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Redefining “At-Risk” to Meet the Needs of the Contemporary Classroom

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Educators face many challenges in the classroom. One of the most difficult challenges is structuring school success for students who do not meet the goals and objectives of the educational system. Enrollment of these students, generally referred to as "at-risk", has dramatically increased (more than 250%) over the past two decades (Franklin, 1994). In effort to find solutions, educators have employed various techniques and implemented several remediation programs to increase the academic success of these students. Some of these initiatives have been deemed successful, some not. Solutions become complicated and elusive particularly since there is no commonly supported definition of what "at-risk" means or which students' should be classified by this label. Frymier & Gansneder (1989) suggest that there are various degrees of “at-riskness”:

At-riskness is a function of what bad things happen to a child, how severe they are, how often they happen, and what else happens in the child's immediate environment. For example, a pregnant 14-year-old is at risk. But a pregnant 14-year-old who uses drugs, is even more at risk. And a pregnant 14-year-old who uses drugs, has been retained in grade, has missed 30 days of schools, and has a low self-esteem is still more seriously at risk (p. 142).

The authors also suggest that “at-risk” must not be used to identify any specific or particular type of student:

Children of all ages are at risk. A 6-year-old whose parents are in the throes of a divorce and who is doing poorly in school is at risk. A 17 year-old whose grades are good but who is deeply depressed because she just lost her boyfriend is also at risk. A 10-year-old whose brother dropped out of school a year ago and who father just lost his job is certainly at-risk (p. 142).

Educators have opposing opinions about the treatment of the term "at-risk". Some suggest that "at-risk" is the latest term for a familiar issue--children with school learning and behavioral difficulties (Bracey, 1997). Others argue that "at-risk" is different from previous definitions and ideas, for example, "at-risk" may also include children with high academic ability and also those from middle and upper socioeconomic families. These students were often excluded in earlier "at-risk" studies (Franklin, 1994).

Historical Overview

In the late 1800's, American educators referred to children who did not adjust to the academic and social demands of the public schools as backward or mentally deficient. Educators defined "backwardness" as "intellectually normal children whose school failure was the result of environmental deficits or cognitive dysfunctions of uncertain origins" (Franklin, 1994, p. 13). Deficit characteristics included the inability to speak English, poor self-concept, unsatisfactory school attendance, weak study skills, or failure to complete school requirements.

Educators, interested in this dilemma during this time, proposed numerous explanations of "backwardness". Some believed the problem was environmental; they concluded that children who lived in urban cities had an increased probability of "backwardness" due to the unlimited access to liquor, tobacco, cocaine, and gambling. Some educators considered "backwardness" to be a result of "unrestricted immigration". Franklin (1994) reported Chicago Superintendent William Bodine's 1905-conference address about this concern: The problem of unrestricted immigration...was allowing the entry into the county of 'illiterates' and others who would make 'undesirable citizens'. Such individuals...would not recognize the need to send their children to school" (p.14). Others considered backwardness to have been a medical problem related to brain damage, children that "exhibited inherent fundamental brain disturbance, sense defect, or

slow rate of development” (Franklin, 1994, p. 16). According to this definition, a portion of the brain had not fully matured in spite of the child’s normal physical development.

By mid-century, parents actively sought medical labels to clarify and identify their children’s learning conditions and support the need for additional educational services. Consequently, medical professionals established the term “brain injury”. Due to its complexity, however, this label did not help educators understand specifically why certain children were not learning. Thus, educators instituted the term “learning disability”, which provided a broader perspective of learning problems. It did not, however, provide specific details about various learning difficulties. As educators and medical specialists continued exploration for the perfect label, various terms such as dyslexia, character impulse disorder, and hyperkinetic behavior syndrome were began to be used interchangeably (Franklin, 1994). Additional labels included low achiever, underachiever, high risk, disadvantaged, mild-retardation, and education deprived (Smey-Richman, 1988). The usage of multiple labels, which referred to essentially the same problems, however, increased educators’ uncertainty about learning difficulties.

Traditional Utilization of “At-Risk”

The term at-risk often has various meanings. Traditionally, "at-risk" definitions are usually examined in three broad contexts: academic achievement, student motivation, and predicting risk.

