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ABSTRACT

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THE EFFECT ON SELF-CONCEPT OF REGULAR EDUCATION 7TH GRADERS WHO MENTOR JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL AGED PEERS WITH SEVERE COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

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The purpose of this study was to evaluate if self-esteem in 7th grade regular education students changed over a seventeen week period of time, one hour per week, when they were exposed to interacting with students with severe cognitive disabilities.

During the seventeen weeks, these 7th grade students were exposed to information about disabilities, assisted students with individual projects and interacted in small group supervised settings. Group discussions and activities were involved to help the students facilitate an understanding of disabilities and to form lasting friendships with students with severe cognitive disabilities.

Data was gathered through implementation of the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale for pre- and post-tests and an exit interview in which questions summarized the impact of this experience on these students.

The information found in this study has limited generalizability to other schools and programs. The data was used to evaluate whether disability awareness training does influence self-esteem in 7th grade students. It also assisted in providing information necessary to determine if this training is appropriate to enhance the self-esteem of future students.

Acknowledgments

Heartfelt thanks to my colleagues Noel Kolo and Julia Martin for their support and encouragement in writing this paper. I was the teacher and you were paraprofessionals. This term insinuates that you were less than professional, but let me assure you that I've learned more from each of you than you could ever imagine. You were collegues, friends and family. The students we've made a career of teaching have very severe disabilities. You've taught me to ignore the labels and to seek out what these kids can do— to concentrate on their abilities. "The time with us is short and they have the rest of their lives not to succeed," one of you wisely told me. You treat each child as if they were your own and taught me to live each day as if it were my last. Our paths have gone three different directions now, but the friendship and camaraderie you've shown me will last a lifetime. Thank you both for the wisdom and friendship you've shown me for the last nine years. I hope that some day we will all have the chance to work together again. Remember, "If wishes were fishes, we'd all have a fry!"

Thanks also to the dozens and dozens of students at West Junior High School that chose to get to know my students better. You were all great kids. Some of you were in "Circle of Friends," some of you assisted me every day as classroom helpers, others just chose to pop in occasionally and say "hi" to my students. The most important thing is each of you chose your own way to be a friend to these students. Each of you helped to brighten our days in your own way. Please remember the phrase we talked about often, "The true reflection of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members."

Sometimes our life experiences go full circle. Another very important contributor to my completion of this paper was Aaron Czappa, a Sophomore at UW-Stout and a former member and President of Circle of Friends at West Junior High in Wisconsin Rapids. He was my "on campus" computer consultant and assisted in critiquing the pages of this field study. Aaron's experiences in interacting with students with severe cognitive disabilities at West Junior High appear to have been quite impacting, as he has chosen to pursue a career as a special educator. He once told me he hopes some day to, "have a class full of kids just like to ones as West." I wish him the best of luck in pursuing his career goal and offer my sincere gratitude for his assistance.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Since the 1973 enactment of Public Law 94-142, “The Education For All Handicapped Children Act,” now called “Individuals With Disabilities Act-1990 (IDEA),” students with cognitive disabilities have thrived in public school settings with regular-education peers. Conversely, little research has engaged the concept of benefits regular or non-disabled students gain from interacting with students with cognitive disabilities.

Attention to gains students with severe cognitive disabilities have made in academic, social, and emotional growth has been attributed to interaction with non-disabled same-aged peers. Like attention, however, has not focused on academic, social or emotional gains these non-disabled students have made while interacting with peers with severe cognitive disabilities. Research has not documented how self-concept in individuals or groups of regular education students has been impacted by exposure to working and interacting with students with severe cognitive disabilities.

Since the implementation of Public Law 94-142, presently called IDEA, regular students and students with cognitive disabilities have interacted with each other in a wide spectrum of settings and environments. In most secondary-level schools a correlation seems to exist between the cognitive disability/functioning level of the students with disabilities and their interaction in school classes and activities with same-age peers without disabilities. In other words, students with mild cognitive disabilities may attend many or all regular classes and activities throughout the day with same age peers without disabilities, while students with a severe or profound cognitive disability may attend only one or no regular activities throughout their school day with their peers without disabilities.

Often times there is a general lack of “normalization” throughout the school day for students with severe cognitive disabilities. Most, if not all of their day is spent within the special education classroom. Other students with severe disabilities are their role models. Due to this limited repertoire of peers, unacceptable, sometimes even bizarre behaviors may be interpreted as the norm. Interacting with regular, non-disabled peers allows students with severe disabilities a chance to experience more acceptable/normal behavior. By sharing in real-world experiences such as turn-taking, sharing and peer pressure with their peers without disabilities, a real learning opportunity is availed to students with severe cognitive disabilities.

Due to the general lack of interaction between students with severe cognitive disabilities and their regular education peers at the secondary-school level, a real opportunity is missed. Students with severe cognitive disabilities miss a chance to interact with non-disabled peers, and a chance to form friendships within and outside of the school setting with this large group of students. Studies have shown that students with severe cognitive disabilities generally have very little contact with individuals other than those who are paid to provide a service or care for them. For example, some of the people these students with severe disabilities come in contact with beside their immediate family are teachers, paraprofessionals, doctors, dentists, bus drivers, and health care providers to name a few. Note that all of these individuals are paid a fee to provide a service to this child with a severe disability. Missing from the list are friends; people who voluntarily spend time with this child.

The purpose of this study is to offer students with and without severe cognitive disabilities a chance to interact with each other, learn about each other and possibly become friends. By exposing students with and without severe disabilities to a structured weekly experience interacting with each other, an opportunity for a positive change in self-concept for each group exists. Although interaction experiences will primarily take part during the regular school day, additional before-and-after school experiences will be provided for the students to interact with each other. The research in this study will focus on the self-concept of regular education students and how it changes over a 16-week period.

Statement of the Problem

No research could be found in Wisconsin gauging changes in self-concept of regular-education adolescents who have been exposed to volunteer experiences and/or friendships with severe cognitive disabilities. To better understand the changes in self-concept of these adolescents, further research is needed to determine if interacting with students with severe cognitive disabilities does impact the self-concept of regular education students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this descriptive study is two-fold. First, a determination if self-concept in adolescents changes during a specific period of time when they are exposed to structured volunteer experiences with students with severe cognitive disabilities. Secondly, input was sought from these adolescents as to what specific experiences were or were not impacting in increasing their self-concept in a positive manner.

