

Stimulating the Possible Selves of Township Children in South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Hope for the future. Hope for the future is an essential quality of life in the First World. We spend considerable time thinking about, visualising and planning for our future. We have a fundamental belief that our hopes for the future are not merely fantasies, wishful thinking, but real possibilities of who we could become, of how our lives could turn out to be. We all know of people who have a clearly worked out ten-year plan – next year they will complete their studies, then they will get a job at this organisation for three years during which time they will acquire the following skills, and then they will get a senior appointment at that company, working their way up to deputy director by the eighth year, after which they will start their own business and live happily ever after. And somewhere in between all of this they'll get married and have two point five children. The remarkable thing is that people who have plans like this often achieve them – the clear vision for the future, the unshakable belief in their abilities and the focused effort they put into developing themselves now all increase the likelihood that they will actualise this future self.

In South Africa, things are not quite so optimistic. The history of apartheid robbed the majority of South Africans of opportunities for the future. In those days, no matter how hard a Black person worked, studied, hoped and dreamed, they would never become a doctor, a company director, a senior official in the government department, a professor at university. Future opportunities for Black people under apartheid were extremely limited and as a result people lived in the present, hoping for a more generally positive future – a liberation of all South Africans.

But not only this, there was also the factor of poverty. Most South Africans, Black South Africans, lived in abject poverty. Where even a daily meal was not guaranteed – no electricity, no real housing, insecure jobs, no medical care, little education, little protection from the elements. In such precarious circumstances, one enters survival mode – living in the moment and striving to survive today. There is no ten-year plan, just a today plan. Any hopes for the future become wild and utopian – a world full of delicious food, free for the taking, big luxurious houses for everyone, servants to wait on you hand and foot. This is the hope for the future that develops in such situations.

Well, it has been 13 years since the fall of apartheid, since South Africa became a genuinely democratic country. Black people now have the vote. Black people can study and enter any career they choose. Thanks to affirmative action and Black Economic Empowerment, Black people have better opportunities than many White people to get ahead in life. As the majority, Black people control the future of South Africa. With all of these positive changes, you would think that hope for the future would have improved.

However, most Black people continue to live in poverty. Many live in townships, in tin shacks, often with no electricity or heating. The quality of education remains poor, with massive classes and disinterested teachers. The opportunities for young people to read books, to learn to write, to develop academic competencies remain limited. The unemployment rate remains alarmingly high. Black people continue to predominate in unskilled and poorly paid jobs.

In response to these challenges, South Africa has adopted a social development approach to welfare, which seeks to harmonise human development with economic development. This is based on the belief that a prerequisite for developing people is ensuring that they have the necessary economic resources to grow and thrive. And not just national economics, but household economics – economic development must benefit families, all families. We believe that in this way, we will gradually extricate individuals, families and communities from the slough of poverty.

It is against this backdrop that I made contact with House of Hope, a home for children who are vulnerable or orphaned. House of Hope is located in a township 15 minutes from my home. It is run by a township church, and accommodates a couple dozen children, ranging in age from birth to 18 years. I got involved in Hope through my church – I helped to organise a number of small outreach projects in that community – taking the children to the Pretoria Zoo, playing sport with them and so on. A friend of mine had volunteered to provide extra English classes to the teenagers. And so, over a period of several months, I built up a relationship with the pastor at the church, who was the legal foster parent of the children.

One of the main concerns that emerged through these interactions was the future possibilities of these children, particularly the teenagers. As with many township children, their options for the future were limited and typically not well articulated. The pastor therefore asked me to develop a programme that would stimulate the possible selves of these children.

In this paper, therefore, I would like to start with a brief theoretical discussion on the theory of possible selves, which served as the foundation of my work with the teenagers at House of Hope. Then I wish to describe the intervention itself. And finally I will reflect on the effectiveness and challenges in this intervention. I believe that the theory of possible selves offers a helpful conceptual framework for work with all human beings, but particularly for those who are young or vulnerable. My aim with this paper is thus to introduce and illustrate the theory in the hope that you will integrate some of its ideas into your own life.

