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Using the Arts to Decrease the Educational Failure of At-Risk Students

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Abstract

The number of at-risk students who are destined for educational failure, quitting school before graduation or by not learning while attending school, is increasing at an unprecedented rate (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1992). If America does not sufficiently educate its increasing numbers of at-risk students, the nation's social and economic status may suffer due to a deteriorated educational system. These national concerns provide an opportunity to address appropriate educational interventions to help at-risk students. This paper will review the literature which suggests using the arts to decrease the educational failure of at-risk students.

Using the Arts to Decrease the Educational Failure of At-Risk Students

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Using the Arts to Decrease the Educational Failure of At-Risk Students

The number of at-risk students who are destined for educational failure,

quitting school before graduation or by not learning while attending school, is

increasing at an unprecedented rate (Office of Educational Research and

Improvement [OERI], 1992). If America does not sufficiently educate its

increasing numbers of at-risk students, the nation's social and economic status

may suffer due to a deteriorated educational system (OERI). These national

concerns provide an opportunity to address appropriate educational interventions

to help at-risk students (OERI). This paper will review the literature which

suggests using the arts to decrease the educational failure of at-risk students.

Defining At-Risk

There are many definitions of an at-risk student. The study, "Characteristics

of At-Risk Students in NELS:88" gave the following definition: "An 'at-risk'

student is generally defined as a student who is likely to fail at school" (OERI,

1992, p. 2), and will probably not graduate from high school. The study reported

that the idiosyncratic traits of high school dropouts were determined by

historically analyzing demographics, family histories, parental educational

interactions, decorum, academics, teacher perceptions and school environmental

data of students (OERI). Those students who will probably fail are from low

socioeconomic backgrounds, are not members of the majority culture, and have

parents who have little or no interaction with their education (OERI).

Hanson, Silver, and Strong (1991) defined at-risk from another perspective. Their approach looked at students' learning styles vs. educators' teaching styles. They (Hanson et al., 1991) found that learning styles fall into four types. These types are the sensing thinker, one who expects concrete details in everyday life and is more concerned with results than implementation processes; and the intuitive thinker, one who prefers to know how ideas and processes interact and loves to experiment. The other two types are the sensing feeler, one who knows himself or herself well and assesses situations as they relate to self; and the intuitive feeler, one who is creative and does not feel a part of the system. The two latter learning styles respond well to the arts and to interacting on a personal basis as a medium of learning. Hanson et al. found that most teachers who teach academic subjects are more likely to possess either sensing- or intuitive-thinking traits as their most dominant teaching styles. These styles do not match well with students who are feelers, thereby, putting this category of students at-risk for dropping out. Natter and Rollings (as cited in Hanson et al.) also categorized feelers as at risk, and defined at-risk students as "the extroverted, sensing-feeling types" (p. 32). Natter and Rollings claimed their research shows that 99.6 percent of the students who left the educational system before high school graduation were classified as sensors (as cited in Hanson et al.).

Newton (1982) described the at-risk college student as being first generation, ranking low on admission tests, attending a two-year institution or a predominantly black institution, needing a financial aid package, and not likely to

be successful in school. "This concept of 'success' means that they graduated from a four-year program within the expected eight semesters and perhaps one or two summers" (Newton, 1982, p. 13).

Scripp and Meyaard (1991) categorized an at-risk student as usually having " . . . severe emotional and learning difficulties" (p. 34), which are related to factors such as not having a family life, being abused, or having encountered lawlessness.

Students with disabilities are often associated with the term, at-risk, as illustrated in Yell and Peterson's (1994) book titled "Disciplining Students with Disabilities and Those At-Risk for School Failure: Legal Issues." A student is deemed disabled (Yell & Peterson) and covered by the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) if his or her education is adversely affected by the disability. Students who have communicable diseases, behavioral and attention deficit disorders, and temporary disabilities are also covered under the IDEA (Yell & Peterson).

Simpson and Simpson (1994) determined that need-based, behavior disordered or disabled students were at risk for school failure. He stated: "With regard to parents and families of students at risk of school failure and those with disabilities, a myriad of needs often exist" (Simpson & Simpson, 1994, p. 22).

Traditional Approaches for At-Risk Students

Educators have attempted to meet the academic and psychological needs of at-risk students by traditional approaches: retention, tracking, and special education

(Office of Educational Research and Improvement [OERI], 1990). Retention is used to retain a student at a grade level until the student illustrates competencies that warrant his or her being promoted (OERI). Tracking is the means by which a student is placed with other students of similar teacher-assessed academic levels (OERI). Special education provides access to special teaching approaches, equipment, or care within or outside a regular classroom (OERI).

