TOWARD AN EQUITABLE EDUCATION: POVERTY, DIVERSITY, AND STUDENTS AT RISK

John P. Portelli    Carolyn M. Shields    Ann B. Vibert
TOWARD AN EQUITABLE EDUCATION: POVERTY, DIVERSITY, AND STUDENTS AT RISK

The National Report

John P. Portelli, OISE/UT
Carolyn M. Shields, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign
Ann B. Vibert, Acadia University
Toward an Equitable Education: Poverty, Diversity, and Students at Risk

First Edition

by John P. Portelli, Carolyn M. Shields, Ann B. Vibert

Copyright ©2007 by Portelli, Shields, Vibert

All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be produced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the authors.

Typesetting: Tracy Choy, BTT Communications

Cover design: Antony Hare

National Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Portelli, John P. (John Peter)


Includes bibliographical references
ISBN 978-0-7727-2623-0


Printed in Canada
# Table of Contents

Preface ............................................................................i

**CHAPTER 1**  
Purpose, Methodology, Conceptions of At-riskness  ....1

**CHAPTER 2**  
What Works .................................................................19

**CHAPTER 3**  
Challenges in Supporting Students at Risk ..............37

**CHAPTER 4**  
Recommendations ......................................................55

References........................................................................59

Notes on Contributors ................................................61
The study *Toward an Equitable Education: Poverty, Diversity, and ‘Students at Risk’* was inspired by some of the insights we garnered from the national project on *Student Engagement in Learning and School Life* (Smith et al., 1998) in which we were involved. More specifically, the focus of this study arose from the contrast we noticed between an elementary school in Nova Scotia (a school serving a markedly low SES community) and other schools in similar contexts. Almost against the odds and in contrast to what mainstream educational literature tells us, in this school we experienced meaningful student, educator, and community engagement aimed at critical democratic transformation. We noted practices and a way of being in school that consciously worked against the predominant “deficit mentality” for students at risk and enacted what we have termed “a curriculum of life” (Vibert, Portelli, Shields, & LaRocque, 2001, Portelli & Vibert, 2002, Vibert & Shields 2003). In this school, this kind of thinking and practice created possibilities that made a qualitative difference in the students’ lives and contributed to the realization of a critical democratic citizenry, as these educators deliberately worked with students, their families, and community to challenge and overcome dominant constructions of them as deficit. Reflecting on the work in this school we asked: How are students at risk conceived of in general by both theoreticians and practitioners? What happens in schools under the category of programs and practices for students at risk? Who benefits and/or gets marginalized by these practices and constructions of students? What are examples of successful practices? We embarked on an inquiry into these questions by examining the literature and, equally importantly, by collecting and analyzing the views of students and educators within the schools.

“Equitable education,” “inclusive education” and “students at risk” are popular catch-phrases in current educational discourse. But catch-phrases run the risk of becoming slogans in other words, rhetorical positions automatically endorsed without due critical attention to the purpose and consequences of our actions or the possible inconsistencies between our beliefs and values, on the one hand, and our practices, on the other. No one would want to argue against an equitable and inclusive education for students at risk. But when such terms are adopted by neo-liberal educational interests in the service of narrow notions of accountability, excellence, and success, and in the interests of increasing standardization, it is time to inquire...
further into their meanings in use. In this study, then, we chose to investigate both those conceptions of students at risk and practices articulated to these students which are currently at play in educational literature, policy, and practice. We sincerely hope that the observations, insights and recommendations we identify in this report will be given serious consideration by educators and policy makers.

Conducting a national study in Canada is not an easy task especially given the distances that separated each of the three sites. Luckily, we have been working together as a group for a decade and we still enjoy doing collaborative work. In every respect, this project has been a joint effort of the three of us. And, of course, we have been blessed by competent and enthusiastic research associates and assistants whom we sincerely thank for their assistance and insights. We also thank the school boards and schools that allowed us to work with them – without their cooperation and support we would not have been able to pursue this study. We acknowledge the financial support from SSHRC that enabled us to conduct this study. Finally, we thank our individual institutions that supported us in a variety of ways throughout this project.

John P. Portelli 
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto
Carolyn M. Shields 
University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign
Ann B. Vibert 
Acadia University

June 2007
The following is the report of a pan-Canadian research project entitled *Toward an Equitable Education: Diversity, Poverty, and Students at Risk*. This project, sponsored by a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada grant, was headed by John P. Portelli (OISE/UT) as principal investigator, and Carolyn Shields (University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign) and Ann Vibert (Acadia University) as co-investigators. We were assisted by the following research assistants/associates: Jason Price, Archana Sharma, Allison Carrier, Cindy Rottmann, Erin Irish, Trevor Norris, Leslie Henry, Michael Scales, Mark Edwards, Erica Mohan, Barbara Morton-Winters, Trudy Lovell, and Monica Hunter.

**CAUTIONARY NOTE**

We use the term *at risk* to denote students who do not fare well in schools with considerable ambivalence. It is a much contested and debated term within the literature, too often implying that students’ struggles are located in their own shortcomings and/or their family backgrounds. To avoid some of the negative connotations, we have reluctantly chosen to adopt the term *students at risk* rather than *at-risk students* to ensure there is no sense in which the reader associates risk with inherent conditions of specific children and/or their communities. It is our hope that readers will read and interpret the term with appropriate skepticism and caution. By way of stylistic note, we have opted for the term “risk” as the noun form of the adjective.

Several decades of educational research have clearly established that ‘students at risk’ is a term that obscures the way in which forms of social difference are treated inequitably in schools. In fact, the discourse of risk has historically served more to mask the sources of educational risk than to reveal them, often relocating the educational effects of racial, cultural, gender, and sexuality marginalization into individual, familial, or community short-comings.
Despite our ambivalence with the term and the negative ways in which it is frequently used, we recognize that some children are at-risk. Many children live in untenable situations (poverty, abuse, neglect) and nothing we say should be taken as implicit acceptance of these conditions or the denial of their existence. Moreover there are some individual behaviours, such as involvement with drugs, gangs, and weapons, or acts of racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of violence that place students at-risk and that pose a danger to themselves and others. These need to be legitimately named and addressed by school officials. Some children also suffer from organic disabilities (such as autism, developmental delays, physical limitations) or temporary illnesses that pose real challenges for them in school settings. These are material differences that require appropriate educational response. We do not want our critique of discourses of ‘risk’ to be misinterpreted as a denial of real differences that matter.

Nonetheless, as we discuss below, several decades of educational research have clearly established that ‘students at risk’ is a term that obscures the way in which forms of social difference are treated inequitably in schools. In fact, the discourse of risk has historically served more to mask the sources of educational risk than to reveal them, often relocating the educational effects of racial, cultural, gender, and sexuality marginalization into individual, familial, or community short-comings. And, indeed, as disability studies have established, organic sources of educational risk such as those we refer to above are interwoven with social difference: poor children of colour, for instance, are hugely over-represented in learning disability categories, and the effects of organic and physical disabilities on educational performance are greatly deflected by dominant race and class identities (O’Connor & Fernandez, 2006). For these reasons, our use of the term ‘students at risk’ is meant to refer to all those students whom schools have historically not served well, including students who do not belong to dominant social identity categories and students who, for whatever reasons, learn differently.

**PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW OF STUDY**

The study was initiated in part because researchers were aware of increasing numbers of students either being labeled “at-risk” or “living under conditions that place them at risk of educational failure.” Maynes (1999) states that as the middle class declines in number (60% of the population in 1973 and 44% in 1996), an increasingly large proportion of children may be considered “at-risk.” Recent claims are that 20% of American children are living in poverty, while in Canada the numbers have been cited as high as 25% for urban centres and 19.9% nationally (Ross, Scott & Smith, 2000; Maynes, 1999) Although initiatives for educational reform and new programs to address these problems continue to proliferate, many suggest that
predominant ways of thinking about both the students and the programs designed to help them rely largely upon “deficit thinking” (Anyon, 1997; Fine, 1990; Kanpol, 1997; Valencia, 1997). Moreover, the correlation between minority status (ethnicity and home language) and socio-economic disadvantage with identification of risk is long-standing and well-established in the research literature.

Alarmed by these statistics and by deficit mind sets and practices we ourselves had seen in public schools, and by our knowledge of schools that have worked successfully to overcome deficit approaches, we conceived of a study to investigate conceptions of “risk” espoused by educators¹, to explore relationships between constructed understandings and “theories-in-use” (Kaplan, 1964), and to investigate how particular theories in use work to support or marginalize students at risk. Over a four year period, between 2001-2005, we studied six schools in three provinces: British Columbia, Ontario, and Nova Scotia. The choice of six schools allowed us to introduce into our analyses the influence of various regional and educational cultures.

Our specific objectives were:

1. to determine how theorists and practitioners constructed and understood the notion of students at risk;
2. to understand the approaches adopted by various educators to students at risk;
3. to identify the strategies and/or programs used by educators to address the needs of students at risk;
4. to ascertain what practices either inhibit or promote the academic success of students who are traditionally unsuccessful;
5. to identify ways in which students understand these approaches; and
6. to make recommendations to educators and policy-makers.

**RESEARCH PROCESS AND DATA COLLECTION**

After securing ethics approval from each participating university in August 2001, we began the process of finding school boards and schools willing to participate in the study, and obtaining

¹ In several ways, this study was a follow-up to the study Student Engagement in Learning and School Life (Smith et al. 1998) in which the principal investigator an co-investigators participated. See also, Vibert, Portelli, Shields, and LaRocque (2001), Portelli and Vibert (2002).
ethical approval from the boards. The schools were selected by each participating board on the basis of criteria we had originally established in the grant application, those being: diversity of the students' socio-economic status, ethnicity, ability, and the variety of approaches and programs designed to address these students at risk specifically.

Although the names of participating schools remain confidential according to the terms of our agreements with them, we can describe them generally in the following ways. In each case, we called our elementary schools A, and the secondary schools B. Both BCA and the secondary school, BCB, were large inner city schools with high levels of ethnic diversity (in each case including a distinct group of First Nations students), high poverty, and highly transient populations. BCA had 500 students representing an estimated 37 language groups, while BCB's 1400 member population included 43 different home languages and a 43% poverty rate. NSA was a relatively small semi-rural elementary school, serving a socio-economically mixed population including largely white high poverty neighbourhoods, with a population of approximately 220 students. NSB was a small junior high school on the outskirts of a city, serving a socio-economically mixed population of white and African Nova Scotian students, and including two significant high poverty communities. ONA, a K-8 school of 650 students, was located in a working class, inner city, ethnically mixed neighbourhood with a high immigrant population, the majority of whom were Portuguese. ONB, an urban high school (grades 9-12) in one of the least socially and economically privileged neighborhoods in Ontario, had a student population of 900, the majority of whom were Black or of Central and South American descent.

We adopted a qualitative research methodology including a multiple case study and a multiple methods approach (Creswell, 1998) informed by the methods of institutional ethnography (Smith, 1987). This approach included specific classroom and in-school observations, semi-structured interviews, surveys, an analysis of existing publicly available data related to student academic performance and engagement in school life, and social, cultural, and political data available from both educational and external sources.

Researchers worked with participants to clarify the research project and process, to collaboratively develop specifics of the research plan sensitive to contexts, identifying, for example, important initial documentation, key personnel, and calendars of school events. During the first year, we conducted selected classroom and school observations and we surveyed 920 students (grades 5-12), 89 educators, and 50 parents and guardians to garner their perceptions of “risk,” student success, and school practices. We interviewed 146 students
(grades 5-12) and 114 educators, including multiple interviews with administrators, to learn how they conceptualized risk, and how schools dealt with students considered at-risk. In the second and third years of the study, feedback sessions were held with interested staff at each school. Thus, as we collected, analyzed, and interpreted the data, we shared our perceptions and checked them against those of the participants.

**THEORETICAL STANCE**

This study was grounded in beliefs underlying critical-democratic pedagogy. Central to this perspective is an understanding of education as an irreducibly political and philosophical pursuit (Freire, 1998). This perspective provides a theoretical framework from which one examines the “taken for granted” (Simon, 1992) in education in order to raise questions about the social and political implications of often unexamined daily practices and language (Powell, 1999; Apple, 2001). When left unexamined and intact, many of these practices conceal or reify societal inequities in education. By focusing on critical-democratic pedagogy, and checking our perceptions with colleagues and participants, however, we began to understand how particular ideas and practices support and/or hinder progress toward a more just and equitable education.

