

Students' Self-Concept Related to an  
Alternative High School Experience

By

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### Abstract

Research shows that some students need nontraditional settings in order to learn. Alternative schools were developed to meet the needs of at-risk students who have difficulty learning in the traditional setting. In order to examine the effectiveness of alternative schools, many factors need to be considered. One of those factors is student self-concept.

This study examined at-risk students' self-concept related to an alternative high school experience. Participants in the present study included 89 at-risk students in one alternative high school program. The students' self-concept was measured by the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, Second Edition (Piers, 2002), administered once in September 2002 and again in December 2002. The relationship of students' self-concept to school status (new or returning student), age, gender, and ethnicity was examined.

Results reveal that, in September 2002, returning alternative high school students had higher Overall Self-Concept, Intellectual and School Status, Physical Appearance and Attributes, and Popularity Piers-Harris-2 scores than new alternative school students. However, Piers-Harris-2 Behavioral Adjustment, Freedom From Anxiety, and Happiness and Satisfaction scores were not significantly different between returning and new students in September 2002. At the end of December 2002, returning students had higher Physical Appearance and Attributes scores than new students. There were no significant differences between new and returning students on the other Piers-Harris-2 self-concept scales at the end of December 2002.

When examining change in the alternative high school students' self-concept over time, students' Physical Appearance and Attributes Piers-Harris-2 scores significantly increased from September to December 2002. However, none of the other self-concept scores significantly changed between the two administrations of the Piers-Harris-2. Results also show that new students' Overall Self-Concept and Intellectual and School Status scores increased, while returning students' scores decreased on these two scales from September to December 2002. There were no significant differences in the change of the self-concept scores when examining age, gender, or ethnicity. Results reveal, however, that male students had higher Freedom From Anxiety and Popularity scores than female students on the Piers-Harris-2. The results of the current study indicate that further research of alternative schools is necessary to determine if these programs are effective in improving students' self-concept, academic achievement, and chances of graduating from high school.

## Chapter I

### Introduction

#### *Overview*

This chapter briefly explores at-risk students in relation to traditional education, self-concept, and alternative education. In addition, one alternative high school program, the KAS Prep Alternative High School, is briefly described. Next, the statement of purpose is explained. The chapter concludes with the research questions and related hypotheses of the current study.

Although the traditional high school setting meets the needs of the majority of students, the problem of at-risk students leaving school without earning their high school diploma or a GED continues to increase (De La Rosa, 1998). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 1991 approximately 348,000 students between the ages of 15 to 24 dropped out of high school, and more than 3.9 million students between the ages of 16 and 24 had not completed high school and were not enrolled in a program (De La Rosa, 1998). Students who are at-risk for dropping out of school have difficulties in the traditional school setting. One major factor affecting students who drop out of school is the traditional school experience which often values tracking by ability groups, grade retention, denial of student strengths, and a focus on weaknesses. Further, the traditional curriculum is typically information-rich and experience-poor which many students find irrelevant and frequently ignore (Barth, 1991).

Students who drop out of school without earning their high school diploma are likely to have poor self-esteem, receive disapproval from parents, friends, and society, and experience racial discrimination (Tidwell, 1988). In addition, dropping out of high school brings many negative consequences, including high rates of unemployment and likelihood of low-status and low-paying jobs (Beck & Muia, 1980). Because students who drop out of high school may have depressed self-esteem, dissatisfaction, and alienation, these feelings can escalate to disordered, aggressive behaviors and a greater probability of crime (Larsen & Shertzer, 1987). Therefore, not only does the development of programs to prevent students from dropping out of high school benefit at-risk students, but society as well.

Students who are at-risk for dropping out of high school have less positive self-concepts than students who are not considered to be at-risk (Nunn & Parish, 1992). In addition, low self-esteem is related to low levels of educational aspiration, which in turn, makes students with low self-esteem at-risk for dropping out of school (Rumberger, 1987). Because traditional schools may not meet the needs of at-risk students, these students may encounter daily failure and eventual grade retention, lowering their self-esteem and increasing the likelihood that they will drop out of school (Queen, 1994).

Although there are many different, but similar, definitions of self-concept, for the purposes of the present study, self-concept is defined as a relatively stable set of self-attitudes reflecting both a description and evaluation of one's own behavior and attributes (Piers, 2002). Self-concept is interchangeable with the terms self-esteem and self-regard (Piers, 2002). Although self-concept is a relatively stable set of self-attitudes (Piers, 2002), changes in self-concept can occur over time. Some researchers have found that

global self-concept declines at the beginning of adolescence (Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1973) and increases during middle and late adolescence (McCarthy & Hoge, 1982; O'Malley & Bachman, 1983; Savin-Williams & Demo, 1984). During adolescence, there is a major reorganization in self-acceptance and self-concept, with periods of both stabilization and reorganization (Ellis & Davis, 1982). An individual's self-esteem is highly influenced by his/her environment, which affects its stability (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003). Therefore, self-esteem is highly reactive to social evaluation and continually changing in response to external feedback (Trzesniewski et al., 2003).

