Making Learning Meaningful: International Perspectives on Teaching Children Considered to be "At-Risk" for School Failure

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This interdisciplinary cross-cultural research project surveyed teachers in elementary schools in five countries: South Africa, Australia, Jamaica, England, and the United States. This study attempted to define and identify best practices used in teaching children considered to be "at-risk" in these five countries: Three research questions guided this study 1). How do classroom teachers define children "at-risk" in their culture and country? 2). How do classroom teachers identify children "at-risk" in their classrooms? 3). What educational strategies do teachers implement to make learning meaningful for children "at-risk" for academic failure in their classrooms.

An extensive cross-cultural literature review was conducted by the research team and a summary of the most frequently cited best practices for teaching children considered to be "at-risk" from the five countries was presented. In addition, detailed responses by classroom teacher study participants that addressed the three key research questions were also included.[1]

Keywords: International Education, Students "At-Risk", Teacher Preparation

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[1] *Note: Initial data from this research study were included in a presentation given at the International Conference on Education, Research and Innovation (iCERI) in Madrid Spain, November 15-17, 2010 which appears in the conference proceedings CD.*

Introduction

The term "*at risk*" has its genesis in the publication of a report commissioned by the United States Government that was submitted by the *National Commission on Excellence in Education to the United States Department of Education* (Gardner, 1983). The report entitled, *A Nation at Risk*, indicated that the quality of education in the United States was lacking and subsequently the term "at risk" became part of everyday vocabulary in many educational reports and educational reform movements in the United States (Vaughn, Bos and Schumm, 1997). However, recognizing that the term "at risk," was broad in its definition, Swadener and Lubeck (1995), argued that 'since children belonging to specified ethnic and language groups have been added as major 'risk' categories,' they therefore must become a major focus of social concern and public responsibility (Laosa as cited in Swadener, 1995, pp.26-27). Consequently, in the past two decades, there has been increased interest in the well-being and status of children in the United States and Worldwide who might be described "at risk." (Heydon & Iannacci, 2008; Kominski, Jamieson, and Martinez, 2001; Vaughn, Bos & Schumm, 1997).

Since the seminal study in 1983, much has been written about disadvantage, social exclusion and income inequality among children. Indeed, several studies have found that nationally and internationally, child poverty rates among many of these children are higher than those of the general population (Harding, Lloyd & Greenwell 2001; UNICEF 2005). However, while some researchers and educators argue that all children are at risk in some way or another and others emphasize that some children face much higher risks than do other children, simply being "*at risk*" does not imply certainty of failure in education (Anderson-Moore, 2006; Sutherland, 2005).

What is certain however, is that most researchers and educators agree that children who are considered to be "*at risk*" are more likely to have difficulty and struggle in school settings, display poor learning and social skills, demonstrate low self-esteem, have higher incidences of ill health and experience a greater degree of social exclusion and discrimination (Al-Yaman, Bryant & Sargeant, 2002; Tanton, Harding, Daly, McNamara &Yap, 2006).

Despite the volume of research that exists regarding children classified as being "*at risk*", much research remains to be done in understanding and integrating these findings into the pedagogical curriculum for pre-service teachers and providing this information to in-service teachers who may not have easy access to the literature that currently exists.

Context of the Study

This interdisciplinary research project was an outgrowth of Elmhurst College's *Total Quality Enhancement Curriculum Transformation Initiative,* and addresses two of the major tenets of the mission of Elmhurst College; first, engaging students in issues related to globalization and social justice and, second, encouraging students to participate in a wide range of study away programs.

At the present time, there are four specific interdisciplinary international travel and service courses offered at Elmhurst College that provide our pre-service education students with opportunities to engage in teaching children in high needs schools. These courses provides student with the opportunity to teach in South Africa, Australia, Jamaica, England. Several other pre-service courses provide similar teaching opportunities in the United States. In order for

our students to have successful and meaningful experiences in these school sites it is imperative that they have an understanding of the culture of the country in which they teach, and the teaching strategies used by teachers. To address these concerns and to gain insight into these teaching strategies, this research project focused on how teachers define 'risk' cross-culturally and on identifying strategies used by these elementary teachers to teach children considered to be "at-risk" in the South Africa, Australia, Jamaica, England and the United States.