THEORY OF POSSIBLE SELVES

In 1986, Markus and Nurius published a paper called “Possible Selves” in the journal *American Psychologist*. In this paper they proposed an expansion on traditional ways of viewing self-knowledge and motivation. Usually, they say, we think about what motivates people’s behaviour in terms of the present or past. If I think of myself as a creative person, I am more likely to engage in creative activities and be committed to art or music lessons. If I think of myself as a sporting person, I am less likely to be committed to music lessons. So current behaviour is motivated by current views of the self.

Markus and Nurius argue that current behaviour is also motivated by future views of the self, which they have termed possible selves or future selves. We are not motivated only by present views of the self, but also by our dreams and hopes of who we may become, who we hope to be, the self of the future that we dream about. This possible self, which of course is just in our imaginations, exerts a surprisingly powerful influence on our current behaviour.

If I dream about becoming a famous concert pianist, I will invest a great deal of energy now in practising piano, scales, and etudes. On those days where I feel too tired to practice, I will think about my dream, about my possible self, and find the will power to practice. If I fail an exam, or do poorly in a competition, I will not just give up, because I have a resilient and steadfast vision of myself in the future as a concert pianist. If anything, the present failure will motivate me even more to practice, in order to make real the possible self.

Markus and Nurius suggest that there are three categories of possible selves. Firstly, there is the ideal self – the self that we would very much like to become. Secondly, the self that we could become, taking into account the constraints of our current reality. And thirdly, the self that we fear becoming, the worst-case scenario, the self that would be our worst nightmare, the self that we will do anything to avoid becoming. Each of these selves exerts an influence

on our current behaviour. If we stay with our aspirant pianist, we would say that his ideal self is to become a famous concert pianist – like Arthur Rubenstein or Yevgeny Kissin. The second self, the self that he could become, may be more modest – rather than being an international icon, perhaps he could become a concert pianist within Germany. The third self, the self he fears becoming, could be that he will end up as a piano teacher with primary school children.

Each of these visions exerts an influence on his behaviour. The ideal self draws and inspires him to work hard. The feared self spurs him on when he loses hope, warning him of the consequences of losing motivation.

Well, this is the essence of the theory of possible selves. There are numerous papers published on the theory, which provide empirical evidence to back up the original ideas. The theory has also been translated into interventions to increase commitment to school, to increase exercise behaviour, to reduce sexual risk behaviour, to reduce substance abuse and to reduce criminal behaviour. Research has shown that children from deprived backgrounds are more likely to have underdeveloped, idealistic and unclear possible selves. Research has also shown that the clearer these possible selves are – less idealised and more real, concrete and attainable – the more influence they exert on current behaviour. Thus, we have a challenge in working with children from deprived backgrounds to develop and flesh-out their possible selves so that they will be more helpful in motivating those children's behaviour.

FUTURES GROUP

In response to the needs of the teenagers at House of Hope and in light of this theory of possible selves, I developed an intervention called the "Futures Group" which has been running at House of Hope since May this year. The Futures Group has two main goals:

1. To help the participants clarify their future possible selves.
2. To help the participants think through what they should be doing now to get there.

The Futures Group ran in three phases: In Phase 1, I conducted individual assessments of each participant. In Phase 2, I ran an educational group. In Phase 3, I created opportunities for each child to explore a career.

Phase 1: Assessments. During May, I interviewed each child using an assessment tool that I designed based on ecological assessment and the theory of possible selves. It took the form of an ecogram, in which the child is assessed in relation to significant components of her or his social environment – family of origin, school, church, peers, the foster parents, etc. Each of these components was assessed at two levels. Firstly, I asked about the present and past, in order to gain a bit of history and current psychosocial functioning. And secondly, I asked what that component would say about the child's future in ten years time. For example, I asked what she thought her teachers would say about what kind of person she will be like in ten years time.

These interviews, which lasted about an hour, were helpful at a number of levels. Firstly, they helped to build a one-on-one relationship between each child and me. This was valuable later when I needed to facilitate each child's growth. Secondly, they gave me information about the social dynamics and needs of the group, helping me to understand the extent of their limited opportunities, language difficulties and so on. And thirdly, the nature of the assessment began to focus the children on their futures. The nature of the questions that I asked stimulated them to think about themselves in ten years time, something they had not thought much about. It facilitated informal discussions between the children about the future. In this way, the assessment process was itself an intervention – it got the topic of the future self into the discourse at House of Hope.

