FROM RISK TO RELIEF: ADVOCATING FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS AND PROGRAMS

Joel Ien and Meredith Lordan

ABSTRACT

How do you support teacher candidates and new teachers (those in their first three years of teaching) who may themselves be at risk while working with students at risk and related programming? This project was inspired by:

(a) the work of the Students at Risk: Learning Pathways cohort at OISE, a group of intermediate and senior teacher candidates; (b) the experiences of first year teachers, all graduates of the Students at Risk: Learning Pathways cohort; and, (c) insights from the associate teachers. Participants shared their concerns arising from the “at-risk” label and discussed both the challenges and the opportunities for enhanced teacher preparation and professional growth. An essential finding of this project is that teacher candidates and new teachers seek informal venues for professional networking and the sharing of best practices in order to meet the needs of students at risk and related programming, even though they appreciate the formal mentoring offered by experienced practitioners and the instruction provided by the Initial Teacher Education program. Informal networks include mentoring of teacher candidates and new teachers, online forums, and research assignments for teacher candidates that explicitly address classroom management, effective communication, and special education infusion.

OBJECTIVES

• To identify the challenges and possibilities that teacher candidates and new teachers face while working with students at risk and related programming
• To identify how teacher candidates and new teachers may be supported to meet the needs of students at risk and related programming
• To empower research participants to share their experiences and, in so doing, to help inform a more responsive teacher education curriculum and professional induction process

“An ‘at high risk’ youth is one who is unlikely to graduate on schedule with the skills and self-confidence necessary to have meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, cultural [and] civic affairs, and relationships.” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 3.) Although this definition remains relevant to educational policy in Ontario, for this study, risk is
defined as both academic and non-academic factors that compromise a student’s ability to succeed. By extending the definition of risk beyond credit accumulation and graduation rates, the potential for both risk and student advocacy is positioned at the centre of equitable teaching and learning. This definition also implies that risk is everywhere, not simply in the inner cities or among particular demographic groups. The Students at Risk: Learning Pathways cohort invites teacher candidates, as part of the development of their advocacy frameworks, to challenge the at-risk label while working in support of student success.

How best can support be given to teacher candidates, and new teachers who may themselves be at risk, while they work with students at risk and related programming? This question guided this project. This article contributes to an emerging discussion of an under-researched area of public policy and scholarship. At-risk students, often presented as the early school leavers, are receiving significant media and public policy attention in Ontario. A number of reports attest to the reality of the disengaged student who is not succeeding in secondary school (Dei, 1996; Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Karp, 1988; O’Connor, 2003; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a, 2005b; OSSTF, 2005; Tanner, Krahn, & Hartnagel, 1995). There are many reasons given, including: academic challenges; insufficient credit accumulation; bullying and harassment on the basis of ethnicity, race, class, sexual orientation, and gender; violence, family trauma, illness; and, the socio-economic necessity of leaving school early. The Ontario Ministry of Education provides funds for at-risk initiatives, notably the implementation of a Student Success Teacher in each publicly funded Ontario secondary school, and the pathways program. This is an initiative to validate and highlight post-secondary options such as workplace transitions, apprenticeships, and college entrance. However, the question of how teacher candidates and new teachers can be supported as advocates of students and programs related to risk is not widely researched.

This project is inspired by the work of the Students at Risk: Learning Pathways cohort at OISE. The cohort is composed of a group of intermediate and senior teacher candidates who share a commitment to at-risk students; and at the same time they challenge the at-risk label by developing frameworks for student advocacy. This project provides an opportunity for current teacher candidates, new teachers, and experienced associate teachers to identify support strategies.

**STAGES OF THE PROJECT**

**Responding to risk**

In May 2006, as part of the annual review of the work of the Students At Risk: Learning Pathways cohort, the cohort coordinators asked the following question: To what extent does the cohort respond to the needs of teacher candidates and new teachers, themselves graduates of the cohort? This question became the catalyst for our research proposal and the basis of this project. While we considered the responsiveness of the cohort to the needs of its teacher candidates and partner schools, we also felt an underlying desire to foster enduring ties with teachers in the field, to empower teacher candidates, new teachers, and associate teachers to contribute to program development, and to share best practices. To accomplish these goals we planned to provide participants with safe spaces that offered professional community and anonymity. These would be spaces where it would be possible to name the challenges and possibilities arising from one’s work with students at risk and related programming.

