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AN EVALUATION OF THE KLARK'S KIDS  
PROGRAM FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

by  
Joann DeKatch-Smith

A Master's Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the  
Master of Arts Degree  
of  
The Graduate School  
of  
Rowan University  
May 1999

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Professor

Date Approved May 1999

## Abstract

Joann DeKatch-Smith

An Evaluation of the Klark's Kids  
Program for At-Risk Students  
1999

Dr. Ronald Capasso  
School Administration

The purpose of this study was to observe and assess the effectiveness of the Klark's Kids program for at-risk students in Grades 7 and 8 in the Pittsgrove Township Middle School Annex by using an action research design.

The subject sample included thirty-three identifiable at-risk students in September 1998. Of this group, only five or six students attended due to the voluntary nature of the program. Forty-two new students were identified in the month of October. Of the eighteen who attended, only twelve to fifteen students came on a regular basis. Evaluation procedures included grades, standardized test scores, grade point averages, and attendance. Previous records regarding achievement, attendance, and discipline served as a baseline for comparisons. Descriptive data in terms of numbers and percentages were compiled and analyzed. Problem areas were identified and recommendations were made.

Findings demonstrated that the greatest key was mandating parent involvement and compulsory student attendance.

## Mini-Abstract

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## Acknowledgments

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .....	ii
List of Tables .....	v
Chapter 1: Focus of the Study .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Purpose of the Study .....	1
Definitions .....	2
Limitations of the Study .....	2
Setting of the Study .....	2
Significance of the Study .....	5
Organization of the Study .....	6
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature .....	7
Chapter 3: The Design of the Study .....	21
General Description of the Research Design .....	21
Development and Design of the Research Instrumentation .....	22
Description of the Population .....	23
Description of Data Collection Approach .....	23
Data Analysis Plan .....	24
Chapter 4: Presentation of the Research Findings .....	25

Chapter 5: Conclusions, Implications, and Further Study . . . . .	32
Major Conclusions and Corresponding Implications . . . . .	32
Further Study . . . . .	36
Implications of the Study on the Intern’s Leadership Development . . . .	36
References . . . . .	38
Appendix A . . . . .	40
Appendix B . . . . .	42
Appendix C . . . . .	44
Biographical Data . . . . .	46

List of Tables

	Page
Table 1 Klark's Kids Student Attendance .....	28
Table 2 Grade Comparison .....	29



## Chapter 1

### Focus of the Study

#### Introduction

Peer leadership is gaining popularity throughout the country as a means to assist students exhibiting problems both socially and academically in the school environment. The psychology behind this type of program centers around the fact that students are more easily influenced by their peers than by teachers or parents. Common agreement among teachers, guidance counselors, administrators, child study team members, and parents indicates that the influence of peers on school performance is more substantial than that of parents. The Klark's Kids program will provide at-risk students with the opportunity to experience higher self esteem and academic improvement. The intern desires to learn if the Klark's Kids program is effective for those students in Grades 7 and 8 who are considered to be at-risk students. Due to the increase in the number of students being considered for retention in Grades 7 and 8 at the Pittsgrove Township Middle School, it is obvious that a program for such at-risk students is essential.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to observe and assess the effectiveness of the Klark's Kids program for at-risk students in Grades 7 and 8 at the Pittsgrove Township Middle School by using an action research design. The results presented in Chapter 4 and the

conclusions drawn in Chapter 5 should prove essential in validating or refuting any premature, informal conclusions concerning the success of the Klark's Kids program.

### Definitions

At-risk students are defined as those who are in jeopardy of school failure signaled by several factors. According to Mary J. Frase (1989), these factors include students from low socioeconomic classes, minority students, students with low achievement, limited English speaking students, compensatory-education students, retained students, students with behavior problems, and students with poor attendance. New at-risk students include homeless children, crack exposed children, and children of migrant workers. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 1996) states that the risk factors seem cumulative; if an individual has two risk factors, the negative outcome is four times more likely to occur.

### Limitations of the Study

This study will be conducted in Grades 7 and 8 at the Pittsgrove Township Middle School which is located in the Pittsgrove Township School District of Salem County, New Jersey. Of these students, only those identified as at-risk will be the subjects of the study, contingent upon parental consent. This study will utilize a qualitative action research design. The results of the study are meant to serve the Pittsgrove Township School District and may not be generalized to other schools in the area.

### Setting of the Study

The Pittsgrove Township School District is a rural district with low to middle socioeconomic standing. It is classified as a "C-D" district factor group with A being the

lowest and J the highest. The district is below the state average in assessed evaluation per pupil. Pittsgrove Township is the largest municipality in Salem County, New Jersey. A suburban community located in the eastern corner of Salem County in the southern part of state, the township is bordered by Gloucester County on its northern bounder, by Cumberland County on the eastern and southern borders, and both the Borough of Elmer and Upper Pittsgrove Township on the west. The nearby major urban centers are Camden, Philadelphia, and Atlantic City.

The Township is slowly changing from a primarily farming community to a residential one. Parvins State park with 1,245 acres comprises a small portion of the township's 29,619 acres. The district of Pittsgrove was separated from Pilesgrove Township and incorporated as a separate township on December 19, 1769. The population of Pittsgrove Township grew from 2,092 residents in 1900 to 6,000 residents in 1980. Currently, there are approximately 7,500 residents in Pittsgrove. The predominant type of housing is the single family detached dwelling that represents 89% of the housing stock. The other significant type of housing is the modular unit with 9% representing housing trailers and 1% representing apartments.

The Pittsgrove Township School District consists of one high school with Grades 9 through 12 housing approximately 800 students, one middle school with Grades 5 through 8 housing approximately 600 students, one elementary school with Grades 1 through 4 housing approximately 525 students, and a primary school housing approximately 100 kindergarten and pre-kindergarten students. The Olivet Elementary School was built in 1922 and remodeled in 1941. The Norma Primary School was built in 1953 and remodeled in 1995. The Arthur P. Schalick High School was built in 1976. The

Pittsgrove Township Middle School was built in 1989. Since 1994, plans have been underway to add additional space for Grades 7 and 8 within the new middle school building. Grades 7 and 8 are still housed within the Arthur P. Schalick High School building. Land owned by the school district since 1976, located between the middle school and the high school, was slated for the use of the middle school expansion project. Grades 5 and 6 are presently housed in the Pittsgrove Township Middle School building.