Definition of Terms

Self Concept-A relatively stable set of self attitudes reflection, both a description and an evaluation on one's own behavior and attributes (Piers, 1984).

Cognitive Disability (CD)-a relatively new and interchangeable term formerly known as "mental retardation" in the state of Wisconsin.

Intelligence Quotient (IQ)-refers to a number expressing the intelligence of a person determined by dividing his mental age by his chronological age and multiplying that number by 100.

Mental Retardation (MR)-refers to (A) significant limitation in general intellectual functioning; (B) significant limitations in adaptive function, which exists concurrently; and (C) onset of intellectual and adaptive limitations before the age of twenty-two years (Jacobson and Mulick, APA Handbook, 1996).

The following are generally accepted guidelines for levels of mental retardation:

Mild Retardation---------55-70 Intelligence Quotient (IQ)

Moderate Retardation---35-54 IQ

Severe Retardation------20-34 IQ

Profound Retardation---Below 20 IQ

Chapter 2

Students with and without severe disabilities have attended the same public secondary schools since 1973. A variety of instructional and extra-curricular programs have been developed to encourage interaction between students with and without severe disabilities. Although a great deal of research has been written about interaction between these groups of students, the majority of literature focuses on benefits derived from students with disabilities during this interaction.

Upon review of the literature, two qualitative studies provide indirect evidence that students without disabilities may benefit from social integration opportunities designed for interaction with same age peers. Bilken, Corrigan, and Quick (1989) used data from interviews and observations to describe the relationships between students with severe disabilities and their peers without disabilities who participated in integrated elementary classrooms in a Syracuse, NY school. Although it was not the focus of the study, relationships formed between children with and without severe disabilities reflected the importance of this experience for enhancing the understanding and caring about other people by the students without severe disabilities.

In a more extensive qualitative analysis of a social integration program in an inner-city school, Murray-Seegert (1989) described the motivation of students without disabilities for participation in the program as related in part to “universal human needs.” She based this interpretation on students’ statements about the “challenge” of working with students who had disabilities, their interest in “working with people” and their feelings about “knowing that you’re helping someone”(pp. 123-124).

Taken together, these studies suggest the value of a more focused investigation of benefits that may occur to students without disabilities as a result of their participation in relationships with peers who have severe disabilities.

A similar investigation, which focused primarily on benefits adolescents without severe disabilities perceive for themselves from their social relationships with peers who have severe disabilities was carried out by Peck, Donaldson and Pezzoli in 1990. Their analysis of interview transcripts from over 200 interviews of non-disabled program participants generated six types of benefits these high school students perceived for themselves as resulting from their social relationships with peers who had severe disabilities.

According to Peck, Donaldson and Pezzoli (1990, page 244) these six areas of benefits include:

1. Self-concept: Students' comments indicating growth in their understanding and appreciation of their personal characteristics. This category of benefits includes both affective dimensions of self-concept (e.g., "I felt good about myself") and cognitive dimensions (e.g., "I learned who I was").
2. Social cognition: Students' comments reflecting growth in their understanding of the feelings and beliefs underlying the behavior of other people. This category includes both increased awareness of human similarities (e.g., "they have feelings too, and they need to have the same things we do, and they feel the same things we do"), and of human differences (e.g., "he was coming from a completely different world, which was good, because I learned a lot and he learned a lot").

3. Reduced fear of human differences: Comments indicating students experienced reduced anxiety and fear of people who look or behave in an unusual fashion, and /or increased confidence in their ability to respond appropriately and effectively in interpersonal interactions with such people (e.g., "…you get to meet a whole range of people-so you're not afraid of the unknown anymore").
4. Tolerance of other people: Students' comments reflecting increased acceptace of the feelings, behavior, and personal limitations of other non-disabled people, including family and friends (e.g., "I've treated my own friends better ...I haven't been as cold to people").
5. Development of personal principles: Students' comments on their relationships with students with disabilities as contributing to reflection and/or action toward the further formation, clarification or commitment to personal moral or ethical principles (e.g., "if there is something personal between us then they're just going to be my friend, no matter what other people say").
6. Experiencing relaxed and accepting friendships: Students' comments on the value of the personal acceptance they experienced from peers who had disabilities, as well as the particularly relaxed nature of their interactions (e.g., "I felt like I could just be myself and have fun").

Although the effects of interactions between students with severe disabilities and their non-disabled peers may have obvious short-term positive benefits, long-term benefits may be questionable.

Kishi and Meyer (1994) completed a six-year follow-up study of the effects of social contact between peers with and without severe disabilities. The non-disabled students interviewed had volunteered to participate in a structured interaction program with students with severe disabilities in elementary school programs six years earlier. Although this follow-up study found many positive results, the larger issue of promoting friendships and lasting, meaningful relationships between persons with and without severe disabilities remains.

Of the nearly 100 students who participated in the six-year follow-up interview, not one currently had a close friend that they described as someone with a severe disability. There were many relationships that students mentioned that could be viewed as an ongoing acquaintanceship, but not one participant reported to have a close friend with a severe disability. One student occasionally "hangs out" with someone who is deaf, while another student plays with his friend's brother with autism. Many of their contacts with people with severe disabilities occurred outside of school-for example, with neighbors or relatives with disabilities.

The original purpose of this structured interaction program was to promote initial interactions between peers with and without severe disabilities, with hopes that they would occur and be maintained under more naturally occurring situations and over the long-term. Although long-term friendship results fell well short of researcher expectations, at least part of these results were caused by the school-system structure. Friendships between peers with and without severe disabilities are still evident at many of the original project elementary schools where these studies originally took place. Secondary programs, however, have been left to their own resources to develop and maintain a means of promoting social interaction opportunities between students with and without severe disabilities. There was little evidence of interaction between these groups of peers at this level.

The school district sent students with severe disabilities to select “cluster” secondary schools. Most high schools had no programs for students with severe disabilities enrolled. This essentially isolated even those children who had maintained a friendship with student(s) with severe disabilities during their elementary school years. According to Epstein (1983), school attendance patterns can have serious consequences for children’s social relationships. Therefore, an administrative decision to place students with and without severe disabilities on different campuses as they progressed through their school careers poses as a major obstacle to continuing relationships (Epstein, 1983).

