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ABSTRACT
          This paper discusses a study of at-risk students in
two highly contrastive schools, located in different districts, in
order to illustrate the comparative perspective on how district and
school characteristics might influence the definition of and response
to at-risk students. The study is linked with a larger cultural
context through an investigation of the occurrence of the term "at
risk" in the educational literature over the past 10 years. The
characteristics of the Suroeste School District and the Raintree
School District (Arizona), the schools within each district, and the
administration personnel within are contrasted. These district and
school differences are then compared to the responses of each
district to at-risk students. The differences between these school
systems in their definition of at risk and their responses to at-risk
students are discussed. In general, the smaller schools and the
smaller, less centralized district, were less rigid in both
identification of students and response to the educational
difficulties. A bibliography with 12 references is included. (JS)

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"Risk Management" in Context:
Policy Meanings of the Term "At-Risk" and
Administrative Responses to "At-Risk" Students

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Introduction

The findings of the "at risk" study on which three of us are reporting derive from classroom observations, supplemented by interviews with teachers, principals, specialists, and parents, and document analysis. However, we also collected as much information as we could about school organization and district policies which might impinge on principal and teacher definitions of and responses to "at-risk" students.

Classroom ethnographers have been charged with ignoring the influence of school, district, and even broader social contexts on classroom happenings. Educational ethnographers have often failed to look beyond the microculture of the classroom for sources of explanations for educational phenomena such as student achievement. Such phenomena are presented as locally produced, through interactions between students and teachers. (Lutz 1981; Ogbu 1980; Wolcott 1982) If school people look beyond the school for explanations, they almost inevitably look to "the home," as if individual families, too, existed in a social vacuum.

There are practical, personal, theoretical and ideological reasons for the classroom focus of much educational ethnography. In addition, there are forces within educational research in general which feed the classroom-focused habits of ethnographers. However, as Mehan et al. have put it, "Research, in its rush to the classroom, has sometimes been guilty of premature closure and tunnel vision." (1986:41) It is clear that:

> Classrooms and other organizational units of the school are influenced by the bureaucratic institutions of the school and the society of which the school is a part. Administrative policy...is established by school boards and state departments of education at an organizational level above the classroom. The decisions made at higher levels of the bureaucracy impinge upon educational practices in the classroom. (Mehan et al. 1986:47)

Our study of "at risk" students in two highly contrastive schools, located in different districts, seemed to prompt a comparative perspective on how district and school characteristics might influence the definition of and response to "at-risk" students. (Richardson-Koehler et al. 1987) This contrast was not a major part of our original study design, and the data we gathered about the schools and districts was thinner than we would like in order to strongly support our arguments. Going farther out on a limb, I would locate our study in even broader contexts. There is no logical reason to end contextualization at the district level, since districts are not isolated from other institutions or from the economic, political and macrocultural forces which impinge on (I stop very short of saying "determine") educational policies and practices.

Any study of "at risk" students must consider the questions: Where did the idea of "at risk" come from? What meanings does the term have in its current usage? Why now, why in the present social climate surrounding education, has the term "at risk" become so popular with researchers and school policymakers alike? Why have state and district administrators hopped on the "at risk" bandwagon? After our study was complete and the initial

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report was written, these questions still hounded me. As a consequence, I have attempted to link our study with a larger cultural context through linguistics. A study of the occurrence of the term "at risk" in the educational literature over the past ten years lead me in some very interesting directions. (Placier 1987)

Meanings of the Term "At Risk" in Education

Up until about five years ago in the educational literature, the item "at risk" occurred almost exclusively in the discourse of researchers in psychology and special education who employed epidemiological models for the prediction of medical or quasi-medical conditions. The item appeared as part of a longer, more specified phrase such as "kindergarten students at risk for development of schizophrenia." That is, the population was defined and the condition for which they were at risk was defined. It is interesting that over the past year and a half, when we have talked about our study of "at risk students," some people have asked, "At risk for what?" indicating that our usage is incomplete in comparison with this original form.

