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ABSTRACT

This study, part of a larger ethnographic study of elementary students categorized as at-risk, attempts to determine whether the labelling of students affects teachers' expectations of, and behavior toward, at-risk students. The beliefs of a teacher sample of five women, three Hispanic and two Anglo, at two urban schools in the Southwest with large populations of minority and low-income students were assessed in two different ways. Teachers were asked first about the notions of "at-risk" in general, and then asked to identify and describe their at-risk students. The first set of questions was designed to elicit their "declared," or public beliefs; the second set was designed to elicit their more private beliefs by asking them to think of specific examples. Later in the year the teachers were asked if their concept of at-risk had changed and whether the students categorized as such still deserved the label. The major findings from analysis of the teachers' perceptions are the following: (1) their concept of at-risk was fluid, with the definition changing from a sociocultural perspective initially to one more focused on a student's ability to learn at the end of the term; (2) teachers' decisions to refer students to special education were based on expectations for academic performance and norms for appropriate classroom conduct rather than on the students' behavior; (3) teachers understood that at-risk status could be situation-specific, with the same student considered at-risk in one classroom but not in another; (4) they tended to blame students' parents and homelife for academic failure rather than the students' personal shortcomings or their own inability to teach effectively; and (5) they failed to see their own role in the creation of an environment and set of expectations that affected both the labelling of at-risk students and the students' behavior and that they themselves may limit the students' potential for academic achievement. The teachers' limited awareness of the problems of the social constructivist nature of their labelling can result in programs that deal with students' individual problems but fail to implement structural changes in classrooms and schools. Two tables and 30 references are appended. (WS)

TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT AT-RISK STUDENTS

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TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT AT-RISK STUDENTS[1]

While the concept of at-risk, when applied to an individual, has been used in the medical and psychiatric literature for some time (e.g., Garmezy, 1974; Werner, Bierman & French, 1971), it has only recently become current in educational literature and policy discussions. For example, "high risk students" has been in use as an ERIC Descriptor only since 1982. Children at-risk is a term that focusses attention on children who have the potential for failing in school, dropping out, becoming delinquent, committing suicide, becoming drug or alcohol dependent, becoming pregnant, and other adverse states (Brown, 1986). In schooling discussions, the term 'at-risk' refers primarily to those students who are or have the potential for failing and/or dropping out. But it also has taken over from such descriptors as disadvantaged, low SES, underachieving, problem children; terms that describe populations of students for whom the schools traditionally have been less than successful.

The term, at-risk, carries with it a number of assumptions that help to define the cause, prognosis and solution to the problem. An at-risk child or student has or lives in a condition that, if not remediated, will cause problems to the child or society. Thus, the term is similar to the medical diagnosis and remediation model. The focus is on the child, and the problem is attributed to the child and/or family. When the child is in school, the school's role is to remediate the conditions that belong to the child. As Wehlage and Rutter (1986) point out with respect to one category of at-risk student, the dropout: "Dropping out is construed as a form of social deviance, and an explanation of this deviant action is sought in the characteristics distinctive to the dropout group." (p. 375). They suggest that we should look for the cause of dropping out "not only in the characteristics of the dropout, but also in relation to those institutional characteristics that affect the marginal student in a negative manner." (p. 377).

Identification of a specific population of at-risk students in school, however, is important for policy purposes such as federally-funded programs.[2] This may be easier at the junior/middle or senior high school level when behavioral indices such as low grades and dropping out may be used. At the elementary level, identification may involve the use of such predisposing factors as family conditions of poverty and single parent homes, or cultural and ethnic minority status. But this approach leads to labelling of students; a deficit label that could be detrimental to their educational and personal future. Keogh & Daley (1983) have questioned the early identification of "problem" students with measures that focus strictly on the child rather than on the environment of the classroom and school. Thus, while there is a considerable push to systemmatically define and identify at-risk students such that they or their parents may receive special programs, there is, at the same time, a healthy concern about labelling and stereotyping students.

