Annotated Bibliography for At-risk Youth

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LIU Post

EDD1205

The purpose of this study was to examine the characteristics and relationships between goal setting and self-efficacy. The participants included 280 adolescents who were deemed as at-risk, delinquent, or not at-risk. The adolescents were randomly selected from detention centers, and from ten different high schools. Reputation Enhancing Goals Theory and several other theories were used to guide hypothesis and the Goal Type Scale to measure the kinds of goals the adolescents had. Pearson’s correlation and discriminant function analysis were performed on the data obtained. The results indicated that the best predictors of which category an adolescent would be in, was educational goals, delinquent goals, and interpersonal goals. Adolescents that had higher educational and interpersonal goals and lower delinquency goals were likely to be in the not-at-risk category. Adolescents who had a lower self-regulatory efficacy and the lowest belief in their academic ability were more likely to be in the delinquent group. The researchers did find that adolescents in the at-risk group had a higher number of sporting related goals. This finding can be used when developing interventions for the at-risk population.

This study has a wealth of information that identified variables that the three groups of adolescents possess. By exploring and using triangulation, the risk factors of low self-regulatory and low self-efficacy, it became apparent on how they can predict that an adolescent is heading towards delinquency. Goals that included academic, occupational and personal self-efficacy appeared to prevent the at-risk and delinquent behavior. This information is valuable when designing and implementing programs for adolescents and should be woven into the everyday curriculum.

The authors of this study found that “feeling valued and having teacher support, was described as fostering supportive relationships with students that encourage their feelings of self-worth, through showing an interest in them and getting to know them as an individual” (Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, & Shochet, 2014, p. 428). Other similar studies do imply this but Chapman et al. (2014) found that when a student lacks a supportive adult relationship, they have an increased chance that they will engage in risky behaviors. They suggested that educators who work with at-risk students develop supportive relationships to provide the student with feelings of support and value. Getting educators to incorporate these strategies into their daily curriculum has continued to be troublesome. The authors suggest school based intervention programs and to continue developing teacher-training programs, and teacher professional development that incorporate this information. The authors stress how teachers are key in encouraging connectedness within their classrooms and how important it is for the whole school to engage in.


This study investigated the psychosocial and contextual influences that effect self-efficacy in Hispanic adolescents. Chin and Lameoka used Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy to guide their research. Their participants were 107 Hispanic children, ages 10 to 13 years old, 44% male, who “overall” were from a low-income status. The researchers used questionnaires and
reading scores from each student. The results indicated that younger students were more optimistic in educational and occupational obtainment than older students. Chin and Kameoka suggest the reason for that is the older child may face discrimination, be more exposed to the negative influences and academics become more challenging as they progress. A primary influence on self-efficacy, according to Bandura is previous performance and for this study, the reading scores correlated with educational self-efficacy. The researchers did not find a significant correlation among neighborhood resources and neighborhood safety with self-efficacy. They postulate that parental influences are more relevant at this age and that the parents are still able to manage and direct their child’s interactions in a positive manner.

This study offers insight into Bandura’s theory on self-efficacy and what factors influence the development of self-efficacy. The researchers touched lightly on many of them but focused mainly on educational and occupational self-efficacy. I believe this study would have had significantly different results if the participants included older adolescents. However, this study is valuable, in that we can see that younger adolescents self-efficacy is less affected by their neighborhood and as they age it becomes more relevant. This knowledge can assist neighborhood programs to direct their efforts towards older adolescents.


Numerous factors may prompt a student to drop out which can include early school failure, early childhood engagement behaviors, and grade retention. According to the researchers the “risk factors for dropping out of school exist in all life domains (i.e., individual, family, school community, peer relations).” Knowing what the risk factors are in each student’s
life is key in aiding educators in providing the best possible outcomes for them. Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) studied the characteristics that are related to schools with low dropout rates compared to high schools with high dropout rates. They used both a quantitative and qualitative approach, in a three-phase study. They began their study by examining 196 high schools, then reduced the number of schools as they honed in on specific variables. Phases one and two were quantitative and identified correlations between dropout rate, academic achievement, school attendance rate, the rate of successful transition to adult life, and percentage of students of white ethnic background.

