

TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE FAMILY BACKGROUNDS OF CHILDREN AT RISK

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ABSTRACT. This paper focuses on a qualitative study that investigated beliefs held by four teachers in high poverty communities about the family backgrounds of children they considered to be at risk for failure in school and later in life. Results indicated that the presence of child abuse in the home, alcoholism, and single or absent parents were the most frequently mentioned family risks thought by the teachers to be affecting specific children in their classrooms. However, the teachers also expressed uncertainty about the level of their understanding of families and about the nature of cause-and-effect relationships between familial factors and outcomes. Further, while the teachers saw familial difficulties as risks for children, they also highlighted the importance of systemic problems such as the lack of support for families in poverty and the differential responsiveness of schools to the more affluent and powerful parents. They also seemed to empathize with single parents, and believed that the cultural backgrounds of Indian and Métis students were a source of strength for Aboriginal children when they were at risk.

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article décrit une étude qualitative sur les croyances qu'entretiennent quatre enseignants de collectivités très pauvres relativement aux antécédents familiaux des enfants qu'ils jugent «à risque», à savoir en voie d'échec à l'école, puis dans la vie active, et plus tard dans la vie. Les résultats démontrent que, parmi les facteurs familiaux de risque affectant des élèves de leur propre classe, les enseignants mentionnent le plus fréquemment l'alcoolisme, les sévices subis par les enfants au foyer familial, l'absence d'un parent voire des deux parents. Toutefois, les enseignants reconnaissent leurs incertitudes quant au niveau de compréhension qu'ils ont des familles et quant à la nature des relations causales entre les facteurs familiaux et les résultats scolaires. Par ailleurs, même si les professeurs considèrent que les difficultés familiales sont des facteurs pour les enfants, ils soulignent également l'importance de problèmes systémiques comme le non-soutien des familles pauvres et la réceptivité différente des écoles face aux parents plus influents et puissants. Ils semblent également empathiser avec les parents célibataires et sont d'avis que les antécédents culturels des élèves indiens et métis sont une source de dynamisme pour les enfants autochtones à risque.

The term “at risk” usually refers to children who are likely to fail in school or in life because of their social circumstances (e.g., Saskatchewan Education, 1996). Most of the research on these children is modeled on an epidemiological approach to the study of disease and focuses on the presence of “risk factors” in the social environment that are correlated with poor school achievement and behavioral problems. Researchers generally agree that a single factor, in isolation, is not a basis for identifying children as at risk, but that there is a “pernicious multiplying effect” among risk factors (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 1995; p. 20) or even “proof that disastrous outcomes are much more likely when several factors interact” (Barr, 1995; p. 11). Familial factors include having parents who are either very young, single, or have low educational attainment. Identifying children who are at risk because of family circumstances and understanding their needs is important in enabling us to play a proactive role in supporting their growth and development.

There are several ways elementary teachers can support children at risk. First, teachers who are good “kid watchers” (Goodman, 1985) are able to detect possible delays in children’s psychosocial growth and make referrals to appropriate specialists for assessment and intervention. Second, teachers are in the front lines of detecting signs of abuse and neglect, which can then be investigated and addressed by appropriate authorities to ensure the wellbeing of the child and of the family as a whole (Tite, 1996). Third, even in cases where a crisis has not occurred or the child is not showing delays in development, teachers can benefit the child in working closely with children’s parents in supporting children’s learning (Balster, 1991). Finally, there is a great deal teachers can do to provide immediate assistance to children in times of crisis (Newman, 1993) as well as providing term support through establishing the warm caring relationships that are so important for the development of resilience (Wang & Gordon, 1994). It would seem that teachers’ abilities to assist children in these ways would be dependent, at least in part, on the beliefs held by teachers about the ways the children are at risk.

