Possible Selves for Career Development
ASCA Conference
Boston 2010

Karen Harrington, Senior Research Fellow
Center for School Counseling Outcome Research and Evaluation
University of Massachusetts Amherst
Career Development

- School counselors as career development leaders in schools
- Professional in the building with greatest training, background, and commitment to deliver meaningful and effective career information
- Unique perspective of being able to combine the personal/social and academic elements of career development
Philosophical Side of Career Development

- Provides a structure, through curriculum and other interventions, to pose large philosophical questions to students:
  - Who am I?
  - What matters to me?
  - Where am I going in my life?
  - How do I get there?
  - How do I deal with challenges along the way?
Philosophical Side of Career Development

- Ideally CD helps students:
  - Understand the *relevancy* of school work
  - Internalize the connection between doing well in school and finding a meaningful career
  - Become more *engaged* in school
  - Gain greater focus about their future *goals*
  - Think about greater possibilities, consider new options, visualize success.
Philosophical Side of Career Development

- Is career development more important today?
- Process students will probably need to go through multiple times in their lives
- Moral imperative: “Providing career development education is an imperative to reduce inequities and deal with the vast differences in social class.” David Blustein
“Possible Selves are the ideal selves that we would very much like to become. They are also the selves that we could become and are afraid of becoming. The possible selves that are hoped for might include the successful self, the creative self, the rich self, the thinking self, or the loved and admired self, whereas the dreaded possible selves could be the alone self, the depressed self, the incompetent self, the alcoholic self, the unemployed self, or the bag lady self.” (Markus and Nurius, 1986)
First introduced by Markus and Nurius 1986
Refer to the future components of self-concept
In individual’s conceptions of future selves, including the selves that are ideal and hoped for, as well as those possible selves that one fears or dreads
Reflect a future orientation, but closely connected with past and present self-concept
Extension of Self-Concept Theory

- “Beliefs, attitudes, and opinions that each person holds to be true about his/her personal existence” (Purkey, 1988)
- What you understand about yourself
- Self-concept is dynamic, complex, contextually interactive, and evolving over time.
“Possible Selves are components of self-concept that have to do with what I can be; what I would like to be; and what I am afraid of becoming.”

(Helen Markus, 1992)
Future vision of self includes
- Hoped for selves
- Expected selves
- Feared selves

A person’s vision of his or her future is highly motivating
Possible Selves Program

- Created by Hock, Deshler, & Schumaker
- Built around activities to guide students in thinking about their hopes, expectations, and fears for the future
- Emphasis on nurturing academic and personal motivation
Possible Selves Program

- Students describe their hoped-for, expected, and feared possible selves
- Use this information to create a Possible Selves Tree as a metaphor for their life
- Process by which students examine their lives (trees) to set goals, create plans and work toward becoming strong, well-balanced human beings.
Motivation leads to goal directed behavior

View of self students hope, fear, and expect to become can be powerful motivators for present school behavior

Students are often as motivated by feared possible selves, visions they want to avoid

Students not motivated in school often don’t see link between academics and future success
Six Components of PSP

- Discovering
- Thinking
- Sketching
- Reflecting
- Planning
- Working
Discovering

- Helps students answer the question, “What are my strengths and weaknesses?”
- Goal is to find at least one area in which the student has had positive experiences and is willing to share them
- Model how you would answer the question
- Link to career connection
Questionnaire to help the student answer

- *Who am I?*
- *What are my hopes, expectations, and fears?*

In areas of Learner, Person, Worker, Athlete

What words best *describe* you as a learner; what do you *hope to achieve* as a learner; what do you *expect to achieve* as a learner, what do you *fear* as a learner?
Helps students to answer the questions
- *What am I like?*
- *What are my hoped-for, expected, and feared possible selves?*

Use questionnaire to draw Possible Selves tree

Is the tree balanced? One limb fuller and stronger? Positive or negative statements?
Possible Self Tree

- **Trunk** = whole person
- **Limb** = major areas in one’s life (learner, person, worker, strength area)
- **Branches** = hopes and expectation for each “limb”
- **Roots** = what students think about themselves, “describe” words. Long roots for positive, short for negative
- **Fear Statements** = things that could attack tree, damage health (dark cloud, lightning bolt, insects)
Answer the question: *What can I be?*

- Students write goals that will keep the tree stronger, fuller, protect it from fears.
- Essentially asking students to think about their life and ways to nurture it.
- Evaluate condition of their tree/life.
Goal Theory

- Share goal with someone
- Put in writing
- SMART acronym
  - Specific – clear and well defined
  - Measurable – include amounts, dates, etc.
  - Attainable – possible to achieve, not too easy
  - Relevant – aligned with the direction you want your life to take
  - Time bound – deadline for your goal
Planning

- Helps to answer: *How can I reach my goals?*
- Construct **action plan**: smaller steps to achieve goal
- Physical and mental tasks
- Road map to future
- Timeline and dates
- May realize that attaining hoped-for goal also means avoiding a feared self
Helps to answer the question: *How am I doing in working towards my goals?*

- Revisiting action plans
- Modifying goals, celebrating reaching goals, adding new goals, reexamining hopes, expectations and fears
Research on Possible Selves

- Freshman student athletes, not well prepared for college
- Randomly assigned to 3 groups
  - Control: tutorial support and academic advising
  - Career counseling: same as control, plus career counseling activities
  - Possible Selves: same as control, plus Possible Selves Program
- End of first year: PS group listed more goals, goals beyond athletics; other groups goals declined
- End of 6 years: PS group had higher GPAs, and 75% had graduated as compared to 60% control group and 45% university rate
Another university study with freshman athletes

- Matched for ACT scores, sport, gender, h.s. GPA
- Control group met with sport counselor; PS group did PS intervention with peer mentor
- PS groups significantly outperformed control group on role identification and goal setting, cited more specific goals
- Retention rate greater for PS group and graduation rate was 75% compared to 56% for control group
Research on Possible Selves

- Diverse, urban, middle school students. PS students identified more roles for future, cited more and specific academic and personal goals.
- Teachers used in IEP transition conferences.
- High school students: students who had clear and specific descriptions of their possible selves had higher levels of task persistence and school achievement.
13-16 year olds. Non-delinquent youth showed better balance between expected and feared PS/Balance occurred when aspects of expected self, such as graduating college, helped prevent occurrence of feared self, such as being poor and unemployed. (Oysterman and Markus, 1990)

African-American middle school students: better balance of positive and negative descriptions was predictive of effort and persistence at school. (Oyserman, Grant & Anger, 1995)
Other Exercises related to PS

- Mission statement
- Prediction letter
- Life Narrative
Some Benefits of PSP

- Relationship building
- Meaning making aspect of career development
- Might appeal to kids with different learning styles
- Can be considered a Tier 2 or 3 intervention or an achievement gap exercise
- Can be adapted for different age groups or to use one-on-one
Closing Thoughts

- Hopeful
- Self is not immutable
- Concepts and constructs of Possible Selves are clearly within domain of school counselor
- Get to work with kids about meaning, purpose, values, fears in their life
- Crosses over to the metaphysical with visualizations but grounded in theory and supported by research