

Children and Youth at Risk:
From Understanding to Intervention

by

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Abstract

At-risk youngsters confront a myriad of problems in school programs and in mainstream society. Yet, existing remediation programs have been geared toward the ineffective traditional identification procedures, inappropriate assessment tools, negative labels, and poor instructional programs that have proven to be unproductive in helping these youngsters maximize their potential. Today, there are more questions than answers. For instance, who are these at-risk youngsters? How are they similar or different from other children and youth? Why have band-aid approaches to their unique problems failed? What can general and special educators, parents, and community leaders do to maximize the full potential of our youth? In other words, what model can best address the needs of children and youth? This article responds to these critical questions and recommends a comprehensive support model that buttresses collaborative multifaceted interventions.

Every 8 seconds, a child drops out of school; every 26 seconds, a child runs away from home; every 47 seconds, a child is abused or neglected, every 67 seconds a teenager has a baby, every 7 minutes, a child is arrested for a drug offense; every 36 minutes, a child is killed or injured by a gun; and every day 135,000 children bring their guns to school. (Gibbs, 1990, p. 42)

Education, historically, has been called to respond effectively to socio-economic, cultural and political problems

(Algozzine & Obiakor, 1995; Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986; Committee for Economic Development, 1985; Holmes Group, 1988; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Obiakor, Mehring, & Schwenn, 1997; U. S. Department of Education, 1991, 1994). Unfortunately, many schools have responded poorly to the unique needs of at-risk youngsters. It is no wonder reforms and reports come in different forms without regard for circumstances and "real" solutions. Many scholars and educators (Ewing, 1995; Ford, Obiakor, & Patton, 1995; Cuban, 1990; Hilliard, 1995; Obiakor, 1994; Obiakor & Algozzine, 1995) have noted that practitioners have difficulty implementing effective policies. To a large measure, at-risk youngsters are misidentified, misdiagnosed, miscategorized, and misinstructed. The very label "at-risk" signifies the child/youth is defective and tends to divorce his or her own realities from the realities of the society. Cuban wondered whether educators and policy makers are interested in dealing with problems confronting students or the politics of these problems. Based on this premise, this article discusses problems confronting children and youth at-risk and recommends a comprehensive support model that buttresses collaborative multifaceted interventions at all levels.

Who Are Children and Youth At Risk?

The construct "at-risk" is derived from medicine and is relatively new in educational applications (Rak & Patterson, 1996). Students in this category do not quite fit into the traditional categories of exceptionalities. According to Davis and McCaul (1990), students at risk have characteristics that include (a) minority racial/ethnic group identity, (b) a poverty household, (c) a single-parent family, (d) a poorly educated mother/father/guardian, and (e) a non-English language background. In addition to this list of characteristics, Rak and Patterson indicated that biological factors of congenital defects and low birth weight, and serious physical and emotional problems resulting from having been born to drug-addicted

mothers place many children in at-risk positions. Earlier on, Clark (1988) observed "the bulk of young people who are at risk are subjected to psychological genocide and robbed of self-esteem and the capacity to achieve" (p. iii). When programs are inappropriately designed to address these students' special needs, they fall into the mode of "learned helplessness" (Lovitt, 1991, p. 387). As Baer (1991) pointed out:

We need to understand who these kids are. They have potential; however, they don't know it. They need what we all have to offer, but they won't believe it. In a way, they may want to fail because there is a kind of comfort in that. After all, it's what they know best. Failure is a restful place to be. Nobody bothers them much because they can't be expected to give or participate. . . . The crucial point to remember is that in spite of all these obstacles, these kids have all the potential that other kids have. (p. 25)

Baer's optimistic comment has two basic implications. First, nontraditional identification, assessment and instructional strategies are needed to ameliorate multidimensional problems of at-risk youngsters. Second, unwarranted suppositions about at-risk youngsters by educators and related professionals do not assist these individuals in becoming productive goal-directed members of school and society.

