

The Business of Placing Canadian Children and Youth "At-Risk"

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This article examines discourses and practices associated with designating some children and youth as being "at-risk" of academic and social failure in and out of school. To respond effectively to "at-risk" learners requires a refocusing of policy and research, an informed political and administrative will, effective use of sufficient resources, and systematic coordination of existing knowledge bases. We explore effective strategies based on a social justice vision of schooling and child development, arguing for an integrated understanding of and approach to child and youth-related activities and initiatives across school, community, socio-structural, and public policy spheres.

L'article traite des discours et des pratiques associés au fait de désigner certains enfants et jeunes comme des personnes « à risque » à l'école et dans la société. Si l'on veut répondre aux besoins des apprenants « à risque », il faut une réorientation des politiques et des recherches, une volonté politique éclairée, des ressources suffisantes judicieusement utilisées et une coordination systématique des bases de connaissances existantes. Les auteurs explorent des stratégies efficaces fondées sur une vision de l'éducation et du développement de l'enfant axée sur la justice sociale. Ils prônent une approche intégrée des activités et des initiatives à l'école, dans la collectivité, dans les sphères sociostructurelles et en matière de politiques publiques.

Discourses related to notions of children and youth considered to be "at-risk" or whose resiliency enables them to avoid risk have gained widespread currency in the educational lexicon. Application of these concepts by educators and policy-makers has provided some children and youth (whom education systems previously have forgotten, marginalized, or misrepresented) with useful services, resources, and opportunities to succeed. Nonetheless, as with many educational ideologies, an uncritical adoption of practices associated with at-risk discourses may also contain potential to reinforce the problems that they seek to address or to produce new dangers.

In this article, we investigate questions related to why discourses of children and youth at risk have been so popular, how they have been

adopted in Canadian educational contexts, and what their implications are, especially for troubled youth and minority groups within Canadian schools. Acknowledging variations in the conception of risk, we suggest that a dominant tendency exists in many associated educational interventions to adopt a medical or pathological orientation that continues to focus negatively on students who are considered to constitute parts of a problem population. By contrast, we highlight, with reference to examples from one provincial jurisdiction, progress made within models of schooling that adopt a broader critical framework and social justice orientation to students and their communities.

PUBLIC EDUCATION, PUBLIC POLICY, AND "AT-RISK" DESIGNATIONS

From their inception, public school systems in North America have been shaped by conflicting and often contradictory purposes. Factors like conformity, competition, knowledge transmission, and responsiveness to economic mandates coexist with commitment to democratic principles of diversity, inclusiveness, innovation, and personal development. Canadian educational developments have been characterized by growing recognition that uniformity in mass public schooling has had to give way to recurrent challenges to integrate varied and changing groups of learners and social environments.

Educators frame and implement practices associated with "at-risk learners" within a dynamic social context. Widespread designation of learners as "at-risk," "disadvantaged," or "marginalized" is relatively recent, but the identification of students with disabilities, specific needs, or other characteristics that educational authorities deem to warrant special attention has a history nearly as long as that of public education systems. Cravens (1993) links the evolution of movements that promote the use of science as a tool for organized "child saving" to changing visions of normalcy in child development since the 1870s. Two-and-a-half decades ago, Crow (1978, pp. 217ff.), in a review of the literature from the previous twenty years, identified 450 symptoms of difficulty experienced by young school-aged children deemed to be "at risk." More recent concern with the educationally disadvantaged has shifted the focus from the immediate school context and characteristics of the learner to stress early diagnosis and preventative measures. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development designates children and youth "at-risk" if they are "failing in school and unsuccessful in making the transition to work and adult life and as a consequence are unlikely to be able to make a full contribution to active society" (Evans, 1995, p. 21).

In keeping with analysis of the contradictory dimensions of education, we locate the origins of consideration for the educationally disadvantaged within a dual concern: to provide opportunities for those students to gain benefits from formal education, and to minimize costs and disruptions that those "problem" learners posed to mainstream education (Franklin, 1994, p. 6). Throughout much of the 20th century, however, notions of students deemed to require special education came to be conceptualized in medical or pathological terms that placed responsibility for learning disruptions or school failure on the individual or his or her cultural background. Increasingly, the concept has expanded from one based on presumptions of deficit in the learner (a medical or psychological model), to encompass sensitivity to the educational, home, and community environments of children's and youth's development (a sociological model).