Ultimately, the implementation of at-risk programs in schools will rest with teachers. They are responsible for developing ways of operating in classrooms that avoid labelling and stereotyping students while providing instruction appropriate to the needs of individual students. The purpose of the study reported here was to determine the ways in which school teachers, themselves, view the concept of at-risk students, and who and how they identify such students in their own classrooms.

There are two compelling reasons to examine teachers' thoughts and beliefs about their at-risk students. The first concerns the relationship between teachers' mental lives and their actions. Recent research is providing a growing understanding of the importance of teachers' beliefs (Clark & Peterson, 1986), expectations (Cooper and Good, 1983), judgments (Shavelson and Stern, 1981), practical knowledge (Elbaz, 1983) and cognitions (Carter, In Press) in guiding their classroom practices. Therefore, to understand teachers' actions, one must explore their thoughts. The second rationale relates to the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their motivation to change. Teachers adapt or adopt new practices in their classrooms if their beliefs match the assumptions inherent in the new programs or methods (see, for example, Hollingsworth, 1987, and Munby, 1984). Thus, understanding teachers' beliefs is crucial to the development and implementation of new programs and effective inservice education.

This study was part of a larger ethnographic study designed to understand the nature, experiences and viewpoints of elementary school students who had been identified as at-risk by their teachers (Richardson-Koehler, Casanova, Placier & Guilfoyle, 1987). This article focusses on the nature of the teachers' beliefs about at-risk students. A major issue explored in the study concerned the labelling of students, and whether such labelling established certain expectancies in teachers' minds that would affect the ways they dealt with their students. One question, then, was whether, when students were identified by teachers as at-risk, they remained at-risk in the teachers' minds. Further, if one teacher identified a student as at-risk, would other teachers agree? Or, as Erickson (1985) suggested, is the notion of at-risk socially constructed, or dependent upon the nature of the classroom context, and the teachers' goals and instructional expectations?

Methodology

This ethnographic study took place in two schools in the Southwest, identified as effective on the basis of reputation and in terms of student achievement scores that were higher than expected given their student populations. Both schools served significant numbers of low income and minority students. One school, which I will call Plaza[3], was relatively small, with 250 students, in a very large urban school district that exerted modest control over the curriculum and

instructional program in the individual schools. The second, Desert View, was a large school (750 students) in a smaller school district with achievement scores among the lowest in the area. This school district exerted considerable control over the curriculum, testing and instructional programs in the schools.

The study concentrated on students identified as at-risk by teachers in three classrooms: one large (54 student), grade 2-3 team-taught classroom in Plaza School, and a grade 2 and a grade 3 classroom in Desert View. The principals, specialists and teachers in these schools were interviewed extensively; students were observed in the classrooms, and the students and their parents were interviewed. This article focusses on the interviews with the teachers, with some reference to their and their students' classroom actions.

Five teachers were involved in this study. They were selected by their principals as being effective and potentially comfortable with the researchers in their classrooms. In Plaza School, the two team teachers worked together in the large classroom. In Desert View, one of the teachers was a Team Leader, and thus taught only one-half of the day. Her class was taken over by a second teacher in the afternoon. Thus, two different teacher perspectives on each of two of the classrooms were obtained. The third teacher at Desert View worked in a self-contained classroom.

All of the teachers in the sample were female, with teaching experience ranging from 3 to 29 years. Three of the teachers were Hispanic, two Anglo.

Teacher Beliefs

For purposes of this study, beliefs were defined as propositions accepted as true (Fenstermacher, 1979 & 1986; Green, 1971; and Eisenhart, Shrum, Harding & Cuthbert, 1987). Several methodologies for the determination of teachers' beliefs were examined. Structured paper-and-pencil measures were rejected because they do not appear to validly measure teachers' beliefs (Hoffman & Kugle. 1982). The elicitation heuristic technique, on the other hand, seemed to come closer to determining the beliefs of interest in this study. The eliciting heuristic technique was developed by anthropologists to determine belief systems in groups of people (Black, 1969; Black and Metzger, 1969; Kay and Metzger, 1973; Metzger, 1973). While anthropologists attempt to determine belief systems of groups, this study focused on the individual, although the results were also examined across the group.

