

The Perpetuation of Risk: Organizational and Institutional Policies and Practices in a Title 1 School

Brenda MacMahon

University of North Carolina, Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

This is an empirical mixed methods study that examined educators' understandings of student risk factors. The research was conducted in a Title 1 combination middle high school in the Florida panhandle that had been open for three years and had received a grade of F school in each of these years. Regulated by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), Title 1 refers to the section of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) initially passed in 1965 and revised as Improving The Academic Achievement Of The Disadvantaged in 2004 (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Ostensibly designed to improve education for low-income and minoritized students, financial assistance in the form of grants and allocations are available to schools that demonstrate compliance as outlined in this section as well as other mandates of ESEA some of, will be discussed in this paper. In Florida, schools are graded according to the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), which includes the following categories: achievement in reading, math, science, and writing, as well as annual learning gains in reading and mathematics. Schools can also be awarded bonus points if "at least 50% of their 11th and 12th grade students pass the FCAT retake in reading and math" (Florida Department of Education, 2009a). Even with the addition of remedial scores, the school where this research was conducted has been designated as failing every year.

The question, which guided the research for this paper was: how do educators in this failing school understand risk as it impacts on student achievement? This study identifies individual, family, and community factors as well as school policies and practices that place students at risk. It expands the existing knowledge base related to school improvement and is important in the United States at a time when a focus on narrowing the achievement gap in schools is at the forefront of research and practice. This work also furthers discussions (Anyon, 2005; Au, 2009; Gabbard & Atkinson, 2009; Leyva, 2009; McMahon & Armstrong, 2003, 2010; Nieto, 2005; Shields, 2009) regarding hegemonic policies and practices of schooling and how entrenched deficit discourses, including conceptions of students at-risk, negatively impact on students from minoritized communities.

Much of the educational dialogue surrounding students at risk focuses on factors, such as poverty or visible minority status, which, in and of themselves do not automatically entail risk. In spite of this, they are often highlighted as the factors, which locate risk in students, families, and communities enabling educators, schools, districts, and states to avoid taking responsibility or educational factors, which create, or at the very least perpetuate academic risk for some students. This research was conducted in Florida where for years there has been an intensive focus on student proficiency, and student and school grading and reporting. In spite of this, Senator Dan Gerber claimed that even though no other state tests as much as Florida, the state received an A in moving students to minimal proficiency, an F in funding, and an F in college readiness (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Jv9L35HhiA>). The concept of what constitutes proficiency is problematic and as the disparity between grades for proficiency and college preparedness demonstrate, a focus on minimal proficiency is especially troubling.

Researchers (Bracey, 2008; Peterson & Hess, 2008; Ravitch & Chubb, 2009) have identified a number of issues related to notions of proficiency and high stakes testing as a means of redressing academic inequities. The un-standardized nature of proficiency standards is identified by Ravitch and Chubb's (2009) who claim that "the federal demand that all students will be proficient by 2014 has led states to embrace a very loose definition of proficiency. Most states are now using NAEP's "basic" achievement level as their definition of proficiency" (p. 51). The definition of basic is illusive in that it denotes "partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade assessed", which is determined by the attainment of a "cut score" (<http://nationsreportcard.gov/glossary.asp>). Ravitch and Chubb (2009) further contend that the current state practices of adopting lowered and minimal definitions could relegate students to lifetimes of poverty by limiting their educational options. This situation needs to change so that:

[o]n a practical level, "proficiency" should describe the knowledge and skills necessary to be "college and career ready" in the 21st century. Proficiency should capture the "common core" of competencies deemed necessary for all students to have a chance at success after high school. (p. 52)

Additionally, Peterson and Hess (2008) argue that, "By setting widely varying standards, states render the very notion of proficiency meaningless" (p. 70/72). They also identify a gap in coherence between state and national proficiency standards, which "reflects a national trend in lowering of state standards" (p. 71). Furthermore, Bracey (2008) identifies a number of problems with proficiency standards; including that:

[A] student at any of the levels will get items right that should be too difficult and get items wrong that should be a cinch... a cut score only establishes the height of a hurdle... Focusing on the cut score — and currently that's what's being done obsessively — also leads to a form of gaming the system, notably giving extra attention to the kids who are close to making the leap (the "bubble kids") and paying less attention to the "hopeless cases" and "sure things."