The school culture is such that collaboration of subject disciplines takes place through team meetings conducted at least once a week. Students who have academic problems are discussed at these team meetings. Parental support is encouraged through frequent telephone and in-person contacts. Progress reports are sent to all parents at mid points of the grading quarters. Counselors (one counselor in Grades 5 and 6 building and one counselor in Grades 7 and 8 building) provide corrective support for each student identified with a failing grade. Basic skills instruction in mathematics and language arts as well as instruction for gifted students is provided. The school philosophy was and is to move the student holistically from dependence to independence.

The administrative staff of the Pittsgrove Township Middle School consists of a principal, vice principal, 2 counselors, 1 nurse, 2 secretaries, and over 40 teachers. The middle school day consists of 9 periods of 45 minutes each. A ten minute homeroom is held at the beginning of the day for the purpose of conducting organizational tasks. The school day includes both a study hall and a lunch period.

Evidence of parent involvement includes parental visitation days, parental athletic events, field trip chaperoning, science fair parental participation, and honor roll awards night. The parent-teacher organization (PTO) sponsors skating parties, student and adult

dances, book fairs, and covered dish dinners. The PTO also provides an annual agenda book for each student for use with daily classwork, homework, and general assignment noting. The agenda also contains information such as report card dates, grading scale, study skills development, and the student discipline code of conduct. The agenda book represents the community's commitment to provide the necessary tools for student organizational skill development. This agenda book plays an integral part in the Klark's Kids program in that it provides the basic organizational tool for the connection between the classroom and the after school program.

#### Significance of the Study

This study will be an important contribution to the student's academic achievement and the district's educational objectives. Students at the middle level, ages 10 to 14, have distinct physical, social, emotional, and intellectual needs. Pittsgrove Township is providing a program designed to meet the changing needs of these students and provide for the transition between elementary and high school education. The Klark's Kids program assumes that students want to and need to organize their knowledge, learn to work well in groups, and become increasingly independent while recognizing the interdependence of all people. This program encompasses organizational patterns that direct the energy and vitality of emerging adolescents toward the realization of their potential. The Klark's Kids program will provide for the necessary tutelage for students in their area of difficulty. Both the school district and the community will profit from this program in that the decrease in retentions will ultimately be more effective for the district.

## Organization of the Study

In Chapter 2 the intern will review the literature pertinent to the study of at-risk students. This review of literature will give credence to the paper's intended goal. It will provide the reader with important information concerning the research context of the study and support the rationale for the importance of the study. This will provide influence for the research design, instrumentation, and data analysis plan.

In Chapter 3 the intern will address the five areas related to the research design used for this study. The five areas include a general description of the research design, a description of the development and design of the research instruments, a description of the sample and sampling technique used, a description of the data collection, and a description of the data analysis plan.

Chapter 4 will address the questions as to the information found during the investigation and the significance of the findings.

Chapter 5 will describe all major conclusions and their interpretations. It will include the effects on the writer's leadership development as a result of involvement in this study.

## Chapter 2

### Review of Literature

The disaffected student population in the United States is growing. Due to the demands of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, school has become either a challenge to those who are academically and socially able to succeed, or a difficulty to those who are considered to be at-risk. At-risk students are to be found in every school district in the United States. The purpose of this study is to observe and assess the effectiveness of the Klark's Kids program for at-risk students in Grades 7 and 8 at the Pittsgrove Township Middle School by using an action research design.

At-risk students are defined as those who are in jeopardy of school failure, signaled by several factors. According to Frase (1989), these factors include students from low socioeconomic classes, minority students, compensatory education students, retained students, students with behavior problems, and students with poor attendance. The Office of Education Center on Data (OECD, 1996) reports that new at-risk groups include homeless children, crack-exposed children, and children of migrant workers. Furthermore, the risk factors seem cumulative; if an individual has two risk factors, the negative outcome is four times more likely to occur.

According to Hogarth (1991), during the past 60 years a dramatic social and cultural revolution has taken place in the United States. For generations, children had been under the direct influence of their families. These capable adults directed children in

their activities and served as role models for them. Hogarth (1991) contends that the church and school also re-inforced family values because clergy and teachers were selected based on their commitment to the same ideals. The ability to solve problems, make good decisions, and exercise responsibility produced competent and creative adults who then took advantage of the various and plentiful opportunities provided by the United States.

In Hogarth's opinion (1991) family life has been impacted by several major events, such as a rapid increase in urban and suburban populations, isolation of family members, television, various rights movements, the Vietnam War, the pill, abortion drugs, and a general lack of personal responsibility. As of 1950, seventy percent of the population lived in the city and its environs, whereas in 1935 seventy percent had lived in rural areas. Parents and children were now separated because of the change in working conditions. Family size decreased with none or few extended family members living in the home. Education became highly centralized with teachers being hired by representative Boards of Education. Hogarth (1991) further contends that husbands and wives became more isolated from each other and their offspring because of the demand of a two income family. Children ceased to be active members of the economic unit and learners in the adult world.

An excellent overview of the three decades since 1960 is offered in Hogarth's article (1991) on the historical perspective of current adolescent problems. He contends that the advent of television and its impersonal and overpowering presence instilled a demand for material goods to fill the void resulting from the loss of personal interaction and isolation from family adults. Various rights movements like civil, handicapped,



prisoners, children, and women have also affected family life. The Vietnam War, of course, dominated American life for several years, thus adding to the strain. Protest movements against the war and multiple social abuses resulted in the review, examination, and rejection-at times-of American values. The individual self became the focus rather than a commitment to family, work, and school. Other factors such as birth control pills, legalized abortion, and the extensive use of illegal mood-altering drugs by all social-economic levels of society have created tremendous hazards and pitfalls for the pre-teen, and teen student. Unfortunately, individual and family responsibilities were not stressed, along with the heavy emphasis on the rights and privileges of self. The ever growing at-risk population has resulted from the combination of these factors.

