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The Minority At-Risk Student: An Educational Challenge

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In the latter half of the twentieth century, rapid advances in technology have spurred an increasing demand for a more educated work force in the United States. Since this phenomenon is expected to continue into the twenty-first century, a higher level of educational preparation constitutes the most logical and realistic insurance for future employment with adequate wages for minority populations. Unfortunately, in today's society far too many minority students are failing to take full advantage of the educational opportunities available to them in the public schools, community colleges, and universities. Furthermore, too many school systems have not yet found the appropriate mixture of

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curricula, instructional approaches, and human resources to fully address the educational needs of minority students and to encourage them to continue their quests toward higher educational attainments. To accomplish this feat, school systems must engender a keen awareness among both school personnel and constituencies of the serious nature of the problem, followed by a definite recognition that this educational challenge will entail adjustments by both the benefactor and the institution.

This paper presents descriptions of the characteristics of minority at-risk students most frequently referred to by authors on this subject. It includes other plausible attributes associated with at-risk students which are inadvertently omitted or given only minor reference in the literature. It points out some of the shortcomings of the American educational system in responding to the educational needs of students from certain ethnolinguistic minorities, and it provides a description of several viable approaches for advancing their education and career aspirations. Additionally, the paper presents a description of several contemporary programs developed by some school districts across the nation in their quest to curb the dropout problem, including approaches especially designed to further the education of at-risk minority students.

Identifying the At-Risk Student

This part of the essay gives a description of behavioral characteristics which are most apparent among at-risk students—that is, students with a propensity to discontinue their schooling before graduating from high school. In this paper the characteristics of at-risk students are described as behavioral patterns that are detrimental to their learning in today's public school system. In the more specific cases, at-risk students exhibit characteristics that are attributable, in varying degrees, to neurological and other physiological factors, while in the more common cases, at-risk students demonstrate characteristics that emanate from traumatic experiences and circumstances in their lives.

Students with apparent neurological or physiological handicaps, e.g., communicative disorders, mental retardation, hearing impediments, dyslexia and other visual impediments, are often recipients of special education provisions (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1986). However, school systems have not been nearly as successful in developing alternative approaches to meet the educational needs of students with more common types of at-risk characteristics. Among the latter type of behavioral patterns are undue anxieties, negative dispositions toward schooling, chronic absenteeism, disruptive behavior, limitations in English,

deficient study skills, poor attention span, low interest and motivation due to reading comprehension problems, and frequent academic failures. The aforementioned list of characteristics found among at-risk students does not imply that the schools are blameless, because most school systems across the nation have not yet developed appropriate assessment instruments and procedures to correctly determine the educational capabilities and physiological and psychological impediments to learning among minority children from diverse ethnolinguistic populations (Jones, 1988; Ogbu, 1989). Furthermore, due to the unavailability of appropriate curricula and instructional approaches, many children from minority populations are at risk when they enter the American school system. Therefore, they will continue to be at risk as long as some of the cultural and behavioral responses they reflect are relatively incongruent with the expectations of the educational system (Valencia, 1982; Ogbu, 1988). Essentially, those who survive the high school grades have learned to function to a significant degree in terms of these expectations. Yet, the schools are overdue in making educational adaptations in regard to cultural diversity.

It is essential for teachers to be certain that children are placed at the appropriate reading level, because youngsters who are pressed to read at an inappropriate level can easily become vulnerable to the at-risk syndrome. In a similar vein, Lesiak and Bradley-Johnson (1983) contend that the placement of children in reading should be accomplished at the instructional level at which the individual student can profit from instruction, i.e., the level at which words are recognized in context.

Once reading development commences, one of the principal educational objectives in the early years of schooling is to insure a progressive (upward) trend in reading development for all children. This is an important consideration because students who continue to read below grade level in the elementary grades also tend to have academic difficulties in other areas of the school curriculum (Hahn, 1987). If they are unable to comprehend the context of the material assigned for them to read, they will certainly falter in responding to oral and written questions presented to them in class.

