

Why They Are Labeled “At Risk” Children

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Abstract

This paper explores generic factors that prevent children from normally reaching their full potentials. Early childhood is a period when children should normally grow in an environment which is secured, friendly, filled with warmth, and nurturing to enhance the holistic growth of all children. There are many theories, ideologies, and policies to define what good education is and the crucial need for each child to be given the opportunity to be educated. The theory on critical and sensitive periods must not be forgotten when it comes to children’s education. Unfortunately, this is not the case around the world. The increasingly cultural, linguistic, social, and emotional differences in society hinder the education of many children. This paper will analyze and examine the label “at -risk” children and the trends that pose negative rather than positive opportunity for children to get adequate education to become successful in life. It will focus on the broad factors such as poverty, educational, health, homelessness, that are ubiquitous to at risk children across developed and less developed societies. The paper would examine the impact of these risk factors and suggest strategies to help children out of such predicaments.

A Generic Understanding of the Word “At Risk”

Early development focuses on Milestone achievements and later development in life in the following various domains of language, social, physical, socio emotional and cognitive development. According to Maslow ‘s theory, each individual move through a hierarchical level of physiological, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization levels for success to be achieved. Maslow's theory requires that everyone’s needs be satisfied at the lower levels before they progress to the higher, more complex level (McLeod, 2018). Importantly, every person is capable and has the desire to move up the hierarchical rung towards a level of self-actualization. The Etymology of the word “At Risk” comes from French risqué, meaning to be in peril. There are synonymous words such as danger, jeopardize, imperil, endanger, ventured, at hazard that can allow us to understand what “at risk” truly entails.

According to Glossary of Education Reform (2013), the term at- risk may be applied to students who face circumstances that could jeopardize their ability to complete school, such as homelessness, incarceration, teenage pregnancy, serious health issues, or domestic violence. In education arena, the term is constantly and interpreted in various ways to suit the policy in place of the institution or organization. Academically, it may refer to learning disabilities, low test scores, disciplinary problems, grade retentions, or other learning-related factors that could adversely affect the educational performance and attainment of some students. The reason being that it comes with a negative connotation. An at-risk child are considered not capable of transitioning successfully into adulthood or one who might not be able to fulfil the requirements of certain rites of passage in the society. They may not secure a good job to become financially stable and contribute to the society in a positive manner. It therefore seems inevitable that with such circumstances many

unfortunate children are often labeled “at- risk”. Hence, the term at risk is not a label any parent would want for their children.

What Are Factors That Can Contribute to Children Being At Risk?

Early childhood education is a very crucial time for every child. It is a time expected for a child to grow socially, emotionally, physically and cognitive stable. Most parents would want and look forward to the different developmental milestones in their children. Harro, (2009), on the cycle of socialization, points out that before we were born, we had no choice as to where we will be born, the religion, gender, age or race that we wanted as our identity. Consequently, when children are born they come like clean slate, they are innocent, no prejudice, no blame and have no bias ideas or opinions. However, through the socialization process a child learns from parents, caregivers, and peers through reciprocal socialization process. Through interaction the child learns self -awareness, self -concept and self- efficacy. In addition, according to Bronfenbrenner, during this sensitive, critical, and crucial period of childhood children develop an awareness of social norms and practices and values. The influence of the microsystem, macrosystem, ecosystem and chronosystem cumulatively affect the developing child positively and negatively (Santrock, 2011). Across the nations of the world many children are exposed to one or more of the risk factors that put them at risk to become successful.

The Risk Factors That Might Impede Success.