Today's children and youth face a myriad of problems. According to Clinton (1996), Obiakor (1992), and Shoaf (1990), these problems include (a) the prevalence of single-parent families or families without "father" figures, (b) an alarming rate of child abuse and neglect, (c) an unending economic and social pressures on parents, (d) rampancy of drug abuse, (e) poor nutrition as a result of poverty, (f) a preponderance of teenage pregnancy, (g) disturbing rates of misery and suicide, (h) an alarming rate of divorce or family breakdown, (i) selfishness and

a "me first" syndrome, and (j) negative perceptions of less fortunate, disadvantaged, and helpless individuals as socio-economic liabilities.

Coupled with these issues is the problem of inadequate preparation of educators and service providers to handle crises confronting at-risk students. These poorly prepared professionals are quick to label these students. As Gould (1981) pointed out, these professionals assign worth to individuals and groups "by measuring intelligence as a single quantity" (p. 20). As a result, they down play their prejudices and ignore their own myths on socioeconomic dissonance. The question of whether poverty is linked to "poor" intelligence, "poor" values, "poor" self-concept, and the ability to succeed in life still lingers in America's public schools. These perceptual assumptions create walls of resistance to tackle current school and/or societal problems (Bushweller, 1996; Obiakor, Algozzine, & Ford, 1993; Obiakor, Mehring, & Schwenn, 1997; Webb-Johnson, Obiakor, & Algozzine, 1995). Based on these premises, one can reasonably argue that traditional intervention strategies to the multidimensional problems confronting at-risk students are mired by the "band-aid" phenomenon. It continues to appear that the more things change, the more they remain the same.

The Band-Aid Phenomenon

We recognize some efforts have been made at school and governmental levels to address the plight of at-risk children and youth. We argue, however, that these efforts have not been properly focused. For instance, in 1965, the United States government funded Project Head Start to help "preschool children from low-income families to overcome the effects of poverty on their development and on their school achievement" (Widerstrom, Mowder, & Sandall, 1991, p. 4). The 1968's Handicapped Children's Early Education Program (HCEEP's Public Law 90-538) was established to provide seed-money for exemplary research/programs for young children. This effort continued until in 1975 when the Education of All Handicapped

Children Act (Public Law 94-142) was instituted to provide education in a least restrictive environment for students from 3-21 years. This law was amended in 1986 (Part 11 of Public Law 99-457) to educate youngsters from birth to 5 years of age and their families. In 1990, another amendment called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Public Law 101-476) was signed into law to educate youngsters with disabilities in an environment that maximizes their potential. Also in 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (Public Law 101-336) was passed to challenge those in business and private sectors to meet the needs of the 42 million American people with disabilities (U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1991). In 1994, President Clinton signed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (U. S. Department of Education, 1994) which focused on remediating inherent problems in the current education system. These federal efforts have been intended to reduce problems confronting children and youth at risk.

The question is, have the above laws and efforts changed the plight of America's youngsters? It appears the education of young children has become a political football. The Family Leave Bill proposed by the Congress, vetoed by then President Bush because of its presumed effects on small and large companies, was finally signed into law by President Clinton in 1993. Recent attempts by the 104th Congress to emphasize morality and family values, and at the same time cut compensatory educational programs, welfare spending, and the food stamp program have been predicted to have far-reaching effects on the well-being of at-risk students. The final score-cards are not out regarding transferring programs to the states through block grants. State agencies and public schools have continued to "jump" on the band-wagon in the establishment of model programs to meet the comprehensive needs of the child and the family. However, funding still remains a major impediment (see Kozol, 1995; Raver, 1991). According to Raver, "the shortage of trained infant interventionists, physical and occupational therapists, and speech therapists is expected to continue into the next decade" (p. 21).

It is increasingly apparent that parental economic pressures and limited child care options put added pressures on school professionals to raise and care for at-risk children. Some scholars have indicated these problems are much bigger than schools themselves (Bushweller, 1996; Carter, 1994). For many at-risk students, schools are their safest havens. While schools have hired law enforcement personnel to serve in and outside of schools to patrol halls and school grounds, the gun-lobbyists have advocated more freedom to carry guns. Students are confronted by mixed messages from adults and role models. America's jails are full of many young men and women who are confused by these mixed signals. Bernstein (1996) concurred with the notion that society isolates adults from adolescents thus creating a profound sense of aloneness in teens. For instance, *Home Alone*, the title of a recent cinematic box office success details zany and raucous adventures of a youth left to fend for himself when his family accidentally leaves him home alone while going on a family vacation. In real life, home alone situations are created by economic pressures on families and are seen as main contributors to early sexual promiscuity and drug abuse which in turn lead to increased levels of teen pregnancy and heightened levels of sexually transmitted diseases (Bernstein, 1996). Adapting to economic and social changes which have resulted in the loss of meaningful parent child interactions, adolescents have developed what therapists have labeled "second families" (Taffel, 1996). These teen peer groups exhibit rigid boundaries that discourage teens from going home to their families. It is this phenomenon, coupled with blocked attempts for legitimate achievement of status, power, identity, jobs, family, and education, that lures youth into gangs.