Stability of self-esteem has been found to increase with age (Trzesniewski et al., 2003). In addition, when examining gender differences in the stability of self-concept, girls' self-esteem has been found to be relatively well-established by adolescence, while boys' self-esteem has been found to be relatively malleable throughout adolescence (Block & Robins, 1993; Rubin, 1978; Wallace, Cunningham, & Del Monte, 1984). There are ethnic differences in self-esteem stability; Asian Americans and Caucasians have higher levels of stability than Hispanic Americans, African Americans, or Native Americans (Trzesniewski et al., 2003).

When developing and evaluating interventions for at-risk students, not only is the stability of self-concept important, but the examination of differences in self-concept between genders and among students of different ethnicities is also important. In one study, male students at-risk for dropping out of high school were found to have higher self-esteem than at-risk female students (Finn & Rock, 1997). When examining multidimensional self-concept of students suspended from high school using the Self-

Description Questionnaire-II (Marsh, 1990), Parent Relationships, General Self, and General School self-concepts were low for both males and females; however, Same-Sex Relationships and Emotional Stability were only low for females (Hay, 2000). When examining differences in self-concept among at-risk students of different ethnicities, African American students have been found to have higher self-esteem than Hispanic students (Finn & Rock, 1997).

Because at-risk students experience low self-esteem, feel heightened anxiety, display poor strategies for achieving success, and have a low expectancy of success, alternative schools must not only tackle academic skill deficits, but affective deficits as well (Stevens & Pihl, 1982). Successful at-risk students differ from unsuccessful at-risk students in motivational processes revealed through measures of self-esteem and locus of control; therefore, self-esteem and locus of control can predict school success in at-risk students (Finn & Rock, 1997). Students can benefit from including self-esteem enhancing programs into curriculum, teaching, and administration of the school (Reyes & Jason, 1993). If schools encourage or discourage self-esteem enhancement, overall levels of students' self-esteem rises or falls (McCarthy & Hoge, 1982). Because self-esteem and self-concept are related to academic achievement (Queen, 1994; Rubin, 1978; Sapp, 1990), a school environment that helps improve students' self-esteem and self-concept would theoretically improve students' academic achievement, and possibly increase the chance that students will graduate from high school.

Alternative schools were developed to address the needs of students at risk for dropping out of high school for reasons such as low self-esteem, truancy, poor interpersonal skills, and behavioral problems (Nichols & Utesch, 1998). Some of these

programs may include, but are not limited to, a smaller teacher/student ratio, classes in interpersonal and social skills, individual learning plans, flexible schedules, and warm and caring teachers with a genuine concern for students' success. Research has shown that alternative programs can decrease the number of students who drop out of high school (Carrier, 1971; Davis, 1989; Diffenbaugh, 1950; Marshall, 1971; Saunders & Saunders, 2001). Alternative programs also increase at-risk students' self-concept, which may decrease the dropout rate for these students (Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Gold & Mann, 1982; Nichols & Utesch, 1998; Raymond, 1978; Strathe & Hash, 1979).

One alternative school attempting to address the needs of at-risk students is The Knowledge & Advanced Skills Prep (KAS Prep) Alternative High School, located in North Bergen, New Jersey (Gargiulo, Sirangelo, DeNoble, & Doran, 2001). The program serves approximately 160 at-risk high school students who have academic or other difficulties in the regular high school due to absenteeism, behavioral problems, or drug use. Students must apply for the program and go through an interview process before being admitted. The environment of the program is supportive and flexible in order to help meet the needs of individual students. Goals of the KAS Prep Program include providing an environment for disruptive/disaffected students to attain a high school diploma and providing individual and group counseling in self-awareness and interpersonal effectiveness. The environment of the KAS Prep Program is supportive and adaptable. The KAS Prep Program was developed to increase students' self-esteem, improve their coping styles, and enhance their academic achievement. Ultimately, the aim of the KAS Prep Program is to award high school diplomas to students who would not have graduated from traditional high schools (Gargiulo et al., 2001).