Ironically, the "at-risk" terminology in schools was popularized through criticism not of learners but of the public education system as a whole, invoked most prominently in the United States in *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Broader debates in diverse national contexts have framed public concern around issues of how schools do or should contribute to economic advancement and the development of human capital in a framework of intensified global competition, relative to how well schools are fulfilling their mandates to provide to all learners equitable opportunities for social, economic, and political participation (Carnoy & Levin, 1985). Thus, notions of risk have gained acceptance from various points on the political and ideological spectrum to signify, alternatively, the failures or limitations of public education, or commitment to policies to facilitate more liberal or social democratic aims of inclusive education.

In the United States one-quarter to one-half of all students are estimated to be "educationally disadvantaged," and one-quarter to one-third of students are "extremely vulnerable" to dropping out or experiencing other severe educational difficulties (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990, pp. 30–31; Waxmann, 1992, pp. 1–2). Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development estimates that 15% to 30% of children and youth in its member nations are at risk of failing to complete school and experiencing subsequent problems of integration into labour markets and adult life (Evans, 1995, pp. 25–27; Evans & Hurrell, 1996, pp. 19–20). Crucial factors associated with risk status (consistent with the replacement of the language of disadvantage with that of risk) include poverty; ethnic minority status; community or family characteristics such as single parent status, parents' education, inadequate housing, child abuse, home-school

breakdown, inadequate knowledge of official languages, and type and geographic location of schools (Evans, 1995, p. 48).

Education ministries and other agencies in Canada have followed the general propensity to define, designate, and implement a wide range of special initiatives for children and youth at-risk. Estimates of the extent to which Canadian children and youth are reported to be at-risk fall within the range identified in other nations. Nonetheless, both the definition and measurement of risk vary considerably from one context to another, reflecting simultaneous tendencies to broaden and operationally refine the concept. Various agencies suggest that up to 30% to 40% or more of Canadian children are deemed to be "at-risk" of not completing high school and face personal development problems because of individual concerns (such as boredom, loneliness, personal health, and early childhood development), family status or difficulties, and/or peer, school, and community factors (e.g., Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, 1998). School-related risks are most heavily concentrated among visible minorities, the poor, residents of inner city and poorer rural regions, and individuals who are not fluent in the language employed at school (Guy, 1997). The status of children of Aboriginal ancestry figure prominently in Canadian analyses and policy discussions on school-related risk, given concerns about the relatively low levels of educational completion and attainment in virtually all age cohorts. Among those aged 15 to 24 in 1996, for instance, the high-school completion rate of persons with registered Indian status was 30 percentage points below that of other Canadians, while the comparable rate for non-registered Aboriginal people was about 10% below the non-Aboriginal completion rate (Hull, 2000, p. 15).

Notions of risk have broadened to encompass increasingly greater aspects of children's lives and circumstances, with as many as one-quarter to one-third of all children and youth considered to be in any single risk category. Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth, for example, highlight 11 major risk factors representing such characteristics as prenatal problems, temperament, immigration status, family income, and parental/caregiver mental well-being (see, e.g., Landry & Tam, 1996; Zeeman, 2001). Findings from this survey suggest that 1.2 million, or 27.6%, of Canadian children under the age of 11 can be considered to be "vulnerable" to emotional, behavioural, social, or academic problems (Zeeman, 2001, p. 5). Nonetheless, these data must be interpreted with some caution because exposure to many of these factors may be relatively limited or transitory, and have little long-term impact. The proportion of Canadian children and youth under 11 years old deemed to be at-risk drops to 3.9% when at-risk status is defined as exposure to

four or more of these risk factors (Landry & Tam, 1996; Zeesman, 2001, p. 5).

