

Children and Youth at Risk:
Some Conceptual Considerations

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Abstract

Although the “at risk” label has proliferated in the literature in recent years, its precise definition remains obscure. According to various statistics, approximately 20%, or 1 in 5 of the children and youth in Canada are at risk for developing problems that jeopardize their present and future adjustment. This article explores the origins of the risk concept and examines the current state of knowledge regarding the conceptualization of risk in children and youth. Current theory and research indicate that risk factors are multidimensional, interactive, and multiplicative, and should be viewed as steps along a continuum. Moreover, the nature and timing of risk factors affect outcomes, and risk propensity is heightened during periods of transition. Research on the role of the school context in facilitating or reducing risk and its implications for intervention and policy is identified as an important foci for the future. Obtaining children and youth’s voices in risk research also much needed. The paper concludes that future research and policy should shift its focus from a risk to a resiliency framework.

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Case of Frank

Frank is 9 years old and lives with his mother, stepfather, and five other siblings. The stepfather has been out of work for 3 years and the family is on social assistance. Frank is currently in grade 4 and has been identified as having a learning disability for which he receives special help via a resource teacher. Test scores indicate that he is two years behind his peers in both reading and math. Medical records indicate that Frank was born prematurely and that his mother was abusing alcohol throughout her pregnancy. Frank wears very thick glasses and often comes to school unkempt. The school administrators are concerned about Frank because he has not attended school for the last three months. According to Frank, he does not attend school because of the frequent teasing and bullying that he receives from his classmates. Frank reports that his teachers never intervene in these situations, even when it was happening right in front of them. Frank has one friend at school, a boy who also appears to be somewhat of an outcast. None of the school-age children in his family attend school regularly and no one in his immediate or extended family has ever finished secondary school.

Introduction

In the past decade, a burgeoning research literature has emerged delineating the experiences and outcomes of children and youth such as Frank, that is children and youth experiencing a range of problems that render them “at risk” for developing into healthy and productive adults (e.g., Brambring, Losel, & Skowronek, 1989; Dryfoos, 1990; Haggerty, Sherrod, Garnezy, & Rutter, 1994; Luthar et al., 1997; McWhirter et al., 1998). Indeed, the “at risk” concept has proliferated in recent years and has become a general term used to describe young people on a trajectory toward a myriad of problems that threaten their present and future adjustment. What the above case serves to illustrate is the range of problems and issues that the at-risk label comprises – such as learning difficulties, poverty, social relationships, and family and school contexts.

Various statistics have been presented to describe the prevalence of children and youth at risk. Overall, it appears that risk prevalence varies with respect to the problem identified as well as the data source. For instance, data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD; 1995) indicate that approximately 15 to 30 percent of school-age children are “at risk” (p. 21). In Canada there is a growing number of children with risk factors that compromise both their present and future adjustment (Steinhauer, 1996). According to recent statistics reported in the Report of the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program 1999 (Canadian Education Statistics Council, 2000), in 1996, approximately one child in five 15 years of age and younger was living in low-income households and thus considered to face greater educational difficulties than those children living in higher-level income households. With regard to school completion, an estimated 30 percent of 15- to 20- year-olds do not complete secondary school (Statistics Canada, 1993). Finally, epidemiological estimations of prevalence of mental health problems indicate that approximately 20% of children and youth are at risk and require support and assistance (e.g., Offord, 1986).

For decades researchers have sought to identify the antecedents and correlates of problems that render children and youth “at risk.” Research journals are replete with studies delineating the phenomenon of being “at risk.” Moreover, in any daily newspaper one only needs to read the front page to witness the lamentable state of our children and youth and the risk factors they confront. As can be surmised, the at risk term has been applied to children and youth experiencing a wide array of difficulties, ranging from exposure to perinatal stress, poverty, abuse, death of a parent to school

failure, teenage pregnancy, and juvenile delinquency. And, while there may be many ways in which these categories intersect with one another, there is not yet a universally agreed upon definition for the “at risk” term. In a discussion of the proliferation of the at risk label, Tidwell and Corona Garrett (1994) state “A term applied too often and too widely loses all meaning. It is necessary either to abandon the use of the term at risk or to attend to the meaning of ‘risk’ as it applies to future probabilities” (p. 444).

