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Children at-risk: What can be done to help them

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Children at-risk: What can be done to help them

Abstract

Students in society today not only have their own personal or academic barriers to overcome, but also have those placed upon them by many outside sources. Determining those sources, how to deal with them and putting programs into action, are the first steps to helping the rising numbers of at-risk youth (Ames, Gillespie, & Streff, 1972). As educators continue to refine the curricula, management structure and teaching methods, consideration must be given to the changes occurring in the family structure so that the child, does not suffer (Lepley, 1989). Dramatic changes have taken place in the so called "traditional family," causing it to become more and more of a rarity. Many personal and societal problems are contributing factors in the recent upswing of the at-risk youth (Morley, 1988).

**CHILDREN AT-RISK: WHAT CAN
BE DONE TO HELP THEM**

**A Research Paper
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and Counseling
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**In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts in Education**

**by
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Students in society today not only have their own personal or academic barriers to overcome, but also have those placed upon them by many outside sources. Determining those sources, how to deal with them and putting programs into action, are the first steps to helping the rising numbers of at-risk youth (Ames, Gillespie, & Streff, 1972). As educators continue to refine the curricula, management structure and teaching methods, consideration must be given to the changes occurring in the family structure so that the child, does not suffer (Lepley, 1989). Dramatic changes have taken place in the so called "traditional family," causing it to become more and more of a rarity. Many personal and societal problems are contributing factors in the recent upswing of the at-risk youth (Morley, 1988).

The purpose of this paper is to identify the at-risk youth, pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, and to review programs, involving the described age group, which have been used in various educational settings throughout the United States.

The at-risk youth has been defined as:

Any student identified who is at risk of not meeting the goals of the educational programs established by the district, completing a high school

education, or becoming a productive worker. These students include, but are not limited to, those identified as: dropouts, potential dropouts, teenage parents, drug users, drug abusers, low academic achievers, abused and homeless children, youth offenders, economically deprived, minorities, culturally deprived, (rural isolated), culturally different, those with sudden negative changes in performance due to environmental or physical trauma and those with language barriers, gender barriers and disabilities. (Morley 1988)

Some additional indicators that might help identify an at-risk youth which have been cited are:

Student Attendance

Academic Performance

Student Behavior

Nature of Family Support

Attitudes Toward School

Should any of these factors continually affect a student, serious consideration should be taken as to how they can be helped (Willis, 1986).

The Iowa Department of Education defines a student at-risk as one who is not succeeding in the educational program designed by his or her district. The criteria

include students who are at-risk of dropping out of school or who are doing poorly in their academic, personal, social career or vocational development (Bartusek, 1989).

In recent years, there has developed a growing dissatisfaction with the educational services provided to students who are at-risk for developing learning problems or school failure (Glass, & Smith, 1977). There is agreement among researchers that program quality is far more important than the setting in which the program is implemented (Madden, & Smith, 1977). By the end of the first or second grade, it is often clear that some students start falling further and further behind. With the exception of a few easily remediable conditions, the fact that students are not achieving adequately in the early grades, is the most important diagnostic indication that a student is at-risk (Madden, & Slavin, 1987; McDill, Natrillo, & Palla, 1986).

Increases in standards will have a positive impact on raising expectations for students and, thereby, performance. However, for students who enter school with skills far behind their peers or who fall behind their peers after entering school, higher standards may impose a forbidding barrier rather than create a positive chal-

lenge (Levin, 1985). States must develop initiatives to help at-risk preschool children become ready for school (Riley, 1986).

States must also work to insure that at-risk children and youth meet the new educational standards from school entry through graduation. As a nation, educators cannot accept the notion that 50%-60% of all students are capable of academic achievement. Education cannot rely on survival of the fittest (Riley, 1986).

Disadvantaged young people are the fastest growing student population. Children who start out behind often stay behind. Schools need a common core of learning to which all students can aspire. Programs should provide students with skills for the next level, not function at dead ends. Dropping out often stems from courses that lack challenge (Riley, 1986).

The following are examples of programs for at-risk youth which have been used in various educational settings throughout the United States:

Early Childhood Preventative Curriculum

Early Childhood Preventative Curriculum (ECPC) is a program in which the students are put into a special class during first grade and experience an individualized diagnostic-prescriptive program. Each student's

individualized strengths and weaknesses are identified and students are allowed to proceed at their own rates. Most instruction is given in small, skill-level groups. ECPC was developed and evaluated in Miami, Florida. Overall, positive effects were found on the paragraph meaning scale of the Stanford Achievement Test (Madden, & Slavin, 1987).

Books and Beyond

Books and Beyond is a program that produces positive changes through incentives to read more outside of school. Success for at-risk students is assured by a self-pacing, individualized approach. Using parent education and student self-monitoring techniques, participants become more aware of their TV viewing habits and more discriminating in their allocation of time between recreational reading and television viewing. Participants in the Books and Beyond program demonstrated significant gains in reading achievement when compared with a control group (Phlegar, 1987).