These observations suggest that, while a widely-framed "at-risk" designation can be a useful tool for locating specific needs or conditions that affect particular categories of learners, educators must regard its application and implications with caution. By considering how such concepts are culturally and socially constructed, educators can pose questions about who benefits from these ideologies and which aspects of reality are ignored (Fine, 1993, pp. 104–105). The broadening of definitions of "at-risk" populations to incorporate increasing numbers of individuals and circumstances has mixed implications, reflecting both genuine concern for learners in troubled situations and potential for intervention with little critical assessment of the nature and need for such action. It is especially striking that genuine concern for the rights and needs of particular categories of learners has emerged during a period in which educational reform, marked by strategies to contain educational costs and to reorient education within a renewed drive for economic competitiveness, corresponds with broader practices that enhance the fragility of children and youth. It is important to consider how these factors affect the life choices and chances for all youth, not simply those designated to be at-risk.

THE MULTIFACETED LIVES OF CANADIAN YOUTH

Canadian youth inhabit a rapidly changing world marked by considerable uncertainty over future prospects. Commentators like Côté and Allahar (1994) have suggested that all youth, to a certain extent, can be considered to be at-risk in an economic climate characterized by rising youth unemployment, fragmentation of family life, public policy emphasis on resources for an aging population, and increasing inequalities in the general distribution of resources. This point is more compelling in light of the growing list of competencies identified for success in today's globally competitive environment. Human Resources Development Canada (1998) observes that, "the definition of essential skills for the workplace has evolved beyond the 3Rs to include such dimensions as oral communication, thinking skills, working with others, continuous learning and computer use" (p. 1). Such additional skills increase the likelihood that employers will find potential employees lacking or at-risk.

Competing interpretative and policy frameworks accompany the mixed prospects that youth face. Several factors contribute to pessimistic conclusions, regardless of ideological stance: continuing family breakdown;

high rates of youth unemployment, especially relative to adult workers; poverty rates that affect at least one in five children and youth; suicide rates that are higher among teens than for any other age cohort; the increased amounts and proportions of education costs borne by individuals; disturbing levels of alcohol and drug abuse; violence experienced by youth and/or their caregivers; and additional threats to physical and mental health complicated by erosions in public health and welfare systems. Marquardt (1998, p. 58) suggests a further danger in assuming that universal high-school completion is a good thing without parallel concern for the extent to which those graduates will have access to quality employment.

Conversely, more optimistic projections stress trends such as an aging population profile that may improve employment opportunities for young workers in coming years, increasing levels of educational attainment and rates of volunteer activity among youth, and general progress towards improved health status and living conditions. Moreover, the majority of youth across diverse social groups and circumstances express optimism about their futures and express high degrees of commitment to and value on the importance of formal education in their lives (Krahn & Lowe, 1999). Comprehensive overviews like the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (see, e.g., Ross, Scott & Kelly, 1996) and the Canadian Council on Social Development's periodic reports on *The Progress of Canada's Children* (1996) bear out these complex realities (see also Guy, 1997, pp. 153ff).

This complexity includes recognition that the benefits and hazards associated with being young are not equally distributed. Poverty, social and economic marginalization, and other risk factors are most strongly experienced by people in selected groups, including Aboriginal youth, immigrants, and those living in inner cities and remote rural areas. Profound variations in circumstances also exist within these groups.

Two significant trends emerge with respect to socio-demographic changes among Canada's children and youth. First, processes such as immigration and internal migration, economic restructuring, growth in Aboriginal populations, and domestic relations contribute to increased social diversity. Changes in employment structures, family patterns, and economic inequality foster additional differentiation (Statistics Canada, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1998, 1999).

A second, related trend is the concentration of increasing proportions of the child and youth population in circumstances commonly deemed to be vulnerable to risk factors. Many of the highest population growth rates and projections occur in target groups noted earlier, including segments

of the Aboriginal population, children who do not speak the language of instruction, visible minorities, children living with lone parents, the poor, and those living in regions with limited social and employment prospects. A Saskatchewan Task Force on the Role of the Schools warns that, without adequate intervention and reversal of current patterns, the proportion of school-age students at risk of leaving school before high-school graduation in that province is likely to increase from 25% to 40% in a short time period (Tymchak, 2001, p. 12).

