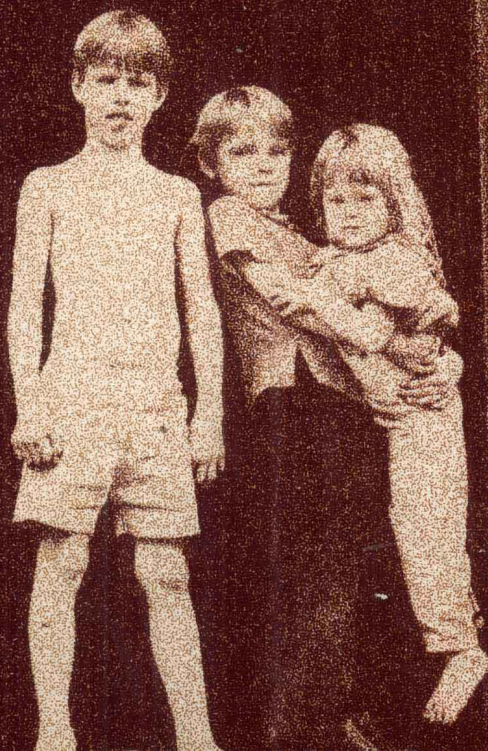

LEARNING TO FAIL

**CASE STUDIES OF
STUDENTS AT RISK**



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STUDENTS AT RISK**

Phi Delta Kappa
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Bloomington, Indiana

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*(The photographs in this book are for graphic
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Oh, narrow, blind, and witless preachers!
Do we expect the “ragged” band
To be among Earth’s perfect creatures,
While we refuse the helping hand?

To work, to work! with hope and joy,
Let us be doing what we can;
Better build schoolrooms for “the boy,”
Than cells and gibbets for “the man.”

“A Song for the Ragged Schools”
Poems by Eliza Cook, 1866

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PREFACE

This book is about individual children who are at risk in America today. Each chapter is a case study of one student who was identified by a teacher or teachers as being seriously at risk and then described by a researcher trying to understand risk and how risk manifests itself in the life and mind of that particular child.

Each child is different. We all know that, of course, but professionals and institutions often overlook differences and focus on the similarities that exist among young people. For example, young people may share a common blood type or ethnic background. They may speak a common language or share a particular religious upbringing. Despite these similarities, every human being is unique. Genetically, no two people in the world are alike, except identical twins. Experientially we are all unique. No two people have the same experiences — even identical twins — thus uniqueness and difference are an important part of life itself.

If we ask which aspects of a student's existence are most affected by education, the answer seems clear. Those things that one person shares with other people are important, but it is the differences among students that make differences in teaching obligatory and differences in learning routine.

It is in the area of individuality — uniqueness — that education and educators can make a difference. These case studies, therefore, are important as a basis for learning more about learning in school.

The Phi Delta Kappa Study of Students At Risk was an attempt to answer four questions through research:

1. Who is at risk?
2. What about them puts them at risk?
3. What are the schools doing to help those students?
4. How effective are those efforts?

The project was initiated with a general definition of risk by assuming that students at risk are young people who are likely to fail at school or fail at life. A child who gets straight Fs on his or her report card is at risk of dropping out of school. Likewise, a young person who is contemplating or has attempted suicide is seriously at risk.

Information was collected about 49,000 students and almost 10,000 teachers in more than 275 schools in 85 communities across the country in an effort to answer the questions set forth above. In addition, researchers conducted case studies of 65 young people to illustrate the reality and amplify the uniqueness of what it means to be at risk in diverse ways. Eleven of those case studies have been selected for publication.

Each case study was prepared by a researcher in the local area in which the student lived. We gave credit to the authors, but in the spirit of confidentiality decided not to make the direct link by indicating which case study was prepared by whom — since knowledge of the authors' locations might make identification of the student possible. It certainly would make it more probable. Our primary concern was to protect the children whose lives are described.

Each of the young people described here is very much at risk, and the case studies highlight each child's risk in dramatic ways.

Neville Robertson
Jack Frymier

INTRODUCTION

The case studies reported in this book are vivid snapshots of 11 children who attended public schools in America during the 1980s. Their stories are unique. Each is set against a different landscape with a different home situation and different societal pressures and demands. Their stories also are similar. Many of the problems the 11 children faced are the same, as are many of their solutions. Most of them learned about failing from an early age.