The majority of students in the school where this research took place might well be assigned to the neglected category of hopeless cases. They are for the most part students who exhibit individual and familial risk factors and the collateral damage in a national obsession with having all students achieve basic levels of proficiency and the existence of the (perhaps widening) achievement gap. In this climate much of the research, policy, and practice focus on narrow conceptions of schooling, ignoring questions about schools' roles and responsibilities in mitigating risk.

Review of Literature

As is the case with much of the language used to describe student and school failure and success, terms such as risk has multiple and often interconnected and contested meanings, which differ in kind as well as degree. Research identifies factors, which although they do not automatically mean that any particular student is at risk, are identified as common to students at risk. Academic risk may be associated with individual, family, community, and school characteristics. Although "any student may begin to perform marginally or poorly, regardless of factors related to economics, gender, ethnicity, or family structure" (Barr & Parrett, 2001, p. 25), the effect of these factors multiply exponentially as more of them are present. Dissonance between schools and students entails that for students risk factors include: living in poverty,

membership in a minority race or ethnic group, first language acquisition other than English, single-parent family composition, parents' low level of education, and rural geographic status (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Bessant, 2002; Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; Marchesi, 1998; Pallas, 1989; Peart & Campbell, 1999). The presence of multiple factors increases the probability of risk. For example, Peart and Campbell (1999) point out the "confounding of poverty and minority status" (p. 271) in the lives of students, which affect students' vision of education as a means of achieving success. In addition, factors in schools, which increase students' risk of academic failure include: irrelevant and meaningless curriculum; absence of authentically caring educators; lack of respect from teachers and administrators; low and negative expectations by educators and the students themselves.

Distal and Proximate Risk

Masten, Best, and Gamezy (1991) distinguish between distal risks, such as social class, which are mediated for a child, and proximal risks, for example incompetent parental figures or ineffective schools, which directly impinge on a child. Even given these distinctions, there are still questions about the impacts of individual instances of adversity and cumulative or chronic risk stressors. It is also often difficult to draw clear distinctions between personal vulnerabilities and environmental adversities since school performance, and marginalized group membership influences how individuals are perceived by others and how they configure their own life-chances. Norman (2000) supports a view of the contextual or relational nature of resiliency with his contention that "a resilient or adaptive outcome is a process of interaction between environmental and personal factors. If circumstances change, outcomes may be different" (Norman, 2000, p. 4). According to Hixson and Tinzmann (1990), being academically at risk is exacerbated by expectations of failure by both teachers and students. This downward spiral of poor performance becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy for both teachers and students. Dei, Holmes, Mazzuca, McIsaac, and Campbell (1997) report that due in large part to a lack of encouragement by teachers; students internalize negative self-concepts, which serve to compromise both personal and cultural self-esteem.

There are however, factors that place children at risk in terms of health and well-being in general and academics in particular. Johnson and Perkins' (2009) compilation of research on children at-risk found that compounding risk factors related to poverty include an absence of preventative and curative dental and medical attention because of the absence of funded health care. They also identified community environmental issues, which increase risk and include, "frequent moves, job loss or low wage jobs, unsafe neighborhoods, and exposure to crime and drugs lack of professional role models, single-parent families, and fewer opportunities outside their community" (Johnson & Perkins, 2009, p. 128). Reporting on a Baltimore study, they recount that:

the risk of dropout increased for students as early as the first grade for those who were born to teenage moms, living in single-parent households, or living in stressful homes due to death, divorce, or relocations...boys were more prone to dropping out of school than girls...85% to 91% of the low- or medium SES students from Baltimore who were retained in middle school became dropouts...is students are low SES, their dropout risk is doubled, and prior to high school, their academic standing and school behavior drastically influenced the predictability rate that they would leave school early. (Johnson & Perkins, 2009, p. 127)

This depiction of students and academic risk seems to locate the problem and thus the responsibility within the student, the family and the community. This mindset is reinforced by their definition of what constitutes an ‘at-risk student’ with its emphasis on individual students’ behaviors “including absenteeism, performing below academic potential or participating in activities that may be harmful to self and/or others such as substance abuse, threats and intimidation, and physical violence are some behaviors that place students at risk” (Johnson & Perkins, 2009, p. 123).