This paper reviews the literature on definitions of risk and the “at risk” label. In the first of the papers’ three sections, past and present definitions of the “at risk” concept are explored. This section also highlights several emerging themes regarding the meaning of risk. New directions and needed research that have the potential of contributing to our understanding of the nature and function of risk are presented in the second section. The importance of recasting our focus from risk to resiliency is discussed in the concluding part of the paper.

Conceptualizing Risk: Retrospect and Prospect

Origins of the “At Risk” Concept

Descriptions of children and youth at risk have been around for many years. Although the precise origins of the “at risk” term appear to be somewhat obscure, it appears that the concept has its roots both in medicine and education. With regard to medicine, the emergence of the risk concept can be traced back to epidemiology research (Garnezy, 1994). From this perspective, psychologists examining risk have been primarily concerned with identifying the factors that “accentuate or inhibit disease and deficiency states, and the processes that underlie them” (Garnezy, 1994, p. 9). The belief is that if these antecedents or determinants of risk can be found, effective preventative efforts can be implemented.

In the educational literature, the term “at risk” has received considerable popularity in North America over the last two decades (e.g., Dryfoos, 1990; Ralph, 1989; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). Cuban (1989), when discussing the origins of the “at risk” concept in relation to schooling and urban school reform, posits that the description of at-risk students heralds back almost 200 years when members of the New York Free School Society asked the state legislature to create a school for children from impoverished families because of the deleterious outcomes these children would face if not for some sort of public intervention. Cuban (1989) explains that, for almost two centuries, poor children, who were often nonwhite and from non-dominant cultures, were perceived to be “at risk” because of the financial drain they posed to the larger society. This fear of increased spending for welfare and penitentiaries, according to Cuban, resulted in the establishment of public schools and the implementation of laws for compulsory schooling. What is important to note here, is that it appears that, in this early approach, the “at risk” label was used interchangeably with poverty. Moreover, the risk was seen as being primarily located within the individual or family, rather than the society or culture. What is implicit in this description as well is that society must take control in order to avert substantial future costs to society.

Although arising from contrasting and seemingly disparate theoretical traditions, the descriptions of risk appear to be in concert in psychology and education – both disciplines predominantly approach the identification of at risk from a deficit model and both primarily locate the problem of risk within the individual and/or family. Cuban (1989) asserts, that over the last century, educators have defined the problem of low achievement among “at risk” students in two ways: students who perform poorly in school are seen as being responsible for their own poor achievement, and students who perform poorly in school do so because of inadequacies in their familial backgrounds. As shall be seen, this myopic approach to characterizing “at risk” limits the utility of the label and, thus narrows the effectiveness of prevention and intervention efforts.

Extant Definitions of Risk

During the past two decades, the term 'at risk' has gained prominence across a variety of disciplines, including education, psychology, social work, and medicine. As noted above, despite its recent popularity in the literature, the "at risk" concept has been around for centuries. In the words of Richardson et al. (1989), the "at risk" label "appears to be simply a new label for phenomena which are as old as public school itself" (p. 3).

A major difficulty in gaining any understanding of what precisely it means to be identified as "at risk" is that the use of the term frequently varies. Indeed, there exist multiple meanings, ambiguous terminology, and inconsistencies in the manner in which the term is applied. Moreover, because the "at risk" concept is vague and obscure, its efficacy in facilitating the design and implementation of successful preventative and intervention efforts is limited. For example, if a student is identified as being at risk and referred for special programming, it would obviously be important for teachers to be cognizant of what the "at risk" label comprises. That is, it is important that we have an operational definition of "at risk" and have some consensus regarding the types of behaviors and characteristics that this label comprises so that we approach at risk students from a common starting point.

Some authors use very broad definitions of what it means to be at risk. For instance, Dryfoos (1990) posits that the "at risk" label be applied to those individuals who are at risk of not maturing into responsible adults. Ginzberg, Berliner, and Ostow (1988), in describing adolescents at risk, use the term "ineffective performers" -- those individuals who would engage in criminal activities and not be able to sustain a long-term marital relationship, support themselves or their dependents, or serve in the armed forces. The inability to function in adulthood roles is also reflected in the OECD's (1995) operational definition of "at risk" which is as follows, "...children and youth 'at risk' are viewed as those failing in school and unsuccessful in making the transition to work and adult life and as a consequence are unlikely to be able to make a full contribution to active society" (p. 21).