Today, the picture of American childhood is different from that of earlier generations. While poverty is not a new stress for children, the growing numbers of poor children are alarming. So, too, are numbers of children with handicaps (many due to the substance abuse of their mothers), inadequate preventive health, and lack of adequate parenting.

- In 1989, twenty-three percent (23%) of America's children age 0-5 were below the federal poverty line according to the Census Bureau. Because poverty is calculated on the ability of parents to buy food, and federal nutrition programs are limited, most of the children in this cohort are poor and subject to malnutrition.
- Almost one in four children born in the U.S. today is born out of wedlock. . . . Fifteen million children in America are being raised by a single parent. Almost half of these children are being raised in poverty. . . .
- Twenty percent (20%) of America's children have not been vaccinated against polio; in California *half* of the children have not received immunization shots for basic childhood diseases.
- Eleven percent (11%) of America's students are enrolled in classes for the handicapped.

Demographics for Education Newsletter
vol. 1, no. 3 (March 1990)
Center for Demographic Policy

A list compiled by the Children's Defense Fund, puts the picture of today's child into sharper focus.

- Every 35 seconds an infant is born into poverty.
- Every 14 minutes an infant dies in the first year of life.
- Every night 100,000 children go to sleep without homes.
- Every week in 1990, 327 children got measles, which could have been prevented by adequate immunizations.
- Every month at least 56,000 children are abused.
- Every 14 hours a child younger than 5 is murdered.
- Every 2 seconds of the school day a public school student is suspended.
- Every 4 seconds of the school day a public school student is corporally punished.
- Every 10 seconds of the school day a student drops out of school.

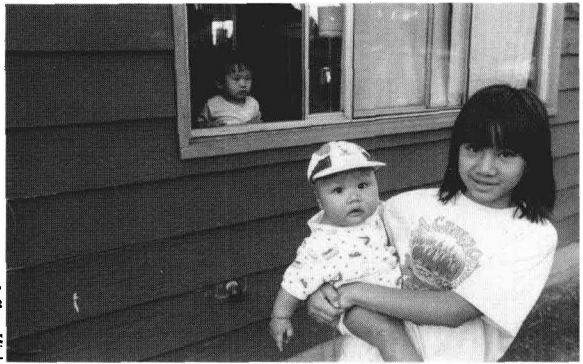
Children's Defense Fund
The State of America's Children 1991, p. 5

Regardless of who takes the picture, it is clear that our children are under increasing stress. Dropout rates are high and academic achievement low. Poverty, violence, drugs, teen pregnancy, and AIDS are common concerns in many school districts, and educators are applying the label at-risk to more and more of their students.

Parents were once a major influence in the lives of their children. They are less so today. Television, a window to the world and to new attitudes, is everywhere. A single parent often heads the household or both parents work. Grandparents live farther away or divorce has separated them from their grandchildren. Today, as children need adults more than ever to help combat the growing lists of stresses, they are less available. The stresses are so great in some cases that children find it difficult to focus on classwork. This problem often is further complicated by irrelevant or outdated curricula.

At a time when patriotism is strong in America, our concern for each other appears weak. We may have won a war in Saudi Arabia, but we are losing the wars on poverty, drugs, and illiteracy in our own country. Even as we boast of our country's strengths, we blame each other for society's shortcomings. We

have blamed schools, in particular, for the problems of students. For the past eight years Americans have been speaking and writing about educators and educational systems as if the education field was an isolated segment of our society, solely responsible for how children fare both inside and outside schools.



Jeffrey High

People who work in schools often do feel isolated. Theirs is a unique culture, but it reflects the larger culture it serves — the values and mores, as well as current subjects of interest. It follows, therefore, that if our students are at risk, our culture — all of us — must also be at risk.