Participant data revealed a diverse range of perspectives, all of which were taken seriously in accordance with the theoretical framework adopted in this project. The school case reports cannot of course be taken as a “final truth.” We are aware that this report is an artifact reflecting data gathered in particular contexts over specific periods of time. As such, it cannot capture all perspectives on the data or the totality of events, scenes, and issues within

---

The term ‘at risk’ is highly contentious, carrying a variety of meanings across different educational ideologies and communities. In other words, ‘at-risk’ is not a politically neutral term, but inevitably value-laden, carrying with it whole sets of social and political beliefs depending upon its ideological location.
each school. Rather, it represents a composite of the major themes and issues across the school communities as they were revealed through our research.

Our research has led us to identify four pervasive conceptions of risk informing and organizing both the educational literature and current practice and policy on the subject. The research has also provided insights into approaches that work in terms of supporting students at risk and conditions that represent challenges for schools and systems in terms of supporting these students. Based on our findings, we have generated recommendations that we believe are not only applicable to the six project schools but have wider implications for schools and policy makers more generally.

We hope that our accounts, analyses, and recommendations will provide an impetus for wider critical discussion of issues related to students at risk, will contribute to a more compassionate and thoughtful discourse on the topic, and will provoke continuing investigation of practices and policies that further equitable public education. We also hope that our recommendations will move boards and ministries of education to provide much needed support to those schools and educators committed to overcoming daunting challenges in order to fashion a just and caring education for students at risk.

CONCEPTIONS OF RISK

The purpose of this section is to identify the various definitions of the term ‘students at risk’ currently at use among educational theorists, participant-practitioners, and policymakers, and to examine various constructions of risk at play in public education. As we have suggested above, the term ‘at risk’ is highly contentious, carrying a variety of meanings across different educational ideologies and communities. In other words, ‘at-risk’ is not a politically neutral term, but inevitably value-laden, carrying with it whole sets of social and political beliefs depending upon its ideological location. For instance, it is a term that can on the one hand work to reproduce inequities by obscuring the sources of risk in social injustices; yet on the other hand, the term becomes a necessary means of support for students at risk when it is used in order to procure resources for high needs schools.

In any case, widespread use of the term ‘at risk’ does not imply clarity or unanimity of definition. Apple (1990) reminds us that examining labels like “children at risk” requires understanding the cultural forces that create them; such labels are themselves social constructions (p.139). Fine (1995) argues at-risk is fundamentally a political construct which
is applied with “promiscuity” to youth who exhibit “high absenteeism, have been retained for a grade, become pregnant, perform poorly in class, have a learning disability, live in a single parent household, or simply come from Puerto Rico” (p.88). Hence, unpacking the concept of risk calls for an examination of the underlying assumptions and perceptions that shape the process of identifying students at risk itself.

In this section, we identify and critique four conceptions of risk that emerge both from educational scholarship and from our analysis of the data from this study. Some theories and discussions of risk imply that applying the label consists solely of the identification of conditions that may put a student at risk. Yet, as Dorothy Smith (1987) suggests, it is important to attend not only to a label but to its social and cultural production through discourse. We contend that any conception of risk combines an identification of conditions with an interpretation of those conditions that results in a particular kind of discourse.

The four conceptions discussed here are based on four different discourses – deficit, liberal, official educational, and critical. These discourses are neither discrete nor universal, but are contingent on the interaction between context and interpretation. Thus, the boundaries between them are fluid, such that in practice multiple discourses function not only within the same school and context, but often within the same person.

A common tendency, both in the literature and in practice, is simply to describe conditions that may create risk without interpreting or critiquing the ways in which these conditions may become educational risks. Some such conditions are psychological, such as ADD, low self-
esteem, emotional difficulties; some are social, such as ESL, minority status, differing sexualities, or poverty. Simply listing these conditions as risk factors without offering an analysis of how and why they become such implies a problematic neutrality, suggesting, for instance, that we should just accept that children with ADD or racialized children are by definition not going to do well in schools. On the other hand, sometimes educators identify these risk factors in a spirit of honest questioning, ambiguity, or uncertainty. For this reason, it is important to point out that a descriptive approach to risk could imply any one of the conceptions we now describe.

(i) Deficit Discourses
The most common traditional explanations for school failure are located in deficit discourse of schooling (Fine, 1995; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Swadener, 1990; Valencia, 1997). Deficit discourses place educational failure in individual and family shortcomings rather than in institutional or structural practices and power relations. They identify intellectual, cultural, and linguistic differences as disabilities and deficits. The implication is that these differences represent pathologies in need of cure rather than alternative and legitimate ways of being in the world (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005).

Deficit discourses tend to appropriate a traditional clinical model for describing students at risk (Donmoyer, 1993; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2001; Valencia, 1997), constructing risk in medical metaphors like “diagnosis and remediation of reading difficulties.” For this reason, deficit discourses are sometimes known as an epidemiological approach. The student at risk is pathologized in a powerful therapeutic language full of medical authority. Within this discourse, for instance, second language learners are constructed as linguistically delayed and in need of remediation. Schissel and Wotherspoon (2001) argue that the therapeutic language within the epidemiological approach can be “risk-inducing” by creating euphemisms for race, sex, and gender biases that distract public attention from structural inequities associated with social justice interests. Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi (2005) argue that deficit thinking is one form of pathologizing practice in which:

> Perceived structural, functional, cultural, or epistemological deviation from an assumed normal state is ascribed to another group as a product of power relationships, whereby the less powerful group is deemed to be abnormal in some way. (p. x)

They further argue that “pathologizing” is a mode of colonization used to govern, regulate, manage, marginalize, or minoritize, primarily through hegemonic discourses” (p. x).
Marchesi (1998) points out that the two risk factors most commonly identified in deficit discourses are low socio-economic status and minority or ethnic status, arguing that within this discourse these become superficial labels that are inherently classist and racist. Rather than producing helpful information on students who require support and care, these identity categories operate here to produce and reproduce the very inequities they purport to address. Valencia (1997) elaborates on this process:

Given the parsimonious nature of deficit thinking, it is not unexpected that advocates of the model have failed to look for external attributions of school failure. How schools are organized to prevent learning, inequalities in the political economy of education, and the oppressive macro-politics and practices in education are all held exculpatory in understanding school failure (p.2).

Valencia, then, argues that deficit discourses contribute to maintaining existing power relations by relocating social and institutional injustices into individual and family shortcomings.

A central feature of deficit discourses is the manner in which they maintain white middle-class privilege by leaving unspoken the way in which schooling is organized around the norms of this group, obscuring the fact that it is the values and beliefs of this class which construct the standard against which risk is measured. Fine (1990) argues that describing risk in this way is a form of political oppression applied to low-income, ethnic or learning-disabled students. According to Hixson and Tinzmann (1990),

Historically, “at-risk” students were primarily those whose appearance, language, culture, values, communities, and family structures did not match those of the dominant white culture that schools were designed to serve and support. These students – primarily minorities, the poor and immigrants- were considered culturally or educationally disadvantaged or deprived. (1990, p. 1)

Risk identification, then, becomes a de facto means of segregating schooling along class and racial lines.

Polakow (1992) argues that locating and distancing the student at risk as an outsider is a central notion of the deficit discourse. Students who deviate from the norm can be constructed through this discourse in ways that account for their unsuitability for mainstream education
opportunity. Garcia and Guerra (2004) believe that schooling constructs “otherness” such that deficit discourses function, in effect, as mechanisms for rejecting social difference. The result is systematic disenfranchisement.

There are several consequences and restrictions attendant on these discourses. Identification processes become problem-finding and blaming. Even more troubling, shifting responsibility for the causes of risk to the victim deflects responsibility away from institutional and social contexts as risk makers (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). Risk appears, in some senses, to be constructed by the discourse itself; it construes individuals in ways which reduce possibility and hope while it weaves a narrative of blame (Comber & Kamler, 2004; Donmoyer, 1993).

This cyclic conception of risk – “description-explanation-prediction-prescription” – which is imposed on the student as explanation or blame for her or his school performance (Valencia, 1997, p.7) privileges existing norms and preserves existing inequalities.

For students at risk, education can become a dead-end street – an inescapable cycle of low expectations creating a separate culture on the margins. Once contained and alienated by deficit thinking, a student cannot easily overcome the effects of this objectification of her or his identity, and it becomes extraordinarily difficult to surmount the alienation from schooling which inevitably results.

(ii) Liberal Discourses
Another way of individualizing conceptions of risk common within education is through liberal discourses. Although there are different forms of a liberal stance, liberal discourse in general is characterized by two central beliefs: a belief in the primacy of individual human rights and a belief in the centrality of freedom and choice. These beliefs have led to practices and policies that focus on improving individual conditions without necessarily taking the larger social and political context into account. According to Hixson and Tinzmann (1990), “within dominant educational discourses, the term ‘at risk’ consciously or unconsciously shifts the locus of responsibility for social inequities from institutions to individuals” (p. 2). The power and the status of the individual are inflated to such an extent that structural power relations and collective social responsibility are ignored. Again, through a failure to address and account for the workings of social power on individual destinies, liberal discourses by default reproduce the status quo.
Deficit discourses locate sources of risk in the failings of individual students and their families; liberal discourses tend to valorize and romanticize the individual child (e.g. “The Child” of child-centred pedagogies), locating the sources of risk in the failings of individual teachers (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). Within liberal discourses, students are at risk because individual teachers are not talented enough to fully individualize curriculum and respond appropriately to the needs of each child; in these ways, both deficit and liberal discourses let off the hook inequitable social arrangements. Further, liberal discourses, by attending so centrally to the individual child and failing to attend to social identities and conditions that constitute individuals, by default “normalize” this idealized child as white, male, and economically privileged. “The Child,” for instance, of child-centred pedagogies vividly illustrates white middle class male ideals: an autonomous individual, he works independently, cooperating with others of course, but learning largely by pursuing his own interests in a rational and orderly fashion (Kelly, 1997).

The tendency to individualize, then, also manifests itself in calls to base curriculum and pedagogy primarily on students’ interests and desires, as if the two are necessarily the same. Student choice, according to this view, enhances possibilities for individual capacities to be identified and fulfilled. Although individual choice is clearly beneficial in certain learning circumstances, choice is always made from the available, and in the absence of social analysis and critique, the available amounts to the status quo. Pam Gilbert (1991) illustrates this point in her study of a grade five writing workshop in which students, freely choosing texts to read and write in the absence of any critical discussion or teacher authority, “choose” to write stories enshrining sexist and racist...
violence. The teacher, stripped of her authority by the liberal discourse in which she is embedded, feels reluctant to interfere lest she violate the dictates of individual choice.

Within liberal discourse, possibilities for overcoming the challenges which risk presents are often described either through narrow policy prescriptions, or through notions of individual ‘resilience,’ used to explain how it is that students occasionally succeed in spite of their at-risk status (Levin, 2004, p. 8). Thus liberalism is based on a meritocratic or "bootstrap" (Briskin, 1990) notion of both schooling and society that present the constellations of power, wealth, and status which indicate success as a valid indication of hard work. This stance assumes that there is such a thing as equality of opportunity resulting in equity.

Despite the predominant focus on individual context, within liberal discourses there have been attempts, albeit tentative, at addressing contextual factors such as poverty, child care, or substandard housing. Adherents of this stance, often cautious and conciliatory, tend to stop short of interrogating the causes underlying these factors. In fact, an often fatalistic attitude is taken. For example, The Ontario Learning Partnership suggests that “social inequality, the prime cause of risk, is deeply rooted and unlikely to disappear—perhaps unlikely even to be diminished significantly—any time soon” (The Learning Partnership: 7. Authors italics). Although this statement is undoubtedly valid, it also conveniently reveals a liberal resignation to ‘unalterable’ structures of society.

Another manifestation of liberal discourse is the observation that all students are at risk at one time or another, regardless of their social and individual conditions. The argument is that, since all students may in fact experience academic failure, no special account of “students at risk” as a social category begging analysis is required. While we need to be legitimately concerned about the social and educational effects of labeling, the well-meaning concern of liberal discourse on this question produces the guise of color and class blindness, as in “I don't see colour; I see children.” This unwillingness to acknowledge difference is an expression of privilege related to the conflation of equality (treating people the same) and equity (treating different people fairly). In other words, it is a stance based on the questionable assumption of meritocracy and on a failure to recognize individual and social privilege.