In early childhood education, children spend more than 7000 hours in kindergarten to elementary school and while in school, the school helps to wean children from coddling at home and trains them for what society expects from them. School as a transmitter of society’s culture and norms prepares the child’s mind to appreciate the dominant ideas and values of the society’s culture. The paramount risk factor for family crises that lead to family breakdown and child abandonment in Africa, Asia and Latin America is poverty. Extreme poverty by continents is indicated to be 383 Million in Africa, 327 Million in Asia, 19 Million in South America, 13 Million in North America, 2.5 Million in Oceania , and 0.7 Million in Europe (UNICEF, 2011). Such figures are indicative that this is a serious inevitable outcome that impedes children from being successful in school. According to Roser & Ortiz-Ospina (2017), they define poverty in terms of children who live in households where the per capita income falls below 1.90 international dollar as stipulated by the World Bank. Their report suggest that 897 million people, or 12.7% of the world’s population, live below the international poverty line in 2012. Statistical analysis they present indicates that in the United States, the official poverty rate for 2012 stood at 15 percent based on the national poverty line which is equivalent to around \$16 per person per day. Also, Roser and Ortiz note that of the 46.5 million Americans living in poverty, 20.4 million live under half the poverty line. If parents are poor, it affects the children indirectly.

When it comes to Africa the phase of poverty is unfathomable as Ferreira & Shaohua, (2016), noted that Sub-Saharan Africa is home to both the highest incidence of poverty and to the largest absolute number of poor people, with South Asia as the region with the second most poor, followed by East Asia and the Pacific. Furthermore, according to Census Bureau Data analysis of different forms of poverty on various ethnic groups of the nation, they acknowledge that several children below 18 years lived in deep poverty. Similarly, Semega, and Kollar (2016), indicate that nearly

8.2 percent of all children lived in a household with meagre income and three percent of children spend at least half of their childhood in deep poverty. Understanding poverty means an insight into the ripple or domino effect it has on an individual. Consequently, no matter how effective the teacher and school are in transmitting the curriculum a child who comes from a poor background finds it hard coping and meeting the demands of schooling. Many children come to school with varied experiences that are tumultuous and unhealthy to their holistic development. Recognizing risk factors may be difficult or challenging for some teachers who might not have come from a chaotic impoverished background experienced by the children in their classes. The goal is for teachers to be intentional and purposeful but with opened eyes to see and understand those vulnerable children under their care who are exposed to societal prevalent social problems.

Living in poverty leads to homelessness for some children. Statistics show about 1.5 million of children and youth in the U.S are homeless at some point each year (NCHE, 2014). These children would be at risk of failure when they are worried about where to sleep or what they must eat the next day. Most of them would miss school because of no transportation and inability to afford for basic school requirements. Nothing breaks my heart like seeing a woman with her child clung to her back by the street side with a piece of cartoon paper with “We are Hungry, Please Help”. Such children in the long run develop adjustment problems, have moderate to severe and chronic health problems, and less access to medical and dental care.

Another at -risk factor that affects children is living in a single-parent family. This seems to be a new phenomenon. Most single parents are teenagers who may have dropped out of school and not ready for parenthood. It becomes problematic if the single parent is not literate enough to have a good job. Most single parents cannot afford to foot the numerous bills such as car notes, rents, utility, and insurance. Consequently, they need to work one or more jobs daily. Struggling to raise children with limited financial support can be very stressful for a single parent as they try to make ends meet. The sad result is these parents do not have the time to see their children grow physically, cognitively, or socially responsible. Most often, the children become latched key children and of course they do what they want without adult supervision. Circumstances as these can immensely increase adverse outcomes such as insecure or avoidant attachment problems in children (Santrock, 2011). Poor parenting style coupled with stress tend to make parents become very indulgent and neglectful and children are left to figure out things on their own. Lack of parental involvement can be detrimental to young children’s success because a child’s cognitive development does not occur in isolation and as Vygotsky points out social interaction is the best way for cognitive, social, and emotional development (Wortham, 2002).

