Deconstructing the At-Risk Student Phenomenon: Can Librarian Values Salvage Education for the 21st Century?

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Introduction

One of the challenges facing education today is the large numbers of students at-risk of school failure. It is estimated that every year, no less than 28 percent of all students fail to attain high school diplomas; the drop out rate for inner city students being about 60 percent. Almost half of all college freshmen drop out, while 33 percent of all adults can be described as functionally illiterate (Bastion et al., 1986). Despite consistent efforts at school reforms, the numbers of these students, who come largely from low socio-economic, and ethnic minority backgrounds have continued to swell (McLaren 1994). Institutions of higher learning have expressed concern over the impact of this crisis on their ability to prepare an U.S. workforce that is competitive in the global economy of the 21st century (Switzer and Gentz 2000).

This paper offers a critical perspective on the at-risk student phenomenon, and its implications for academic libraries. It contends that the focus of reform efforts on learner deficiencies, rather than inequities in the learning and social relations in society, position schools to repro-duce, rather than eliminate risk factors in education. Educational practices, which sustain cultural dissonance and lowered expectations for at-risk students will be examined for illustration. These practices are then juxtaposed and contrasted with the librarian values of social equity, and cultural diversity. The enhanced instructional role for academic libraries offers the library profession an opportunity to impact the educational system with its values. Strategies for doing this are proffered. Experiences of African American at-risk students are cited for illustration.

Identifying Risk Factors in Education

At-risk students have been defined as those predisposed to fail or voluntarily drop out of school. If they graduate, they often lack the knowledge, skills and self-esteem necessary to exercise meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, culture, civic affairs and inter/intra personal relationships. (Donmoyer and Kos 1993). Although at-risk students are highly idiosyncratic, attributes used to define them include the following:

1. They come from low socio-economic strata in soci-

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ety.

 2. They are often from broken homes.

 3. They are verbally and concrete minded.

 4. They are physically less healthy than their middle class peers.

 5. They lack stable identification figures or role models.

 6. They lack stable community ties because of their constant migration.

 7. They are often handicapped by their color, which provides them with a negative self-image.

 8. They are handicapped in the expression and comprehension of language.

 9. They tend to be extroverted, rather than introverted.

 10. They may have a disability, the most common of which is mental retardation (Rosehan, 1967)

These attributes suggest that under-achievement originate from the nexus of cognitive, behavioral and socio-economic traits derived from familial, cultural and societal circumstances. Empirical evidence points to socio-economic status as a stronger predictor of a child's future than all other factors combined (Adler 1991). Since low income and ethnicity are confounded with each other, as well as with other pertinent variables, such as gender and family structure (Johnson, Miranda, Sherman, and Weill, 1991, Eggerbeen and Lichter 1991), it is apparent that low income, gender and ethnicity constitute personal risk factors in education. Groups who are over-represented among lower income groups, such as ethnic minorities and females are therefore most likely to be predisposed to school failure.

However, the notion of "predisposition" to school failure is a contradiction in terms. Since a basic tenet of learning theory is that <u>all</u> students <u>can</u> learn, those lacking in the acknowledged prerequisites for optimal learning require learning resources adapted to meet their unique needs. Labeling such students as at-risk of failure is not only self-defeatist on the part of the educational system, but sets in place a self-fulfilling prophecy that ensures eventual failure. Current analyses of student failure advocate a shift from the student deficit to interactionist perspective, focusing on the mismatch between students' and institutional attributes (Pallas, Natriello, and McDill 1989, Tinto 1986). Critical theorists attribute this mismatch for at-risk students to the cultural politics of the hegemonic educational system, which seeks to reproduce class, race, ethnic, and gender inequalities in society. This perspective contends that at-risk factors are historically and socially constructed (McLaren 1994).

Despite egalitarian goals of public education, most school practices tend to foster social stratification over equity for underprivileged groups, thereby constituting institutional risk factors in education. In the next section, the social stratification thesis will be illustrated by examining the manipulation of the curriculum, school knowledge and educational policies to effect cultural dissonance and lowered expectations as institutional risk factors in education.