In the OECD (1995) report entitled "Our Children At risk," the authors report that there is general consensus among OECD Member countries about the determination of who is "at risk." Although most of the OECD Member countries agreed that the label should focus on those children and youth identified as socially disadvantaged, some countries also included those children with disabilities with particular reference to those children with physical and mental handicaps. With regard to this issue, it appears that the distinction between "special educational needs" and "at risk" becomes somewhat obscure. What unites the concepts, however, is the notion the failure of the student to learn effectively in school.

In the educational literature, many terms have been used to describe at risk students, including disadvantaged, culturally deprived, low ability, dropout prone, alienated, disenfranchised, low-performing, and remedial (Lehr & Harris, 1988; Natriello et al., 1990). Indeed, educators sometimes use the term to describe students who are at risk of dropping out of secondary school, sometimes to refer to students who are not acquiring the skills necessary for successful transition into the work force, and sometimes to denote students with learning problems that limit their future career choices. In contrast, psychologists, social workers, and counsellors often use the term in describing children and youth with the potential of developing emotional and behavioral problems.

In the literature on developmental psychopathology, risk has been defined as "those factors that, if present, increase the likelihood of a child developing an emotional or behavioral disorder in comparison with a randomly selected child from the general population" (Rae-Grant et al., 1989, p. 262). In their recent review of the research of risk in childhood and adolescence, Gore and Eckenrode (1994) report that there exist three major ways in which the notion of risk in the psychological literature has been considered to date. The first approach primarily relied upon the identification of broad indicators of family socioeconomic status and familial mental health for

operationalizing risk status. An example of this line of research is illustrated in the longitudinal research of Werner and Smith's (1992) classic investigation of the biological and psychosocial risks of Hawaiian children. In this study, children who were identified as high risk were those who were born into poverty or whose parents had little education or were alcoholic or mentally ill. The second approach described by Gore and Eckenrode concerns the examination of stressful life events. This line of research, they argue, is characteristic of epidemiological research and is widely utilized for assessing a variety of proximal social role and situational stressors that are associated with physical and mental health status. Finally, the third research strategy that, according to Gore and Eckenrode (1994) has played a dominant role in the research on child and adolescent mental health and development, has focused on critical singular events, such as parental divorce, family illness, or transition to puberty. In all of this research it is acknowledged that the examination of risk involves the recognition that there are individual differences in vulnerability to stress and risk factors.

What becomes apparent is that the way the term has been used across discipline has led to ambiguities in the meaning of the term and the representativity of the ways in which risk has been concretely operationalized. Despite the lack of consensus with which the term has been utilized, however, there exist some common threads. Specifically, as described by McWhirter et al. (1998) the at risk term is used "to denote a set of presumed cause-and-effect dynamics that place the child or adolescent in danger of negative future events." (p. 7).

Emergent Themes in the Risk Literature

During the past decade, there has been a tremendous accumulation of knowledge regarding the examination of risk in children and youth. Because the literature in this area is so vast, this review of emerging issues in the risk literature was necessarily selective. Several recent edited books (e.g., Haggerty et al., 1994; Luthar et al., 1997) present a more comprehensive review of current knowledge of risk factors in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Following, is a brief discussion of several of the salient dimensions of risk of which we need to be cognizant.

Risk status should be viewed as steps along a continuum. The concept of risk also contains danger of other misunderstandings. For example, it is important to recognize that risk status is not a unitary category, but instead should be seen as a series of steps along a continuum, ranging from low risk to high risk (McWhirter et al. 1998).

Risk factors are multidimensional and interactive. The determination and operationalization of which children and youth are and are not at risk is multifaceted and systemic. Moreover, risk status is dynamic and context dependent -- it is not a fixed quality, but can vary across time, circumstances, and contexts.

Risk factors include factors from the individual level reaching far out to the societal level. Bronfenbrenner (1979) has provided a theoretical framework that is particularly well-suited for understanding the multilevel and interactive nature of risk factors. In his ecological framework, Bronfenbrenner (1989) views the child as being nested within a complex network of interconnected systems, ranging from lower order proximal input directly experienced by the individual in a specific microsystem (e.g., school, family) to higher order cultural and social belief systems that cut across and influence multiple microsystems.

There exist an array of risk factors that range from the individual level out to the socio-cultural level:

Individual Factors (e.g., low IQ, poor social problem solving skills.)