It should also be noted that many of the expected social benefits of mainstreaming children with severe physical disabilities into general education classrooms have failed (Guralnick & Groom, 1988). Even children who were exposed to teacher-peer-mediated programs to promote social interaction failed to accept children with severe disabilities as friends outside of clearly controlled and defined classroom conditions (Hundeft and Houghton, 1992). When conditions were manipulated to create an increased perception of risk, the more risky conditions elicited more negative responses than the less risky situations did (Weiserbs & Gottlieb, 1992).

Further results of this investigation showed that attitudes of the non-disabled peers toward friendships with students with disabilities were consistently more negative than attitudes toward help, but that in most cases attitudes toward friendship became more favorable over time. Attitudes toward willingness to help children with severe physical disabilities became more negative over time.

Several reasons could have accounted for the participants' greater willingness to help rather than befriend children with severe physical disabilities. First, friendship is a broad relationship that can cross many aspects of life. Helping is a rather specific or discrete behavior. Friendship can assume occasional help, but helping does not require friendship.

Second, the perception of the social consequence of participating in friendship and helping behavior is different. Peers may question certain friendships, but accept helping behavior because it is a positive social norm (Weiserbs & Gottlieb, 1995).

Differences in attitude toward friendships and help may also be understood in relation to the age of children. Young children's attitudes on friendship are influenced by physical characteristics. They may reject friendship with a peer solely on the basis of differences in appearance (Dion, 1977; Ryan, 1981). Friendship has different meaning to different age groups. To younger students, it can mean shared experiences. To older students, friendship can mean support and affection. In older age groups, the peer group often becomes the focus of group members and can influence many behaviors, such as dress, values, and self-esteem (O'Brien & Bierman, 1988).

It is obvious that structured interaction experiences between students with and without severe cognitive disabilities can have a positive impact on self-concept in students without disabilities on a short-term basis. The amount of long-term impact this experience has on students without disabilities can be debated and depends on a variety of factors, including age and emotional maturity at the time of the interaction experience.

Whether these interaction experiences have long-term impacts on self-concept and carry-over into long-term friendships between students with and without severe cognitive disabilities may also depend upon such an obvious variable as whether or not these students attend the same public secondary schools throughout the duration of their academic careers (Epstein, 1983).

Another variable in how students without disabilities perceive this experience and whether it may impact their self-concept in the long-term is how the interaction was structured. Did they perceive themselves as “friends” or “helpers?” Each perception or viewpoint carries with it a variety of positive and negative emotional connotations, depending upon the age and maturation level of the non-disabled student participant. A great deal of forethought must take place in planning interactions between students with and without severe cognitive disabilities before the process begins. In the past, students with and without severe cognitive disabilities had been placed together with the assumption that short- and long-term friendships would naturally occur. In earlier studies of interactions between peers with and without severe disabilities, it was also assumed that because of these interactions, the self-concept in both students with and without severe cognitive disabilities would be enhanced.

Kishi and Meyer (1994) disputed these assumptions. In their longitudinal qualitative follow-up study of relationships between students with and without severe disabilities from six years earlier, it was found that no student had maintained a relationship with a peer with a disability. In summarizing the integration outcomes of this study, Kishi and Meyer stated, “They are superficial and time-related relationships. Such experiences may support positive attitudes toward persons with disabilities in general, but appear to have little (long-term) behavioral consequence for the children involved” (page 286).

If positive long-term relationships between students with and without severe cognitive disabilities are to develop and be maintained on a long-term basis, many essential components need to be established. Many of these components have been lacking or non-existent in the past, thus resulting in findings of studies like Kishi and Meyer (1994). One of the components that must be considered is the maturity level of the regular education students involved. What does friendship mean to them? Do they consider themselves “friends” or “helpers?” Although each term may appear appealing to students at some cognitive level, O’Brien and Bierman (1988) determined that in order for these friendships to be maintained over a course of years, regular education students must view themselves in these interaction experiences as friends, not as helpers.

It should also be noted that it is important for researchers to understand where regular education students may be at in their developmental process. Young children’s attitudes toward friendships are often influenced by physical characteristics, while adolescents or young adults may be more influenced by their peer group than any other attribute to friendship.

Finally, there is a very strong correlation between schools students attend and the long-term friendships they maintain. Some school districts cluster students with severe disabilities to one school, while their same age regular education peers may attend a different school within the same district. There is a much greater probability that friendships will be maintained over a long-term basis if students attend the same schools throughout their academic training.

In the past it was assumed that friendships between students with and without severe cognitive disabilities would develop and be maintained simply by putting students together in a classroom situation. Recent research has shown that there are many variables that must be considered, discussed and planned out if friendships between peers with and without severe cognitive disabilities are to be maintained over a period of years.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Design of the Study

In an effort to determine if self-concept of 7th grade students changes over time when exposed to volunteering experiences with students with severe cognitive disabilities, both quantitative and qualitative measures were utilized.

This 16 week study encompassed the following activities with regular education 7th grade students, who were the focus/subjects of the study:

1. A pre-test in which students completed a Piers-Harris Self-Concept scale. Individual results were compared with post-test scores.
2. Regularly scheduled weekly one-hour time slots with an opportunity to interact in structured small-group activities with students with severe cognitive disabilities and other regular education 7th peers. Students were encouraged to write journal entries about their feelings after engaging in the activities.
3. Regularly scheduled weekly meetings in which students learned about a specific disability (blindness, deafness, cerebral palsy, others) from a special education professional. Activities were designed to engage students into role-playing or otherwise participating in activities that demonstrated how the disability feels.
4. A post-test in which students completed the Piers-Harris Self-Concept scale. Results were compared with pre-test scores.

5. An exit interview in which students were asked to expound upon specific questions about experiences or instances that may have impacted their self-concept.

Population

A sample group of eleven 7th grade students attending West Junior High School, Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin was utilized.

West Junior High School is a grade 7-9 building, and has a student population of 650. 217 of these students are in 7th grade. Each grade is divided into two "teams" of approximately 100 students per team. The 7th grade teams are named Wizards and Explorers.