Purpose of Study

This study had several purposes. The first was to examine the cross-cultural context of children "*at risk*" in each of the five countries. The researchers engaged in extensive reviews of the research literature related to children "*at-risk*" in South Africa, Australia, Jamaica, England and the United States to identify best organizational and instructional practices used by teachers who teach students considered to be "*at-risk*." The second purpose was to design and pilot a teacher questionnaire to investigate how primary school teachers in each country defined and identified children considered to be "*at-risk*" in their classrooms. The third purpose was to identify what teaching-learning strategies the teachers in these communities used in their classrooms to make learning meaningful for children previously identified as being "*at-risk*". The final purpose was to infuse these "identified best practice strategies" for teaching children "*at-risk*" into the pre-service teacher education program curriculum at Elmhurst College.

Cross-Cultural Literature Review

After reviewing the research literature in the 5 countries, the research team compiled a summary of both organizational and instructional strategies that were cited most frequently as being the best practices for working with children considered to be "*at-risk.*"

Organizational / Systems Strategies

Cross-cultural organizational / systems strategies cited for better serving children "at-risk" varied across the literature by country. The most frequently cited strategies included:

- Creating partnerships with parents to increase parental involvement in their child's learning; (U.S., South Africa, England, Australia, Jamaica)
- Reducing class size (U.S. & South Africa)
- Providing bilingual classroom instruction and supports (U.S., & England)
- Creating partnerships with community organizations, health organizations and businesses to enhance resources for school programs; (U.S., South Africa, England, Australia, Jamaica)
- Tapping into government grants to assist in supplementing school programs (Australia)
- Providing appropriate instructional materials as identified by respected professionals; (U.S., South Africa, England, Australia, Jamaica)
- Providing classroom teaching assistants to focus on children "at-risk" (Jamaica & England)
- Implementing early intervention by creating school readiness programs for preschoolers; (U.S., South Africa, England, Australia, Jamaica)
- Providing ongoing in-services for classroom teachers on working

with students "at-risk" for school failure; (U.S., South Africa, England, Australia, Jamaica)

- Developing national prevention strategies for HIV/AIDS pandemic; (South Africa)
- Implementing a model of "progressive mainstreaming" for children with learning disabilities and developmental delays; (South Africa)
- Conducting research on the impact of cultural and racial issues on student learning outcomes; (South Africa & England)

Instructional Strategies

Specific cross-cultural instructional strategies considered to be best practices also varied by country. Again, the most frequently cited instructional strategies across cultures included:

- Providing English Language Learning (ELL) specialists in classrooms for children who are bilingual; (U.S., South Africa, England, Australia, Jamaica)
- Integrating technology into classrooms and providing individual instruction; (U.S., Jamaica, South Africa)
- Engaging in cooperative learning activities in small groups; (U.S., South Africa, England, Australia, Jamaica)
- Using Multiple Intelligence Theory and accommodating for individual learning style differences in students; (U.S. & Australia)
- Using problem-based learning activities that connect in meaningful ways to children's lives; (US, South Africa, England, Australia, Jamaica)

- Implementing HIV/AIDS education in the classroom; (South Africa)
- Providing direct teaching of learning strategies and basic skills to children; (U.S., South Africa, England, Australia, Jamaica)
- Creating lessons with precise student learning outcomes; (England & U.S.)
- Providing gender appropriate role models to enhance the personal identity of children; (U.S., South Africa, England, Australia, Jamaica)
- Engaging in peer-mediated instruction (peer coaching-peer tutoring); (U.S., Africa and Jamaica)
- Establishing alternative curriculum-based assessments to better determine student learning outcomes; (U.S., South Africa, England, Australia, Jamaica)
- Establishing culturally connected, caring relationships with students. (U.S., England, Jamaica, South Africa, Australia)

Methodology
Setting

A total of ten publically funded elementary schools from the five countries listed were selected as data collection sites for this research project. The schools were selected because the researchers and Elmhurst College had and continues to have professional and personal relationships with administrators and teachers at each school. Each of the schools selected served a population of children who were considered by teachers and administrators to be "*at-risk*" for school failure. The geographic distribution of ten schools was: South Africa (two

schools), Australia (one school), Jamaica (one school), England (two schools), and the United States (four schools in Chicago and suburbs).

