

## **(Im)moral praxis: Configuring theory and practice of students at risk**

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Brenda J. McMahon

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In spite of mission statements which articulate respect and value for all students, at individual, institutional, and systemic levels, educators make choices on an ongoing basis which reinforce existing hegemonic structures. These include larger societal forces; curriculum and the structures of schools; and attitudes, dispositions, and expectations of teachers, administrators, and the students themselves. Within schools students are provided, explicitly and implicitly, with varying degrees of encouragement and opportunities for validation, participation, and recognition. In particular, students from underrepresented groups' experiences of disengagement, disempowerment, and marginalization are often compounded within schools (Dei & Karunmanchery, 2001; Pearl, 1997). However, in spite of being often systematically discouraged from further educational pursuits, a number of students who are deemed 'at risk' (McMahon, 2004; McMahon & Armstrong, 2003) place a high value on academic achievement and are compelled to seek creative and nontraditional routes to overcome these obstacles to attain their goals.

What is the significance for students who are deemed at risk of claims that education is a moral undertaking? To state that education is a moral activity or relationship raises questions as to the moral frameworks that are being adopted; the kinds of moral stances being taken; and the ways they are enacted: specifically, who do we value? How do we value students and their families? Which moral decisions do we actualize and which are not realized? How do our attitudes, dialogues, behaviours, and action with and about students inform and demonstrate the kind of moral relationships we value?

Although use of the term 'moral' often presumes that what is depicted is automatically 'right' or 'good,' educational legislation, policies and procedures as well as curricular resources are written and presented from within particular locations, belief systems, and moral stances, not all of which are 'right' or 'good' for all students. As researchers (Schwandt, 2000; Starratt, 1994; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001) suggest, schooling as a moral activity is in some sense ideological, political, and permeated with values which benefit some segments of society at the expense of others. In their treatment of students and their families, schools play a role in recreating and reproducing societal inequities.

There exist an abundance of research and strategies focused on varying conceptions of student risk as identified with student failure within schools (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Peart & Campbell, 1999). However, few researchers include the voices of students. Typically, educators and not students characterize, define the criteria for, and describe experiences related to risk. Without romanticizing or denying the impact of individual, familial, and societal factors, and without dealing with institutional structures such as school size, mandated curriculum, or high stakes testing, the purpose of this paper is to focus on risk influences that are clearly within all educators' spheres of influence<sup>1</sup>.

Assuming that educational theory and practice form and inform each other, my intent is to examine the role that they play in the creation of conditions of risk; specifically to a) problematize configurations of student risk, b) describe respondents' encounters with inauthentic and/or uncaring educators, and c) propose recommendations for school personnel in fulfilling their moral mandate to educate all students within their care.

This paper is part of a larger study (McMahon, 2004)<sup>2</sup> which explores urban students' experiences of being marginalized by and academically at risk in high schools, to their becoming academically successful in universities in a large metropolitan centre in Ontario. The participants either are not high school graduates or have not attained high enough grade point averages in prerequisite courses for direct admission to post secondary institutions. They all currently experience relatively high levels of academic success having entered university by way of transitional programmes which admit students who are deemed to have the potential and who have not yet consistently demonstrated the knowledge, skills, and/or self-confidence required for successful completion of university curriculum. Although they could be framed within the Ethics of Justice, Critique, Professionalism, or Community (Furman, 2004; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001; Starratt, 1994), the absence of an Ethic of Care permeates their narratives of academic risk created and maintained within school environments. In order to be genuine, the Ethic of Care needs to exemplify "the dignity and uniqueness of each person in the school" (Starratt, 1994, p. 53). By not recognizing existing societal inequities, and in an effort to be caring, educators may unwittingly lower their expectations for poor and visible minority students. This type of care risks being patronizing and could be deemed inauthentic.

Although questions “regarding social class, race, gender, and other areas of difference” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001, p. 15) are often configured under the Ethic of Critique, they are integral to the creation of authentically caring school environments. Respondents’ stories speak to a longing for meaningfully caring relationships with educators who challenge existing socio-cultural inequities, respect their lived experiences, and encourage and support their knowledge and abilities.