In summary, liberal discourse constitutes and is constituted by a number of social myths: an assumption of meritocracy and a concomitant notion of failure as lack of effort; a refusal to sufficiently interrogate systemic inequalities, thereby reproducing the myth of neutrality; and a confusion of equality with equity. The liberal failure to recognize that choice is always choice
from the available amounts to a reproduction of the status quo and a continued privileging of dominant middle class curricula.

(iii) Official Educational Discourses
Many educational discourses suggest that students are at risk because of factors associated with learning and behaviours occurring in schools. According to the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, a student at risk is “any student who has difficulty proceeding through school at the prescribed rate” (OSSTF, 2001, p. 9). Identification occurs in the context of school achievement: “a student at risk is one whose past or present characteristics or conditions are associated with a higher probability of failing to complete high school” (The Learning Partnership, 2004, p. 2).

Within this discourse, adaptation to curriculum goals and expectations is the goal of education. Therefore, risk is a compatibility problem; the result of a poor fit between the curriculum expectations and the learner (Waldoch, 1995). The deficit in this case is relational. Risk is clearly the risk of not achieving credit completion or graduation from schooling. The question begged here is, should the students be shaped to fit the school or should the schools be organized to fit the students? (Deschnes, Cuban & Tyack, 2001, p. 546). Central concerns within educational discourses of risk are: the drop-out rate, low achievement, poor attendance, retention in a grade, behavioural problems and student transience (McWhirter et al., 2004). Such an instrumental view of what it means to be a student, though not confined to students at risk, is particularly dangerous for students already alienated from schools.
While some educators and schools, both in this study and beyond, work against official educational discourses by interrogating and addressing systemic inequities, dominant educational discourses limit possibilities for substantive change. Spurred by the standards and accountability movements, by high stakes testing, and the assumption that education primarily serves the economy, some educators feel the only task for students at-risk is to learn to navigate the system. How the system itself fails students is not sustained in the discourse. In this way, official educational discourses unwittingly reflect deficit thinking, as improving students to fit schools is deemed more important than understanding the systemic barriers facing some students.

This perspective makes invisible the constructed and controversial nature of standards, disallowing questions like: Which and whose notion of success? Whose standards? Which goals? What curriculum? In like fashion, dominant educational discourses perpetuate the marginalization of some parents as some schools make unwarranted assumptions about their lack of concern and support for their children’s education.

To address these concerns, this discourse invests in making students at-risk adapt to meet the norms and standards of the authorized school curriculum. To overcome this emphasis on adaptation, it is important not simply to focus on accommodation, but to create curriculum that is appropriate for and reflective of the lived experiences of all children. ‘Benevolent compensation techniques’ such as flexible assessment frameworks, individualized programs of instruction, reduced expectations for literacy and numeracy are intended to assist in promotion and graduation from school, but in fact narrow and limit the chances and opportunities of many students.

(iv) Critical Discourses

Critical discourses, although not widespread in schools, were embodied by some educators and schools in this project. Such discourses look past surface appearances, questioning neutrality claims, and challenging constructions of risk that blame individuals for their circumstances. Critical discourses frame risk as arising from underlying systemic structural conditions and identify larger social, economic, political, and cultural dynamics that inform schooling. Education is seen to be not isolated from these factors but intricately interwoven in a relationship which is mutually reinforcing and invariably ideological. These discourses explicitly recognize the political nature of schooling and the role of power and privilege in maintaining inequitable structures and practices.
Found in such theoretical literature as critical feminism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, critical race theory, critical pedagogy, queer studies, and disabilities studies, critical discourses undermine compliant attitudes and refrain from pathologizing students, teachers, and communities. DeBlase writes that “a curriculum of critique supports a democratic ideal of citizens who not only have the ability to act as agents of their own lives within political and social systems but also can critique the systems themselves” (2003, p. 324). In identifying systemic critiques and proposing alternatives, critical discourses offer a pedagogy of hope and possibility through which teachers, administrators, students, and communities can use their power to become positive agents of change (Smith et al. 1999; Portelli & Vibert, 2001; Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005).

Although the other discourses examined here focus on changing the student to fit the system, critical discourse introduces new ways of thinking about curriculum and schooling. Students and communities that struggle are not constructed as deficient, but as resourceful and agentic. Curriculum is not conceptualized primarily as a series of facts to be learned or skills to be mastered, nor is it located exclusively in students’ personal interests. Within critical discourses of learning, facts are introduced and skills are acquired in the context of making sense of the world (Grumet, 1995) and positively acting upon it. For example, instead of learning about the abstract and depoliticized science of water, one school community in our project located a study of water in the 21st century in the fact that water in the school and community was not potable. The study involved students interviewing local officials and community members to understand the history of the problem, connecting the situation to worldwide water problems, discovering the connection
between poverty and bad water, and taking local action to address it. This project was an example of an enactment of a critical curriculum, one we have called elsewhere “a curriculum of life,” and illustrates “a positive pedagogy of action” (Giroux, 2002) – a vital and necessary quality of a critical discourse.

Common critiques of critical discourses arise from both research and practice. These include claims that critical discourses do not address practical issues nor offer sufficient prescriptions for practice; that critical theory and practice is too intellectually challenging for teachers; that critical discourses blame teachers and schools for social problems; that critical perspectives unfairly burden educators with excessive responsibility; that, from feminist perspectives, some critical traditions are inherently paternalistic or rationalist; that, from some school board and ministry officials’ perspectives, critical discourses give teachers too much authority and autonomy over curriculum.

The first criticism, that critical discourses are too esoteric for teachers, comes out of a de-skilling and de-professionalizing view of teachers and their work. Presupposing a narrow, linear relationship between theory and practice, this claim is grounded in a functionalist view of theory, as rightly the purview of scholars and policy-makers, and a reductionist view of practice, as a matter of mere techniques. By contrast, a critical perspective brings theory and practice together, acknowledging that theorizing arises from practice and that all practice is inherently theoretical. Appropriate practice, therefore, is determined by practitioners who critically assess their contexts keeping in mind issues of equity and social justice. Indeed a critical perspective validates teacher autonomy, responsibility, and authority, and in no way intends to invoke blaming discourses characteristic of some of the discourses identified earlier. This is not an “anything goes” approach to pedagogy, but a considered and deliberate recognition of teachers’ knowledge and expertise. Acknowledging that some of the earlier critical work failed to account for gendered constructions of knowledge and question its own rationalistic tendencies, all educational projects are “unfinished,” and these feminist critiques are being taken up seriously among critical educators currently.

**CONCLUDING COMMENT**

In this section we have identified the focus and objectives of the study, and the research and theoretical stance adopted, and we provided an overview of issues from the literature in relation to theoretical stances and issues arising from the data. We have identified three dominant discourses – the deficit, the official educational, and the liberal – that shape and
constrain notions of risk in educational and public forums, and we have identified the problems with these discourses. Further, we have offered an alternative discourse, the critical, which we argue offers a deeper analysis and richer possibilities for addressing issues of students at risk in schools.

Keeping in mind the different conceptions of risk identified in this chapter, in the following two chapters we identify and examine major themes regarding what we believe has worked and is possible in schools, as well as challenges that schools face.

A critical perspective brings theory and practice together, acknowledging that theorizing arises from practice and that all practice is inherently theoretical. Appropriate practice, therefore, is determined by practitioners who critically assess their contexts keeping in mind issues of equity and social justice.
“What works” in schools is a difficult topic to tackle, even after spending several years of intensive work in schools attempting to understand that very question. What works in one school may not work in another. What may be identified in one set of terms in one school may actually look – and be – very different in another. What is meant by “works” is also situated and dynamic, changing across different locations and sets of values. Hence the following section should be read critically and with sensitivity to local context. It should be taken as a series of ideas which need to be considered together, rather than as a list of prescriptions or recipes that schools might implement.

We found a range of activities that exemplified each topic identified here, from those that were negative exemplars to those we considered highly commendable. What follows is not a check-list of quantifiable factors for building schools that work for students at risk, but rather larger qualities that make a difference by their presence or absence. There are definitely some ways of doing and being in schools that are more productive, more inclusive, and more respectful than others – especially when dealing with students at-risk.

Although there are undoubtedly, many ways to think about “what works,” we have broken the topic into four main categories: caring relationships; the learning environment including engaging instructional programs, curriculum, and pedagogy; building supportive and collaborative structures; and leadership and policy.
CARING RELATIONSHIPS

There is no doubt either from our study or from the wider literature that one of the key aspects of making schools “work” for all students – those considered at-risk as well as all other members of the school community – is a focus on building caring and supportive relationships. This does not mean a touchy feely kind of niceness, but rather a strong sense of “absolute regard” (Starratt, 1991) for all persons. It implies an “ethic of care” in which the welfare of students as whole people is taken seriously, in which home and community become part of the fabric of the life of the school, in which concern for the quality of relationships is extended among teachers, administrators and staff as well as students. A focus on caring relationships, when it “works” extends throughout the whole school community, from district officers to school-based principals, to teachers and students, as well as their families and the wider community. A caring school is considerate of all its members; it is a place where relationship is valued and paid attention to. Such a school is not so much a “safe haven” amidst the chaos of the rest of a student’s life, but a bridge across school and community that supports the student in all areas.

The notion of developing and fostering caring and respectful relationships does not conflict with holding high expectations and standards, but it does require that these be considered in a framework broader than narrow notions of high stakes testing. The popular discourse of high expectations and standards usually implies standardization and uniformity. We argue that high expectations and standards are not incompatible with allowing for different kinds of expectations and standards to flourish: for example, high standards in literacy education need not imply dealing only with canonical texts (Dyson, 1997; Nieto, 2000; Powell, 1999.)

Under the broad heading of caring relationships, we place a number of sub-headings – ideas that are both discrete and interrelated. Here we include relationships among the school faculty, relationships faculty establish with students, relationships between and among students themselves, and outreach to and relationships built with the wider community.

COLLABORATIVE FACULTY RELATIONSHIPS

The literature on teaching and teachers’ professional workplaces is clear that for most educators, teaching is an isolated and lonely endeavour. (De Lima, 2003) Although this is most often the case, in those instances where we found evidence of teachers working together, collaborating in various ways, we found strong relationships among faculty, and concomitantly a more positive overall environment for teaching and learning. Where the climate among
faculty was characterized by isolation, competition, tension, and/or fragmentation, students suffered. Where faculty took time to talk together about teaching and learning, to work collaboratively, and to enjoy each others’ company, the positive effects were felt across the school.

Some schools made a concerted effort to bring faculty together around pot-luck lunches, soup and salad lunches, and so forth. In others, teacher interaction tended to occur around sharing of resources, meeting informally to examine new ministry initiatives and develop lesson plans, or identifying and planning ways of addressing school-wide concerns. In any case, the quality of relationships between and across faculty, including school administrators, set the tone for the school, and had far-reaching consequences that ultimately touched students and families. The relational climates that worked in this regard were open, human, and flexible, not authority-centred, hierarchical, or bureaucratic.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS

In schools where the dominant discourse was about “these kids” and “these families,” said in a disparaging tone, we did not find the kinds of relationships that are conducive to learning. Where disparaging comments were made about the norms of a specific ethnic community, for example, or about a perceived lack of caring on the part of parents, relations between school and community were obviously not supportive of students. Where classrooms or halls were characteristically sites of much shouting, where students were regularly singled out and embarrassed for lack of attention or inappropriate behaviour, or where the norms of the school suggested surveillance rather than trust and openness, school climates were destructive and
relationships were visibly damaged. By contrast, schools that worked tried to deal with negative student resistance and destructive behaviors proactively, at a school-wide and systemic level, actively teaching students workable ways of being and acting in school.

In schools that worked well, careful and deliberate attention was paid to knowing the students as whole people, to engaging activities in which relationships were fostered, and to taking up and addressing damaging and disparaging talk. These were the schools in which there were engaged and engaging teachers who got to know the students and their lives both inside and outside of school. Our data include numerous stories of teachers who, with humour and respect, built an ethos of constructive relationships. A young boy expressed gratitude that his teachers were supporting him in his anger management; a group of young mothers spoke about teachers who saw them, not as “irresponsible, easy type people” but as they were – “teen mothers who are just trying to get an education”; students talked about teachers with “an open door”; they spoke of teachers who helped them face grave life challenges, like a prison term or a bullying problem. Many emphasized the importance of a teacher’s sense of humour and perspective. Unsurprisingly, far more central to a student’s sense of well-being and ultimate school success was a teacher’s humanity and decency rather than their efficiency at meeting outcomes.