Not all members of minority groups or individuals in positions designated "at-risk" will experience behavioural problems, failure, or other negative outcomes. Even for those not so designated, childhood and adolescence are characterized by various passages in which many individuals may find themselves in risky circumstances that may not have any lasting significance: parental separation or divorce, family relocation or migration, experimentation, rebellion, or association with troublesome peer groups. Gilbert et al. (1993, p. 23), for instance, observe in their analysis of early school leavers that nearly three-quarters of youth in categories constructed to constitute the most high risk group were successful in completing high-school diplomas. Similarly, higher than average proportions of Aboriginal people who leave school early eventually return later in life to complete high-school or enter post-secondary or vocational programs (Hull, 2000, pp. 15–16). Many immigrant children who lack fluency in English or French at the time of entry into Canada nonetheless succeed in school over time because of immigrant selection criteria that emphasize high levels of education, occupational qualifications, and social supports (Beiser, Hou, Hyman, & Tousignant, 1998).

Partly for these reasons, public policy has emphasized segments of the population deemed to be "most vulnerable" through exposure to multiple risk factors. Similarly, growing attention to the phenomenon of resilience has suggested that many children and youth deemed to be in high-risk circumstances are able to complete school and avoid other major difficulties (Jenkins & Keating, 1998; Johnson, 1997).

These discourses carry mixed implications for the children and youth they describe. A tendency to increase the dimensions and prevalence associated with those deemed to be "at-risk" of numerous educational and social problems coexists with efforts to refine the definition and measurement of risk. The varying conceptions of risk have their counterparts in diverse policy responses and interventions into the lives of children and youth. In the process, the understanding of risk, regardless of how it is framed, has encouraged the development of intervention strategies that link early childhood, family, school, and other social sites.

We contrast, in the remainder of the paper, two competing orientations — a social control model and a social justice approach — to illustrate both the dangers and promise that may be inherent in the adoption of coordinated strategies to respond to child and youth deemed to be at-risk.

YOUTH PATHOLOGIES AND THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF RISK

Consideration of the possibility either that all youth may be “at-risk” or that risk can be prevented by specific therapeutic measures has a powerful ideological impact on public perception and subsequent policy intervention. Contemporary media accounts of problem or offending youth are fraught with the language of increasing risk and danger. The media often maintain the credibility of their accounts by appropriating the language and the voices of scientists. This biological language has political implications because it equates or at least associates issues of inherent or acquired physical and mental deficiencies with stereotypical race, class, gender, or geographic categories. As a consequence, it minimizes the impact that structural disadvantage has and enhances the influences of culture, biological traits, and familial behaviour (Schissel, 1997). For example, much of the discussion that permeates the media surrounding fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) focuses on the chemistry and physiology of FAS and the ensuing potential for criminal behaviour. The media present the relationship between mothers’ drinking and disrupted neurological development as almost a singular explanation for poor education attainment and future adolescent deviance (Findlay & Miller, 2002). Medical explanations, filtered through various media, simplify issues of good and bad for public consumption and demonize and stigmatize mostly individuals and families who come under the scrutiny of the public eye, namely, marginalised, racialized, and gendered families.

The same type of rhetoric is common in public policy directives in which risk is not only associated with future educational problems, but also with potential criminality. The National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC) issued a strategy for helping children from the prenatal stage to six years of age (National Crime Prevention Council Canada, 1996). Written in crime prevention language, the expressed intent of the strategy was to prevent future criminality by addressing issues of risk at early ages. Such pronouncements, however, use provocative and potentially dangerous language to make the point that criminals are predisposed either genetically or pre-natally to offensive behaviour largely as a result of poor pre-natal care (such as poor nutrition, poor parental attachment, excessive stress)

or poor maternal health. The NCPC has presented its analysis against three other backdrops: a culture of poverty, parental discord, and poor parenting behaviours. While semi-truths are embedded in these discussions, the fundamental focus is on poor, irresponsible parents, living in poor communities, who inadvertently predispose their children to anti-social behaviour. The final arguments are those expressed frequently in the literature on children at risk (Eron, Gentry & Schlegel, 1996): if legal-therapeutic intervention does not occur in these early stages of child development, children at-risk are in danger of persistent delinquency that results largely from their inability to conform to conventional society, especially the inability to conform to the structures of education.