Phase three of the study was conducted by selecting eight schools, four schools with high dropout rates and four schools with low dropout rates. The qualitative instruments they chose were an administrator survey, staff interviews, and the use of direct observation. The average number of students was 840, with 30 staff including administrators. The results from this part of the study revealed that the high schools that had the lower dropout rates were observed to be in better physical condition and were cleaner and more orderly than the schools with a higher dropout rate. More importantly, the high schools that had a lower dropout rate had a higher staff-student ratio, more teacher-student interactions, more instructional strategies, more student engagement, and an overall higher general mood and impression. “This finding supports the observation that students who feel a sense of belonging and are connected to school are less likely to drop out of school” (p. 333).

Coleman’s research was a narrative case study which included eight student that had been expelled from their main school and then placed into an alternative school. Coleman sought out to find out what the positive outcomes for these at-risk youth where. Through her study, she was able to capture the at-risk student’s perspectives on their experiences while attending an alternative school. From their perspective, she found that students were able to develop more positive self-concepts, increased self-efficacy and an optimistic outlook on their future. (Coleman, p.178) She concluded that the positive interactions with the educators and their ability to work closely with the students provided the students with a supportive relationship, which may have protected the students, from the negativity associated with being at-risk (p. 183). She describes the risk factors and protective factors and demonstrates that when a student has been presented with enough protective factors, the student has a better opportunity to overcome past failures.


De La Ossa (2005) examined students’ perceptions of attending an alternative school. This study included 78 students from eight alternative schools who participated in focus groups. All eight of these schools differed in demographics and socioeconomic levels. She used a qualitative method, and video recorded her interviews. In addition, she used a participant-observational approach, while teaching and observing in the classroom. De La Ossa asked a series of questions to each focus group. Each session was transcribed and then analyzed for recurring themes (p. 30).
The themes that related to school connectedness were small school size, small class size, and personal attention and relationships (p. 32). It was evident that the feeling of receiving personal attention and forming relationships assisted these students in continuing their education. De La Ossa expressed that “It is a community feeling being able to academically concentrate and learn, feeling supported and comfortable and forming valuable community relationship skills. A sense of security allows these students to grow as individuals, both academically and psychologically” (p. 33).


The authors researched how Zero Tolerance has negatively affected numerous adolescents and how the minority populations have been most effected. The disparity can be seen in the statistical data that is available throughout the U.S. Often a single innocuous event can propel a student into the juvenile justice system and or into an alternative program. Many of the disciplinary responses to the infractions are often disproportionately severe (DeMitchell & Hambacher, 2016). DeMitchell & Hambacher (2016) state that zero tolerance policies were designed to “offer quick, anti-discriminatory responses to dangerous behavior, however research has shown that these policies do not provide favorable outcomes” (p. 4). They suggest that educators discontinue using such blanket approaches and work towards a common sense approach that will treat all students as individuals and their “act” as an individual event and disciple that student appropriately but allowing the punishment to fit the crime.

Dupere, Leventhal, and Vitaro, in a multilevel, longitudinal study, researched the relationship between an adolescent’s neighborhood and the adolescents’ self-efficacy. They used self-efficacy as the variable to measure mental health by means of internalizing problems. Four neighborhood characteristics were identified as concentrated poverty, perceived neighbor violence, neighborhood activities, and collective efficacy. The study location was in Chicago, and they used three age cohorts 9, 12 and 15 year olds. Dupere et. al. were able to demonstrate that self-efficacy develops from social contexts, like a neighborhood, family and school experiences. The researchers acknowledge that residential mobility is usually a stressful event for adolescents who see their peers as the most important factors in their life. However, when the adolescent is relocated out of a violent neighborhood into an area where there was more educational and economic opportunity, the adolescent gained positive school experiences, developed educational aspirations, and their self-efficacy increased. In most cases, the new neighborhoods offered more collective cohesiveness, and the schools were superior from the inner city.