Since reading is considered one of the critical areas in the elementary school curriculum, well-intentioned educators may elect to hold back grade level promotion for students who fail to meet the expected criterion level (Kronick & Hargis, 1990). Invariably, minority children from low socio-economic home environments, or with limitations in English, or both, are among the children who are retained in the early elementary grades (Goodlad & Oaks, 1988).

Being held back a grade can affect the self-esteem of children, for students generally desire to progress through schooling with peers of the same age group

(Kronick & Hargis, 1990). Educators face a dilemma in considering the effect of below average reading on the child's ability to perform adequately in other subject matter areas as compared to the psychological effects that the average child experiences in having to repeat a grade level. Moreover, if the child continues to have reading problems after repeating a grade level, the psychological effects on the child can be devastating. These can occur when a teacher relatively inexperienced in dealing with the language needs of minority children. Sound administrative judgement is necessary in assigning teachers to classrooms with children from diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds, especially when the children are held back a grade level due to low performance in reading and other components of the English language. Otherwise, special types of reading development programs represent plausible approaches for below grade level readers who are not required to repeat a grade level.

Underachieving students who progress beyond the junior high school grade usually face a critical period of adjustment in the early high school years. If the problems of underachievers are not seriously dealt with during the junior high school and early high school years, the probability of their survival beyond the tenth-grade is virtually nil (Kronick & Hargis, 1990; Kreitzer, Madaus & Haney 1989).

Alienation is another factor that is directly related to at-risk students. Alienation is usually interpreted as antisocial behavior, which includes a negative attitudinal disposition toward any number of factors associated with schooling. Paul Woodring (1989) asserts that while some students drop out because they are unable to comprehend what is being taught, a substantial number leave because they are bored and cannot stand being cooped up in the classroom all day. Therefore, it behooves educators and teachers to identify and provide alternative instructional arrangements and meaningful content that have a greater possibility of motivating and advancing the education of these students.

A stressful home environment because of the loss of a parent or family problems associated with alcohol, drug, and child abuse can seriously affect the psychological well-being of children and their academic performance in school (Calabrese, 1988). Furthermore, if the school fails to show compassion and understanding or falters in extending provisions to assist these students during particular crises related to their home situations, alienation from the school can emerge. Under these circumstances, children who find little or no psychological support in both the home and school environments often become at-risk students.

Peer influence makes a tremendous impact on the attitudinal orientation of youth, and this type of influence occurs with greater intensity during the middle

school years and through the high school grades. Unfortunately, this phenomenon tends to pull some academically capable students away from their academic responsibilities (Ogbu, 1989). If minority students with a high frequency of academic failures were mentally retarded, generally antisocial, and psychologically withdrawn, their influence on other students would be relatively minute. Since this is not the case, low achieving minority students who forego academic studies usually have more time to socialize with peers. Such students are inclined to fulfill their affiliative needs by inducing other students to adopt similar behavioral patterns (Ogbu, 1989). Consequently, minority youth who are academically successful, who also desire to socialize with peers, are especially vulnerable to the negative influence of alienated peers. It takes will power for academically successful minority students to maintain their individual values and favorable orientations toward higher educational goals and career pursuits. Teachers and counselors should be increasingly cognizant of this eventuality in the public schools and should implement effective counseling measures to assist students who are being subjected to negative influence by disenchanting peers.

Sexual activity among adolescents occurs across all ethnic and socio-economic groups. Since low-income females are most likely to become pregnant and give birth, this episode can interrupt their education (Fine & Zane, 1989). The school can assist these students through appropriate counseling sessions and through special provisions to enable them to continue their schooling. Advising students on measures to prevent pregnancies is one of the first approaches; however, continuation schools with arrangements for individualized and personalized instruction offer opportunities for pregnant students and other students with different types of problems to continue their education.

