Population at Risk

Aisha Habeeb

AL0117

Wayne State University

SW 4997 - Integrative Seminar

Professor Lori Klein-Shapiro
Abstract

Urban elementary and secondary students, especially those with special needs, have been members of the “at risk” population for quite a while. Working to address the problem, in 1965 Lyndon B. Johnson declared “War on Poverty”. Within this declaration included The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Through this act, a special source of funding, Title I, allowed for the allocation of large resources to meet the needs of educationally deprived children. Ten years later the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was created. IDEA is a federal law which requires schools to accommodate, equally educate, and serve students with disabilities. Still working to address the issues of urban education, in 2002, Bill Clinton signed the “No Child Left Behind Act”, a reauthorization of ESEA. Even with the above policies urban education continues to be a major concern in America, with poverty being the most incessant social problem.

This paper will discuss what an at-risk population is and how urban elementary and secondary students are a part of this population. This paper will highlight the barriers this population faces due to their “at-risk” membership. Lastly, utilization of a case study from a previous client will outline the social workers role as it relates to this at-risk population.
What is an At-Risk Population

When thinking of the phrase “at risk population” a lot of things come to mind. The characteristics of members in the population can encompass but are not limited to individuals that need assistance with maintaining independence, communicating, medical care and daily living activities. There are various reasons a student can become a member of an at-risk population during the course of their educational period. The reason can range from one to many. The marginalization of a student may be due to social contrasts, learning crevices, socioeconomic status which bring about the requirement for special attention within the learning environment. (Miller, 2006)

Schools in the United States are facing an immense crisis to educate at-risk students, who have been labeled as unlikely to succeed. The term “at-risk” only identifies that problems exist and might lead a student to drop out. While the numbers are steadily rising, over one-third of all elementary and secondary school enrollments have been labeled at-risk. Performing two years behind grade level and only reaching the eighth-grade level if/when they graduate from high school, this population’s poor educational performance does not provide them with the skills needed for labor market success or further training, a situation with serious consequences for the nation’s economy. (Hanushek & Jorgenson, 1996). Being a member of populations whose diversity places the student at risk of experiencing prejudice, discrimination, and oppression.

Identifying Members of the At-Risk Population

When working to identify those at-risk students, it is best if this is done as early as possible. Signs that at student may be at-risk include poor attendance, lack of
interest in school and school related activities, behavioral issues, and low literacy and school performance. There are wide range of risk factors that result in academic failure and students dropping-out. These risk factors include one or more of the following: family and community factors, personal factors and/or, school-related factors. While the presence or one or more risk factor does not inevitable mean a student will become disengaged, it is consequential that schools have a cognizance of these factors to be able to identify and address issues as early as possible. (Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, Royer, & Joly, 2006, p. 367)

**Family and Community Factors**

Characteristics of a student’s family and community can have a tremendous impact on the student’s education attainment. These characteristics can include poverty, parental low educational attainment, homelessness, relationship issues and domestic violence. Students that are faced with these issues are less likely to focus on school due to the prevalent issues in their home life. Their lack of focus and support in the home puts them in jeopardy for becoming a member of the school’s “at-risk” population.

Autumn Jackson (alias), an eleventh grade student at Lincoln High in Warren, MI was deemed an “at-risk” student due to family factors. After reviewing grades, it was discovered that Autumn had been absent from school twenty-six out of forty-nine days. Upon meeting with Autumn the school’s social worker, Autumn explained that she resides in a single parent household and she and her mother’s relationship was strained because her mother works three jobs and forces Autumn to care for her younger siblings while the mom works. Autumn explained that her brother has severe Attention Deficit Hypertension Disorder (ADHD) and her rarely listens to her. She states she
spends majority of her time outside of school chasing him around and very little or no
time for homework or studies. Due to this Autumn is performing substantially below
grade level and only has seven out of twenty-three credits needed for graduation. At this
rate Autumn will not graduate on time and she has expressed that if she does not
graduate on time she will dropout.

Autumn is just one of many at-risk students due to family factors that the social
worker encounter this year. Family factors have a significant impact on a students ability
to focus on academics. Hence, leading them into that at-risk population.

**Personal Factors**

In addition to family and community related issues that effect a students
academic performance there are also personal factors that can contribute to low school
achievement and the possibility of a student dropping out. These personal factors
include physical or mental health issues, disability, behavioral issues, substance
dependency, pregnancy or childcare responsibilities, and learning difficulties. A lot of
times when students are faced with the issues of parenting or substance abuse they
become distracted with their life outside of school and lose focus on school. Those with
physical or mental health issues, disabilities or learning difficulties often become
discouraged with the learning process, making them more plausible for becoming a
member of a school’s at-risk population. (Borman, Rachuba, & Educational Resources
Information Center (U.S.), 2001)

While working with Autumn to address family issues that are distracting her fro
learning, it has been discovered that she is also considered a part of the at-risk
population due to her undiagnosed ADHD and severe drug abuse. Autumn also
presents learning disabilities in math and reading. The learning disabilities may have a
direct connection to his undiagnosed medical condition and drug abuse however, it’s
unsure to know. Furthermore, Autumn also displays significant behavioral issues and
has poor attendance, often arriving to school and all classes late. Autumn disclosed that
she is not motivated to attend class or do any of her work and sometimes feels
worthless. Autumn's behavior and lack of interest towards school confirms her feelings.
Autumn’s current performance connects him to the at-risk population.

    Autumn, along with other students, do not always posses the resilience to fight
against these personal factors and have allowed them to effect their academic success.
Thus, thrusting them into that population of those students at-risk.

