

# **Risk and Urban School Transition in Early Adolescence**

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*This is a comparison study of 244 early adolescents attending sixth grade at either an urban elementary school or an urban middle school. Utilizing four data collection instruments, it compares the adolescent groups' degrees of loneliness, levels of positive self-concept, academic competence, problem behaviors, and social skills. Results indicate that, when compared to the comparison group, the at-risk students present higher levels of loneliness and problem behaviors and lower levels of academic competence, self-concept and social skills across both school contexts. The results are relevant to school adjustment and success as well as providing support for local policy decisions when transitioning students to middle school.*

Becoming an adolescent is associated with a variety of new experiences, expectations, and stressors (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). In sixth grade, many young adolescents transition from elementary school to middle school settings and, during this transition, early adolescents encounter a variety of new

experiences related to changes in school structure, academic standards, classroom organization and teacher expectations (Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001). Some of the new school experiences associated with educational transitions include changes in instructional strategies and student-teacher relationships (Midgley, Feldlaufer & Eccles, 1988). Some researchers have suggested that these changes may be related to an increase in challenging behaviors for some adolescents (Feldlaufer, Midgley, & Eccles, 1988). Past research has indicated that school transitions during early adolescence can be linked to lowered academic achievement (Blyth, Simmons & Bush, 1978; Crockett, Peterson, Graber, Schulenberg, & Ebata, 1989;). Additionally, research indicates a drop in students' academic self-concept during periods of transition (Wigfield, Eccles, MacIver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991).

Although there are numerous studies that focus on the at-risk child, the term is broadly defined. In the literature, students at-risk are defined as those with (a) academic underachievement (Schwartz, 2005), (b) poverty (Burns, Senesac, & Symington, 2004), (c) social or emotional disabilities (Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, & Sumi, 2005) and (d) peer rejection (Gresham & MacMillan, 1998). In a previous school-based study, at-risk students were differentiated from their peers by having lower academic skills, higher rates of classroom behaviors, lower social skills, lower self-concept, and more rejection from their classmates (Gresham, Lane MacMillan, Bocian, & Ward, 2000). Children who were defined as being at-risk by these parameters were found to have lower academic success (Gresham, et al., 2000).

Educational transitions may influence ratings of student characteristics including academic competence, loneliness, self-concept, the development of social skills, and challenging classroom behaviors. The purpose of the current study is to examine the characteristics of sixth grade students who have made the transition to middle school compared to

those students who have not yet made this transition. Additionally, this study will compare at-risk students and those not considered at-risk within both the transition and non-transition groups.

Based on the literature, it was anticipated that students who transition to a middle school setting in the sixth grade would experience higher levels of loneliness and problem behaviors and lower levels of teacher rated social skills, self-concept and academic competence than their peers who had not yet transitioned.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants in the present investigation were 244 sixth grade students enrolled in 29 urban schools in five southern California school districts. Data for this study were gathered as part of a five-year, federally funded research project designed to investigate the effects of different educational placements on at-risk students' social and affective outcomes (Gresham & MacMillan, 1998).

Their third grade teacher identified the participating students as being either "at-risk" or "comparison". The sole criterion for "at-risk" was that the teacher would refer the student to a pre-referral intervention team. The comparison group approximated the referred sample in terms of gender and ethnicity and was described by the same teachers as being "average students." Ethnicity and gender demographics for the total sample included 60% male ( $n=139$ ); 40% female ( $n=105$ ); 42% Caucasian; 13% African American; 41% Latino; and 1% Asian. This sample closely resembled the ethnic distribution in the geographic region.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Three data collection procedures were utilized in this study, two for the students and one for their teachers. Students completed a *Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction*

*Questionnaire* and a *Student Self-Concept Scale*. Students were assessed in small groups at quiet locations on each campus. Teachers completed a *Student Social Skills Rating System*. Teachers completed the rating system during their preparation time and returned them via mail. Data were collected approximately four weeks into the sixth grade academic school year.

*The Social Skills Rating System-Teacher Version (SSRS-T)*. The SSRS-T (Gresham & Elliot, 1990) contains teacher ratings of 30 behaviors distributed equally among three social skills domains (cooperation, assertion and self-concept) and 18 behaviors equally distributed across three-problem behavior domains (externalizing, internalizing and hyperactivity). The SSRS-T also contains a nine-item teacher rating of the students' academic competence. This study utilized the Problem Behavior Internalizing subscale score, the Social Skills standard score, and the Academic Competence standard score. The SSRS-T shows acceptable levels of internal consistency and test-retest reliability. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients were computed on the present sample during year one of the study and ranged from .83 through .97.

*Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire (LSDQ)*. The LSDQ (Asher & Wheeler, 1985) consists of 16 primary items and eight filler items, rated on a five-point Likert scale reflecting the degree to which each item is a true description of the student and ranges from (1) "That's not at all true about me," to (5) "That's always true about me." These items assess children's feelings of loneliness ("I am lonely at school."), feelings of social adequacy versus inadequacy ("I am good at working with other kids from my class."), or estimations of one's status among peers ("I can find a friend in my class when I need one."). Scores on the 16 primary items are summed to yield a total raw score ranging from 16 (low loneliness) to 80 (high loneliness). Coefficient alpha for the LSDQ are reported above .90.

Cronbach's coefficient alpha reliability computed on the current sample indicated adequate internal reliability ( $r=.79$ ).

*Students Self-Concept Scale (SSCS)*. The SSCS (Gresham, Elliott & Evans-Fernandez, 1992) is a 72-item multidimensional scale of self-concept that provides norm-referenced scores. The dimensions tapped by the SSCS include academic, self-image and social self-concept along with an overall self-concept composite score. The self-image domain measures general self-concept. The academic domain includes items relating to students' perceptions of academic or academically-related performance. The social self-concept domain measures students' self perception in social situations. Cronbach's coefficient alphas ranging from .74 to .86 were computed on the current sample.

## Results

Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was performed to examine the two levels of placement and two levels of risk status on measures of loneliness, self-concept, academic competence, problem behaviors and social skills. The MANOVA showed a significant multivariate group effect,  $F(3, 14) = 7.35, p < .0001$ , that accounted for 59.67% of the variance. Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) are presented in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1 *Variance Means and Standard Deviations*

	At-Risk No Transition	Comparison No Transition	At-Risk Transition	Comparison Transition
Social	95.4	108.54	91.89	102.21
Skills	(14.86)	(15.04)	(13.99)	(9.47)
Problem	105.15	93.52	105.34	91.26
Behaviors	(15.09)	(12.99)	(16.98)	(9.37)
Academic	86.75	101.70	88.59	101.63
Competence	(9.69)	(11.83)	(9.17)	(7.10)

Loneliness	36.13 (11.66)	33.52 (10.69)	36.96 (10.20)	34.25 (10.64)
Self Concept	99.93 (15.37)	103.36 (14.68)	101.50 (18.54)	103.60 (14.20)

A series of one-way ANOVAs were computed to identify which dependent variables contributed to the significant effects of levels of group membership by educational placement. Teacher-rated academic competence differed between groups,  $F(3, 198) = 31.79, p < .0001$  and accounted for 33% of the variance, as did teacher-rated problem behavior,  $F(3, 198) = 10.34, p < .0001$ . Teacher-rated social skills were also a significant factor,  $F(3, 198) = 12.68, p < .0001$  and explained 16% of the variance between groups. Self-reported global self-concept did not significantly differ between the groups,  $F(3, 198) = 0.47, p < .7061$  nor did the self-reported degree of loneliness  $F(3, 198) = 1.42, p < .23$ . Transition to middle school was not identified by differentiating scores on loneliness, academic competence, self-concept, social skills, or problem behavior for either the at-risk or comparison groups.

Post hoc Tukeys analyses show that most variables differentiated the at-risk and comparison groups. The at-risk group had the lowest scores of teacher-rated academic competence and social skills and the highest ratings for problem behaviors. The at-risk sixth grade elementary students did not significantly differ on any measure from the at-risk sixth grade middle school students. Similar findings were noted for the comparison group.

Table 2 shows a strong negative correlation between teacher-rated problem behaviors and teacher-rated social skills evidenced in middle school at-risk group  $r(53) = .757, p < .0001$ ; elementary at-risk group  $r(79) = -.748, p < .0001$ ; and elementary comparison group  $r(57) = -.794, p < .001$ .

As Table 3 demonstrates the relationship between student and teacher-rated problem behavior and social skills was weaker for the middle school comparison group  $r(20) =$

-0.47,  $p < .04$ . This highlights the characteristics of the at-risk sample and is consistent with previous research on at-risk students in different educational environments.