### *Conceptions of Risk*

Theorists’ (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Johnson, 1994; McMillan & Reed, 1994) use of the term ‘at risk students,’ as opposed to ‘students at risk’ is a moral distinction. Adopting external and somewhat arbitrary definitions of success and locating failure in the students, the use of the term ‘at risk students’ as opposed to ‘students at risk’ becomes analogous to distinctions made between ‘applied level students’ and ‘students in applied level classes.’ The use of the term ‘at risk students’ implicitly reinforces the belief that failure and risk reside within the student rather than in the relationships between the students and the institutions, or in the institutions themselves. Furthermore, the global nature of the depiction and implicit sense of finality contained in the notion of ‘at risk students’ conveys a message that the ascription of at risk is somehow all encompassing and terminal, whereas ‘students at risk’ more readily identifies its contextual nature and holds schools accountable for students’ failures, as well as taking credit for their successes.

Based on the language used in discourse surrounding student failure, a deficit mentality, consistent with an immoral stance which reinforces the status quo, pervades literature on students who are deemed, by educators, as at risk of not achieving academic success (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990; Marchesi, 1998). This ideology exists even though theorists such as Barr and Parrett (2001) claim that it is possible to separate the factors that place children at risk “into two primary areas: those related to individual, family, and community and those related to school” (p. 13). Rather than problematizing formal educational systems, a pervasive deficit approach to students at risk focuses on whatever it is the school system deems to be a student’s deficiencies. As a result, the designation of being at risk which is constructed as a means of generating more equitable outcomes for students “serves to maintain stratification, and the segregation of ‘difference’ among children in our schools, forming part of an all-encompassing web of privilege and power” (Polakow, 1995, p. 263). The desire to ‘blame the victim’ is identified by Johnson (1994) who claims that traditionally, the attributes of being at risk, although deemed societal, “are conceptually linked by the assumption that students are at risk by virtue of innate inadequacies that are the consequence of deprived unhealthy homes” (p. 37). This ideology is consistent with what Books (1998) identifies as ‘anti-youth discourses’ designed to reinforce existing inequities by diverting attention from societal responsibilities for, and the impact of, poverty and racism on the lives of students. Instead, ‘blame the victim’ ideologies are reinforced and compounded through locating deviance within poor and minority adolescents. Even when the behavioural indications of risk occur within schools, rather than examine educational practice, they are causally linked to the student and his or her family and/or community.

Meanings of ‘at risk’ are typically associated with traditional definitions of and dominant discourse regarding academic success. Researchers’ (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990; Marchesi, 1998) definitions of students at risk identify them as achieving below grade level academic performance, and as exhibiting a high probability of not graduating from high school. The latter is true of respondents who left high school without graduating but this study does not limit designations of being at risk to students who drop out of and do not complete high school. Even the participants who completed secondary school experienced interrupted schooling in attempting to find the right environment. For example, Anthony eventually received his diploma following a period of three to four years during which he “went from school to school, semester to semester.” Similarly, Carol left school for the first time in grade nine, went back for grade ten, dropped out again and eventually graduated “after going back the third time.” Nixon-Ponder’s (1998) understanding of at risk students also extends beyond high school drop-outs to include students who graduate from high school with low literacy levels which deem them unemployable for anything other than menial labour. Although there are different conceptions of literacy, the respondents’ references to being or fearing being underemployed and the complexity of the language they used to communicate, combined with literacy requirements of transitional programmes suggest that the ghettoization of their employment prospects was a result of a lack of certification rather than low literacy levels. This also counters Barr and Parrett’s (2001) conception of at-risk as underprepared for available employment. All of the participants were able to find work prior to their enrollment in college and university programs. However, they speak of frustration at being restricted to jobs that they do not find meaningful and which provide minimal incomes and limited career opportunities.

The dominant middle class ideology that pervades educational institutions and the resulting dissonance with students who live in poverty, are members of minority groups, reside in single-parent family homes, and whose parents have low level of education entails these the students are likely to be designated as at risk (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; Marchesi, 1998; Peart & Campbell, 1999). The manner and degree to which students at risk are configured as ‘different’ from the dominant group within impact both on students’ feelings of connectedness to schools as social spheres and on their varying levels of engagement within them as educational institutions and

ultimately their opportunities for academic success. Anthony, Deanna, and Elaine experienced what Peart and Campbell (1999) identify as the “confounding of poverty and minority status” (p. 271). These dual factors impinged on their visions, of education as a means of achieving success. At the same time, all the participants attest to Donmoyer and Kos’ (1993) report that being at risk extends beyond the characteristics of the students “and the conditions from which the students have come... students who are classified as being at risk in certain educational situations can be quite successful when classroom and school characteristics change” (pp. 10-11).