According to Helge (1991), two thirds of America's schools are rural, and rural schools contain higher percentages of students who are at-risk than do non-rural schools. Rural communities have a disproportionate percentage of poor children. These areas contain Hispanic and other non-English speaking groups, as well as African American and Native American minorities. Olson (1987) states that over 25% of American high school seniors do not graduate and a high percentage of these graduates need remedial reading and writing activities. The dropout rate for many small rural schools may reach 40% to 50% compared to a national average of almost 20%, according to Phelps and Prock (1991). Rural residents have twice the possibility as their non-rural countrymen to be poor. Fewer social services are available for the rural at-risk student. The following headings offered by Helge (1991), currently categorize academically/socially at-risk students:

Substance abuser

Those experiencing depression, suicide attempts, and/or low self esteem

Victims of child abuse (physical, emotional, verbal, or sexual)

Children living in poverty

Children of an alcoholic or substance abuser

Children of illiterate backgrounds

Children in migrant families

Sexually active/pregnant students

Children involved in crime

Children from minority and poor backgrounds

Various studies have found that most students with disabilities also have another of the at-risk conditions listed above. Olson (1991) contends that although the national dropout rate is 25%, it is 36% for students with disabilities. In his research, Hedge (1991) suggests rural areas face a mountain of obstacles because of the square mileage of townships, scattered and diverse populations, inadequate services lacking the trained personnel, specialized facilities and equipment, and remote, isolated conditions. The very cultural nature of a small rural community in which the independence of each family and its individual members comes first is often a hindrance to the delivery of educational health, and social services. Family counseling and psychological and social services are limited or absent altogether in many isolated and impoverished school districts. Even recreational activities are curtailed, and the television becomes the focus of leisure activities.

Helge (1991) further contends that many at-risk students have been inappropriately classified as special education students due to the emotional turmoil in their lives that affects behavior and academic achievement. At-risk students pose a great challenge since two-thirds of all American schools are rural and the majority of unserved and under served children with disabilities are not being identified. There is less media coverage and less attention to funding needs by the state and national governments. Intervention for the needs of these children before their problems and situations grow beyond their control is absolutely a priority for every school district. Schools, whose primary function is the education of all American youth, have become the only national agencies capable of dispensing social services directly to students. As a result, schools are uniquely placed to meet young people's needs. Teachers are able to detect the early warning signs of problems that can be addressed promptly before escalation. Effective support can be provided in the context of continuing teacher-student relationships in familiar surroundings. This will reduce absenteeism and increase the possibility of graduation. Each school should survey and analyze data about their own population. No universal at-risk program fits all contexts, and responses must be designed at the local level to meet these identified students' needs.

According to the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI, 1995), although communicating with other schools may sometime prove helpful, each district must have its own locally designed system. Each school needs to state its own objectives and design an education plan explicitly for those students at risk of educational failure. This plan should integrate all the related aspects of school activity and improve the education opportunities available for these students. School responses should aim to give

all at-risk students the extra academic help and social support they need to improve their overall performance, while coordinating information and staff input effectively to continuously adjust the program for the needs of the individual learner.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 1996) states that the needs and problems of this age group are very complex, requiring assistance from a wide range of professionals. Interventions must focus on integrating and coordinating support from the school, the family, and the community to answer the needs of the students. Encouragement of full participation by each of these groups will produce the best possible results for each student.

Hillard (1989) states that students who are placed at risk because of poverty, race, ethnicity, language, or other factors are rarely well served by their schools. These students frequently attend schools where they are placed into substandard courses and programs with low expectations for learning. Much of the curriculum and instruction provided to educationally disadvantaged students assumes that academic skills are hierarchical in nature. According to Means & Knapp (1991), the assumption is that students must acquire the basics of vocabulary and phonics before they are capable of reading critically or reading for comprehension. Palincsar & Klenk (1991) contends that cognitive research; however, on reading comprehension has demonstrated that students can acquire comprehension skills well before they are good decoders of the printed word.

Over the years teachers have repeatedly emphasized the acquisition of basic skills for at-risk students. When computers are available for serving at-risk students, drill and practice programs on basic skills tend to be utilized. These applications of technology have limited benefits for these students.

An education plan for students at risk should show the process for identifying at-risk students as well as the anticipation responses to their needs as a group and as individuals. It should show how a school:

Assists the entry of students to school

Monitors student performance and identifies those needing help

Modifies curriculum delivery where necessary to improve learning

Ensures access to a range of personal guidance and support services

Provides suitable alternative learning programs

Fosters relationship with parents and the community

Monitors the outcomes for students and continues to improve program coordination and effectiveness.

Teachers have long emphasized the great importance of home and school cooperation to improve the cohesiveness between the education environments provided by the school and the attitudes and expectations of the students who are educationally at risk. Close professional links between a middle school and its contributing school or schools ease the information sharing in ways that benefit teachers, students, and parents. Schools must have working partnerships that allow the easy facilitation of information concerning at-risk students. This will allow teachers to adapt the curriculum and make learning relevant to student needs.

Various factors influence the ease with which students adapt to a receiving school. These factors include:

The relationships of the receiving school and contributing schools

Practical arrangements made for student enrollment

Provisions for student profiling and placement

The structuring of groups

Provision for continuity and integration

Curriculum workshops shared by both receiving and sending schools foster closer interaction between teachers. They also increase the flow of information concerning student needs on formal and informal levels.

Rural communities should communicate with parents for enrolling welcoming students. All principals and staff should arrange to meet with parents and students at the contributing schools. The ease that students experience when adjusting to new environments contribute to a working relationship between the student and the school.

A system for profiling and placement of students varies according to district and school. Published standardized tests and one of the school's designs may also be used to identify at-risk students. Armed with this information, the school may then put their at-risk programs in place with a selection of academic and social modifications utilized to support the individual students.