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of twenty (20) elementary school teachers from across five countries who volunteered to participate in this study. The participants were: South Africa (5 teachers), Australia (3 teachers), Jamaica (3 teachers), England (3 teachers), and the United States (6 teachers). The teaching experience of the participants ranged from 2-35 years, and the grade levels taught by the teachers ranged from kindergarten to seventh grade. All twenty teachers indicated that they had previous experience teaching at multiple grades in elementary schools.

Data Collection

Data collection in each country occurred across a one week time period at each school commencing in June of 2007 and ending in July of 2009. An interview questionnaire that addressed the research questions that guided our study was developed and piloted before the complete data set was collected. There were a total of 17 open ended questions in the questionnaire. (See appendix 1: At-Risk Questionnaire).

The interview questionnaire included four sections: Section I. Demographic questions designed to obtain relevant information about the teacher respondents; Section II. Questions asking teachers to define children "at-risk"; Section III. Questions asking teachers how they identify children "at-risk"; Section IV. Questions asking teachers to identify instructional strategies for teaching children "at-risk".

Classroom teachers at each school site in the 5 countries were interviewed by faculty research team members during the time period of the study away programs for pre-service teachers who engaged in teaching and service work within each of the school buildings. Individual teacher interviews took place over lunch periods and before and after school. Each interview took about 45 minutes to administer to each teacher. Faculty research team members collected qualitative research data by transcribing each teacher's answers to the open-ended questions on the interview questionnaire.

Data Analysis

We chose a qualitative, semi-structured interview process because qualitative data sources offered the opportunity to capture the expressed views of participants, to describe that information and develop themes, and then to situate those themes within the larger context of our research questions (Creswell, 2008). After reviewing each participant's interview questionnaire, the researchers met to establish and condense preliminary themes that emerged from the data into sub-themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Stake, 2005). Using inductive open coding to search for patterns in the data, commonalities across themes separately identified by the respondents were identified (Wolcott, 1994). These multiple sub-themes were collapsed into broader global themes that were shared across participants. Ultimately, the data were integrated across all cases to elicit findings in response to the research questions. Our collaborative analysis process and our use of the multiple participant perspectives of the teachers represented in their own words help make our interpretations of the data meaningful and trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The common themes and distinctive cultural responses from the teachers in each specific country were in the results section below.

Results

The results from the teacher questionnaires in each of the 5 countries will be described as they relate to the specific research questions that guided this study.

Research Question # 1. How do teachers define children considered to be "at-risk?"

All teachers were asked to define children who they considered to be "at-risk". After collapsing the cross-cultural data sets there were 7 primary themes or risk categories that emerged from the 20 teacher interviews conducted across the 5 countries. A list of each of these 7 risk factors and specific statements from teachers interviewed in each of the 5 countries will follow. See Table 1.

Socio-economic risk factors.
All 20 teacher participants indicated that children whose lives were impacted by some sort of socio-economic condition were more likely to be "at risk" for not being successful in school. For example, teachers in the United States, Australia and South Africa reported that many children who came from "low-income families" and "children who are living in poverty" were more likely to be children they considered "at risk." Teachers in Jamaica mentioned children "who had not had breakfast" as a risk factor, while

Table 1: Cross-Cultural Definitions of Risk

Definition of Risk	South Africa	Australia	Jamaica	England	United States (Chicago)
Socio-economic Risk-Factors	A child living in poverty	Children who are affected by their socio-economic, gender or skill-based level	A child who has not had breakfast	A child who is neglected	A child from a low-income family
Academic Risk-Factors	A child who exhibits delays in academic skills (writing, reading, speaking and numeracy)	A child who is not achieving his/her full potential; underachieving	A child who is not functioning at his/her grade level academically	A child who is two or more levels behind academically	A child not making grade-level benchmarks
Social Risk-Factors	A child who is emotionally withdrawn	A child who is discontented	A child who is not functioning at his/her grade level socially	A child who is withdrawn or who exhibits emotionally aggressive behavior or a child who is emotionally withdrawn	A child who has social / family circumstances that affect learning
Physical Risk-Factors	A child who is physically neglected (violence in the home), neglected, or emotionally ignored	A child who is neglected		A child who is physically, sexually, or emotionally abused	Life factors that influence school success (no parent involvement, foster care, abuse)
Developmental Risk-Factors	A child who has limited English speaking skills		A child with difficulty reading		No access to literature at home
Family Risk-Factors	A child from a single parent	A child from a different cultural background			A child whose parent/parents are not involved at school
Health Risk-Factors	A child who is physically ill			A child with poor hygiene	A child who appears unkempt
Attendance Risk-Factors	A child who fails to attend school		A child with inconsistent school attendance	A child who has erratic school attendance or is excessively tardy	A child who lacks the "tools" to be successful in school A child with a low record of attendance

