Future Orientation: Definition, Measurement, and Strategies

Excerpted from Skills and Dispositions that Support Youth Success in School

What is Future Orientation?

Future orientation consists of two distinct but closely related skills and dispositions: the ability to set goals and monitor progress toward their achievement and hope and optimism regarding one’s future potential, goals, and options. Future orientation is related to a person’s ability to initiate and sustain goal-directed action. It is not sufficient to have goals; one must also have the general belief that these goals can be attained. This is similar to C. R. Snyder’s hope theory, in which hope is conceived of as a “dynamic motivational system” comprised of goals, the motivation to pursue those goals (agency) and the ability to devise a plan to reach them (pathways) (Snyder, et. al., 2002, p. 820).

Why Future Orientation Matters

Future time perspective is a key feature of adolescence. As future time perspective develops, having a long-term goal or purpose, especially when that goal or purpose is intrinsic (i.e. related to one’s desired contribution rather than to external rewards) instills tenacity and promotes positive growth in youth (Lee, McInerney, Liem & Ortega, 2010; Damon, 2008). Once a young person commits to a personally valued future goal, he or she develops a system of proximal sub-goals and self-regulatory behaviors to achieve it. Goal orientation is an important component of academic success when school work is seen as relevant to future goals and instrumental to their attainment (Miller & Brickman, 2004; Tabachnick, Miller & Relyea, 2008).

Hope and optimism are important corollaries to goal orientation. A young person with a hopeful attitude and an optimistic vision of their future self may be more motivated to pursue educational and vocational goals over the long term. Accordingly, hope is a strong predictor of success in middle school, high school, college, and beyond (Snyder, et. al., 2002) Youth who are not hopeful or goal-oriented may lack a clear sense of direction, and become overwhelmed by external pressures and expectations. Positive future orientation also predicts better social and emotional adjustment, and can help to mediate the effects of stress in youth (Wyman, Cowen, Work & Kerley, 1993).

Can increasing Future Orientation decrease the Achievement Gap? Research has suggested that youth who engage in delinquent behavior have a restrictive view of their options in life. Young people’s views of their own options are highly sensitive to their context, their background, and their self-perception. Supporting youth to envision a positive “possible self,” and the path it will take to become that person, can have a marked effect on their life outcomes – particularly when those youth come from impoverished communities (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). In their work on role models, Lockwood and Kunda found that young people are more likely to be positively motivated by a “superstar” figure when they perceive that figure to be more like themselves, and when their success appears attainable (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). This suggests that it is critically important to provide youth with role models that they can relate to, and with real-world stories of overcoming trauma, poverty, and oppression.

Measuring Future Orientation

In order to nurture future orientation in young people, it is important to understand where they currently stand. Future orientation can be measured in a number of ways. Each has strengths and limitations. Measures of future orientation fall into three basic categories:
1. **Observational Assessments:** Some observational assessments include components related to hope, optimism, or general positivity. The Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA) is one example; it asks teachers or other adults to rate children on behaviors that represent optimistic thinking and goal-directed behavior.

2. **Self-Report Surveys:** Examples include the Life Orientation Test, the Future Aspirations Scale, the Hope Scale for Children, and the Hope component of the Gallup Student Poll. YDEKC has used a survey scale comprised of items from Child Trends’ Hope and Goal Orientation scales to measure future orientation in older youth (Lippman, Guzman, & Anderson Moore 2012).

3. **Intervention- or Performance-Based Measures:** Future orientation can be assessed qualitatively, in the context of planning or goal-setting activities. Asking youth to articulate goals and plans in a structured way can provide information on their future orientation.

### Strategies for Building Future Orientation

Since future orientation is conditioned by context, cultivating school and program climates that promote belonging is a key foundational practice. In her research on high school dropouts, Carol Dweck found that positive relationships and a sense of social belonging were linked to goal orientation generally and persistence in school in particular (Dweck, Walton & Cohen 2014). Targeted interventions based on social belonging can also be effective in promoting future orientation in young people. Walton and Cohen (2007) found that an intervention designed to affirm social belonging in an academic context by framing adversity as a universal and temporary condition improved the optimism, sense of belonging, and ultimately academic performance of African American students.

Helping young people to envision their future in new ways can help build their future orientation. Markus and Nurius (1986) introduced the concept of “possible selves,” which are “the ideal selves that we would very much like to become... the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming” (p. 954). Other researchers have used the concept of possible selves to develop interventions in which youth imagine possible selves associated with academic success, and then develop strategies to attain them, anticipating challenges and failures as part of the process (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006).

Oettingen (2012) theorized that behavior change is possible when future visions are accompanied by a sense that these visions are attainable. She proposed an intervention known as WOOP (Wish-Outcome-Obstacle-Plan) based on mental contrasting with implementation intention. In short, WOOP asks participants to articulate a future hope (wish and outcome), along with factors that might get in the way (obstacles), and then develop an if-then plan.

### Considerations

Interventions directed toward individuals hold promise, but are ultimately limited. Children and youth whose lives are affected by poverty, racism, and other forms of oppression face challenges that are difficult to rise above through individual agency alone. Educators and community members need to focus not only on individual children and youth, but also on the environments in which they spend their time and the adults with whom they interact. We need to work toward structural and institutional changes that will afford all children the opportunity to both imagine and achieve the future they desire.

### For More Information

- **Youth Worker Methods Training: Planning and Reflection** - [http://cypq.org/products_and_services/training/YWM](http://cypq.org/products_and_services/training/YWM)

  As part of the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality “Youth Worker Methods” Series, this training focuses on engaging youth in planning and reflection in the context of youth programs. Through these activities young people can develop transferrable skills that will help them succeed in other areas of their lives. School’s Out Washington offers these trainings and can set up custom trainings for programs or schools.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