According to psychologist Sylvia B. Rimm (1997), underachievement is a discrepancy between a child's school performance and some index of the child's ability. If children are not working to their ability, they are underachieving.

Rimm (1997) further states that the underachievers sitting in American classrooms are capable of A's and B's but have report cards with D's and F's. The work they produce is usually incomplete or done in a careless manner. If completed, the assignment is often forgotten or lost. Some underachievers engage in a constant battle with their teachers openly refusing to complete their work. Others are often blamed for

their problems. Teachers, sibling, parents and sometimes even outside forces may be used as an excuse for incomplete assignments. Excuses are caused by two main issues. Internal focus of control is missing in these children and they function poorly in competition. Underachievers have a missed connection between effort and outcome. They have not learned about hard work which is necessary for success. Rimm (1997) maintains:

These underachievers are often magical in their thinking. They expect to be anointed to fame and fortune. They want to be professional football players even when they have never played football; they strum the guitar hoping their unique sound will be discovered by a passing talent scout. They know that they're smart because they've been told that by almost everyone. They just don't know how to be productively smart. If they put forth effort, they no longer have an excuse to protect their fragile self-concepts. They've defined smart as "easy" and everything that is difficult threatens their sense of being smart. The competition problem is less obvious because underachievers often declare that they are good sports. Their behavior reveals that losing experiences make them feel like losers. In order to avoid losing, they choose only activities or interests at which they are unique or best; but, when they hit the proverbial "wall," they quit, drop out, or choose something else (pp. 18-19).

Home and school causes of underachievement usually occur in tandem.

Rimm (1997) states over empowerment and "adultization" can be important causes, especially for first and only children, children in single-parent households, or children of difficult divorces. Gifted children are also at risk of being given too much power too

soon. Early health problems may also be a risk factor. Peer relationships can also be responsible for underachievement. Informal family nicknames, such as “the smart one,” can create competitive pressures. In addition, parental disrespect for school effectively destroys a teacher’s power to instruct.

According to Rimm (1997), underachievement may be reversed. She suggests a three pronged approach known as the Trifocal Model that focuses on the child, the parents, and the school. The six step model includes assessment, communication with parent and child, identification of the child’s profile, changing parent and teacher expectations, and home and school modifications and strategies.

Rimm (1997) contends that many parents and teachers report success by following this model with problems being corrected and improvement in the child’s achievement. This model is most effective when there is strong cooperation between parents and teachers. The strategies offered teachers include teaching to multiple learning styles about challenge, competition, cooperation, and acceptance of criticism. Intrinsic motivation, a student-teacher alliance, concentration techniques, anti-arguing routines, and the existence of an audience are of importance to an underachieving child. Suggestions for teachers include the utilization of the youngster’s academic strengths and the use of anti-arguing strategies. Other strategies include building study routines, bedtime and morning independence routines, organizational and attention techniques and united parenting, as well as open parental respect and support for teachers and schools. Rimm (1997) strongly supports effective modeling of appropriate behaviors by parents as one of the best ways to boost a youngster’s achievement. In addition, achievement and self-confidence are the result of struggle, and parents must explain and model this reality.



The author stresses that children are able to learn a healthy work ethic from parents who have a realistic set of expectations. A mutual respect between teachers and parents, who model and encourage resilience to the face of adversity, will teach that achievement can be reached. Common sense is much encouraged by Rimm (1997) who states that parents and teachers must accept their responsibilities for their choice of leadership roles.

A clinical social worker, Frieman (1997), maintains that family problems, especially divorce, have a profound effect on all children who react with a multitude of powerful emotions. Among these emotions are anger, anxiety, abandonment, loneliness, a feeling of being out of control, or overburdened at the prospect of having to assume some of the responsibilities of an absent parent. Teachers and principals are able to take steps both directly and indirectly to lessen the potential of devastating effects of separation and divorce on children, thus encouraging them to deal with their feelings. In addition, both parents should remain committed to their child's schooling.

Frieman (1997) reported that for younger children, the main task is to enable them to understand what is happening and to give them permission as well as the skills to deal with the feelings that result from family breakups. Teachers should be quick to respond in a supportive manner once the child provides an opening. Younger children often act out, seeking attention in socially unacceptable ways. They exhibit behaviors that interfere with their learning and usually disrupt the activities of the entire class. Others withdraw or exhibit a passive facade, seeming preoccupied with no interest in school. Many depressed youngsters contemplate suicide.

Frieman (1997) continues that even without a plan, teachers should be alert, taking seriously any student's verbalization of ending their problems by not being here or

that the world is better off without them. Students should be referred to the appropriate school personnel or to the nearest crisis center or other mental health agency. According to Frieman (1997), the disenfranchised parent should also be included by the school. Nonresidential parents are frequently excluded from the child's life by the ex-spouses. Teachers can send all parent communication to both homes, invite both parents to teacher conferences, even if two conferences must be involved and keep both parents informed concerning schoolwork and assignments. This includes long range tasks that necessitate weekend assignments or projects so that the non-custodial parent can integrate the activity into the weekend. Schools can also employ school counselors who can conduct individual and group therapy sessions and reach out to all mental health facilities and community groups that are involved with parents. In addition, the school can conduct parenting seminars hosted by various local groups. In-service training for teachers should be organized around those topics that most affect children in distress.

According to the Director of Formative Research Catherine Lewis and Research Associate Ineko Tsuchida (1998), Japanese elementary schools are not the academic pressure cookers of media lore, but lively friendly places devoted to the three C's: connection, character, and content. Japan has a national Course of Study for elementary schools which has many goals related to children's friendships, belonging, and social development. Moral development is divided into four categories:

1. Things related primarily to oneself
2. Things related primarily to others
3. Things related primarily to nature and the sublime
4. Things related primarily to group life and society

The Japanese elementary school emphasizes close human connections, student, social and ethical development, and a depth of curriculum that is far different from the American elementary school. Twice daily class meetings, class committees, and a rotating system of leadership allow all students starting at Grade 1 to shape goals and participate in class discussions.