Within this framework, beliefs consist of a set of assertions held by informants and realized in the natural language as declarative sentences. This methodology uses both open-ended questions, and closed-ended questions which are framed by the language and concepts of the answer to the open-ended questions. With this system, the

interviewer, in effect, is being trained by the informant to behave linguistically or verbally in ways which the informant considers appropriate. The interviewer must avoid a false sense of communication and of familiarity with structure (both linguistic and cultural) by constant self-reminders.

Teachers' beliefs about at-risk students were assessed in two different ways. Teachers were asked about their notions of at-risk in general, and then asked to identify and describe their at-risk students. The first set was designed to elicit their "declared" beliefs about at-risk students: propositions given by a person in public behavior and speech, cited in argument, or used to justify actions to others (Goodenough, 1971). The second set was designed to elicit more private beliefs by asking them to think of specific examples. It was felt that their private beliefs would come closer to their beliefs in action. We also asked the teachers about their own backgrounds, and their classrooms, schools, communities, students and students' parents. Toward the end of the year in a second major interview, teachers were asked if their concept of at-risk had changed, and who the at-risk students were at that point. They were probed on those students no longer at-risk: how they were doing at that point, and what had caused the changes? They were also asked about the relationship between Learning Disabled and at-risk designations, and why more boys are at-risk than girls.

Using a constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), each teacher's at-risk interviews were treated separately, with categories emerging from the responses. Thus, a theory of at-risk emerged for each teacher. Each teacher's broad statements of beliefs about students were examined in relation to their own instructional style in relation to their observed behaviors in the classroom. It was also possible to look across teachers to determine commonalities and differences between the teachers in the two teams, and among teachers in the two schools.

Findings

Overall Views of Teaching and Schooling

This sample of teachers felt very responsible for all of their students, including their at-risk students. They spoke emotionally of their at-risk students, angry at those parents who they felt did not treat the children well, frustrated with themselves and the school system if the students did not respond appropriately. They wanted their students to succeed and be happy. All but one of the teachers, the least experienced teacher of the five, exhibited a high sense of efficacy: that is, the feeling that what they did as teachers made a difference in the lives of their students (Ashton and Webb, 1986).

For the two teachers in Plaza, success could be reached if little intruded upon the atmosphere they created in their classroom. Intrusions included students' depression, confusion and physical harm from home situations; standardized tests; mandates regarding basal readers; and, quite ambivalently, specialists who pull the students out of the class. They, in fact the whole school, preferred in-class alternatives for their problem students to pull-out programs. The most experienced teacher of the two subscribed strongly to a developmental philosophy that most early elementary students will eventually be able to perform the basic skills; some needed more time than others and a context in which they were not compared with others and where no harm could be done to their self concept. Since these teachers had the same students for up to three years (Grades 1, 2 and 3), they felt that this extended time allowed them to ensure that all of their students would be prepared for grade 4. They relied on noncompetitive group activities. They both emphasized that they had few rules, but applied them consistently and treated all students, including their at-risk students, equally. Neither teacher used the words "failure" or "failing" with respect to any of their students at any point in the long interviews.

The teachers at Desert View were more varied about their stated approaches to teaching, although there were certain aspects of the school and school district that seemed to affect all three in the same way. The use of specialists was clearly a very important part of their lives and affected the organization of the day for teachers and students. The at-risk students saw as many as six teachers in one day. Descriptions of at-risk students took on a medical flavor; specifically, brain dysfunctions. The instructional goals of all three teachers in this school related to students getting work completed in a timely (not necessarily accurate) fashion, and achieving mastery of the basic skills. These goals seemed related to the school district's strongly implemented objectives-based curriculum and testing programs. Considerable anxiety was expressed about students' achievement of basic skills, testing and grading.