However, the desired result, increasing the educational success of at-risk students using these traditional approaches, does not appear to be occurring. The OERI (1990) further stated that policymakers are consistently seeking programs and practices that will increase the educational success of at-risk students.

<div align="center">Non-Traditional Approaches for At-Risk Students</div>

Hanson et al. (1991), Gardner and Hatch (1989), Pillay (1996), and other educators, researchers, and policymakers support, using the arts, " . . . the conscious use of skill and creative imagination . . . " (Woolf, 1975, p. 63) as a non-traditional approach to increase the educational success of at-risk students, and as presented by (Ohio State University, 1991), " . . . visual arts, music, literature, theatre, and film" (p. 9).

Research at the Elementary and Secondary Education Level

Hanson et al. (1991) found that music teachers and other teachers of the arts can appeal to feeling-oriented students, because these teachers tend to instruct in the two styles of feeling. Music teachers in particular can relate to feelers,

because these students' learning styles parallel music's call for sensitivity and composition.

Other researchers supported using a therapeutic expressive art approach to help emotionally and behaviorally disordered students to " . . . cope with their emotions, modify maladaptive behavior, and learn effective coping skills . . . " (King & Schwabenlender, 1994, p. 13). These researchers believed that if more supportive strategies are not undertaken to help these students, their behavior patterns will increase in severity, placing them at risk for dropping out of school. "The expressive arts, music, dance, drama, poetry, and art encourage the development of divergent thinking, creative self expression, and perceptual awareness" (King & Schwabenlender, 1994, p. 13).

"Learning to Read through the Arts" is a senses model structured to help students retain what they have studied. Art instruction is provided intermittently throughout the teaching process and is used as a thrust to teach most other subjects in the curriculum (Collett, 1991). Mann (as cited in Collett, 1991) was convinced that using a form of art in the classroom is educational, captivating and attracts students into a more enriching world of academics. Increasingly, more educators are incorporating the aural, visual, tactile, and kinesthetic modalities, experiential learning approaches, into their instructional strategies. Kolb (as cited in Delworth, Hanson, and Associates, 1989) also recognized that benefits can accrue from experiential learning. Kolb (as cited in Delworth et al.) stated that

student development instruction integrated fact and feeling, epistemological applications and effects, thereby students became involved in their learning.

Scripp and Meyaard (1991) discussed how two at-risk students, one shy, the other outgoing, found and solved the same musical problem in two different ways, "at unanticipated levels of musical perception, perseverance, and musical thinking" (p. 37). Each student used strategies that were idiosyncratic in nature. Using a computer based musical program, one student chose to match notes with ones he had previously heard on the software. The other student created his own notes. Scripp and Meyaard further explained the benefits of music education for the at-risk student. They claimed that using the computer to produce, "integrating notation with playback, directly linking what students hear with the corresponding notation" (Scripp & Meyaard, 1991, p. 39) allowed the student to build on his or her stored musical data.

Gardner and Hatch (1989) believed that engaging students in activities that they enjoy like the Arts PROPEL project for junior and senior high school students, directed by the Educational Testing Service and the Pittsburgh Public School System, enable them to explore and grow, thereby allowing them to feel committed and successful. This project credited itself with identifying potentially successful students through its arts assessment techniques who otherwise would have been deemed at risk for school failure. Performed in a cultural context familiar to the student, Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, possessing seven aspects of relatively independent forms of information processing, with

each person differing from one another in the particular profile of intelligences they display, is measured via art activities (Gardner & Hatch). One intelligence is called logical-mathematical, an individual who comprehends and analyzes reasoning patterns. Another is linguistic, one who is sensitive to sound, rhythm and who is language and semantic aware. A third is musical, a person who produces and appreciates rhythm, pitch and expression. Still another intelligence is spatial, one who performs abstract discernment. A fifth one is bodily-kinesthetic, an individual who has the capability to perform motor skills. A sixth is intrapersonal, a person who is subjective about oneself. A seventh is interpersonal, a person who is intuitive.

Szauder (1996) described other authors' ideas regarding using drama as a means of teaching special needs students. The ideas paralleled the goals and objectives of the National Curriculum in England and Wales, discerning the needs of and the usefulness of teaching each student. One of Szuader's conclusions was that drama holds therapeutic value, serving to bring about positive effects on special needs students.

Research at the Postsecondary Education Level

Not only are new approaches being studied at the elementary and secondary school level, but colleges and universities are also researching the possibilities of using the arts to increase the educational success of at-risk students.

Lakeland College in Lloydminster, Alberta received funding from the Secretary of State to perform an experiment to increase the literacy level in its

Literary and Drama Departments (Brennan, 1991). The program was directed by a professional actor/playwright who, in collaboration with faculty members of the community, created a theatrical production called "The Write Stuff." A second event, in the form of a drama/literacy workshop, designed to received audience and colleague feedback for writing improvement, was held. Both plays examined the reasons some people cannot read or write and the detrimental effects. The plays also looked at the availability of training for people who were illiterate. In both cases, literacy levels and interest in literacy training programs increased.