We highlight two points with regard to the effects of the discourse of risk. First, the language of science decontextualizes the problems of children living in poverty and other situations characterized as vulnerable. Science has a strong political message, that badness and incompetence rest primarily with the biological results of bad parenting (beginning with conception). When this reasoning is placed within the context of poverty, the association between bad parenting and living on the margins of society becomes a powerful indictment of poor people. Second, this type of rhetoric often results in policy discussions that revolve around pre-delinquency, probable school dropouts, or other pathways to trouble. It does not matter whether there is scientific validity to the search for the potential. What does matter is that the search legitimates one type of explanation for badness and incompetence and prohibits other debates. Essentially, the pre-delinquency discourse pre-empts discussions about unfair social structures, about exploitative adults, and about irrelevant or unworkable institutions.

Substance abuse education programs offer an example of a therapeutic rhetoric and an emphasis on at-risk behaviour that may conceal underlying social conditions. Substance abuse by youth is portrayed as irresponsible behaviour that is indulgent and self-destructive. In fact, youth often emulate adult behaviour or attempt to live up to the expectations of adults as a result of the stresses and strains of a world in which youth have little political and economic impact on the way society runs. Adolescent abuse of drugs and alcohol is frequently a result of relative powerlessness, as evident in research that illustrates that marginalized youth and youth from indifferent families are at greatest risk from substance abuse (Canadian Institute of Child Health, 2000). More importantly, substances like alcohol that place youth at extreme jeopardy are legitimately produced and acclaimed as part of the good life, especially in commercials for beer and wine. The grim reality, of course, is that underage youth have easy access

to alcohol and are literally at risk from its dangerous effects. Similarly, street youth use and abuse alcohol and drugs to help them normalize marginal and traumatic existences.

Furthermore, the paradigm of "children at-risk," as part of the discourse of medicine, has served to permit the expanding psycho-pharmaceutical intervention of medicine into education. A recent report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* stated that in the United States the use of psychiatric drugs (primarily Ritalin and Prozac) in two- to four-year-olds had increased 50% between 1991 and 1995 (Zito et al., 2000, p. 1025). Despite considerable medical acknowledgement that the long-term effects of the use of such drugs at an early age are unknown, doctors continue to prescribe them to pre-school children, and parents continue to accept the diagnoses of their hyperkinetic children. This is done, ostensibly, to prepare potentially pre-delinquent children for a normal school life.

In Canada, the increasing use of Ritalin to control children and youth who are unable to fit in a regular classroom situation, diagnosed as attention deficit disorder, results in some of the drug ending up on the street, used in combination with other pharmaceuticals (Diller, 1998). An equally pressing problem is that Ritalin use on hyperactive or attention deficit disorder children and youth has increased 4.6 times in Canada since 1990 (Chisholm, 1996). The implications of this are staggering, given evidence suggesting that attention deficit disorder is difficult to define, let alone diagnose. Some doctors regard Ritalin as a panacea for youth-attention problems, and prescribe accordingly, while others regard it as a dangerous narcotic. In some communities, like Vernon, B.C., 10% of 11-year-old boys were found to be on the drug (Rees, 1998, p. A6). Significantly, Sweden banned Ritalin in 1968 because of heavy abuse (Diller, 1998).

The grim reality is that Ritalin has dangerous side effects, including drug dependence, headaches, eye and mouth tics, insomnia, and long-term risks for cancer and chronic depression (Diller, 1998) — but it is an extremely lucrative amphetamine for its manufacturers. It is plausible that in a climate of fiscal restraint and consequent larger classroom sizes, teachers use Ritalin to manage inordinately large and diverse student contexts. More directly, it appears that policy makers have chosen to ignore the environment in which children and youth are placed and to focus on the more lucrative, more compelling world of individual sickness, deviance, and risk (Livingston, 1997, pp. 17–18). The official language of substance abuse is about the individual-level pathology of being at-risk. The larger, hidden, and more important reality is that youth, in many respects, are victims of an adult world where a "business as usual" ethic frames the danger that jeopardizes the health of adolescents.

