



Construction of the Concept of Future Self as an Element of Protection

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Abstract

This contribution is part of an ongoing action research initiative involving teachers and secondary school students. The primary objective is to experiment with actions that counter educational risks and enhance students' inclusion and social participation in schools. Specifically, the project explores the practices, policies, and strategies teachers can employ to boost participation, foster inclusion, and prevent early school dropout. The project's initial phase included distributing two questionnaires – one for teachers and one for students. The secondary schools involved were technical institutes; we have tried to give priority to the identification of schools with a high rate of students in vulnerable conditions. The sample of the schools includes different scholastic, territorial and socio-economic contexts. Schools participating in the project signed a research protocol, outlining the various research phases. The student questionnaire, completed online, delves into factors influencing academic success, such as well-being, school participation, and the construction of the "future self." This paper presents data on the dimensions of the "future self." The theoretical construct of the "possible self" is crucial in shaping students' individual choices and motivating them to learn about their future. Qualitative analysis of responses from 500 students indicates that they have not developed a well-defined idea of their future selves. Approximately 22.4% envision themselves in the workforce, 12% express a desire to complete their studies, 12% aspire to attend university, and 21% cannot provide a specific response. Effective guidance practices should consider students' image of their future selves, encompassing both desirable and undesirable life paths.

Keywords: future self; early school leaving; vulnerability; educational risk; school success

1. Introduction

This contribution is part of ongoing action research that involves teachers and secondary school students. The principal objective is to experience actions that counter educational risks and improve all students' inclusion and social participation in schools.

Among the most crucial educational risk factors, as highlighted by Sorzio and Bembich (2021), multiple dimensions characterize daily life, and which concern the following aspects:

- structural such as, for example, housing quality, nutrition, health and access to health services.
- social such as, for example, parents' work and community support.
- cultural such as, for example, the possibility of having early diagnoses and inclusion models.

Risk is not exclusively a condition within the person but is placed in the interaction between the history of psychological development, the tensions that the person must face and the resources and support that the person can draw on in different contexts and, therefore, varies in relation to life contexts (Lee, 2009). Among the educational risks there is, for example, early school dropout. In Italy, as underlined by Rocchi (2020), early school dropout is a real “historical problem”. Early school dropout, the causes of which can be traced back to socio-economic-cultural factors and/or factors within the school system, compromises different dimensions not only of the person (e.g. social and relational) but also of the community in which the person lives and of society as a whole (Bellotti, & Raccagni, 2023). The report “Early school leavers” published by Eurostat in 2022 highlights an improving trend at European level, but not at Italian level. As it emerges from the 56th Report on the Social Situation of the Country/22 produced by Centro Studi Investimenti Sociali (2023), Italy has a very high rate of school drop-outs: 18-24 year olds who have dropped out of the education and training system are 12.7% at national level and 16.6% in the southern regions, against a European average of 9.7%. In the average of European Union countries, the share of 25-34 year olds with a diploma is 85.2%, while in Italy it is 76.8% and reaches 71.2% in Southern Italy. The percentage of 30-34 year-olds with a degree or tertiary qualification is 26.8% in Italy and 20.7% in Southern Italy, against a European Union average of 41.6%. In the European Union, Italy has the highest number of NEETs (Not [engaged] in Education, Employment or Training), young people who are neither studying nor working, 23.1% of 15-29 year-olds against a European Union average of 13.1%. According to the “ISTAT Annual Report 2023. The Situation of the Country in Italy”, NEETs are predominantly foreigners (28.8%), residents in the regions of Southern Italy (27.9%) - in Sicily, NEETs are almost one third of 15-29 year olds - and females (20.5%).