Conversely, Condly (2006) notes that children who live in poverty often attend impoverished schools. These schools, which are often “resource poor, short on qualified staff, and/or exist in dangerous neighborhoods” (Condly, 2006, p. 229) are involved in the perpetuation of risk for students. Additionally, “opportunities to learn in group settings and exposure to information-rich environments have been found to be less available to children in poverty, placing them at a disadvantage relative to affluent classmates”(Burney & Beilke, 2008, p. 305). The role that schools play in perpetuating risk for low income students is illustrated by Burney and Beilke’s (2008) finding that “students from the lowest quintiles of family income who had the best academic preparation earned bachelor’s degrees at a higher rate than most students from the highest quintile without a rigorous background” (p. 302)

The intersecting factors of poverty and visible minority status compound risk factors in schools for some students to the extent that in Florida, for example, high school graduation rates for Latino males is 49% and 38% for African American males (Schott Foundation, 2008). There are a number of school factors that contribute to these abysmal statistics. In addition to inexperienced and unqualified teachers, “schools with a higher minority and low-income student population are less likely to offer rigorous curricula and Advanced Placement course...Students from low-income, Black, Hispanic, or Native American groups are under-identified and underrepresented in rigorous coursework of any kind” (Burney & Beilke, 2008, p. 303). Research (Dei, Holmes, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Campbell, 1997; McMahan, 2007; McMahan & Armstrong, 2003; Solomon, 2006) with minoritized youth demonstrates the role that school policies and practices play in the disproportionate levels of academic risk experienced by Black, Latino, and First Nations’ students. Dei et al.’s (1997) study of Black Canadian youth who dropped out of school found that rather than dropping out, they felt pushed out of schools that were hostile, uninviting environments. The students’ experiences stand in stark contrast with research, which finds that “there is strong theoretical and empirical support for school connectedness as an important causal element in healthy youth development and as protection against health risk behaviors” (Faulkner, Adlaf, Irving, Allison & Dwyer, 2009, p. 313).

Method

This mixed methods approach consisting of a survey and interviews generated in-depth data from a school that, in spite of in spite of reforms designed to improve student success, has been designated as failing. The survey was completed by 30 of 45 faculty members for a return rate of 66.67%. It enabled me to elicit initial responses to questions about risk and the roles of schools and educators, as well as district, state, and federal level policies and practices. Data from the surveys was used to create questions for semi-structured interviews with 14 faculty members (31.11%) who represented a cross-section of school personnel. Three of the interviewees were administrators and 11 were teachers. The interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes and member checks provided participants with the opportunity to review and edit the

transcripts to ensure accuracy. This school was chosen for the study because the majority of students exhibited a number of distal risk factors, the school improvement plan focused on steps to address its failing designation and attain a pass, and the administrators were interested in the concept of resilience as a vehicle for increasing student achievement and school improvement.

Findings and Discussion

There was not a statistically significant difference between survey responses to questions about risk based on teacher/ administrator/counselor role or length of service. However, in response to the interview questions, which provided the participants an opportunity to provide in-depth information, noteworthy distinctions were evident across and within roles and experience. The respondents identified characteristics of risk in the community and the school. For the purposes of this discussion, distal risk factors are configured as features existing in the students, parents and community. Consistent with this focus on academic risk, proximal factors are identified as those generated by school, district, state, and national educational policies and practices.

Distal Risk

The students in this school community could be deemed academically at risk for a number of reasons. A number of distal risk factors associated race, ethnicity, economics, and parental levels of formal education were present in the community. For example, in comparison with the state average of eight percent of students who meet the criteria for free and reduced lunch programs, 73% of the students at this school qualify for these services (Bringing Learning to Life, 2009). When asked about economic opportunities, 21 (70%) of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that there are good economic prospects in this community, and 22 of 30 (73.3%) respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that teenagers have good job prospects in this community. Marrs, Hemmert, and Jansen (2007) report that “many rural schools are located in communities that are characterized by disadvantages that may contribute to school underachievement, such as poverty, vulnerabilities to economic downturns, declining populations, and lack of cultural resources and health services” (p. 30). As an extreme indication of poverty in the district, a teacher noted, “We have a lot of homeless teenagers around here.” Several of the participants referred to low socio-economic levels as contributing to student failure. One of the administrators observed, “There’s definitely a connection between economics and student achievement in school... What that connection is I’m not sure.” Other educators spoke of the feeling of economic futility that permeated the region. For example, one interviewee suggested that students internalized external messages, specifically “that this is an area that is non-productive.”