In recent years, the less specified adjectival form, as in "at risk students," has proliferated in the educational literature. It usually describes students who are statistically more likely to exhibit certain decidedly nonmedical conditions, -- such as dropping out of school. Such usage represents the importation of the aforementioned epidemiological or public health model, entailing early identification, prevention and/or treatment, into a currently active educational policy area. It also represents, I think, an attempt by educational policymakers and researchers to borrow the legitimacy of a medical field through linguistic borrowing.

Wehlage and Rutter (1986) have discussed the inappropriateness of borrowing the identification-and-treatment model into the "dropout" field. Identifying potential dropouts through certain predisposing social characteristics almost inevitably singles out low income, minority students. Directing special programs at this group only reinforces the middle class biases of education. Edelman (1984) has warned about the current vogue in the helping professions of "pre-" terms like "predelinquent," which give professionals carte blanche to assert authority over persons who have not yet exhibited signs of deviance, based on their higher statistical probabilities as members of certain social categories.

However, such warnings go unheeded by most educational policymakers. In fact, in its origins our study represented a further extension of the epidemiological meaning of "at risk." The rationale of the Exxon Foundation officer who approved our project was that to locate the causes of dropping out one had to examine earlier stages in the child's school career. He seemed to be defining the second and third grade students we would be observing as "predropouts."

More unspecified and hortatory are usages of "at risk" in reform reports distributed by state and national interest and policy groups: the Education Commission of the States, the College Board, Goodlad's Partnership, to name a few. These reports define students as "at risk" in a multitude of senses -- as a result of poverty, divorce, child abuse, drug abuse, mental

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illness, teenage pregnancy -- a whole variety of conditions which beset many children in our society. But the term, if it fails to communicate any specific meanings, accomplishes certain other communicative purposes (Lehrer 1983). It calls dramatic attention to the failures of educators to address the "needs" of many students. This prompts educational administrators at all levels to act, to devise some response to "at risk students" in order to satisfy the public that they are responsive.

Now, in order to formulate a response to "at risk students," educators seem inevitably to fall back on the epidemiological model. The ways in which moneys are expended in this sector -- on specific populations of students -- dictates the way in which the term will be defined, and the battles that will ensue over an "operationalized" definition. (Richardson-Koehler 1988) Money from the federal or state governments, or from private sources, is not distributed to districts or schools to spend in some generic, unspecified way. Money is spent on certain kinds of students, and to get this money districts and schools have to identify their target students through some criteria. The question becomes: Who will set these criteria and who will identify the target students of "at risk" funding?

The influence of all this had clearly been felt in the school districts in our study. When researchers Casanova and Richardson-Koehler began interviewing district officials and principals about participation in our study, their impression was that "at risk" was "in the air" at the district level. In initial talks with the researchers, elementary school principals were more than ready to use the term to describe some of their students. It seemed that "at risk" already meant something to them in relation to their elementary students. However, their meanings varied. "At risk" is not the kind of term for which there is a consensus on meaning among the many speakers who employ it. Rather, it seems to be what linguist Lehrer (1983) would call a pragmatically interpreted descriptor -- an all-purpose, unspecified term for children exposed to any and all kinds of negative conditions.

In one school the principal had recently become involved in a district "at risk" project, and thought our study might help her with program implementation. The school was a primary grade, bilingual magnet school in a predominantly low income, Hispanic neighborhood. Many extra resources had been devoted to making this school attractive to Anglo families, to meet desegregation quotas.

Teachers were to select at least three "at-risk" students in their classrooms, and focus attention on these students. It seemed at first that there were no clear criteria for this selection. The curriculum specialist told us that at this school the notion of "at risk" was completely individualized, since "each child that is perceived as at risk has a different collection of factors." She said she was "deathly afraid of categories," but nevertheless thought that "there are kids that look like 'at risk' to us and we worry ourselves a great deal about them, and we should."