**Claiming one’s voice as researcher**

Teacher candidates, new teachers, and experienced associate teachers were co-researchers, key sources of insight, and change agents in this study. Mindful of these roles, in September 2006 90 members of the Students At Risk: Learning Pathways cohort were invited to participate in this voluntary study. They were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire. Their responses, as well as information volunteered during class discussions and through their responses to questionnaires submitted in April 2007, provided valuable insights about their experiences.

Three teacher candidates were invited to be in a focus group for a more in-depth discussion of “at-risk” in relation to this study. They were each matched with the study’s three participating associate teachers during practicum placements. The practicum helped to forge more enduring ties between the teacher candidates and associate teachers. These initial discussions ensured that the views of all participants were heard. In this way, the teacher candidates helped to inform the research process.

The teacher candidates’ involvement also raised challenges. An extensive ethical review had been completed prior to the research project, and assurances had been given that they could speak openly and honestly, without reprisal, and make...
comments, both positive and negative, about enhanced support for teacher candidates. However, the anonymous questionnaire showed more critical questioning than did the face-to-face focus group, where fewer criticisms were made of the B.Ed. program. This raised a concern about the level of perceived safety felt by the teacher candidates during the project. In spite of assurances, they seemed to have perceived more security through anonymity. At the same time, it is significant to note that the three teacher candidates felt that their voices and insights had been respected as part of a larger planning process.

Focus group dialogues
In Spring 2007 two focus group interviews took place. The first one, intended as an informal dialogue, involved the project researchers and the three teacher candidates. This first dialogue created a space within which they could speak with candor about any aspect of the Initial Teacher Education program. The second focus group, involving two new and three experienced teachers, was an intensive daylong discussion and networking opportunity that provided a space for participants to discuss both the nature of risk and the support strategies that could aid teacher candidates and new teachers. This event had an unintended result: it helped to forge professional ties among the participants, and some of the new teachers expressed interest in completing their job-embedded learning days (part of their professional induction) with these experienced associate teachers. The coordination of schedules and the logistic of securing release time presented the largest obstacles for this aspect of the project. However, these challenges were addressed through ongoing dialogue with participants and their school administrative teams. The support of administrators proved invaluable to this study: these school leaders offered their support by encouraging the participants to attend their focus group, providing release time, and securing occasional teachers.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS
This project involved a variety of data collection methods, including a questionnaire, focus group discussions, and transcripts from the focus groups. The following questions, which were included in the questionnaire, guided the project: (a) How do you conceptualize the at-risk student? (b) Recalling your own initial teacher education, how were you prepared to work with students at risk and related programs? (c) What are the strengths and challenges faced by teacher candidates and new teachers when working with students at risk and related programs? (d) How can teacher candidates and new teachers who choose to work with at-risk students and programs be supported most effectively during their training and induction into the profession?

The use of these qualitative methods of data collection provided a forum for participants to give voice to their own challenges and possibilities. The themes that emerged from the dialogue are “voices from the field” that offer compelling insights concerning the limitations and possibilities of grappling with risk, especially in relation to the support strategies needed for teacher candidates and new teachers.

Voices from the field: Considering the nature of risk
Participants cited a wide range of factors that create or contribute to risk for secondary students: socio-economics; English as a second language; special needs; multiple abilities; mental health issues, notably depression and addiction; family disruptions and trauma; attendance; and punctuality. One participant observed: “Any student can be at risk. We need to expand the definition from poor students or failing students to any student. To be at risk means to be at risk of not graduating and making poor life decisions.”

Project participant

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making, self-awareness, and self-advocacy skills. And teachers can be role models and facilitators for these skill sets.

Another participant noted the inherent problems and bias associated with the use of the at-risk label and its ability to inform perceptions and misperceptions.

I was bothered by the language that was used around the at-risk student as being bottom of the barrel, the classes no one wants ... By the end even the term “applied” implied something ... language is so powerful and a reflection of our culture, particularly our school culture. It upset me that new teachers and students are not even given a change when they enter a school or classroom with that culture, using that language.