This study brings to focus the ability to influence an adolescent and build self-efficacy by engaging them in academics and by offering more opportunities. The adolescents who were moved out of the inner city into superior schools developed a stronger sense of self-efficacy and educational aspirations. The results of this study also demonstrate, although not the purpose of the study, that programs and funding needs to be directed into inner cities schools to offer better educational experiences and to encourage youth to strive for academic success.

Farrell et al. investigated the direct effects of three social-cognitive variables and how they relate to adolescent’s physical aggression and if they serve as protective factors. The variables were individual norms supporting aggression, individual norms supporting nonviolence, and self-efficacy for nonviolence. Participants were chosen from 37 schools located in North Carolina, Virginia, Georgia and Chicago. A total of 5,581 adolescents participated over a three-year study. Farrell et al. measured frequency of physical aggression and risk factors, which included school climate, delinquent peer associations and parental support for fighting. Self-efficacy for nonviolence was measured by how confident would the adolescent be if he were to use a nonviolent response to a conflict. The results highlighted that adolescents who have a low level of beliefs supporting aggression at a younger age might be less influenced by the risk factors they encounter later on. However, the researchers note that this is not a lasting and that youth may become more influenced over time. Adolescents who had higher self-efficacy for nonviolent responses had lower levels of physical aggression and that it was long lasting and less affected by risk factors.

This depth of this study and the number of participants over a three-year period has an enormous amount of valuable information. The benefit of discovering that self-efficacy, when developed early on in children can act as a protective factor towards risk factors such as violence is imperative. This knowledge can be used in developing elementary programs that would help build self-efficacy and middle school program that could continue to support it.

Identifying the roles educators have in fostering reliance with their students was examined by Green, Oswald, & Spears (2007). The researchers had noticed that the educators’ perceptions and ability to recognize resilient youth are significant “merely by the amount of time spent with all students,” including students who may be at risk. Green et al. conducted their study by interviewing and surveying 57 educators. What they found was the majority of educators believed that resilience was fostered by “working hard and achieving” and they believed that an “at-risk” student will display “disruptive, aggressive behavior and being off-task.” The authors suggested that teachers may perceive a student as being resilient but in fact the students had more “risk factors” but were able to compensate for them by showing qualities of resilience. The authors encouraged educators to recognize the differences in an effort to help the students they encounter. Educators have the opportunity to develop strong relationships, which can provide the student with a “supportive adult figure who can act as a protective buffer against adverse circumstances” (Green, Oswald, & Spears, 2007).


Knesting and Waldron (2006) examined at-risk students and their persistence to complete their high school education. The qualitative study had 17 participants from a traditional high school. Eight of the 17 students had been retained in elementary or middle school. “Before becoming involved in the study, three of the students had dropped out and then returned to
school, one student spent a year at an alternative high school, and one student had been expelled” (p. 601).

The outcomes of the study suggested that three factors that assisted a student in their persistence of an education. They were goal orientation, willingness to follow school rules, and meaningful connections (Knesting & Waldron, 2006, p. 603). Goal orientation is the students’ belief they will benefit from graduating. The students discussed “four general goals: the better life a diploma would bring, financial independence, the desire to continue their education beyond high school, and avoiding the consequences of dropping out of school” (p. 604).

Knesting and Waldron maintained that students needed an incentive for their persistence. They saw the positive outcomes they would have by continuing their education and how it would enhance their future (p. 604).


The authors contend that in some states, it is documented in legislation that disruptive behavior is enough criteria to mandate a student to an alternative program (Lehr, Tan, Ysseldyke, 2009, p. 26). Some school districts offer students a choice if they want to enter into an alternative program, but for many the choice becomes a “forced choice,” because they feel as if they have been pushed out of their general school (Lehr, Tan, Ysseldyke, 2009, p. 20). These students who feel pushed out relate that a previous grade retention or subject failures cause them to feel defeated and to feel that they were not smart enough to keep up with the required material. Others feel that school staff perceives them as difficult and that the staff was always out to find fault with them (p. 21). The authors recommend that educators reconsider leaving a
student behind at a younger grade and provide that student with supports that will allow them to “catch up”. They also stated that school districts need to be cognizant on the attitudes and perceived beliefs that students are receiving. Negative perceptions can be harmful and make a struggling student give up.