More specifically, she explained that the term had first cropped up in the school when it was recognized that a larger than acceptable number of students were being retained. In her

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opinion, schools were responsible "to help kids move into society," and needed to respond to such a high incidence of student failure. Teachers, she said, were also "at risk' ecause they felt _personally_ responsible for student failure. School failure, in addition, was harmful to children's "self esteem." Therefore, people at this school were on the alert for students at risk for retention -- both for the children's sakes _and_ their own. From what we knew about this school's district, a high retention rate in a much-touted magnet school, with a high proportion of minority children, undoubtedly also had political meanings.

We interviewed two of the teachers at this school about participation in the study. Both said that performance below grade level was the primary criterion they would use to identify "at risk students," though they recognized that the causes of academic failure could be very complex. This was consistent with the "at risk for retention" criterion. But they wondered about having to identify such students in October, when they had barely gotten to know them. It is interesting in itself that teachers did not consider two months of observation for five days a week, six hours a day, to be sufficient for making this particular labelling decision. On the other hand, the administration understood that teacher retention decisions are made late in the year, when it is too late to interve e on the child's behalf.

One teacher expressed her frustrations with having to label children "at risk." In her words: "The point is, I don't see all of a sudden how that's the buzz word. All these kids are 'at risk' and I don't see it's making any difference whether we're labelling them at risk or not. For me, someone who hates paperwork, it means me actually sitting down and labelling some kid . . . first of all, it's a label, second of all, it means more paperwork for me." She thought that "at risk" was part of a futile language game, simply a current replacement for a whole group of older student labels: "Now this at risk is taking in academic, social, behavioral, cultural, linguistical, the whole big shebang all at once." She was concerned about her failing students, but seemed to argue that the extra work the "at risk" program entailed was unlikely to contribute toward her success with these children.

We decided not to choose this school for the study because the resistance of some teachers to the "at-risk" program was so clear that we might only have exacerbated the tension. Our association -- in name at least -- with the new program seemed unlikely to facilitate close relationships with those teachers. However, we did learn from this example that teacher interpretations of "at risk," and their identification of "at risk" students to meet the demands of administrators, or researchers, might present a dilemma for them. We learned that asking teachers to define "at risk" and to label "at risk students" would be different from asking policymakers or administrators. The epidemiological model of "at risk" may be more congruent with the interests of district and school administrators than it is with the realities of the classroom, with teachers' interests and teachers' ways of thinking. Richardson-Koehler (1988) has argued that teachers employ a social constructionist definition of "at risk" which is not at

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all useful to administrators or program designers, because it cannot specify a population at risk or prescribe a specific prevention treatment.

As explained above, our study focused on "at risk" as a classroom phenomenon. We relied on teachers to identify our "at risk" student participants, and then contrasted their views of these children with the views of parents and other school staff. Our conclusions were that in this context, only a social constructionist notion of "at risk" seemed to fit the data. (Richardson-Koehler et al. 1987) However, though teachers play a powerful role in constructing the success or failure of individual students, their responses to students whom they consider to be "at risk" may be constrained by the options provided in their school and district environments. It is to this topic that I now turn.

The Two Districts: Suroeste and Raintree

The two districts in our study differed in certain structural, demographic and political characteristics. Plaza School was located in Suroeste School District, a large district of over 70 elementary schools, 20 junior high/middle schools, and 15 high schools. The total student population was over 55,000. Over half of the students were classified as white. Hispanics constituted the next largest group of students at approximately 30 percent; Black, American Indian, and Asian students made up the difference.

The district was divided into several administrative regions, and included a wide diversity of school populations and programs -- a veritable smorgasbord of educational options. Contributing to this was the fact that magnet schools were the desegregation strategy negotiated with the Office of Civil Rights in the 70s. Magnet schools provided everything from back-to-basics to arts-based curricula.

