

# Exploring Teaching Practices That are Helpful in Addressing at-risk Students in Classroom

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**Abstract-** This study is conducted to explore and identify factors that put students at risk. Secondly, it introduces teaching practices that are found to be helpful in dealing with those students who are entitled at-risk. The data for the study has been collected through a critical review of available literature. The findings indicate that different factors related to school, personal life, family and community contribute in putting students at-risk. The findings also show that caring and committed teaching, involvement in learning, peer tutoring, tutoring and small groups are the beneficial teaching practices for students at-risk.

**Index Terms-** contributing factors, teaching practices, Students at-risk

## I. INTRODUCTION

There is a large body of students at schools around the world who are titled to be at-risk. In the education field, it is important to find ways that would be effective in dealing with these students. Thus this literature is a small step for the doing something important for the students. This paper has identified teaching practices that would prove helpful for teachers to bring back the students to the right track of learning performance and has also identified factors that contribute in putting students at risk.

### Research Objectives

1. To identify the factors that contribute in putting students at-risk.
2. To identify teaching practices that are helpful in dealing with students at-risk.

### Definition of "at-risk" students?

Moore (2006) believes that at-risk term can be widely used for referring to the problems an individual face such as school failure, death, dependency in terms of economy and etc., but at-risk in the context of school refers to students who are experiencing no success in terms of grades. Calabrese, Hummel and Martin (2007) similarly define at-risk students as those who are not able to perform well in the mandatory assessments and overall school achievement. Moreover, Manning and Baruth (1995) define students at-risk as those who are not able to graduate from high school due to several risk factors that include poor achievement, grade retention, bad attendance, problems of

attitude and school attendance where large body of the students are poor. Similarly Thompkins & Deloney; DeYoung et al (as cited by Khattri, Riley & Kane, 1997) explains at-risk students as those who fail a course, drop out of school or who don't take challenging courses.

## II. FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE IN PUTTING STUDENTS AT RISK

According to Hammond, Linton, Smink and Drew (2007) studies have found different factors that put students at-risk and these factors are categorized in four domains: Individual, school, factors related to community and family. The individual domain factors are those that are related to students individually such as high-risk demographic characteristics, responsibilities of early age (excessive work hours, being a parent), attitudes and behaviors of high-risk, low or no progress at school, no engagement in school (poor attendance, lack of effort, no school commitment) and education stability. The family domain factors relate to the background of the family such as family background characteristics (poor socioeconomic status, mobility of family, uneducated parents, many siblings, family problems, not living with natural parents), stress level at family, attitude and perception toward education, and family dynamics. The school domain are factors that relate to the environment, structure and policies of the school such as resources of school, the characteristics of students as a whole, students' performance, school atmosphere, academic rules and policies and supervision and discipline rules and regulations. The community domain factors are relevant to the societies and its surroundings such as type and location of the society, characteristics to the demography of the society, and the overall environment. All these factors contribute to entitling a student to be at-risk and the combination of more than one risk factors result in less motivation of the student and eventually increases the chances of putting the student at high risk for dropping the school (Suh & Suh 2007).

Finn & Rock (1997) argues that the notion of at-risk is related to the fact that if an individual is exposed to a condition involving risk factors, it is inevitable that the individuals will experience unwanted consequences. The common risk factors with regard to academic outcome are characteristics of group status related to academic failure or school drop outs such as a minority group related student attending a more populated city school, students

from low-income families or living where English is not spoken as a primary language. Finn and Rock further describe that the risk factors usually give birth to risk behaviors too that hinder the learning of the individuals and resulting in not going to school, not attending classes, not meeting the teacher and ignoring to do class activity or homework. Finn (1989) goes deep into finding out the causes of students failure or school drop outs by presenting two models to explain the drop out as a process that is developmental and that may start in the early school grades: First, The frustration-self-esteem model that recognizes failure of school as the starting point in the form of either the student's rejecting of school or school rejection of the student. In this model, poor performance in the school in the form of low scores on standard or teacher made tests or a history of low scores lead to poor self-view. A poor self-view is the result of frustration and embarrassment from poor school performance. Consequently, the impaired self-view may give birth to opposing behavior in the form of not attending classes, disrupting the instruction process or even commitment of offending behaviors. Second, participation-identification model that concentrates on the student's behavioral and emotional engagement and involvement in school. Moreover, students who are successful tend to have the feelings of commitment or affiliation with school while those who are tending to be at-risk students don't develop the identification sense with school. The model further describes that

### III. TEACHING PRACTICES THAT HELP STUDENTS AT-RISK

This part explores teaching practices that are found to be helpful in addressing at-risk students in the class.