teachers in England mentioned children who were "neglected" were most frequently "at risk" for failure.

Academic risk factors.
All 20 teachers included a child's failure to meet some recognized academic assessment or academic criteria in their definition of risk. Most teachers indicated that delays in a child's academic achievement or a child's failure to meet benchmarks, including exhibiting "delays in academic skill areas" including writing, reading, speaking/language and numeracy, (teachers in South Africa and America), or "not functioning at grade level" and "being delayed one or two levels academically," were strong indicators of a child's potential for being *"at risk."* (Teachers in Australia, Jamaica and England).

Social-behavioral risk factors. The influence or presence of some negative social factors contributing to a child being "at-risk" was also a common response for all 20 teachers. Some of the characteristics of social-behavioral risk factors included: "children who were emotionally withdrawn," (teachers in England and South Africa), "children who presented with behavior problems and were overly aggressive," (teachers in the United States and Jamaica), and "children who were discontented" (teachers from Australia).

Attendance risk factors. Fifteen teachers from all five countries mentioned erratic, inconsistent attendance or failure to attend school at all were major risk factors leading to academic failure.

Physical risk factors. Twelve teachers from three countries; South Africa, the United States and England, mentioned physical risk factors as part of their definition of risk.

For example, "a child living with violence in the home" (South Africa), "a child who is physically or sexually abused" (United States, South Africa and England), and "a child who is emotionally neglected or ignored" were specific teacher's comments reported by teachers from South Africa and England. Teachers from the United States described negative "life factors (e.g., no parent involvement, abuse and being in foster care) as physical risk-factors.

Family risk factors. Six teachers from 2 countries mentioned family factors in their definition of risk. Three teachers in South Africa mentioned "a child being from a single parent family" as a risk factor, while three teachers from the United States described "a child whose parents are not involved at school" as being "at risk."

Health risk factors. Five teachers mentioned health factors in their definition of risk. Four of the teachers in South Africa highlighted the "physically ill child" as one who is "at risk," one teacher in England talked about "poor overall hygiene" as a risk factor for children, and a teacher from the United States indicated that a child who "appears unkempt" was one who was "at risk."

Research Question # 2. How do teachers identify children considered to be "at-risk?"
The second research question focused on understanding how teachers identified children they considered to be "at-risk" in their classroom settings. There were a variety of methods, from informal strategies to formal assessment procedures that were cited by the teachers as being useful for identifying children "at risk." See Table 2.

Table 2: Methods for Identifying Children Considered to be "At Risk"

Method	South Africa	Australia	Jamaica	England	United States (Chicago)
Initial Identification	Initial evaluation of child by school personnel	Interview all incoming children	Informal observation		ISEL Test given to determine children "at risk."
Informal Identification	Teacher observation of child in classroom		Teacher observes anti-social behavior refers to counselor	Teacher observes child in class and completes "Cause for concern" form. Identifies concerns	Referral and anecdotal data from previous grade teacher
Formal Testing		Administer an oral language test Administer age-appropriate "word-recognition" test	National tests at grades 1, 3, 5, & 6	Administer academically appropriate tests.	DIBELS Literacy Test of letter recognition and word fluency) Woodcock Johnson Test administered
Placement after Identification	Appropriate Educational Specialists (O.T., P.T., Social worker, Speech therapist, Special educator) are contacted	Establish baseline literacy	Placement in computer-based reading programs	Children 2 levels behind are placed on "Special Education Register and served either within or outside school	Placement based on test results
External Input	Teachers negotiate with specialists an appropriate intervention process or program to use in classroom			Child removed from home and placed in foster care	Child study team can be requested
Other Assessments		Administer a series of "kinesthetic assessments "Explore "number-sense" of children			Intervention provided after study team assessments completed