The Social Construction of Risk Factors
Cultural Dissonance as an Institutional Risk Factor

When a child arrives at the school door, she brings a cognitive and affective learning "tool box" which is a product of physiological, cultural and social programming from the home environment. The content of this "tool box" constitutes her cultural capital. The concept of cultural capital refers to the general cultural background; knowledge, disposition and skills passed on from one generation to the other. It is exhibited in styles of behavior, language practices, and ways of talking, acting, and socializing (McLaren 1994). The school learning environment affirms and rewards those who exhibit the dominant cultural capital, which the teacher often exhibits by virtue of her race, ethnicity or class. White middle class male students are therefore better socialized in the cultural capital espoused by the school. In contrast, at-risk students experience cultural dissonance due to the conflict between what is learned from the home environment, and the demands and expectations of the hegemonic educational system (Gordon and Yowell 1994).

A high degree of dissonance results in a distortion of the learning process or failure to learn. Such dissonance is evident for instance, in the difference between the manner of evoking numbers and time between minority and dominant cultures. Unlike the practice of calculating time in precise and specific references in the dominant culture, some minority cultures depend on estimations. This demand for exactness is often perceptually linked to behavioral patterns that reflect on character, work habits, and thinking styles, among others. The minority student who does not abide by this dominant cultural mores may therefore, be at-risk of school failure not only because she does not "get it", but also due to connotations of tardiness, laziness, lack of industry, or even dishonesty, associated with her time concept. Such perceptions, among others, create social distance between teachers and at-risk students. Peter McLaren, a white, middle class teacher and critical theo-

rist, who has written extensively on empowering minority students said this of his early experience:

> When I worked with students in my suburban ghetto classroom, those whose cultural capital most resembled my own were the students with whom I initially felt most comfortable, spent the most instructional time, and most often encouraged to work in an independent manner. I could relate most readily and positively—at least at the beginning- to those students whose manners, values, and competencies resembled my own. (1994, 198).

A young American Indian lady described her experience of social isolation in the classroom in these words:

> You're the minority and they just completely shoot you down and the teachers will ignore you. And I found that out when I discussed something American Indian…And you are the only person with that opinion…No body else has that experience, so they don't have that opinion…The teacher will be like…that's inconsequential, let's move on (Taylor 1999, 9).

The dismissal of American Indian experiences as "inconsequential" is reflective of the nature of scholarship and knowledge legitimized by the school system. A content analysis of social science research on human development used in schools during the last decade (MacPhee, Kreutzer, and Fritz 1994), for instance, revealed that fewer than one third of the studies included subjects from low income or ethnically diverse backgrounds. Most studies of minority cultures were based on the premise that "through careful examination of groups, which like children or primitives, differ from the contemporary Western adult, new light can be cast on the whole of human experience" (Gardner 1974, p. 13). Youth from low-income backgrounds were therefore, less likely to be included in studies of "normative" development, whereas people of color predominated in studies of social problems, such as crime, and drug use. Such biased research designs and sampling plans have ensured that there is precious little accurate knowledge on ethnic and cultural differences in human development. By failing to disentangle the effects of low income and ethnicity, social science research, and consequently school knowledge have helped to perpetuate bigoted stereotypes and social stigma of minorities and people of color.

The academic performance of at-risk students may therefore represent less of their individual competence, and more of the school's depreciation of their cultural capital. Such depreciation fosters lowered expectations, and consequently reduced opportunities and support systems in higher education.

Lowered Expectation as an Institutional Risk Factor
The attrition rate for at-risk students in K–12 has been attributed to lowered expectations, based on the practice of ability grouping which tailors students' aspirations and competencies from kindergarten (Carnoy and Levin 1985) to college (Tierney 1994) to match the occupational and income status of their parents. It is therefore not surprising that college presidents complained about a dearth of "qualified" minorities to recruit to their institutions in Congressional Testimonies during the last decade. Although they observed that higher education "created opportunity that allowed individuals from all works of life…to move up the ladder of accomplishment as far as their energies and abilities will take them" (Slaughter 1991), their recommendation for addressing the scarcity of minority students was largely in the form of financial incentives and "aid to poor" and "needy students". Even at that, this assistance was earmarked largely for undergraduate education. The statement by Frank Rhodes, president of Connell, attests to this observation:

> It is important to recognize that the rationale for a Federal role in higher education and the appropriate policies to implement it, are fundamentally different from those underlying Federal support for undergraduate education, which properly emphasize access and choice through need-based student aid…academic merit is an important facet of graduate education, and must be a stronger factor in the allocation of support for graduate students" (Slaughter 1991, 68).