The Wizard team teachers were asked if they had students who may enjoy participating in a volunteer experience with students with severe cognitive disabilities. The Wizard teachers listed several dozen students who would potentially participate in this experience. Due to time constraints (students would miss one or two periods a week for four months), it was agreed between the Wizard teachers and this researcher that a student volunteer population pool requisite would be that participants have a study hall scheduled at least one hour per day. This requisite would cut down on missed class time during this volunteer experience. Wizard teachers also agreed to allow these student volunteers to miss one class period per week if extra time was needed to devote to this volunteer experience.

The eleven initial participants in this study were all regular education 7th grade students enrolled in the Wizard Team at West Junior High School in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin. Students in the sample ranged from 12-14 years of age. The student sample represented several different geographic locations of the larger school population. Student survey participants were from Rudolph, Vesper, Kellner, and the West Side of Wisconsin Rapids, although geographic analysis/computation and other demographic data were not a consideration in this study.

Wizard teachers submitted only names of potential student volunteers who were not failing a class. These teachers felt an extra burden would be put on students who were struggling with academic work and then be asked to miss one study hall and class period per week.

After two weeks two student volunteers requested to discontinue participation. One student stated he was too uncomfortable with students with severe disabilities. The other student stated two hours per week took too much time away from his regular friends. Both students were immediately allowed to discontinue participation in the study. Nine students remained for the duration of the study.

Data Collection

Student volunteers participated in this study between September 21, and December 18, 1998. The Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale was administered to students September 21, 1998. Surveys were set aside to compare with post-study scale results, which were administered December 18, 1998. Pre-and post-surveys were distributed to students during their volunteer period. Students were assigned a number 1-9 to use as their identification number throughout the semester. These random numbers were designated to keep results confidential. Surveys were collected by a classroom assistant/paraprofessional and returned to the researcher. This numbering system was utilized for confidentiality of these minor survey participants and used primarily for comparing pre-and post-survey results.

Because of the delivery and numbering method, the response rate was anticipated at 100 percent.

Limitations

Since these students would not directly benefit from any of the initial research about self-concept and its relation to volunteering time to gain experiences with students with severe cognitive disabilities, information shared in the exit open-ended question interview may not be an accurate account of their experiences.

Because the subject matter deals with personal skills and experiences, student's responses may not be completely accurate. Their responses may reflect how the student feels they should respond to the question, rather than their true feelings or response.

Although survey participants were accorded an extra hour a week to volunteer time as a mentor to students with severe cognitive disabilities, few took part in this extra experience.

Very few experiences took place outside of the small group setting. Most volunteer activities were group-participation oriented, rather than one-on-one. By having volunteers concentrate more on volunteering with an individual student, more learning and/or gains in their self-concept may have occurred.

An adequate percentage of the population may not have been utilized in this study. Results may have been different if a larger study group had been established. Because the study was designed to address changes in self-concept in 7th grade regular education students at West Junior High School in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin, results could not be generalized to populations outside of West Junior High School.

Summary

Research, training, and education in the past has stressed how students with severe cognitive disabilities benefit from experiences interacting with their regular education peers without disabilities.

Virtually no research has been devoted to benefits derived by regular education students from volunteering/mentoring with students with severe disabilities.

Some of the evidence in this study suggests that self-concept in regular education students is enhanced when they participate in these voluntary experiences. Since no past research has been conducted in Wisconsin regarding changes in self-concept of regular education students who volunteer as mentors to students with severe disabilities, the focus of this study was to gather data of specific experiences and instances which regular education students felt led to an enhanced, more positive self-concept.

Chapter 4

Results

The purpose of this study was to determine if self-concept in regular education changes when they interact with peers with severe cognitive disabilities in a structured environment over a semester of time.

This issue was addressed by utilizing pre- and post-tests of the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale and gauging changes in total self-concept and the specific sub-clusters this scale measures.

The Piers-Harris was initially administered at the beginning of the study to the 11 students who participated in the structured interaction activities at West Junior High School in Wisconsin Rapids. At the end of the study, the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale was again administered to those nine students still participating in the study.

Data Analysis

A statistical analysis was conducted and the following data was compiled using the T-Scores of the Piers-Harris Scale. Impacts on the individual student's self-concept was further explored by analyzing qualitative data compiled throughout exit interviews with the nine students who completed the study.

It was found that there was no significant difference in the total self-concept of students without severe disabilities who interacted with students with severe cognitive disabilities when results were compared between the pre- and post-test results of the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale (See figure 1).

It should also be noted that although some individual results within the specific sub-clusters of the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale did change over the semester between the pre- and post-test scores, but the significance of change in results of the group as a whole were very minimal (Figure 2).

Exit Interview

Another data collection method utilized in this study was qualitative in nature, an exit interview of all students. A battery of questions was designed to allow students to describe, in their own words, how the experience of interacting with students with severe cognitive disabilities over a semester of time impacted them. This exit interview was conducted on the last day of the interaction experience at the end of the semester. The nine remaining student participants in the study were interviewed individually by the researcher. Participants were questioned individually in an adjacent school office so peer input would not influence how respondents answered specific questions. Students responded to a series of eleven open-ended questions. If a student failed to answer a question for any reason, it was so noted.

The following eleven open-ended questions were asked of each student participant. Their exact responses follow.

Question 1: When you first began interacting with these students, did you feel they should be attending a regular junior high school? How do you feel now?

#1: Yes. They're regular kids with problems they are born with. They deserve to be here as much as anyone else.
#2: Yes. I felt they should be in our school and feel even more strong (ly) about that now.
#3: Yes, they should be at West. They should have a chance to interact with others and have a chance to learn like us.
#4: Yes. (No other comments).
#5: Yes. Everyone should have a fair chance to learn.
#6: Yes. These students shouldn't have to be in a separate school away from other kids like us. The more time I spent with them, the stronger I felt about this.
#7: Yes. I really enjoyed spending time with these students. I feel very strongly that they should be in this school with us. I feel sorry for the kids at East (cross-town junior high) because they don't get a chance to know these kids.

#8: Yes. These students shouldn't be in a separate building or sectioned off from everyone else. They have the right to be with other kids their same age.
#9: Yes. I feel even more so now. They have taught me they can learn just like I can.

Question 2: What will you remember most about this experience next year?