The implicit and explicit equating of goodness with academic-level courses is problematic. Through these words and pedagogy, a hierarchy is created that privileges academic achievement, and students may then internalize these attitudes. In accordance with the pathways program, students may take courses in a variety of streams, not just one. As new generations of teachers enter the profession—rather than, for example, referring to a student as an “applied student”—teacher candidates will be asked to think of the student first, not her or his course enrolments.

In opening up the definition of risk to include the larger social realm of poor life decisions, the first participant invites us to consider how we construct and apply risk as part of our own professional practice. At the same time, as the second participant cautions, opening up the definition must be done with a critical eye to the power of the at-risk label to deny opportunities to students and reinforce systemic barriers.

Voices from the field: Effective and current support strategies

Participants identified a wide range of effective strategies used to support both students and teachers—from building a sense of community with students to informal networking. “Rapport is absolutely the most important element when working with students at risk. Without making genuine connections with the at-risk students, there’s considerably less chance that they will respond to your assistance.” Echoing the call for a more holistic approach to address risk, this participant encourages teachers to take time to get to know their students. Rapport building fosters community in the classroom and school, assists with curriculum planning, and may help to avert classroom management issues and other conflicts. Although curriculum is one important part of the teacher-student dynamic, interaction with students must not be reduced to the fulfillment of curriculum expectations.

“Working in at-risk environments, I saw things that worked: lots of rewards to provide extrinsic motivation and the coordination of the Student Success Team to identify and address issues like attendance, behaviour, and building rapport with students.” Taking a holistic view, this participant valued reward for positive choices and behaviours. Similarly, another participant identified the importance of making teaching and learning choices with the interests and needs of the students in mind. “When trying to connect with at-risk students and link the curriculum to things that matter to them or to things that will only affect them, you end up hitting on all these different teaching strategies and methods.” By providing real-world connections, students’ interests can be affirmed and valued.

The sharing of best practices—including those related to holistic teaching and learning—presents challenges for new teachers. Participants commended OISE’s cohort structure for the enduring ties and sense of community that it fosters. “Networking with the other teacher candidates in the cohort has proven to be a valuable asset for the year. Not only do I have access to really good ideas and resources, but these peers have also provided me with the emotional and social support that I need to remind myself that things happen and aren’t always going to run the way I planned.” Both formal and informal channels of communication between teacher candidates and new teachers, including the online class forums, email dialogues, and in-person visits, proved valuable in the sharing of ideas and problem solving.

Voices from the field: Proposed effective support strategies

Participants offered a wide range of ideas for effective support strategies. Suggestions included increased interactive and scenario-based learning, improved communication skills in teaching and learning environments, and more detailed information about professional induction. “Situations
surrounding classroom management, including modifying curriculum, assessment, effective questioning, social difficulties with students, self management (de-stressors), role play activities (i.e., what would I do in this situation?), are so useful." Offering more advice about practical supports, another participant commented: “Provide a list of contacts of support staff that are available to speak with or come into class and sit in on a lesson. That would be more helpful to me than having someone come in and creep up on me asking if I need any help ... Have a practicum that more deliberately matches teacher candidates with at-risk and alternative programs.” Echoing the theme of practical skill acquisition during the Initial Teacher Education program, a participant noted the importance of communication techniques: “Things like writing effective overheads or creating effective handouts [are important topics]. I couldn’t believe how important something like this is and how much of a drastic change you see in your students.” All of these suggestions can—and are—being included as part of the curriculum in the Students at Risk: Learning Pathways cohort.

IMPACT
Risk, resilience, and engagement underpin the Students At Risk: Learning Pathways cohort. This project created a forum within which teacher candidates could work with students’ strengths to create possibilities for their success. Teacher candidates were encouraged to engage all learners—especially those at risk of failure—regardless of the grade level where they were working. By extension, the project revealed the participants’ desire for enduring relationships with colleagues to ensure that their own explorations of risk, resilience, and engagement could continue to be fostered through informal professional networks.