Values and Expectations of the Institutional System

In one of his recent studies, Ogbu (1989) proposes that minority students whose ancestors are traceable to two or more generations in the United States envisage the standard English, the curriculum, and the standard practices of the school as identifiers with the Anglo American (mainstream) culture. Moreover, when they perceive that their vernacular and other cultural (behavioral) patterns are considered inferior by teachers and mainstream peers, the results are alienation from teachers, the curriculum, and the entire school milieu (Ogbu, 1989; Valencia, 1982).

Another educational shortcoming of the American school system is the

absence of particular classroom arrangements that facilitate the learning of minority at-risk students. Many classrooms are still structured on the basis of independent and competitive learning arrangements. In competitive learning arrangements students are expected to strive for a top grade based on an inflexible grading system (Slavin, 1987), and these expectations place minority at-risk students at an educational disadvantage. Yet other types of learning options, such as self-competition, group competitive games, peer-learning arrangements, and cooperative learning activities, are viable approaches that can be readily used by teachers for all students in the classroom (Gage & Berliner, 1988; Kagan & Buriel, 1977; Valencia, 1986).

Since about the middle of the 1970s, the development of cognitive skills has been emphasized over humanistic values and relationships. Nevertheless, students are expected to exhibit particular types of personality characteristics such as the ability to accept constructive criticism, to maintain emotional stability when interacting with others, and to take individual initiative in seeking counseling services. Since many minority students do not have role models who have attained higher academic credentials and professional careers, they often do not have a knowledge of the many career options that are available to persons with higher educational attainments. Consequently, many of them accept a non-college bound program before considering other academic options. Thus, teachers and counselors should provide ample information about more lucrative career opportunities to these students and encourage them to pursue more advanced studies.

The vocational-technical oriented component of the dual-track curriculum should not be the only option to encourage at-risk minority students to continue their high school education. In the dual-track curriculum one track is designed to prepare students who aspire to enter university studies leading to higher career goals. The other track is designed to simply assist students in completing a high school education, and if they so desire, to continue their education at a technical-vocational institute or community (two-year) college. Since many minority students, mainly Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans, elect or are advised to take the vocational-technical oriented track, a large percentage of them seek jobs after high school graduation rather than university studies leading to more advanced degrees (Goodlad & Oaks, 1988). Educators and counselors should not assume that all at-risk students are incapable of pursuing and attaining higher academic achievements. Instead, they should consider that any preliminary lack of interest toward higher education and career goals by at-risk students is not necessarily a *fait accompli*.

The test performance of minority students is another factor that merits further

attention in public schools, colleges, and universities. The literature gives consistent evidence of a higher level of performance among students whose parents have attained higher levels of education and socio-economic status. Since the percentage of minority students from lower-income homes and undereducated parents is nearly three times that of Anglo Americans (Collison, 1988), it is not surprising to find lower average test scores among them. The factors associated with lower test performance among students from lower-income environments include the level of vocabulary used in the test instructions and test items, their unfamiliarity with specific test-taking strategies, the time constraints of the examination periods, and the reluctance of examiners in creating a more relaxed testing situation and ensuring that all examiners clearly understand the test instructions (Cervantes, 1988).

Timed tests based on a norm-referenced scoring approach tend to heighten the anxiety of students who already have disadvantages (Gage & Berliner, 1988). Although standardized tests are usually designed on a norm referenced basis, the time factor can be adjusted in consideration to students with disadvantages. Additionally, educators need to give further attention to the use of criterion-referenced tests and flexible time arrangements in determining the achievement and educational needs of minority students.