Family Factors (e.g., low family cohesion, mentally ill parent, low SES)

Peer Factors (e.g., rejection by peers, victimization)

School Factors (e.g., low teacher support, school alienation)

Social/Community Factors (e.g., few community supports)
Social-cultural Factors (e.g., socio-historical and political ideologies that lead to stereotypes)

Recent research has identified the importance of examining multiple contexts simultaneously when determining risk propensity. Children and youth live and grow up in multiple contexts – families, peers, schools, neighborhoods, communities, and cultures. Moreover, children and youth, their families, their communities, and the larger society develop; they show systematic and successive change over time (Lerner, 1986). The changes that occur should be seen as interdependent and not be viewed in isolation of one another -- changes that occur at one level of organization are reciprocally related to changes within other levels. Thus, there exists a need to examine the conjoint influences of those multiple contexts on risk and outcomes. Additionally, because risk factors are multilevel and systemic, interventions that approach risk from a “single-issue” perspective (i.e., they address only one single risk factor, for example, poor reading ability or lack of social skills, or a single negative outcome, for example school dropout) may be ineffective. Indeed, fragmented interventions have been found to lead to unnecessary duplication of efforts as well as poor long-term outcomes (Kazdin, 1993; Tolan, Guerra, & Kendall, 1995). Thus, instead of approaching risk factors as independent and isolated problems, researchers and educators today recognize the necessity of designing complex and comprehensive interventions that take into consideration multiple contexts of functioning (i.e., family, school, and peer group). Additionally, it is important to not only intervene at multiple levels simultaneously, but to design interventions that focus on factors that lead to problematic functioning (i.e., risk factors) along with strengths within the child and his or her social milieu (i.e., protective factors) (Kazdin, 1997).

The “at risk” label assumes prediction. What are the markers of risk? Concepts such as *antecedent conditions* or *predisposing factors* which create a state of susceptibility have been used throughout the literature. A vast array of research exists identifying both the events that lead to problems as well as what the consequences of the behaviors have been. Whereas some researchers use the “at risk” label to identify children and youth who possess one or more risk factors, such as a genetic predisposition for a disorder or low socioeconomic status, other researchers utilize outward signs of failure and distress, such as truancy, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, depression, and suicide to identify children and youth at risk (Ralph, 1989). This latter approach appears to be particularly in vogue in recent years. According to Tidwell and Corona Garrett (1994), “Although *at risk* is defined, implicitly and explicitly, with reference to both social ills and personal pathology, current usage drops the element of prediction the words *at risk* literally imply. Combined in a single label, “at-risk,” the words have lost much of their developmental meaning” (p. 444).

Successful intervention efforts designed to ameliorate risk have been elusive because such programs are too fragmented and “do not deal with the antecedents or the predisposing factors that lead to the behavior, but only with the outcome” (Dryfoos, 1990, p. 4). It is important to note that obtaining the label of “at risk” and engaging in risky behaviors is not equivalent. According to Blum (1998), during the past two decades we have come to use the terms “at risk” and “risk taking” behaviors interchangeably. Such an approach leads to conceptual imprecision regarding what fundamentally constitutes risk and therefore interferes with identifying whom to help and how (Ralph, 1989). Whereas risk refers more to antecedents conditions that diminish the likelihood of successful adjustment, risk taking behaviors refer to the outcomes themselves.

Risk is multiplicative. There exist a number of research studies demonstrating that, exposure to multiple risk increases the likelihood of having one or more problem outcomes. For instance, Rutter (1980) found that those children experiencing only one risk factor were as likely to experience the outcomes of those children with no risk factors. For those children with two or more

risk factors, unfavorable outcomes increased four times, and for those children with four risk factors, the chance of negative outcomes increased ten times.

The nature and timing of risk factors may differentially affect outcomes. The effect of exposure to risk factors on adjustment may be more deleterious at specific developmental stages than at others, as illustrated in a recent study conducted in Canada. More specifically, Landy and Tam (1998) examined the contribution of multiple risk factors in predicting problems among a sample of children from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth collected in Canada in 1994-1995. Their results revealed that, for infants and young children, the total number of risk factors to which they had been exposed was enough in predicting problems. In contrast, for children aged 4 to 11 years, detailed information regarding the nature of the risk factor – single parent family -- provided a better explanation than the sheer number of risk factors.