TABLE 2 *Correlation Coefficients for No Transition Elementary School Placement*

	Social Skills	Problem Behaviors	Academic Competence	Loneliness	Self Concept
Social Skills		-.470*	.475*	-.288	.468
Problem Behaviors	<b>.757**</b>		-.333	.231	-.308
Academic Competence	<b>.755**</b>	<b>-.725</b>		.057	.064
Loneliness	<b>.043</b>	<b>-.031</b>	<b>-.086</b>		<b>-.776**</b>
Self Concept	<b>.201</b>	<b>-.097</b>	<b>.334**</b>	<b>-.173</b>	

Note: \* = significant at  $p < .05$ ; \*\* = significant at  $p < .001$ . The at-risk group is in bold below the diagonal, and the comparison group is above the diagonal.

TABLE 3 *Correlation Coefficients for No Transition Elementary School Placement*

	Social Skills	Problem Behavior	Academic Competence	Loneliness	Self Concept
Social Skills		-.794**	.668**	-.400**	.316**
Problem Behaviors	<b>-.748**</b>		-.489**	.454**	-.217
Academic Competence	<b>.557**</b>	<b>.377**</b>		-.197	.107
Loneliness	<b>.287**</b>	<b>-.128</b>	<b>.157</b>		<b>-.413**</b>

Self				
Concept	<b>-.029</b>	<b>-.044</b>	<b>.036</b>	<b>.504**</b>

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*Note:* \* = significant at  $p < .05$ ; \*\* = significant at  $p < .001$ . The at-risk group is in bold below the diagonal, and the comparison group is above the diagonal.



## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine affective and academic outcomes in early adolescents identified as at-risk or comparison, who have either transitioned to urban middle school or remained at an urban elementary school environment in the sixth grade. Based on prior research, it was expected that students who remained in the elementary school setting for the sixth grade would experience lower levels of loneliness and problem behaviors and higher rating of self-concept, teacher-rated social skills and teacher rated academic competence. Conversely, we expected that students who transition to a middle school setting, in the sixth grade, would experience more loneliness and problem behaviors and have lower scores of teacher rated social skills, self-concept and teacher rated academic competence. Results only supported group differences by at-risk status, and there was no effect for transition.

These findings support conclusions from an earlier study that at-risk status is associated with social and academic difficulties in school (Gresham, et al., 2000). The current findings suggest that risk status is more predictive of difficulty than the impact of the environmental variables associated with the transition to middle school settings. These findings may be counter intuitive based on the findings from previous studies that indicate a decrease in self-concept and academic competence for students transitioning to middle school settings (Blyth, et al., 1978; Crockett, et al., 1989; Feldlaufer, et al., 1988; Wigfield, et al., 1991). The sampling of students in these studies may be impacted by the risk status of the students who participated in the study. The current sampling procedure clearly delineated the students considered at –risk from their not-at-risk peers. The lower rates of academic competence, social skills, and self-concept, and the increased rates of loneliness and problem behaviors are clearly accounted for by the at-risk status and not by the fact that the students transitioned

from an elementary school setting to a middle school setting.

This study provides data for an area of limited investigation that is the middle school transition experiences for the early adolescent identified as at-risk or comparison. Yet, the data from this study suggest no obvious difference regarding these students reaction to the transition to middle school. Specifically, these findings suggest that early adolescents transitioning to middle school in the sixth grade to not suffer from a decrease in academic competence, a drop in self-concept, are not more lonely, do not have more problem behaviors, and do not have lower social skills. Early transition to middle school is not detrimental to the child's social or affective self. Local educational policy makers and families may utilize these findings in making decisions regarding placement options for their early adolescent students. Additionally, this research may provide relief or diminish parental anxiety associated with the sixth grade.

More important are the group consistencies across placement settings. Our findings suggest that average students do equally well regardless of educational placement. The same findings held for students identified as at-risk. The importance of the sustained lower levels of social skills, self-competence, and academic competence and higher levels of problem behavior and loneliness of the at-risk group should not be overlooked. Future research should be focused on the student characteristics associated with school success in middle school settings and how students at-risk can be supported in these settings. Additionally, future research should take into account at-risk status when investigating student characteristics associated with making the transition from elementary to middle school to determine the extent to which student characteristics may be affected by transitions.

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