Suroeste District had a very large (some said too large) administrative staff, including significant minority representation. It was also a highly politicized district, characterized by pluralism and conflict, bordering on unmanageability. Suroeste had not adopted any districtwide instructional program. District influence on Plaza School was most in evidence in the areas of textbook selection, in a new computer assisted instruction system, and in requirements for teacher planning. Otherwise, from Plaza School one derived the impression that school autonomy was the rule in Suroeste District.

However, the school described earlier in which an "at risk" program was being implemented was also part of Suroeste District. But this school was more visible in the district than Plaza for a variety of reasons. It was a bilingual magnet school with a majority of Hispanic students. The district expended considerable effort in attracting the required number of Anglo students to the school, citing the high quality of programs there. Moreover, in Suroeste district, labelling of minorities had long been contended. Classification of minority students for special education was carefully monitored by special Black and Bilingual assessment teams. The teachers knew that labelling such children "at risk" was not a simple decision.

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Raintree District was much smaller, with 11 elementary schools, 3 junior high/middle schools, and 2 high schools. It was located on the outskirts of Suroeste, bordering an Indian reservation. The student population was 60% Hispanic. Raintree District had a dropout rate that was almost twice as high as that of Suroeste District. During the period of our study, the district sponsored an "At Risk" conference, focusing on the drop out problem, which generated recommendations about reaching potential drop-outs at a younger age. Therefore, it seemed fairly unsurprising in Raintree when we suggested a study of "at risk" students at the second and third grade levels.

Raintree District had been exposed to public criticism over the years for overall low student performance on standardized achievement tests. As a result of such pressure, the board and administration of Raintree seemed much more likely than in Suroeste to follow the latest trends in educational reform and to import the most currently popular expert advice. Improvement efforts occupied a great deal of the school board and administration's attention, and Desert View School, long known as a very low-achieving school in the district, was likely to be the target of such efforts.

For example, Madeleine Hunter's EEI program had been a thrust of teacher staff development in recent years. Increased emphasis was placed on curriculum coordination through the development of district objectives in both reading and mathematics. These objectives were accompanied by criterion referenced tests which were intended to evaluate pupil progress, and the efficacy of instruction. The district was implementing Outcomes Based Education, a program sponsored by the Danforth Foundation as a result of the "Nation at Risk" report, on a school-by-school basis. Workshops for principals and teachers had been offered to encourage adoption of this educational model. Raintree had also adopted a career ladder program for teachers which entailed closer evaluation of classroom performance.

To summarize, the contrasts between these two district contexts set the stage for some of the differences between the schools. In many ways, these contrasts fit Weick's (1982) contrast between loosely and tightly coupled organizations. Suroeste was a large, diverse, politicized district in which there was very loose coordination among schools. It was often remarked that Suroeste's magnet schools received an unfair share of resources, but the tradeoff was that magnet schools were more closely scrutinized. A magnet school was the target of the "at risk" program previously described, a program which seemed as much designed to pull the school out of a tight spot as to identify and treat specific children.

Raintree District, on the other hand, was small, with an administration which was reactive to public criticism, grasping at just about every new educational reform which came along and aiming for tight coordination among schools in curriculum, instruction, and teacher performance. Moreover, Raintree District administrators were already using the epidemiological model of "at risk" in their dropout prevention policies.

The Two Schools: Plaza and Desert View

Plaza School and Desert View School were different in size, ethnic make-up and school organization. They were, however, similar in an important way which undoubtedly led to their being recommended to us for the study. Both schools exuded a warm and welcoming atmosphere. The staff in both schools were conscious of what is often called "school climate." Children's work was exhibited around the walls, and we consistently observed a relaxed, enthusiastic student body. The staff frequently recognized positive student behavior and achievement through awards and incentives in both schools. There was also a sense of hope in each of these schools. In our contacts with staff, they put forward a positive, "can do" philosophy.