Socioemotional Factors

Undeniably, young children need proper good nutrition. This is not provided most of the time when busy working poor single parent resort to fast food for their children. This might eventually lead to obesity and other complications that come with being overweight. Failure to provide for those essential nutritional needs of a child may place them at risk of reaching their full potentials. Kwashiorkor and Erasmus are common nutritional plight of African children. UNICEF works in more than 190 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The challenges children face in the East Asia and the Pacific, are factors that impede needed development. The melancholic stories of parents asked to leave their children with

disability die because they could not afford money for expensive surgery are pathetic. Some children with disabilities have many abilities, but are often excluded from society by discrimination and lack of support, leaving them among the most invisible and vulnerable children in the world (UNICEF, 2013). Their marginalization only increases with discrimination and undoubtedly this could have a very big negative impact on the children. These children definitely would grow up with no sense of self-worth, hopelessness, and they would feel like they do not belong anywhere (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Consequently, these children would not be able to develop autonomy and independence as they are able, as well as confidence and pride in their competence.

Child maltreatment is another crucial at-risk factor to consider. Maltreatment is an umbrella term that encompasses abuse and neglect. Generally, child maltreatment or abuse are unambiguously deliberate and intentional words and actions that cause harm to a child; such as demeaning, humiliating, and deriding a child. Forms of abuse could be sexual abuse, physical abuse that inflict considerable pain, verbal abuse that can scar a child's emotion for a long time. According to Levine & Munsch (2016), child neglect was on the rise with about 78.3% of the victims reported in 2012 were neglect, and 18.3% were physical abuse. 9.3% sexual abuse and 8.5% were psychological abuse. It is worthy to note that while many of these risk factors vary from nation to nation. A case of child abuse is easily reported in seconds in the United States, while children in other parts of the world are left without laws protecting them against such abuses. The abuses are glaring but nothing is done to alleviate or solve the problem. It becomes a disheartening situation as children are doomed with their predicament. In most African countries due to abject poverty of the population, they are so preoccupied with their own suffering that they pay no attention to the victimized children. In addition, it is heart wrenching when for no apparent reasons some parents neglect their children. They fail to keep up with their parental responsibilities to provide affection, health, education, safe shelter, unconditional love, and basic human needs for survival. Consequently, these children become mendicants, steal food, become aggressive, absent or always late to school, and become more matured for their ages. Nevertheless, it is important for teachers and parents to note that the relationship between a child and their primary caretaker influences the child's perception of themselves, how they feel about their body, how they learn, act, behave, think, and how they interact with the world, would flourish in a loving caring atmosphere rather than an abusive and hostile environment.

Social and emotional learning is essential for all children. Unfortunately, some children experience domestic violence which is also a risk factor in their development. Children exposed to violence may develop mental health problems, impacting their ability to develop appropriate social emotional skills (Huth-Bocks, Lavensky, & Semel, 2001). Parents and children may develop irritability in a home dominated with domestic violence. When there is tension and animosity in a home between the parents it transcends to the children, who may become aggressive and bullies and abusive in future. While kids some may be resilient to the damaging effect of adversity at home others would be adversely affected in all aspects of their socio emotional development.

Health risk factors

Diseases such as HIV / AIDS in some countries have left children at risk of finishing school. These innocent children contract the illness from mother-to-child transmission during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding. In the bid to look for more financial support women had to prostitute

which resulted with many children born with the AIDS and many children were left to grow as orphans. With lack of Sex education many villages were almost wiped out by this monstrous disease before it could be brought under control. Today the prevalence of teenage pregnancies because of financial exploration keeps adding to the statistics of AIDS and those who drop out of school. In a UNICEF (2013) report, it points out that globally there are 3.0-4.0 million children living with HIV. It further states that HIV/AIDS alone is responsible for almost 20 million children being orphaned, of whom 15 million live in Sub-Saharan Africa. It has truly been a pandemic in Africa. HIV remains a stigma in rural villages and children die daily of it due to inaccessible to rural areas where HIV testing is simply unavailable. In some instances, like in Cameroon, there are no finances for many to get treatment for diabetic conditions, or chemotherapy because of limited or no hospitals with appropriate equipment.