Risk propensity is heightened during periods of transition. According to Graber and Brooks-Gunn (1996), “understanding how individuals navigate developmental transitions is a the crux of understanding risk and resilience across the lifespan.” (p. 768) Transitions have been viewed as particular stressful points in development because they require reorganization at either the structural or functional level (Rutter, 1994). Transitions and transition-linked turning points allow for the opportunity to fully explore the emergence of new behaviors. Early adolescence, for example, is viewed as a critical transition point in development because of the multitude of rapid changes that occur across several domains and contexts. Such changes undoubtedly create greater vulnerability, but also presents special opportunities for intervention and for the rerouting of developmental trajectories towards more positive outcomes. In contrast to the transition to adolescence, research examining the transition from adolescence to young adulthood is rather sparse.

With regard to early childhood, the transition to elementary school is considered to be a major developmental milestone that is particularly critical for a child’s future school adjustment (Perry & Weinstein, 1998). When children embark on their first years of formal schooling, they are confronted with a number of varied and evolving demands. How well children cope with the transition to formal schooling lays the foundation for their future academic, social-emotional, and behavioral development (Entwisle & Hayduk, 1988).

New Directions and Needed Research

Delimiting the nature and function of risk and the “at risk” concept is a necessary first step for informing both research and policy. Additionally, for any area of scientific inquiry to move forward, there is a need to identify themes that assist in the elucidation of the field of study. Such an approach will, hopefully, yield increasingly more integrative and comprehensive models of the topic under consideration. Thus, several issues that have emerged in recent research on risk are delineated below.

Clarifying the Role of the School Context in Facilitating or Reducing Risk

Although researchers have examined a wide range of factors associated with risk, community as well as biological, the primary focus in the risk literature has been on individual and familial factors. Far less attention has been given to the role of the social context in contributing to and/or protecting against risk. Take, for instance, the role of schools. It has been suggested that the school context provides another critical, but often overlooked, sphere of influence on risk (e.g., Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994). Little research attention, however, has been given identifying the school factors that may serve to mediate the relation between risk exposure and outcomes.

Understanding how particular aspects of the school environment relate to both adaptive and maladaptive academic and behavioral functioning has become an increasingly important topic in the field of educational psychology (e.g., Eccles et al., 1993; Roeser et al., 1996). Nevertheless, research on the role of schools in facilitating or deterring risk has been limited in at least two significant ways. First, research efforts have focused almost exclusively on academic outcomes of “at risk” children and youth rather than on broader interrelated patterns among cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioral functioning, despite the fact that research has demonstrated the ways in which these aspects of functioning are intertwined (e.g., Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996; Wentzel, 1991, 1996). For instance, in a meta-analysis of factors related to early learning difficulties, social-emotional variables predicted academic achievement as well as or better than variables of intellectual ability, sensory deficits, or neurological factors (Horn & Packard, 1985). Of particular importance for understanding children’s school adjustment is that research has linked children’s prosocial and responsible behavior and their academic functioning – children who are empathic, interact prosocially with their peers, and demonstrate appropriate classroom conduct and compliance achieve better in school than those students who do not exhibit such behaviours (Wentzel, 1993). Second, research efforts have linked “risk” status with characteristics of individuals (e.g., cognitive ability, temperament) or families (e.g., socioeconomic status, parent-child interactions, family structure) and have neglected the salient role that the school context may play in fostering or lessening risk.

The potent role of the school context in promoting risk has received recent research attention. Research has consistently demonstrated that the early adolescent years mark the beginning of a downward spiral that leads some adolescent to experience school failure and subsequently dropout. Research conducted by Eccles and her colleagues (1993) suggests that the ethos of the secondary school itself may, in fact, be causing many of the motivational and academic problems that emerge in early adolescence. Drawing from Hunt’s (1975) person-environment fit theory, Eccles et al. (1993) argue that the increases in behavioral problems and decreases in motivation typically seen in early adolescence are a result of developmentally inappropriate educational environments for students, that is a consequence of a developmental stage-environment mismatch. For instance, adolescence is characterized by an emerging need for autonomy and self-determination. Midgely and Feldlaufer (1987) found, however, that grade 7 students and their teachers in their first year of junior high school reported fewer classroom decision-making opportunities than did these same students and their teachers one year earlier in grade 6.