#### 3.1. *Caring and committed Teacher*

Good and Brophy (1997) stated that the academic success of students is strongly related to what the teachers expect from the students. This proposition is also supported by Muller (2001) stating that what teachers do and what attitudes they show in the form of expectations from students, greatly relates to the academic success of students. Alderman (1990) also accept the fact that teacher's expectations greatly influence the academic performance of at-risk students and he identifies the teacher expectations as the feelings given to students that teachers are really looking forward to their success and that the objectives will be achieved by them and the assurance that expertise needed for them to achieve teachers' expectations will be taught to them. McCrosky (as cited by Teven & McCroskey, 1997) asserted that It is always wonderful to have teachers care about their students, however it is difficult for teachers to care for every single student in larger classes. Thus, it crucial for instructors to communicate with students in a way that students should be given the perception that they are cared for by the teacher even if the caring phenomenon is not true in reality. The fact that providing the feelings to the students that a teacher really care is more important than caring for students in reality.

Knesting (2008) insists that caring and commitment of a teacher is more helpful to at-risk students in their persistence to avoid school drop-out compared to the counseling and academic programs designed to prevent the drop-outs of at-risk students. The perception of teachers who tended to understand the attitude of students, the belief by teachers that these students have the potential to succeed and acceptance of students despite the fact of

students have to experience identification with school that is feeling the attribute of belonging and valuing and this would result in students' participation in school activities and eventually successful performance outcomes will be experienced in students. In this cycle, quality instruction also has important impact on the students' engagement in school activities and positive performance outcome. However, based on this model if students fail to develop the sense of identification with school or are not able to engage in school activities, there are greater chances that students would be labeled as at-risk or may drop out of school. Moreover, Suh and Suh (2007) found three risk factors that greatly contributed in putting the students at risk and made students on making the decision to drop out of school. The risk factors include failure in academic environment, low socioeconomic status and behavioral problems. The study results also proposed that teachers and parents should be collaboratively involved in consultation activities by school counselors so that the students who show risk factors can be identified.

On the contrary numerous researchers put forward the factor of low school engagement during the education period of students as the main reason making students to be at risk and to drop out of school. The more students at-risk are engaged with school related activities and perceive the feelings of belonging to school, the less their chances are to be at-risk to drop out (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003)

being at-risk are factors that proved to be helpful in making at-risk students stay at school and ignore the drop out decision. Knesting further explained that at-risk students tend to consider school drop-out due to the fact that they perceive their selves as unwanted or someone that does not matter at all, however he argues that teachers' role plays a very important part to insure the students that they matter and efforts by the teachers should be made to create classrooms where the at-risk students are provided with the opportunity of belonging. Knesting also described that the belief of teachers that all students have the potential to succeed who are dealing with at-risk students is of equal importance in helping them with their persistence in school. This belief motivates them to show progress. By ignoring their weaknesses, teachers insure students that they are equally respected just as all other students and this will lead to providing an atmosphere of acceptance and support where students would find it very easy to stick to the class and possibly show progress. Meanwhile McCrosky (as cited by Teven & McCroskey, 1997) presented three factors (Empathy, understanding, responsiveness) that will likely make a student believe that his/her teacher is caring for her/him. First, teachers have to show empathy for their students, that is giving the feelings to the students that the teacher understand their situation and behave toward students in a positive manner. Second, teachers' ability to understand students' feelings, ideas and needs. Teachers who are able to understand the situations where students feel troubled in terms of their course subjects or for personal reasons, they are considered caring teachers. Lastly, teachers who tend to respond to students' needs and problems rapidly or when the students are given the attention by teachers, students' perceive them as caring teachers.

#### 3.2. Involvement in learning:

The main factor that influences students' decision to drop out of school is their disengagement in the learning process of school, the more they are provided the opportunities to engage in school activities and learning, the less are their chances of school dropout (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003). Literature reveals that engaging the at-risk students with learning greatly decreases the chances of school dropout. Lehr and Harris (1988) presented instructional processes that is found to be effective in engaging at-risk students in learning process. They believe that the information should be presented to low achievers of the class in different ways by the teachers so that the students can have the information processed at their pace. Teachers have to look for ways to engage at-risk students to the possible extent, because the more classroom activities engage the students, the more it would be helpful for them to process information in fruitful ways to become independent learners. Lehr and Harris further explain that involvement of at-risk students in leaning starts with finding ways to get them started in the first place. Literature revealed that slow learners take longer to get started compared to those who are fast learners. In order to have low achiever students to get started, teachers have to help them learn on how to learn. In other words, if a task is being given to students, the teacher has to be more helpful to at-risk students to explain what he/she expects them to do and even demonstrates it through an example to motivate them to get started. Lehr and Harris presented different ways that can be used to engage at-risk students in learning. They propose that teachers have to teach needed study skills that would enable low achievers get started with the tasks they are supposed to do. These skills include, explaining the task to students in more details and with illustrative models, providing a checklist of assignments to these students, employing an attention getter in the beginning of each lesson, providing peer assessment when students need and letting them choose a peer, careful observation of seatwork, having students use help cards when assistance is required while doing classwork and etc.