The principals of both of our schools were similar in their personal and leadership styles. Further, both had been brought in, from what we were told, to reform their respective schools. However, the principal at Plaza, Ms. McGuffey, had had six years to improve her school when the study began; Ms. Bolivar at Plaza was only in her second year of change. Though both of these schools were recommended to us as "effective," neither fared exceptionally well on achievement tests, the usual indicator of effectiveness. What we heard was that these schools performed pretty well, given their student populations. Low scores at Desert View had at least improved in recent years.

There were other important differences between the schools. Plaza School, in Suroeste District, was a small school of only 280 students. It had once served predominantly white, middle class students, many from a nearby affluent neighborhood. The building of new schools, the restructuring of school boundaries, and a desegregation order caused major changes in this population. Now the school was marked by cultural diversity. Students were 24% Black, 19% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 3% American Indian and 50% white and others. Fifty students attended the school with special permission, because their parents liked the school environment. A "developmental" mixed-grade primary classroom headed by one of our participating teachers for many years had been especially popular with parents.

That is, although Plaza was not officially a magnet school, there was something magnetic about it, an attraction to its unique climate of diversity and intimacy. The school population was quite transient, however. The principal reported that over 50% of the students were new to the school during the year of the study. One of the teachers added that some children might "re-enter the school three times."

The Plaza principal, Ms. McGuffey, was a Black woman who appeared assertive in her relationships and assured about her school. When she was first assigned there, it had just been named a deseg school and was considered a problem school in the district. Students fought, the halls were barren, and graffiti was everywhere. Ms. McGuffey was able to bring the school counselor, another experienced woman, with her to Plaza. Together they had worked with faculty, parents, and students to turn the school climate around. The counselor had acted as a co-administrator more than anything else, but the therapeutic language and worldview she brought to the school were different from the usual "management" perspectives of school administrators.

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After six years, the school gave the appearance of having arrived at a somewhat stable state. The principal and counselor had decided that it was time to move from improving school climate to other issues, especially student achievement. Plaza had become caught up in the effective schools movement, not through the district but through a state-sponsored improvement program called "Success Schools." Plaza's enrollment in the program meant that the principal and her staff had been willing to complete a lengthy application and acceptance process through the State Department of Education, and to develop an improvement plan. This official state recognition also contributed to the positive public image of the school.

As part of the "Success Schools" program, the administration had decided to target not student achievement, but parent and community involvement and communication. For instance, Ms. McGuffey was trying to bring the surrounding business community closer to the school. She had invited various business people to her office for coffee, to discuss the school and their perceptions of it. She claimed that the business people had thereby developed a better understanding of the school, and their participation in school improvement had followed. Some had donated money, merchandise or gift certificates for awards and a new student incentive program; a florist provided flowers for the cafeteria tables.

Perhaps as a small school in a very large district, Plaza School did not appear to be particularly vulnerable to district control. The decentralized nature of Suroeste District allowed this little school to develop its own identity over time. The administration had focused on school climate, student behavior, philosophies of therapeutic school management and developmental pedagogy, community involvement, and parent attraction to certain expert teachers, to construct a positive school image. Notice that none of these reforms had involved closer monitoring of teacher performance; teachers at this school maintained a great deal of autonomy. There was also no sense among the staff that "at risk students," and the feeling of urgency generated by that label, were a major preoccupation.

Desert View was a large school of 750 students, in a rapidly growing, predominantly working class area of Suroeste. The student population was 90% "Hispanic" (almost entirely Mexican American), 3% Anglo, and 7% American Indian, Asian and others. The transiency of the school population was lower than at Plaza, but still moderately high. A significant number of students were either born in Mexico, or their parents had been born there. These families often maintained close ties across the border. The school population also included immigrant students from other Latin American countries, such as El Salvador.