Consistent with previous research on student risk (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; Peart & Campbell, 1999), the respondents mentioned parents’ low level of education as contributing to academic underachievement. Educators identified parents’ low levels of formal education with students’ lack of academic achievement. “The great majority of our parents probably haven’t graduated from high school” meant that parents did not understand how the education system worked and could therefore not advise their children appropriately. The principal reflected:

They don't have mom or dad who was a college graduate telling them honey you've got to be in Algebra 1 and you need to do well because that's the course that's going to help you do well on the SAT. And you need this score on the SAT and your 10th grade year is the most important year in terms of high school. That's the year that the university—they don't have those types of things going on. They're sort of feeling their way in the dark.

In addition to poverty, being a member of a visible minority group membership and first language acquisition other than English are often identified as distal risk factors (Barr & Parrett, 2000). In this school, relative to the state average of eight percent, 92% of the students are members of visible minoritized groups composed of 68% African American, 23% Latino/Latina, and 1% multiracial (Bringing Learning to Life, 2009). Race was not identified by the participants as a factor in student success. The principal provided an example of ethnicity in the form of language acquisition that demonstrated the interconnectedness of external and internal risk factors by suggesting that increases in the “number of Spanish speaking students and parents” meant that the school needed to hire:

clerical support that can speak Spanish and a few teachers and counselors and administrators that can communicate with parents so when we're talking to a parent about something that a student did that normally would get them kicked out of school...that they understand what the issues are and they can help us mediate those issues at home and maybe the student won't end up getting suspended.

Proximal Risk

Even in terms of proximal risks, distinctions between factors that are external to the school and factors that are generated within the school system are not completely clear. Instead of examining educational policies and practices when behavioral indications of risk occur within schools, they are often causally linked to the student and his or her family and/or community. Donmoyer and Kos (1993) claim that: “Sometimes school performance variables such as absenteeism and below-grade-level academic performance are also cited as indicators of at-riskness, but these generally are seen as intervening variables caused by out-of-school factors” (p. 9). One of the administrators claimed that this was the case in this school where students are trapped in a battle over responsibility for their success and failure:

The teachers seem to have given up and the parents seemed to be disconnected. They maybe didn't have a positive experience in school and so they don't trust the school system in the first place. The teachers have maybe given up a little bit, given up on her kids and it's the student that's saying, “Let me into that college prep class. So I didn't score as high as I should have on that test, but I still want to go to college. Help me get in college.”

Unfortunately, this is not the case for the majority of the students in this school. As Barr and Parrett (2001) contend that “for the at-risk high school student, it is obvious that most schools have compounded the problem of poverty, dysfunctional families, low self-esteem with a decade-long barrage of humiliation, despair, and defeat” (p. 165).

For some of the respondents, the parents' low levels of formal education meant that the educators needed to assume more responsibility to ensure that the students understood how the educational system works and how to access financial and human resources. The feeling that some members of the faculty are instrumental in student underachievement was echoed by teachers and administrators alike. Some

faculty members demonstrated attitudes and behaviours, which Johnson (1994) identified as a desire to 'blame the victim' by locating the attributes of being at risk within the student and/or his or her family circumstance. "Based on medical model dogma, educational risk factors... are conceptually linked by the assumption that students are at risk by virtue of innate inadequacies that are the consequence of deprived unhealthy homes" (p. 37). This was reflected in a teacher's statement, "We need parental enforcement because if parents are not that concerned about education, then the kid is not going to be concerned about education and that makes it harder on the instructors." Another teacher said that parents have asked her to call them with updates. She said, "I can't be calling you. That's your child. I call teachers about my kids, you know? I don't look for the teachers to call me." As an afterthought and without appearing to appreciate the intrinsic irony she added, "Well, I used to before I got into education."