### *Statement of Purpose*

The present study aims to build upon the literature examining self-concept, at-risk students, and alternative education. The purpose of the study is to investigate at-risk students' self-concept related to the KAS Prep Alternative High School experience. Participants in the present study included 89 at-risk students in the KAS Prep Alternative High School in September 2002. The participants' self-concept was measured by the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, Second Edition (Piers-Harris-2; Piers, 2002). Administration of the Piers-Harris-2 occurred once at the beginning of September 2002 and again at the end of December 2002. The present study explores the relationship between the KAS Prep Alternative High School experience and students' self-concept. In addition, the relationship of the KAS Prep students' self-concept to school status (i.e., new or returning student), age, gender, and ethnicity is examined. The relationship between the KAS Prep Alternative High School experience and students' self-concept is important to examine since an increase in students' self-concept may be related to students ultimately graduating from high school.

### *Research Questions/Hypotheses*

1. Is there a difference in self-concept between returning and new students in the KAS Prep Alternative High School Program as of September 2002, the first administration of the Piers-Harris-2?

*Hypothesis One:* Students who returned to the KAS Prep Program in September 2002 will have higher self-concept scores on the Piers-Harris-2, administered at the beginning of September 2002, than students who were new to the program in September 2002.

2. Is there a difference in self-concept between returning and new students in the KAS Prep Alternative High School Program at the second administration of the Piers-Harris-2, at the end of December 2002?

*Hypothesis Two:* There will not be a significant difference in self-concept between returning students and new students in the KAS Prep Program at the end of December 2002.

3. Is there a change in KAS Prep Alternative High School students' self-concept from the first administration of the Piers-Harris-2, in the beginning of September 2002, to the second administration of the Piers-Harris-2 at the end of December 2002?

*Hypothesis Three:* KAS Prep students' self-concept, as measured by the Piers-Harris-2, will be higher at the end of December 2002 than at the beginning of September 2002.

4. If there is a change in KAS Prep Alternative High School students' self-concept from the first administration of the Piers-Harris-2 in the beginning of September 2002 to the second administration of the Piers-Harris-2 at the end of December 2002, is this change associated with student status (i.e., returning or new)?

*Hypothesis Four:* If there is a change in KAS Prep students' self-concept from September 2002 to December 2002, new students' self-concept scores will increase more than returning students' self-concept scores on the Piers-Harris-2.

5. If there is a change in KAS Prep Alternative High School students' self-concept from the first administration of the Piers-Harris-2 in the beginning of September 2002 to the second administration of the Piers-Harris-2 at the end of December 2002, is this change associated with age?

*Hypothesis Five:* If there is a change in KAS Prep students' self-concept from September 2002 to December 2002, younger students' self-concept scores will increase more than older students' self-concept scores on the Piers-Harris-2.

6. If there is a change in KAS Prep Alternative High School students' self-concept from the first administration of the Piers-Harris-2 in the beginning of September 2002 to the second administration of the Piers-Harris-2 at the end of December 2002, is this change associated with gender?

*Hypothesis Six:* If there is a change in KAS Prep students' self-concept from September 2002 to December 2002, male students' self-concept scores will increase more than female students' self-concept scores on the Piers-Harris-2.

7. If there is a change in KAS Prep Alternative High School students' self-concept from the first administration of the Piers-Harris-2 in the beginning of September 2002 to the second administration of the Piers-Harris-2 at the end of December 2002, is this change associated with ethnicity?

*Hypothesis Seven:* If there is a change in KAS Prep students' self-concept from September 2002 to December 2002, there will be differences in the change of self-concept among students of different ethnicities.

*Summary*

In summary, alternative schools have been developed because traditional high schools often do not meet the needs of at-risk students. In order to assess the effectiveness of alternative schools, characteristics of at-risk students need to be examined. Examining self-concept of at-risk students in relation to alternative schools is one approach to evaluating the effectiveness of alternative schools. The present study examines at-risk students' self-concept in relation to the KAS Prep Alternative High School Experience. In the next chapter, existing research on self-concept, at-risk students, and alternative education is reviewed.

PREVIEW

## Chapter II

### Review of Literature

The review of literature provides an overview of research on self-concept, at-risk students, and alternative education. First, self-concept in general and self-concept of at-risk students in particular are explored. Second, self-concept related to school success and academic achievement is examined. Third, research on alternative education, characteristics of successful alternative schools, and examples of successful alternative programs is presented. Finally, the relationship among self-concept, at-risk students, and alternative schools is examined and the relevance of research to the present study discussed.

#### *Self-Concept*

There are many different, but similar, definitions of self-concept. An early definition of self-concept by Turner (1968) is as follows:

Typically my self-conception is a vague but vitally felt idea of what I am like in my best moments, of what I am striving toward and have some encouragement to believe I can achieve, or of what I can do when the situation supplies incentives for unqualified effort (p. 98).