**STUDENT PEER RELATIONSHIPS AND PEER SUPPORTS**

Because caring relationships are not confined to ways in which adults relate to students, we have entitled the second positive factor “peer supports.” Here we include a series of activities found in many schools in which students related well and helped each other. This included buddy systems in which senior students were paired with younger ones either for academic activities such as reading or for more social activities like tours of the school. There were schools in which student leadership was encouraged through such formal programs as classroom monitors, office or custodial helpers, peer tutoring, peer counselling, or peer mediation – all programs for which students were offered specific training in relationship and mediation. To the extent that these provided formalized training and opportunities for students to take on leadership activities and responsibility, they were particularly important for students at-risk. Because such students may be considered threatening or lacking in social or academic competence, they are often excluded from opportunities to help others or provide leadership. Schools that worked rejected this practice and placed students at risk in positions of responsibility. When these students were not subjected to patronizing attitudes that constructed them as “needy,” as potential recipients of care, they could reach out and offer support and assistance to others.
Thus, the purpose of peer support and leadership programs is generally to explicitly address some historic problems in schools: student violence in the halls and on the playground as well as academic failure. Peer support programs, instead of merely attempting to eradicate the problems through strict discipline policies, take a proactive stance, actively teaching students “how to be in schools”, and actively creating a culture of respect, self-discipline, and empathy.

We found some disciplinary programs in some schools developed with punitive and questionable assumptions: one punished students who misbehaved by assigning them to work with the custodians, or rewarded the compliant with jobs as office help. Apart from disparaging the dignity of some people’s work, this kind of approach supported negative conceptions of certain students rather than offering instructive involvement.

Other peer supports were more informal and included activities related to “peaceful schools initiative” or proactive approaches to discipline, or anti-bullying. Some schools had transition programs in which students from the elementary schools visited the secondary school and were paired with buddies for a day or two prior to actually enrolling in the school. Other schools developed programs around what were variously called “effective behaviour support,” “positive discipline,” and “solution-focussed discipline.” Still other programs were related to the establishment of “house systems” or to mottos like “bee the best you can be” that were intended to actively teach social responsibility and constructive behavior.

One school had an overarching “peaceful school” initiative of which its peer support and peer leadership programs were a part. There was a peer mediation program that involved a number of trained student mediators in mediating disputes between students on the playgrounds and hallways. In addition, there was a “PALS” program, through which peaceful action was taught; a grade six leadership club, through which students at-risk were encouraged to take leadership roles in teaching responsibility and empathy to peers; a “second step” program, through which part of the classroom curriculum focused on getting along with others; reading buddies, through which older children worked with younger around developing reading; and an ongoing anti-bullying program that included visiting speakers.

In other schools, peer support took a more academic focus. In one the Peer Tutoring Program was clearly recognized as a program extremely important for students at risk. In both quantity and quality the educators’ and students’ responses exploring the importance and effectiveness of this peer tutoring program were the most enthusiastic and detailed in regard to what the school was doing that worked. The program was recognized for filling “gaps” in ESL, LD, and
counselling support for a wide range of students. Participants, who were often also students who had experienced academic difficulty, described in rich detail how the program had given them insight into the learning process, added motivation, and self esteem. They talked of feeling proud of their tutees and of the relationships that they had built.

In short, schools that actively engaged students in the process of fashioning and maintaining school culture and climate, in developing the social mores and behaviour codes for the schools, worked far more effectively for all students than those that constructed students as the objects of adult decreed and policed policies.

**RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE WIDER COMMUNITY**

Our study took place in schools in neighbourhoods that were sometimes perceived to be dangerous, in which crime rates tended to be relatively high, and in which some teachers believed the school provided a necessary buffer for the children. Sometimes these constructions of school communities resulted in an unfortunate bunker mentality in which the school had little to do with its wider community. At the same time, in a number of sites, educators reached out to the wider community, drawing on its many resources, and building the kinds of relationships required to support students. To accomplish this, educators in these schools worked hard to maintain a sense of perspective. They did not deny the presence of drugs or community violence or hardship; in fact, such problems were not only explicitly named, but teachers took them in stride, drawing upon them, in some cases, as the basis for relevant curriculum and ongoing conversations with students.

Schools engaged in outreach and collaboration with their wider communities in various ways. One principal took the initiative to meet with local landlords to develop ways of alleviating transience among critically low-income families in the neighbourhood. In another school, a small number of educators, including the principal, worked with students on a River Cleanup Project which was subsequently featured in a major newspaper. In turn, the positive press and positive response to this program have helped to mitigate the negative public image of the school. In other schools, community outreach was built into the job descriptions of faculty like Aboriginal support workers, community school liaison workers, and so forth. Relationships, of course, are most constructive when they go both ways: several schools made concerted efforts to bring members of the wider community into the planning processes of the school, for example in providing hot lunches, safe arrival programs, socials, and school trips, and offering concrete assistance for school concerts, plays, and town halls. In contrast to unwelcoming and
intimidating signs in some schools, requiring all visitors to register at the office immediately, for instance, these schools actively welcomed and encouraged members of the community to visit and participate in the life of the school. The administrators in these instances understood that a culture that actively involved students and parents in making the school was especially central to significant schooling for students at risk.

THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

A second broad category of findings about what works relates to the learning environment, to the choices made about instructional programs, the understandings of curriculum, and the approaches to pedagogy that are dominant in a given school.

(i) Home-Grown Curriculum vs Packaged “Programs”

We found a range of approaches to the choice and/or development of programs in the project schools. In almost every case, the programs that were context specific, that were developed (or, at minimum, locally adapted) to serve specific students in a specific place were more effective than readily available packaged programs alleging to be context-free and content-neutral. Although packaged programs sometimes appeal because they appear to be easier than teacher developed curriculum, they cannot address the identities and needs of actual students in any relevant or comprehensive fashion.

The range of locally developed programs we found was impressive: from “Growing Together” a program for teen Moms, to a behaviour program called STAR (safe, tolerant, accountable, and respectful); from locally developed ways to work with the First Nations communities to meal programs offered in various creative ways; from a garden project to “second step,” student leadership and peer mediation programmes, educators have found ways to engage students in school life. Although many of these programs were designed to help students with behaviour or attendance problems, many others were designed with more academic goals in mind. These included a team-taught eighth grade cohort combined SESM (Science, English, Social Studies, and Math) program, homework clubs, peer tutoring, reading buddies, community-based learning initiatives, a school calculator program, remedial literacy and numeracy programs, a school based “fifth block” literacy program, a home-based Portuguese balanced literacy program, apprenticeship programs and cooperative education activities.

Some schools attempted to address “discipline problems” managerially, by controlling student movement, using hall passes, hiring hall monitors with walkie-talkies, and the like. These
approaches affected school culture very negatively, producing a prison-like sense of surveillance and distrust. Conversely, the schools that took the sorts of approaches detailed above, instead of merely attempting to eradicate problems through strict discipline policies, deliberately taught students “how to be in schools,” and actively created cultures of respect, self-discipline, and empathy. Here educators were careful to include students as leaders in the shaping of these projects, and regularly placed students at risk in particular in leadership roles.

(ii) Engaging Pedagogies
It must be noted that during our site visits to schools we saw considerable traditional transmission pedagogy. Nonetheless, we also saw a number of more imaginative approaches, as educators used computers, audio visual equipment, arts and crafts, movement, and music as part of their repertoire for keeping students engaged. We met teachers who took their guitars to school and used music to integrate students’ home languages into the classroom and others who worked with various indigenous dances. Schools also included an array of events and activities devoted to cultural awareness and social justice. Some co-curricular programs related to cultural events which recognized, explored and celebrated specific cultures such as Black (Caribbean and African) and Hispanic cultures, Hindi, Muslim, First Nations and others were identified by educators and students as important to student and community engagement and rapport between educators, students, and parents. Examples of other social justice related activities included the “March Against Male Violence,” celebration of Black History month, participation in local foodbank and relief activities, and fund raising activities for developing nations. Each of these was recognized as an important activity that was engaging for students. Each required, of course, increased administrative and faculty participation and support.

Classes that were hands on, interesting, diverse, innovative, and took students outside the classroom were listed as the most powerful in promoting learning and supporting students’ academic success. Indeed, humour occupied a place at the top of the student list of the qualities of the effective teacher. Students identified a number of teachers and administrators who made them smile and said these are educators who “get through.” Nevertheless, as we discuss below, it is when teaching strategies make strong connections to real life issues and engage students thoughtfully and critically in issues relevant to their lived experiences, that students are most engaged and successful.

(iii) Engaging Students: “Curriculum of Life”
We often use the term ‘curriculum of life’ to refer to curriculum that is important, relevant and engaging for students, curriculum in which students’ worlds are a source of rich and serious
curriculum (Portelli & Vibert 2002). Grumet’s (1995) definition of curriculum as the “conversation that makes sense of things” comes to mind here. Curriculum is not only, or indeed even primarily, the objectives contained in a teacher’s guide or ministerial resource package, but rather a way of helping students bring their lived experiences together with the official curriculum in the classroom. Instances of such rich conversations in which life in the world formed the core of the curriculum included the creation of a school garden, the experimental Creek project and river clean-up, the teen Moms program, Growing Together, a grade eight literature class in which texts explored students’ concerns. In each case, we saw evidence of curriculum as social responsibility. This is curriculum that speaks to students’ lives, curriculum tuned to their daily realities, helping them to develop dispositions and ways of thinking necessary to clearly and critically interpret their world.

In every school, students and educators reported that learning occurs most effectively in classrooms where time is taken to recognize and address anxiety, where the formal curriculum is not the only focus of classroom discussion, and where students are given the opportunity to share themselves, their lives, and their ideas with their teacher. Likewise, both students and teachers said that when educators are open and willing to share themselves, their lives, and their concerns, opportunities for real learning arise.

Moreover, many students at risk reported that they relied on opportunities to discuss critical issues in their lives with teachers as a way to get through difficult times in their lives. Students suggested that teachers who listened to them respectfully, openly, and carefully made great differences in their lives, contributing to keeping them in

---

It is when teaching strategies make strong connections to real life issues and engage students thoughtfully and critically in issues relevant to their lived experiences, that students are most engaged and successful.

---

27
school despite a number of hardships and challenges that they felt could have precluded them from “making it through school.”

Although for the most part, curriculum was fairly traditional across these schools, there were also a number of examples of openness and experimentation. One such was a grade six unit on water, through which students explored the water history of their community (the water had not been potable there for a number of years), connecting their local situation with global twenty-first century concerns about water. This example also demonstrates that a curriculum located in students’ lives does not just leave students where they are, but helps to lead them out of their local lives and take them beyond the familiar, making connections to and creating interest in the larger world. Another instance of an innovation that worked was the collaborative SESM program in which eight graders were not only kept together in one class and taught the core subjects of Science, English, Social Studies, and Math by the same teacher, but also spent several days together with their teachers, getting to know one another at the annual eighth grade camp.

Central to these examples of curriculum of life was student involvement in the development and direction of the curriculum. Despite the fact that teachers sometimes worried about a loss of control implied in negotiating curriculum in this manner, most who had tried it rarely taught a teacher-centred curriculum again. Teachers were surprised by the seriousness, competence, and dedication of students when they engaged the formal curriculum by using it to pursue issues and questions of interest and concern to students. Focusing on students’ interests and concerns does not mean leaving students where they are or simply reproducing dominant values. It involves encouraging critical questioning about the taken for granted, dealing with controversial issues, as well as creating possibilities for actions.