The term inclusive education, echoing, for example, the definition given by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in 2015, refers to equitable, quality education and full participation of all students, with or without Special Education Needs. From the perspective of inclusive education “the existence of special needs, which for some pupils are really special needs, which for some pupils are indeed very special, but it is invited to consider them in a social, systemic dimension as well, and not as mere deficits of individuals” (Cottini, 2018, p. 11). Several nations worldwide have recognised inclusive education as a human rights issue and have ratified global agreements, for example, the Salamanca Declaration (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1994), the Dakar Framework (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2000) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), and developed legislation in favour of inclusive education. Italian legislation on inclusive education, the result of a journey that began in the early 1970s, is considered among the most comprehensive and advanced at the international level and has been taken as a model to be followed by several nations (Meijer, 2003). Although the Italian legislation on inclusive education is among the most advanced at an international level, in reality, in everyday schooling, the situation in Italy is still today very varied and variegated, it is even possible to find opposing realities in the same school, classes in which one operates well and classes in which, for example, the pupil with disabilities, or the child who does not speak Italian because they have just arrived in Italy from another country

is mortified by an educational-didactic climate inadequate to offer him both opportunities and resources (D'Alonzo, 2016). The construct of social participation usually includes engagement in activities, a sense of belonging and social interactions (Eriksson, & Granlund, 2004; Falkmer et al., 2012; Hammel et al., 2008). In particular, social participation in the school context refers to students' involvement in the peer group, which includes, for example, interaction with peers, acceptance by peers, being part of friendship networks in the classroom and being socially included (Bossaert et al., 2013; Koster et al. 2009; Schwab et al., 2022). Improving inclusive education and social participation at school is not only one of the most critical factors for the future social participation of people with disabilities in society (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018), but also one of the main factors in counteracting educational risks, as, as we have seen, the early school dropout, for all students in general.

The project's initial phase included distributing two questionnaires, one for teachers and one for students. The student questionnaire specifically investigates factors influencing academic success, such as well-being, school participation, and constructing the "future self/selves". This contribution presents data related to the dimensions of the "future self/selves". The construct of "future self/selves" is of utmost importance as, for example, guidance practices must consider the aspirations of young people about the self-image they project into the future and not merely as a recognition of their aptitudes, considered as fixed psychological traits.

2. Theoretical background

To quote Markus and Nurius (1986, p. 954) <<Possible selves derive from representations of the self in the past and they include representations of the self in the future. They are different and separable from the current or now selves yet are intimately connected to them. Possible future selves, for example, are not just any set of imagined roles or states of being. Instead, they represent specific, individually significant hopes, fears, and fantasies". The theoretical construct of the "possible self/selves" is crucial in shaping students' individual choices and motivating them to learn about their future.>>. The theory of the "possible self/selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986) thus sees the development of the individual self-concept as the result of a construction that connects future self-representation with present and past experiences. This self-representation is fundamental in making sense of experience, defining one's life goals related to both school and career choices, and orienting personal motivation for future choices. It encompasses, on the one hand, the representation of a positive and desirable image of the person one wishes to become and, on the other hand, the representation of a negative image of the future one wishes to avoid. Young people's aspirations are thus not limited to the employment and educational opportunities on offer. Still, they more generally are constructed in the light of their perceived desirable self, the type of people they want to become and the possible social obstacles they will encounter (Oyserman & Friberg, 2006).

In recent years, the original theoretical conceptualisation of possible selves was expanded to make explicit its connection between future-oriented self-representations, motivation, behaviour and self-regulation processes (Hoyle & Sherrill, 2006). Self-regulation includes how individuals control and direct their thoughts, emotions and behaviour to achieve goals. It is thus a fundamental activity of the self-system: it represents a dynamic set of thoughts, feelings and motivations that constitute the self-concept that people develop.

Explicitly considering the student population, orientation for the group of students at risk of school failure is particularly critical. For these young people, orientation interventions mostly tend to be based on rigidly considered psychological aptitudes rather than on their 'possible selves'. Therefore, less attention is given to these individuals' self-image in the future, both in terms of desirable life paths and those they would like to avoid, to define effective orientation

practices (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002). In designing effective orientation paths, schools should consider the role of "possible selves" in young people's educational and occupational path choices. Research (Oyserman et al., 2002) has shown that educational interventions aimed at promoting change of possible selves in young people can improve school performance and reduce the risk of dropping out.