### 3.3. Peer tutoring

Peer tutoring is an instructional process in which learning happens in between students by teaching each other (Goodlad & Hirst, 1989). Extensive research findings indicate that peer-tutoring is a very effective way of addressing the needs of at-risk students or low performing students especially in helping them in learning basic skills. As in peer tutoring, students are learning from each other, it is important that peer students are clearly provided instructions about their peer tutoring roles and in order to insure the effectiveness of peer tutoring practice, the peers should be closely monitored. Teachers should make sure that peer tutoring activity is highly organized and structured so that it is effective in helping at-risk students to learn better (Snow & Barley, 2005). Meanwhile, Beasley (1997) also considers peer tutoring as a cost effective way of letting learner's get academic support from another learner in an effective way. He further claims that students benefit from this activity by improving their understanding and proficiency in their relevant subject matter, improving their confidence and study expertise, and establishing fruitful friendships. Within peer tutoring activities, both the tutor and tutee benefit in enhancing their learning and skills. In the findings of a study by Comfort and McMahon (2014), it was

revealed that peer tutoring is an influential method that fosters the academic success of students and the data results of the study indicated that students with peer tutor sessions had achieved higher grades than those who did not experience it. The findings also demonstrated that peer tutoring improves both academic experience and achievement of learners. Gaustad (1992) pointed out that despite the fact that peers don't have as much content knowledge as teachers have it, still there are some cognitive and social advantages of peer tutoring to the peers. Peer tutors and tutees are cognitively so closer that makes it easy for the peer tutors to understand the problems of tutees. Allen and Feldman (as cited by Gaustad, 1992) the nonverbal behavior to determine the understanding of lessons by peers was accurately interpreted by third and six graders compared to experienced teachers.

### 3.4. Tutoring

Extensive literature evidence prove that tutoring is a brilliant way of addressing the needs of students who are at-risk or are performing poor and it is important that each tutoring session is implemented based on a clear purpose of guidance so that tutors can take decisions accordingly (Snow & Barley, 2005). In 1991, many different intervention programs designed to stop school drop-outs or academic failure were reviewed by Robert E. Slavin and his co-workers at research center for effective schooling of disadvantaged students (CDS). The findings indicated that all kinds of tutoring are far more beneficial and influential compared to other alternatives and the best of all tutoring kinds is one to one tutoring that is done by skilled instructors (Gaustad, 1992). Gaustad (1992) presents two factors that make tutoring the most powerful way in helping students with their learning. First, tutoring is beneficial due to its cognitive individual instruction. This means that in tutoring the instruction can be entirely modified in terms of pace, style of learning and difficulty level of the learner. In case the learner is noticed to express signs of not understanding, the tutor can come up with some changes so that the learner can follow and understand what is supposed to be understood or learned. In this individualistic instruction, misunderstandings are rapidly tackled, quick feedback and correction is provided, the practice for the learner is provided according to the perceived need of the learner and level of difficulty from easy to hard is decided upon the learner's progress. Secondly, tutoring is emotionally beneficial in one-to-one relationship. The emotional advantages of tutoring is greatly of benefit to students at-risk. Because tuition is one-to-one learning process, the absence of competition between others help at-risk students be motivated and by receiving admiration for the progress made without being neglected due to the comparison with other rapid learners. Also, the learners by seeing the evidence of the progress, feels more self-confident and tend to be more engaged in the subject matter.