The principal, Ms. Bolivar, was fully bilingual in Spanish and English and the former district director of bilingual education. She was in her second year at Desert View when our study began. There was a seriousness of purpose in her demeanor, and she often seemed very harried, but she also displayed a quick sense of humor. Her appointment to the school had been a purposeful act by district administrators. We heard from some sources that prior to Ms. Bolivar's principalship, the school had been considered the "armpit of the district." District

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administrators had high expectations for change at Desert View under Ms. Bolivar's direction. It was interesting that they had chosen another district level administrator for this task.

Ms. Bolivar was both well prepared and idealistic, primed for her role as a school reformer. She was a powerful supporter of Outcomes Based Education, and wanted to make her school an example of this model in action. In her first year she had faced particularly strong opposition from some of the bilingual teachers at Desert View School. These teachers had been operating rather autonomously under the former principal, and this had been a bone of contention with Ms. Bolivar in her former role. She used transfer and hiring practices to build a strong corps of allies among the bilingual teaching staff. Her teacher allies emphasized to us, however, that the school's transformation was not complete, and there were still some teachers at the schools who were resisting change.

Consistent with the OBE model, Ms. Bolivar struggled to overcome a school history marked by tracking of students by achievement. She argued that low-achieving students should be treated with respect and helped to feel "no less than the others." The self-concepts of her students, their feelings and personhood, were a recurrent theme in her interviews. Changing old, harmful patterns meant reorganizing ways of grouping students for instruction. Students were now placed in heterogeneous groups for most activities. However, reading was still ability-grouped. The district's emphasis on standardized achievement tests and Ms. Bolivar's emphasis on student equality sent mixed messages to her teachers.

One of Ms. Bolivar's duties was to closely evaluate teachers as part of the district career ladder program. This further complicated her relationships with teachers. However, Ms. Bolivar had implemented other organizational changes which gave teachers some measure of control over their day-to-day coordination of instruction. Teachers were grouped into teams, and had every Wednesday afternoon free of students to meet for planning. The biggest complications they faced were organizing ability groups for reading in two languages and teaming to provide bilingual instruction in the content areas. With the advice of a university consultant, they had set up a reading program of incredible complexity which shuffled eight groups of students at each grade level from one classroom to another.

Desert View was also an unofficial "magnet" school of sorts. It was the only school in the district which could provide bilingual special education services, so that it attracted many students who were classified both as limited English proficient (LEP) and LD or EMH. The school also provided a bilingual language therapist, and bilingual speech and hearing specialists. The presence of all of these specialists gave the school a clinical flavor which was not present in Plaza, and which seemed more than anything else to affect teacher responses to students considered to be "at risk."

Desert View School, then, did not exhibit the relative obscurity and freedom from district pressures which Plaza School enjoyed. Student achievement scores were still the lowest in the district. The principal was a former district administrator who felt very vulnerable to district pressure. Her reforms at the

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school focused on student grouping and achievement, and teacher coordination of instruction. These were more-than-cosmetic, structural changes which generated complexity, confusion and some resistance.

There was a sense of urgency at Desert View which we did not encounter at Plaza. "Risk" was in the air at the school level. The principal often referred not just to "at risk" but to "high risk" students among her school population. One of our participating teachers had been active in the "at risk" conference held by the distric:. The ubiquitous presence of school specialists provided a clinical atmosphere. There seemed to be few of the political qualms about considering minority students "at risk" that we encountered at the magnet school in Suroeste. After all, the vast majority of the students at Desert View were "minorities"!

Responses to At-Risk Students:

How did these district and school differences seem to influence teacher responses to students they considered to be "at risk"? It seemed that in Suroeste District people were more sensitive to labelling as an issue. The principal at Plaza, Ms. McGuffey, felt that students with academic problems were "at risk," but she also recognized the importance of "social problems." Some youngsters, she thought, had not been given a sufficient opportunity to use expressive language or to develop socially. She worried about labelling these students LD or handicapped, and pushed for in-class alternatives for students with whom teachers were having problems.