Informal Strategies for Identifying Children "At-Risk"

All 20 teachers interviewed across the five countries responded that their primary role in the identification and assessment process for children "at-risk" involved the following: making careful classroom observations of individual children; collecting data on students; discussing information and knowledge about a child's strengths and needs with their school study teams and specialist staff; and working directly on the skills and specific areas of need identified with students individually in their classrooms. Once classroom teachers identified a child who was considered "vulnerable" (England) or "at-risk", a referral process was then put into place which involved utilizing more formal assessment procedures and tools.

Formal Procedures for Identifying Children "At-Risk"

Each of the 20 teachers interviewed reported that there were initial formal and ongoing assessment and referral protocols for identifying, assessing and referring children considered to be "at-risk" at their schools. Australian teachers conducted initial screening interviews on all 4-5 year old preschool children as they entered school. They established a literacy baseline by administering oral language and word recognition tests, numeracy baselines, and conducted kinesthetic assessments focusing on balance, coordination and directionality. Based on this initial screening process, children who presented with the greatest needs were referred to the Special Education Division within the district.

Teachers in England reported placing "vulnerable" children on a Children At Risk Register and monitoring their social-emotional needs by meeting every 2-3 weeks with parents. Children who were 2 or more levels behind academically were put on a Special Education Needs Register that had three tiers of intervention ranging from services provided within the school classroom, services provided outside the school and finally culminating in a legal statement of Special Education Needs being created.

Jamaican teachers reported that they administer formal diagnostic tests in grade 1, 3, 4 and 6 each year to monitor the academic progress of children. Children who fail these tests can be selected to participate in a computer-based Reading remediation type program.

Teachers in South Africa reported that once teacher observations of a child were completed and there seemed to be delays in either academic or emotional levels of that child, the building principal then contacted appropriate specialists (psychologist, social worker, counselor, special education teacher) to do further evaluation. Referral for ongoing services were then made based on the specialist evaluation results.

Finally, in the United States, the 6 teachers interviewed reported that they administered several formal assessments in the reading-literacy area, and used standardized test scores to identify children "at-risk". Much like the teachers in South Africa, US teachers reported that referrals to specialists were made on the recommendation of child study teams located in each school building.

Research Question # 3. What types of remedial programs and instructional strategies do teachers use to make learning meaningful for children "at-risk?"

The third research question asked all teacher participants in this study to identify

any remedial programs that their schools offered for teaching children determined to be "at-risk". It also inquired about any specific instructional strategies that teachers used in their classrooms to make learning meaningful for children they considered to be "at-risk". A brief description of the various remedial programs and instructional strategies identified by the 20 teachers interviewed will follow. See Table 3.

Remedial Programs

Vaughn, Bos and Schumm (1997) describe remedial programs (remediation) as "additional instruction for students who do not demonstrate competency in basic skills in Reading, writing, and mathematics at an expected rate." In both South Africa and Australia teachers reported that literacy resource centers that provided base-line literacy testing at the start of each school year for all grade 1 students were established in their schools. Students who were considered to be "at-risk" for language and literacy were scheduled to be seen weekly in the literacy centers. These children received individual and small group tutoring on reading, writing, spelling and speaking skills. There were also qualified teachers at each of the two schools who worked in the academic areas in which children were performing at or below grade level. These "remedial programs" were conducted on a part-time basis (3 days weekly).

In the United States and England teachers reported that they used reading tutors and reading coaches in Reading Recovery Programs at their schools. They also reported that after school homework clubs were available to students who needed extra assistance with homework and parent workshops were offered to encourage family participation in supporting their children's academic and emotional development at home.

Jamaican teachers reported using computer based remedial programs to assist in bringing up the reading and math levels of their students. Other types of remedial programs listed by teachers included social skills programs (Australia, England), dance and music programs (Australia), and behavioral specialist consultation (England).