Participants provided examples of low expectations and teaching practices that disengaged students. Some of these were felt to be a result of the pervasive singular focus on the FCAT even though researchers such as Campbell and Levin (2009) claim that a focus on assessment is vital to improved student achievement. A few of the educators conceded that test while preparation was important, it should be approached differently than was currently the case. As one teacher explained:

I know that FCAT is something the children have to pass, but we need to integrate it instead of making it the big picture. We need to prepare our children for life after FCAT. FCAT is not the big all and the—even though we make it out to be. [We need to] train our teachers to integrate it. I taught back when the functional literacy test first came out. I was a business teacher, I taught business math. I didn't say to the students in my class this is a skill on the test and I need to drill you on this.

These sentiments were consistent with research that critiques the all-encompassing role that assessment plays in schools. Peim and Flint (2008) raise concerns about the simplistic nature of assessment-based approaches to equity and improvement that have pervaded all facets of schooling to the extent that, "assessment has intensified and consolidated its hold on the institutions, discourses, practices and identities that fall within the ambit of education." (Peim & Flint, 2008, p. 343). Additionally, Nagy (2000) distinguishes three intersecting roles that assessment plays in schools. Of these, only two; namely, accountability and instructional diagnosis, are acknowledged by the advocates of data-driven decision-making. The most insidious function of assessment is that of gate-keeping, which "determines who is granted a privilege such as admission or graduation" (Nagy, 2000, p. 262). The focus on school improvement and increased student achievement can serve as another mechanism for increasing academic risk for students especially since high-stakes tests restrict the curriculum so that "content that recognizes the diversity of student history, culture, and experience becomes increasingly unacceptable" (Au, 2009, p. 68). Even more sinister than the absence of the students' identities in the curriculum is the presence, in FCAT preparation materials, of works such as Rudyard Kipling's *The White Man's Burden*, which, even when and if they are deconstructed, serve to reinforce notions of White supremacy and Black and Brown inferiority. Needless to say, there is no reading of Herbert Harrison's *The Black Man's Burden* and the psychological damage caused by repeated attacks on their identities cannot be underestimated as minoritized students prepare for and write tests that disrespect and denigrate them.

Several teachers commented on the problematic nature of assessment driven schooling. For example, "we are supposed to be preparing them to be able to go out

into the world and function, but as I see it now, all we're doing is preparing them to take a test and that's taking away from the learning." Another teacher spoke of the tensions that educators experience in these testing times. "We're focused on it [FCAT] because we're being forced to focus on it because if we don't focus on it, our grades are not going to look good, then we don't get funds so we don't have what we need." One teacher emphasized state-wide nature of this phenomenon, "I think in the state of Florida with the FCAT, there's a tendency for teachers not to teach. There's a tendency for teachers to provide papers for kids to practice on rather than engaging students in the learning process. We do a lot of that."

Compounding the negative impacts of large scale testing and school grade reporting is federal legislation, which allows for parents of students in a Title 1 school, which "has not made adequate yearly progress in improving student achievement--- as defined by the state--for two consecutive years or longer and is therefore identified as needing improvement, corrective action or restructuring" (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). While this is articulated as a freedom of choice issue, it further marginalizes schools such as this one. In order to take advantage of this legislation parents need to know how to navigate educational institutions and consequently are by and large members of professional communities. The schools that accept students from failing schools seek those who will enhance their test scores and consequently the purported choice is not offered to the majority of the students. Transportation to other public and charter schools combined with compulsory tutoring must equal 20% of Title 1, Part A funds (Vergari, 2007, p. 312). An administrator observed:

There are lots of kids in this county who do not attend schools in our public school system. Quite frankly, I want those kids back. I want the entire community from private schools and schools in [X] County and as long as we have the student numbers and students, we have the same resources and a lot more than [X] County schools.

With those middle class students and their parents in the school, in addition to needed monies, she felt that there would be increased pressure and support for advanced placement courses, which (Burney & Beilke, 2008) identify as important for the success of minoritized students.