Phase 2: Group. Phase 2 ran from July to September. It comprised a group for the ten children, on a weekly basis, for an hour to an hour and a half. We worked through nine topics: the abundant life that God desires for us, eulogies, career choices, curriculum vitae, school and studies, my body, sexuality, obstacles and termination. Each of these topics was designed to stimulate thinking about the future. We don't have time for me to go into all of them in detail, so I will highlight just a couple.

In the second session we focused on **eulogies** – these are the speeches that people make about us at our funerals. We began by sitting in a long row in the middle of the venue all looking in one direction. We talked about how what was behind us was in the past, what was before us was in the future and where we were sitting was in the present. The children began to recognise that they needed to be correctly oriented towards the future, to learn from the past but to move towards the future, always located in the present where they needed to work.

We then spoke about the long-term future – fifty, sixty years in the future, when they have come to the end of their lives. This evoked anxiety in some of the group members, who did not want to think about themselves as elderly. The group members helped each other work through this, and we then spent some minutes preparing the eulogies that we hoped people would provide at our own funerals. Each member had a chance to present their eulogies, after which we reflected on what we learned from them.

The children recognised that the things we hoped people would say about our lives when we have finished living reflect some of our deepest values and aspirations. Most of the children, for example, emphasised the importance of integrity, honesty, and faithfulness in relationships. They described themselves as generous people who invest in social relationships, and who put back into the community. These discussions helped to clarify the deep values held by the group members.

In terms of the theory of possible selves, this session helped to clarify the value components of their possible selves, thereby making the self clearer and more real.

In the fourth session we compiled **curriculum vitae** (CVs), which are used to apply for studies and jobs. I compiled a CV template that was suitable for young people who are still at school and together we each compiled our CVs during the session. During the completion of the templates, the children began to recognise certain gaps in their CVs – things that they had not thought about and that could reduce the chances of their getting a job or a study opportunity.

For example, one of the main things they realised was the importance of community involvement and leadership. They began to recognise that their possible selves, without exception, required them to be leaders, to be active in the world, to make a difference not only in their own lives but also in the lives of others. Although they were still too young to go to university or get a full time job, they recognised that they could already begin getting involved in community project or leadership roles. This translated into their volunteering to lead Sunday School, to help out with a community project at school, to take the lead in classroom activities and to volunteer at a local soup kitchen. These activities could then be incorporated into their CVs.

In terms of the theory of possible selves, this session helped to translate a future vision of a possible self into current behaviour.

In the eighth session we explored **obstacles** – things that could get in the way of their progress towards realising their possible selves. The reality is that these children live in deprived circumstances, have no money, little opportunity and no connections. The world is, in many ways, against them. It is, therefore, likely that they will encounter obstacles that block their path to the future. In this session, run near the end of Phase 2, we faced these obstacles squarely.

In the first part of the session we brainstormed the obstacles. Initially, there was reluctance on the part of the children to talk about the obstacles. It was as if they wanted to hold on to an idealised, romantic view of the future in which everything will just unfold as they dream it. However, thanks to the influence of a couple of the older children, they became able to face these realities and engage with them constructively. A range of obstacles was identified, including their own motivation, the negative views of others, lack of financial resources, crime and so on.

I then taught them a simple decision-making procedure called the crossroads, in which they are to stop when they encounter an obstacle, look at the various options, evaluate the options, make a decision and then move forward. They then broke into small groups and used the crossroads procedure to problem-solve one or two of the obstacles that we had identified. In this way, they began to develop a level of autonomy, focused on dealing constructively with the challenges to their aspirations.

In terms of the theory of possible selves, this session helped to affirm the resilience and strength of their possible selves. Even in the face of current challenges and obstacles, they could retain a firm hold on the possible self and continue to strive towards it. The possible self thereby serves a compass, pointing them in the direction they want to go, providing stability and focus to their current lives.

Phase 3: Career Opportunities. A significant focus of the Futures Group has been on developing a vision for a career. In this way, the Group is an example of a social development intervention run with children at a small scale. It is expected that the Group will help these children progress to a career that makes them financially independent and even sufficiently well-resourced that they will be in a position to assist others who are vulnerable. Ultimately, it is my hope that, in the long term, the Futures Group will help these ten children escape the trap of poverty.