In an interview with Bill Moyers, veteran teacher Mike Rose revealed his experiences as an at-risk child of the 1960s — his poverty, average work in elementary school, and accidental placement in the vocational track during his first two years of high school. “What’s interesting to me about that experience is not that an unusual thing happened, but that it shows how arbitrary placement in ‘fast track’ and ‘slow track’ can be. It also shows how students placed in the slow track live down to the expectations of their classrooms. And finally, it suggests to me that for parents who are not socialized into that whole way of thinking about education, it’s very easy not to realize that something is amiss.”¹ Rose said that the raw power of education is so strong that children often feel left out. These feelings are manifest in a variety of ways according to Rose — students are sulen and silent, make lots of noise, become the class clown, get stoned on drugs, or are absent a lot — all ways to defend themselves against the feeling of not belonging. Unfortunately, they also are ways of failing.

Author Susan Gordon recently wrote, “The United States is experiencing an extreme crisis in caring. As a society we cannot seem to muster the political will to care for the most precious things we produce — other human beings.”² The indicators of our crisis, she says, are our homeless families, our high infant mortality rate, and the large numbers of our citizens

and their children who are living in poverty, with inadequate or no health insurance. Our education system is a shambles, and recent political decisions have discouraged care giving for the young and the old. Our country's negative attitude toward caring discourages people from entering the caring professions such as teaching and nursing, and even clouds personal relations between men and women. Americans, says Ms. Gordon, are emotionally deprived: "We have children other people care for, friends we have no time to socialize with, spouses about whom we complain but with whom we have no time to structure to create more fulfilling relationships." A National Care Agenda, she suggests, could end the crisis.

The details of her program are controversial, particularly for those people opposed to our current welfare system. Yet her sentiments seem appropriate in this at-risk age. If Americans can renew their patriotism, why can't we care for fellow Americans who need help?

Schools provide the right conditions and opportunities to implement an agenda of caring, whether in a classroom, school, or the whole district, suggests Alphonse Kohn in a recent Kappan article.³ He proposed the idea of teaching children to internalize the value of community, and not just the good values in a community.

Schools are a part of our culture and an important part of each community. They do not exist in isolation and many educators are suggesting we would all benefit if schools filled an expanded roll. Larry Barber, director of Phi Delta Kappa's Center for Evaluation, Development, and Research, predicted, "We can no longer afford to operate independently. The schools are going to have to start taking a leadership role in coordinating the home and all other social agencies, including the courts, the police, the social service agencies, child welfare, to be able to save these kids."⁴

In her book *Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage*, Lisbeth Schorr details places in America where schools are providing superb health, education, and social services to children. If these services "were more widely available," she predicts, "fewer children would come into adulthood unschooled and unskilled, committing violent crimes, and bearing children as unmarried teenagers. Fewer of today's vulnerable children would tomorrow swell the welfare rolls and the prisons. Many

more would grow into responsible and productive adults, able to form stable families and contributing to, rather than depleting, America's prosperity and sense of community."⁵

Stories about children at risk, like those in Schorr's book and in this monograph, provide shocking examples of the lack of coordinated services available to children at risk within our society. They also provide information about how children can be helped to overcome their problems and eventually become productive members of their communities.

This book resulted from the work of Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) members who themselves form a strong community. While the information they gathered was valuable, an important outcome of the process for those educators and their institutions was involvement in the process itself. Collaborating with one another and working within the PDK community was a valuable experience for those volunteers. Working together also gave participants a chance to share stories, discuss outcomes, and compare insights.

THE STUDY

The Design

Jack Frymier, senior fellow of PDK International Headquarters and chairman of the coordinating committee of the PDK Chapter-Based Research Project, worked with committee members to develop a research design to address the issue of students at risk. The committee developed an innovative research methodology — simultaneous replication — and involved the community of PDK chapter members to carry out the research. Researchers in 85 communities studied children at risk. All participants used the same definitions, procedures, and instruments. Project coordinators collected and analyzed their data according to the same timeline and techniques.

Details of the study are included in the monograph *A Study of Students at Risk: Collaborating to Do Research*, by Jack Frymier. Details about the methodology are included in the article "Simultaneous Replication: A Technique for Large-Scale Research" by Jack Frymier, Larry Barber, Bruce Gansneder, and Neville Robertson (*Phi Delta Kappan*, November 1989).

The Tasks

The PDK Chapter-Based Research Project researchers had to accomplish four tasks.