#1: How fun it was to interact with them. They did things with us just like any other normal person. It was fun to make them laugh.
#2: That the students can do a lot of things for themselves. I didn't know that some could even talk!
#3: When I made them laugh, how happy they got. I'll remember the activities we did and stuff about their individual personalities.
#4: That the students were fun and unique. Everyone had a different personality. That was neat.
#5: How much fun we had with the students.
#6: That it was fun doing stuff with them and playing games with them. I enjoyed talking with them and asking them questions.
#7: How these students can do so many things even though they're in a wheelchair or disabled some other way.
#8: Coming into the classroom and saying, "Hi!" I guess I enjoyed the whole experience of interacting with them.
#9: How they goof around just like my other friends. That really surprised me.

Question 3: What will these students most remember about you?

#1: Playing games. How my team almost always won.
#2: Going for walks inside and outside of the school. The neat things we saw and some of the stuff we talked about.
#3: My sarcasm and joking around and that I could be helpful if they wanted me to be.
#4: That I was a good partner when we played games; I tried to let them do things for themselves.
#5: How I was helpful, but not pushy and that I had a good sense of humor.
#6: Hopefully they will remember that I treated them like normal people, not like they were handicapped. They will remember that I treated them well and was nice to them.
#7: Did not respond.
#8: Maybe they thought I was funny.
#9: The way that we goofed around and joked around. They will remember my sense of humor.

Question 4: What has volunteering to interact with students with severe disabilities taught you about yourself?

#1: I'm happy that I have the capabilities that I do.

#2: That I enjoy helping out and hanging out with all kinds of people. It doesn't bother me to be around people with disabilities now. It did before this (experience).

#3: How lucky I am to have the gifts I do. This was a good chance to meet some new friends, learn about them and a little about myself.

#4: That I can help them learn. This has made me think about becoming a teacher.
#5: I'm more comfortable around these students than I ever thought I would be.
#6: That it's neat to have people with special needs as a friend.
#7: Not to take things for granted, because some day I might not have them.
#8: An accident could happen some day out of the blue and my life could be changed forever.
#9: I felt more comfortable with these guys as time went on. I always felt I could do it (interact), I just didn't have the chance before.

Question 5: What have you learned from these students?

#1: These students are no different than me. They have a sense of humor. Maybe they can't answer back all the time, but they may try to draw you closer with their hands or smile at you.
#2: They're more like me than different.
#3: They are individuals, too. They each have their own personality and can't be lumped together in a group.
#4: They're capable of a lot of things that other kids their it age without special needs can do.
#5: I can make a difference in people's lives.
#6: That they can think as much as anyone else can. They might not be able to answer every question, but they know what's going on.
#7: Each student is an individual. They're not all the same.
#8: Some can't talk, some can't walk, but their personalities are wonderful.
#9: That they can do lots of stuff as well as anyone else, even though they have a disability.

Question 6A: If you saw one of the students (you interacted with this semester) in the hall unattended or in the wrong spot, how would you feel?
6B: How would you respond?
6C: Has this changed since the beginning of the semester?

#1: I'd try to help them figure out where they're supposed to be. When I didn't know them before I would have gone to a teacher to get help. Now that I know them better, I'd try to help them find the place they were supposed to be.

#2: I'd help them find their way back to the classroom. I wouldn't have done that before if I hadn't gotten to know them.
#3: Look for a teacher that works with them and explain the situation or bring the student back to the classroom. I wouldn't have done that before.
#4: Probably help the student find where they're supposed to be or find one of their teachers. I would have ignored them in the beginning of the year.

#5: I’d help them get back to the right class. Before I would have just left them alone and gone on my way.
#6: I would try to find out where they’re supposed to be. I got comfortable enough over the semester with these students to do that now.
#7: I’d help them get back to where they’re supposed to be. I might not have done that before this semester.
#8: Ask them what’s going on. Help them find where they’re supposed to be. I probably always would have helped out.
#9: See where they’re supposed to be and take them there. I would have always done this, but I’m more comfortable now.

Question 7: Has interacting with these students over the semester changed how you feel about yourself in any way? How?

#1: Yes. I’m more comfortable trying new things. I also notice that I’m spending more time with my sister, who is severely handicapped.
#2: Yes. I feel better about myself because I spent time with people I normally wouldn’t have and learned some things about myself.
#3: Not really.
#4: Maybe a little, but nothing I can think of right now.
#5: Yes. It was nice to feel I might be making a difference in someone else’s life.
#6:It made me feel good that I was doing stuff with them, being their friend, but I usually feel pretty good about myself.
#7: Yes. I’m more helpful to others now. I learned that it feels pretty good to help others.
#8: Yes, kind of. I don’t take everything for granted any more. Now I don’t mind walking to school any more or complain about the school lunch as much. I learned those things from working with these kids.
#9: Yes. I feel better about myself.

Question 8: Has interacting with these students over the semester changed how you feel about them?

#1: Yes. At first I thought they were kids with a lot of problems. Now I know they’re just like me. They’re less different than they are like me.
#2: Yes. I have much more respect for them now.
#3: Yes. Now I look at them differently. They’re just normal people. Forget about the disabilities.
#4: I feel more comfortable with them than I did at the beginning of the semester.
#5: Yes. I feel closer to them. I’ve gotten to know them better.
#6: Yes. I think of them more as people now; not people with disabilities.
#7: Yes. I wasn’t as comfortable before. Now I enjoy being around them. They react just like you and me.
#8: Yes. For example, a lot of kids won’t watch these students eat at lunchtime. They look away or make faces. I understand better now why these students have eating problems at lunch. They’re trying the best they can. I try to tell my friends that.

#9: Not really. I have relatives with disabilities who I've spent time with, so I kind of knew what to expect.

Question 9: How would you feel about participating in these situations:

A: You are invited to watch a movie or play a game at school individually with one of the students you interacted with this semester.

B: You are invited to this same student's house to play a game or watch a movie (transportation is provided and you don't have plans).

C: Three or four friends are visiting at your house. Would you feel comfortable inviting one of the kids you interacted with over the semester to join your other friends at your house?