While Phase 2 of the Futures Group appeared effective in helping the children gain a clearer vision for the future and to recognise what they need to do now to move towards that future, they still did not have a real understanding of the careers that they were interested in pursuing. Thus in Phase 3 I linked each child with someone who had the career that they aspired towards.

Thus three of the children spent a day with a state prosecutor in the local magistrates court to see what being a lawyer is like. Another child spent a day with a social worker, seeing different kinds of community projects. Two boys spent a day at a police station learning about the job of a police man. In all of these examples, the children began to develop a more reality-based vision for that career – less idealised, less impressionist, more grounded in the real world. In so doing, they bring into the present those things that they need to work harder at to achieve that vision.

I want to mention one of the children in a bit more detail. Dee is an 11 year old girl who dreamed of becoming a hip-hop dancer. Now that is a little out of my own cultural experience, and I struggled to find a professional hip-hop dancer. But what I did discover is that making a profession out of dancing requires a high degree of flexibility in dancing different styles – not just hip-hop but other styles as well. Using the networking skills that I learned as a social worker, I secured free ballet lessons for Dee and organised a team of six people to assist in providing Dee with transport from House of Hope to another community three times a week for ballet lessons.

Now this was a lovely opportunity for Dee, but the transformation that took place is what is remarkable. Before the Futures Group, she wanted to be a dancer and would mess around dancing with the other girls. But there was no real investment in developing herself as a dancer – it was just a nice idea because she thought she had the right 'moves'. Now, however, she locks herself into the church hall at House of Hope every day, chasing everyone else away, and practices her dancing. Her ballet teacher has reported on her passion and enthusiasm. And although she has a long way to go, she is demonstrating real potential to

become a dancer. The possible self that was developed during Phase 2, is now translating into a change of behaviour in Phase 3.

REFLECTION ON THE FUTURES GROUP

As I reflect back on the Futures Group and the growth that it facilitated in the ten teenagers who participated, I think there are four main points that need mentioning.

Firstly, I have learned that none of the teenagers I worked with had a well developed possible self when I first met them. They had romantic, idealistic dreams of their future, in which they fantasised about being rich and famous. The literature suggests that this is probably typical of most adolescents – they have grandiose dreams that only mature in their twenties. But the literature also indicates that among disadvantaged groups, marginalized and vulnerable groups, this is even more true. Thus I have reached the conclusion that facilitating the possible selves of teenagers from disadvantaged communities is a significant and valuable investment for a social worker, particularly when working within a social development paradigm.

Secondly, I have seen how a fairly non-invasive group work process that creates experiential opportunities for teenagers to reflect on their possible selves can prove effective in stimulating the possible self. This results in a more fleshed out, concrete, detailed and realistic possible self – the idealised, romanticised possible self becomes a real possibility. This seems particularly effective when these teenagers are given an opportunity to see their possible future in real life. In the case of the Futures Group, this was facilitated through spending time with people doing the job they have thought about.

Thirdly, I believe that there were a number of factors that may have increased the programme's effectiveness. The key factor is the sustained involvement from my side. My involvement extended over several months, beginning with the initial assessments in Phase 1 and continuing through to the career visits in Phase 3. Indeed, I have not yet completed the project, as I have arranged for the older teenagers to obtain career counselling in February next year. Change of this nature is unlikely to take place within a single workshop – a community development process, even at a small scale like this, is required.

Fourthly, there is at least initial evidence, albeit anecdotal, that the increased clarity of possible selves is influencing current behaviour. We see this most clearly in Dee's genuine commitment to dancing. But also in the effort that the others put into their studies and exams, their continued exploration of their careers and their increasing commitment to and participation in the Futures Group.

In conclusion, hope is a vital part of what makes us human. It is that capacity to imagine a future, a possible future, as if it is a reality. This capacity is at least in part dependent on our social environment – factors like poverty, political exclusion and social oppression inhibit the capacity to hope, the capacity to imagine a possible future. The theory of possible selves and the Futures Group that is derived from that theory appear to offer a mechanism to stimulate the possible selves of township children in South Africa.