

Do We Really Change? Mental Health and Achievement Stability over the Life Course

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Abstract:

Researchers view the enhancement of self-concept as a vital component to achievement academically as well as in social and emotional experiences across the life span. Stipek, Recchia, and McClintic (1992) find that positive academic achievements or failures can affect how children develop a sense of self-worth or self-esteem. Similarly, the clinical psychology literature views a healthy and positive self-concept as a means for individuals of all ages to deal better with life stresses and achieve more in their lives (Coopersmith, 1967). In this paper we examine the trajectories of children with different self-esteem and achievement levels as early predictors of later adult outcomes.

In this study we are using data from the Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transitions (MSALT), a longitudinal study that began with a cohort of sixth graders (starting in 1983-84) and followed them until they were adults (1998), to examine mental health and academic achievement and life success. We used a person-centered approach to grouping children that varied between high self-esteem/achievement cluster and low self-esteem/achievement cluster (4 groups in all). The results indicate that early indicators of mental health and achievement are significant predictors of later adult outcomes.

Introduction

Longitudinal research on academic achievement has shown that trajectories for achievement are set as early as third grade, if not earlier, and continue through high school (Alexander & Entwistle, 1988). Researchers also view the enhancement of self-concept as a vital component to achievement academically as well as in social and emotional experiences across the life span. Stipek, Recchia, and McClintic (1992) find that positive academic achievements or failures can affect how children develop a sense of self-worth or self-esteem. Similarly, the clinical psychology literature views a healthy and positive self-concept as a means for individuals of all ages to deal better with life stresses and achieve more in their lives (Coopersmith, 1967). The important question for longitudinal researchers is how stable are effects of academic achievement and self-esteem across the lifespan of individuals. In order to answer this question we examine the trajectories of children with different self-esteem and achievement levels as early predictors of later adult outcomes.

Methodology:

Data from approximately 900 sixth and seventh graders (1983-1984) participating in an on-going longitudinal study (Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transition (MSALT)) were analyzed. Using a person-centered approach, students were grouped into one of four categories based on mean splits of their answers to self-esteem measures and their academic achievement (GPA) collected from schools records at 6th and 7th grade.

These groups were identified as:

Group1 (Low-Low) - individuals with low self-esteem, low GPA

Group2 (Low-High) - individuals with low self-esteem, high GPA

Group3 (High-Low) - individuals with high self-esteem, low GPA

Group4 (High-High) - individuals with high self-esteem, high GPA

Outcome Measures.

Three outcome measures were assessed by participants reports on self-esteem, depression, and future educational attainment at four time points, 10 grade (1988), 12 grades (1990), 2 years post high school (1992), and 6 years post high school (1996). Also, two additional self reported outcome measures assessed general health and suicidal ideation at two time points, 2 and 6 years after high school (see Table 1).

Demographics of Sample (6 Years Post High School - 1996):

❖ Sample Size	500-900 (varies by analysis)
❖ Ethnicity	91% White, 9% Other
❖ Gender	Females = 60%, Males = 40%
❖ Income	Median Range = \$20,000-\$29,000
❖ Marital Status	Married = 24.6 %
❖ Have Children?	19.6%
❖ Education Attained	< HS Diploma 3%
	Diploma 14%
	Some College 28.9%
	BA, BS degree 45%
	Post-graduate 10%

Results:

Results of five MANOVAs (self-esteem, depression, future educational plan, suicidal ideation and general health) controlling for teacher rating of participants ability in 6th / 7th grade are presented in Table 2 and Figures 1-5.

Individuals reporting high self-esteem at 6th/7th grade, regardless of academic achievement, report significantly higher levels of self-esteem, lower levels of depression, lower levels of suicidal thoughts, and higher levels of perceived health in early adulthood than those with low self-esteem.

Individuals with higher GPA's and higher self-esteem at 6th/7th grade have significantly higher educational aspirations in early adulthood than those with lower GPA's and self-esteem.

Discussion:

This study confirmed earlier work by Alexander and Entwistle (1988) that showed a stable effect of academic achievement across the school years. Our study extended this research to show that achievement continues to have an impact into adulthood, especially on variables associated directly with education (Future Educational Attainment) and even on mental health variables such as lower levels of suicidal thoughts.