Other forms of engaging curriculum in these schools included examples of active learning, including Readers’ Theatre, literature circles, curriculum that integrated subjects through theme or concept studies, and activities that attempted to broaden and deepen the curriculum through the arts. Recognizing that the arts can offer students, perhaps especially students at risk, ways of expressing themselves that are often less “loaded” for them than formal school languages, a number of schools developed dance, visual arts, band, drama, concerts and performances as important, regular, and joyful events.
Art-Infused Curricula

The arts as a way of exploring ideas and engaging students – particularly those considered at-risk in some way – were so prevalent in a number of these schools that we need to remark this phenomenon more fully here. Here we are talking about taking the arts seriously – not simply as decorating the “real curriculum,” but as a way of speaking, as an expression of identity. Among the approaches that “worked” in these schools serving marginalized communities were strong and serious fine arts programs and arts-infused curricula. Such initiatives tended to overcome the sometimes negative and fragmenting structures of schools (especially secondary schools) and to offer students both ways of integrating the curriculum and of demonstrating their learning through alternative media. Recognizing not only the concept of different ways of knowing, but also the differing cultural values, standard English proficiency, and abilities of students at risk, these approaches not only provided broader pedagogical forms but also offered avenues for students to demonstrate their knowledge, insights, and perspectives. It seemed that, for many students at risk, while standard school English might be a language they saw as belonging to someone else, the arts were a language that belonged to everyone.

In some schools arts-infused programs were more developed than others, although it is fair to say that in every project school we found some attempt to integrate the arts into the curriculum and some awareness of the importance of alternate forms of instruction and assessment for students at risk. In some instances, the arts were used as a way of collaborating with the wider community, building bridges and developing partnerships between adults and students. These included a community art project in a secondary school and

Teachers were surprised by the seriousness, competence, and dedication of students when they engaged the formal curriculum by using it to pursue issues and questions of interest and concern to students. Focusing on students’ interests and concerns … involves encouraging critical questioning about the taken for granted, dealing with controversial issues, as well as creating possibilities for actions.
collaboration with a symphony orchestra around a home-made instrument band which engaged and intrigued students in an elementary school. In other cases, the arts were used as a way of expressing the varied identities of students in the school, as in the large tree with multiple hands posted in the foyer of one school or the poster showing that “13 students live in an apartment, 11 have dogs, 15 speak a language other than English at home,” and so on, in a classroom.

Teachers and school administrators in these schools clearly recognized the centrality of the arts in engaging and including students and communities at risk, and sometimes went to considerable lengths to tweak school budgets to support arts curriculum. In terms of community building, learning about students, and cross cultural learning, the arts – however sadly undervalued in much official curriculum in Canada – were clearly seen as crucial.

BUILDING SUPPORTIVE AND COLLABORATIVE STRUCTURES

Although many approaches that “work” for students at risk can be introduced and developed by individual teachers or small groups of people working in collaboration, it is critically important to consider the kinds of larger institutional cultures and structures that support students at risk in schools.

(i) Inviting Space

One topic that is rarely discussed but ubiquitous is space. How space in schools is planned, distributed, used, and considered helps to determine whether a school is open, inclusive, and inviting, or closed and unfriendly, tending to marginalize particular groups as “outsiders.”

Some schools controlled space in ways that alienated students. Where they were required to use extensive systems of hall passes, were prohibited from many spaces (designated for teachers only), or were subjected to surveillance cameras or hall monitors with walkie talkies, students unsurprisingly felt that the school did not belong to them, and that its purpose was far more to control than include them. On the other hand, where spaces were inclusive, open, and prohibitions and regulations minimal, students felt a greater sense of belonging and ownership – a sense that quite naturally translated into their taking more care of their school. In one secondary school, for example, students were permitted to gather wherever they found appropriate spaces, including halls, as long as they were not disrupting adjacent classes. Here the hall space was designed with benches to encourage student interaction and no-one urged them to “move along” as they sat and talked. This gave students a sense that they were trusted.
and as well as an awareness of their own responsibility for
and in the overall climate of their school.

Another way in which space was either open and inviting
or closed and controlled had to do with opportunities for
students to have food or beverages. In some schools, food
was carefully stored and distributed only at set times according
to pre-established regulations; but at one elementary
school, teachers and administrators made food available to
students as needed. Several classrooms had their own stores
of food as well as microwave ovens and children were
permitted to help themselves as they felt the need.

In some schools, parents were encouraged to enter the
school and the staff-room and to participate freely in
conversations about the life of the school. In others,
parents were provided with a separate “parent room” in
which to congregate, while in still others, no space was
made available to non-educators, and indeed, all
indications were that their presence was discouraged.

In like fashion, the location of programs in each school sent
a clear message about whether students were valued or
marginalized. The situation of aboriginal programs, the Teen
Moms program, art rooms and academic support programs
was vitally important. Whether these were segregated in
separate wings or portables, located in basements or left-over
rooms, or centrally situated in attractive classrooms spoke
volumes to students. In these ways, spatial arrangements are
vividly symbolic of how students at-risk are constructed and
conceived of by and in schools.

(ii) School-wide Collaborative Approaches
Some of the strategies we have noted that helped to
support students related to space, some to programs, and
others to attitudes and dispositions. All are part of

“It’s interesting how teaching is
a solitary act for many teachers.
I hadn’t really teamed with
teachers and everything we do
is so witnessed and so it’s a little
intimidating in the beginning.
But we’ve just supported and
been there for each other and
been through a lot together,
you know, and now we can’t
imagine working alone... I really
believe that if we dream it then
we can do it.”
creating supportive and collaborative school-wide approaches to the education of students at risk.

Several schools introduced school-wide programs to help students in need of extra-emotional/psychological, social/behavioural, and academic support. Examples included: “Anti-gang Behaviour,” in which police made presentations to intermediate classes; a series of small group sessions dealing with topics such as self-esteem, and life skills management; opportunities for community-based internships and job placements; and school wide recognition programs. The school's participation in these programs was identified by educators and students as important and useful to all students, but especially significant for students at risk, in that students identified these programs as substantively relevant to their concerns, interests, career plans, and lived experience.

Additionally, recognizing that students often find the transition from elementary to secondary school difficult, in all sites, teachers at both feeder and receiving schools instituted orientation for students ready to move on.

A more controversial but locally effective approach was the initiative of one secondary school to “counsel out” students who were either over-age or appeared to have a strong negative influence on peers. Although this strategy might be abused, if used without discretion and sound judgment, in this instance it acted proactively to improve both the safety and the culture of the school. Where it’s used, a strategy like this needs to be accompanied, as it was in this case, by finding viable options for these students.

We have discussed the importance of instituting partnerships with community groups and developing more collaborative cultures in that way. It is also important to find ways to develop collaborative cultures within schools, to permit teachers to overcome their isolation and find ways to reflect, work, and talk together. In some schools, schedules were adjusted to permit team teaching and collaborative planning; in others teachers took the initiative to share classes and work together informally.

One constructive influence was active and engaged parent and community member councils that provided ongoing support for school programs. Another was a school curriculum committee which had representation from various departments, aimed at reviewing curriculum issues, developing possibilities for subject area integration and increasing cooperation between and within departments regarding co-curricular programming. Teachers identified this
committee as an empowering experience that greatly improved communication and cooperation among them.

Another structural innovation that worked was the periodic use of large group instruction periods initiated by the administration to free teachers up for much needed shared curriculum and activity planning time. One teacher commented at length on the importance of a collaborative culture in providing support for the exhausting work required of teachers in schools with high numbers of students at risk:

> you have to pull together…as a school. If you didn’t, you couldn’t make it here because … you’d be emotionally drained by Christmas time…. It’s very common to come in and see teachers grab somebody and say “What did you do with this student last year that worked?” You just use each other all the time for things like that. But everybody is really good at making you laugh. You know you need a good sense of humour; you just can’t do it if you don’t. It’s very emotionally draining.

Two additional examples of formalized initiatives occurred in a secondary school: SESM and the Growing Together program. In each case, structural supports were instituted to permit extensive collaboration on the part of teachers. One of the teachers from the Teen Moms program described how participating in the program changed her teaching from a solitary act to a collaborative effort in which she gained support from her colleagues:

> It’s interesting how teaching is a solitary act for many teachers. I hadn’t really teamed with teachers and everything we do is so witnessed and so it’s a little intimidating in the beginning. But we’ve just supported and been there for each other and been through a lot together, you know, and now we can’t imagine working alone… I really believe that if we dream it then we can do it.

The 16 science, math, English, and social studies teachers who worked in SESM not only taught and planned in teams of four to work with a specific section of eighth graders, they each taught senior classes in their subject area as well. This arrangement permitted the notion of collaboration to be extended throughout the school as these teachers talk to others not involved in SESM about the advantages of teamwork and take the collaborative disposition into the rest of their work. These teachers also began to conduct action research projects in which they documented the success of such approaches.
Building capacity for teachers to work and plan together and to develop new ways to provide support for students goes a long way to promoting strong school cultures and the intellectual and practical growth of staff. But there is one final factor critical to the performance of schools working with students at risk: leadership and policy considerations.

**LEADERSHIP**

We have identified above approaches that develop student engagement and leadership as critical components of building caring schools that respect students’ abilities. In this section, we turn to the ways in which the formal leadership of the school and district and the policies they introduce or support may contribute to or impede student welfare.

The schools that worked best with students at risk also had highly proactive school administrators. These were people who worked hard at building connections to their school communities, often consulting with other agencies like community workers, shop keepers, landlords, and police in order to coordinate support for families in crisis. They rejected deficit thinking, working to recognize and engage their school communities as resourceful, building capacity in the school and community. Determined and persistent, these leaders were often unwilling to take “No” for an answer, and looked for ways to push back against board and ministry policies that disadvantaged their students and communities.

For example, when budget cuts reduced the number of special education assistants and aboriginal workers in one site, the principals met with staff and district officials to find creative ways of organizing school funding to
alleviate these threats. When lack of funding prevented the school from purchasing needed materials or from funding field trips, they solicited help from businesses in the wider community. Other schools tweaked school budgets and funding formulae in order to provide art and music teachers, to hold on to strong resource teachers, or sometimes to materially support desperate families.

When these schools were working well, teachers talked about the help they received from the “office.” Sometimes help took the form of specific intervention, like one principal who initiated pull-out reading lessons with students in her office. Others recognized the efforts put into providing additional support faculty at the school, saying that without adequate support, they would burn out. This conviction was so strongly held by principals that, even in small schools, attention was paid to providing support for English language learners and students with identified learning difficulties. Nevertheless, during the three years of our study, in every site there were reductions in numbers of specialist support staff – or in school staff in general – and an increased burden on teachers.

Despite – or perhaps in light of – these constraints, one effective structural arrangement was flexibility. In many schools, students are rigidly assigned to counselors, homeroom advisors, resource personnel, and so on. But schools that worked well in this study developed much more open and flexible arrangements, in which all adults took responsibility for all students. Thus, a student might choose to talk to one counsellor about an academic problem, to another about a relationship difficulty, and to a trusted teacher about a problem at home. Unless time was allocated to permit educators to talk together, these conversations remained separate and isolated. Where teachers had time to meet collaboratively and had developed a collaborative culture, these flexible arrangements helped to create a support network for students.

Both teachers and students noticed and appreciated principals and vice principals who were open to and encouraged more flexible and responsive school structures and fought hard for students and communities. One teacher working in a special program said that “the administration has been more than helpful in letting us offer as many services as we have.” Another teacher indicated that the administrators do not “micro-manage” but rather trust in the judgments of the staff, supporting, but not intruding, recognizing that the educators share common high expectations and common goals.” They noted that although the administrators did not micromanage or interfere, they still had a “real sense” of what was going on and created options to ensure that there was “never a last mistake” but always an opportunity to remedy it.
Summary of “What Works”

As this section has indicated, what works for students at risk in schools cannot be captured in a convenient check-list, formula, or prescription; in fact, one might well argue that the kind of mind-set that insists on such simplified solutions is precisely the kind of mind-set that schools that work continuously struggle against. Nonetheless, there are a number of themes emerging from this study of what works for students at risk, summarized here:

- Inclusive, flexible, and proactive leadership
- Commitment to social justice work
- A collaborative, school-wide approach
- Building time and opportunities for collaboration
- Deliberate attention to relationship – an “ethic of care”
- Trust, respect, a sense of perspective and humour
- Opportunities for student peer interaction and leadership
- Involvement of the wider community
- A curriculum of life
- Widespread use of the arts
- Engaging pedagogies
- Locally developed, context-specific programs and approaches
- Inviting spaces

Taken together with the findings on challenges to supporting students at risk, these findings about “what works” begin to sketch possibilities for school reform directions that can make a real difference in the educational lives of all children, but most especially in the lives of those considered in some way to be at risk.
While many of the challenges the schools encountered in attempting to articulate themselves to students at risk were located in particular school, community, and/or system contexts, common themes emerged across the data from these various contexts. The central challenge posed to all these schools was to develop and maintain ways of doing school differently, approaches to schooling that at one and the same time recognized students and their families as resourceful and capable and yet accounted for the real and material consequences attendant upon race, class, and language differences. Work in racially and culturally diverse schools and schools serving high poverty communities provides vivid instruction in the classed and raced assumptions underlying schooling in our culture. Teachers and school administrators are challenged in myriad ways every day to re-think habits of communicating with students and families, of approaching curriculum and assessment, and of organizing school and classroom cultures in order to develop approaches that move beyond white middle class assumptions so ingrained in much of the public school enterprise.