Teachers' Public Beliefs About At-Riskness

Definition: Responses to questions concerning at-risk reflected the general confusion about the term in everyday use today. There was no hesitation on the part of all but two of the teachers; they answered quickly and fully. Two were uncomfortable with the term because of its negative connotation. One stated that she didn't use the term because "some parents are put off by it" (Teacher 2). Another suggested that it should also have a positive connotation--"there could be a positive at-risk, e.g., of becoming a popular political candidate" (Teacher 3). Some of the definitions were tied to outcomes ("at-risk for what?"), and others to nonproductive behaviors. In all cases but one, the definition remained stable over the year.

In analyzing the interviews, a difference between responses of the teachers by school became apparent. The teachers in Desert View thought about at-risk in terms of long-range problems. One stated: "It's a matter of will they be at-risk when they grow up? Will they be able to function in society? Am I helping them? Can anyone help them?" (Teacher 3). Another stated: "We are thinking of what's going to happen to these people as adults. With so many people homeless and unemployed, we ask 'where did this all begin?'" (Teacher 5). This approach to at-risk was undoubtedly related to the five-year goal setting exercise the school had just completed. In Plaza School, at-risk definitions were tied to school behavior. For one teacher, it was primarily academic problems or a history of failure that defined an at-risk student; however, by the end of the year, she had changed her definition to include "any kind of problem: academically low, low self concept, emotional problems that they bring into the class--that I haven't caused." The other teacher suggested that there are two ways a child can be at-risk: "one can be academic, and one socially or emotionally. A lot of times they are related in a child." (Teacher 1). The manifestation of the latter, according to this teacher, would be behavioral: aggressive behavior toward other children.

For all teachers, the Learning Disabled (LD) students in their classroom would be considered either at-risk or, for two of the teachers, perhaps "marginally at-risk". A marginal at-risk student was described by one teacher: "they have a limitation on them because of a physical or a mental handicap but their desire to learn far outweighs their handicap and so they do whatever they have to do to keep improving themselves." (Teacher 2). Nonetheless, by the end of the year, several LD students were considered not at-risk by the teachers (see below).

Causes: The theme of home life/family problems as being the cause of at-riskness in children was strong in all of the interviews. Family problems, divorce, parents who don't care, high mobility were all mentioned by the teachers. Another attributed at-risk status to the lack of school-beneficial experiences that left the children behind when they entered school. One suggested that all students in foster homes were at-risk, and another that all LD students were in bad family situations. Two suggested that school could cause a child to be at-risk: one explicitly mentioned basal readers and pushing children too hard, and another that she, as their teacher, could be a cause of their at-riskness. Three teachers suggested that being a first-born son placed a child at-risk because of parental expectations.

Solutions: While the teachers mentioned family problems as the cause of at-riskness in students, only two of them suggested working with parents as the solution. Another suggested that teachers should go by the rules in dealing with at-risk students: that is, call the

appropriate social services such as Child Protective Services. All other solutions that were mentioned were in-sc' l processes. One suggested that the school is a buffer zone for these kids, and another that the teachers' responsibility was to try different techniques until they worked. Two felt that child studies for special services were important.

The responses to the 'solutions' question by the teachers in Plaza School differed from those in Desert View. Important to both teachers in Plaza was the notion of "not singling them [at-risk students] out for special attention, and not spending time with them alone." They were worried about stigmatizing them, and relied on the group process--either the adult working with the group, or a peer tutor helping them out when they were in trouble. However, they felt that their classroom was a special place for all of their students to be.

At-Risk and LD Designations: Teachers in both schools expressed the sense that there are students who require special help to overcome learning disabilities, and that LD students were at-risk, or at least, marginally at-risk. However, the teachers in Plaza felt that the numbers were much smaller than educationists presently thought. As Teacher 1 said: "I think that the number of children who do have dyslexia or some visual or auditory problems is so small, so minor compared to the number of kids with emotional, family-based reasons". They felt that the specialists could share some of the responsibilities for looking after a given at-risk student, but this meant, in the present organization of both schools, giving up control over that student for part of the day. This they saw as losing "knowledge" about the child. Teacher 3, for example, felt that if the children were not in her classroom, she would not know as much about them. And yet, they could see that there was a specialized knowledge that they didn't have about how to take care of certain students who had "glitches." Teachers in both schools described "ideal" situations in which the LD teacher would be in the classroom part or all of the day. Teacher 2 suggested that they could team teach; Teacher 4 suggested that the LD teacher should be in the regular classroom working with LD groups, and had, in fact, instituted such a plan on a pilot basis.