The presidents clearly distinguished between their support for access to undergraduate education, regardless of ethnicity, gender and economic status, and access to graduate education. Students slated for the latter were described as "a thin stream of extremely talented students", "able", "well prepared" and possessed of "sophisticated knowledge and skills", "that small but important supply of talented individuals, with the knowledge and technical skills, who

give us every aspect of our national need" (Slaughter 1991). It is apparent from these statements that their emphasis would be focused on assisting minority students to access undergraduate, not graduate education. Implicit in their statement is the notion that the "most able" students are largely exclusive of minorities. Since minority students and women take out less educational loans and take longer to complete higher education than other students, however, need-based aid might benefit them less than majority students (Allen, Epps, and Haniff 1991).

Moreover, there is little evidence to support the contention that financial aid is a primary consideration in individual enrolment and retention decisions. According to Tinto (1987), financial considerations are secondary to academic and social involvement, such as faculty and peer support, and campus "climate". While financial assistance may increase the graduation rate of at-risk students, it would hardly accelerate social mobility for minority groups enough to meet the needs of the multicultural workforce. The language used to differentiate access to undergraduate (need-based students) from graduate (merit) education, presume different expectations for majority and minority students. Lowered expectations for these students hack to the deficit model of school failure, as the social structures that inhibit academic success are ignored. The presidents' statements are informed by the meritocratic ideology which assumes that education is a neutral and autonomous equal opportunity system in which the innately intelligent and hardworking student is justly rewarded, while the less able is excluded.

The relative educational success of at-risk African American students in historically back colleges compared to their counterparts in predominantly white institutions point to the potency of the institutional environment in shaping educational outcomes. Cultural dissonance and lowered expectations implicate the librarian values of cultural diversity and social equity. How can these values be put in practice to ameliorate institutional risk factors in higher education?

Implications for Academic Libraries
Librarian Values and At-risk Students
The library profession shares with education, the contradictions inherent in its professional value systems and practice. For example, glaring inequities in access to library services in the society attest to unfulfilled promises of democratic access to information and social equity. Academic libraries on their part have largely served as agents

of the institutional risk factors described above. The contradictions in upholding such practices, in tandem with espoused democratic and egalitarian aims, can be traced to the alleged "neutrality" of libraries as social institutions. The implications of choosing neutrality over social responsibility is well articulated by Ronald Benge, when he wrote that

> The librarian, as librarian, provides information, but there may well be times when his convictions as a man will oblige him to ask, "What is the information for?" (Information is never an end in itself)…Information has been defined as "knowledge put to use" but if the librarian is indifferent to the nature of the use, he is not a man but a thing…This is the dilemma of German liberal librarians during the Nazi period, and those who cooperated with the regime, for whatever reason, used this same argument that what they did or did not do as librarians had to be separated from their beliefs as men. The implication seems to be that the specialist can and should isolate his functions from other general human considerations. This is why the specialist provokes alarm and distrust, and the librarian should be the last person to submit to this form of intellectual betrayal. (1977, 250).

A window of opportunity exists for academic libraries today to practice what they preach, thereby leading their parent institutions by example. Thanks to information technology, and concerns for accountability and outcome-based assessment, academic libraries have gained increased visibility on their campuses. Recognition of the relevance to learning of information literacy skills also offers academic librarians opportunities to work closely with professors and students. Writing on academic library effectiveness, McDonald and Micikas stated in 1994,

> It is our conviction that we can no longer afford to perpetuate the artificial boundaries that exist between libraries and the classroom…Technology, however, is destroying those boundaries and helping us to understand libraries as a process. As we increasingly understand what it means for a library to be a process, not a place, we will be discovering what it means to integrate information into the curriculum

(119).