Academic Achievement

The most prominent use of "at-risk" refers to students not succeeding academically in school. Students identified as low academic achievers are often one or more grade levels behind in basic reading, language, or mathematics skills (Reglin, 1993; Slavin, 1991). Deficiencies in these basic academic skills often interfere with further academic success, eventually creating a cycle of failure that usually result in school dropout (Swanson, 1991; Levin, 1988; Bracey, 1997, Taylor et al., 1997). Engelmann (1999) noted that students with academic difficulties usually enter the school year

substantially behind grade level. He suggested that it is nearly impossible for these students to complete the school year on grade level because these students would have to learn substantially more than the advantaged student within the academic school year.

Student Motivation

"At-risk" is sometimes used to reference student motivation or the amount of effort a student invests into the learning process. Unmotivated students usually have little or no desire to achieve neither for intrinsic nor extrinsic gratification (Chance, 1992). Research suggests that students are more motivated to attend and perform well in school when they do not perceive the relevance of learning activities and can connect the importance of the learning activity to their personal, family, and community lives outside of school (Reglin, 1993; Swanson, 1991). Another aspect of student motivation includes the presentation of classroom activities (Swanson, 1991). Boring and repetitive learning activities are of little value to unmotivated students and do not stimulate interest. Students often become more intrinsically motivated when they are engaged in learning activities that are fun, interesting, and relevant (Reglin, 1993; Chance, 1992; Montgomery & Rossi, 1994; Swanson, 1991).

Predicting "Risk"

Rightly or wrongly, some educators use "at-risk" to predict the future of a student's academic success or failure. Some empirical definitions attempt to identify and describe specific characteristics of students who are most likely to have academic difficulties, social difficulties, or both (Swanson, 1991; Slavin, 1991; Gordon & Yowell, 1994). Slavin (1998) suggests that based on certain "predicted values" educators could fairly predict which students would not graduate from high school by the third grade. Swanson (1991), however, disagreed and argued that it is impossible for educators to predict absolute academic outcomes because this would suggest that particular students are destined for academic success or failure.

Redefining “At-Risk”

Rossi (1994) suggested that initially educators were comfortable using “at-risk” to refer to children and youth who were experiencing difficulties in school, but that now this reference is troubling because it has become almost standard practice to refer particularly to Black or Hispanic children only. In agreement, Freeberg (1987) states “The danger of this is that the terms ‘at-risk’ and ‘minority’ are rapidly becoming synonymous, perpetuating racial stereotypes that have handicapped minorities for decades” (p. 5M).

Natriello et al. (1990) suggested that misuse of the “at-risk” label may lead to the derogatory mis-labeling of students who will be exposed to lower teacher expectations throughout their school careers. This usage of “at-risk” implies that certain children are inherently “at-risk”. Rossi (1994) concluded that no child is inherently “at-risk”, but placed into “at-risk” situations by external disadvantages: “If these conditions were to be eliminated or their effects were to be significantly reduced, the children in question would no longer properly be termed ‘at-risk’” (Rossi, 1994).

Frymier and Gansneder conducted *The Phi Delta Kappa Study of Students at-Risk* in 1989, which included 22, 018 subjects in 218 schools. The authors asserted that children are “at-risk” if they are likely to fail—either in school or life.

If a student fails a course in school, is retained a grade, or drops out of school, that student is at risk. Likewise, if a child uses drugs, has been physically or sexually abused, or has contemplated or attempted suicide, that child is also at risk. Failure, in school or in life, is evidence that a [student] is ‘at risk’ (p. 142).

Pianta and Walsh (1996) suggest that the term "at-risk" represents an important change from traditional descriptors and definitions. "To the extent that 'at risk' remains simply another descriptor for the children of the poor, the term remains an invidious label that clouds discourse, masks contemporary realities, and obfuscates efforts to address these realities". "At-risk" should not be used casually to imply characteristics or to predict the success or failure of a specific population of students. Nor should the term refer to the process of a circumstance causing an outcome. The term “at-risk” should be used to

identify relationships between specific cause and effect factors (Knapp, 1995). The causes, or risk factors, can be any event, condition, or characteristic that *increases* the probability of the occurrence of an identified outcome (Eaton, 1981). For example, reading below grade level, drug abuse, poverty, and teenage pregnancy may be risk factors of academic failure. These risk factors may *increase* the probability of academic failure, however they do not necessarily cause the academic failure (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). Once risk factors are identified, they may be classified as social risk factors or academic risk factors.