At-Risk Identification in Practice

The Students: When teachers were asked to identify at-risk students, they each automatically selected those who had been identified as Learning Disabled, and several others.

Table 1 summarizes the numbers of students in each class, the numbers described as at-risk by each teacher in the first interview, the numbers of those who left during the year, those still at-risk at the end of the year, the new-to-the classroom students identified as at-risk, and those who were not mentioned at the beginning of the year

who had been added to the list at the end. Since two teachers in each school worked with the same sets of students, the data provided the opportunity to determine whether those two sets of teachers identified the same students as at-risk. This is indicated by the "overlap" category between Teachers 1 and 2, and 4 and 5. The bracketed number in the 'Still At-Risk' category indicates that of the total number in that cell, the teacher was hesitant about whether a subset of them were still at-risk.

Insert Table 1 Here

While the numbers of at-risk students in each class appears to remain quite stable, the students themselves did not. The first teacher, for example, named ten students at-risk in the first interview. Of those, one left the school. In the second interview, only three of the original ten students were still identified as at-risk and one of those was questionable to her. However, five new students were placed on her list. She was the most extreme in changing students' status; however, all of the teachers changed to a certain degree.

Further, it would appear that the concept is not stable across teachers. Team Teachers 1 and 2, while espousing quite similar philosophies, each named ten students in their class as at-risk, but only agreed on seven. Teachers 4 and 5, who did not work as closely together as the first team, only agreed on four of the students in their class.

The lack of stability within teacher can be explained to a certain degree by the high mobility of the students. New students coming in the second semester seemed particularly prone to being identified as at-risk. Further, it may be that teachers can only manage to pay close attention to a limited number of students. As Teacher 4 stated: "And you know what teachers do: we replace some with another. As we get kids that have real severe needs, we tend to bump up those that aren't as bad . . . until M___ and S___ came, I didn't realize how much J___ had grown . . . And teachers do that as a defense mechanism 'cause we can't handle it."

The lack of agreement between teachers reflects, in part, the use of different criteria for identifying students. Table 2 presents the reasons given for students being at-risk during the first interview, and those still-at-risk and newly at-risk during the second interview. For example, Teacher 1 identified five students as at-risk in the first interview on the basis of academics (what that meant to her was Learning Disabled), one as social/emotional, three on the basis of behavior, and one received a mixed diagnosis. Her new at-risk students were all identified as behavioral or social problems. The behavior problems for this teacher were primarily aggression toward other students. Teacher 2, however, named no

students in the first interview on the basis of behavior; she seemed to focus primarily on academic problems. Teacher 5 appeared to focus more of her attention on behavior problems than on academics, whereas Teacher 4 focused on academic lags due to learning disabilities. Her two physical reasons were LD students for whom she provided clinical brain dysfunction reasons. The behavior reasons for Teacher 5 related solely to students not finishing their work and/or not bringing in their homework. It would seem, then, that the teachers focused on quite different criteria for the identification of at-risk students, and that these criteria were related to the teachers' sense of what a smooth, well-run class should look like.

Insert Table 2 Here

All teachers identified more boys as at-risk than girls. In Plaza School, of all students mentioned as at-risk, fourteen were boys, seven were girls. In Desert View, fifteen boys and seven girls were identified. When asked about this finding, two of the teachers felt that it was a random event: "something that just happened this year." The two teachers in Plaza had quite elaborate theories about how first-born sons develop problems because of parents' and societal expectations. A teacher in Desert View also had an elaborate cultural theory about what goes on in Hispanic homes: Mothers do too much for their sons, and the sons are not expected to talk as much as the girls. This, she felt, places the girls at an advantage when they enter school.

