Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction
Among Adolescents in General and Special Education

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Using the Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire (Asher & Wheeler, 1985), significant differences were found for loneliness and social dissatisfaction among four groups of adolescents based on class placement and rank within placement. Results indicated that general education students were significantly less lonely than special day class students. In addition, the low-achieving group of adolescents was significantly lonelier and socially dissatisfied than the high-achieving group. Research must now focus on effective interventions for specific groups of adolescents who are at higher risk for feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction.

Detrimental effects of loneliness on peer relationships and self-concept have been documented by Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel, and Williams (1990). Situations in which children are dissatisfied include having no friends in class, low sociometric status, and having relationships which are low in supportiveness and other important features of friendship (Gresham & MacMillan, 1997). This has been found to be true among both general education students as well as students with mild disabilities.

Students with mild mental retardation have consistently been found to exhibit high levels of loneliness and dissatisfaction with their lives especially when analyzing the social realm of their experiences at school (Luftig, 1988; Taylor, Asher, & Williams, 1987; Williams & Asher, 1992). In an investigation by Coleman, McHam, and Minnett (1992), students with learning disabilities (LD) were found to be less lonely than low achieving (LA) students. The social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) which postulates that children compare themselves to other children in their same class placement best explains this finding: Children with LD placed in special education classrooms are provided with a second reference group against which to judge themselves socially, whereas the general education classroom is the placement for the LA students and their comparisons are based on general education students (Gresham & MacMillan, 1997).

A primary reason for the comparison of adolescents in general education and special education is the current education movement of inclusion. According to Hallahan and Kauffman (1997), the inclusive schools movement is “a reform movement designed to restructure general education schools and classrooms so they better accommodate all students, including those with disabilities” (p.531). There are different conceptualizations of what inclusion means (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997; Laski, 1991; Sailor, 1991; Stainback & Stainback, 1992). However, most definitions of inclusion contain the following elements:
1. All students with disabilities attend all classes in general education which means that there are no or few separate special education classes.

2. All students attend their neighborhood schools.

3. General education, rather than special education, is responsible for all students with disabilities.

The current push for inclusion requires intensive attention to the anticipated benefits of inclusion which are primarily in the areas of self-concept, peer acceptance, and social skills (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; MacMillan, Gresham, & Forness, 1996). To date, there is little solid empirical research supporting these anticipated benefits of inclusion for students with disabilities (Gresham & MacMillan, 1997). Therefore, this investigation is a necessity as the self-concept, loneliness, and social dissatisfaction of students in general education and special education must continue to be studied to determine the effectiveness of the presumed benefits of the full inclusion movement. For instance, if it is determined that students in special education classrooms have adequate self-concepts and do not feel loneliness, why is it a necessity to remove them from the classrooms where they feel most comfortable? The contrasting side is that students in special day class settings may feel labeled, segregated, and excluded from the general population; therefore, their self-concepts may be low and loneliness will then be exhibited.

This study focuses on loneliness and its relationship to self-concept in four different groups of adolescents based on class placement and achievement level. Because of the limited number of studies addressing loneliness in general, the present investigation will add to the empirical work comparing the variability among adolescents who experience loneliness and dissatisfaction with their peer relationships.

The assessment and analysis of affective characteristics such as loneliness and social dissatisfaction are imperative when considering the consequences of class placement of students with disabilities. The four groups in the current investigation were specifically chosen for comparison in order to add to the literature base about loneliness and its relation to adolescents. The groups were divided by class placement – general education and special education. In addition, within each placement, students were rated by their teachers as either low-achieving or high-achieving. Therefore, the four groups of middle school students in this study included the following: low-achieving special day class adolescents, high-achieving special day class adolescents, low-achieving general education adolescents, and high-achieving general education adolescents.

