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ABSTRACT

Changes in students' (N=313) present and possible "good student" selves over the transition from elementary school to middle school are examined by this study. Findings indicate that both present and possible selves decline over the transition, and that the decline is greater for males than for females. Holding mastery goals is related to self-schemata at elementary and middle school. Self-efficacy is related to present and possible selves only during elementary school. Holding performance goals becomes related to one's future possible self during the sixth grade. This result corroborates other research suggesting that middle school environments are more focused on grades, comparisons, and relative ability than elementary schools. Three tables and one figure present data and statistical analysis. One table presents sample items for the student efficacy and goal orientation scales that were used in this study. Contains 11 references. (Author/TS)

Present and Possible Selves Across the Transition to Middle Grades School

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Abstract

This study examines changes in students' present and possible "good student" selves over the transition from elementary school to middle school. Findings indicate that both present and possible selves decline over the transition, and that the decline is greater for males than for females. Holding mastery goals is related to self-schemata at elementary and middle school. Self efficacy is related to present and possible selves only during elementary school. Holding performance goals becomes related to one's future possible self during the sixth grade. This result corroborates other research suggesting that middle school environments are more focused on grades, comparisons, and relative ability than elementary schools.

Present and Possible Selves Across The Transition to Middle Grades Schools

The transition from elementary to middle school is often a traumatic time for adolescents (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Research suggests that the environment provided by typical middle grades schools may be developmentally inappropriate, and may adversely affect motivation during early adolescence (Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, Reuman, MacIver, & Feldlaufer, 1993).

Pintrich (1992) suggests that our understanding of motivation will be enhanced by giving consideration to the role of self-concept in human motivation. Markus and her colleagues (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1986) argue that both present and "possible" self schemata are important linkages between cognition and motivation. Specifically, individuals strive to become certain selves, while seeking to avoid becoming undesired selves.

The present study examines changes in self-concept (present and possible selves) across the transition from elementary to middle schools. We investigate the effects of mastery and performance goals (e.g., Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Nicholls, 1989) and self-efficacy (e.g., Bandura, 1986) on self-schemas across the transition from elementary to middle school, since recent research suggests that goals and efficacy beliefs play an important role in the development of the self-system (see Maehr, Pintrich, & Zimmerman, 1993).

Method

Sample

The sample includes 313 students who completed versions of the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (PALS) (Midgley, Maehr, & Urdan, 1993). The students came from six elementary schools, and two middle schools. The sample is 82% Caucasian, 15% African American, and 3% from other minority groups. The sample is 43% female, and

57% male. Only students for whom we had data at both times were used in these analyses.

Procedure

Students completed the PALS during one class period at the end of the fifth grade, and again one year later, at the end of the sixth grade. Teachers also completed short questionnaires about the types of strategies that they use to motivate each individual student in their classroom.

We split the sample into "at risk" and "not at risk" students based on scores on the Cognitive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) -- those scoring above the 50th percentile on the overall test were categorized as "not at risk" for the present study.

We used repeated measures MANOVA and multiple regression to examine relationships before and after the transition.

Results

Reliabilities are presented for the possible selves scales in table 1, and for the motivational scales in table 2.

Table 1: Possible Selves Scales

	5th Present Self	6th Present Self	5th Possible Self	6th Possible Self
Good student	.62	.68	.57	.66
Doing as little schoolwork as possible*				
A poor student*				
Interested in my schoolwork				
Quitting school*				
Doing better than other students in school				

Present selves were assessed on a five point scale, where the student answered, "How much does this describe you now?" Possible (future) selves were assessed with the question, "How much is this likely to describe you five years from now?". All responses were on a 5 point Likert scale, where 1 Not at all like me, and 5 Very much like me.

**Reverse Coded*

Table 2: Sample Items For Student Efficacy and Goal Orientation Scales

Mastery Goals	*I like math work that I'll learn from, even if I make a lot of mistakes.* *Understanding the work in math is more important to me than the grade that I get.*
Performance Goals	*I would feel successful in math if I did better than other students.* *I would feel really good if I were the only one who could answer the teacher's questions in math.*
Self Efficacy	*Some of the work we do in math is too hard for me.** *Even if the work in math is hard, I can learn it.*

Sample Items For Teacher Scales

Mastery Practices	*I show this student how the work is interesting.* *I give this student challenging projects.*
Warm Relationship	*I interact with this student on a one to one basis.* *I discuss non-school issues with this student.* *I try to relate to this student on a personal level.*

* Reverse Coded

Results of the repeated measures MANOVA are presented in table 3.