1. Select one child in grade _____ (they were randomly assigned a level — elementary, junior high, or high school — and instructed to “select the one student at the grade level specified who, in your judgment, is most seriously at risk.”
2. Prepare a cumulative folder for that one child.
3. Produce two videotapes related to that child [instructions detailed what tapes should focus on, scenes and interviews to include, and additional technical information about equipment and filming conditions].
4. Prepare a narrative description of that child.⁶

Subjects were told to secure permissions from the student and his or her parent(s) and to “indicate to the parents that all evidence suggests the student is having difficulty at school, and you hope to learn about the student so you can help that youngster learn more effectively.”⁷

Participants were to be kept anonymous. “The intent is for you to bring together a complete set of information for this particular student . . . such as would typically be available and helpful to teachers and other professionals who might work with the student.”⁸

Project designers did not specify methodology for the case studies, and researchers’ techniques varied from naturalistic inquiry to more traditional scientific methodological procedures. The time researchers spent with their subjects also varied, as did the environments and conditions in which the interviews were held. Researchers visited one child on death row, where during the interview he sat handcuffed and under surveillance by prison staff. He had been sentenced to die for a murder he committed at age 15. Other interviews took place in homes, schools, and local teen hangouts.

Reflections

Few participants were unaffected by the research. They spent much time with their subjects and developed great insight into their lives. Some felt frightened as they entered prisons or

searched out trailer homes tucked away deep in the countryside. Others were shocked and saddened by conditions in the child's life. Occasionally their deep feelings are evident in the case studies they wrote. In follow-up interviews, many researchers wanted to talk at length about their subjects. They also wanted to talk about how the study had changed their views of education, the course of their own work, and even their lives. One researcher said she now challenged the standard definition of multicultural. "The culture of poor or educationally deprived students is distinct," she said, "with language and value standards that depart significantly from middle-class culture."⁹ "Normal" behavior for poor children, she said, is different from that of middle- or upper-class children. To fail to recognize this enlarged definition of multicultural, she concluded, places new teachers at a disadvantage when working with such families.



Victoria Voelker

THE CASE STUDIES

The children in this book have problems. Their stories are alarming; a few haunting. Some are sad, others will provoke anger. And some might even remind you of your own school days. All the stories will raise more questions than they answer.

The book contains 11 stories about children who were deemed "at risk" by their teachers, counselors, or principals. Although the children were labeled at risk and provided with assistance from their schools, the help was often scattered among different agencies and uncoordinated. Several researchers discovered that the needs of their subjects were met by few teachers. One researcher estimated that of her subject's six teachers only one identified a specific need and made allowances in teaching techniques.

As you read about the children's lives, you may notice that positive comments about the students usually came from those teachers the students liked and who liked them. The teacher-student match appeared very important. You also may notice

the ways the schools responded to these children and how they coped with those responses. Several of the children found out how to get out of a school they hated. As one child we call Roach put it, "I found out that I didn't have to take spankings. I could leave or get suspended." The schools were unable to teach Roach how to make it and so he found ways on his own to avoid his problems at an early age. He avoided trouble with school work by not going to school. He felt good about himself by using drugs and alcohol. He found role models — brothers and older friends who drank and used drugs. He became financially independent by robbing people. He solved a serious family problem by killing the person causing the trouble. And he learned to read — on death row.¹⁰ Roach got an education. But not the one his teachers and parents thought they were providing.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Educators can learn much about today's children from reading these case studies. Listen to the children and find out what problems they face, how the schools deal with them, and the results of that intervention.

Readers may notice similarities among the children, which will provoke stimulating comparisons and contrasts for discussion. However, each child is unique. All children are unique and bring to schools very different sets of needs.

The Center for Evaluation, Development, and Research hopes that this book will help educators and all people working with today's children develop a greater sensitivity to their problems, compassion for their "solutions" to them, and motivation to help find ways to ensure that all children get the education society wants them to have.

-DBS

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1. Bill Moyers, *A World of Ideas* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 219.
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 3. Alphonse Kohn, "Caring Kids: The Role of the Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 1991, p. 501.
 4. Perspectives on Education 8 Series, "Students at Risk: A Case in Point," PDK Media Presentation (Bloomington, Ind.: 1990).
 5. Lisbeth B. Schorr, *Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. xxvii.