The following section discusses the potentials for integrating the librarian cultural diversity and intellectual freedom values in library services to ameliorate cultural dissonance as an institutional risk factor in higher education. *Cultural dissonance vs cultural diversity and intellectual freedom*: Library collections, like school knowledge also reflect the legitimation of particular forms of cultural knowledge and experiences. Cultural dissonance is responsible for the mismatch between such collections and the information needs and "literacies" of at-risk students and their communities, leading to the substitution of "information poverty" for "at-risk" in the library community. The ALA web-site bears a statement on cultural diversity, which states that: "We value our nation's diversity and strive to reflect that diversity by providing a full spectrum of resources and services to the communities we serve." Similar statements from the Intellectual Freedom and Freedom to Read statements affirm the democratic right of all citizens to access whatever information resources they desire.

These statements suggest that the challenge of information "poverty" entails more than the provision of free and democratic access to information that largely reflects the knowledge, values, and interests of the dominant culture. Such information requires adaptation and interpretation to make sense within the cultural frames of reference, intellectual tastes, value systems, and literacy levels of diverse patrons. Thus, besides provision of culturally relevant information, cultural diversity and intellectual freedom call for customization of information to connect with the lived experiences and needs of diverse peoples. To fully exploit information resources, the information "poor" also need training in critical information literacy skills so they can evaluate, select, adapt and apply information with discrimination. These values are however better articulated in public than academic library circles. In supporting the curricula needs of their patrons, academic libraries have focused on building collections of "quality" and "authoritative" resources that portray the racist, sexist and class interests of mainstream literature. Free and democratic access to such collections helps to sustain cultural dissonance for at-risk students and their communities, and further undermine their self-concepts and sense of self-efficacy.

Two implications are obvious. First, librarians could encourage the documentation and provision of information on the cultural backgrounds and interests of at-risk students. Several ongoing projects collect and document information about diverse groups, including folk and indigenous peoples, some of which are in digital form. Academic librarians ought to educate themselves about at-risk students and their communities, and support research and documentation of knowledge about them. They should also advocate infusion of critical information literacy skills and culturally diverse content in all academic curricula and library resources. Secondly, as academic librarians engage in their instructional roles, they must provide opportunities to connect with *every* student in the class by using curricula content and teaching methods that draw on students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, interests and learning styles, irrespective of subject matter being taught (Agada 1998a).

Critical pedagogy offers strategies to integrate the lived experiences of students and their communities into class lessons. Critical pedagogy, which assumes that all knowledge is socially constructed, seeks to empower all students, not only at-risk students, to engage in cultural criticism by appropriating knowledge outside their own experience, so as to broaden their understanding of themselves, their worlds, and the possibilities for transforming the assumptions about their conditions. This critical thinking approach to learning would better prepare students to participate in the democratic process of redressing the inequalities of the school and social systems.

Lowered expectations vs democratic access and social equity: Lowered expectations ensure that

> Mainstream schooling offers disadvantaged students little choice but to negotiate a life for themselves somewhere among the psychologists office, the compensatory program set up to remediate their deficiencies, the streets where they will eventually be dumped. If the economic climate is good, perhaps they will end up in low skilled, low paying jobs (McLaren 1994, 211).

The frustrations of structural inequalities in the school and work environments have evolved a resistant culture among some African American students that is incongruent with the measures of success in the mainstream culture (Ogbu 1986). Fueled by a distrust of public schools and the larger society, their disillusionment is communicated to them at a very early age in their communities from

observing their parents and other adults (Agada 1999, Ogbu 1986).

The librarian rhetoric which promises democratic access to information as the route to social equity in contemporary society is however, unconvincing in the face of marketplace dynamics. Based on the meritocratic ideology, such rhetoric assumes that information, its technology and market forces are neutral agents, which any individual can marshal to her educational or economic interests.