Before "at risk" students were referred for any special services at Plaza, teachers were expected to make use of a Teacher Assistance Team (TAT). This was a group of three teachers who met once a week with other teachers to talk about students who might be candidates for special services. They discussed the student's problems and tried to recommend classroom solutions. The principal believed that all students had to be given an opportunity, and that the classroom environment should be modified as needed to provide this opportunity. She wanted the teachers to "try other alternatives" before referring students. She asserted, "You can take a student who is at-risk and work with the student and do a lot...You tell them they can achieve and they will achieve." Therefore, Ms. McGuffey espoused a social constructionist definition of the "at risk" label, and backed it up by delegating to teachers the power to formulate classroom solutions to student problems.

At Desert View, Ms. Bolivar defined an "at risk" child as any student attending school in a setting that takes no account of his/her uniqueness as an individual. "If you don't...take kids from where they're at...when a kid doesn't feel comfortable in a learning environment, or excited, or motivated, or feel like the people with whom they have contact on a daily basis don't respond to what ever background they're coming from, I think you have an at risk situation." This view of "at riskness" as a function not of the child, but of the institution, was particularly apparent in Ms. Bolivar's support for a system that would allow for fair evaluation of student work. She did not believe in assigning students F's, and had proposed that they be replaced by "incompletes." But she added that it was not only the learning of

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children that may be incomplete. The problem must be looked at internally: the adequacy of instruction, the teacher, or the curriculum may be incomplete for these children.

That is, Ms. Bolivar talked a line similar to Ms. McGuffey's about the importance of school adaptation to student differences, rather than student failure. But Raintree District policies were shutting down the possibilities of such school adaptability. These policies required more and more standardization in the delivery and evaluation of instruction.

In addition, Ms. Bolivar's teachers had not been delegated as much power over their responses to "at risk" students as those at Plaza. If a teacher at Desert View had a problem with a student, the teacher generally called for a Child Study meeting. These meetings, facilitated by a school psychology and attended by the LD teacher and the nurse, followed a medical diagnosis-and-treatment model. In their interviews with us, the school psychologist and the nurse both articulated a definition of "at risk students" based on background social characteristics -- contrary to the expressed OBE philosophy of the district and school.

We are not claiming that there was a radical difference between these schools in definitions of "at risk" or responses to "at risk" students. However, the relative autonomy of Plaza School and the adoption of a teacher-run system of problem solving allowed for a less urgent, less clinical, more individualized response to students. Plaza School was too small to be the center for the myriad of special programs directed at Desert View. After initial improvements in school climate, Plaza was free of the high expectations for transformation directed at Desert View, and could settle into simply being a good place for its students and a center of neighborhood activity.

The well-intentioned top-down directions of reform at Desert View, both at the district and the school level, did not seem to be freeing teachers to think slowly and creatively about how to adapt their instruction for certain students. The emphasis even in the regular program, despite the principal's intentions, was on classifying children into certain categories and moving them around the school in groups. Too much time was taken up in managing the complexities of new organizational arrangements, and not enough on planning appropriate responses to students.

Of course, there are flaws in a particularized, individualized perspective on student problems, as well. I would agree with Ogbu (1978) that schools and teachers do not hold the only keys to unlock social patterns of school failure. There are profound difficulties with school and teacher autonomy when school administrators and teachers do not act responsibly toward their students in trouble. In addition, despite the rhetoric of their principal, the teachers at Plaza School too often did not seriously consider parents, especially minority parents, as a resource for student learning.

This is not a simple problem by any means. But administrators and teachers who have retained their autonomy, who act on the belief that they can mutually construct school success with students in the classroom, may be less likely to contract the latest special program-itis. They may be less likely to believe that the notion of "at risk" merits a new categorical

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program at the elementary level, and that they must cooperate in
simplistic or pseudo-medical identifications of students for
special treatment.

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