In a qualitative study conducted by Lind (2013), she sought to find what builds student capacity in an alternative setting. “Capacity-building was understood as a process: something that promotes one’s ability, feeling capable, stepping up to the plate; activities that improve one’s ability to realize goals” (p. 451). The research was carried out over two school years, at an alternative school with a research team of eight (school principal, two teachers, four students and Lind who was the outside academic researcher). The team completed ten focus groups and two individual interviews.

An analysis of the findings suggested, “The school provided a safe place to develop mutually supportive relationships. These included relationships between students, mentors (each student was assigned a specific teacher-mentor), teachers, and peers” (Lind, 2013, p. 458). Within this alternative school, they held weekly meetings in which students voted on a variety of school issues. Students were allowed to speak freely and were encouraged to use critical thinking skills. That safe environment taught students activism and leadership skills. The inclusion the students experienced by participating in decision-making enabled them to engage within the school community. “Students were given citizenship through nurturing their voices
and participation in real experiences that promoted a sense of confidence and capability, extending into long-term positive effects” (p. 464).


Magen-Nagar and Shachar studied the quality of teaching and its relationship to students dropping out. This study involved 2,870 student participants from 18 schools between the grades of 4th and 9th. Magen-Nagar and Shachar (2017) inform that although dropouts usually occur in high school, the signs can be seen as early as elementary school. Poor attendance, disciplinary problems, and poor academic achievements can begin early on in a student’s educational career and continue to worsen as the years progressed. The researcher used the variables of quality of teaching, student satisfaction, and sense of belonging. The findings indicated that when teachers have positive-interpersonal relationships with their students and motivate them to excel academically, the risk of a student dropping out decreases. Students in this study reported that the greater their satisfaction with the quality of their teachers and a sense of belonging reduced their desire to drop out. Almost half the students in this study reported that they had dropped out because they felt like they did not get along with their teachers or fellow students (pp. 20-21).


This study is a similar study that was conducted by Magen-Nagar, N., & Shachar, H. (2017). In this study, McCall investigated why some alternative school students who had been
successful in the Michigan alternative education program had dropped out after they returned to the mainstream educational system. The study involved surveying 32 students who completed the alternative program. The students were split into two groups for comparison. One group was composed of 16 students who continued their education and graduated from a traditional school setting. The second group of students had dropped out after returning to the mainstream educational system.

The findings of this study suggested that the most substantial reason for a student to drop out was to make money. However, a significant inference drawn from the data revealed that the students who dropped out reported that once they went back to the mainstream school, they felt as if they were “treated poorly.” They related that they no longer had teachers that understood their needs and who worked closely with them to be successful. They felt like no one cared if they did well or not. McCall (2003) states that within a smaller educational program like an alternative school, the positive staff-to-student relationships and individual attention were crucial to success, and within the mainstream school, this staff-to-student ratio could not be met.


Morrissette (2011) conducted a phenomenological study among twenty alternative high school graduates. One of the recurring themes in his study was program flexibility. The students shared how their teachers were able to help them academically, but if the student needed help with personal issues, the teacher was there to assist. Students related that they appreciated clear expectations of what needed to be accomplished to graduate and that the flexibility of the staff allowed them to learn at their pace which fostered their unique learning styles (Morrissette, 2011,
It was also noted that some students work better with minimal teacher influence and this should be taken into account when dealing with students that have had a history of negative teacher-student contact. The author states that the students that attended the alternative program gained much more than a high school diploma, which they were provided with opportunities that they would not have been if they had dropped out. The students learned to become introspective and had obtained a feeling of being accepted and valued. (Morrissette, 2011, p. 186)


Phan explored self-efficacy and hope by using Latent Growth Modeling (LGM). The purpose of his study was to examine the development course of self-efficacy and hope, in adolescents. He had 196 participants, with the mean age of 14.30, and 107 were male. He surveyed his participants at four intervals, approximately seven months apart over a two-year time span. He analyzed the data using several different measures, which included a statistical analysis, a Latent Growth Analysis and a Multivariate analysis of variance. These results showed that a curvilinear pattern of student’s self-beliefs for academic learning, self-efficacy, and motivation increase and then decrease over time. Phan posits that negative social influences and peer pressure can account for much of the decline. He contends that high parental expectations and scholastic demands are like a “two-edged sword.” The adolescent is going through rapid changes and the demands maybe over burdensome, lowering their sense of hope and self-efficacy. However strong positive parental supports from parents and environmental settings can assist with building both. Phan relates that both self-efficacy and hope are traits that are
formulated and developed over time and that both are important constructs in learning and academic achievements.