Instructional Strategies Used by Classroom Teachers

Australian teachers. Specific instructional strategies that the three Australian teacher respondents reported using in their classrooms to make learning meaningful for children identified as being "at-risk" included: making individual modifications based on a child's ability level; engaging in small group work; providing one-on-one tutoring using parent volunteers; offering rewards programs for individual achievement; and working with specialist staff on incorporating programs specifically to address a child's needs. All three Australian teachers reported that they felt they received adequate formal support / assistance in working with children "at-risk" in their classrooms. They indicated that they received the following types of assistance: reading assistance vouchers; reading, writing and numeracy aides for children in grade 2; an Intervention program for children in grades 4-7; and a government grant for literacy for upper primary aged students grades 6 & 7.

Jamaican teachers. The three Jamaican teachers reported using the following instructional strategies to address the learning

needs of children they identified as being "at-risk" in their classrooms: engaging in cooperative learning groups to help with anti-social behaviors of students; using individual computer programs to address problems students have in the areas of literacy and numeracy skill development; and offering a group activity called "peer counseling" which was very effective in assisting students to readily relate to their peers. The three teachers reported that they did receive some formal support / assistance in working with children "at-risk" in their classrooms. They also indicated that they received games designed to support literacy development in their classrooms.

English teachers. Specific instructional strategies for students considered to be "vulnerable" or "at-risk" used in the classrooms by the three teachers in England included: small group and one-on-one instruction; differentiated tasks, assignments, classes; teacher assistant (required in every class for Year 3 and below); circle time to discuss behavioral issues; confidence building/positive reinforcement; scaffolding concepts; and the use of visual prompts. These teachers also reported that "venerable" students also received the following formal support/assistance when needed: speech and language therapists, occupational and physical therapists, behavior specialist, educational psychologist, parent support advisors, and numeracy and literacy programs.

South African teachers. Specific instructional strategies that the South African teacher respondents reported using in their classrooms to make learning meaningful for children identified as being "at-risk" included: creating ability grouping for math,

reading and writing using hands-on materials; pairing above average learners with struggling learners (peer-mediated learning); making individual modifications of curriculum based on a child's ability level; engaging in small group work; providing one-on-one after school tutoring using teacher and parent volunteers; offering rewards programs (stickers or praise) as a motivational tools for individual achievement; working with specialist staff on incorporating programs specifically to address a child's needs in the classroom; repeating tasks across developmental domains using a variety of approaches (sensory, manipulative, auditory, visual) and breaking down learning tasks into teachable steps (task analysis).

All five South African teachers indicated that they received the following types of classroom assistance in teaching children identified as being "at-risk," a limited amount of In-service professional development training opportunities on a variety of topics including: inclusion, anti-bias curriculum and part-time language aids in classrooms in grades Pre-K-3 to help work with children who are non-English speakers when they come to school.

Table 3: Remedial programs and instructional strategies used to make learning meaningful for children "at-risk"

Method	South Africa	Australia	Jamaica	England	United States (Chicago)
Remediation	One-on-one after school tutoring	Small group work		Small group work and one-on-one tutoring	High school tutors in one-on-one instruction
Formal Intervention	Modifications to curriculum for individual students	Specialist staff for child's specific needs	Instructional strategies developed by school head and classroom teacher	Teacher observes child in class and completes "Cause for concern" form. Identifies concerns	Whole group phonics and phoneme awareness program (Haggerty Program)
Informal Interventions	Place "above-average" learners with 'struggling' learners	Heterogeneous small group activities	Peer counseling and positive feedback about positive social behaviors	"Circle-time" to discuss behavioral issues	Learning buddies
Reward Systems		Offering rewards (e.g., book selection, free time)	Participate in co-operative games and role-play activities		
Other Remedial /Reinforcement Strategies	Create ability groups who use hands-on materials for math, Reading and writing activities	Kinesthetic activities (physical activities)	Co-operative learning games (chess, dominoes, cards)	Use scaffolding concepts to engage learners	Use manipulatives for Reading, math, writing

U.S. teachers. Specific instructional strategies to make learning meaningful for children identified as being "at-risk" reported by the six U.S. / Chicago area teacher respondents included the following: providing direct one–on–one instruction; whole group phonics and phonemic awareness programs, small group work on basic skills; guided reading; peer-tutoring (Learning Buddies); and setting up learning centers that address different learning styles of children.