Much of the research on teachers’ beliefs about children at risk indicates a high degree of awareness among teachers with respect to factors that impede children’s chances of future success in school and in life (e.g., Johnson, 1997). Yet a review of the literature also raises a disconcerting number of questions about the ways teachers think about children at risk in their classrooms. Some writers allege that teachers’ thinking in this area is still shaped by colonialist discourse viewing parents of visible minorities and working class or poor parents as deficient, which has led historically to the wholesale appropriation of child rearing from parents who were poor, of color, or otherwise considered to be unfit (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). Flores, Cousing, and Diaz (1991) argue that the idea of cultural deficiency

still rests behind the widespread application of the term "at risk" to any child or family who happens to be different from the mainstream model of success. Further, Fine (1990) argues that describing children at risk on the basis of their family backgrounds is basically an "ideological diversion" that "satisfies both the desire to isolate these people by the Right and display them by the Left" (p. 68) and that the label functions to deflect attention away from the systemic inequities that are the source of the problem. In support of these criticisms of teachers' thinking about children at risk, there is research showing teachers' beliefs about children in lower-income families and visible minorities to be inaccurate, stereotypical and resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure for the children (e.g., Delpit, 1995; Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; Taylor, 1991; Tauber, 1997). Furthermore, a number of studies provide cause for concern about the extent to which youth at risk have distinct memories of feeling their needs were unacknowledged and unaddressed when they were in elementary school (Ellis, Hart, & Small-McGinley, 1998).

Overall, there is a need to reconcile these two kinds of research, the one showing that many teachers are knowledgeable about factors placing children at risk, and the other showing that teachers' thinking about these children, in itself, may be a risk factor for them. One possibility is that these disparate findings are resulting from research carried out with two different types of teachers. Another possibility, discussed in the following paper, is that when we explore more fully the nature of teachers' beliefs about the "at riskness" of children in their classrooms, we find important gaps and omissions between teachers' general understandings of risk and their particular application of those understandings to children in their classrooms. In order to advance our understanding of how teachers think about children they view as at risk, what is needed is a fuller understanding of how teachers place specific children in their classrooms in this category. What indicators do teachers use to identify specific children at risk in their classrooms? What factors do the teachers think are placing these children at risk? How do teachers see the futures of these children? What connections do teachers see among the risk factors, indicators and the children's futures?

PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

An opportunity to explore the preceding questions in relation to teachers' lived experience with children arose in a broader study designed to develop qualitative case portraits of elementary classrooms in both urban and rural communities. One of the goals of the study was to identify how the teachers interpreted the common phrase "likely to fail because of their social circumstances" (Frymier & Gasneder, 1989) in relation to specific children in their classrooms. In other words, this goal was to explore the teachers' concept of at riskness in the context of their practical experience with particular

children as opposed to the more generalized discourse of risk and risk factors. The assumption was that teachers' beliefs in relation to specific children would be more closely linked to their pedagogy than would be their beliefs and opinions about risks more generally. As Wells (2000) suggests, the basis is a constructivist position that teachers' understanding emerges from a melding of problem-solving in their personal experience, in this case dealing with children at risk, with knowledge from other sources such as knowledge gleaned from knowing the research on risks.

Six teachers participated in the inquiry. The discussion below focuses on the four who were working in urban or rural high poverty communities and who said that at least one quarter of their pupils were at risk. The participants' years of teaching experience ranged from two to over twenty. Three were Euro-Canadian and one was Aboriginal. They were teaching at grades two, combined three/four and combined four/five. In one of the classrooms there were two teachers who were job-sharing. Data collection was carried out for one week in each of the three classrooms and consisted of daily semi-structured interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) with each teacher, and classroom observations, which were recorded with videotapes and fieldnotes. In the interviews, the teachers were asked about their beliefs regarding children at risk and risk factors in general, to give examples of specific children they considered to be at risk, to tell anecdotes illustrating why they considered them to be at risk, to describe children they did not consider to be at risk, and to explain a variety of events that were observed in their classrooms.

