Can academics be made more central to middle students' 'possible selves'?

What this research was about and why it is important

Recent research shows that **possible selves**, one's positive and negative mental images of the person one might become, matter. However, when it is difficult for students to imagine themselves (or people like themselves) realising those possible futures, they may become uncertain that they are actually attainable. For school and academic attainment, maintaining a sense that success is possible may be difficult for low-income and minority students because of existing stereotypes and base rates. These might influence how students interpret and approach difficulty, whether difficulty in starting or sustaining action needed to work towards school success or difficulty in interpreting the meaning of failures along the way. This paper describes the results of an intervention based on a theoretical model concerning the possible selves, school, engagement, mental health, and academic outcomes of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The results suggest the intervention led to real, and sustained, improvements in both the children's academic results and their mental well being.

What the researchers did

- Eighth graders (264 students aged 12) from three middle schools in an economically disadvantaged area of Detroit participated in an intervention. 71.6% of students were African American, 17.4% Latino, and 11.0% White.
- Baseline assessment occurred in the first week of the school year, followed by a number of weeks of the intervention, ending before the first quarterly report card. Follow-up assessment was conducted over two academic years, American grades 8 and 9 (ages 12-14).
- A theoretical model of the connections between place in social structure, social identities, and possible future selves was developed. The authors focused especially on how the way students interpret any difficulties they experience influences their self-regulatory behaviours (e.g. doing homework/paying attention in class), academic outcomes, and mental health.
- Based on the model, an activity-based intervention was created to help the students see their (school-focused) positive future selves as compatible with their social identities, in order to inoculate them from a) experiencing difficulties working towards these possible selves, and b) imagining these possible future selves were impossible for them. The intervention also gave students specific strategies to work on these issues.
- Sessions helped students: (*i*) develop positive future selves and negative future selves (i.e. outcomes they wanted to avoid), as well as a sense that these were compatible with their current social identities; (*ii*) develop a sense that experiencing difficulties is a normal part of academic life, and does not mean an idealized academic self is unattainable; (*iii*) develop timelines and action plans to work towards their goals and specific strategies to help them meet these.
- Students were randomly assigned to either the intervention or to their normal school program. Changes over time in the two groups were compared with the expectation being that the intervention would affect possible identities, school and classroom engagement, depressive symptoms, and grades.

What the researchers found

- At the end of grade 8 and 9, students had more positive and negative school-focused possible selves. These were also linked to specific strategies to work towards these possible selves.
- Students in the intervention groups also had more feared off-track possible identities, spent more time on homework, were more engaged in class, skipped fewer classes, had fewer symptoms of depression, and got better end of year grades.

Things to consider

- Gaining *both* school-focused and feared off-track possible future selves matters, each content domain plays a separate role in student outcomes.
- Having strategies to avoid off-track possible future selves led to increased school attendance, while having (positive and negative) school-focused possible future selves led to increased school engagement and better school grades.
- Engagement and attendance both affected school grades and risk of depression. Social, structural, and cultural factors matter, shaping the content of school-focused and off-track possible future selves.