### *Inauthentically Caring Educators*

An absence of responsive and authentically caring educators pervades the participants' narratives. Carol who left school two years before the legal age suggests, “They could have noticed that I wasn’t showing up and even pulled me aside and say... what’s going on?” For the participants, buying into dominant discourses by locating responsibility for being academically at risk within themselves, “not only had a powerfully detrimental impact on the students themselves, it also worked to silence any legitimate critique they may have about the school's role in their decision to leave” (Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995, p. 60). This is evident in Elaine’s account of her initial high school experiences as she refers to teachers who she calls kind, and who, as with Carol’s experience, did not take action as she failed due to accumulated absences. Even in the apparent benign description which Elaine gives of her ‘caring’ teachers is underscored by deficit thinking and neglect in their approach that she still does not question or challenge: “In grade nine, I had many good teachers, patient teachers, but I guess after the 50th class missed they started asking questions, started losing patience.” What Elaine identifies as kindness can be configured as the blatantly uncaring marginalization of poor and visible minority students.

Barr and Parrett (2001) report teacher attitudes are instrumental in the perpetuation of risk. Jennifer’s experiences in both elementary and secondary schools reinforce their contention that “[t]his problem is fueled by reluctance of schools to address problems of certain students” (p.47). As a student in elementary school when Jennifer arrived battered and bruised as a result of beatings from her abusive mother, no-one intervened. As she recalls, “you’d think if you see a kid coming in with bruises for the third time this week that you should call someone... maybe there’s a mother out there who needs help.” Similarly, Deanna’s account of her experiences with the majority of her high school teachers resonates with anger and pain as she states that what she learned in high school is “that a lot of teachers didn’t really care at all.” Specific instances of teachers’ behaviours contribute to Deanna’s designation of being at risk and to her cynicism about school systems. Deanna’s experience as a poor, Black, female student in a ‘Section ’ program echo Hixson’s and Tinzmann’s (1990) findings that due to its predictive nature, early identification of students becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy for both students and teachers and “often has the effect of simply lowering teachers’ expectations of what students have the potential to achieve” (p. 2). There is no ambivalence in Deanna’s account of her experiences with the majority of her high school teachers as she describes specific instances of teachers’ behaviours which contribute to her designation of being at risk and to her cynicism about a school system that could keep an alcoholic teacher. Deanna describes a teacher, “You could smell alcohol on him and it was so obvious that the teachers knew – the whole school knew and there’s no way for them not to know. I don’t know what it was that the school didn’t get rid of him.” By combining negative expectations with a lack of accountability by teachers and administrators, risk is exacerbated for students already marginalized. In not addressing and eliminating these blatantly inappropriate situations, the school system fails to demonstrate authentic care and at least implicitly condones them.

As high school students Anthony and Elaine’s experiences of risk in the form of academic failure are clearly correlated to their enrollment in specific high schools. Their experiences of schools as alienating and uncaring environments exemplify what Eccles, Lord and Buchanan (1996) refer to the importance of “the fit between characteristics individuals bring to their social environments and the characteristics of these social environments. Individuals are not likely to do very well, or be very motivated, if they are in social environments that do not fit their psychological needs” (p. 254). Carol, Barbara, and Anthony developed patterns of changing schools and then leaving them to the point that Barbara did not graduate although she says, “I tried to make an effort, you know, but again I didn’t have that background and support I needed to get through it.” These disclosures concur with Dei, Holmes, Mazzuca, McIsaac, and Campbell’s (1997) study which finds, “[t]hey (dropouts) tended to construct dropping out as a gradual process where students are simply not given support and encouragement for school, particularly by school agents (teachers, guidance counselors, and administration) but also by friends and parents” (p. 36). Socio-economic conditions exacerbated this choice for Barbara, Carol, Elaine, and Frank in the form of “implicating outside forces such as adverse economic or social structural conditions and personal problems, which conspire to force individuals out of school” (Dei et al., 1997, p.22). Carol’s recollection of her need to contribute financially to her family reflects findings by Ianni and Orr (1996) that “[t]he more youth take on responsibility for the economic well-being of their families, the less likely it will be that they can remain in school...because it is difficult for youth to work full-time jobs that conform to the school schedule, the choices become even starker” (p. 299). School structures and personnel exhibit a lack of genuine care as they remain inflexible and unresponsive to students’ economic realities.