Muller, Chambliss, and Wood (1977) indicate that self-concept is an individual's set of self-descriptive behaviors, while Rosenberg (1979) defines self-concept as "the totality of an individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object" (p. 7). According to Gecas (1982), self-concept is "the concept the individual has of himself as a

physical, social, and spiritual or moral being” (p. 3). In the present study, self-concept is interchangeable with the terms self-esteem and self-regard, and is defined as a relatively stable set of self-attitudes reflecting both a description and evaluation of one’s own behavior and attributes (Piers, 2002).

Although self-concept is a relatively stable set of self-attitudes (Piers, 2002), changes in self-concept can occur over time. When examining age differences in self-concept during adolescence, some researchers find that global self-concept declines at the beginning of adolescence (Simmons et al., 1973), some conclude that self-concept increases during middle and late adolescent years (McCarthy & Hoge, 1982; O’Malley & Bachman, 1983; Savin-Williams & Demo, 1984), and others assert that self-concept remains relatively stable during adolescence (Dusek & Flaherty, 1981). In addition, Marsh, Parker, and Barnes (1985) find that self-concept is lowest in grade 9 and highest in grades 7, 11, and 12. When examining changes in self-concept during adolescence, Rosenberg (1979) reports that disturbance in self-concept during adolescence is due to both biological/hormonal changes and a shift from primary to secondary school.

The stability of self-esteem increases during adolescence, with self-esteem in early adolescence less stable than self-esteem in late adolescence (Trzesniewski et al., 2003). In addition, when examining gender differences in the stability of self-concept, girls’ self-esteem tends to be relatively well-established by adolescence, while boys’ self-esteem is relatively malleable throughout adolescence (Block & Robins, 1993; Rubin, 1978; Wallace, Cunningham, & Del Monte, 1984). Ethnic differences in self-esteem stability have also been found. Asian Americans and Caucasians have higher levels of

self-esteem stability than Hispanic Americans, African Americans, or Native Americans (Trzesniewski et al., 2003).

Not only is the stability of self-concept important, but also differences in self-concept, due to gender and ethnicity. Gender differences in self-concept consistently are found. Martinez and Dukes (1997) determine that male students have higher self-esteem than female students in junior high and high school. In addition, gender differences are found when examining age-related changes in self-esteem: girls' global self-esteem decreases while boys' self-esteem increases from early adolescence to late adolescence (Block & Robins, 1993; Blyth et al., 1983).

Gender differences in self-concept also appear to depend on specific dimensions of self-concept consistent with gender stereotypes (Mboya, 1999). For example, boys have higher self-concepts in masculinity and achievement/leadership than girls (Dusek & Flaherty, 1981). Research also shows that male students have higher self-concept in physical ability than girls (Crain & Bracken, 1994; Fleming & Courtney, 1984). In addition, when examining the self-esteem of eleventh grade students, Richman, Clark, and Brown (1985) reveal that male students are significantly less anxious and hold more positive attitudes about their popularity than female students. Female students, however, hold more positive attitudes than males toward their school ability (Richman et al., 1985). Marsh et al. (1985) find that on the Self-Description Questionnaire-II (Marsh, 1990), General-Self, Math, Physical Ability, Physical Appearance, and Emotional Stability self-concepts are higher for boys than for girls, while Verbal, Same Sex, and Honesty self-concepts are higher for girls than for boys.

Differences in self-concept among children and adolescents of different ethnicities have also been found. When examining self-concept and ethnicity, some researchers find that African American and Caucasian children have higher global self-concepts than Hispanic children (Wasserman, Rauh, Brunelli, Garcia-Castro, & Necos, 1990; Zirkel & Moses, 1971). In addition, when examining students between the ages of 10 and 18 years, Crain and Bracken (1994) determine that African American students report significantly higher global self-concepts than Caucasian or Hispanic students. Richman et al. (1985) also found that, when examining the self-concepts of eleventh grade students, African American students have higher self-esteem scores than Caucasian students. Additionally, Caucasian males and African American males and females have significantly higher general self-esteem than Caucasian females (Richman et al., 1985).

#### *Self-Concept of At-Risk Students*

The characteristics of at-risk students are important to examine in relation to the effectiveness of alternative high school programs. Indeed, because learning cannot be isolated from psychosocial and affective characteristics, constructs such as self-esteem and self-concept of at-risk students need to be considered (Nunn & Parish, 1992). One study examined the differences between high school students, those at risk for school failure and a control group of peers, and finds statistically significant differences in self-concept, locus of control, and personal styles of learning between the two groups (Nunn & Parish, 1992). Results show that at-risk students hold less positive self-concepts and a more external locus of control than the comparison group. At-risk students are also less motivated toward achievement, have lower self-concept as learners, and desire a more