In one or more Chicago school settings, high school students assisted with students in one-on-one and cooperative groups in the classroom; used math manipulative to help students comprehend math concepts at a faster rate; taught techniques of appropriate behaviors and expectations; provided the predictability of daily activity that many children do not get in their home lives; used graphic organizers; used cooperative learning groups to teach abstract concepts that require introducing learning vs. mastery-learning; used task analysis to break down learning tasks into teachable steps, and provided structure in the daily schedule of activities for students.

Four of the six U.S./Chicago-area teachers indicated that they received the following type of direct classroom assistance in teaching children identified as being "at-risk": Reading coaches were supplied, and children identified as being "at-risk" were either excused from the classroom for tutoring or supported by a tutor in the classroom (N=3).

Discussion

When asked to define a child "at risk," all twenty teachers identified similarities among the backgrounds and characteristics of children of the same age, the same grade, that contribute to placing a child "at risk." In particular, socio-economic, academic, social–behavioral status of children were mentioned by all teacher participants as being key factors in determining which children were "at-risk" for academic failure. Poor school attendance and physical risk factors also seemed to be critically important variables used by teachers to define children "at risk" in their classrooms. All twenty teachers agreed that they face similar challenges in doing what is needed to meet the diverse needs of these children. Examples of some of the common challenges include a high student-teacher ratio in classrooms, a lack of sufficient personnel to accommodate the specific learning needs of children in classrooms, and a lack of good medical follow-up on children who needed it.

All twenty teachers reported using both informal and formal measures to identify children "at-risk" in their classroom and administered a variety of formal developmental screenings and assessment protocols to determine specific areas of delay in their students. More importantly, to gain greater insight into the needs of "at risk" children, they regularly engaged in specific observations of these children in their classrooms. All teachers in this study tried to mitigate the recognized factors that contribute to a child being "at-risk" by utilizing a variety of instructional strategies in their classroom.

Ten instructional strategies emerged as the most commonly utilized strategies across the data sets from all 5 countries. They included:

1) Providing small group instruction when teaching basic skills (e.g., reading, numeracy)

2) Making modifications to curriculum to meet the needs of individual students and differentiated instruction
3) Using cooperative learning groups (e.g., reading out loud)
4) Using peer-tutoring by pairing above average learners with struggling learners
5) Scaffolding concepts by breaking down learning tasks into teachable steps (e.g., using task analysis)
6) Presenting graphic organizers to students (e. g., visual prompts)
7) Engaging in hands-on learning experiences including using math manipulatives, creative drama / role-play to act out concepts, and computer programs to support basic skill practice and application
8) Providing direct phonics instruction (e.g., focusing on phonemic awareness)
9) Utilizing reading tutors
10) Providing structure by engaging in predictable daily classroom routines (e.g. daily calendar and schedule written on chalk board).

It is interesting to note that all of these ten most used instructional strategies were consistent with the best practice strategies identified in the research literature bases across the five countries studied.

The levels of formal assistance (i.e., qualified teacher-aides) provided to classroom teachers to assist in working with children considered to be "at-risk" varied greatly between each of the countries. The most consistent and universal form of assistance provided to the teachers in the study were remediation programs in language and literacy development. Using parent and community volunteers who acted as reading coaches or tutors for individual or small groups of delayed readers and writers occurred in each of the 5 countries. Some teachers in the United States & England reported being able to utilize specialists in speech pathology, occupational and physical therapy, educational psychology and social work to assist them in meeting the needs of these children in their schools. While other teachers in Australia and South Africa indicated that classroom aides were able to assist them in providing more individualized instruction to students "at-risk".

Teacher participants in this study were also asked to identify what specific information they would like to have known before working with a child "at-risk" in their classrooms. Their responses included the following:

- Basic background information about a child's family
- Knowledge about factors that influence a child's learning (medical issues, illness, hearing, vision, auditory processing)
- Knowledge about where a child is functioning academically
- Knowledge about factors that impede a child emotionally (e.g., socio-economic status, physical abuse, and neglect)
- Knowledge of "how" to adapt their curriculum to meet the individual needs of a child "at-risk"
- Ongoing professional development that focused on children "at-risk"

Perhaps not surprisingly, and most encouraging, it was interesting to note at all twenty teachers interviewed indicated that they believe it is ultimately the classroom

teacher who makes the most impact on the success of children considered to be "at-risk" for school failure. This perspective was captured in the following comments from several of the teachers in the five countries we studied. A teacher in Jamaica stated:

I believe that teaching is a calling. If you do not love to teach you should consider this before you go into the profession. Our students have many needs and they are looking to their teachers to assist them in tangible ways.