### *Negative Expectations*

A lack of authentic care is instrumental in what the literature (Pearl, 1997; Peart & Campbell, 1999) refers to as the insidious nature of educators' lowered expectations. Respondents report that a lack of support from teachers and family members exacerbated by negative expectations mean that they, "internalize negative self-concepts and feel the demands of schooling are beyond their capabilities. This sense of hopelessness is commonly stated as a precursor to disengagement and must therefore be reconciled in order for students to succeed" (Dei et al., 1997, p. 34). In a manner consistent with research on Black youth in Canadian schools (Dei et al., 1997; McMahon & Armstrong, 2003; Solomon, 1992) Anthony identifies escalating conflicts, grounded in negative expectations and treatment by educators which lead to his retirement from the school. He recalls, "I thought the system was against me. I felt like I was always targeted especially by vice-principals, principals, and teachers. They perceived me in certain ways." This is consistent with Elaine's account of her interactions with her first secondary school principal, who saw her as a poor Black female and, knew the area I was coming from and I think he believed most kids from that area were 'failures,' so why should he even try? You're supposed to not want to come to school. You're supposed to not want anything good out of life. He basically pigeonholed me and didn't give me any encouragement.

These experiences highlight what Pearl (1997) identifies as a number of ways deficit thinking pervades schools. They also exemplify racial aspects of deficit thinking which Peart and Campbell (1999) identify as creating conditions, in concert with economic conditions, which put students at risk.

### *Lack of Meaningful Curriculum*

Meaningless and inauthentic curriculum which devalues students' knowledge and lived experience is instrumental in creating climates of risk. Nixon-Ponder (1998) locates the existence of risk for many students in "the discrepancy between cultural values and beliefs of school and home" (p. 58). This 'discrepancy' is something other than mere differences between cultural beliefs and values and is neither limited to the mere fact of religious differences inherent in celebrating Eid, Hanukkah, or Christmas, nor is it contained within a 'laundry list' of values. Instead, it exists within what Minow (1990) refers to as socially constructed 'difference that makes a difference' and in the enactments of those that are valued while others are rendered invisible. These differences that make a difference take many forms within the hidden curriculum of schools; for example, structuring Canadian school calendars to entrench the supremacy of Christian high holidays, valuing of print material and devaluing of oral traditions, respecting what is deemed rational while deriding emotional and spiritual ways of knowing, and overriding beliefs about which and whose knowledge is worthy of a place in core curriculum, and who is named as creator of that knowledge. These enactments of difference "are often difficult to deal with precisely because they are offered under the guise of value-free descriptions yet smuggle in normative considerations that carry with them the stigma of inferiority" (Rothenberg, 1990, p. 43). Significant in the lives of all students is the value that schools place on beliefs, values, and experiences that members of dominant groups possess which Foster (1986) refers to the 'cultural capital' that schools "endorse as natural" (p. 98). Tabachnick and Bloch (1995) identify the pervasive nature of covert dimensions of cultural capital including "patterns of social behavior and relations of power, social control, deference, resistance; among these institutionalized social forms are patterned responses from within the perspectives of class and gender groups" (p. 189). An absence of care is evident in both the hidden and explicit curriculum of schools which perpetuate social inequities.

### *Conclusions*

The participants' persistence is analogous to findings by Armstrong and McMahon (2002) that "[i]n spite of their deeply ingrained feelings of inadequacy, the educational system's apparent lack of responsiveness to them, and the lack of relevant curriculum" (p. 57) students marginalized within high schools demonstrate a desire to graduate. Consistent with research by Johnson (1994), Hixson and Tinzmann (1990), and Wang (1997) on resilience, the participants speak to conditions of risk which can be seen as analogous to unbalanced ecosystems where the vulnerability of the 'at risk' casts them into the role of endangered species. Contained by school environments, risk is created within moral frameworks characterized by the presence of: deficit thinking which devalues students as learners; tensions between what counts as valid and invalid knowledge; and negative interactions. This is juxtaposed with an absence of scaffolding and support systems, positive relations between teachers and students, relevant and meaningful curriculum; and positive feelings of self worth. The respondents demonstrate that the greater the degree of dissonance experienced by the student, the more significant their experience of risk. However, in spite of their discordant environments, these students were able to focus on their strengths and develop relationships within the 'right' schools in order to change from being endangered academically to thriving academically.