#1: A. Yes. We see our friends in classes all the time, so we should get to see them in their classes too.
B. Probably. Most of the time I'm home bored anyway.
C. Yes. It would be fun to have them come over and hang out. They need friends, too.
#2: A. Yes.
B. Maybe. I might not be comfortable enough to go over to someone's house that I don't know real well.
C. Probably not. I don't think I know them well enough yet.
#3: A. Yes.
B. Yes.
C. Maybe. I'd talk to my other friends first, tell them about my experiences and find out their reaction.
#4: A. Yes.
B. Yes.
C. I'd feel comfortable, but don't know how my other friends would react around them.
#5: A. Yes.
B. I don't think so. I'm not comfortable enough yet to go over to one of their houses. Maybe when I'm a little older
C. No. I'm pretty shy and don't think I'm ready for this yet.
#6: A. Yes
B. Yes.
C. I don't see why not. I'd be comfortable having them come over, but I'm not sure how my other friends would feel.
#7: A. Yes.
B. Yes.
C. Yes. I think that would be pretty cool!
#8: A. Yes.
B. Probably yes, but I'd have to get to know some of the students a little bit better first.
C. Probably, if I knew them well enough.
#9: A. Yes.

B. Yes.
C. It would depend on if my other friends got to know first. That's only fair. I'd want to okay it with my other friends first.

Question 10: Did your answer the questions in 9. change over the semester, after spending time with students with severe cognitive disabilities? Why?

#1: Yes. At first I probably wouldn't have been too sure about doing stuff with the kids, but now that I know them better, I would.

#2: Yes. I became more comfortable over time. I really like the kids, but I still have a ways to go with feeling totally comfortable.

#3: Yes. My attitude did change over the semester. I probably wouldn't have wanted to participate in any of the activities without getting to know the students better first. Now I can't wait until Thursday's (day of interaction experience each week).

#4: Yes. I got more comfortable over the semester.

#5: I became more comfortable, yes. I'm not all the way there yet, though.

#6: Yes. I was always pretty comfortable. Now I'm even more comfortable.

#7: I guess I changed over the semester. I was a little scared at first. Now I love coming down here.

#8: Yes. I definitely got more comfortable over the semester.

#9: Yes. I got more comfortable. I definitely wouldn't have considered B. (going to house of peer with severe cognitive disability) or C. (inviting a peer with severe cognitive disability to their house) before.

Question 11: Are you relieved that this interaction experience is over, or would you like it to continue? Why?

#1: I wish it would continue. I've really gotten to know some neat kids down here. A lot of times classes get boring. It's fun and interesting hanging out here and getting to know the students.

#2: I guess I don't care if it continues. It was fun. I wish we could have gone on some field trips or someplace away from school to get to know them better in a different setting.

#3: I'd like for it to continue, so we can get to know these students even better and try some more fun activities.

#4: I would like for it to continue because it was fun doing stuff with them and playing games.

#5: I'd choose to keep it going. It was fun and I learned a lot.

#6: I would like to still do it. It was fun getting to do different activities with them and getting to know them better.

#7: Continue. The kids are fun. It took me a while to get to know them and now that I finally do, I'd like to continue relationships and friendships with them.

#8: I'd like it to continue. I had fun seeing the kids. It was a good experience.

#9: Continue. I liked doing stuff with the students. It was a fun experience and I learned a lot about them.

Summary

It appears that even though the quantitative analysis of the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale showed only small changes in overall self-concept and in the specific sub-clusters of the scale over a semester of time, the exit interview did reveal that this experience possibly had a larger impact on these students than the statistical analysis showed.

As noted in the literature review, when regular education students interact with students with severe cognitive disabilities, several positive outcomes may occur. Some of these outcomes may include a more positive self-concept, increased social cognition, reduced fear of human differences, tolerance of other people, development of personal principles and experiencing relaxed and accepting friendships. When the reader reviews comments from study participants throughout their exit interview responses, it is interesting to note that many of the aforementioned positive outcomes are listed throughout participant’s individual interviews.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary

The era of integrating students with severe cognitive disabilities into public schools is here to stay. In the past it was assumed that simply by placing these very students in a public school setting with regular students, integration would somehow automatically happen and lasting friendships would result.

Several studies have proven that a somewhat systematic approach must be developed if true integration is to occur between students with and without severe cognitive disabilities. This integration can lead to enhanced self-concept in both students with and without severe cognitive disabilities. This study concentrated on enhancing self-concept in regular education students who participated in weekly integration opportunities with peers with severe cognitive disabilities. If lasting friendships are to develop between students with and without severe cognitive disabilities, many considerations must be made.

In the review of the literature it was revealed that self-concept in regular education students can be enhanced in the short-run simply by exposing them to interaction experiences with students with severe cognitive disabilities. The literature review also revealed that lasting friendships between students with and without severe cognitive disabilities were not likely to continue on a long-term basis unless these friendships were nurtured like a typical friendship would require. For example, if a school district places value on the integration of students with severe cognitive disabilities and nurturing relationships between these individual students, there is a need for both groups of students to attend the same schools throughout their public school academic careers.

In this study the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale was used to measure total self-concept and the sub-clusters that make up the total self-concept: behavior, intellectual and school status, physical appearance and attributes, anxiety, popularity and happiness and satisfaction.

Pre- and post-tests of the Piers-Harris Scale were administered to regular education student participants during this seventeen-week study. These participants interacted one hour per week with same-aged junior high school peers with severe cognitive disabilities in a structured classroom setting. Other integration opportunities were available for study participants throughout each week, if they chose to participate. Only three students did participate in these extra opportunities, and on a very limited basis.

Conclusion

Throughout the semester individual scores on total self-concept and sub-cluster scores of the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale did change between the pre- and post-tests. Most of these changes in individual scores were not significant; therefore overall changes in group scores in pre- and post-tests were only minimal.

Many reasons for these limited changes in scores in self-concept may be pointed out. To begin with, the method in which students were chosen to participate in this study could be improved upon. Student participants were nominated by their regular education teachers to take part in this study. These students were average or above average academically. No student was scoring below average in any of his or her classes. This in itself could be a reason why self-concept scores varied little between the pre- and post-tests over the semester. Each student scored relatively high in overall self-concept and the sub-clusters of the Piers-Harris in the pre-test. Their self-concept scores remained high throughout their post-test scores, as well. Thus, little change was evident within the group for overall self-concept or the specific sub-clusters within the Piers-Harris Scale. Possibly by selecting a more educationally diverse group of regular education students, more changes in self-concept would be noted.