Achievement, however, was not the strongest predictor of success in adulthood. A positive self-esteem had a strong impact on success in early adulthood. Those individuals who reported a positive self-esteem in middle school were more likely to report higher self-esteem, lower levels of depression, higher aspirations for educational attainment, lower levels of suicidal thoughts, and higher perceived health in adulthood.

These two characteristics, when combined as predictors, showed that if individuals have both high self-esteem and a high achievement then their outcomes will also be positive. Conversely, those who are low on these two characteristics showed negative outcomes in adulthood.

This finding is important for intervention research. If there is strong stability in mental health and achievement outcomes across the lifespan, then intervention needs to occur early in childhood. Perhaps even earlier than middle childhood before the trajectories become stable.

Future research will examine these variables at younger ages to see how early these trajectories become stable. Using data from a study which started to examine these issues as early as kindergarten, we will be able to examine the predictive ability of early self-esteem and achievement on subsequent adult outcomes.

References:

Alexander, K. L. & Entwistle, D. R. (1988). Achievement in the first 2 years of school: Patterns and processes. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 53 (2, Serial No. 218).

Coopersmith, S. (1967). The antecedents of self-esteem. San Francisco, CA: W. H. Freeman and Company.

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Table 1: Measures for Study

Grouping Measures:	Reliability (Cronbach Alpha)	Item Information/Sample Item
Academic Achievement	NA	GPA (average of 6th & 7th grades)
Harter Self-Esteem Scale (5 Items)	.67 - .70	Some kids feel that there are a lot of things about themselves that they would change if they could/Other kids would like to stay pretty much the same. (5 pt Likert Scale)
Dependent Measures:		
Self-Esteem (3 Items)	.71 - .81	How often do you feel satisfied with yourself the way you are? (7pt Likert Scale)
Depression (4 Items)	.70 - .74	How Often do you lose appetite or eat a lot when upset? (7pt Likert Scale)
Future Educational Plans (3 Items)	.61 - .65	When you think about your future, how likely do you think you will graduate form your year college? (7pt Likert Scale)
General Health (1 Item)	NA	How would you rate your overall health?
Suicide Ideation (2 Items)	.85 - .87	How often do you think about suicide? (7pt Likert Scale)

Table 2: Means Across Time of Self-Esteem, Depression, Future Education, Suicide Ideation, and Perceived Health By Levels of Self-Esteem and GPA

	<u>10th Grade</u>	<u>12th Grade</u>	<u>HS + 2 yrs</u>	<u>HS + 6 yrs</u>
<u>Self-Esteem</u>				
Low Self-Esteem/Low GPA	4.12	4.45	4.49	4.58
Low Self-Esteem/High GPA	4.13	4.53	4.53	4.79
High Self-Esteem/Low GPA	5.05	4.91	5.13	5.48
High Self-Esteem/High GPA	4.85	5.14	5.18	5.41
	***	***	***	***
<u>Depression</u>				
Low Self-Esteem/Low GPA	4.44	4.04	4.01	4.16
Low Self-Esteem/High GPA	4.42	3.80	3.73	4.10
High Self-Esteem/Low GPA	3.75	3.28	3.11	3.46
High Self-Esteem/High GPA	3.81	3.32	3.19	3.68
	***	***	***	***
<u>Future Education</u>				
Low Self-Esteem/Low GPA	4.33	4.50	4.79	5.16
Low Self-Esteem/High GPA	4.19	4.64	5.14	5.60
High Self-Esteem/Low GPA	4.10	4.62	5.21	5.88
High Self-Esteem/High GPA	4.33	4.61	5.52	5.70
	NS	NS	**	**
<u>Suicide</u>				
Low Self-Esteem/Low GPA			2.09	1.82
Low Self-Esteem/High GPA			1.84	1.60
High Self-Esteem/Low GPA			1.53	1.23
High Self-Esteem/High GPA			1.57	1.40
			***	***
<u>Health</u>				
Low Self-Esteem/Low GPA			3.43	3.40
Low Self-Esteem/High GPA			3.40	3.49
High Self-Esteem/Low GPA			3.73	3.69
High Self-Esteem/High GPA			3.77	3.76
			***	***

Note: All analysis were conducted controlling for Teachers Rating of Ability at 6th/7th grade.