Consistent with qualitative case study methodology, data analysis was concurrent with data collection so that preliminary themes emerging from the data could be pursued with the teachers while the study was in progress (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Stake, 1994). This open-ended, inductive approach is a major strength of the qualitative case study inquiry because it allows the researcher to pursue avenues of investigation that had not been pre-determined. The initial purpose of the study was to identify issues important to teachers who think their pupils are at risk. In response to the research invitations to speak about these issues, the teachers spoke about familial circumstances with a particular complexity, depth and urgency that is the focus of the discussion below.

FINDINGS

The notion of risk: An overview

In all the cases of children described as at risk by the teachers, the teachers provided evidence of both academic and behavioral problems similar to those reported in the prior literature on children at risk (e.g., Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 1995). This evidence included de-

lays in language or reading development, aggression and violence toward other children, withdrawal from social interaction with children or adults in the school, and a variety of signs of problems in the child's family. None of the teachers said they used a single indicator, in isolation, to determine that a child was at risk. One teacher, summarizing beliefs that had been expressed by others, stated that her perception that specific children were at risk was based on "a combination of things that I know about in the home and the things I see in school, and the disengagement that I see is happening. . . . It's rarely one variable." The participants generally seemed to approach the label "at risk" cautiously, saying that it was only after they saw a cumulative body of evidence of problems that they began to see the children as at risk. For these teachers, the futures of particular children in their classrooms eventually became clear, as can be seen in a statement made by one of the teachers when asked what she thought would eventually happen to one of the boys in her classroom. "We're talking about being at risk for not finishing school, not getting a job, being involved with drugs and alcohol, maybe beating up your wife. You know, being on the streets." A similar sentiment was expressed by another teacher as follows:

'At risk' is the kids who are not going to make it. They're not going to get a good job. They aren't going to buy a nice house. They aren't going to have kids. They're probably going to have an alcohol and drug problem. And maybe be involved in crime. These are the kids we are worried about. Yeah, that is what at risk means.

Consistent with the idea that "at risk" is a predictive descriptor (Centre For Research And Innovation, 1995), the teachers associated it with a sense of disaster looming for the children. In this respect, a typical comment was "I worry about them. Like, I think what is going to happen to you?" Yet, they also expressed hesitation in admitting their sense that a child was at risk.

One teacher, for example, identified negative outcomes for particular children while recognizing the potentially unacceptable nature of her views:

These children drop out, get in trouble with the law, become social aid recipients and end up alcoholics. The list of negative outcomes goes on. And maybe I should cease my thoughts now before I say something too offensive. . . .

Risks in family backgrounds

Prior to discussing the teachers' beliefs about the characteristics of children's backgrounds, it is important to note that previous research has shown that teacher knowledge about families of children at risk is often uneven and inaccurate (Cassanova, 1990). In this study, all the teachers said that their knowledge of each pupil's home circumstances varied a great deal from child to child, usually in accordance with the relationship they had with the particular child or family in question. Sometimes they received disclosures

from the parents or children. Sometimes their information came from secondary sources such as colleagues, the principal, counsellors or social workers who had dealt with the families in question. In still other cases of particular children thought to be at risk, the teachers professed to know nothing at all about the family situation. This usually occurred when the child was living in a temporary placement, such as a foster home or with an aunt or uncle, or when the parents did not respond to repeated requests by the school for a visit or interview. Like the teachers in Johnson's (1997) study, these teachers interpreted such lack of communication as a sign, in itself, that the family background of the child was placing him or her at risk. They also frequently made reference to their frustration with this lack of communication. One of them heaved a big sigh and replied "Who knows?" when asked what she thought was happening in the home of a child she described as having extreme behavioral problems. Another commented, "Even a home visit is such a shallow encounter." In contrast to accounts of teachers appearing to jump to conclusions about children's backgrounds, these teachers seemed to be quite aware of and concerned about the partiality of their knowledge.