There was a sense from some of the participants that testing and teaching students in this community were exclusionary practices and some teachers' comments conveyed deficit attitudes toward students and their families. As one participant said, "focusing on the FCAT is not what they need. They need life skills because they're not being taught that at home. They need training in more vocational settings in this county." Another teacher spoke of lowered expectations for students she saw as permeating the teaching practices in this school. "We tell them [students] they don't have to learn it the first time, because then we'll put you in a remedial class, then we'll give you tutoring, then we'll give you after school, then we'll give you summer school, and maybe you'll pass it somewhere along the way." Research (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) has demonstrated the insidious impact of expectations as they become self-fulfilling prophecies. Barr and Parrett (2001) spoke to the significance of teachers' perceptions:

Students seem to live up to or down to the expectations of their teachers. If teacher believe that all students can learn, develop realistic expectations, and plan appropriate learning experiences, all youth can and will learn. Unfortunately, the

opposite is also true. It remains all but impossible for students to overcome negative perceptions held by others. (p. 71)

One of the teachers spoke of the impact on students of low expectations from the school and surrounding community: “This is an area where you’re going to work in the factories or you’re going to work in the fields and the kids hear that and it’s imbedded in them and they don’t set higher goals for themselves.” This internalization is consistent with Anyon’s (2005) findings that the lack of economic opportunities in local and wider communities contributes to beliefs held by poor and minoritized individuals that schools are not vehicles for social mobility and furthers their alienation from them. However, an assistant principal spoke of low expectations by teachers and the effect of student disengagement on student risk:

Teachers just want to do it their way. They’re not taking the students into consideration. It’s just all about them and you know this is what I want to do, this is what I want to cover, but you’re not taking the students—their culture, their likes and dislikes as a factor. Those types of things disengage students.

Another teacher identified two factors, which she claimed led to disengagement. The first was a lack of teaching expertise on the part of some members of faculty: “Most people take a book and they’ll use that same vocabulary in the book and they’re really not teaching. The kid can read the book. But, they don’t know how to use textbooks.” The second involved a desire to use more engaging resources and problems with current approved curricular materials, “as an English teacher, I hate our books.”

The junior teachers who were interviewed were ambivalent about their desire to be career educators and one novice teacher spoke of one factor in his decision to leave the profession being the faculty lounge filled with teacher discourse, which is antithetical to student success. “I have heard teachers complain about the subject they’re teaching, that they hate everything. Hate the subject you teach? So, they hate the subject they teach, they find it boring. How can you truly convey a love for something that you yourself don’t love?”

Some of the participants reported on aspects of the school, district, and state, which create academic risk for students. One program, which creates risk and yet was identified by some of the participants as positive was that approximately one quarter of the students were involved in The Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC). It provides another example of the regimentation of students in poor and marginalized communities. Related to increased military presence in low income schools and even more immoral was the amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act during the Iraq invasion that mandates schools receiving Title I funding “to provide students’ names, addresses, and telephone listings to military recruiters, when requested” (U. S. Department of Education, 2002). This is not the case for schools in predominately White and affluent communities. Instead students in ‘failing schools’ provide grist for the military machinery.

The most immediate district factor that teachers spoke about was the constant turnover of administrators. One teacher said, “We have had three principals in three years and so teacher involvement is not going to be fantastic because there hasn’t been enough continuity.” A teacher spoke of the need to adjust to the current principal’s efforts to build community “in this county, I think that’s a type of administrator we’ve been used to, that old style where, you know, get it done or you hit the road.” At the same time, veteran teachers were aware that this principal was

likely to be replaced at the end of the school year. The resulting lack of time or opportunity to develop relationships may have been partially responsible for the administrator/teacher disconnect regarding facets of schooling including student discipline. An administrator used the following example, which illustrated the need for some teachers to change how they approached interactions with students and student evaluation.

Right now we use grades as punishment. You're late for my class so you don't get to turn in the bell warmer or you don't get to take the quiz and oh you talk so much in my class and that's why you can't learn in the first place. We don't want them talking in class either, so we have to deal with that too. But we can't use grades as punishment - not when the stakes are so high.

This view was juxtaposed with a teacher's perception of a lack of support from administrators.

When I say you need to go to the office and you need to stay in there and they can deal with you, I'm getting administration bringing them back saying let them in. I followed all the steps you told me and the school board told me I need to do, but nothing's happening with this child. That undermines my authority in my classroom.

This perceived inequality extends beyond the school walls and the same teacher claimed that students of parents who are actively involved in the school and community receive preferential treatment. Even if they are suspended by school administrators, these are overturned at the district level. Furthermore she reflected "a child who does not have a parent there or a guardian who's actively involved gets sent home for weeks for the same thing that another student did and that's where my frustration lies." Discipline is not the only inequity the participants identified in the district.

