

Educators' Notebook
Reviews of Research of Interest to Educators

Students At-Risk: A Review of Research

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This Notebook is based on a more substantial review of research prepared for The Learning Partnership (www.thelearningpartnership.ca) as part of their work to inform the Canadian public on important issues of Canadian education policy. The full paper will be available from The Learning Partnership website in the near future. All conclusions and interpretations are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the opinions of The Learning Partnership.

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What is 'at risk'?

A student 'at risk' is usually taken to be one whose past or present conditions are associated with a higher probability of failing to attain various desired life outcomes. Risk is a useful concept only if it allows us to prevent future problems through present action (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2003).

Designating people as 'at risk' is neither easy nor always beneficial. Our predictions often turn out to be wrong, as the great majority of children even with many risk factors end up leading quite satisfactory lives (Masten, 2001; Willms, 2003). Predictions may also create self-fulfilling prophecy. For example teachers may lower their level of instructional demand from students who they believe are less capable (Howard et al., 1999).

Risk is a continuum of probabilities (Schonert-Reichl, 2000), not a single condition. Every person faces some vulnerability that fluctuates as people's situations change. For this reason one cannot determine a specific number of Canadian children at-risk.

Nonetheless, three different measures of risk - the child poverty rate, the proportion of students who do not complete high school by age 20 (Bowlby & McMullen, 2002), and a 'vulnerability index' based on longitudinal Canadian data (Willms, 2002) - all suggest that that about a quarter of Canadian children have some vulnerability and about 10-15% are likely to experience serious adverse consequences.

What factors shape risk?

The factors shaping risk can be thought of as falling into three categories – characteristics of children themselves,

family situations, and larger social forces. These factors interact in complex ways and may have different effects at different ages depending in part on how people respond to their circumstances.

Personal factors include characteristics such as disability, temperament (some children are easier on adults than others) and even appearance (more attractive children may be more likely to receive more adult approbation).

Families are powerful shapers of children's lives. The education level of parents, especially mothers, appears to be related to children's outcomes. Parenting styles or practices such as using discussion with children rather than punishment may also be important (Willms, 2002).

Educators sometimes blame students' problems on parents' lack of interest and support. Yet quite a bit of evidence (DesForges, 2003) shows that parents in all circumstances have high hopes and a strong desire to see their children succeed, suggesting that schools need to maintain a positive view of parents' intentions and to look for ways to support them.

Poverty, especially over many years, is a very negative force on all outcomes (Ross & Roberts, 2001) because it exacerbates other problems such as parental stress levels. The availability of secure work with reasonable rates of pay is critical to the capacity of parents to support their children. Neighbourhoods with higher incomes and stronger social supports appear to generate better outcomes for children (Beauvais & Jenson, 2002). Students also appear to do better overall when their school

population comes from less disadvantaged backgrounds (Frempong & Willms, 2002).

Schools can play a role in creating as well as reducing inequality in outcomes. Research on dropouts shows that about half make reasonable academic progress and leave school because of difficulties in their lives or with the school (Bowlby & McMullen, 2002). Many studies identify active support from caring teachers as an important factor in children's success (Howard et al., 1999).

What steps might reduce risk?

In-school efforts have taken four main forms: (a) supplementary programs such as support services to help students meet non-academic needs (e.g. providing food or emergency funds); (b) compensatory programs that provide different settings and services for designated students; (c) changes in mainstream instructional programs in an effort to alter overall teaching and learning practices in schools as a whole with particular effect for those at-risk, and; (d) efforts to work more closely with parents and communities. In all categories, most efforts to address populations at-risk have been short-term and on the margins of what schools do.

There is little evidence about the impact of the first category. The evidence on compensatory programs raises serious concerns about whether many of them actually improve the long-term situation of participants (Knapp et al., 1995). Current thinking on effective school change has tended to focus on basic approaches to teaching and learning and on changing student-teacher relationships, even though evidence shows that it is very difficult to create and sustain real changes in teaching and learning across entire schools.

Our changing understanding of the nature of risk has also drawn greater

attention towards other areas of education, notably early childhood and adult education. Given limited resources, it may be more effective to invest them in the first years of life (prenatal to age 2) than in primary or secondary schooling. At the same time, because vulnerable children often have vulnerable parents, adult education may be a critical part of any strategy to improve the situation of young children. Canada lags behind many other countries in both these areas.

We have learned a great deal more in recent years about how to build connections with parents including those considered 'hard to reach' (Desforges, 2003). However the development of parent involvement in schools in Canada is poorly resourced and a low priority. Given the importance of community as an independent influence on children's outcomes, schools may also look at ways of participating in larger efforts to build strong communities.

Another strategy for improving educational outcomes is the integration of various educational and social services through the school; however almost all such efforts have turned out, like many institutional changes, to be very hard to do effectively (Volpe, 2000).

Given the evidence, it is clear that whatever the role of schools, any comprehensive attempt to reduce inequities in life outcomes and to improve the situation of children at risk must extend beyond the school; it should involve a comprehensive attempt to address a range of factors that create and sustain risk for students. These include availability of meaningful work with reasonable pay and benefits, the adequacy of basic social programs, affordable housing, good health care, availability of nutritious food at affordable prices, and so on.

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This is a brief review of a complex body of educational research. Since no brief review can capture a full body of research, readers are urged to consult the references which have been cited. The views expressed in this notebook are those of the author. The sponsors welcome your comments on this issue and your suggestions for future issues of *Educators' Notebook*.