Social Risk Factors

Two major influential and pervasive social risk factors include poverty (Slavin, 1998; Edelman, 1993; Means, Chelemer, & Knapp, 1991) and homelessness (Reed & Sautter, 1990; Rafferty, 1998; Quint, 1994). Additional social factors may include, but are not limited to, family problems, drug association, physical or mental abuse, neglect, negative school climate, community disorganization, and limited accessibility to basic human necessities (Sell & Shepard, 1998). Unfortunately, exposure to such compromising conditions interferes with students' academic and social development, growth and maturation into responsible adults (Taylor et. al, 1997). A recent social risk factor, which was often excluded from earlier "at-risk" studies, includes children with high academic ability and also those from middle and upper socioeconomic status families (Metz, 1993; Frymier & Gansneder, 1989, Franklin, 1994). Metz (1993) suggests that because these students do not need physical resources such as clothes, food, and shelter, they are often not recognized as a possible "at-risk" population.

Academic Risk Factors

A major academic risk factor is school readiness (Graue, 1993; Kagan, 1990; Ramey & Ramey, 1994). It is imperative that positive educational experiences take place in the home, school, or the community during the formative years (Natriello et. al, 1990). These experiences become "building blocks" for basic learning competencies required for

academic success. Students from homes or environments that do not nurture these essential experiences often enter school unprepared to meet academic goals and expectations of the educational system (Dryfoos, 1991; Pianta & Walsh, 1996).

An additional academic risk factor may include academic retention (Swanson, 1991; Natriello et. al., 1990; Bracey, 1997). Research supports findings that school dropout increases dramatically with low grades, academic subject failure, and grade level retention. Frymier & Gansneder (1989) suggest that retention is the only risk factor that schools impose on students rather than something that happens to students as a result of where they live, what their parents are like, or how they feel about themselves. Retention has many negative effects including the probability of school dropout increases more than 50% and academic achievement decreases substantially once students experience grade retention. Contrary to these findings, approximately 48% of teachers and 26% of principals view retention as helpful (Frymier & Gansneder, 1989). Tobias (1989) contended that students would not remain in school when they constantly receive the message that they are bad students. Swanson (1991) suggested that grade retention negatively effects both the student and society: “society has to pay for an extra year of school that does more harm than good, and the student has been turned off to academic learning and waste their time or may drop out of school...the price for the extra years in school is in the billions, but the price for the wasted potential is incalculable” (p. 60).

Conclusion

In order to reach and understand “at-risk” students, educators must be compassionate about the students' world and their personal situations. We must become compassionate toward family issues, mental or physical difficulties, and academic and learning deficiencies, which may not be familiar to us personally. We must not generalize at-risk students inaccurately or inappropriately based on preconceived perceptions and judgments. And ultimately, we must remember that at-risk students are

not only those in urban/inner-city schools, of low socioeconomic status, and/or who are of minority or ethnic backgrounds.

Much work remains to be done before “at-risk students” become “unlabeled students” in our schools. The foundation of this change may have to begin with perceptions and attitudes educators possess, resulting from our limited personal human experiences. As educators, we must keep in the forefront of our minds that no child is inherently at-risk, but placed into at-risk situations by external disadvantages: “if these conditions were to be eliminated or their efforts were to be significantly reduced, the children in question would no longer properly be termed at-risk” (Rossi, 1994). Therefore, the task for music educators becomes to eliminate those conditions. If we support the concept that at-risk conditions are *obtained* and *not inherited*, then there is much hope for working with these students.

In conclusion, Knapp (1995) illustrated through an analogy the desired response that educators should have toward “at-risk” students: *Educators to school failure*, as *medicine* is to *disease*. As medical professionals search for a disease’s cure, initial emphasis is placed on patterns of the disease’s occurrence and the factors that influence the occurrence. Like medical professionals, educators should initially focus upon patterns of school failure and the factors, either social, academic or both, that influence its occurrence.

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