Whether in test-taking situations or in other learning activities, it is a normal characteristic for minority students to be more inhibited in environments that are unfamiliar to them and that emphasize interactive modes, behavioral expectations, and reinforcement techniques based on the dominant culture. Furthermore, the effects of these phenomena are more devastating to minority students from low-income homes located in segregated barrios and ghettos. It is not as likely to occur to the same degree among minority students who come from middle-income homes, whose parents have more education and who live in integrated neighborhoods where children have more frequent socializations with middle-class Anglo American children (Ogbu, 1989). Unfortunately, minority children who are more inhibited in classroom interactions are generally perceived by their teachers to have a negative self-concept and low self-esteem. Yet, a visit by the teachers to the children's home environments and community functions would dispel these generalizations, for they would find that these children are just as interactive and assertive as any other children. The most unfortunate syndrome that can emerge from these assumptions about minority children is the self-fulfilling prophecy. For if children are continually perceived and treated as if they have a negative self-image, they may soon begin to believe and behave according to the way others perceive them.

The literature on the subject of the self-concept and self-esteem underscores

the premise that children's negative self-image is consciously or unconsciously formed through unfortunate experiences in their lives, which include failures and frustrations in the school environment (Astin, et al., 1982; & Biehler Snowman, 1986; Gage & Berliner, 1988). Therefore, instead of perpetuating failures through a competitive grading approach which, in turn, lowers the self-esteem of the recipients, it behooves educators and teachers to focus on the creation of positive and constructive learning environments that actually increase the frequency of successful outcomes for at-risk minority students by allowing them to analyze and correct their mistakes (Strassburger, Rosen, Miller, & Chavez, 1990).

Educational Efforts to Advance the Academic Achievements of Minority At-Risk Students

In response to the pressing concerns about at-risk students and the dropout rate, many school districts are searching for approaches and arrangements to assist them in overcoming their personal and academic difficulties and to inspire them to continue their studies.

At the elementary school level the identification of at-risk children should include information on such factors as underachievement in reading and the basic skills, poor study habits, health problems, frequent tardiness and absences, and a stressful home life. In addition to an identification system for at-risk children, the program at the elementary school level should include inservice workshops for teachers and part-time staff to enable them to provide appropriate counseling, tutorial approaches, and some type of support system for at-risk children. It should include workshops to enable teachers to identify and apply a variety of instructional approaches in reference to the individual needs of limited English proficient (at-risk) students, to apply alternative grading approaches that motivate students to reach and surpass individual goals, and to organize the classroom environment to allow students to learn through cooperative learning arrangements. Furthermore, it should incorporate a monitoring system to periodically ascertain their class attendance and academic progress.

The identification system for at-risk students at the middle school level and junior high school level should include the student's subject-matter achievement record; achievement test scores; evidence of overage compared to classmates; reading level (including reading comprehension and English language scores); evidence of child abuse, drug or alcohol abuse; history of behavioral and emotional problems; and problems related to pregnancy and a stressful home

life.

The principal objectives of the program for at-risk students in the middle grades and through the high school grades should be designed to assist them to graduate with their peers. To accomplish these objectives, the program must provide academic remediation and tutorial services, study skills sessions, character development through teacher counseling, career counseling and goal setting, cooperative learning activities with peers to enhance their academic achievement and self-esteem, counseling services for students involved in using drugs and alcohol, provision of alternative educational arrangements, collaborative work with community agencies to help pregnant students continue their studies, and parental involvement in finding solutions to the educational and psychological needs of students at risk. The program should provide inservice workshops to assist teachers to implement appropriate instructional approaches, evaluation processes, cooperative group arrangements, and tutorial sessions. Additionally, the program should maintain a monitoring system to ascertain periodically the academic progress, attendance, and comportment of at-risk students.

Instructional programs at the high school level should also include different instructional approaches and activities to accommodate the particular learning styles of at-risk minority students (Riley, 1986). Cooperative peer learning arrangements have been found to be effective for advancing the learning of certain minority children (DeAvila, 1986; Goodlad & Oaks, 1988; Slavin, 1987). Successful outcomes have also been reported among high school at-risk students in continuation schools that include a combination of cooperative student learning arrangements, individualized and personalized instruction, and study skills sessions (Valencia, 1986).