CHILD ABUSE. In spite of the uncertainty the teachers expressed about their knowledge of children's home backgrounds, there were some familial circumstances about which they expressed firm beliefs. The most frequently mentioned circumstance was the presence of child abuse in the home. One teacher said that a girl in her classroom had been raped in her home shortly before the study began but then was denied counselling on the grounds that it might interfere with the girl's testimony in the forthcoming court case. In the meantime, the girl had not only developed severe behavioral problems, such as "temper tantrums," but had initiated a sexual touching game with other children on the school ground. In another case, there was a boy who had visible scars from the cigarette burns an adult relative had made on his face. This teacher said when this occurred and she reported the abuse, she had to wait at the school until eight o'clock in the evening for the social worker to pick him up. Then (according to his teacher), the boy was apprehended and moved to another community for two months before being suddenly returned to his home. This teacher said that the boy's departure and return had been carried out without any court action, counselling, or long-term follow-up to address the abusive situation. Not surprisingly, she attributed the boy's subsequent development of behavioral problems to both the abuse and the lack of constructive intervention by authorities.

In other cases, the teachers expressed more vague suspicions about abuse. One of them referred to a girl in her class as a "frail child," who "flinches when you come near," and who had made repeated and strange references to familial "love" in her daily journal. The teacher, interpreting these as signs of possible sexual abuse, made a report to authorities and was told there

was no grounds for intervention but she was left with the suspicion that abuse was ongoing in the girl's home. This suspicion, in conjunction with the girl's behavior and lack of concentration in school, indicated to the teacher that the girl's family situation was placing her at risk. In another case, a teacher said she had previously taught one of her current pupils when he was in kindergarten and knew at that time that he had been severely sexually assaulted. According to her, he had never recovered emotionally from the experience, and based on what she had been told by the mother, the boy now seemed to be living with another abusive man in the home. Again, the preceding two teachers related the abuse directly to the problems they saw in both children's behavior, and in both instances they were critical of the lack of support in "the system" for these children. In this respect, their voices of frustration echoed those of teachers quoted in the prior literature (Leroy, 1995; Maynes, 1990; Tite, 1996).

ALCOHOLISM AND ADDICTIONS. The teachers also said that the presence of alcoholism or other addictions in the home made them more likely to think of a child as "at risk." However, as with their dealings with parents suspected of abusing their children, they said they had little firsthand knowledge of specific parents who experienced alcoholism and other addictions, largely because these parents tended to stay away from the school. Yet, the teachers said they often knew about these problems from what they heard from the children or saw in the community. One teacher described hearing one of her pupils being publicly taunted by other children because his father's alcoholism was well known in the local neighborhood. Another teacher, after asking a boy why he did not get his homework done, was told, "My dad was drinking." In still another instance, a teacher related an incident in which a boy remarked to her casually that his father had offered him liquor to get him drunk the night before. Then, during the week of classroom observations, on a day when this boy was absent from school, I heard his cousins telling the teacher the boy was at his aunt's house because the night before that two drunk uncles broke into his house and that "one of them hit the baby."

In the preceding case, the teacher reported the incident and then said that a social worker visited the home but, other than checking to see that the children were safe with the aunt, the social worker did not intervene or arrange for follow-up monitoring. A teacher from another community related an instance where intervention did occur during the child's parents' "drinking binge" which had lasted several days. According to his teacher, the apprehension had occurred at the school so she had seen firsthand how it had traumatized him. Then, it seems that he was simply returned to his home three days later, with no follow-up counseling for him or his family. The teacher who related this episode remarked that her own father was a recovered alcoholic who had quit drinking when she was quite young, "And

that was bad enough. I can't imagine what it would have been like to have been apprehended on top of that." Again, the implication was that the child was at risk, not just because of the family dysfunction, but also because of the way his case was subsequently handled by authorities.