**Methods**

**Characteristics of Student Participants**

The sample (N = 145) consisted of 72 males (50%) and 73 females (50%). A total of 37 were sixth grade students (26%), 64 were seventh grade students (44%), and 44 were eighth grade students (30%). Nineteen percent of this sample was White (n = 28) while just six percent (n = 8) of the sample was Black. The majority of the adolescents in this sample (n = 109) were
Hispanic (75%). At the onset of the study, participants ranged in age from 11.3 to 15.0 years with a mean age of 13.7 years.

**Sampling Procedures**

As noted above, there were a total of 145 students who were selected from general education and special education programs in an attempt to select equal numbers from each group. Stratified random sampling was also used in order to secure equal numbers of males and females in both settings. Because of the district’s high proportion of Hispanic students (over 70%), ethnicity was not used as a basis for stratification. Students from several ethnic backgrounds participated in this study; however, the predominate ethnic group was Hispanic.

**Special Education Sample Selection**

One group of students were enrolled in special day classes who had been qualified as eligible for special education and related services by their schools as learning disabled. All of the students in the mild/moderate special day class program at each school were solicited for participation in this investigation. A total of sixty-one students were enrolled in the special day class program at the first school. At the second school a total of thirty-eight students were served as learning disabled. Therefore, a total of ninety-nine students placed in special day class programs classified as learning disabled were solicited for participation in this study.

Letters describing the study and requesting informed consent were sent home to the parents/guardians of these students. All of the parents (n = 70) who returned the consent forms allowed their children to participate in the study. The twenty-nine remaining students for whom consent forms were not received within the three weeks of allotted time were not allowed to participate in this study. In total, seventy of the ninety-nine students (71%) placed in special day class settings received parental consent to participate in this investigation. The seventy students in special day class settings were then stratified by gender. There were 37 males and 33 females.

Next, the seven special day class teachers completed the Social Skills Rating System – Teacher Form (SSRS-T) for each of their students, and based on the academic competence subscale, the students were designated as either low-achieving or high-achieving. The academic competence subscale includes nine items that require the teachers’ judgments of each student’s academic or learning behaviors as observed in the classroom. Teachers rated the students on a scale of one through five on the following nine items: overall academic performance, reading in comparison to other students, mathematics in comparison to other students, grade-level expectations of reading, grade-level expectations of mathematics, overall motivation, parental encouragement, intellectual functioning, and overall classroom behavior. A score of one indicates the lowest or least favorable performance, placing the student in the lowest 10% of the class. A score of five indicates the highest or most favorable performance, placing the student in the highest 10% compared with other students in the classroom (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). Overall, a score of one indicated the lowest 10% of the class, two equaled the next lowest 20%, three was the middle 40% of the class, a score of four was the next highest 20% of the class, and five equaled the highest 10% of the class.

A total score equaling twenty-six points or lower was used as a basis for classifying an individual student as low-achieving. This would mean that the teachers had an average rating of either one (lowest 10% of the class) or two (lowest 20% of the class) on each item of the academic competence portion of the SSRS-T for that student. A composite score of the nine
items of twenty-seven or higher (middle 40% of the class to the highest 10% of the class) was used to classify a student as high-achieving. This constitutes an average score of three (middle 40%), four (next highest 20%), or five (highest 10%) on each of the nine items on the academic competence portion of the SSRS-T.

A total of thirty-nine students, using the SSRS-T, were rated by their teachers as low-achievers whereas thirty-one special day class students were rated by their teachers as high-achievers. In the low-achieving special day class group, there were twenty-one males and eighteen females. Sixteen males and fifteen females were rated as high-achieving in the special day class sample. Therefore, this group of seventy special day class students was divided according to their relative standing within the special day class as two groups differentiated by their rank within placement as either low-achieving or high-achieving.

**General Education Sample Selection**

Teachers in the lowest track and highest track of general education were asked to rate their students on the academic competence portion of the SSRS-T as just described for the special education sample selection.

Within the lowest track of students in general education, fifty-five out of one hundred eight students were rated by their teachers as being among either the lowest 10% of the class or the lowest 20% of the class on the academic competence subscale of the SSRS-T. Out of this group of fifty-five students, thirty-six were males and nineteen were females.