Popular theatre was a technique used to increase adult literacy. Participants were usually from oppressed groups or groups who had less than an adequate education. They developed unique problem-solving strategies for addressing community concerns, expressing them from their reality. In "Exploring Literacy through Theater," Andruske (as cited in Flannery, 1993) described how the Adult Basic Education Program for Northern Lights College in Fort St. John, British Columbia improved the method for teaching students via popular theatre. Participants' self images were raised and an increased awareness about illiteracy occurred.

Pillay (1996) conducted a study at the University of Durban-Westville in South Africa based on the premise that the development of right brain thinking skills, "feelings, relationships, visual images, and patterns that constitute the whole" (p. 265) have been neglected by the educational system for left brain thinking skills, the thinking concerned with "language, numbers, logic, sequence, time, the

abstract, and the symbolic" (p. 265). The South African students came from a disadvantaged community, vestiges of an apartheid government, and had not been exposed to the type of education that would increase left brain skills. Therefore, these students were faced with the difficulty of absorbing and processing information from the left brain perspective. Pillay found enough evidence to argue that this difficulty could be solved by using drama as a catalyst to generate left brain thinking skills, the theoretical dimension of the brain, with the desired result being a balanced, whole brain, thinking skills approach.

Epskamp (1992) examined the performing arts as a medium to educate and train developing nations. Approached from a Dutch perspective, the study explored, among many themes, the interaction among culture, education and performance; the intelligentsia that develops new or experimental concepts and popular theatre; alienation topics; the origin, nature and destiny of theatre; and the role of theatre in developing national communication.

Teacher Preparation through Curriculum Guides and Training Sessions

Curriculum guides and training sessions are being provided to teachers regarding how to use the arts to decrease the educational failure of at-risk students in elementary and postsecondary education.

Massachusetts Bay Community College's publication "Educational Forum," presented educational methods designed to provide faculty knowledge and understanding teaching and learning via college theater (Fielder, 1992). Wolf (as cited in Fielder) explains that "college theatre is education--how each production

offers mini-courses in psychology, sociology, history, economics, literature, poetry, and more" (p. 2).

A secondary education curriculum guide, "From victory to freedom: The African American Experience," regarding the teaching of visual arts, music, literature, theatre and film is offered by Ohio State University (1991). The lesson objectives are presented clearly. For instance, the lesson objectives of the visual arts section states that the student has to "identify major Black artists and their contributions to the visual arts, to research and analyze the works of Black artists and to form a personal reaction to those works, to understand twentieth century artforms and increase awareness of the Black artists who created works in those form" (p. 9). The overview and activities are clearly stated, enhancing comprehension and implementation.

"Learning to Read through the Arts," an elementary program for at-risk students, designed to use the arts as a motivator to learn other subjects in the curriculum, is a collaborative effort between people who specialize in the arts and classroom teachers (Collett, 1991). The implementers have had training in unit design and specific developmental aims that meet the needs of the students (Collett).

Conclusion

Conclusive evidence to support the hypotheses that using the arts may decrease the educational failure of at-risk students in higher education is not in; but its use looks promising. Extensive research has been conducted and published on this

topic for elementary and secondary grades. However, data regarding using the arts to decrease the educational failure of at-risk students at the postsecondary level is not as readily accessible, because not as much research has been done, nor its finding published. L. Keig (personal communication, August 25, 1996), a professor in the Educational Administration, Student Affairs Department at the University of Northern Iowa, is using film, in an original research study, as one method among many, in teaching the course, The History and Philosophy of Education. Although his study is not geared toward at-risk students, this method, a form of art and experiential learning, is used to challenge the aural, visual, and mental capabilities of students in capturing subtle and overt educational themes in films that have educational bases. Once the themes are captured, students expound upon them via using higher education historical perspectives and student development models regarding the themes' relationship to higher education. Dr. Keig will report implications from his findings to educators and student affairs practitioners for future use in maximizing the epistemological processes of students, in general, through film. So far, he has received positive feedback from students, citing rewarding experiences in their creativity abilities to effectively meet his challenges.

Advocates of these seemingly innovative instructional strategies are hopeful that using the arts to decrease the educational failure of at-risk students will gain wider acceptance and support for future collaborative activities incorporating the findings of educators like Dr. Keig who are not specifically targeting at-risk

students. It is also hopeful that these new techniques will continue to be used among the educational system's traditional elementary and secondary teaching approaches and be used more frequently in postsecondary education instruction.

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