* = $p \leq .05$, ** = $p \leq .01$, *** = $p \leq .001$

Figure 1

**Self-Esteem Overtime by Initial Self-Esteem and GPA in
Middle School Controlling for Teacher's Rating of
Ability in Middle School**

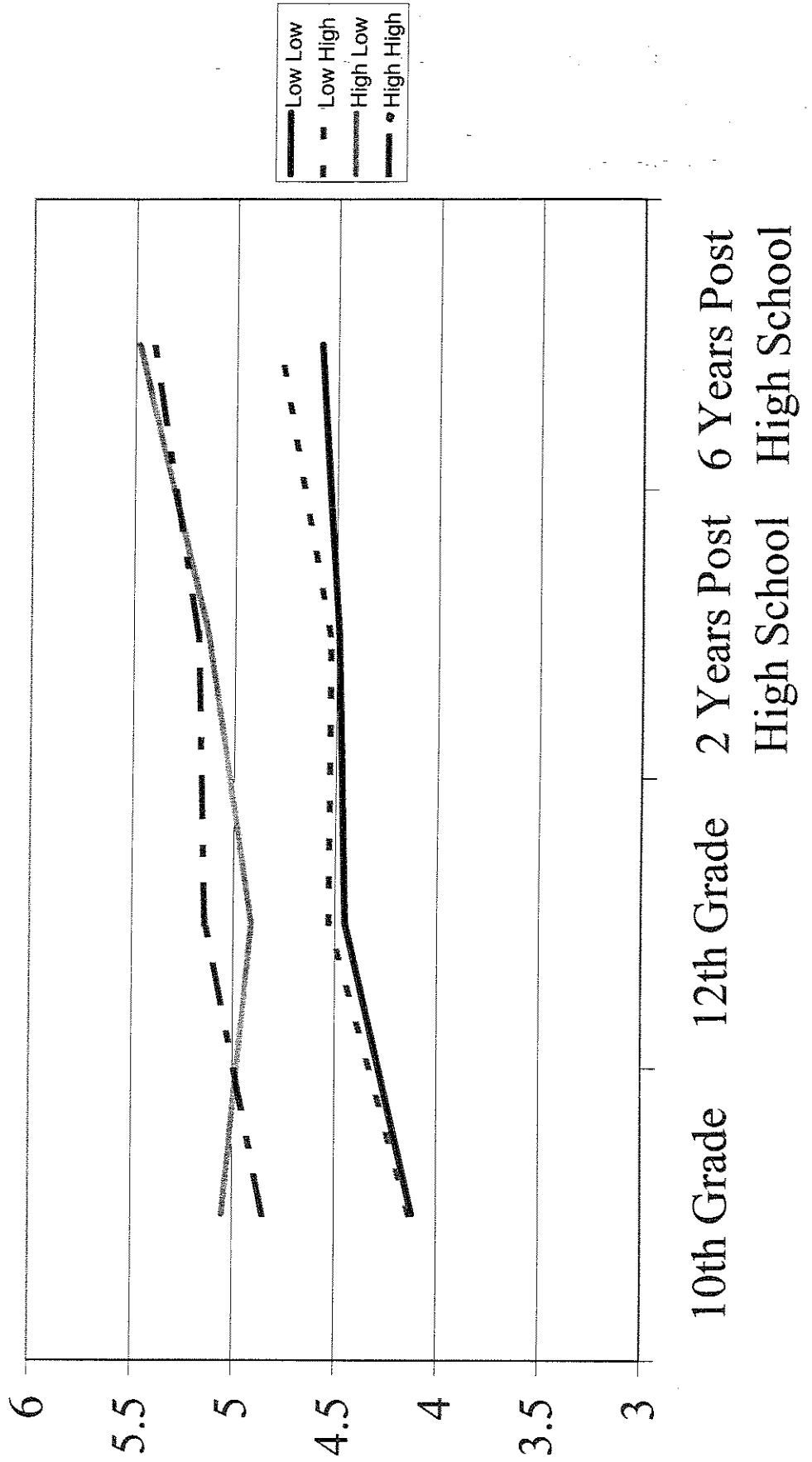


Figure 2

Depression Overtime by Initial Self-Esteem and GPA in Middle School Controlling for Teacher's Rating of Ability in Middle School