Educational risk factors

An intellectual disability can be inherited, others could be environmental or superficial consequently, learning disability can place a child at risk of succeeding in school and develop dysfunctional personality. Many children with low cognitive development in African are at risk because of the lack of special education institutions. Mental and emotional health is shaped by experiences, especially in early childhood and lack of special education institutions in some countries could lead to children developing difficult temperament. Children born with any form of disability are often not considered fit for school. The families in Cameroon are left to raise the children even when family members may not know the diagnosis and how to care for the children. The regular schools do not admit them because children with disability are perceived as a source of distraction to the progress of the other regular children in class. Children severe disability are often regarded as outcasts in some remotest areas of African villages. These children become object of ridicule and are blamed for their disability. Sometimes early experiences can lead some children to believe they are helpless and become learned helplessness. In addition, school-related factors such as negative relationships with teachers or peers, very large class size, poor print environment could make young children to be at risk of progressing in their learning. Lack of speech therapists in some countries, and lack of highly qualified teachers for early childhood settings are disturbing factors to keep in mind. Inadequate subject knowledge of unqualified teachers of how children develop and learn could be detrimental to learning. In addition, teachers' inability to use developmentally appropriate practices for children can lead to frustration and lack of interest in school. Family values and beliefs about the girl child has contributed to at risk factors for many young girls in African. According to ICA Canada (2018), the enrollment for girls in Cameroon is affected by socio-cultural biases, early marriage, sexual harassment, unwanted pregnancy, and domestic responsibilities. Girls as young as five years become caretakers for their siblings while parents go to farm all day.

Political factors

Every so often political intrigue may contribute as probable negative outcomes for children. Countries disagree with one another, and rivalry among political parties have led to bitter animosity and civil unrest in some nations. Children become at risk in their educational journey when poor policies are taken. Zongo (2018) laments about the country of Cameroon with the ongoing instability, gruesome murder of innocence children in classrooms, and horrific genocide

that children experience daily. Children out of curiosity have been innocently killed by stray bullets or maimed for life. Children have witnessed their fathers, brothers, mothers and their teachers killed and slaughtered in front of them. Children have *been displayed from their homes* and children as young as four to five-year-old have been seen trekking for miles separated from their parents running away from the violence. Since September of 2016 schools have been closed in the North West and South West Anglophone regions of the country of Cameroon. If for three years, the Anglophone children have not gone to school then children are at risk of future failure because the sensitive and critical learning period for some children would elapse with them hiding in the bushes and forests. These normative age-graded events would affect most of them for the rest of their lives academically, socially, and emotionally (Santrock, 2011). Amid the unrest there has been a rise in street children and child trafficking has become rampant.

How can we mitigate these risks factors?

When risk factors are present in children's lives they produce several unfavorable developmental outcomes. Children are likely to experience developmental delays, health issues, emotional, social and physical setbacks (Bredekamp, 2011). The child's neighborhood conditions, such as low socioeconomic status, presence of violence in his/her vicinity, and social attitudes, can place the child at greater risk for maltreatment. Early intervention would be the key to any sign of endangerment. Educators can strive to become activist and bridge the discrepancies between urban and rural educational settings. Advocating for children and appealing to political parties to end deadly rivalries and war for the sake of children is important. Schools and novice teachers need more professional development workshops to focus more on the child, the parent, community and school and be able to coordinate activities that can enhance learning and growth. They can accommodate and alleviate the plight of the homeless, embattled boys or girls that suffer gender stereotypes in the community. An African proverb alludes that when two elephants fight the grass beneath suffers. This is depicted in the hardship children endure due to political parties not able to negotiate and find a lasting truce in their disagreements. Hence, if only nations, political parties, those in authorities can put their individual feelings and egocentric views aside and consider the helpless children in their senseless tusk fight and become less belligerent, then the grass would sprout back when there is peace and a tolerant society. Regardless of how desperate a situation may seem to be, it can always be turned around by empowering at risk children to succeed. They can make lemonade out of lemons with their awful situation. Children are the future of any nation and teachers, parents and society have to put all hands-on deck to provide the perfect condition to help them live and function in a better society. No child should be labeled at risk in the 21st century.

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