

FROM THE TRENCHES

At-Risk Students: What Exactly Is the Threat? How Imminent Is It?

by Edward G. Rozycki

The sky is falling, the sky is falling.

—Chicken Little

Threat, Imminence and Option

It would be taken as a joke were someone to say, “He’s at risk of winning the lottery!” or “She’s at risk of graduating from Harvard!” This is because being “at risk” is taken to indicate a possible confrontation with something undesirable and we would find it hard to believe—although not inconceivable—that someone would think of winning a lottery or graduating from Harvard as undesirable.

Also interesting is that someone’s likelihood of *not* attaining something desirable is not, in many situations, seen as putting him or her at risk: “For a fourth-grader, your son plays good basketball, but I’m afraid he has at best a very slim chance of becoming an NBA star.” It is not at all likely that you or I will win an Olympic medal in the decathlon; however we are not, thereby, at risk.

Now, being devoured by a tiger is generally considered an unpleasantly best avoided. But few Americans are at risk of such an experience. Indeed, no stay-at-home resident of Akron, Ohio, is at risk of freezing to death on the slopes of Mt. Everest. Being “at risk” implies a certain worrisome likelihood of occurrence. But even here the 100 percent probability of death does not invoke a notion of being at risk. We don’t mix our congratulations on childbirth with concerns that the newborn is now at risk of old age and death.

Then there is the issue of option: if evils can be avoided through careful choice, their mere existence does not put someone at risk. It is dangerous to cross a street, perhaps—but much less so when you cross with the light at a corner and look before leaving the sidewalk. We do

not, consequently, worry that crossing a street puts our children at risk. Nor do we place children at risk when we take them to the zoo, assuming they have been raised to know that one does not cross barriers to stick one's hands into cages.

Is Low Scholastic Achievement a Threat?

Where does the great concern with students at risk come from? What dangers lurk to befall our children? A flood of articles names the beasts: a) low scholastic achievement and b) dropping out of high school.¹ Let's consider each one in turn.

I grew up in a working class neighborhood where most people's aspirations were to enter a trade, make a decent living, marry, and raise a family. School was something you endured. Or, even if you did well in school, it was not seen as "real life." Those of us who enjoyed certain aspects of erudition were, at best, tolerated, but always reminded that getting out "on our own" was what really mattered. One week before I graduated from high school I had no plans whatsoever—nor any great yearning—to go to college. My scholastic achievement had been relatively high; a serendipitous scholarship befell me three days before



commencement. My friends' achievements had been mediocre or low. They went on to military service or the work world. Despite a new collegiate adventure opening for me, I missed them very much. We parted ways and were lost to each other.²

Does low academic achievement in the lower grades—in high school, even—condemn one to a life of despair and ruin? I would think not. People mature at different rates and may not be able to take advantage of school offerings until well past their teen years. This is why community colleges have grown up. (I, personally, did not become studious until graduate school.) To pretend that life is over if high achievement has not happened before age eighteen is to approach hysteria.

Actually, what is probably at work here is the “gypsy moth panic.” Gypsy moth caterpillars used to attack and strip trees of all their foliage. Weak trees would die. If you had only a few trees on your property, one lost tree was, for you, the homeowner, a substantial loss. From a forester's professional view, however, gypsy moths were at worst a nuisance. Not the reason for panic that evoked a political response in many townships whereby entire areas, homes, children, plants, and pets were sprayed from the air by helicopter with the *Bacillus Thuringiensis*.

A child—for any parent, “my child”—seen to be at risk is like the lone tree threatened by ugly gypsy moth caterpillars. Massive public efforts are urged to annihilate the scourge, quite irrespective of possible negative effects on environment and inhabitant.

To assume that life is over without high achievement before age eighteen is also to assume that those persons whose “high scholastic achievement” in elementary, middle, and high school enabled them to go right on to college are generally something other than the ignorant clods their professors so vehemently complain about.³ Eighty percent of these scholastic “stars” concede they enhanced their high school grades through cheating and plagiarism⁴ and continue to do so in college.⁵

Is Dropping Out a Threat?

What about “dropping out” of high school? One thing researchers complain constantly about is the vagueness of the term “dropout.”⁶ A student who “drops out” of a given high school may enroll in another. The statistics may not be adjusted to reflect that outcome. Or she may complete a GED and go on to college through special admissions. Or she may go to community college, make up her high school work, and go on to a four-year program. Or she (or he) earn a technical certificate, get a job industry, and continue her education in the corporate world.⁷

Despite myths to the contrary that support a multi-billion-dollar college-prep industry catering to anxious parents, a high school diploma is not a prerequisite for entering some of the nation's most prestigious uni-

versities. The easiest way to attend the prestige college of your choice—if prestige rather than knowledge is your preference—is to transfer in as a sophomore or junior, thereby circumventing the whole freshman-application circus. If your grades are decent and there has been some attrition in the freshman class, you'll be admitted—at the behest of the Development Office—to fill the gap as a potential graduate donor.