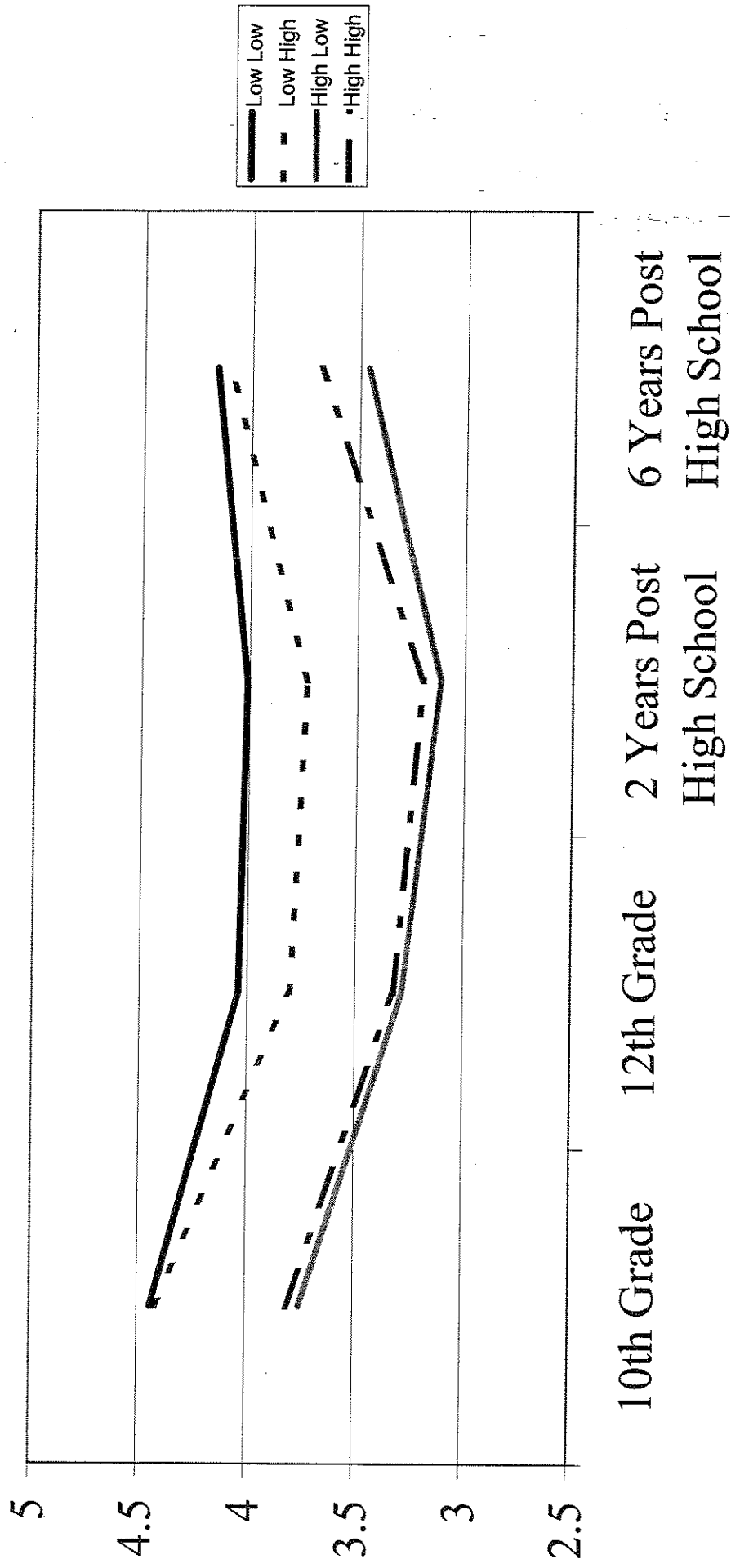


Figure 3

**Future Education Overtime by Initial Self-Esteem and
GPA in Middle School Controlling for Teacher's Rating
of Ability in Middle School**