Throughout the literature it is recognized that a child’s and adolescent’s functioning in school is inextricably linked with his or her sense of belonging and connection to the school environment and his or her relationships with peers and teachers within it. Recent work by Roeser, Midgely, and Urda (1996) demonstrates this point. In a study examining the association between early adolescents’ perceptions of the school environment and their psychological and behavioral functioning, Roeser et al. conclude that “school environments that are perceived as supportive, caring, and as emphasizing individual effort and improvement are related to a more adaptive pattern of cognition, affect, and behavior than are . . . school environments that are perceived as less supportive and emphasizing relative ability and competition” (p. 417). Perceiving positive and strong connections to school have implications for current school functioning as well as future educational plans. For instance, in a recent large scale study examining the health status and psychological well-being of 25,838 adolescents grades 7 to 12 in British Columbia (McCreary, 1999), adolescents identified as having a high level of school connectedness were more likely to report lower levels of truancy and plans for post-secondary education than those adolescents identified as having low levels of school connectedness. Taken together, these studies highlight the significance of school belonging in determining students’ present and future educational functioning.

Understanding the Perspectives of Children and Youth

According to Rutter (1993), one cannot assume risk given the overall family environment – different children, given their biological predisposition, birth order, gender, age, etc. – may be differentially affected by different environments. Thus, it is necessary to consider individualized aspects of children’s experiences and to obtain the perspective of the child and youth regarding their experiences of risk. It is increasingly being recognized that it is important to collect data that permit children and youth opportunities to describe their own perceptions of their experiences. Indeed, one concern that has recently been voiced by researchers is the scarcity of descriptive and qualitative research that reflects children and adolescents’ organization of their own experiences. Such research has implications not only for theory, but has tremendous potential for influencing the design and implementation of effective interventions. In the words of Zaslow and Takanishi (1993), “The failure to take such a step may lead to a flawed understanding of normal development; it may also limit the effectiveness of interventions” (p. 190).

Delineating Processes, Mechanisms, and Contexts

Compas, Hinden, and Gerhardt (1995), argue that while risk factors be serviceable in the identification of individuals with a high likelihood of developing problems, such static markers do not help to elucidate why such problems develop. As a way to understand why some children succumb to even modest stress whereas others seem to ‘beat the odds’ and remain resilient in the face of what appear to be overwhelming risk factors, researchers have become interested in understanding the processes and mechanisms by which children and youth deal with adverse life stressors.

It is important that the development and implementation of intervention efforts arise from sound theoretical models concerning the mechanisms and processes that lead to problematic adjustment, and from basic empirical research in which these processes and mechanisms are evaluated (Dodge, 1993). Clearly, researchers need to examine which events cause children and youth to follow different pathways, and what factors can alter the trajectory of both positive and negative behaviors.

Refocusing Our Efforts from Risk to Resiliency

It should be noted that risk is just one factor examined in the larger area of adaptation and competence. A promising framework for efforts to reduce and prevent risk factors focuses on examining the ways in which individuals, despite the presence of risk factors, develop in healthy ways -- are resilient and “beat the odds.” The study of resiliency has increased dramatically in recent years (e.g., Blum, 1998; Garnezy, 1991; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994). The popularity of this construct is due, in part, to the increased recognition that the key to prevention and intervention efforts is the identification of factors that lead to success rather than to just those factors that reduce risk. And thus, a paradigm shift has occurred as illustrated in the following quotation: “There is a regrettable tendency to focus gloomily on the ills of mankind and on all mankind and on all that can and does go wrong . . . The potential for prevention surely lies in increasing our knowledge and understanding of the reason why some children are not damaged by deprivation . . .” (Rutter, 1979, p. 49). Recasting our priorities in terms of facilitating positive adjustment among children and youth, rather than only limiting risk, extends our focus to all children and youth, instead of those just exhibiting risk factors.

Conclusion

Although the term “at risk” has witnessed considerable popularity in recent decades, there is considerable lack of clarity about the meaning of this concept. The research literature lacks a consistent vocabulary, conceptual framework, and methodological approach. Especially noteworthy is the primary focus on variables associated with individual-level characteristics of risk and the lack

of attention given to the role of contexts – such as schools – in promoting or reducing risk. The “at risk” label is relative and not absolute, it is the result of environmental as well as individual factors, it is not a fixed quantity, and it is dependent on context. Moreover, risk is not a monolithic construct, that, once achieved, will always be present. It cannot be seen as a fixed attribute of the student, because the circumstances in which it may occur are dynamic.

As we move into the new millennium, the importance of promoting positive development in our children and youth in Canada becomes paramount. In today’s complex society, we need to take special care to encourage and facilitate our young people to reach their greatest potential. It is therefore critical that we make concerted efforts to devise the most effective interventions that are based on strong conceptual models and sound research. Only then will we be in a place to foment the development of our nation’s children and youth.

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