The schools most able to meet these challenges had a central characteristic in common: within the classrooms, within the schools, and within the systems, questions of education across social and class difference were matters of open and on-going discussion, debate, and action. In British Columbia in particular, school district central administration provided professional development on...

---

Students who come from high poverty communities don’t necessarily bring the automatic advantages of knowing their basic material needs are met... . It is not fair to assume that all kids have access to the kinds of nutrition, recreation, and leisure activities that underpin what is so thoughtlessly called “school readiness.”
these issues, encouraging schools serving diverse and economically disadvantaged communities to work together. In other jurisdictions, school administrators worked with teachers and community members to address issues of disadvantage or social difference within the school, sometimes working against the assumptions of “colour-blind and culture-blind” central administrations. Despite these efforts at the system or school level, in general we saw little evidence that school systems and policy-makers recognize either the nature or the extent of the work entailed in fashioning schools that work for students at risk.

While the challenges we discuss below have some bearing in all sites in the study, as the discussion indicates they play out quite differently in different sites. We speak to the effects of social class and the effects of race and language difference in separate sections; we recognize the complexities of intersections of race and class – and, indeed, the highly diverse schools in this study were also high poverty schools. We separate race and class here only in order to address the effects of each as we saw them played out in daily incidents in the schools. In the more general discussion of challenges facing these schools, race and class again intersect as they do in practice.

**DAILY EFFECTS OF SOCIAL CLASS**

Perhaps the central challenge for schools serving high poverty communities is located in the class structure of schooling itself. The processes, policies, practices and structures on which schooling is based are pervasively white middle and professional class. Notions like school readiness, early and emergent literacies, meritocracy, background knowledge, and previous experience are all based in unexamined assumptions that universalize white middle class habitus (Connell, 1994; Dei, 2002; Finn, 1999). This habit of thought presents daily challenges for students, community members, and teachers working in diverse and high poverty sites.

Students who come from high poverty communities don’t necessarily bring the automatic advantages of knowing their basic material needs are met. It is not equitable, for instance, to assume that all kids have access to the kinds of sneakers, jackets, skates, scribblers and equipment required to participate fully in schooling. It is not fair to assume that all kids have access to the kinds of nutrition, recreation, and leisure activities that underpin what is so thoughtlessly called “school readiness.” It is not fair to assume that all kids have access to the particular pre-school literacies and discourses on which school knowledge is grounded. And more and more in these days of school fund-raising to provide educational necessities, it is not
fair to assume that all communities have equal access to disposable income.

Schools that worked more successfully in and with such communities, then, were called upon to recognize who their students were, and to go a long way toward providing for educational basic needs. Such schools found ways of modifying budgets and raising funds to offer breakfasts and hot lunches, to keep closets full of discretionary school supplies, snacks, and clothing, even to respond to community emergencies. And these extra demands were in aid of merely meeting the physical requirements of schooling. Beyond this, such schools were called upon to recognize how power and discourse work to marginalize their students and to try to find ways through curriculum, program, and culture-building of better connecting to students’ home languages, codes, and discourses. These were extraordinary feats to ask of teachers and school administrators over and above their prescribed daily work. And yet, during the duration of the project, school systems made very few concessions to schools serving high poverty communities, concessions of the sort that might realize and recognize the importance and urgency of this work.

CURRICULUM CHALLENGES

In terms of curriculum, the challenge for these schools was to develop curriculum that was demanding, respectful, engaging, and meaningful within the contexts of the students’ lives: that is, curriculum that made sense within the daily lived experiences of students both inside and beyond the school. In this connection, some schools developed a school-wide curriculum, or an overarching social/academic curriculum manifested in school-wide activities as well as in classroom learning. As we have

---

Teachers and administrators deliberately developed curriculum that brought together the formal curriculum with the curriculum of life – the lived experiences of the students in their worlds (Portelli & Vibert 2002). This work required imagination, ingenuity, the courage to take risks, systemic support for understandings of curriculum and assessment that went well beyond “covering outcomes.”
detailed above, a number of schools spent considerable thought and time in evolving school-wide curricula focused on teaching students how to be in schools, how to get along in the world, how to value themselves and others. Frequently this school-wide curriculum was taken up in whole school activities – town hall, peaceful school initiatives, peer mediation initiatives, aboriginal education initiatives, and so on – that were then reflected in classroom curriculum. In these cases, English language arts and social studies and science and math were taught through drawing, wherever possible, on social issues raised and addressed through the school wide curriculum.

In these cases, teachers and administrators deliberately developed curriculum that brought together the formal curriculum with the curriculum of life – the lived experiences of the students in their worlds (Portelli & Vibert 2002). This work required imagination, ingenuity, the courage to take risks, systemic support for understandings of curriculum and assessment that went well beyond “covering outcomes,” as well as a genuine regard for students’ abilities and achievements. The kind of work involved in evolving a curriculum of life that speaks to students at risk is, nonetheless, nowhere officially recognized as part of the work load of faculty in disadvantaged schools. And yet this study indicates that such an approach to curriculum is not optional, if schools are serious about engaging students at risk.

Students’ perspectives on curriculum were revealing in this connection. In interviews and surveys, they told us that the sort of curriculum that engaged them involved “hands-on activities”; “important discussions, not just copying and answering,” broad ways of representing what they know “not having to write and do essays all the time”; “teachers who know you and care about who you are.” Students and teachers identified fragmentation of curriculum, of programs, and of time as the largest challenge for developing engaging curriculum. Pull-out programs, rigid subject boundaries, short class periods, compressed school days required by bussing, lack of time for teachers to work together, on-going PA announcements all contributed to a curriculum of interruptions. Further, students sometimes perceived pull-out programs articulated to students at risk, such as ESL and resource as intentionally easy and demeaning. Similarly, alternative courses were sometimes limited by enrollment, taking place after school hours, and hence potentially marginalized, dangerous, and inconvenient.

In some schools, we found a decided preference among working class students for particular, practical sorts of classes, classes like “Shop,” when it was framed as working with wood and automobiles, and “Family Studies” when it focused on practical knowledges of child care and making things. Students spoke of feeling capable and comfortable in these spaces. In some
cases, they chose to go to shop on lunch and free periods – “a warm place and a buzz saw,” as one tech teacher put it. This was the kind of work they saw in their communities – it was valued, it made sense to them, it was a familiar way of knowing. Ironically, these were the very kind of courses that school systems were increasingly cutting or transforming into computer technology classes. Difficult and complex issues concerning competing discourses and social class are raised by this phenomenon; as one teacher put it, to what extent do you engage kids in learning that interests them, and to what extent do you teach them those things that count most in schools? Many students’ stated preference for such “real-world” and “practical” classes, their identification of these classes as “safe spaces” in which they felt competent and valued underlines the importance of developing curriculum that locates academic knowledge in the competencies and world knowledges that students at risk bring to school.

ASSESSMENT CHALLENGES

The nation-wide move toward increased standardized testing represented a number of challenges for these schools and students. The manner in which such accountability discourses control and prescribe curriculum and teachers mitigates against the development of a curriculum of life and of context-sensitive pedagogies so vital to the engagement of students at risk. Also, research has repeatedly established the consequences of such assessment for disadvantaged schools: typically, they perform poorly, leading to further stigmatizing and marginalizing, more teacher blaming, more individualizing of problems that are fundamentally social, and often reductions in resources for such schools (Apple, 2001; Gipps & Murphy, 1994; Kohn, 1999.) The current school ranking fad precipitated by the likes of the
Fraser Institute and the Atlantic Institute for Marketing Studies hurts teacher and student morale and decreases public support for the schools (Shields, 1998). Moreover, it denies the very real successes and progress made by these schools and their students (Corbett, 2003).

Too often standardized assessments *de facto* define curriculum in narrow and rigid terms. For instance, while the official language arts curriculum of Nova Scotia defines literacy quite broadly, allowing for multiple readings of text, validating critical literacies, and including visual and technological literacies in its definitions, the grade six assessment is comprised of bland “white bread” print texts and multiple choice questions for which there is one right answer. Teachers in all our schools raised questions about the felt necessity and pressures of teaching to the test and the detrimental consequences of such pedagogy especially for students at risk. One principal told of two students who deliberately subverted the test, but were subsequently placed on literacy support programs regardless of their teachers’ protests that they were strong readers and writers. When the results of standard assessments are allowed to override the located and informed assessment judgments of teachers who work daily with these students, the potential of students in disadvantaged schools is denied.

Largely missing from moves toward increased standardized testing is public discourse about how these tests represent knowledge – about who gets to define the kinds of knowledge and standards the tests sample and promote. In British Columbia, where there is extensive public debate about the influence of the Fraser Institute in constructing versions of “good schools,” this is much less the case. Nonetheless, across the country, increasingly substantial proportions of education dollars go to testing. Yet we found very few teachers, administrators, or students in these schools who believed the expenditures on testing made good pedagogical or fiscal sense. This phenomenon raises questions about which sector of the public is supporting this policy move and who really benefits from these tests, since it is evidently not the students, parents, teachers or school administrators in the communities represented in this study.

**TEACHING AND WORKING CONDITIONS**

Each of the schools involved in this project served at least one high poverty community or neighbourhood. The actual school buildings varied in age and condition but common to Nova Scotia and Ontario sites was a starkness and ugliness in the surrounding playgrounds/athletic fields and streetscapes. One school was actually built on reclaimed industrial wasteland. The exceptions were the British Columbia schools, which were not only aesthetically pleasing but
also well serviced by a variety of resources implemented with the overall welfare of their students in mind.

Common to many buildings’ interiors was an unimaginative design of long corridors, which were transformed and made attractive and welcoming through the installation of student art, particularly if the schools were fortunate enough to have an art program. Although some of these schools were disrupted by construction, or were desperately in need of repairs, teachers did not particularly place specific emphasis on this aspect of their working conditions, as there were broader and more far-reaching issues that they regarded as more significant.

A central concern for teachers in this study, at least in the Ontario and Nova Scotia sites, was a sense that their work was jeopardized by a lack of professional development geared towards realistically supporting schools like theirs and appropriately targeted to the real complexities of working with significant populations of students at risk. Again, British Columbia, where significant professional development is articulated to teaching across social difference, is the exception here. In general, though, schools that made a real difference for students at risk were those that specifically named the problems and then set up school wide initiatives to deal with them. This leadership was in some cases directed by the administration or in others by groups of teachers who realized that in order to carry out this type of work they needed to support each other; they recognized that a strong sense of community was vital to their well-being and worked to the advantage of those with whom they were working. However, even in sites where teaming and collegial support were deliberately made available, time was sometimes limited and schedules posed obstacles for teacher interaction. One school, in order to overcome
this problem, deliberately scheduled team teaching and team meeting time within the school day.

Teachers in urban schools with high proportions of ESL and learning disabled students felt the challenges of a scarcity of resources. High enrolments and class sizes, along with dwindling resources, stretched these teachers and administrators. They emphasized the importance of systems recognizing and responding to the need for limited class sizes, lower teacher-student ratios, enhanced learning support staff for disadvantaged schools. In general, school systems did very little in terms of responding concretely to the special circumstances of teaching in these schools.

High stakes testing and the publication of results certainly added another dimension of stress for these teachers and administrators. In the run of a day teachers concerned about the socio-emotional development of their students found themselves intervening in behaviours or situations ranging from extortion, drugs and alcohol abuse, to feeding hungry children. Preparing students for standardized testing in situations like this certainly placed educators in an awkward if not impossible situation. The test results and the publicity of these inventories added to an already low morale, reinforcing negative reputations for the schools, and sending messages that the schools’ work did not count in the end in any case. As growing emphasis was placed on school standings on standardized tests, the extensive and often exhausting work that teachers and administrators undertook in these schools in creating workable school cultures, in supporting students and families materially and socially, in developing challenging curriculum that mattered to students was perceived as increasingly irrelevant in the final analysis.