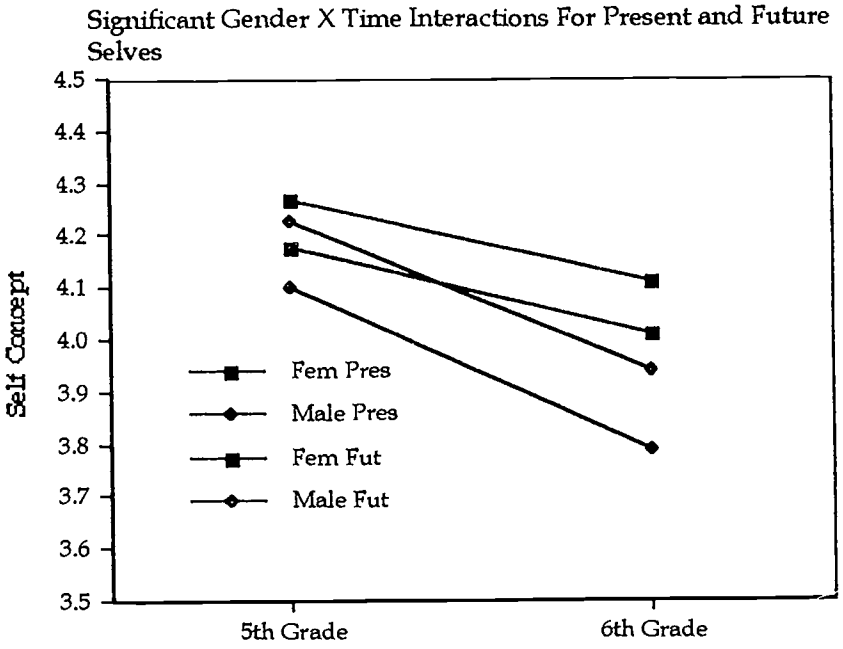
Table 3: Results of Repeated Measures MANOVA:

	Time	*Gender*	*At-Risk*	*Interactions*
Present Good Student Self	15.17***	13.72***	23.67***	Gender X Time, F=4.83*
Possible Good Student Self	28.85***	3.77*	21.39***	Gender X Time, F=5.60*

^{+}p .07 * p< 05 ** p<.01 ***p<.001

Results indicate that present and possible selves decline over the transition. In addition, academically at-risk students have lower present and possible self schemata at both times. Present and possible selves decrease more for males than for females. The gender X time interactions are displayed in Figure 1.

Present and Future Selves Over Transition by Gender



We used multiple regression to examine the variables which predict present and possible selves before and after the transition to middle grades school. Results are presented in table 4.

Table 4: Multiple Regressions Predicting Present and Future Selves[1]

	Present Self		Possible Self	
	5th Grade	6th Grade	5th Grade	6th Grade
Teacher Has Warm Relationship	.07	.02	.07	.02
Teacher Uses Mastery Practices	-.04	.05	-.04	.09†
Self-Efficacy	.30***	.05	.22***	-.01
Performance Orientation	.01	-.01	.00	17***
Mastery Orientation	.38***	.35***	37***	.35***
Gender	-.10**	-.16***	-.05	-.09†
End of Year Grade in Subject	.19***	.32***	.15***	.27***
R-Squared	.42***	.30***	.31***	.28***

[1] *All measures (self-efficacy, mastery performance orientation, end of year grade) are domain specific; forexample, in mathematics, the self-efficacy items referto students' sense of efficacy at mathematics,rather than a general sense of efficacy.*

Mastery goals are positively related to present and possible selves before and after the transition. Self-efficacy is a predictor of present and possible selves in elementary school, but not in middle school. Performance goals are positively related to possible selves in middle school only.

Discussion

Maehr, Pintrich, & Zimmerman (1993) proposed that the study of achievement goals and studies of self-schemata may inform each other and broaden our current understanding of achievement. The present study examines these relationships, while simultaneously examining changes in these relationships over the transition to middle grades school. Eccles and her colleagues (e.g., Eccles & Midgley, 1989) have demonstrated that changes in the nature of school environments over this school transition have a strong impact on motivation and achievement. Consequently, possible selves, and the relationships between possible selves and goals, may be impacted by this transition.

Our results indicate that present and possible "good student" selves decrease over the transition, although the decline is greater for males than for females. Also, academically at-risk students have lower present and possible self-concepts than not at risk students.

Holding mastery goals in math is positively related to present and possible selves before and after the transition. But, self-efficacy in math is only related to present and possible selves in elementary school. Holding performance goals is positively related to possible selves in middle school only.

The fact that self-efficacy is only significant during elementary school is intriguing. It is possible that a student's overall self-concept, which includes dimensions of efficacy, is less general during adolescence, and consequently, not perceiving oneself as competent in

"math," which is merely one subject and one part of the school day, is less important during middle school in determining one's overall self-concept.

The fact that performance goals become a significant predictor of possible selves in middle school also is intriguing. Researchers have lamented the fact that middle school environments are more focused on ability and grades than elementary schools (e.g., Anderman & Maehr, in press; Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Consequently, students may come to hold the belief during the middle grade years that to be successful in the future, one has to compete and outperform others. Future longitudinal studies should investigate these findings.

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