Another reason for this minimal change in self-concept could be the limited time allotted weekly for interaction with students with severe cognitive disabilities. Due to time constraints in the seventh-grade schedules, regular education students interacted with students with severe cognitive disabilities only one hour per week. Increased integration opportunities and experiences could possibly increase self-concept in the regular education students.

Recommendations

To further understand the effects on self-concept when regular education peers interact with students with severe cognitive disabilities the following recommendations for further studies are suggested:

1. Conduct a more extensive pilot study with a larger group of regular education seventh grade students. This study group would include a control group as well as an active group. Comparisons should be made to examine if/how self-concept changes over a given period of time between the two groups.

2. Develop a sampling of more diverse academic backgrounds within the control and active groups. Students should not just be chosen to participate because they have average or above average grades. It could be interesting to find out if students with lower academic grade averages have a greater increase in self-concept when they interact with students with severe cognitive disabilities.

3. Review a variety of instruments that measure change in self-concept. Although the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale did seem appropriate for use in this study, there may be more adequate scales that have been developed to measure the specific age group of junior high school students.
4. Review recommendations made by students in this initial study and consider implementing their suggestions. Some examples include: "…I wish we could have gone on some field trips or someplace away from school to get to know them in a different setting," "I'd like for it to continue, so we can get to know these students even better and try some more fun activities," and "…It would be fun to have them come over (to my house) and hang out. They need friends, too."
5. Conduct a longitudinal study that follows these students through their secondary public school careers and find out if this interaction experience did have an impact in developing long-term friendships with individuals with severe cognitive disabilities. The study should look at the students' changing self-concept and the level of interaction they have maintained with individuals with severe cognitive disabilities. Whether this experience had any impact on these students career choice should also be explored.

6. Develop a continuum of opportunities for regular students to interact with students with severe cognitive disabilities as they transition from junior high school to high school. An earlier example in the review of the literature demonstrated that one school district sent all students with severe disabilities to a “cluster” school site, while the peers that had initially interacted with them attended a separate public school within the same district. These interaction opportunities must be supported by school administration in order to succeed.
7. Develop a means to analyze how this interaction experience may have impacted or affected students with severe cognitive disabilities.

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Figures

Figure 1

Total Self Concept Scores On Piers-Harris
For The Pre & Post Comparison

Mean Score

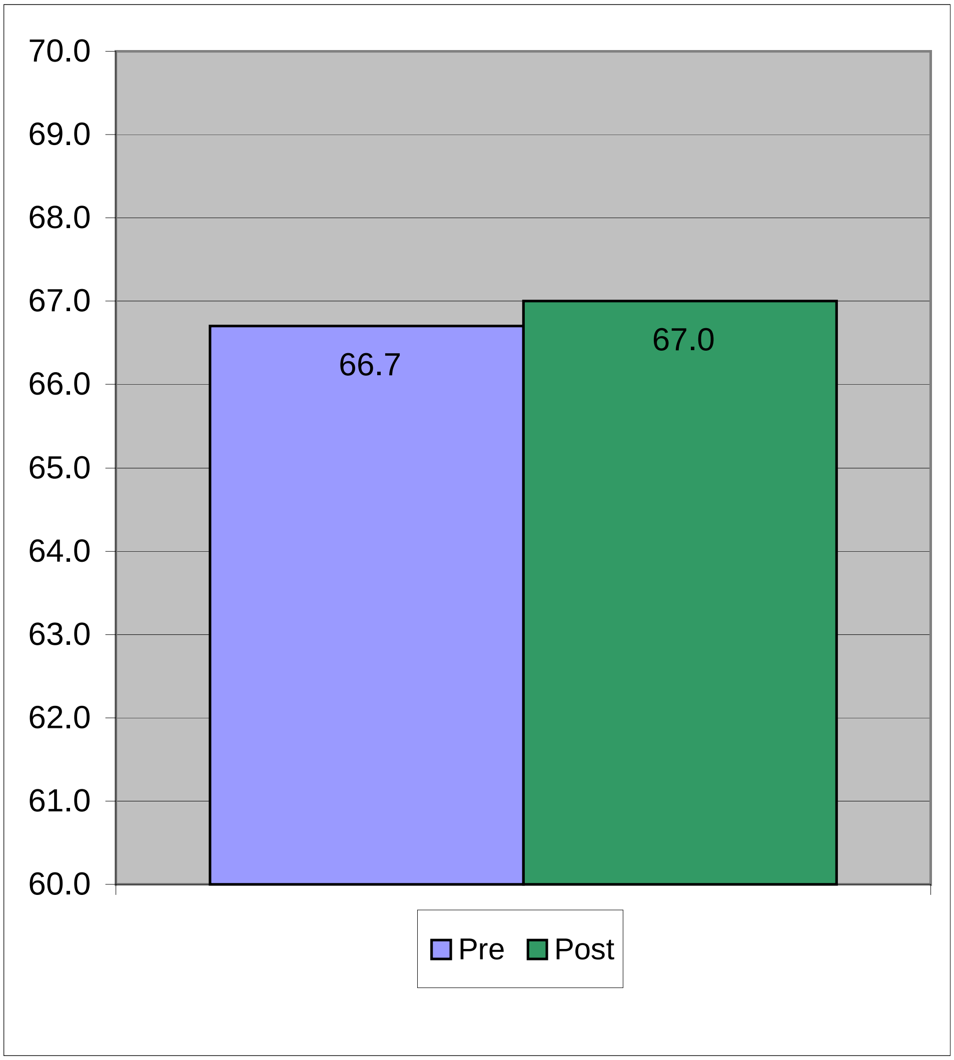
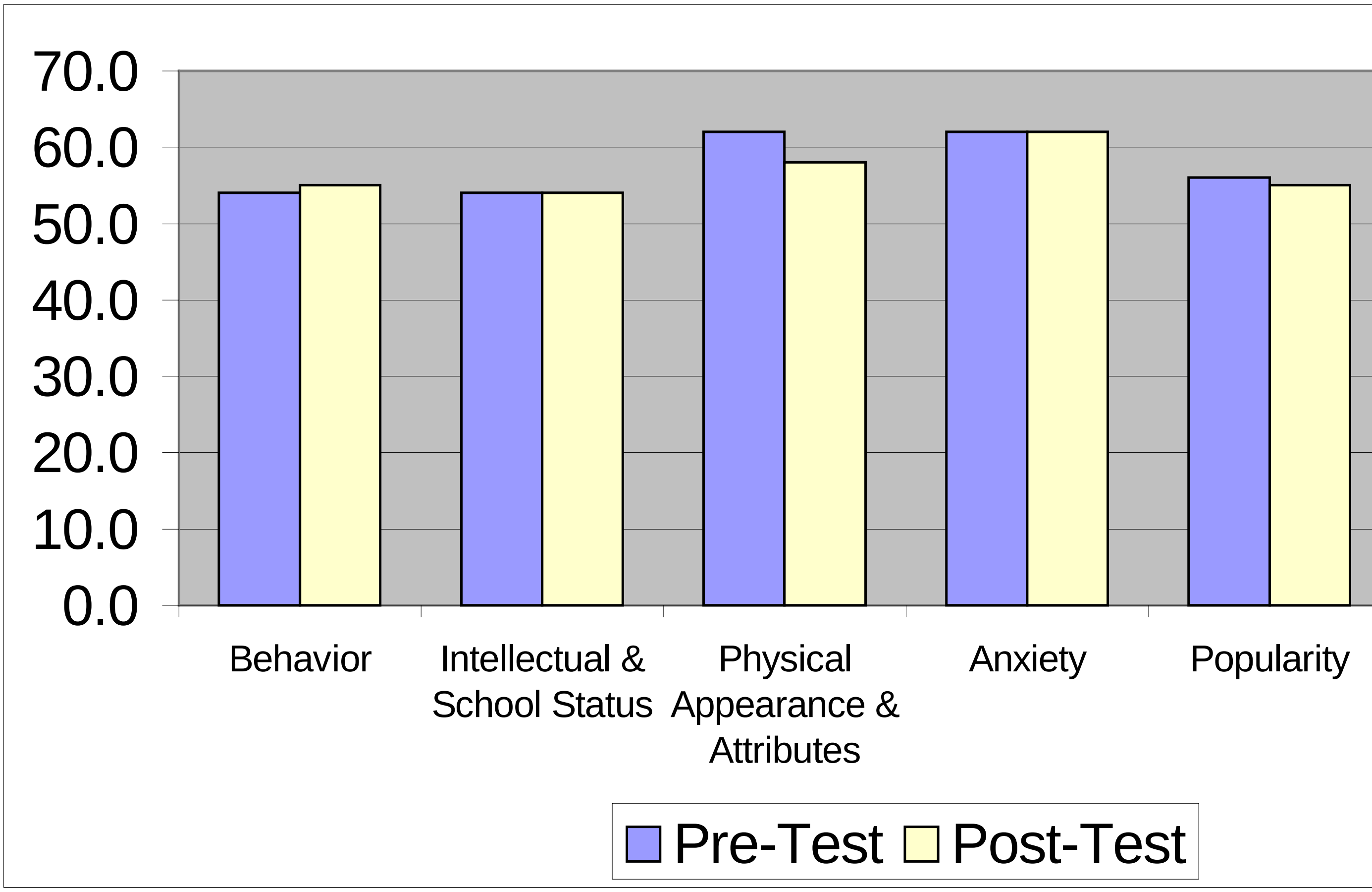