Academics and educators who fail to acknowledge how discourses of risk may restrict the way in which issues of child and youth welfare are framed can reinforce ideological discussions that have, at best, short-term therapeutic benefits and potential long-term disadvantages. The designation of risk poses a dilemma in the sense that, while it is necessary to identify specific segments of the school population for successful intervention, labelling of problem populations may create stigma, self-fulfilling prophecies, or inappropriate attention on certain individuals to the neglect of real problem sources (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990, p. 3). Several groups have begun to raise questions about why so many students are becoming categorized in special or designated groups (Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg, 1995, pp. 8–9). These kinds of concerns have also led many commentators to emphasize the ways in which schools produce rather than ameliorate risk. Schools can be "risk-inducing phenomena" in the cultural assumptions, classroom practices, and organizational and fiscal arrangements they adopt (Gordon & Yowell, 1994, p. 59). Even the language of risk can serve as a euphemism for racism, sexism, and biases based on factors like class and regional inequalities, thereby shifting attention away from more enduring problems. One of the most serious concerns expressed by members of many communities who see themselves poorly served by schools — including residents in some rural regions and Aboriginal people in diverse communities — is the failure by education systems to connect with the lives and worlds of the learners they are meant to serve (DeYoung, 1994, pp. 248–249; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, pp. 482–483). A general preoccupation with fixing problems has also meant that school success is rather negative: acceptable outcomes are avoidance of behavioural problems and avoidance of dropping out rather than positive intellectual and social development (Zeldin & Price, 1995, pp. 6–7).

ALTERNATIVE ORIENTATIONS TO CAPACITY BUILDING

An alternative orientation to the understanding of risk is premised on the recognition that schools and other institutions must exercise both discretion and flexibility to meet the needs of children, youth, and the diverse communities that they represent. A social justice orientation does not view phenomena like hunger, racism, violence, serious illness or disability, inability to speak English or French as a first language, and other circumstances strictly in terms of disadvantaged status; rather, its concern is to locate and transform the sources of inequality. In school settings, this involves in part sensitivity to how educational environments may damage students who are placed in situations built around expectations and

practices dependent on specified conceptions of normality. Dei et al. (2000) present a vision of inclusive schooling premised on the notion that "every student is able to identify and connect with the school's social environment, culture and organizational life" (p. 13). Inclusive schools concerned with social justice build upon the recognition that students possess or have the capacity to develop multiple competencies both in and outside of school. They incorporate social and cultural resources such as the accumulation of significant pools of informal learning, or the presence of individuals with special skills or life histories, that are often ignored in schooling or not considered as legitimate learning resources (Livingstone, 1999).

Many jurisdictions have made progress to understand and organize interventions in an integrated way that highlights connections among personal circumstances, institutional contexts, and social conditions (Jensen & Stroick, 1999, p. 4). Nonetheless, substantial limitations stand in the way of educational progress to ensure that equitable educational opportunities, and a socio-economic framework in which these can be realized, are available to all learners. At a practical level, these include jurisdictional concerns, funding and resource issues, fragmentation of services, strained relations between community and school personnel, and the location and physical arrangement of schools and services, among many others (Evans & Hurrell, 1996, pp. 27–28). The core challenge, as the literature on exemplary schooling highlights (Gaskell, 1995), remains the quest to match a supportive policy and institutional framework with an open and caring student and community orientation.

BEYOND THERAPEUTIC LANGUAGE TO EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

This section provides some examples from one provincial context, Saskatchewan, that offers some external acknowledgement of its commitment to link public services with local community initiatives in a coordinated, holistic manner (Hurrell & Evans, 1996, p. 159). A provincial task force on the role of the school provided further impetus in 2001 for a more explicit vision of an integrated, community-based school system in which schools would become core agencies linked with, and ideally equipped to deliver, all services to children and youth (Tymchak, 2001, p. 64). The government of Saskatchewan (2002) has recently endorsed these principles, stressing that the role of the school has changed in recent years to encompass two key purposes — to educate children and youth, and to support service delivery so that schools become "centres at the community level for the delivery of appropriate social, health, recreation, culture, justice

and other services for children and their families" (p. 1). It will be a major undertaking, given some of the obstacles cited above, to ensure that this model is implemented successfully. Nonetheless, Saskatchewan Learning has developed an action plan, in part through an awareness that examples of such schools already exist in the province. We draw from some of our own research and work with selected schools in order to illustrate how a social-justice orientation to schooling can be effective (see Schissel, 1997, and Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, for further details).

Won Ska Cultural School in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, exemplifies the benefits that an integrated, community-based school can offer, especially for marginalized children and youth who have generally been in trouble with the law. The school is noteworthy for several reasons, not the least of which is the provision of mentoring. This school, like other effective schools, deals with the passage from childhood to adulthood as fundamental.

