	48.1 (1067)	71.35***
	Job Success	"Have a good job"						
	Military Service	"A Marine"						
Avoidance of Negative Traits		"No doing drugs"	4.5 (35)	2.5 (15)	3.2 (20)	3.8 (8)	3.5 (78)	4.46
Religiosity ^b		"Christian"	1.5 (12)	2.0 (12)	1.5 (9)	4.3 (9)	1.9 (42)	
Mature/Honorable Traits		"More responsible"	12.2 (95)	14.9 (91)	23.2 (144)	29.2 (61)	17.6 (391)	51.27***
Family-oriented Goals		"Be a mom"	9.3 (72)	12.0 (73)	9.2 (57)	13.4 (28)	10.4 (230)	5.67
Independence/Confidence Traits		"Unique"	5.5 (43)	5.9 (36)	10.2 (63)	13.4 (28)	7.7 (170)	22.81***
Prosocial Values		"Good person"	39.3 (305)	41.1 (251)	44.4 (275)	39.2 (82)	41.2 (913)	4.10
Other ^c		"Nothing"						

*
p .05.

**
p .01.

p .001.

Note. Percentages and frequencies represent the total number of participants within the grade-level who ever mentioned the possible selves category. Significant omnibus χ^2 tests are boldfaced.

^aSome categories were collapsed based on definitional and conceptual similarities. The subcategories belonging to collapsed categories are indicated.

^bDue to low endorsement of the Religiosity category, grade-level differences were not assessed.

^cDue to the ambiguity of the Other category, it was not assessed.

Table 2

Feared Possible Selves Coding Categories, Frequencies, and Differences by Grade-Level

Category	Subcategory ^a	Example	6th Grade (N = 764) % (n)	7th Grade (N = 594) % (n)	8th Grade (N = 609) % (n)	9th Grade (N = 211) % (n)	Total (N = 2178) % (n)	χ^2
Academic Failure			14.3 (109)	15.7 (93)	20.0 (122)	17.5 (37)	16.6 (361)	8.71 *
	Failed Academic Goals	"Drop out"						
	Poor Academic-related Traits	"Dumb"						
Poor Health and Well-Being		"Sad"	23.7 (181)	24.6 (146)	20.5 (125)	27.0 (57)	23.4 (509)	4.85
Poor Physical Traits		"Ugly"	11.8 (90)	10.8 (64)	9.2 (56)	8.1 (17)	10.4 (227)	3.83
Extracurricular Failure ^b		"Bad at sports"	1.3 (10)	1.2 (7)	.7 (4)	.5 (1)	1.0 (22)	
General Failure		"A failure"	6.8 (52)	7.6 (45)	10.5 (64)	14.7 (31)	8.8 (192)	16.21 ***
Poverty		"Homeless"	21.2 (162)	21.0 (125)	23.5 (143)	21.8 (46)	21.9 (476)	1.36
Failed Interpersonal Goals		"Not be popular"	7.2 (55)	6.6 (39)	7.2 (44)	11.4 (24)	7.4 (162)	5.51
Negative Personality Traits		"Fake"	42.9 (328)	44.3 (263)	42.7 (260)	50.2 (106)	43.9 (957)	4.12
Occupational Failure		"Not have a job"	21.5 (164)	18.0 (107)	18.7 (114)	14.2 (30)	19.1 (415)	6.54
Non-normative and Delinquency		"Violence"	59.4 (454)	63.3 (376)	54.5 (332)	46.4 (98)	57.9 (1260)	22.04 ***
Lack of Religiosity ^b		"Sinful"	.1 (1)	.2 (1)	.7 (4)	.5 (1)	.3 (7)	
Immature/Dishonorable Traits		"Irresponsible"	20.5 (157)	19.5 (116)	33.2 (202)	37.9 (80)	25.5 (555)	57.00 ***
Failed Family-oriented Goals		"Not get married"	7.9 (60)	6.4 (38)	8.4 (51)	16.6 (35)	8.4 (184)	21.66 ***
Dependence/Lack of Confidence		"Dependent"	4.6 (35)	4.9 (29)	8.2 (50)	12.8 (27)	6.5 (141)	23.97 ***
Other ^c		"Nothing"						

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Note. Percentages and frequencies represent the total number of participants within the grade-level who ever mentioned the possible selves category. Significant omnibus χ^2 tests are boldfaced.

^a Some categories were collapsed based on definitional and conceptual similarities. The subcategories belonging to collapsed categories are indicated.

^b Due to low endorsement of the Extracurricular Failure and Lack of Religiosity categories, grade-level differences were not assessed.

^c Due to the ambiguity of the Other category, it was not assessed.