Character development requires values. In a previous study of 19 Japanese first grade classrooms, Lewis (1998) revealed that friendship, cooperation, responsibility, doing one's best, and maintaining safety and health dominate in every school. These values advocating the Course of Study for elementary schools are to be part of the fiber of all daily activities.

Lewis and Tsuchida (1998) further states rewards and punishments are usually avoided in the Japanese classroom. Individual class goals are formulated by the students in each classroom with the intention of giving them a sense and a pride of ownership. Then individual goals, written out by hand and often accompanied by a drawing, are prominently displayed. Reflection on these goals is done during regularly assigned time set aside for this specific activity and is known as bansei. As one goal is achieved, another goal is developed. Content in the subject area is kept to a minimum and is not to be in excess of the standards required by the national Course of Study.

In their findings, Lewis and Tsuchida (1998) stated that one third of all elementary instructional hours are required to art, music, physical education, home making, and to special school activities such as daily class meetings, school wide meetings, school festivals, and field trips. The whole person is to be developed and nurtured in order to develop a well rounded person and citizen. The Japanese intend to

create cooperative citizens of their children and to have a deep commitment to the school. Junior and senior high schools have a much heavier emphasis on conformity and exam focused education, but the roots of their achievement, nationally and internationally, are found in the elementary grades.

American schools deal with many problems and will have to examine how they will help produce reasonable individuals and citizens who will maintain and continue the ideals of the American Revolution and subsequent democratic practices and form of government. The agent for this continued army of citizenry is the individual local public school district. An example of a local school district that has addressed several of these aforementioned problems is Pittsgrove Township whose Klark's Kids program offers solutions and alternatives to at-risk students in Grade 7 and 8 in an after school setting on Tuesday and Thursday. This program centers on the academic and social needs of the student. The main objectives are to assist the students in their problematic areas that include emotional, organizational, behavioral, and academic. The psychology behind this type of program centers around the fact that students are more easily influenced by their peers than by teachers or parents. According to a recent study regarding pupil achievement, the influence of friends on school performance is more substantial than the influence of parents (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, as cited in Leslie (1996). Does the Klark's Kids program help to improve the academic achievement of the identified at-risk students in Grades 7 & 8 of the Pittsgrove Township Middle School in Salem County, New Jersey? This writer's objective is to provide purposeful information to the aforementioned question.

## Chapter 3

### Design of the Study

#### General Description of the Research Design

In observing and assessing the effectiveness of the Klark's Kids program for at-risk students in Grades 7 and 8 at the Pittsgrove Township Middle School, a qualitative action research design was utilized. The results of this study were meant to serve the Pittsgrove Township School District in providing at-risk students with the opportunity to experience higher self esteem and academic improvement through the Klark's Kids program. The intern was an active participant in the program as both observer and tutor for sixty percent of the sessions. In addition, the intern was studying the effectiveness of the program in its entirety.

The objective of this program was to decrease the number of students considered for retention. It would give students the opportunity to work with adults in a non-threatening situation as well as encouraging peer tutoring. This study would help the intern to apply effective strategies for implementing and assessing school programs. The utilization of the Klark's Kids program was to assist all at-risk students in Grades 7 and 8 who were exhibiting problems in the area of social and/or academic development. The intent of this program was that the students would exhibit improved report cards and behavioral reports, thereby decreasing the number of retentions.

## Development and Design of the Research Instrumentation

To gather the quantitative data, the intern accessed information through the school's databases. Student report cards were used to identify candidates for the program. Staff input assisted in the selection process. Criteria included failing grades, poor attendance, and a general change in attitude and performance of the students. Information regarding all facets of the program were recorded by the intern. Individual student progress was analyzed and documented on a weekly basis for the duration of the study. Peer tutors were selected according to their willingness and potential. These tutors were not required to be academically exceptional students. One of the precepts was to utilize students from diverse backgrounds and varying abilities with an interest in helping others. Peer tutors were supervised weekly by the intern to assure their competence and continued interest. The position of peer tutor has now emerged as a popular activity for the students.

Other instruments included:

1. Parent/Guardian Letter (Appendix A)
2. Daily Job Chart (Appendix B)
3. Weekly Progress Report for Parents (Appendix C)

A letter was issued to the parent/guardian of each identified at-risk student. The letter introduced the Klark's Kids program and offered an invitation for the student to attend. A daily job chart, which consisted of schoolwork/homework assignments, was signed by student, teacher, and parent. The weekly progress reports were completed by teachers and sent home for parent signature. This report included remarks on attitude, behavior, and

assignments which must be returned to the teacher. These instruments will offer insight to the intern regarding the effectiveness of the Klark's Kids program.

#### Description of the Population

The intern chose as the population of the study, all at-risk students in Grades 7 and 8 enrolled in the Klark's Kids program at the Pittsgrove Township Middle School during the 1998-99 school year. A rural district with low to middle socioeconomic standing, the Pittsgrove Township School District was classified as a "C-D" district factor group with A being the lowest and J the highest. These at-risk students were listed according to academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs. The academic component was further divided according to the number of subject failures for each student.

#### Description of Data Collection Approach

As a result of the June 1998 retention list, a final population was determined for placement into the Klark's Kids program. Letters were sent to the families of these students introducing the program and inviting the students to attend. Parents were required to return the letters accepting or rejecting their child's participation in the Klark's Kids program. In October 1998, mid term progress reports were evaluated and the list of possible participants was compiled. Families of these newly identified at-risk students were then notified and the same procedure followed. When report cards were issued, the identification and follow-up procedures continued. This was an on-going process maintained throughout the year.

All parent/guardian letters were collected and filed as evidence that all at-risk students were offered the opportunity to attend the Klark's Kids program. The daily job

charts were used for organizing and focusing the student on the completion of all school and homework assignments. The weekly progress report was an important means of communication between teacher and parent. This report allowed the school the opportunity to convey to the parent the academic and behavioral achievement on the part of their child.