Students No Longer At-Risk: Students were taken off the at-risk list if they improved in their social skills in working with other children, exhibited better working behaviors, demonstrated improved self concept and seemed reasonably adjusted to the particular environment of the classroom. While academic problems were the primary stated criterion for identifying an at-risk student, improvement in academics was not used as the sole criterion in taking a student off the at-risk list except in two instances in which the students were named because of lack of English language skills. In those two cases, their English improved during the year. In all other cases, students' social, personal and behavioral adjustments were noted as improved. Two LD students were taken off the lists either because they seemed to adjust to their handicaps, or the LD problems were seen as minor. One teacher, for example, was asked in her second interview about whether a special education student who had been on her list in the fall was still at-risk. "No, I wouldn't . . . because if she is doing the best that she can, so she is socially adjusted, and she seems to fit in well, then I would not consider her at-risk." (Teacher 2).

Causes of At-Riskness in Identified Students: When causes of a student's at-risk status were mentioned, they were overwhelmingly related to home/family situations. In several cases, the teachers felt that the parents pushed too hard, a number of others did not push enough. Some home lives were described as chaotic and inconsistent. For others, the students' mothers did too much for them. In one case, wierd religious rites were hinted at; in others, physical abuse was suspected. In fact, for three of the at-risk students in one school, the Child Protective Services had been called. One teacher felt that all students in foster families were at-risk, and another saw a relationship between LD students and bad home lives. In one case, a teacher expressed a desire to help a child in a particular way against the wishes of his mother. In only two cases were students themselves made responsible for their at-riskness; one because he did not speak English, and another because of a negative attitude. The school system was faulted in two instances, both related to misplacement of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students.

Students Not At-Risk: The degree to which the family was important to these teachers in the at-risk status of their students was revealed in the question that asked teachers to describe students not at-risk. All of the teachers tied their not-at-risk students' behaviors to good home situations. For Teacher 5, whose emphasis in the classroom was on students proceeding through workbooks, her two not-at-risk students were described as "self-motivators". Even though one was a trouble maker, he still got his work done ahead of time. Both, she said, came from "good families." Teacher 3's not at-risk students were bright, followed directions and were nice to the other children. This, she felt, was caused by "good environments at home." The strongest response was from Teacher 4 who described the not at-risk student solely in terms of parent involvement in the child's education. One of her student's mother was there every day, she said, and another kept her son "always on track." For Teacher 1, not-at-risk students were serene, self confident and other kids never tease them. She attributed this state to an open atmosphere in the home in which the children were always told what was going on, and were brought into decision-making.

Solutions to Problems of At-Risk Students: The solutions prescribed for students that the teachers had identified as at-risk were broken into five categories: social/emotional ("build up his self esteem by having him tutor other kids in art"); behavior control (either through "consistently applying rules," "rewards for good behavior," or "keep pushing him"), parent involvement or change, special services (speech therapist, counsellor, LD specialist), and retention.

Teachers 1 and 2 favored all strategies equally except retention. The social emotional prescriptions related to building self concept through telling them they were wonderful and having them help other

students. The behavior control related to their consistently applying rules until the students learned them. One pointed out that some kids just take longer to figure out the rules because they come from "inconsistent families." "When they begin to conform, they become a part of the group, and then they can do their work because anger is not interfering." (Teacher 1).

Teacher 3's solutions related primarily to visiting the homes and to the use of special services for her LEP students. Teachers 4's solutions related to communicating with the home and special LD services, whereas Teacher 5's solutions were primarily within the behaviorist framework of rewarding them when they did their work well.

Three of the teachers expressed concern about at least one of their at-risk students moving on to another class next year; although the most experienced said: "they're tough; they'll survive."