It is obvious adults and significant others who interact daily with children and youth say one thing and do something else. In the same vein, governmental agencies have promulgated laws that should have provided systematic restructuring of compensatory programs. Apparently, better laws have not yielded better methods of addressing the needs of people in crises. Public policies that govern welfare programs and monitor

child support collection frequently create wedges between parents and children. Dawsey (1996) and Hacker (1992) described the plight of young fathers as they adjust to the reality of parenthood. Because they have no jobs and no money to pay for their child support, they fall under the denigrating category of "Deadbeat Dads" to the extent that many young dads become homeless and depend upon young women who live in federally subsidized housing, relatives and/or homeless shelters for a place to live. The frustration of these forced arrangements precipitates incidents of domestic abuse, and the transient nature of their existence that further burdens their ability to obtain employment. The questions then are, Should we continue the cyclical flow of laws, policies, and methods that have failed? Or, should we look for collaborative techniques to reach at-risk students? Surely, the latter appears to be innovative.

Moving Forward

The impact of federal legislation on the education of at-risk youngsters cannot be underestimated. However, the federal government must make sure the strategies initiated are implemented in a manner that reduces risk and enhances healthy child development. Hamburg (1991) indicated that these strategies should provide needed elements of family support through (a) enriched parental care, (b) preventive care in the first few years, (c) dealing with child injuries, (d) developing solid child care programs, (e) building parental competence, (f) developing social support services, (g) supporting families with adolescents, and (h) developing life skills training programs. He added "there is much that can be achieved if we think of our entire population as a very large extended family - tied by history to a shared destiny and therefore requiring a strong ethic of mutual aid" (p. 19).

As it stands, state governors are eagerly waiting for powers and resources to be transferred to them from the federal government. The question is, Will this sacred move, revered by many, be politics as usual? Based on Davis and McCaul's

(1990) definition of at-risk students presented earlier, at-risk students have multidimensional problems that call for multidimensional solutions. As a result, policy makers and educators must look for new ways of doing things. Edelman (1992) suggested that school curricula be reevaluated and changed for purposes of addressing the needs of at-risk individuals. By the year 2000, one in three persons in the country will be non-white (Dettmer, Dyck, & Thurston, 1996). Other demographic shifts include an overall aging of the population and a rapidly rising birth rate among non Anglo American mothers (Carter, 1994). To this end, pre-service programs must assist students going into professional "helping" jobs to develop a transcultural world view. The previous "cookbook" method of employing overgeneralized information in relation to other cultures simply is not feasible in today's world (Marshall, Johnson, & Johnson, 1996). According to Carter, "...much has changed, but for many of our children, much remains the same...in our wealthy nation disproportionately large numbers of minority and socio-economically deprived children continue to fail in school" (p. 119).

Kozol (1995) and West (1994) noted that the postmodern ghetto of our times is a defined social policy created by economic greed and sustained by racism, neglect and political expediency. Both authors described a grueling island of meaninglessness surrounded by a land of plenty. For instance, West described a concept of nihilism that pervades black communities as "...an experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness" (p. 23). In a similar dimension, Schneider (1993) explored the relationship between the need for economic reforms and the need for school reforms. He argued that the future of U.S. schools is intricately tied to the future of U.S. cities. According to Schneider, "Children in the inner-city schools may be poor students but they are not stupid...they know that they are being trained for dead-end jobs in the service sector" (p. 185). In the midst of what may seem like insurmountable bleakness, Rak and Patterson (1996) reminded those who search for

solutions that many youth living in risk filled environments exhibit a capacity for "resilience" by summoning self-protective behaviors that buffer them from negative consequences and make success in life possible.