Causes and Effects?

It is difficult for educators to believe that most people can live, it seems, without academic engagement. (As an academic, I find it almost incomprehensible.) Like the man whose toolbox has only a hammer, so that for him all problems look like nails, educators addressing the potential causes that place students “at risk” use the only kinds of tools they are comfortable with: academic interventions.

Druin and Butler⁸, in an article titled “Effective Schooling Practices and At-Risk Youth: What the Research Shows,” list the following as correlates of students being at risk:

- a. living in high-growth states
- b. living in unstable school districts
- c. belonging to a low-income family
- d. having low academic skills (though not necessarily low intelligence);
- e. having parents who are not high school graduates
- f. speaking English as a second language
- g. being single-parent children
- h. having negative self-perceptions; being bored and alienated; having low self-esteem
- i. pursuing alternatives—males tend to seek paid work as an alternative; females leave to have children or get married

(The preponderance of these conditions would have applied to me and most of my classmates as high school students in the late 1950s. They were difficulties, impediments, perhaps; but not overwhelming. We looked for alternatives.)

What is interesting about Druin and Butler's conditions is that, although they are merely mentioned as characteristics correlated with being at risk, we might imagine that somewhere among them or embedded in them are *causes* of being at risk.⁹

The conditions themselves are beyond the control of educators working with the children at risk: so presumably, the embedded causal factors. But the interventions offered are—for the most part—educator controllable:

- a. high expectations for all
- b. clear, achievable goals
- c. clear rules for behavior, fairly enforced
- d. effective instruction and classroom management
- e. carefully monitoring student progress
- f. emphasizing that school is a place for learning

Six hammers for a universe of nails! These slogans have been around for a dozen years at least. We still await—although with less trembling, breathless anticipation than we used to—proofs of their success.¹⁰

Are “At Risk” Concerns Compatible with Multiculturalism?

Understanding a person’s choices is an oftentimes-difficult undertaking involving subtle considerations of their values, priorities, perceptions, and situation.¹¹ A particular student’s choice not to go to school, or not to study, might—in easily enough to imagine circumstances—be a rational choice. If one is in school, one is most likely not earning money. So if earning money now is the priority, going to school is not rational.

If one is in school, one might be missing out on valued experiences and learnings—e.g., the feeling of power, the subtle motor-skills training one gets riding from driving a tractor or a truck. If such experiences have high priority for someone, then going to school is not rational.

In the immigrant history of the United States, the usual pattern for new immigrants is first to earn a living and then, afterward, send the second generation to school. This second-generation education typically seeks skills that enhance earning a living. For such people, “being at risk” is not an issue because there is no perceived threat, nor any perceived likelihood of threat, for their non-engagement with the school.

It is more than strange, with the incessant lip-service given to promoting “multiculturalism” and “appreciation of diversity” in the educational community, that educators so readily overlook that very diversity of perceptions of threat, likelihood, and priority—which alone give reality to the notion of being “at risk.”

Notes

1. Put the terms “at risk” into an ERIC search engine and stand back!
2. I found the movie *Good Will Hunting* to be so very untrue to my experience. In the movie, Will’s friends encourage him to leave them behind and go on to “better things.” What could this mean from their own perspective about themselves?
3. An opinion expressed all too frequently by colleagues who teach undergraduates is that they know little and, in class, contribute less.

4. See B. Brandes. 1986. "Academic Honesty: A Special Study of California Students." Sacramento, Calif.: California State Department of Education, Bureau of Publications.

5. See D. L. McCabe and L. K. Trevino, 1996, "What We Know about Cheating in College: Longitudinal Trends and Recent Developments," *Change* 28(1): 31.

6. See, for example, the complications explained in trying to define what a dropout is in "Public High School Dropouts and Completers from the Common Core of Data: School Years 1991-92 through 1997-98" at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/dropout91_97/section_a.asp>.

7. Corporate employee education expenditures, I suspect, continue to fall not far behind all public and private expenditures for education, even up through college. In 1987 corporations spent \$210 billion dollars on employee education. Public and private non-corporate education of all kinds that year was about \$279 billion.

8. See <<http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/1/topsyn1.html>>.

9. Correlates are not necessarily causes, so the wisdom goes. However, looked at rhetorically, since there are no doubt tens, hundreds, or even thousands of items that correlate with being at risk, the choice of the twelve or so given insinuates a causal relationship if not directly with any of the mentioned variables, then in some decomposition of them.

10. Has anyone investigated to see if there is an "at risk" problem *despite* these conditions being in place? Clearly, the educator interventions can have no affect on the social conditions mentioned.

11. See E. G. Rozycki, "Pluralism and Rationality: The Limits of Tolerance" at <<http://www.newfoundations.com/EGR/RatPlurTol.html>>.