As mentioned, the construct of "possible self/selves" closely connects with self-regulation processes. Indeed, the concept has been incorporated within self-regulation models, including metacognitive, motivational and behavioural components (Frazier et al., 2021). Self-regulatory processes are thus fundamental to effectively achieving one's personal goals. Oyserman et al. (2004) introduced the concept of the 'self-regulating possible self', defining it as the ability to represent a self-defining goal and find strategies to achieve the end goal. The dynamic processes resulting from the interactions between possible selves, metacognition and behaviour thus provide the basis for developing effective self-regulated learning.

3. Materials and Methods

This contribution describes the first phases of an action research path, initiated with teachers and students in secondary schools to experiment with actions to contrast educational risk and improve social inclusion and participation within educational establishments. The project investigates the practices, policies and strategies teachers can adopt to improve participation and inclusion and tackle early school leaving.

The first phase of the project involved the distribution of a questionnaire for teachers and students involved in the project, which investigates, through different dimensions, factors involved in academic success, such as example, aspects related to well-being, participation in school, the construction of the image of oneself in the future (Konu & Rimpelä, 2002). Here and concerning the specific object of analysis, it was decided to focus on the analysis of data relating to the dimension of the future self, as a factor related to the risk of school dropout.

The survey involved a total of 498 high school students, attending secondary education. The schools involved were two technical institutes located in northern Italy. The students were enrolled as follows: 57.7% in the two-year program and 42.4% in the three-year program (mean age = 17.46; SD = 1.68; female students = 37.8%; male students = 59.6%; undisclosed gender = 2.6%). We have tried to prioritise the identification of schools with a high rate of students in conditions of vulnerability. The sample of the schools includes different scholastic, territorial and socio-economic contexts.

The students responded to an online questionnaire of 18 items, some closed-ended (with a Likert scale from 0 to 4) and others with open responses. The questionnaire is structured into different sections to investigate the following areas: Quality of school environments and accessibility; Social relations at school; Participation, inclusion, collaboration; Personal fulfilment; Self-image in the future and Emotional well-being.

Anonymity, informed consent and the protection of sensitive and personal data are guaranteed in accordance with Legislative Decree nr. 196 of 30 June 2003, "Code regarding the protection of personal data" and the research ethics code established University of Trieste¹.

For this study, the analysis focused on the responses given by the youth regarding specific questions related to the dimension of the future self through the following open questions (Oyserman, 2004):

¹ <https://www.units.it/ricerca/etica-della-ricerca>

a. Next Year Possible Selves: "If you imagine yourself in a year, as you expect to be and what do you expect to do?"

b. Action to reach the goal: "Are you doing something to achieve this goal?"

Regarding the analysis of open-ended questions, the coding involved reading the freely given statements and constructing a taxonomy of responses, grouped into homogeneous conceptual areas. The number of occurrences observed and the percentage distribution of the main categories were calculated for each identified category.

For the coding of responses concerning Next Year Possible Selves, we utilised the analytical categories identified by Oyserman (2004): Achievement; Interpersonal Relationships; Personality Trait; Physical/Health-Related; Material/Lifestyles; Negative.

4. Results

a. Next Year Possible Selves

Next Year Possible Selves	Frequencies	Percentage
Achievement-school	159	31,86%
Achievement-work	143	28,66%
Personality Traits	82	16,43%
No project	69	13,83%
No answer	23	5%
Material/Lifestyles	11	2,20%
Physical/Health-Related	5	1%
Interpersonal Relationships	5	1%

The predominant themes observed in the students' responses align with the categories Oyserman (2004) outlined. Specifically, a significant portion, totalling 60.52% of the responses, pertained to "Achievement." Additionally, 16.43% of the answers were categorised under "Personal trait," while 13.83% expressed a lack of plans.

In the category of Achievement-school, responses commonly revolved around expectations of academic performance and success:

"I anticipate maintaining high academic performance."

"Striving to improve my performance in school."

"Committing to completing school without any failures."

"Expecting to acquire new knowledge and build trust and respect with teachers and classmates."