When students come with diverse cultural backgrounds and life conditions, democratic (physical) access to information alone is unlikely to equalize opportunities for all. Rawls' theory of social justice argues for going beyond provision of equal opportunities to ensuring diverse but optimal learning outcomes for each student (1971). This stance has informed the constructs of diversity, pluralism, contextualism and perspectivism in educational theory (Gordon and Yowell 1994). While diversity demands customizing information and learning activities to match learner needs, pluralism require that each student excels beyond their indigenous standards by being multiskilled, e.g. multilingual, and multicultural; skills that prepare them well for the global society of the 21st century. Although all meaningful learning must be contextualized within the cultural capital of each student, the educational system also needs to emphasize the acquisition of multiple perspectives—so that students can appreciate the perspectives of and empathize with the Other. Such educational programs designed along democratic access principles would tend to foster social equity through individual and collective growth and empowerment.

Academic libraries could successfully adopt this model in their instructional programs. Research suggested that school libraries provided more supportive cultural space to pursue egalitarian aims than instructional classrooms. Social dynamics in the library enabled students to negotiate with and reconstruct the hegemonic agenda of school knowledge, and classroom discipline (Dressman1997). Academic libraries could therefore design confidence-building activities to support diversity, pluralism, contextualism and perspectivism for all, but especially at-risk students. Where and when possible, information literacy lessons and library services can be customized to match individual's idiosyncratic characteristics (Agada 1998b), rather than stereotypical ethnic group profiles, (e.g. African American undergraduates), which tend to stigmatize such patrons. Accommodating students' diverse learning styles, interests and experiences in instructional and service design

would also facilitate development of diverse and multiple talents and skills in students. Exercises using cooperative learning and group problem solving activities can also be used to impart appreciation for diverse contexts and perspectives (Agada 1998c).

In addition to one-on-one and group interactions with students, the library could also, in cooperation with student groups and service units, sponsor public lectures, exhibits, discussion groups, and workshops that provide opportunities for the campus community to learn about the intersection of diversity with academic and social issues. By building such activities around at-risk students, their faculty, and peers, the library would be providing opportunities to broaden perspectives, and hopefully reduce social isolation and stigma for at-risk students. The library ought to offer a non-threatening environment that affirms and encourages students to integrate their cultural capital with their academic and library research tasks. Sensitivity training for diversity should be mandatory for all library staff. Working with a diverse staff would also help majority staff adapt to a multicultural patron body. At-risk students should therefore be hired as aids and trained to teach library use to their peers. However, at-risk students would not perceive the library any differently than the classroom, if diversity is not evident in the composition of its staff. Having minority professionals on board would also facilitate work with at-risk students. Aggressive programs to recruit minorities, including the use of intern positions, should therefore be pursued. Finally, academic librarians ought to offer leadership in intellectual explorations of the challenges in pursuing social equity through information access in an environment that fosters competition over cooperation, personal over group success, and the commoditization of public information, for examples.

Conclusion

In another paper, Agada and Daunheimer (this conference) observed that the structure of buildings, transportation and communication devices today largely reflect the needs and characteristics of those who use them, but are disabling to people with disabilities who had been denied access. Similarly, hegemonic educational systems are designed to cater to the needs of the majority student, such that for at-risk students, schooling comes to be associated with that which is "not me". Educational reforms have largely dealt with student deficiencies rather than the interactions between students' and institutional attributes. Mismatch and

inequities in this interaction are evident in the cultural dissonance and lowered expectations experienced by at-risk students.

Information technology and the concern for accountability offer academic libraries more opportunities to interact with faculty and students in instructional settings than hitherto. The librarian values of cultural diversity, social equity and democratic access to information are implicated in the quest for educational and social justice for at-risk students. As the library profession rises to issues of social responsibility in society, it could salvage education in the 21st century by practicing what it preaches, thereby leading their campuses by example. The obstacles to shifting from the student deficit to the interactionist perspective, which may arise from issues of academic freedom, lack of staff and resources, and personal prejudice, among others, may seem daunting. However, taking on this challenge, would not only align academic library priorities with student outcome-based accountability, but also with its avowed professional value system.

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