A classroom teacher in a middle school in Chicago, Illinois put it this way:

A teacher needs to really evaluate his or her commitment to teaching students considered to be "at-risk. These students often require 2-3 times the amount of a teacher's time and attention. It is the teacher's job to identify and remediate learning gaps in students and do so in creative and caring ways so that students stay motivated to learn and develop their potentials.

Finally a teacher in a Junior Primary School in South Africa commented:

All children are different and special so they should be treated accordingly with love. Also every child can learn and very child must learn. I believe school is all about children and helping them learn. Therefore teachers should do everything they can to help each child be successful.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the sample of teachers was not a random sample but one of convenience. Our faculty research team members had developed relationships with school personnel in each of the five countries and utilized teachers in these settings who volunteered to par-ticipate in the interviews. Second, the sample size was small (N=20) so this would limit the generalizations of results to other settings. Third, the qualitative nature of the teacher interview data collected also limits its generalizability across settings. Finally, the authors readily recognize the importance of communication as it relates to a child's ability to speak, read, write and listen in an academic setting. Thus if this study was done again, survey questions would be re-written or added so as to elicit specific teacher responses reflective of each of these four communication areas that may put children 'at risk" for school failure.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this research project was to investigate how teachers in elementary schools in five countries: South Africa, Australia, Jamaica, England and the United States define and identify children 'at-risk' and the best practices used in teaching children considered to be "at-risk". A secondary purpose was to embed identified theory and best practice strategies for teaching children "at-risk" into our interdisciplinary international teaching and service courses in South Africa, Australia, Jamaica, England and the United States. By including these findings into our teacher education program curriculum, pre-service students could use what was learned from the project when they travel and teach in these schools. The findings of this study have provided the researchers with "real-life" data we can incorporate into our pre-service curriculum.

We have put an increased focus on teaching our pre-service education students how to engage in differentiation of instruction and curriculum and how these adaptations can better meet the needs of all the di-

verse students in their classrooms. Second, we have concentrated on expanding our students' knowledge of both informal and formal assessment procedures for identifying students "at-risk" in their classrooms, including the administration of specific diagnostic tests in reading, math, adaptive behavior, and curriculum-based assessment measures. Third, we have infused five aspects of cultural competence into our international service-learning and instructional methods courses. These are: 1). an awareness of one's own cultural limitations; 2). Openness, appreciation, and respect for cultural differences; 3). Viewing intercultural interactions as learning opportunities; 4). the ability to use cultural resources in interventions; and 5). Acknowledging the integrity and value of all cultures (Lynch & Hanson, 1992, p.356). The authors believe that in order to attain optimum communication and interaction with all children, pre-service teacher education students must learn and become comfortable with the above five critical aspects of cultural competence.

When we began this project, we tried not to forget "who" we were studying. We tried to remember that every day teachers teach children "at-risk" who go to schools all around the globe. Sadly, for some children, simply attending school or not being able to go to school puts them at even greater risk. To keep this perspective, we adopted the ecological systems perspective on developmental risk championed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Garbarino (1992). Their work encouraged us to "look beyond the individual" and to the environment for both the questions and the explanations about individual behavior and development. This research project allowed us to enter the classrooms of those who strive daily to

make a difference in children's lives and consequently we have become better able to understand the challenges that all teachers face as they attempt to reach and teach all children around the world.

Throughout the implementation of this research, we were constantly reminded that a child's development results from the interplay of biology and society, from the characteristics that children bring with them into the world, and perhaps most importantly, by the way the world treats them. Further, the results of this study certainly echo the thoughts of Dunn and Debollo (1999) and Dunn and Blake (2008) who make the point that "teachers are unlikely to impact successfully on poverty and how children's parents behave, however when provided with adequate financial and intellectual resources, they can certainly teach them to read well, to speak their language fluently and succeed in learning."

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