Student report cards issued in June 1999 were analyzed to ascertain the effectiveness of the program. They were utilized as a basis to make decisions on needed additions and/or deletions for the following year's program.

#### Data Analysis Plan

The intern analyzed data on a continual basis. Instruments of measurement included grades, standardized test scores, grade point averages, and attendance. Previous records regarding achievement, attendance, and discipline served as a baseline for comparisons. Descriptive data in terms of numbers and percentages were compiled and analyzed. Problem areas were identified and recommendations made. Finally, summative assessment was made regarding the effectiveness of the program. The intern's reflective journal served as a record of participation in the assessment process. This study was an important contribution to the students' academic achievement and the district's educational objectives.



## Chapter 4

### Presentation of the Research Findings

The Klark's Kids program has been in existence in the Pittsgrove Township Middle School Annex for the past five years. This voluntary program, offered to seventh and eighth grade at-risk students, is scheduled to meet twice weekly, Tuesdays and Thursdays, with some exceptions such as school closings due to inclement weather, holidays, and early dismissals. From the start of the program on September 22, 1998, through February 18, 1999, twenty meetings took place at the Pittsgrove Township Middle School Annex with a total of 47 students attending for a various number of sessions.

The Pittsgrove Township Middle School Annex has a total enrollment of 310 seventh and eighth grade students. Initially, in September of 1998, thirty-three students were identified as candidates for this program utilizing the retention list of seventh and eighth graders from the previous year. A letter was issued to the parent/guardian of each identified at-risk student. The letter introduced the Klark's Kids program and offered an invitation for the student to attend. Only five or six students attended the two September sessions due to the voluntary nature of the program. In October, mid-term progress reports were issued and reviewed for the purpose of identifying new at-risk students. A new list of 42 students was compiled with 14 seventh graders and 28 eighth graders being identified. Of the 42 identified students, only 18 from the 1998 retention list had attended

with any regularity from September until the middle of November. The parent/guardian notification procedure was repeated for the 24 newly identified students. Attendance increased with 12 to 15 students present per session.

Retention reductions remain the long range goal of the Klark's Kids program. Immediate goals include the appropriate use of the school agenda book, organizational skills development and maintenance, the assumption of personal responsibility, and positive growth self esteem. To accomplish these goals attendance is the key. Attendance, unfortunately, was not as consistent as hoped for by the staff.

In November, at the end of the first marking period, the identification process was repeated. The intern concentrated on seventh and eighth grade students who received one or more failing grades on their report cards. Sixty-six students were identified as being program candidates. The number of students was evenly distributed between the two grade levels. Once again the procedure was repeated. Parents of newly identified students were contacted, inviting their children to attend the program. Those students already in the program, who continued to fail, were conferenced by the school counselor. Parents were called for further conferencing when it was deemed necessary. Student participation, unfortunately, remained nearly the same with 12 to 15 students attending the sessions. Attendance was often sporadic with a student present for one meeting and not returning for the next several sessions. This pattern of poor attendance would cause the student to revert to being unprepared for class and having incomplete assignments.

Twenty sessions were offered between September 20, 1998, and February 18, 1999. The breakdown for student attendance is as follows: 14 students attended one session; 7 students, two; 4 students, three; 9 students, four; 6 students, five;

1 student, six; 2 students, seven; 1 student, eight; 2 students, nine; and 1 student, 13 sessions. This information is recorded in Table One.

Students	Sessions Attended
14	1
7	2
8	3
9	4
6	5
1	6
2	7
1	8
2	9

Teachers were contacted regarding a student's progress in their class and were urged to encourage those students who had failing grades for the marking period to attend the twice weekly sessions. Throughout the interim between the first and second marking periods, these students were closely monitored. Reminders about the program were announced on the PA system at the end of the day. Teachers, support staff, and the school counselor continually urged those students identified at-risk to attend the program on a consistent basis. Enrollment; however, changed very little. Some students just refused to attend and, without parental consent, these students could not be required to stay after the school day concluded.

By the end of the second marking period, which coincided with the conclusion of the project, report cards revealed an even larger number of at-risk students. The intern compiled second marking period grades of D and/or F to access placement into the program. The number of students now rose from 66 failures to 84 failures. First marking period saw 6 failures in health, 10 failures in math, 10 failures in science, 10 failures in social studies, 9 failures in writing, 14 failures in literature and 7 failures in physical education. Second marking period saw 11 failures in health, 15 failures in math, science and social studies, 7 failures in writing and physical education, and 13 failures in literature. Though not addressed in the first marking period, the grade of D was tallied in the second marking period. The D's totaled 41 with 5 in health, 4 in math, 8 in science, 6 in social studies, 7 in writing, 6 in literature, and 5 in physical education. A comparison table is given below in Table Two.

	First Marking Period	Second Marking Period	
Subject	F = 66	D = 41	F = 84
Health	6	5	11
Math	10	4	15
Science	10	8	15
Social Studies	10	6	15
Writing	9	7	7
Literature	14	6	13
Physical Education	7	5	7

Among the students in the Klark's Kids program, 13 maintained a grade of C or better in all subjects. Three students maintained their averages somewhat, in that they each received no F's in the first marking period and received D's in two subjects. Four students showed improvement. Student 1 had no F's in the first marking period and received a D in one subject the second marking period. Students 2, 3, and 4 had an F in one subject in the first marking period with students 2 and 3 receiving no D's or F's and student 4 receiving three D's. Six students improved somewhat. Student 1 received an F in one subject the first marking period and had only a D in one subject the second marking period. Student 2 received an F in one subject in the first marking period and one F and four D's in the second marking period. Student 3 received three F's in the first marking period and three F's and three D's in the second marking period. Whereas one of his F's rose to a D, student 3 managed to fail another subject. Student 4 received four F's in the first marking period and three F's and two D's in the second marking period. One F rose to a grade of C; however, the three other grades of F's remained. Student 5 received five F's in the first marking period and three F's and one D in the second. Three F's remained the same, one F rose to a D and one F rose to a C or better. Student 6 had six F's in the first marking period and three F's and one D in the second. Two grades of F rose to a C or better and one F rose to a D. Six individuals declined from receiving no F's in the first marking period to F's and D's in the second. Students 1, 2, and 3 received one F each. Student 1 received one F and two D's. The last group of students received up to six F's each on their report card for the second marking period indicating more frequent one to one attention.