Analysis and Discussion

The teachers in this study exhibited a fluid notion of the concept of at-risk. This contrasts with definitions in use today that assume that a student's at-risk status can be determined easily on the basis of relatively stable enduring predispositions such as minority culture background, or generally agreed-upon problem behaviors such as high absenteeism. At the beginning of the study, the teachers identified students at-risk in their classes as those who were not fitting in socially, were performing poorly on tests, or were not working as they should. At the end, students still at-risk were those who had not responded adequately to the attempts the teachers made to help them adjust.

In a study that traced teachers' decisions to refer students to special education child studies, Mehan, Hertwick and Meihls (1986) suggested that the referral process appeared to fit within a "social constructivist" perspective. This perspective suggests that the perceptions of a students' classroom performance is a function of the norms, expectations and values of the perceiver interacting with the essential nature of the student. Thus, "the teacher's decision to refer students is only partially grounded in the students' behavior. It is grounded also in the categories that the teacher brings to the interaction, including expectations for academic performance and norms for appropriate classroom conduct" (p. 87). An additional aspect of the theory is that what the teachers bring to the interaction can affect the students' behavior.

The example in this study of Travis, one of the students in the study, highlights the social constructivist nature of the identification of at-risk students by the team teachers at Plaza School. Travis was new to the teachers when they were first interviewed. Teacher 1 did not mention him on her list of at-risk

students. Teacher 2 pointed out that they were surprised to find out that Travis was designated as LD and that they had found out that he was having trouble with the LD teacher but not with them. Nonetheless, she identified him as at-risk "depending on personality and situation" because he had repeated second grade, and did not participate well with the LD teacher. In the final interviews, Teacher 1 stated that Travis was doing well, and was not at-risk. Teacher 2, however, felt that he would always be at-risk because of poor self-concept. The first thing she said about him was that he was hard to figure out; that compared to the rest of the kids, she didn't know him very well. The classroom observer noted he sometimes appeared bored in the classroom, and that he did not participate eagerly in activities. In general, though, he seemed to get along well with other students, and his grades were average.

This example indicates a difference between the two teachers' expectations for appropriate classroom behavior, and in the student behaviors that triggered each of their concerns. These different views affected the teachers' identification of at-risk students. Teacher 2 could not 'read' Travis and assumed that his detached demeanor was a sign of low self concept. Teacher 1, who focused on whether or not students got along well in group activities, felt that Travis was doing well.

This study suggests that Mehan's concept of the social construction of teachers' labelling of at-risk students could be extended in two directions. First, the teacher's views of appropriate behaviors are, themselves, situation specific. That is, while the teachers' decisions about which students are at-risk are affected by their expectations for academic performance and norms for appropriate classroom conduct, they also appear to be affected by the particular set of students in the classroom. Therefore, as Teacher 4 stated, a teacher can only pay special attention to a small number of students. These are the students who stand out, negatively, in the class. As these students begin to act like the majority of the students in the room, or if a new student with more abnormal behavior patterns enter, the initial at-risk student will no longer be considered as such.

The second extension of the theory is that the teachers were aware, in part, of the situation-specific nature of the identification of at-risk students. The teachers all stated that students who were at-risk in one classroom may not be considered at-risk in another. This finding is similar to Erickson's (1985) who concluded that teachers, because they consider what one student is doing in relation to what others are doing, are "intuitive social constructivists" (p. 7).

The teachers were generally unwilling to attribute a student's lack of success to the students themselves, or to their own instructional programs. They, therefore, moved outside the classroom to find the cause of the students' problems. These causes most often rested on

their students' home lives and parents. Their frustration with the parents of at-risk students was palpable, and the assumption that the not-at-risk students came from strong families was universal. The teachers appeared to accept any negative statement about families of at-risk students from other teachers or adults in the building, or, in one case, from a relative of a teacher. While some of these concerns were well-founded, others were not. Although the teachers did not seem to develop negative expectations for individual students on the basis of their difficult family backgrounds, they did build negative images of families on the basis of the students' problem behavior in class.