Early Prevention

Early Prevention of school failure is a program designed to prevent school failure by identifying the developmental levels and learning styles of children ages four to six years. This program has demonstrated

that effective screening and diagnostic and classroom techniques can identify and remediate students that could otherwise adversely affect school performance (Phlegar, 1987).

Early Success in School K-3

A program that emphasizes the prevention of early school failure is called Early Success in School K-3. This program focuses on expanding kindergarten and first grade curriculum to provide classroom activities that foster children's thinking skills and allow the children to develop more positive attitudes toward themselves and their school work (Phlegar, 1987).

Systematic Program for Instruction Remediation and Acceleration for Learning

The Systematic Program for Instruction Remediation and Acceleration for Learning is another successful program. The objectives for this program are that the retention rate be reduced by 20 percent annually and 25 percent of retained students will rejoin their grade level. The remediation component of the program gives retained elementary students who do not qualify for special education services the opportunity to catch up with their classmates by placing them in reduced-sized classes taught by specially trained teachers (Phlegar, 1987).

Project Care

In 1984 in West Shore (Pa.) School District an opportunity arose to involve not only the school's educators and staff, but also district employees in the search for solutions to the risks in the lives of students. The state government granted each school district a fixed amount of money for education improvement. West Shore used its money to meet the needs of at-risk students, thus calling it "Project CARE." Out of the 15 school districts, 35 staff members formed the body of the project directed by a district administrator. Their purpose was to study the five issues identified as most threatening to the orderly education progress of the students--abduction, child abuse, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, and family crisis. A community advisory committee consisting of parents, agency representatives and former students helped to implement Project CARE. Each of the five issues was addressed in a range of activities including parent clinics, publications, staff inservice seminars, student meetings, and curricular units. The goal of project CARE was to have the activities described to become a routine part of each school's program of education and service. While it is still too early to measure the total efforts of Project CARE,

there are indications that some of the objectives are being met. Many students, staff and community members have gained information about the identification and support of youngsters who are threatened by personal dangers. A definite advantage of a program such as Project CARE is that it may be scaled to meet the resources available within any given district or setting (Cormany, 1987).

Many educators, researchers, and child advocates agree on several recommendations for needed changes in order to better meet the educational needs of students at-risk of school failure. Both state and local action is necessary. Taken collectively these recommendations include:

1. Structural school changes whose main aim is the strengthening of the regular education program for all students;
2. Early preventative efforts for all at-risk children for early childhood education, and greater availability of extended day care;
3. Improved teacher and administrator preservice and inservice training and recruitment;
4. Significant parent and community involvement;
5. Alternative programs and smaller classrooms for

students who do not do well in larger settings;

6. Retrieval programs that bring dropouts back to school to academic programs specifically designed to help them complete their education (Edelman, 1987).

The State of Iowa has recently recommended the following standard for at-risk students:

4.5(13)

Provisions for at-risk students. The board shall have a program to identify and provide special assistance to students who have difficulty mastering the language, academic, cultural, and social skills necessary to reach the educational levels of which they are capable. The program shall serve students whose aspirations and achievement may be negatively affected by stereotypes linked to race, national origin, language background, gender, income, family status, parental status, and disability. The program shall include strategies for identifying at-risk students and objectives for providing support services to at-risk students. These objectives shall be translated into performance objectives for all school personnel. The program shall also include provisions for in-service training for school personnel: strategies and activities for involving and working with parents;

provisions for monitoring the behavioral, social, and academic improvement of at-risk students; provisions for appropriate counseling service; strategies for coordinating school programs and community-based support services; and maintenance of integrated educational environments in compliance with federal and state non-discrimination legislation. (Department of Education, 1988)

Clearly, there is no one model program that all school systems can use to address the needs of at-risk students. There are some characteristics that seem to lead to success. Among them are programs that have low student-adult ratios, are offered in a location separate from the comprehensive school, offer a variety of school experiences combined with work, and provide such related services as counseling and day care. In addition, students benefit from early intervention with remedial help and social services before they fall so far behind. The research has shown that successful programs combine intensive, individualized training in the basic skills with work-related projects and finds that when the relationship between education and work becomes clear, most of these at-risk students can be motivated to stay in school and perform at a higher level (Hodgkinson,

1985). All of these factors increase the chances of students succeeding in school. Schools must make sure that whatever they are doing or planning to do with at-risk students that they include evaluation. Only through evaluation will they know which efforts are successful and should receive continued support (Greene, 1986).

At-risk youngsters need a new and fair deal if they are to have a chance at succeeding in school. Youth needs a purpose and direction and must understand what our schools have to offer them. The purpose of education is to raise the young to become active participants rather than passive spectators of their culture (Conrath, 1988).

To fulfill that purpose, youngsters must not be allowed to choose out, to do less. They need to be guided by skillful, tough adults who can help diagnose the most effective means for achieving the end result: to actively participate in the culture (Conrath, 1988).

The search for effective programs for students at-risk of school failure is a task of great importance. This paper has presented where education is now in identifying and meeting the needs of at-risk students and the necessity of doing this.

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