"Although uncertain about plans, aiming to graduate with a diploma."

In the Achievement-work category, responses predominantly focused on aspirations related to future employment:

"Envisioning opportunities in jobs that require the skills gained from schooling."

"Expecting to secure a fulfilling job."

"Aspiring to excel in a specific profession, such as cooking."

"Hoping to pursue a career as a professional footballer within a year."

"Anticipating employment in settings like a bar or a kindergarten."

In the Personality Traits category, responses primarily centered on personal development and self-improvement:

"Striving to become more focused."

"Aspiring to gain confidence and maturity, leading to improved self-esteem and mindset."

"Expecting to be a self-assured and content individual."

"Seeking to be more discerning in academic decisions and selecting the right path for my future."

b. Action to reach the goal

Action to reach the goal	Frequencies	Percentage
Yes	364	72,95%
No	67	13,43%
No answer	48	9,62%
I don't know	20	4,00%

Most students, comprising 72.95% of respondents, assert their proactive pursuit of goals. Their ambitions typically span academic endeavours, career aspirations, sports, or further education.

The responses are categorised below into the following categories:

- Commitment to studying and pursuit of interests (30%): responses indicating an effort in studying, searching for interesting subjects, or acquiring knowledge.
- Reflection and self-improvement (20%): responses denoting attention towards personal development, awareness of mistakes, and a desire for improvement.
- Exploration and seeking opportunities (25%): responses indicate active information seeking, evaluation of future choices, and exploration of new possibilities.
- Participation and involvement (10%): responses indicating active involvement in school or extracurricular activities.
- Self-confidence and determination (8%): responses reflecting strong self-esteem, determination, and confidence in achieving goals.
- Work and effort (5%): responses highlighting work commitments or efforts in pursuing future goals.
- Unspecified or various responses (2%): responses that do not provide specific information or indicate various actions or thoughts.

A significant group of students (30%) declares their intention to commit to studying to achieve their future goals; approximately 25% state their desire to explore new opportunities and activities; a lower percentage of students (20%) affirm their intention to work on themselves and their personal improvement. Students generally declare that they would like to engage in study or declare general actions oriented towards the world of work, sport, or university. However, most of them don't identify clear actions or plans to reach their goal: a notable proportion lack concrete strategies or plans to actualize these aspirations.

5. Discussion

Analyzing students' responses reveals a general lack of well-defined ideas regarding their future selves. Most students fail to provide clear answers when questioned about their actions to achieve their future goals. These findings underscore how, for most students, their future self-image remains nebulous, lacking solid connections to concrete actions and plans to attain their stated objectives.

This observation suggests that students' representation of the "possible self" construct is fragile, which could potentially hinder their orientation choices. Schools must recognize the significance of the possible self in shaping students' future trajectories and motivation to learn.

Focusing on the self-images that students form of themselves in the future is imperative for developing effective guidance practices. This approach aligns with previous research by Markus and Nurius (1986) and Oyserman, Terry, and Bybee (2002), highlighting the pivotal role of the possible self in shaping students' aspirations and decision-making processes.

6. Conclusion

The conclusions of this study highlight the crucial importance of the concept of "possible selves" in shaping students' educational and professional aspirations, as evidenced by the theoretical contributions present in both the introduction and the theoretical background. The analysis highlights a general lack of clarity in young people's ideas about their future, with many unable to provide concrete answers regarding the actions they are taking to achieve their goals. This underscores the importance of school guidance practices that consider the future images that students have of themselves, in line with previous research and the theoretical model of "possible selves" introduced by Markus and Nurius (1986). Such a model reveals the close connection between individuals' future self-representations and their motivation to pursue their goals, a central element in analyzing the emerged results (Oyserman & Friberg, 2006). The action research initiative involves teachers and students in exploring strategies to improve social inclusion and participation and prevent early school dropout. These aspects bring to light both the educational challenges outlined in the introduction and the emphasized theoretical context. These findings underscore the urgent need for effective interventions to counteract the phenomenon of early school dropout in Italy and promote an inclusive educational environment that supports the full engagement of all students.

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