**School Related Factors**

    During the high school years and sometimes before adolescents tend to place a
lot of premium on their peer relationships, school acceptance, and social acceptance.
These relationships can have negative impact on the students academic performance
when the interaction are negative. A negative relationship with teachers or peers and
unsupportive school culture can force a student to run from school. Students that do not
feel welcomed and are unsuccessful in building positive school relationships have often
have a negative opinion about school.

    Due to Autumn's behavior issues associated with her ADHD, she has a strained
relationships with her teachers who are constantly forced to remove her from class.
Since Autumn is hardly in class she struggles with developing positive peer
relationships. Autumn feels she has no reason to come to school since she is behind
academically, has no friends, believes her teachers don't like her. In addition Autumn
has no support at home. Autumn is a critical member of the at-risk population and immediate intervention is necessary to avoid further disengagement.

**Autumn’s Subsequent Factors**

Although Autumn’s current factors are a primary concern however, as a social worker there is always a concern for subsequent issues that may present themselves as a result of those current factors. As a result of Autumn’s family factors, it is also a fact that Autumn is being raised in a single-parent household which can present poverty issues. Autumn is also in a home where there is minimal supervision since her mom is at work majority of the time. Autumn may also have some resentment towards her mom due to the heavy responsibilities placed upon her. These feelings that Autumn has about her home life and the lack of supervision can lead her further into substance abuse with the possibility of developing further substance dependence. If these habits continue to progress then there could become an increase in the school imposed factors which are also hindering her academic growth.

**Where is the Help**

According to the National Association of Social Workers, school social workers have been providing a critical link between school, home, and community. Their primary focus is to address student issues that effect student’s learning abilities and the learning environment while coordinating all efforts with the student’s environment. This network can include doctors, outside therapist, family, teachers and more. Coordination efforts are centered on viewing the person in their environment with the hopes of improving academic achievement and social, emotional, and behavioral competence. “School social workers seek to ensure equitable education opportunities; ensure that students
are mentally, physically, and emotionally present in the classroom; and promote respect and dignity for all students.” (National Association of Social Workers, 2002, pg. 1)

School social workers work daily to address the issues faced by the at-risk population. Their primary work involves direct service to the students. Through direct service, the school social worker provides crisis intervention, assist the student in developing strategies to increase academic success, aid in conflict resolution and anger management, work with the student to develop appropriate social interaction skills and self acceptance with the intended goal for students to become resilient self-learners.

In order to provide optimal service, social workers must also support teachers, engage families, and collaborate with outside agencies. When working together social workers and teachers further identify barriers to learning, design and implement behavior intervention plans, and aid each other in further understanding family, cultural, and community factors imposing on the learning environment. When engaging families, the school social worker helps the families understand the school policies and available services and resources, in and outside, of the school. Through partnership with families the school social worker hopes to encourage home support and a streamline understanding of the student’s developmental and educational needs. The collaboration with outside agencies is also very important for the success of the student. Through this collaboration educational and mental heath services are better coordinated and the resources are adequately developed to meet the needs of students and families. (Miller, 2006)
How do At-Risk Members Get Connected

A student facing the mention barriers does not automatically receive school social work services. They must be referred by either parent, teacher, counselor, or themselves. Even if the student presents some challenges they still may not qualify for services. In order to qualify for services the barriers must present signs that actually interfere with the student’s success at school. Issues that may prompt a referral could include but are not limited to: mental health issues, abuse or neglect, chronic attendance or tardiness, substance abuse and social or emotional difficulties. Upon referral social workers must begin an in-depth research of the student’s history and creating a report an initial evaluation. This research will include looking into the student’s pass education history, gaining feedback from teachers and family members. After all the information is gather and the student has significant issues the multi-disciplinary team can conclude that the student either does or doesn’t qualify for social work services. Depending on the team’s decision will determine how the student is service however, it is the responsibility of the school to ensure the student has everything they need to adequately and equally learn as other students that are not considered at-risk.

Ethical Dilemma

With school social workers interacting with various aspects of the students environment there is often an ethical dilemma relating to confidentiality. There is never a simple answers to a social workers ethical dilemma. Social workers understand that minor clients must be able to trust them in order for them to share clinically revenant information. Minors should also be aware of the limits of their confidentiality. Outside of
NASW confidentiality reasons to disclose confidential information such as those required by law, a student should also be aware that there are times information must be shared with teachers, families, and outside agencies to better service the student. School social workers must accept that they cannot offer their students absolute confidentiality" (Kopels & Kogle, 1994 p.1) and should also be sure this is conveyed to students and their families.

A few months, the school social worker intern encountered an ethical dilemma with Autumn. For several days Autumn has been displaying severe problematic behavior. Autumn’s teachers felt there was a need to develop a behavior intervention plan (BIP). Autumn’s mother, two her teachers and the school social worker were present during the development of the plan. While in the meeting the mother asked the school social worker what her and Autumn discussed during their meetings. Faced with the dilemma of what should be disclosed the social workers mind begin to race back and forth between the NASW School Social Worker code of Ethics and disclosing pertinent but confidential information relating to the development of the BIP. In the end the social worker asked permission from the student to disclose pertinent information

Conclusion

Some research has identified factors contributing to students in the at-risk population as stemming from involved interactions between individual and family circumstances as well as characteristics of schools and society, policy identification of students ‘at-risk’ has inclined to simplistically fixate on personal attributes of the students. At-risk students are faced with many challenges to overcome. Autumn is an at-risk student faced with many challenges. However, through federal policies such as
IDEA and the No Child Left Behind it us believed that with a collaboration between the multidisciplinary team, including social workers, psychologist and teachers, Autumn, her family and outside therapist she can build resilience against her learning barriers and achieve academically and socially.
References