Next, letters describing the investigation and requesting informed consent were sent home to the parents/guardians of this group of fifty-five students in the general education program who had been rated by their teachers as low-achieving. No requests for additional information about the study were received by parents of this group of students, but only thirty-three parents out of fifty-five (60%) submitted signed consents within the allotted time frame of three weeks. An additional two weeks were given to obtain more consent forms due to the delay in receiving parental responses; however, no additional parental consent forms were acquired. A total of sixteen males (44%) out of thirty-six males in the low-achieving general education group participated in the investigation whereas seventeen females (89%) out of nineteen low-achieving females in general education were a part of the study.

The high-achieving general education group was formed by having the two teachers who teach in the highest track rate their students on the academic competence portion of the SSRS-T. Again, all nine items from the academic competence section of the SSRS-T were used to rate each student. Forty-two students were rated to be within the middle 40% to highest 10% on the academic competence portion of this assessment tool which constituted a score of twenty-seven points or higher.

Letters describing the study and informed consent forms were sent home to the parents/guardians of the forty-two students eligible for the high-achieving general education group. Six parents contacted the principal investigator to acquire additional information about the study. Parents of all forty-two students agreed to have their children participate in this investigation. This group of high-achieving students in general education included nineteen males and twenty-three females.

Therefore, one group of students in general education who participated in this investigation consisted of the lowest-achieving adolescents in the entire general education program. The sample of the high-achieving students in general education included the top students in all of the general education classes since they were from the highest track. The
majority of the adolescents in the high-achieving general education sample participated in the Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program.

In summary, a total of 196 students were selected to participate in this study. The investigator received a 74% rate of cooperation.

**Student Measure: Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire (LSDQ)**

The LSDQ developed by Asher and Wheeler (1985) is a 24-item measure containing 16 items assessing feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction as well as 8 items which ask about hobbies, interests, and school subject preferences.

The 16 primary items are comprised of four different types of items: (a) children’s feelings of loneliness (e.g., “I’m lonely”), (b) children’s perceptions of their peer relationships (e.g., “I don’t have any friends”), (c) children’s perceptions regarding how relationship provisions are being met (e.g., “There’s nobody I can go to when I need help”), and (d) children’s perceptions of their social competence (e.g., “I’m good at working with other children”). These four areas were not differentiated in this investigation. One total score of loneliness and social dissatisfaction was obtained for each student.

Each item is rated by the student on a five-point scale reflecting the degree to which each item is an accurate description of the student, ranging from (1) “That’s not at all true about me” to (5) “That’s always true about me.” The higher score of five indicates higher loneliness on a total of ten items on the LSDQ. The remaining six items which assess loneliness and social dissatisfaction require reverse scoring. A score of one would indicate the highest level of loneliness on those six items.

High internal consistency for the LSDQ is indicated by coefficient alphas above .90 and a test-retest reliability coefficient over one year of .55 (Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel, & Williams, 1990).

**Teacher Measure: Social Skills Rating System-Teacher (SSRS-T)**

The SSRS-T (Gresham & Elliott, 1990) is one component of a multi-rater assessment of social skills development in children. According to Gresham (1985), social functioning may well affect a student’s social status as reflected in peer ratings of acceptance/rejection, teacher-student relationships, school adjustment, and self-conduct. Additionally, impaired social functioning is highly predictive of difficulties in school performance, psychopathology, and juvenile delinquency (Kupersmidt, Coie, & Dodge, 1990).

There are different versions of the SSRS for use with varying age levels: preschool, elementary, and secondary, as well as a parent (SSRS-P), student (SSRS-S), and teacher (SSRS-T) form. The SSRS-T form for the secondary level was used in the current investigation. The SSRS-T form requires that the student's classroom teacher rate the child on three areas of performance: (a) Social Skills (30 items), (b) Problem Behaviors (18 items), and (c) Academic Competence (9 items).

