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ERIC Development Team

Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

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INTRODUCTION

Current approaches to educating at-risk students are the result of several shifts in thinking over the last 35 years. Now, a new way of defining at-risk students is needed for changes in school policy and practice to better meet these students' needs.

DEFINING RISK

Past Definitions. Earlier, risk was considered the result of only a single factor in a youth's life. Over time, policymakers and educators have identified different factors as the factor. Thirty years ago, the problems of school-aged children were attributed to cultural deprivation. As an antidote, children were provided with preschool compensatory enrichment that attempted to create a middle-class culture for them. Subsequently, educational deprivation was considered the primary cause of at-risk status. Resulting educational programs focused on K-12 education, and the lack of fit between poor, minority children and their schools.

Another cause for at-risk status was thought to be the failure of all social institutions charged by society with educating youth. All youth were considered at risk because families, communities, religious organizations, and work places, among other institutions, failed to help individuals achieve their full human potential (Fantini & Weinstein, 1968). This definition suggested the need for basic restructuring of all the social institutions that educate youth.

A final definition of at-risk status is the probability that a student will fail academically, and/or drop out of school. This concept has been operationalized by identifying subpopulations likely to perform poorly or drop out (i.e., students retained in grade). Programmatic responses involved provision of early identification and intervention.

A New Definition. None of the earlier perspectives on at-risk youth conveys precisely enough the full complement of factors that put a student at risk. Since education is a process that goes on both inside and outside of schools, schools are just one of several social institutions that educate--or can fail to educate--our children. Families and communities, along with schools, are the key educating institutions in our society. Any definition of risk needs to be sensitive to these other educating forces.

Thus, young people are at risk, or educationally disadvantaged, if they have been exposed to inadequate or inappropriate educational experiences in the family, school, or community. This definition is intentionally vague about what constitutes "inadequate" or "inappropriate" experiences, as it would be difficult to secure agreement on what would be adequate or appropriate. Still, it provides some broad guidance for assessing the extent to which children can be described as educationally disadvantaged or at risk.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW DEFINITION

The working definition of risk presented above is sensitive to the match between individuals and their environments, without becoming bogged down in fingerpointing over where the blame for a bad match lay. Acknowledging the three sources of influence--school, family, and the community--highlights a critical weakness in most programmatic approaches to serving disadvantaged youth. Concerned solely with changing schools, most programs ignore the impact of the community context or family environment on a child's academic development.
Early intervention programs that are discontinued once children are brought up to par in school are inadequate in the face of the ongoing effects of the school, family, and community. What is needed instead are programmatic strategies that serve at-risk children all through their school careers.

INDICATORS OF RISK

The five social factors discussed below are associated with a youth's exposure to inadequate or inappropriate educational resources and experiences. While these factors do not automatically condemn a youth to school failure, the presence of one or more increases its possibility.
Poverty. Poor children are more likely to perform poorly in school and to drop out than children from higher income households. More than 12 million children under the age of 18--or one in five children--were living in poverty in 1987 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1988). Black and Hispanic children are three to four times more likely to live in poverty than non-Hispanic white children.

Race and Ethnicity. Black and Hispanic students frequently score lower on tests than do whites, and are more likely to drop out of school than are whites. About 19 million children under age 18 were black, Hispanic, or Asian or Pacific Islanders in 1988.

Family Composition. Children growing up in single-parent households frequently spend much of their childhood in poverty (Ellwood, 1988). They score lower on tests than do children living in two-parent homes (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, in press). More than 17 million children under age 18 lived in households without both parents present in 1988 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989).

Mother's Education. Highly educated mothers provide children with educational resources that less-educated mothers cannot; their children do better in school and stay there longer than do the children of mothers who have not completed high school. Nearly 13 million children aged under 18 in 1987, disproportionately black and Hispanic, lived with mothers who dropped out of school.

Language Background. Children with limited proficiency in English, and living in homes where English is not spoken, face barriers to success in schools in which English is the language of instruction. Various estimates suggest that anywhere from 1.2 million to 2.6 million children had limited proficiency in English in 1986.

THE DISTRIBUTION OF AT-RISK YOUTH

Current Distribution. The highest concentrations of at-risk children are in urban centers and rural areas. The poverty rate for children is about 31% in the central cities of metropolitan areas, and about 24% in rural areas (Natriello et al., in press). Children in central cities also are more likely to live in single-parent households (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1986), to have poorly-educated mothers, and to live in homes where English is not spoken (Bruno, 1984; Milne & Gombert, 1983).
The regions of the country with the highest proportions of children at risk of school failure are the South and the Southwest. They include a substantial share of the nation's black and Hispanic populations. Poverty rates are somewhat higher there, and levels of educational attainment are noticeably lower. California, Texas, and New York contain more than two-thirds of the population of limited English proficient children (Milne & Gombert, 1983).

Trends. Using the five factors discussed above as indicators, roughly 40 percent of the school-aged population can currently be considered at risk. This proportion--and the overall number of at-risk youth--are almost certain to increase, if, as anticipated, the fertility rate of whites continues to decline, Hispanic fertility and immigration maintain their high levels, and blacks and Hispanics continue to be disproportionately poor. Barring any dramatic changes in U.S. society, the school-aged population of the future will be more at risk than the school-aged population today.

MATCHING STUDENTS AND SCHOOL

The working definition of risk outlined above emphasizes the match between individuals and their educational environments. In this view, the problem of restructuring schools to meet the needs of at-risk students is one of developing an environment, programs, and services that will provide them with appropriate educational experiences.
Making schools more responsive to at-risk students is extremely difficulty for several reasons. First, all students bring with them unique family backgrounds and school experiences that result in different educational needs. Second, schools are held accountable for a diverse array of goals, ranging from teaching basic skills to preparing youth for work. Third, the economy is demanding a larger pool of highly skilled workers. Fourth, schools will need to educate more at-risk children. Finally, there no best way to educate children, and a great deal of trial and error is still involved.

To make schools more responsive to at-risk students they must have the appropriate

academic and nonacademic programs and services for students. Then they must correctly match students with these programs, and do it quickly, before serious education problems fester and become uncorrectable.

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