Based on the multidimensional nature of problems confronting America's children and youth, it seems logical to tackle these problems in an integrative manner that combines collaborative strategies with multifaceted interventions. Students are not only to blame, parents are not only to blame, schools are not only to blame, and federal, state, and local governments are not only to blame. There are enough faults to go around. We propose a comprehensive support model (CSM) that acknowledges the "self," the family, the school, the community, and the government (Obiakor, 1994). The CSM has its root from the "whole village" African concept of educational service delivery that values all societal entities. Recent years have seen an exclusionary and elitist system of education develop which is at odds with families (Edelman, 1992). The CSM is a family-centered model that engages a whole active community in creating responsible citizenry. As indicated earlier, the "self" is involved, the family is involved, the school is involved, and general community is involved. To increase the efficiency of this model, the following recommendations must be pragmatically pursued:

1. The development and use of identification, assessment, and instructional strategies that operationalize cultural competence.
2. The creation of a collaborative system of community support for families that has as its guiding principle the eradication of social stereotyping based on race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, and socio-economic status.
3. The development of an awareness and an appreciation for the many forms "family" can assume by valuing individual differences and strengths.

4. The thwarting of conditions leading to violence in the home or the community and the cultivating of a sense of safety for children and families.
5. The advocacy for economic policies and human services that attest to being pro-family by virtue of proven outcomes.
6. The promotion of culturally competent practices in schools and in the larger society to respect differences in world views and learning styles among individuals.
7. The advocacy for expanded services to provide for affordable quality child care to meet the varied needs of all families and children (e.g., infant and adolescent 24 hour care and weekend care).
8. The promoting of conditions that enhance resiliency for children and youth who face many challenges in education and other pursuits.
9. The development of collaborative community approaches to problem solving where all sectors of the community are involved including parents, students, and community leaders.
10. The recognitions that the focus of the problem in situations of risk is not only in the individual but also in institutional barriers in the environment.
11. The reconfiguration of curricula to eliminate the hidden curriculum and other culturally insensitive curricula variables.
12. The reinstatement of rites of passage and service opportunities to cultivate a sense of belonging in youth.
13. The broadening of visions in educational reform to include economic reform and the investment in human capital.

The components of the CSM must be infused in all educational levels and programs. This model of intervention must be free-flowing and must always involve students. Families, (traditional and nontraditional), must continue to be central stakeholders in the planning of educational services to

meet their individual needs. General and special educators and other service providers must employ family advocates whose primary work would be to forge educational partnerships with students and the greater community. Teacher preparation programs must offer courses on (a) self-concept development in children and youth, (b) collaboration, consultation, cooperation and conferencing in education, (c) crisis intervention techniques, (d) multicultural psychology and special educating, and (e) problem-solving techniques. Additionally, in-service trainings must address these topics so educators are not left in quandary. In the end, educational services must be provided in an atmosphere of respect for the family and in the environment where continuous communication is an ongoing priority.

Perspectives

Children and youth at-risk have continued to confront multidimensional problems despite legislative efforts in the United States. Our premise is these students are not beyond redemption and their minds are not "blank slates." Federal, state, and local governments must be fully involved in educating these students. In today's world of inclusion, general and special educators, counselors and service providers, parents, and community leaders must redefine their assessment, placement, and instructional strategies. We must embrace a "preventive strengths" strategy that emphasizes a CSM and buttresses holistic assessment and proactive accommodation strategies that capitalize on the individual child/youth resiliency. Finally, we must create non-restrictive environments for children and youth who are at risk. These environments must allow them to maximize their full potential. As Hamburg (1991) succinctly concluded:

We have to move beyond the easy and pervasive recourse of passing the buck. It is **our** responsibility—each individual, each institution and each organization, every

business, and all levels of government. We cannot lose sight of the fact that wise investment in human capital is the most fundamental and productive investment any society can make. Constructive development of our children is more important than oil or minerals, office buildings or factories, roads or weapons. The central fact is that all of these and much more depend in the long run on the quality of human resources and the decency of human relations. If these deteriorate, all else declines. (p. 20)

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