One teacher contended that not only were there disparities across the state and the nation but even within the district there was an inequitable distribution of resources with areas that had "the most prominent people's children attending schools" benefiting saying, "This side of the district has always, from what I've seen, received less and that's unfair to the students because students on this side of the district should also have the same opportunities as other students." In this region of the district where students are deemed at-risk, a teacher also voiced the following concern about teacher allocation, "We have teachers who have just been thrown out here because they were no longer wanted in other settings within the district, and that's unfair." In spite of legislation, which mandates that every classroom be staffed by highly qualified teachers, Marrs, Hemmert and Jansen (2007) report that rural schools in economically disadvantaged areas "have difficulty recruiting and retaining highly qualified staff" (p. 30). This is especially true in states such as Florida, which ranks 45/50 in per pupil spending (http://www.epodunk.com/top10/per_pupil/index.html). However, even in this economic climate there is money to be made from the education budget. In addition to companies that create the standardized tests, according to Goodman and Gonzales (2004) and Carlson (2003), Neil Bush, brother of former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, and brother of former U. S. President George W. Bush who were instrumental in NCLB and FCAT legislation, heads a company that "sells software to help students prepare to take comprehensive tests required under the No Child Left Behind act" (Goodman & Gonzales, 2004). Having been banned for banking improprieties in a Savings and Loan scandal in the 1980s, Bush formed Ignite, which, at a cost of \$30 per student simplifies curriculum and includes

“controversial aspects [such as] a lesson that depicts the Seminole Wars in a cartoon football game -- "the Jacksons vs. the Seminoles" -- the animated Indians smashing helmets with animated white settlers” (Carlson, 2003).

Even more troubling is the discrepancy between state corrections and education budgets. In Florida, the per annum average cost for incarceration, probation, and parole is \$18,260.63 per person while annual state public school spending is \$6,056 per pupil (US Census Bureau, 2008). Of the state in general, and this district in particular, one of the experienced teachers reflected, “I think that all goes back to how legislatures and other people in the powers that be see what’s important. A lot of people don’t see education as being important. So, therefore funds are not put into place whereby you can get the best.” This may be a contributing factor to Florida’s high incarceration rate. “As of January 2010, the most current data available, Florida had the third largest state prison population in the United States, behind Texas and California” (Florida State, 2011).

Within the state there is a wide discrepancy in educators’ salaries and this school is located in one of the three lowest paying districts in the state (see Appendix). The incongruity between salaries here and districts within close proximity mean that educators choose to work here either because they are committed to working with and having positive impacts on the students and this community or because they are seen as employable by the other districts. A veteran teacher reported, “It’s all about when you don’t want that person on staff, requesting them to go somewhere else becomes a problem because nobody else wants them.” One of the novice teachers had a similar observation,

There are teachers here when they don’t want to be here and sometimes since it’s so low paying, who wants to do it? And so people go find other professions and you get people who don’t want to be here. So they hand out work, they sit down.”

Even with the salary constraints another teacher contended “it’s the district responsibility to hire or bring in teachers, good teachers.”

In addition to hiring practices, participants expressed frustration regarding ineffectual state training initiatives, which did not facilitate teacher professional development and, which contribute to students’ risk for academic failure. A senior English teacher contended:

I would like to see the state provide enough in-service training so that teachers feel comfortable teaching. Most people take a book and they’ll use that same vocabulary in the book and they’re really not teaching. The kid can read the book but they don’t know how to use textbooks...Sometimes you have to do a lot of different things to get to what we really want from a student and I would like to see...more practice in delivering a message to the student and reading coaches won’t do it. They follow the prescribed six steps. I think in-service so that we can train the teachers. The teachers all know what the state wants. We know the standards but, how do you use those standards in a meaningful way. That’s very important.

Reflective of research on the importance of teacher professional development and teacher preparation for working in high poverty schools (McKinney, Haberman, Stafford-Johnson, & Robinson, 2008), a novice teacher referred to her experiences with the disconnect between teaching in this school and the professional development sessions she attended during her first year as an educator.