The Academic Competence Scale was used for the current investigation. It measures teacher perceptions of academic achievement, requiring the teacher's judgment of the students' academic and/or learning behaviors as compared to the other children in the same classroom. This scale consists of nine items tapping reading and mathematics ability, parental encouragement, and overall academic performance. Internal consistency alpha coefficients of
a=.95 and four week test-retest stability estimates of r=.93 were reported for this scale (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). The Academic Competence items are rated on a percentage ranking of classwide functioning (i.e., 1 = lowest 10% of the class, 5 = highest 10% of the class). Standard scores (M = 100, SD = 15) for each scale are provided. This assessment tool was nationally standardized on a representative sample of 4,170 children and adolescents with 1,770 of that group being at the secondary level.

**Results**

The univariate test for the two-way interaction of class placement and rank within placement failed to reach significance (approximate $F(1,144) = 1.17$, $p > .05$). Univariate ANOVAs resulted in significant differences for the main effects of class placement ($F(1,144) = 21.17$, $p < .0001$) and rank within placement ($F(1,144) = 3.98$, $p < .05$).

Post hoc tests revealed that general education students ($M = 13.87$, $SD = 4.18$) were significantly less lonely and less socially dissatisfied than special day class students ($M = 17.73$, $SD = 5.18$). In addition, post hoc tests revealed that the low-achieving group of adolescents ($M = 16.76$, $SD = 5.14$) were significantly more lonely and socially dissatisfied than the high-achieving group of adolescents ($M = 14.71$, $SD = 4.22$).

Overall, the results of the loneliness measure demonstrate that students placed in general education were significantly less lonely than adolescents in special day class settings. This validates the fact that students in special education will be significantly more lonely than students in general education overall. Similarly, the prediction that high-achieving students will be less lonely than low-achieving students was also supported in the current investigation.

**Discussion**

The interaction of class placement and rank within placement failed to reach significance. However, the main effects for both class placement and rank within placement on loneliness and social dissatisfaction were significant. Adolescents in special day class settings were significantly more lonely and less socially satisfied than participants from the general education population regardless of their rank within placement as low- or high-achieving.

Loneliness is directly related to self-concept and social anxiety (Crick & Ladd, 1993). Feelings of loneliness may have detrimental effects on peer relationships and self-concept (Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel, & Williams, 1990). The results of this investigation clearly illustrate that students in special day classes as well as those who are low-achieving both have higher levels of loneliness and social dissatisfaction. Children fitting these descriptions may feel lonely because they have few friends or no friends in class, are rejected or excluded, and have low sociometric status (Gresham & MacMillan, 1997).

Students who are not placed in special education tend to be aware of those who attend the special classes at their school. It is obvious to the students in general education that the special education classes are smaller and that, at times, these students receive special help during an elective or mainstream course. This segregation of students may automatically make special education students less included in the general school population. Therefore, this leads to feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction for those students placed in special day class settings because other students view them as different.
When looking at less loneliness/social dissatisfaction among the high-achieving students across placements, one can surmise that those who are considered better students are more well-liked than those who are low-achieving. People strive to be like others who do well and this would possibly be one explanation why the high-achieving adolescents felt less lonely, independent of class placement.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the findings demonstrate that adolescents who are in general education exhibit less loneliness/social dissatisfaction than adolescents in special day class settings regardless of rank within placement. Likewise, adolescents who have been designated as high-achieving by their teachers also have less loneliness/social dissatisfaction than adolescents who have been designated as low-achieving by their teachers, independent of class placement. This finding clearly supports the social comparison theory in which students compare themselves to others within their educational placement. This comparison leads to either a more positive or negative perception depending on one’s class placement or achievement level. Educators must look for interventions to implement which will improve levels of loneliness and social dissatisfaction for both low-achievers as well as students placed in special day class settings. Continued research must be done in this area in light of the recent research against the segregation of students with disabilities.

The current investigation is one step in the direction of identifying distinct areas of need in the affective area of loneliness/social dissatisfaction in adolescents. Effective interventions must be created and implemented to improve levels of loneliness in specific groups of adolescents.

**References**