Improvement in grades appeared to be closely tied to frequent attendance. Since the statistics from the district were only concerned with the number of D's and F's received by the students, no statistics were available for grades of C or better. A few youngsters were able to improve in some subjects but were unable to transfer their skills to subjects other than the one or two upon which they focused.

A majority of the students displayed some improvement which supports the stance that the Klark's Kids program be retained. It is obvious to the intern that some modifications are needed in the program such as requiring attendance to be mandatory rather than voluntary, increasing the number of sessions from two times a week to possibly three or four sessions a week, and instituting more parental involvement. For those students who are persistent failures, the establishment of an alternative school would provide an option not available at the present time in the Pittsgrove Township School District. The addition of several parenting/study skill workshops for the parents of these students should be considered. Though not an instant success, the Klark's Kids program has demonstrated that it has made an impact of some significance on the academic progress of a number of Pittsgrove Township students and is here to stay as one of the avenues for academic improvement in the district.

One very encouraging outcome of the program was evident in the successes of the peer mentoring group. The student peers offered their time and abilities freely to any youngster in need of help as well as to the intern and staff member overseeing the program. The peer tutors were excellent role models for their fellow students, exhibiting planning and organizational skills which they were quite willing to share. They worked for no discernible reward other than of being a good neighbor and citizen, taking no

tangible profit from anyone. They will; however, receive a certificate of achievement from the intern and Dr. Clark.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions and Implications

#### Major Conclusions and Corresponding Implications

Conclusions are oftentimes the best part of research. They frequently offer ideas and avenues not previously entertained as possibilities by either the writer or the reader. After studying the Klark's Kids program this year, and after discussions with numerous staff members as well as the school counselor, the middle school principal, and the assistant superintendent, several conclusions have been drawn from the research and the intern offers the following recommendations for future years.

Mandatory attendance for all potential failures in the seventh and eighth grades must be put into effect so that the future dropout will be redirected towards a successfully completed school year and a successfully completed course of study, resulting in the attainment of a high school diploma. The holders of these diplomas will then have the skills necessary for the entrance into other programs as well as the possibility/probability of the successful attainment of licenses, seals and other certificates. Possession of the latter items will enable the holders to maintain jobs, build careers, pay taxes, and become self-sufficient citizens.

Occasional attendance in the Klark's Kids program did not result in great improvement. Attending sessions sporadically made no difference to students who were failing most or all of their major academic subjects. These students displayed no



academic progress and held no hope of passing for the school year. Retention will only embitter these students more and further entrench them in the cycle of poor study skills, poor work habits, and academic failure. When a student fails in the American public school system, blame should not be placed primarily on the school, the teacher, or the subject matter. Fault and the assumption of responsibility must be placed in the hands of the individuals who did not choose to take advantage of every situation and instrument offered by the public school district to improve their educational experiences and academic successes. Allowed to flaunt a pseudo-sophistication encouraged by American pop culture, all students should be allowed and encouraged to accept the praise for successful efforts as well as the blame for unsuccessful activities. Certain choices will now have to be made for those students who cannot manage their time, abilities, and/or responsibilities. Education, like citizenship, is a privilege. It must be valued and honored by the best efforts of all who benefit from the tax-based public education.

Parents are to be held responsible for their actions in contributing to their child's failures. Students who are failing and who resist the district's directives for academic achievement are not being guided properly by those adults responsible for the student's academic well being at home. It will become necessary to establish a series of parent conferences as well as parent workshops, geared to giving these guardians and care givers the tools which will enable them to be satisfactory promoters of good educational habits and to assume the proper adult role in their homes. Parents of at-risk youngsters must present a united front with the school district. Should some individual parent or guardian refuse to meet with teachers and/or administrators, the district must exercise the available laws to bring these parents into the fold. Court appearances and fines will be

needed initially, but with persistence, fairness, and consistency, even those who are recalcitrant will be forced to present a united front with the district program and staff.

Resistive parents are in reality enablers to the poor academic behaviors of their offspring who are far too young to be making decisions that affect their lives. These individuals must be offered workshops on parenting skills and given the opportunity to attend family academic counseling sessions with positive feedback on an ongoing year round basis. In addition, firm steps must be taken for those parents who become lax in their support of the after school program.

Teachers of all Klark's Kids must be involved in a weekly ongoing academic evaluation. The utilization of a check off sheet or e-mail memos should also be mandated. All items should be filed in the students' portfolios. Feedback must be specific and timely for the greatest good. Even a voice mail arrangement could be established in case an emergency should arise. The district must make use of all technological advances available to provide the most up-to-date feedback for all concerned in the program. Teachers should be encouraged to become involved in the program by promoting drop-in visits, volunteering to teach a specific skill with reimbursement, and to give as much feedback as possible to help identify a student's area of need. Most students will benefit from a strong structured, well organized program. For any student who cannot or will not adjust to this program, an alternative school must be devised.

An alternative school, housed within the middle school building, with classes starting at 3:00 p.m. and ending at 8:15 p.m., would be the final component of planning for the coming school year. Designed for 25 to 35 students who need intense supervised structure for all aspects of academic study, removal from the least restrictive environment

to a more restrictive one would be the next step. This school would have its own administrator, supervisor, core of six to eight teachers who would give instruction in all academic areas as well as health, physical education, technology, and the arts. A self-contained special education class would also be a necessity. A full time guidance counselor is an essential requirement. All staff should be there on a voluntary basis in that they would not be required to transfer from their day school schedule. All teachers would be offered the opportunity to work on a full or part time basis in this new venture before the district would seek outside personnel.

Various forms of structure and praise towards the student may be implemented here, borrowing ideas from similar programs and collecting additional suggestions from the district's own teachers as well as the alternative school staff. Students should be allowed to earn their way into the regular day school through academic and behavioral successes. Students should always be focused on goals.