Widely unrecognized by the systems in which these schools were set – and by the media and public discourses of student achievement and test results – was the central nature of the work teachers and particularly school administrators were called upon to do. Countless hours were spent in talking to students and community members, and the days of school administrators in particular were filled with crisis intervention on behalf of students, their families, and their communities. Schools that work well in high poverty communities act as resources for the families they serve, and teachers and administrators devote considerable time to advocacy work, helping students and their families negotiate the school system itself as well as a labyrinth of public health and welfare support systems that are too often over-taxed and under-staffed. The failure of some system administrations to recognize the nature of the work in these sites was most graphically illustrated in two sites by a system inflexibility that insisted on treating all schools the same and amounted to a gross failure to recognize the contextual nature
of schooling. During the duration of the study, in both Ontario and Nova Scotia, few resource allowances were made toward recognizing the particular circumstances of these schools, and the schools were held to the same rigid staffing and resource formulae as all other schools in the system. On these matters, the schools in British Columbia, which found ways to build flexibility and responsiveness into these contexts, (such as the availability of small amounts of inner school funding) offered a constructive alternative.

Similarly, increasingly bureaucratized and centralized school systems down-loaded administrative tasks to the schools and adopted system-wide policies – which the schools were responsible for implementing – without regard for the differing effects of policy decisions on different school contexts. Examples included literacy and math assessments carried out early in the school year – the time at which students in schools like this are most vulnerable to “summer learning loss”; guidance, art, ESL, and learning support positions dependent not on school and community characteristics but on enrolment numbers; professional development programs in Ontario and Nova Scotia that enshrined narrow literacy and math instruction, and that neglected the kinds of diversity and equity education staff required to support their work in these schools.

In Ontario and Nova Scotia, school governance processes and procedures that assumed white middle class communities and largely excluded the families with which these educators worked were pervasive. At the same time, both school administrators and teachers strongly felt that school systems rewarded with recognition and advancement the kind of work that was by necessity secondary or impossible in these sites, such as efficient completion of paperwork and system-initiated tasks and solid scores on standardized tests. The teachers and administrators working with such commitment and energy in these schools wryly recognized that not only were their efforts largely unappreciated and misunderstood by their system supervisors, but also that the necessary and vital work they were doing was most likely to act as a strike against them in terms of professional rewards and recognitions. Again, on these issues of system support for and recognition of work in disadvantaged schools, in British Columbia, although more recognition needs to be enshrined in policy, educators were able to exercise initiative in this regard.

A connected pervasive challenge for the schools in this study involved the attraction and retention of qualified, appropriately educated, and experienced teachers. The project school reports indicate that this is a concern across the country. All of the schools except one in this study were characterized by a high staff turnover rate, either as a result of the inevitable burn-out
such work produces, or of inflexible contractual agreements that did not allow schools to deliberately seek out and/or retain specially qualified teachers or new teachers who were interested in working in such sites. All school administrators in the study expressed frustration with contractual arrangements that did not allow them the flexibility to seek out and retain staff who were both interested in and qualified to work in high poverty and/or culturally diverse schools. Beginning teachers who were good at the work and wanted to stay were bumped out by system staff with seniority claims on permanent contracts; committed and effective school administrators were transferred, sometimes against their will, because of inflexible system policies that limited stays at any one school; new appointments to the school were made on the basis of contractual agreements and system policies rather than on recognition of the school contexts; and administrators were prevented by contractual agreements and system policies from seeking out specifically qualified staff for their sites. At the same time, systems and contracts included no provisions that recognized the reality of work in such sites, including the markedly higher rate of burn-out, and allowed for sabbaticals from such sites for teachers who wanted to stay in the long run, but needed a temporary change. The challenges of staffing became another graphic illustration to the administrations of these schools of system neglect of the circumstances of students and communities at risk.

**EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE CHALLENGES: RACE, CLASS, GENDER AND SEXUALITY**

While all of the challenges we detail in this section speak to matters of equity and social justice, there are a number which are best identified only by this heading. One of these is the mythology of disadvantaged schools and the manner in which these mythologies contribute to further marginalization. Reputations for danger and chaos constructed around these schools allowed people to ignore the good things that were happening in them and discouraged some strong teachers from coming to them. In this way, the negative mystique became a self-fulfilling prophecy for such communities and schools, contributing to a culture of hopelessness.

Deficit constructions of school and community in these sites were sometimes taken up by some of the educators and applied to their students. In one school, students considered at risk explicitly named some of the teachers’ constructions of them as “bad kids,” “trouble-makers,” and said that getting trapped in these constructions limited, frustrated, and disempowered them. They asked that teachers give up some of their unquestioned authority in order to listen to them, to attempt to enter into their perspectives, to give them some voice. A challenge for such educators was to find ways to include students more genuinely in decision making in the school.
Unsurprisingly, racist and classist ideologies embedded in our culture also entered into some educators’ (and students’) constructions of the kids in these schools. In one school, teachers assumed Portuguese boys were violent “because Portuguese men beat their wives.” In most schools in the study, at least some teachers adopted the “us-ing and them-ing” language of racism and classism, referring to “these kids” and “these parents” usually in the context of explaining perceived deficiencies. Some teachers made assumptions that underclass and working class families and of families of colour were not interested in their children’s education – and some parents were vividly aware of and enraged by these constructions of their families.

Language and cultural differences contributed to poor communication between administrators, teachers, students, school staff, and parents in some schools. An enormous challenge for these schools was to provide adequate ESL support for both students and parents, so that parents could communicate with schools about their children’s education. A closely related challenge was for schools to attract and retain teachers who represented diversity in race and culture.

There were also a number of ways in which dominant discourses of gender and sexuality intersected with racialized and classed identities in these schools to further marginalize students. Surveys, particularly of grade eight boys in one school, demonstrated their articulate awareness that serious engagement with school was not a requirement for them. The responses indicated that these boys took up discourses of what Michelle Cohen (1998) identifies as “healthy idleness,” nurturing a disinterested attitude toward schooling that reinforced dominant
masculinities in these sites. Boys and girls, in this case, responded to surveys entirely differently: while the girls’ responses were, for the most part, earnest, serious, and self-blaming, many boys identified themselves inaccurately as successful in school, and located any short-comings firmly in the incompetence of teachers. As a number of writers have demonstrated (Connell, 1994; Finn, 1999; Martino, 2003), these gendered identities among working class and underclass boys and girls are both common and educationally destructive to themselves and others.

Generally speaking, these schools participated in the pervasive schooling habit of reproducing traditional gender binaries. Daily practices provide a number of examples: in one school, girls were rewarded and assigned to work in the office, while boys were disciplined and assigned to work with the custodian; in another, celebrations of children’s accomplishments showcased girls lip-syncing and dancing, boys starring on hockey teams and demonstrating martial arts; and of course generally, students were referred to by sex designations (“girls and boys”). In the hallways of some of the schools, bullying in the form of sexist and homophobic name-calling amounted to a rite of passage.

Not all of the schools in this study were successful in responding to diverse populations. Schools in one site, for instance, demonstrated the ways in which policies designed to address bullying can sometimes backfire. For instance, while suspension was an official component of the Safe Schools Act, in many ways these suspensions seemed to exacerbate rather than solve problems related to safety and violence experienced daily by students within and beyond the school walls. In the opinion of almost all the students interviewed, the danger of physical, verbal, and emotional violence was ever-present in their daily life in schools – in the schoolyard, hallways, at the local park, and at home. Students and teachers agreed that more attention was required within the school hallways and schoolyard during recess to improve feelings of students’ sense of safety and security. The threat of imminent violence undoubtedly affected students’ self image, ability to cope, desire to attend school, and feelings of engagement. By contrast, in other sites, schools drew upon curriculum to mitigate against destructive behaviour, and addressed occasional incidents in a more relational manner.

In some schools, students attributed some portion of this aggression to teacher behaviours. Students reported ongoing verbal harassment from some of their teachers, citing incidents of angry and shouting teachers – incidents which we as researchers also observed first-hand. They also reported that some teachers used negative teasing and humiliation to try to control and/or marginalize difficult students. Students said that there were teachers who did not always
demonstrate appropriate respect for them, who embarrassed, and/or discriminated against some students. One student told how a teacher would continually call him names and verbally abuse him. As a consequence he no longer felt engaged in school, and admitted to taking out his feelings of frustration and anger on fellow students. For this student, like many others at this elementary school, violence through language was a part of their everyday school experience – a part of school culture. An obvious challenge for this school was to face this issue of violence embedded in the school culture head on.

In one secondary school, some educators expressed fear of the black student population, constructing black Caribbean male students as unreliable, defiant, and dangerous. The black and Hispanic male students we interviewed said that they thought many of the educators were unnecessarily intimidated by them and their communities. Some admitted using this fear to their advantage to get away with being late for class or acting out. One teacher in another school spoke directly to issues of “zero tolerance” around students’ violent behavior in schools:

*I think as we in society are discovering as well, that the more you punish, the more bad behavior you see. It doesn’t extinguish anything, it doesn’t decrease the frequency of bad behavior, it just highlights it, and reminds you of it every time. And for some of our students, you know, if this is the only place where they have consistency and it’s the only place where they have a chance to have a positive experience, if we are continually highlighting all the bad things that they do, why would they want to be here. I don’t think any of us would want to be somewhere where we’re being reminded of our shortcomings all the time.*

An alternative to zero tolerance policies is to take up issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality based bullying directly within the school curriculum. Some teachers and schools did precisely this: one used her grade eight literature circles to discuss issues of social difference, bullying, gender and sexuality, and relationship through the reading of young adult fiction; another school launched a school-wide “anti-bullying” initiative through a peaceful schools initiative. We are not suggesting that challenging dominant discourses of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism or homophobia in schools, and the violence they beget, is easy for individual teachers to take up. Nevertheless, one of the challenges for all schools – but particularly, we think, for schools in which students are already marginalized by identity – is to nurture a culture in which race, gender, class, and sexuality issues are explicitly named, discussed, and renegotiated school-wide, as we saw in one secondary school. Too often anti-bullying programs in schools are approached as though bullying is an individual problem, unrelated to issues of
social difference and social justice, and too often such programs are articulated only to students, ignoring the ways in which adults in schools and school systems can contribute to a bullying culture through the relational culture they establish among themselves.

A hopeful approach to dealing with violence in schools might begin in a system-wide examination of the working culture, creating opportunities to take up issues of anti-bullying and anti-oppressive work across the adult system, while raising the issues within schools. Such a system-wide approach would demonstrate an honest interest in and concern for a socially just practice in general, not only within the schools but across the system as well, thereby enormously supporting efforts within individual schools.

**SYSTEM CHALLENGES**

It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that, for the most part, instead of offering systemic support for schools serving high-risk populations, school system bureaucracies in all three provinces actually posed obstacles for the work. Some of the challenges created by board and ministry policies in all provinces included: inability to maintain new, energized teachers and to hire culturally and racially representative teachers; decreased professional development, and a focus on ‘best practices’ in the form of strategies and skills in-service at the expense of social justice and equity work; cuts to ESL programs, black history, peer tutoring, drama and the arts, media studies, and initiatives like Race, Culture and Human Rights development and equity programs; and constraints created by more narrow, province-wide definitions of curriculum and repositioning of assessment.

---

*An alternative to zero tolerance policies is to take up issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality based bullying directly within the school curriculum.*
as standardized testing. In all three provinces, failure on the part of boards and systems to recognize and concretely support the different and special requirements of schools working with high poverty and/or highly diverse communities represented the greatest challenge to supporting students at risk. Too often, the very programs, approaches to curriculum and assessment, approaches to school culture and governance that best supported the work of such sites were the very programs and approaches being cut or revised.