Some programs for at-risk students at the high school level are specifically designed to provide cooperative work-experience arrangements with local businesses and industry. The primary objectives in these programs are usually intended to encourage at-risk students to complete their high school education, to help them gain employable skills through on-the-job-training, and to assist them in developing a sense of economic independence and responsibility.

Other programs for at-risk students at the high school level are designed to enhance the academic achievement of at-risk students, to motivate them to complete their high school studies, and to encourage them to pursue post-secondary or university studies. Some of these programs include collaborative arrangements between the high school district and a local college or university. One type of program places students in small classes on a college campus where they are given an opportunity to learn at their own pace (Hirschorn, 1987). Each

student is assigned to a mentor, placed in a summer job through cooperative educational arrangement, and given career or college counseling. Hirschorn (1987) declares that this type of program has been successful in reducing the attrition of minority students, in increasing the percentage of high school graduates, and in raising the percentage of students who pursue post-graduate studies.

Summary and Conclusion

In a quest to curb the escalating dropout rate among minority students, especially those from lower-income populations, school systems must become fully aware of the characteristics of at-risk students. This paper presents descriptions of several types of at-risk characteristics and provides descriptions of plausible programs and strategies especially designed to further the education and career aspirations of at-risk students.

One of the immediate challenges confronting school systems is to determine approaches to overcome children's reading difficulties, especially in their early years of schooling. Literature on the subject of at-risk youth indicates that if reading difficulties are not checked in the early school years, they will certainly affect students' academic performance in other subject-matter areas at more advanced school levels. Moreover, educators and teachers should expect these difficulties to be compounded among minority students whose language and other cultural (behavioral) patterns differ from those of Anglo mainstream children.

Alienation toward schooling and people associated with the school system is another behavioral pattern found among at-risk students. This characteristic is usually attributed to frustrations emanating from frequent academic failures, which may be caused by the inability of school system personnel to understand and respond to their learning styles, psychological needs, or both.

Among other conditions and circumstances that contribute to the deviant behavioral patterns of at-risk students are the loss of a parent, teen-age pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse, and frequent absences due to family mobility and pressing economic situations. If the school fails to extend compassion and understanding to at-risk students during particular crises in their lives, they will certainly continue to experience academic difficulties until they reach the age that enables them to terminate their education.

This essay presents viable approaches for school systems to consider in seriously addressing the educational and psychological needs of at-risk students.

The following are important components of a comprehensive program for at-risk students: (a) an effective system for identifying at-risk children in the early school years; (b) instructional strategies and arrangements that take into consideration the unique linguistic and cultural factors of minority students; (c) appropriate assessment instruments and grading approaches which emphasize successful outcomes through constructive feedback and recycling; (d) a monitoring system to determine the progress of at-risk students, coupled with provisions for immediate positive (nonpunitive) action that will encourage them to continue pursuing their education; (e) academic remediation and tutoring; career counseling and goal setting; and counseling services for students with personal problems attributed to pregnancy, drug, alcohol, and child abuse; (f) alternative school arrangements to accommodate students with special educational needs; (g) cooperative work-experience arrangements to enable at-risk students to complete high school while they gain employable skills through on-the-job training; (h) collaborative arrangements between the high school and local college or university to encourage at-risk students (who are academically capable) to pursue post-secondary or university studies; (i) inservice workshops for teachers, counselors, administrators, and other school personnel on strategies and procedures to develop and implement an effective program for at-risk students, which will include pertinent supportive services, effective curricula and instructional approaches, appropriate assessment and evaluation processes, and viable cooperative and collaborative arrangements with community agencies and businesses.

Unfortunately, the number of programs and educational approaches for at-risk students across the nation is dismally low. Most minority students are still not being served through appropriate curricula and instructional provisions, and many of them are not receiving counseling that encourages them to plan their academic programs toward higher educational goals and more lucrative careers. I hope the descriptive data and approaches presented in this essay will inspire a larger number of school people at all educational levels to implement policies, strategies, and programs that will dramatically curb the dropout rate among minority students and further their academic achievements and career aspirations.

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