Each student attending the alternative school will be subject to the same school rules and state regulations that are applied to all other students. There should be at least two or three buses and bus drivers involved in the program to provide home transportation. Behavior modification must be included along with academic modifications. Absenteeism must be cut to nothing, except for major illness or injury. Even home instructors for these particular students must be included in the planning, so that the student is never left as an isolate. Communication lines between teachers, students, administrators, support staff, and parents/guardians must be open and utilized on a constant and consistent basis. If these at-risk students should stumble or fall, the support system must go into action as quickly as possible to attempt to identify the

problem and offer constructive advice and support as needed. These conclusions do not intend to suggest that every student will emerge as a butterfly. Obviously, some will still continue to fail, but hopefully the district's losses should be cut significantly.

One final observation must be made here. The middle school level is not the only place that needs intensive therapeutic work. The high school would be the next target for implementation of an after school program as well as an alternative school. The same basic plan should be applied with the necessary changes made to accommodate the needs and aspirations of these older students. The final step in this particular three stage program is a modified version of the after school program for the elementary students with several summer activities to be designed for the specific needs of this age group.

#### Further Study

All of these programs will take time, staff, organizational planning, and money. Ongoing studies and evaluation of each level of these programs must be made on a regular basis, constantly gleaning the most practical ideas and activities for use in the program. Further study needs to be done in this school over the next consecutive years to determine both the long-term effects, and to ascertain if the number of retentions has decreased significantly due to attendance in the Klark's Kids Program. Also, further studies should be conducted using populations from other school districts that are utilizing an at-risk program to ascertain their level of success or problem areas.

#### Implications of the Study on the Intern's Leadership Development

This year's experiences as an intern in the school administration program have been both a challenge and a learning experience. As a result of completing this study as well as the internship, growth has been realized in the leadership competencies such as

the ability to contemplate, to plan, to organize, and to see a project through to successful completion with the support of an empowered staff of fellow professionals. As a part-time Klark's Kids assistant, the intern had the experience of observing the flaws in the program and determining a plan of action for the correction and improvement as well as the design and expansion of other programs. The intern was able to assume the roles and functions of school based management by becoming an integral part of the design and implementation of the program. The intern gained valuable experience by applying human relation skills in interacting effectively with students, teachers, and administrators. While functioning in the role as a Klark's Kids assistant, the intern was called upon to analyze and solve problems as they arose, using appropriate decision making techniques. The intern was also able to use conflict resolution techniques to assist students as needed.

As the last stable institution in this country, the public school is the final bulwark of a public non-sectarian influence and the upholder of our civil institutions as well as democracy itself. An old saying summarizes the situation well—all that democracy needs to fail is that good men do nothing. For American men and women teachers, the challenge is here. Public schools helped to build this country, and these same schools must again rise to this new challenge and repeat its earlier successes in a different format.

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Appendix A  
Parent Guardian Letter



*PITTSGROVE TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS  
718 CENTERTON ROAD, PITTSGROVE, NEW JERSEY 08318  
PITTSGROVE TOWNSHIP MIDDLE SCHOOL  
(SCHALICK ANNEX)  
(609) 358-7083*

*J. W. Fritz, Ed.D  
Principal*

*W. Roger Nelson, Ed. D.  
Vice Principal*

Dear Parent/Guardian:

During the last school year (97-98), your child had significant academic problems.

Klark's Kids is an after school program that meets on Tuesday and Thursday from 3 - 4 p.m. There will be a 4 o'clock bus. The program provides your child with an opportunity to gain skills and information that will enhance their day-to-day school work.

Please check your choice and sign below:

- I want my child to participate.**
- I do not want my child to participate.**

Yours in services,

---

Douglas Clark  
Guidance Counselor

---

Joann DeKatch  
Administrative Assistant

Appendix B  
Daily Job Chart

# DAILY JOB CHART

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

## DAILY SCHOOL WORK COMPLETED

\_\_\_\_\_ SEATWORK ASSIGNMENTS

\_\_\_\_\_ READING WORK

\_\_\_\_\_ MATH WORK

\_\_\_\_\_ LANGUAGE ARTS WORK

\_\_\_\_\_ SPELLING WORK

\_\_\_\_\_ SOCIAL STUDIES WORK

\_\_\_\_\_ SCIENCE WORK

\_\_\_\_\_ HEALTH WORK

HOMEWORK DATE \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I COMPLETED ALL OF MY HOMEWORK

\_\_\_\_\_ I DID NOT COMPLETE ALL OF MY HOMEWORK. I STILL  
OWE THE FOLLOWING WORK: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I WILL HAVE ALL OF MY WORK COMPLETED BY  
TOMORROW (DATE \_\_\_\_\_)

STUDENT SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

TEACHER SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

PARENT SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix C  
Weekly Progress Chart

**PITTSGROVE TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS**  
**718 B CENTERTON ROAD, PITTSGROVE, NEW JERSEY 08318**  
**PITTSGROVE TOWNSHIP MIDDLE SCHOOL**  
**(SCHALICK ANNEX)**

GUIDANCE OFFICE

1. To be signed by each teacher on Friday, and
2. Returned to Guidance on Monday after parents have examined & signed it.

WEEKLY PROGRESS REPORT

TEACHERS: Please report on the progress of \_\_\_\_\_  
in your course during the week of \_\_\_\_\_  
Your signature or initials under Assignments will signify  
that all work has been completed for the week.

	Attitude & Behavior	Assignments	Comments	Parent's Signature
Period 1				
Period 2				
Period 3				
Period 4				
Period 5				
Period 6				
Period 7				
Period 8				
Period 9				

## Biographical Data

Name	Joann DeKatch-Smith
High School	Bridgeton High School Bridgeton, NJ
Undergraduate	Bachelor of Arts Elementary Education Glassboro College Glassboro, NJ
Graduate	Master of Arts School Administration Rowan University Glassboro, NJ
Present Occupation	Elementary Teacher Pittsgrove Township School