What was not seen by the teachers was their own role in the creation of an environment and set of expectations that affected both the labelling of at-risk students and the students' behavior; that the concept of "lack of success" or "at-riskness" was defined by themselves and differed from teacher to teacher. The teachers saw, in part, the effect of the context on the behavior of their students, and they understood that a child may not be at-risk in another context. But they were not aware of the way in which they affected that context through the enactment of their beliefs and understandings about students. Their strong sense of efficacy and feelings of responsibility for their students on the one hand helped the teachers create a strong and unique learning environment in their classroom that was beneficial for many of their students; but also made it difficult for them to understand and question the effects of this environment on students who did not adapt to it.

Both the social constructivist nature of the labelling of at-risk students and the teachers' lack of understanding of it can have a profound effect on the nature of the attention students receive. Those students who comply with specific classroom norms of behavior may not be labelled at-risk, and thereby perhaps not receive the extra attention they need. This happened in the case of one of the students in Goldenberg's dissertation (1984) who appeared to the teacher to be learning to read at an acceptable rate because she was acting like other children in her group. It was not until the Spring that the teacher moved beyond surface level task behavior to find that the child was having severe reading problems. Other students who do not adapt their behavior to the norms of the classroom may be labelled at-risk and placed in inappropriate remedial programs that set the effects of low expectancies in motion. In addition, as Erickson (1985) pointed out, the teacher's lack of understanding of the social constructivist nature of identifying at-risk students "restricts the teacher's capacity to learn from experience" (p. 9).

The actuarial/medical approach to the identification of at-risk students as exemplified by much of the current literature may be more problemmatic. This approach locates the problem within the child who is identified on the basis of background characteristics over which s/he has no control. Thus, the degree to which the school is

contributing to the child's problems is not in question, even though the school is being asked to adjust to the remediation needs of the at-risk students. The lack of understanding of the interaction between the personal/social characteristics of the student, and the nature of a particular school and classroom could lead to programs that label students and deal with their individual problems rather than to structural changes in classrooms and schools.

Endnotes

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2. For example, a recent letter from William Pierce, the Executive Director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, discussed the Council's 1987 activities. Objectives 4 and 5 were: "To formally adopt a functional definition of at-risk students"; and "To develop, formally endorse, and publicize structural ways, e.g., new entitlements, individual plans and programs, in which states can ensure that the educational needs of such children will receive priority attention in the future" (p. 1). Letter to Dean Gary Fenstermacher, October, 1986.

3. All names of schools, teachers, and students have been changed to protect their identities.

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Table 1

Numbers of At-Risk Students Identified by Each Teacher in Two Interviews

	Teacher/School						
	PLAZA			FREEDOM			
Category of Student	Teacher #1*	Teacher #2*	Overlap	Teacher #3	Teacher #4**	Teacher #5**	Overlap #4&5
Total No. of Students in Class	54			20	23		
Total No At-Risk First Interview	10	10	7	8	6	7	4
No. Named Left School	1	2	1	--	1	--	--
No. Still At-Risk 2nd Interview	3(1)	6(2)	3	6	4(2)	5	4
No. New At-Risk 2nd Interview	5	1	1	--	3	--	--
No. Old Students, 2nd Interview Newly Named At-Risk		1	1	1	--	3	1

* Team teaching same class

** Teacher 4, morning; Teacher 5, afternoon - same class

( ) of those, no. about whom teacher hesitant/not sure

Table 2

Reasons Given by Teachers Across Time for Students Being At-Risk

	Teacher 1			Teacher 2			Teacher 3			Teacher 4			Teacher 5			
	I	II	III	I	II	III	I	II	III	I	II	III	I	II	III	Total
Social/Emot.	1	2	2	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7
Academic	5	(1)	-	6	3(1)	-	4	1	-	1	3(2)	3	2	3	3	35
Physical	-	-	-	1	-	-	2	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	5
Behavior	3	-	3	-	-	2	2	3	1	1	1	-	5	1	-	22
Mixed	1	-	-	3	1	-	2	-	2	-	-	-	-	1	-	10

I = Students Identified in First Interview

II = Still At-Risk, Second Interview

III = New At-Risk