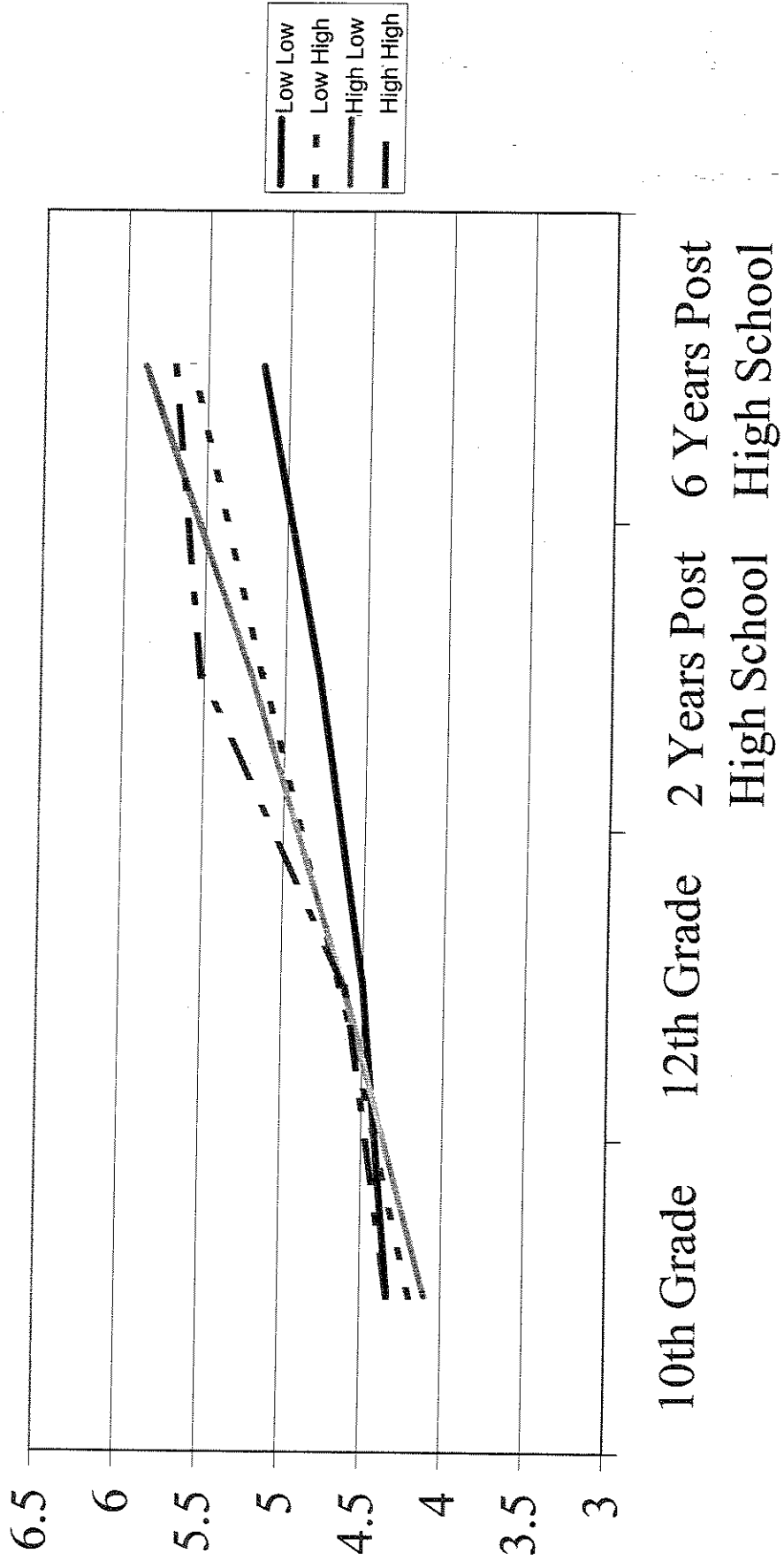


Figure 4

Suicidal Ideation Overtime by Initial Self-Esteem and GPA in Middle School Controlling for Teacher's Rating of Ability in Middle School