SINGLE AND ABSENT PARENTS. All the teachers believed that having a single parent was a contributing factor to the difficulties experienced by specific children they thought of as at risk, yet none of them expressed negative judgements about the single parents, all of whom were women. Indeed, when asked why she thought single parenthood was a risk factor, one of the teachers replied, "Because I *am* one." More specifically, she related single parenthood to a lack of supervision for children in the home, stating that a single mother cannot supervise children on her own because, "You're just tired all the time." She went on to point out that the problem is even stronger for single mothers in poverty, providing an example of the mother of one of her at-risk pupils, who expressed deep concerns about her daughter's apparent drifting into street life and who seemed unable to support her daughter emotionally because of the long hours she had to work in order to support her financially. In a similar vein, in one of the rural communities, a teacher gave the example of a mother who was raising her grandchildren as well as her children and thus had ten children to look after in her home. This teacher replied "No," when asked if she thought the family situation had caused the learning problems she had observed in the grandchild, but she did say, somewhat sardonically, that it seemed unlikely the mother would be in a position to help the boy with his schoolwork. This particular boy was virtually a non-reader at the age of nine. The teacher actually thought his reading problem was caused by a disability rather than his home circumstances but she also believed that he could still learn to read if he was able to practice his skills with someone at home. This was an example of where the teacher did not blame the mother or her circumstances for causing the boy's learning problem. Instead, she believed that lack of support for the family was a barrier to implementing a solution.

In contrast to what has been reported in the previous literature (e.g., Swadener & Lubeck, 1995), the teachers in this study did not express critical attitudes toward single mothers, perhaps because of the extent to which they found themselves in conversation with them, usually young single mothers who came to them requesting help. One teacher talked about a mother who dropped in regularly to seek advice on how to keep her child, whom both the mother and teacher thought was experiencing escalating difficulties, out of trouble. It seems the mother and teacher established a close working relationship, and the teacher at one point referred to the parent as a "great mom," who needed emotional and practical support mainly because she was young and on her own. Another teacher related a similar perception of the mother of one of her pupils, " 'Mom' is great. Like,

this mom's at our school all the time. She's really good. She's at a point in her life where she says, 'I don't know what to do. What can I do?' "

This particular teacher made a distinction between single mothers who need "information" and the ones who need "help." According to her, some mothers are able to solve their children's learning and behavior problems through implementing strategies received from the teacher. When this happens, the teacher tends to think the child is not at risk because she is more optimistic there will be long-term change. However, she also said there were mothers who reported problems she considered too large to be solved without in-depth professional support. For example, one asked her to arrange counselling for her and her daughter to deal with the aftermath of marital breakdown and a sharp decline in the daughter's behavior, which seemed to be largely beyond the mother's control. Yet, according to the teacher, counselling was unavailable in the local community or surrounding area and the mother did not have a car or other resources to gain counselling elsewhere. In this respect, it is important to note that all the teachers said it was not uncommon for them to be dealing with parents who came to them "weeping" for assistance.

There were additional instances where the teachers believed the children did not have access to their parents at all, as in the case of a boy whose mother was in jail several hundred kilometers away and who was staying with his older siblings; and in the cases of many additional children who were said by their teachers to have been living "in and out of foster homes." In these contexts the teachers tended to define familial risks less in terms of a lack of support provided by caregivers, and more in terms of the "loneliness" they thought the children were experiencing when they did not have access to their parents. With the child whose mother was in jail, for example, it was evident during the observations he was heartbroken at having thought he would be able to visit his mother the previous week but then not being able to do so.