Figure 2

Comparison of Pre & Post Tests
Sub-Clusters



Appendix

Appendix A

Item Content of the Cluster Scales
(taken from the Piers-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale Revised Manual 1984)

Item Number	**Item**
	I. Behavior (16 Items)
12	I am well behaved in school.*
13	It is usually my fault when something goes wrong.
14	I cause trouble to my family.
21	I am good in my school work.*
22	I do many bad things.
25	I behave badly at home.
34	I often get into trouble.
35	I am obedient at home.
38	My parents expect too much of me.
45	I hate school.
48	I am often mean to other people.
56	I get into a lot of fights.
59	My family is disappointed in me.
62	I am picked on at home.
78	I think bad thoughts.
79	I am a good person.*

Item Number	**Item**
	II. Intellectual and School Status (17 Items)
5	I am smart.*
7.	I get nervous when the teacher calls on me.*
9	When I grow up, I will be an important person.
12	I am well behaved in school*
16	I have good ideas.
17	I am an important member of my family.
21	I am good in my school work.*
26	I am slow in finishing my schoolwork.
27	I am an important member of my class.
30	I can give a good report in front of the class.
31	In school I am a dreamer.
33	My friends like my ideas.
42	I often volunteer in school.

49	My classmates in school think I have good ideas.*
53	I am dumb about most things.
66	I forget what I learn.
70	I am a good reader.

Item Number	**Item**
	III. Physical Appearance and Attributes (13 Items)
5	I am smart.*
8	My looks bother me.*
15	I am strong.
29	I have pretty eyes.
33	My friends like my ideas.*
41	I have nice hair.
49	My classmates think that I have good ideas.*
54	I am good-looking.
57	I am popular with boys.
60	I have a pleasant face.*
63	I am a leader in games and sports.
69	I am popular with girls.*
73	I have a good figure.

Item Number	**Item**
	IV. Anxiety (14 Items)
4	I am often sad.*
6	My looks bother me.*
7	I get nervous when the teacher calls on me*
8	My looks bother me.*
10	I get worried when we have tests in school.
20	I give up easily.
28	I am nervous.
37	I worry a lot.
39	I like being the way I am.*
40	I feel left out of things.*
43	I wish I were different.*
50	I am unhappy.*
74	I am often afraid.
80	I cry easily

Item Number	**Item**
	V. Popularity (12 Items)
1	My classmates make fun of me.
3	It is hard for me to make friends.
6	I am shy.*
11	I am unpopular.
40	I feel left out of things.*
46	I am among the last to be chosen for games.
49	My classmates in school think I have good ideas.*
51	I have many friends.
58	People pick on me.
65	In games and sports I watch instead of play.
69	I am popular with girls.*
77	I am different from other people.

Item Number	**Item**
	VI. Happiness and Satisfaction (10 Items)
2	I am a happy person.
8	My looks bother me.
36	I am lucky.
39	I like being the way I am.*
43	I wish I were different.*
50	I am unhappy.*
52	I am cheerful.
60	I have a pleasant face.*
67	I am easy to get along with.
80	I am a good person.*

Note: Asterisks (*) indicate items which load significantly on more than one cluster scale