Phan’s research adds vital information to exploring what builds self-efficacy and hope in adolescents. By understanding the patterns of growth and what factors can hinder the growth, we can educate and offer guidance to parents and educators who work with this population. Phan’s suggestions for educators are to emphasize the importance of mastery goals, skill development, and effective modeling. These will assist in helping youth formulate a positive identity and work efficiently towards desired goals.

Pritchard, R., Morrow, D. & Marshall, J. C. (2005) School and District Culture as Reflected in Student Voices and Student Achievement, School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 16(2), 153-177, DOI: 10.1080/09243450500101196

The researches describe school culture as the beliefs, values, perceptions, attitudes and written and unwritten rules that make up the identity of the school (Pritchard, Morrow & Marshall (2005). These attributes may be conscious or unconscious perspectives of the educators, students, family, and community members that have influenced the school. Pritchard et al. studied what factors influenced a negative or a positive school culture. They asked students to volunteer to write essays that were directed to another peer on why they should attend their school. This essay prompt was able to elicit information that included the positive and the negative aspects of their school cultural. Their study included 2,725 student essays, representing 62 schools in 18 districts. From the total number of students, they took a random sample of 248 student essays to decipher the culture categories and to do an in-depth analysis. The results of this study showed that the main categories that students felt make up their school culture where:
(a) social/people, (b) educational climate and programs, (c) codes and rules, (d) extracurricular activities, (e) physical facilities, (f) location/community, (g) special (which referred to something truly unique to the student or the school. Through investigating these categories, Pritchard et al. discovered that the students in positive school cultures had a “voluntary conformity” regarding academic and social behaviors. Both students and teachers presented with mutual respect for each other and valued the learning environment. Within the negative school culture, it was noted that students would be disruptive in order to gain empowerment. The teachers would often follow up this behavior with rigid rules and inordinately high consequences for the misbehavior. Pritchard et al. recommend that school districts keep their focus on enhancing learning through professional development that promotes a positive school culture.


Shepard et al. conducted a study that compared resilience with at-risk youth. They had interviewed 16 at-risk students who attended an alternative school program (p.50). The authors’ contend that the students received praise for doing well and did not feel demeaned over past failures. Teachers worked diligently on providing support and encouragement. Students expressed the view that the teachers they had knew that they believed in their abilities to succeed (p.50). The students expressed their belief that they were now able to see past their history and overcome their prior beliefs that they could not succeed in school. They developed a newfound motivation to work towards and obtain a career of their choice (p. 51). Many of the students realized that they might be the first ones in their family not only to graduate but also to attend college.

Slaten, Irby, Tate, and Rivera (2015) explored authentic relationships with students that foster an accepting school environment (Slaten, Irby, Tate, & Rivera, 2015, p. 49). They focused on teachers’ and administrators’ perspectives on social and emotional learning in an alternative school. The alternative school they used for the study had approximately 175 students, of which 99% were African-American, and 55% were female. The majority of the students had come from schools where they had been expelled, dropped out or been truant. Approximately 30% of the school population had been charged with armed robbery or burglary. Slaten et al. (2015) conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants. Through an analysis of the results, the study found some consistent beliefs. Teachers and administrators shared that they needed to encourage students, know students personally, and believe that relationships are a pre-requisite to learning. It was important for them to be vulnerable with students, sharing personal struggles and triumphs that related to students (p. 50). These attributes added to the climate of respect that students felt and aided the students with the ability to communicate candidly with staff (p. 52). The overwhelming consensus was that the teachers and administrators used social-emotional learning and personalized learning techniques that had cultural and racial relevance to the youths. They revealed that developing authentic relationships with the students provided a pathway for better learning and mentorship (p. 48).