Perhaps the most egregious form of system neglect of the needs of disadvantaged schools was the failure to recognize, in any concrete manner, the special circumstances, particular skills, and enormous extra work involved in teaching or administering such sites. In British Columbia, although these circumstances had historically been recognized, recent cuts to resources for disadvantaged schools presented new challenges. In Ontario, while extra funding may be made available to disadvantaged schools in an attempt to raise test scores, it is not allocated in recognition of the demands of teaching across social difference. Such schools regularly fed and clothed students, scrambling to write for NGO grants or juggling meager budgets in order to fund such activities. Community fund-raisers, aimed at supplying the “extra” resources many schools now need in order to carry out their work, understandably produced far smaller funds in disadvantaged communities.

Supplying students and their families with the physical necessities of life is just one of the forms of extra work in disadvantaged schools. When such schools are successful, they have taken some pains to involve the community in school life, and particularly those community members and parents least likely to come into schools. Engaging the parents of students at risk, many of whom have less than happy memories of schools themselves and often feel alienated and/or judged by school people, is in itself a massive and important piece of work. In our study, those schools that worked most successfully with such marginalized communities operated as community centres, where members of the community regularly contributed to school programs like hot lunches or safe arrival programs, and in which regular community events (town halls, barbeques, concerts, shows, etc) were held.

These schools approached marginalized community members as resources, rather than as deficits in need of the school’s help in raising or educating their children. Such a relationship with the community meant that family and community problems regularly arrived in the school, and negotiating such problems, offering advice on services available, and addressing on-going stresses within families that have consequences for students’ lives became a central piece of work done in these schools. No substantial system support recognized this extra and
fundamentally necessary work, in terms of providing disadvantaged schools with extra personnel or in terms of recognizing in any concrete way the special qualifications of principals and teachers doing this work.

Increasingly centralized, bureaucratized, legalistic, and standardized systems and policies posed active obstacles for school people working with high numbers of students at risk. For instance, one principal who regularly kept the school gym open and supervised on weekends for the benefit of public housing students in the neighbourhood told us that new policies requiring written application and notification as well as extra fees meant the school could no longer be offered as a safe and healthy space to these students and their families beyond school hours.

Developing, maintaining, and retaining experienced and informed teachers who know how to work in such sites was an enormous challenge for these schools. Union seniority policies often mean that strong new teachers who are committed to this kind of work are bumped out in favour of candidates with more seniority. Principals have little control over the development and retention of a teaching staff committed to and knowledgeable at working in disadvantaged schools. Several of the schools in our study had marked staff turn-over in three years, two losing strong principals and vice-principals to thoughtless system policies that reassign school administrators regularly without attention to contextual needs. All schools lost promising teachers, young and experienced, who had both an interest in and an ability for this kind of work to seniority or system needs; most schools had a number of beginning teachers transferred in, teachers who had not yet the experience or knowledge for such challenging placements. On the other hand, systems showed no particular sensitivity to transferring out teachers who struggled in such sites, or teachers and principals who worked well there, but simply needed a break from the constant demands of such work. Lack of any official recognition for the expertise required to work as teachers and school administrators in disadvantaged schools combined with the deficit reputation of the sites to create unstable staffing conditions for these schools.

The time, energy, ingenuity, and knowledge required to create safe and productive cultures within disadvantaged schools is under-recognized by the present policies of school systems. Thomson (2002) documents the kind of time and energy teachers and administrators in such schools are required to put into discipline in order to build safe school communities for their students. Violence of various sorts is an issue within communities marginalized by poverty and despair, and that violence will erupt into community schools. A number of the schools we
worked with had undertaken far-reaching, time-consuming, and energetic school-wide programs (peaceful schools, teen health centres, house systems, in-school inservicing for teachers and students together) in order to address these challenges. It is long past time that their efforts, expertise, and knowledge were recognized and concretely supported by school systems, if we are to make genuine attempts to better support students at risk in schools.

**CONCLUDING COMMENT**

Given the systemic, practical, and daily challenges involved in creating and maintaining schools articulated to students at risk, it is a real tribute to the schools, school administrators, and teachers in this project that we were able to learn from them so much about what works and what doesn’t for students at risk. Recommendations which follow proceed largely from this analysis. In summary, then, major challenges facing these schools included:

- Recognizing and re-working white middle class habits of schooling
- Providing material supports for students and their families
- Developing curriculum that speaks to students’ lives and concerns
- Developing school-wide curriculum and constructive disciplinary processes located in teaching social responsibility
- Responding to community needs and engaging the community as resourceful
- Finding time and energy for the specialized work of disadvantaged schools, the extent and seriousness of which is often unrecognized by school systems

The time, energy, ingenuity, and knowledge required to create safe and productive cultures within disadvantaged schools is under-recognized by the present policies of school systems.
• Explicitly and deliberately naming and addressing justice issues – racism, classicism, sexism, and homophobia – school-wide
• Developing in-school and inter-school professional development appropriate for disadvantaged schools
• Negotiating systems and system policies that fail to recognize and often contravene the particular demands of teaching and learning in such sites
• Hiring and retaining committed, informed and engaged faculty and staff in light of system policies that interfere with this.
Recommendations

We offer the following recommendations for re-imagining a schooling that might better speak to students at risk, their families and communities, in the spirit of contributing to a continuing discussion. This as an on-going project in education; any suggestion that such a project is ever deemed to be complete trivializes the power of social difference and marginalization as structuring categories of experience inside and outside of schools. However, clearly our data and analysis indicate directions for both schools and policy-makers which we express in the form of the following recommendations.

Given our work in these schools and in many like schools over the years, and given our own work as teachers and teacher educators committed to a more democratic and just schooling, we want to explicitly recognize and underline how difficult it is to do this work. Further, much of what we have learned about creating equitable schooling for students at risk we have learned from extraordinarily dedicated and genuinely professional teachers and school administrators like those represented in this project. We recognize, with them, that work toward an equitable education is an on-going project.

The meaning of the word “democratic” has been widely corrupted in popular parlance to connote merely market-based societies that hold purportedly free elections. The original meaning of the word is not so restricted, and it is not this restricted sense of “democratic” that we intend here when we refer to “a democratic education.”

A democratic education does not observe the usual polite silences on controversial or “sensitive” matters; does not shy away from publicly naming and taking up injustices; welcomes disagreement and conflict as critical to a dialectic of justice.
“Democratic,” as we intend it, refers to the open exchange of social and political ideas in public discourse, including the full inclusion and representation of voices and perspectives historically silenced and/or marginalized. A democratic education does not observe the usual polite silences on controversial or “sensitive” matters; does not shy away from publicly naming and taking up injustices; welcomes disagreement and conflict as critical to a dialectic of justice. In this sense, democracy itself is never fully achieved; it is an on-going struggle, shaped by the access of all citizens to voice, and the willingness of privilege to speak out on behalf of a common good. The recommendations that follow are intended as contributions to the continuing project of democratic education, representing our current thinking on how schools might work toward a more equitable education for all students, and particularly for students at risk.

FOR TEACHERS AND SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS:

- Work toward recognizing dominant norms, assumptions, values, and traditions (e.g. in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, spirituality) in schools and school systems, and the many and daily ways in which students at risk are marginalized by them.

- Take seriously the multiple perspectives which students bring, creating genuine opportunities for them to contribute to school curriculum, practice, and policy.

- Make deliberate and sustained efforts to develop classroom and school cultures in which it is safer for students to speak.

- Examine all school practices and policies (e.g. discipline policies, safe schools programs, attendance policies, parental involvement practices, health policies) from the perspective of who benefits and who is disadvantaged, who is included and who excluded by them, who is heard and who is silenced.

- In the daily discourses of classrooms, schools, and school systems, encourage continuing explicit conversations about issues of power and privilege and how they work in schools to normalize the experiences of some and marginalize those of others.

- Work toward creating collaborative school cultures in which democratic human relations are central. This implies rejecting fads of “corporatization,” including legalistic, bureaucratic, and overly regulatory ways of operating, and the predominance of business and managerial discourses.
• Aim for a curriculum of life that takes into account students’ lived experience, their local and global concerns, and respects their intellectual capacities by maintaining high academic quality.

• Broaden definitions of academic standards and quality to include multiple forms of knowledge, various ways of knowing, and demonstrations of knowledge as contested and co-constructed.

• Include multiple and diverse forms of assessment; recognize the value of contextualized teacher evaluations and performance-based assessments.

• Work toward making schools places where it is safe for administrators, teachers, parents, and students to disagree. Understand that disagreement and conflict are characteristic of democratic spaces, and not indications of disrespect or insubordination.

• Allow for a variety of context-sensitive support structures such as alternative schedules, diverse programs, and flexible counseling arrangements to address the diverse needs of students.

• Approach high poverty communities as resourceful and not as deficient or in need of remediation; in other words, work with rather than do for communities.

FOR POLICY MAKERS:

• Work toward explicitly identifying and interrogating assumptions underlying educational policies and practices that generally pose as neutral or generalizable.

• Develop policies that provide for additional funding targeted to students, schools, and communities at risk, and mechanisms through which local sites shape the disbursement of such resources.

• Recognize, in concrete ways, that school administrators and teachers working in disadvantaged schools have particular, urgent, and added demands placed upon them, and are called upon to do specialized kinds of work requiring specialized knowledge and expertise.

• Develop general disadvantaged schools policy that allows for differential and flexible staffing, class size, hiring, transfer and retention policies, recognizing the particular circumstances of these schools.
• Select school administrators and teachers carefully, recognizing specialized knowledge, expertise, and interests required in disadvantaged schools. Develop policies that contribute to stability in leadership, acknowledging that some schools are not well served by general policies on principal transfer.

• Work toward developing policies and practices that explicitly recognize the kinds of special qualifications required for working in these schools in teacher education, teacher certification, and professional certification and affiliation. Explicitly and publicly recognize the special expertise of teachers and school administrators who work successfully in high-poverty schools.

• Ensure that schools in poor communities are as attractive and well maintained as schools in affluent communities, and make accommodations for differential access to fund-raising across different communities.

• Explicitly recognize the good things happening in these schools and communities, and develop district-wide efforts to counter negative images and reputations of these schools and communities.

• Increase diversity in school faculty and staff – actively recruit non-white and under-represented teachers and administrators.

• Encourage and support the development of informed classroom-based and performance-based assessment. Recognize the limitations of standardized tests, and their historical tendencies to reproduce inequities and “whiten” curriculum, and work actively to mitigate these effects system-wide. If high stakes standardized testing is used, interpret testing data appropriately and legitimately to survey broad trends, not to single out individual students, schools, or communities.
References


Dei, G. S., et al. (2002). *Removing the margins: The challenges and possibilities of inclusive schooling*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press Inc.


Notes on Contributors

JOHN P. PORTELLI is Professor, Co-Director of the Centre for Leadership and Diversity, and Associate Chair of the Department of Theory and Policy Studies at the Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education, University of Toronto. He teaches in the graduate programs in Philosophy of Education and Educational Administration, and the pre-service program. His research and teaching focuses on: issues of democratic theory and educational policy, leadership and pedagogy; student engagement and the curriculum of life; standardization, equity and “students at risk”; analysis and critique of neo-liberalism in education. He has published seven books (including a collection of poetry).

CAROLYN M. SHIELDS is Professor and Head of the Department of Educational Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Prior to taking a university position, Dr. Shields worked in numerous cultural settings in the K-12 school system across Canada; she has subsequently studied cross-cultural leadership in the United States, England, Fiji, New Zealand, Australia, and China. She has served on several ministerial advisory boards and completed terms as president of the Canadian Association for Studies in Educational Administration and as Canadian representative to the Board of the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management – a council that honored her by electing her a “fellow” in 2004. She teaches courses and engages in research related to leadership for academic excellence and social justice. She has published six books and over 90 articles and monographs.

ANN B. VIBERT is Associate Professor and Graduate Coordinator, School of Education, Acadia University. Her research and teaching interests include: critical literacy and language education; students “at risk” and equitable schooling; critical perspectives on curriculum and assessment; social justice questions in education; gender, sexuality and schooling. She has worked as a consultant with ministries of education and school boards in the area of literacy education, and is currently the PI for a national project Pedagogies at risk: Just schooling and accountability discourses, which documents public school educators’ experiences in attempting social justice work in current contexts.
Based on classroom and school observations, over 1000 survey responses and over 200 interviews with students and educators in six schools in Canada, this national report documents the major findings regarding educators’ constructions of 'students at risk' and practices meant to address the needs of such students. Adopting a critical-democratic perspective, the report offers an analysis of the findings and makes recommendations for schools and policy makers.