The school administrators create a democratic context in which students have the final say in their educational development. To this end, the teacher as mentor is of deep importance. The mentoring process includes not only training and the transmission of knowledge, but also the creation of a mutual, idea-sharing context in which the mentor listens as much as she or he speaks. (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 72)

The importance of the mentoring is that, for the most part, the lives of the students at-risk have been devoid of understanding people who listen, physical and emotional safety, chances to express themselves democratically, chances to make reparation, and appropriate role models. This last point is fundamental to the paradigm of learning that sustains the school. Students learn practical life skills from observing and interacting with adults with whom they are comfortable. They learn about responsibility, responsible intimacy, the nature of good parenting, and the ability to trust people in positions of authority. Most of the students we encountered in alternative education programs (many who are highly disadvantaged) expressed a fear and distrust of people in positions of authority — especially the police and other legal officials — and an overwhelming lack of affinity with regular schools. Many of the students indicated that they would likely be in jail if not for an effective alternative school like Won Ska. Such schools provide a vital solution to the stigma of being at-risk. They do so by focusing on the future and by ignoring the histories of their students. In accord with First Nations spirituality, the school avoids issues of guilt and blame and focuses on what the student needs to develop academically and socially. While the school works with the police and the courts, it insists that social justice, personal development,

and well-being are anathema to punishment. The philosophy is that a student can learn meaningful citizenship only in the context of a system that avoids punishment.

The school also succeeds because of its particular approach to democratic decision making. Authority structures are not rigid; students decide on issues surrounding administration, curriculum, and social events. The logic is that marginalized youth (and youth more generally) are already disenfranchised and that a responsible and just education has to invest students' lives with the right and the ability to have an influence. Consequently, retention rates are high and many students expressed the desire, if it were possible, to stay at school 24 hours a day.

A school like Won Ska, to many observers, is a radical departure from conventional education. As a result, the school battles for credibility and struggles to obtain adequate physical and financial resources. The school board is reluctant to endorse Won Ska because of its irregular curriculum, largely student-driven. The mentoring model is expensive because it is based on very small class sizes, often with one-to-one learning. Furthermore, the school refuses to participate in at-risk/young offender discourse which is fashionable in the larger community. Lastly, some students remain in school well into their twenties, again a relatively expensive practice. Ironically, the practices and philosophies that make Won Ska School highly successful also endanger its existence.

Nutana Collegiate in Saskatoon provides another example of a clearly defined, Integrated School-Linked Services program to deal with youth in trouble. Between 50% and 70% of the students are involved with social services at any one time, and the courts and social services designate 80% as at-risk. In dealing with highly stigmatized students, the school provides flexibility and individualized programming within the confines of a standardized curriculum. Students' needs are dependent on their life contexts, and the school responds. The school provides, for example, a program for single mothers that includes complete educational opportunities for mothers and day care for children. It is unique, however, in that it also provides opportunities for fathers to be involved with the children. In the end, the atmosphere that the school creates destigmatizes pregnancy and parenthood and fosters a climate wherein being a young mother (or father) is not a risk factor for the baby and where mothers especially can develop intellectually and socially.

The school also stresses mentorship and apprenticeship by using students and former students as student aids, as youth leaders, and as facilitators in various self-help groups. Former students who were likely at one time labelled as at-risk become role models. The honour of being

respected replaces the stigma of being diagnosed.

As with Won Ska Cultural School, Nutana strives to neutralize the stigma associated with being at-risk by ensuring that students feel valued and by fostering the opportunities for the public to value students as productive and influential. This is accomplished by using community resource people as much as possible within the school. This practice provides the context in which adults interact with youth on an ongoing basis. Adult members of the larger community get to see young people designated at-risk as real people, an important part of the education process and an important part of dealing with the largely condemnatory, socio-legal discourse of risk.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR A PROGRAM FOR DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

Jurisdictions like those described here exemplify innovative educational programs that provide for the needs of all students but especially for those designated as at-risk. Importantly, they provide academics and social policy advocates with the philosophical and practical tools to critique the mechanisms through which children and youth become stigmatized and disadvantaged through formal education. The program for democratic education embodied in such programs is the bedrock for a new paradigm of education that confronts and counteracts disadvantage.

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