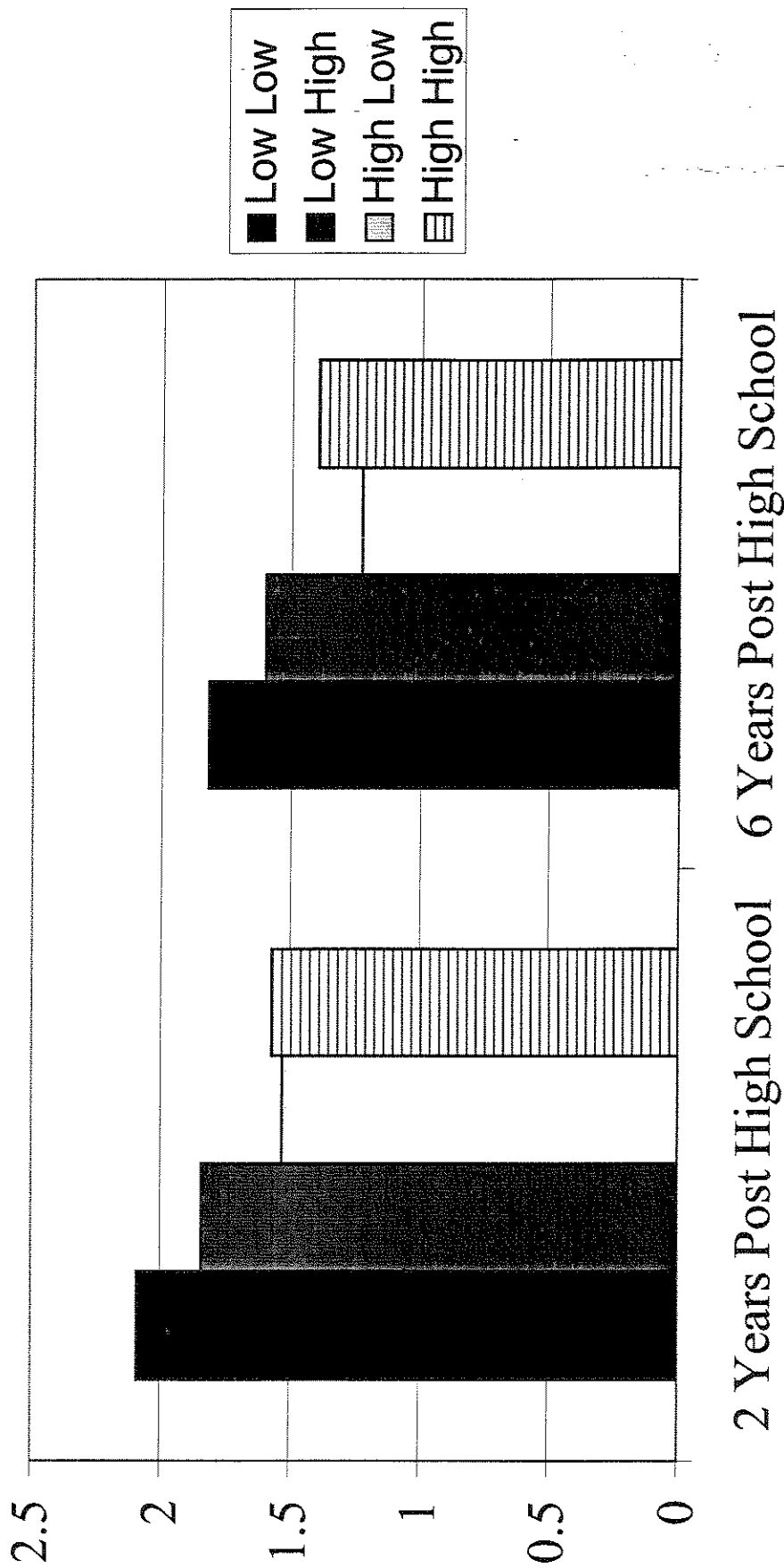


Figure 5

**Health Overtime by Initial Self-Esteem and GPA in Middle School
Controlling for Teacher's Rating of Ability in Middle School**