UNSUPPORTIVE PARENTS. The participants said that their belief that some parents were not being "supportive" of their children was a major influence on thinking of these children as being at risk. In some cases, this apparent lack of support seemed to constitute neglect, and hence, was a form of abuse. One example was given by a teacher who described a child's report that his parents had not been home in three days and that he and his siblings had run out of food, "And he was very upset about not having Mom and Dad home. He was very uptight about not having food." As well, all the teachers referred to families that were supposedly intact but who, inexplicably, seemed to ignore their children's physical needs. In this respect, each of the participants described at least one instance where a child in their classroom was currently going without medical care for conditions the school had repeatedly brought to the parents' attention: eczema, an infected sore, a

bleeding wart, and problems with vision. As well, there were children who were suspected of having had poor nutrition, often coming to school with nothing but chocolate bars and potato chips for their lunches.

The teachers also believed that when parents were not involved in the school, even if there was no evidence of problems in the family background, this had a negative effect on the children. More specifically, if a child had an academic or behavioral problem and if the parent did not come to the school, the teachers were inclined to believe that this lack of involvement contributed to the child being at risk. The teachers said one reason was that unless the parents agreed to meet with them, they would be unable to work together to implement a plan of action to resolve the child's problem. Second, from the teachers' perspectives, the children experienced this lack of partial involvement as a lack of caring. One teacher spoke of having observed deep disappointment in the eyes of children whose parents did not come to the school on open-house days or for parent-teacher interviews:

I think there's a bit of a shame factor when the children's parents say that they are going to come and then they don't. Well, the children feel bad about it, because – I have one right here [in my classroom] for sure. And a couple of others. They say, "Oh, my mom's coming," and this and that. They are so excited. "My mom's coming!" And they are really keen on the fact that their mom's coming. And when their mom doesn't show up, they think they have to provide you with an excuse.

The teacher who made the preceding comment also noted that home-school activities, such as the provision of prizes for children whose parents verify they read at home, seemed to backfire for many children since it strengthened the children's beliefs that their parents were letting them down.

PARENTAL ADVOCACY. While the themes of dysfunctional families and parents who were not supportive emerged when the teachers spoke about families of children they considered to be at risk, another theme, involving a negative view of parental advocacy, emerged when the teachers spoke about families of children they did *not* consider to be at risk. Indeed, when asked to talk about the latter, all the teachers spontaneously raised this point to illustrate what they saw as the differential advantage afforded to children of middle-class, well-educated parents.

In other words, a shared and very strong concern among the teachers was the extent to which parents who were white, middle-class, well-educated and assertive seemed to be able to appropriate a disproportionate set of resources in the school and in society to ensure the success of their own children. For example, in two of the classrooms the teachers were dealing with children whose "special needs" gave them access to teaching aides and curriculum adaptations far beyond what was available to the other children, and far beyond what the teachers thought was necessary. Another teacher

referred to a mother who had lobbied at the school and school division level to ensure that her daughter, who was physically disabled, received what the teacher considered to be more than her share of resources. In all three instances the teachers were conscious of these advantages being provided to privileged children at the expense of resources for children with stronger needs simply because their parents were more vocal and strategic in their lobbying. In this respect, the teachers' beliefs were consistent with Maynes' (1990) finding that school systems tend to be more responsive to issues of learning disabilities than to those of poverty. A note of sarcasm was sometimes apparent in the tone used by these teachers to describe the privileges that some parents obtained for their children. With reference to one middle-class mother's assertiveness, one of the teachers commented, "My stomach twirls every time I see her." Then she paused and said, "Actually, I think the mom's the at-risk person, in this case."

The teacher's critical attitude toward the assertive middle-class parents also extended to their consideration of privileges afforded some children outside of the school. As one teacher put it, it seemed that children of "rich daddies" could do well no matter how low their achievement or how poor their behavior because the "daddy will buy them a business and set them up in it somewhere." Paradoxically, while the teachers did not think of these children as at risk, they did perceive them to have their own set of problems. Describing one of the children, a teacher reported the following:

He tests my patience quite often because of his sense of arrogance and his pompousness. He has become a little more modest, but a lot of the times in the circle it was – he wouldn't raise his hand, he would blurt out. He always wanted to be heard because he had the best toys and he had the best stories. Sometimes it's the kids – maybe it's just a different kind of problem that an upper-middle-class kind of kid can have, in terms of self-control.

CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS. Based on the prior literature on teachers' thinking about children at risk, one would expect their thinking to be affected by stereotypes about children with cultural minority backgrounds (e.g., Tauber, 1997). In these teachers' classrooms the largest single minority group was comprised of Indian and Métis students and the proportion of these children identified as at risk by the teachers was the same as their representation in the class as a whole. This finding, in combination with the comments made by the teachers, suggests that particular aboriginal children were not identified by teachers at risk simply because of their culture or race. Indeed, comments made by the teachers generally indicated a belief that having a strong cultural background was, or could be, an asset for aboriginal children. In this respect, their beliefs were consistent with those advanced by contemporary researchers and theorists on culture and risks among aboriginal youth (e.g., Brendtro, Brokenleg, Van Bockern, 1990; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). For example, they said they noticed the children of parents who were

conscience of their traditions, particularly “spiritual” ones, seemed to be more secure than were children who were not in touch with their roots. As well, all of them spoke of the importance of including Indian and Métis content in the curriculum as much as they could, while at the same time pointing out that provision of Native curriculum content did not compensate for what the aboriginal teacher termed “cultural loss” in the home and community. However, the Euro-Canadian participants believed this loss was a risk factor affecting Indian and Métis children more than others, the Aboriginal teacher said she also saw adverse effects of cultural loss on the identities of children at risk in the mainstream culture as well.

Additionally, the teachers believed that mainstream social agencies were often unwilling to intervene when problems were evident in the home but, at the same time, local Indian and Métis organizations were not yet well established enough and jurisdictions were not yet clear enough to enable them to step in. Hence, they believed that Indian and Métis children were more likely to fall through the cracks of social services systems. The Euro-Canadian teachers expressed confidence that Aboriginal control over social services would eventually “solve the problem,” and while the Aboriginal teacher expressed the belief that Indian and Métis communities need to hold responsibility for the children, she expressed less confidence that a solution for the children’s problems was close at hand with a transfer to local control over social services.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The preceding discussion was based on a qualitative case study inquiry that attempted, in part, to explore teachers’ beliefs about social circumstances they thought were placing their pupils at risk for failure in school and in life. The most important factors, as perceived by the teachers, were familial ones: child abuse, alcoholism or other addictions in the home, and single or neglectful or absent parents. Consistent with the literature on children at risk, the teachers referred to the complexity and multiplicity of these risk factors and raised questions about the nature of cause-and-effect between factors and outcomes. Furthermore, consistent with contemporary research from an aboriginal perspective, these teachers viewed the cultural backgrounds of Indian and Métis students as sources of strength rather than as an impediment to school achievement (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). Finally, while they viewed family circumstances as the main locus of problems for the children, like some of the more critical researchers in this area (Fine, 1990) the teachers also expressed concern about systemic problems in the broader community that prevented children’s families from obtaining the assistance they need. Overall, the teachers’ level of knowledge and their overall tone of respect toward children and families were at odds with portraits painted in the literature of

teacher attitudes as being less than tolerant of children whose circumstances are different from those the teachers would prefer to see (e.g., Delpit, 1995).

However, the study also revealed some important aspects of teachers' perspectives on children at risk that warrant further study and perhaps indicate a need for further professional development. First, it was found that the teachers thought of children as being at risk only after the children developed problems and even then only when the problems were multiple and more extreme. Such caution on the part of teachers would, on the one hand, decrease the chances of unnecessarily targeting children and families for intervention but, on the other hand, could result in too many children at risk being overlooked until their problems escalate and become more difficult to address. Since the term "at risk" is meant to be a predictive descriptor enabling the implementation of proactive measures, such caution on the part of teachers needs further investigation. One possibility is that the teachers are concerned about the ethics of labeling and stereotyping of children that may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy for the children. Another possibility is that teachers may be concerned about sharing their concerns with others in case their own professional judgement is called in question. For example, it would be difficult to refer a child for investigation on the grounds that she flinches or one might easily be considered to be reading too much into references to family love as incest. In either case, teachers need more support of a collaborative nature that would enable them to talk through their observations and concerns with well-qualified professionals without fear that such talk has negative ramifications for themselves or their students.