The project also provided an opportunity to forge deeper ties with partner schools and associate teachers. It created a dedicated space for participants to explore both the challenges arising from work with students at risk and related programming, but also the problematic use of the at-risk label as a source of stigma. Participants experienced a sense of empowerment from hearing each other’s voices. They became committed to using their voices as catalysts for developing more responsive models of teacher education, and their sense of empowerment also helped them to forge enduring ties with partner schools.

Participants provided timely insights about the ways that the politics of risk are reflected in contemporary schooling. They did so by highlighting the wide range of perceptions and experiences of risk, profiling the related school programming intended to meet the needs of at-risk students, and naming the challenges experienced by teacher candidates and new teachers who work with these students and programs. All of these insights inform areas for program growth and development within teacher education and professional induction programs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION
All of the participants commented on the sense of empowerment they gained through their participation in this project. To ensure strong ties with Initial Teacher Education, the project partners need an ongoing dialogue, especially one that is mindful of the importance of incorporating their voices as part of enduring relationships with the field. This ongoing dialogue can be achieved in a number of ways: continued study through research partnership initiatives like this one; invitations to associate teachers to speak with teacher candidates and instructors; ongoing professional development and sharing of best professional induction practices by OISE and its field partners; and greater involvement of the associate teachers, themselves leaders in student advocacy and support, during practicum placement and supervision.

As sources of ongoing support for teacher candidates and new teachers, professional support networks are also critical. Online sharing of best practices, compilation of resources, and mentoring for teacher candidates and new teachers can be facilitated. Indeed, as of spring 2008 the Students at Risk: Learning Pathways cohort continues to implement a number of the suggestions that emerged from this study. These include invitations to field partners and recent graduates to discuss their experiences with new teacher candidates, online dialogues between current teacher candidates and recent graduates, site visits to field partners, and the linking of the latest Ministry of Education student success policies to examples from the field.

Teacher candidates and new teachers need opportunities to share their questions and concerns in professional, honest, accessible, and even vulnerable ways. This can happen by creating informal spaces for professional community and dialogue beyond the scope of official programs, notably the
New Teacher Induction Program in Ontario, courses, and degree requirements.

**NEXT STEPS AND NEW QUESTIONS**

Ongoing support of teacher candidates and new teachers, especially via easily accessible and informal online forums and mentoring, can support professional community building. Further, this network can create and maintain sites within which future research questions can be explored, for example:

1. What does effective classroom management and communication look like within at-risk teaching and learning environments?
2. What are some of the best practices for infusion of special education supports?
3. How could a teacher candidate or new teacher challenge the at-risk label as a source of agency for students, their families, and professional colleagues?
4. How can we, as teacher candidates, new teachers, experienced teachers, and allies, challenge the equation of “good” with “academic” and the linking of “bad” with open, essential, and applied levels? While these are not views shared by all teachers, several project participants noted their discomfort with these implicit and, all too often, explicit equations. Participants voiced their concerns about how these equations marginalize students.
5. Reflecting teacher activism, service to the profession, and the desire to forge enduring relationships with the field, how should the Students at Risk: Learning Pathways cohort create a student support program in partnership with a local secondary school? While the particular needs of the school would inform the content and delivery of such a program, areas of potential contribution include mentoring programs, assistance with credit recovery, and transitions programming for grades seven to eight, and eight to nine. Teacher candidates could also serve as tutors in credit recovery and peer mentoring programs.

While the scope of these questions is large, the issues they raise outline areas for greater program responsiveness both within the Initial Teacher Education program at OISE and also in close cooperation with OISE’s field partners, recent graduates, and current teacher candidates. The support for at-risk students and programming demands nothing less than ongoing refinement in order that teachers can respond to the multiple ways that risk is manifest.

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**CONTRIBUTORS**

**Joel Ien** is the co-coordinator of the Students at Risk: Learning Pathways cohort, OISE. With a passion for teaching and learning, he brings a wealth of experience and knowledge to his work.

**Meredith Lordan** is the co-coordinator of the Students at Risk: Learning Pathways and School, Community, and Global Connections cohorts, OISE. Her research interests include challenging risk, accessible education, global education, and multilateralism. She is seconded from the Toronto District School Board.