### 3.5. Small groups

Newsome (2004) pointed out that numerous approaches such as incentive programs, after school enrichment activities, tutoring programs, individual consoling, talking to parents actively have been practiced to address those students who are at-risk and low achievers. Recently researchers have proposed school based group intervention in the form of solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT). Group work provide the opportunity of letting students

help each other mutually and is a great platform for shared learning. Additionally, it is an efficient way to use services provided by school practitioners that are of high demand on their time. Group work in the form of (SFBT) has showed positive impact on fostering the self-esteem and academic achievement of individuals who are titled as at-risk students due to the various risk factors they have been facing. Snow and Barley (2005) also suggest group work as an effective model for at-risk students and further believe that students at-risk and low achievers can greatly improve within groups that have been comprised from mixed ability students with the belief that the group members should be working together following the basic concept of cooperative learning. However, in order for the mixed ability group to have desired results, it is important to make sure that the teacher has quality training, the activity for the group is prepared beforehand and the activity is facilitated within group. Lehr and Harris (1988) presented a technique called Kindling that can be used to increase the involvement of at-risk students through the process of kindling. The five step kindling process is used as a group activity to motivate and involve at-risk student with learning process. First, teacher presents a questions and the students write a response for it individually. The students each share their answers with their partners and if possible, they can expand their response further. Later on, the question is discussed in a small group and each individual shares his/her ideas and as a group the response to the question is expanded. Finally the group can discuss further because the idea is kindled and at-risk students within the group were engaged in the activity. Bauer, Sapp and Johnson (1999) also believe that Counseling group is an effective way to bring out the at-risk students out of the failing cycle they often go through and group counselling is a perceived as a good way of letting members of the group experience and learn skills and behaviors that are new and practice them as it would help students at-risk to be successful in school.

#### IV. PREVIOUS STUDIES

A study conducted by Calabrese, Hummel & San (2007) to investigate positive experiences of teachers and administrators related to students at risk at Centerville High School and Centerville Middle School of Centerville area of Midwestern America. The study was conducted based on qualitative embedded case study and data was collected using focus group, semi-structured interview and an online survey as data instrument. The findings of the study indicated many teachers believed that they viewed themselves as difference makers in dealing with students at-risk and these teachers believed that by building rapport with their at risk students, they experienced positive change in the lives of the at risk students. The rapport building between these students and teachers happened outside the setting of classroom on frequent bases. The findings further illustrated that with the belief that the at-risk students have the potential to succeed, teachers and administrators were able to experience change in them. The results additionally indicated that teachers have experienced positive core of experiences by communicating with the parents of at-risk students through technology and this communication provided the opportunity to the teachers to work with the at-risk students in the best of their interest. Lastly, the findings proposed that many of the teachers

agreed that it makes a difference in the lives of at-risk students when teachers give them the feeling that they care for them and they are wanted and loved.

Another study undertaken by Laskey and Hetzel (2011) was aimed to study the factors that impact the retention and GPA of students in a college based program designed for students at-risk. The study was undertaken in a private university located in Midwest. The study sample included 115 at-risk students registered in a Conditional Acceptance program (CAP). Data for the study was collected in the period of three years length of the CAP program and students' records were used to extract data for the study. The findings of the study pointed out that the retention and GPA of at-risk students is greatly influenced by tutoring. The results further explained that tutoring presents the contents of the class in a different context and in more clarified way to at-risk students. Additionally the results proposed that tutoring is not only an effective way to help at-risk students academically, but it can also be used as a means of establishing relationship between at-risk student and tutor.

This study was intended to examine whether the school engagement has influence over the students' achievement. Two studies were conducted for studying the relationship of engagement with achievement and a nationwide sample of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students survey of the U.S. Department of Education's NELS:88 was used. The measures of participation was generated student, parents and teacher questionnaires for both studies. The participation measures included students' attendance, classroom engagement and participation in school related activities apart of their regular studies. Three main findings were found from both studies: first, risk factors that relates to behavior have relationship with school outcomes in a significant way even within racial/ethnic, socioeconomic or language groups. It was found that behavior of engagement can be corrected more compared to traditional indicators of status, thus educators and researchers should focus more on behavioral engagement amendment. Secondly, the findings indicated that risk behaviors emerge in the period of early school years or even earlier and it should be recognized in the early stage possible. The early identification of risk behaviors and tackling it at its earliest will improve students' engagement in the primary school. Lastly, the results stated that achievement of students should be recognized even if it is not very significant compared to the successful students, so that the students are motivated to retain their school involvement (Finn, 1993).

#### V. CONCLUSION

There are wide range of factors that put students at-risk which most of the time result in school drop-out or the inability of students to graduate from school on time. It is quite difficult to control factors of risk surrounding an individual, however different teaching approaches and methods can be used that would help students at-risk to be engaged in learning and show progress even if it is minor. This paper presented some of the teaching approaches that have been found to be very effective in addressing students who are entitled to be at-risk.

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