Another important finding of the study was the extent to which the teachers believed that lack of parental involvement in and communication with the school contribute to the risks faced by children. This finding is consistent with results of Johnson's survey of teachers (1997) as with several other studies in which teachers have been known to judge parents as less active and supportive in their children's schooling than they actually are (e.g., Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). In the current study, however, it did not seem that parental involvement in itself was perceived by teachers to be the source of the child's problem. Rather, parental involvement was perceived to co-occur or be symptomatic of other problems such as alcoholism or abuse in the home. It was only when teachers also saw evidence of such domestic problems or saw evidence that the child was experiencing academic or behavioral difficulties that they viewed parental lack of involvement in children's education as a risk. Questions arise from this study as to the basis for which teachers try to connect with parents and how they respond if they feel their efforts are rebuffed. It seems likely that some contexts of teacher-family relationships are more conducive to open communication about family circumstances than others. For example, it may be that when the

teacher and school are seen as part of a network of social support services, parents are more likely to be open about the challenges they face when raising their children. Conversely, when the school is seen as part of an adversarial system, as in contexts where more children are apprehended than are helped, it is more likely that teacher-parent communication would break down. As well, this study indicates there may be personal characteristics around which particular teachers and parents develop an affinity with each other. Much more research is needed to discern what facilitates the growth of mutual understanding between parent and teacher so they may better collaborate in meeting the needs of the child who is thought to be at risk.

Results of the study also indicate ways in which even well-informed teachers may overlook children at risk in their classrooms because of ways they view the children's backgrounds. Generally speaking, quantitative studies do support the teachers' contention that children from middle-class backgrounds are less likely than children in poverty to drop out of school and be less successful in life, but this does not mean that children from middle-class backgrounds do not face risks of their own (e.g., Human Resources Canada/Statistics Canada, 1996). Indeed, it may be that when a middle-class child has academic or behavioral difficulties it can be more difficult for the teacher to have patience with the child or to identify social characteristics for which referrals may need to be made. This may result in a situation where a child's authentic need for attention is dismissed as pompousness. In a similar vein there is evidence emerging in the literature that in some classrooms children who are visibly members of minorities actually evoke a stronger sense of patience from the teacher than do other children from the same minority group. This occurs because there is less visible evidence to remind the teacher the child is struggling to establish himself or herself as a member of the community if the child does not show particular racial characteristics (Leroy, in press).

Overall, the findings of the study indicate a great deal remains to be explored in the complexity of teacher's beliefs about children at risk and how these beliefs are interrelated with the teachers' pedagogical practices. The beliefs indicated by the teachers in this study were more complex than has previously been revealed in survey research on risk factors for children. They also seemed to be more informed by a more critical understanding of social issues than would have been anticipated on the basis of some of the literature on the problems inherent in the discourse of risk. It would be most beneficial if follow-up studies could be carried out to determine the accuracy of teacher assessments of the risk status of particular children in their classrooms but also on the extent to which teachers are able to qualify their judgements or express the degree of uncertainty they experience in their judgements. Furthermore, much more research is needed to discern teachers' perceptions of and comfort levels with varying degrees of parental

participation in their children's schooling. In this study too little participation was viewed as a risk factor but too much was also viewed as unhealthy. Additional investigations would be necessary to learn whether this relates to a fairly narrow conception of what the parents' involvement should be like or whether it represents an accurate picture of the extent to which both the lack of involvement and extensive involvement may be related to the development of risks for the child later in life.

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