The data exemplifies some conceptions of students at risk in educational literature (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Johnson, 1994; Marchesi, 1998; Peart & Campbell, 1999). At the same time, due to their academic achievements, they embody Fine's (1995) caution to avoid simplistic depictions of risk and to be mindful of the possibility of divergent

outcomes for students designated as at risk. The distinction between 'students at risk' and 'at risk students,' demonstrates the beginnings of change in discourse about risk. If educators care to make meaningful claims that education is a moral undertaking for all students, there needs to be a concurrent shift from a moral framework entrenched in deficit approaches to a moral perspective grounded in envisioning possibilities. As we reframe our dialogue, attitudes and actions, we create a climate whereby everyone is afforded an opportunity for equitable participation, voice, and outcomes. Contextualizing these as requirements for all students within what Johnson (1994) calls an 'interactional orientation' and Hixson and Tinzmann (1990) refer to as an 'ecological approach' neither discount, dismiss nor romanticize the existence of personal, familial, and societal factors which may inhibit students' academic achievements. Locating conceptions of risk within the relationships and interactions among students, parents, teachers, and administrators enables educators to move away from a focus on deficits and consequently enhance opportunities for success for all students.

### *Recommendations*

Respondents' academic accomplishments attest to Hixson and Tinzmann's (1990) belief "that all students can learn whatever the school has decided it is important, or is required, to teach" (p. 9). Their narratives speak to the importance of congruency between their aspirations and educators' beliefs in their capabilities; including high academic expectations for and belief in the abilities of all students while providing support in order for them to fulfill their potential, adopting inclusive, meaningful curriculum, and caring as demonstrated by a willingness to devote time to all students. The implementation of authentic curriculum requires a genuine commitment to students which moves inclusionary educational initiatives away from the superficial 'stomp, chomp, and dress-up' strategies adopted by many educators. If inclusionary foci provide the basis for and inform the curriculum, we create an environment within which "students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality and a sense of empowerment" (Banks, 1993, p. 27).

For administrators, the conception of school leadership most congruent with the data is one which Ryan (2003) calls emancipatory, meaning that it is shared, democratic, and authentic. In order to provide responsive learning environments for all students, administrators need to be instrumental in the development of systemic approaches to education, which focus on the interconnectedness of the student, the family, the community, and the school (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990; Johnson, 1994; Marchesi, 1998). Administrators have both moral and legal obligations to their communities. A moral commitment calls on them to engage in a discourse of potential which involves thought, words, attitudes, and actions, with regard to all students. In addressing the hidden curriculum, administrators need to ensure that their recruitment, hiring, and promotion practices generate staff that is representative of their student populations and ensure that all teachers value the strengths of all students. In examining their roles in the creation and maintenance of conditions which place students at risk, they need to move beyond the superficial responses such as new labels and special programs which are ineffective to address the real problems inherent in educational structures and ideologies (Placier, 1996). School mission statements need to be more than mere declarations. It is not possible or perhaps even desirable to construct a list of generic strategies that are applicable to all schools. However, within each school community, the enactment of high expectations for all students, challenging and relevant curriculum, and academic, social and emotional support can create a foundation for the authentic care necessary to ensure equitable outcomes.

### **Endnotes**

1I do not assume that students have no agency or bear no responsibility. However, this paper focuses solely on educators' roles in the creation and maintenance of risk.

2Quotes from five of the participants with the pseudonyms Anthony, Carol, Deanna, Elaine, and Jennifer appear throughout this paper.

3Section programs are named after the section of the Education Act dealing with Special Education pertaining to hospitals and institutions. The Section program Deanna was in was a segregated class designed for students, generally living in group homes, who are deemed behaviorally, at least, unable to attend "regular" classes. Very rarely do students in this kind of Section program complete their high school graduation requirements.

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**Author's contact information:**

Dr. Brenda J. McMahon  
[brendam@nipissingu.ca](mailto:brendam@nipissingu.ca)  
Graduate Studies – Educational Leadership,  
Nipissing University  
North Bay, Ontario, P1B 8L7