I've been in training where they talk about a 75 minute class and it's like 'well that's great, but that's not the school I work at...I have 47 minutes, what you're talking about takes an hour and 15. I can't do that.' Unless you bring somebody else over here and you pull my kids out and you help them while I'm helping the rest of them. My biggest problem is when I have 30 students and 20 of them get it and 10 still don't. What do I do with those 10? So if you want me to get a solution, then give me an example worked out, let me look at it, see how it works. You come in and run my class one day and show me how it works. Then I'll be like, 'okay I can do this,' maybe.

This is in a school with a student population whose distal risk factors are such that "having effective teachers is a matter of life and death. These children have no life options for achieving decent lives other than by experiencing success in school" (Haberman, 1995, p. 1). As one of the administrators claimed, "It's that group that need really dedicated counselors, teachers who understand the community that they're serving and administrators who understand the community that they're serving and they haven't given up."

Conclusions and Recommendations

The leadership team in this school had both the vision and the skills to change the school climate to one, which decreased risk for students, increased student success, and improved school achievement. Unfortunately, shortly after these interviews were conducted, the administrative team was again reassigned. The school now has its fourth administrative team in four years with the same mandate of instantaneously raising test scores. However, continually changing administrator assignments is creating conditions within, which this cannot occur. Given the time frame, if changes in test scores were to occur immediately following the principal's placement at that school, they would more likely be a result of actions on the part of prior administrators than as a result of the current leadership. Policies and practices at district, state, and national levels, which focus on very narrow and ineffectual approaches to schooling, teacher compensation, and professional development exacerbate academic risk for vulnerable students.

The findings show a commitment on the part of individual educators to reduce risk and increase life chances for students in this school. Unfortunately, these random acts were not supported at institutional levels. Federal, state, and district policies and practices create a climate or risk wherein it is amazing that these teachers and administrators persevere or that any student in this school community attains academic success. The narrow curricular and testing focus and existing salary disparity combined with administrator turnover contribute to the district's difficulties in attracting enough strong educators to change the deficit thinking that pervades this school. While higher pay does not automatically translate into better teaching practices, it could serve to create a larger pool of applicants for teaching and administrative positions in the district. It would also support policy mandates that every classroom have highly qualified teachers, however that is defined. In addition to increasing teacher and administrator salaries, the district, state, and country need to: shift from testing paradigms to inclusive multicultural education that honors students identities; provide professional development programs that are authentic and meaningful for the teachers; support administrators in their attempts to change the cultures of schools; give them time to build responsive communities; create opportunities for dialogue about underlying issues: e.g. purposes of schooling, beliefs, values etc.; and allow administrators to choose faculty and support staff. In order to better serve schools in poor rural and urban communities, teacher and administrator

preparation programs need to reframe existing structures, curricula, and pedagogical practices and reassess their recruitment, admissions, and graduation policies and practices.

Author details

Brenda J. McMahon PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Educational Leadership, UNC Charlotte, 9201 University City Blvd., Charlotte, NC 28223-0001

Appendix

Table 1

	Average Years Experience	District Average Salary	State Average Salary	Salary Differential	% Salary Differential
Bachelors	10.12	34,874	43,745	-8,871	-21%
Masters	15.22	37,426	51,164	-13,783	-27%
Specialist	14.60	45,299	57,317	-12,018	-21%
Doctorate	4.8	34,574	56,685	-18,111	-32%
H.S, Assistant Principal		51,101	70, 818	-19,717	-28%
H. S. Principal		70,958	92,851	-21,893	-24%
District Superintendent		102,902	137,299	-34,397	-25%

References

- Anyon, J. (2005). *Radical possibilities: Public policy, urban education, and a new social movement*. New York: Routledge.
- Au, W. (2009). High-stakes testing and discursive control: The triple bind for non-standard student identities. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 11(2), 65-71.
- Barr, R. & Parrett, W. (2001). *Hope fulfilled for at-risk and violent youth: K – 12 programs that work* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bessant, J. (2002). Risk and nostalgia: The problem of education and youth unemployment in Australia: A case study. *Journal of Education and Work*, 15(1), 31-51.
- Bracey, G. (2008). Cut scores, NAEP achievement levels and their discontents: The attempts of political bodies to bludgeon public schools with arbitrary performance standards. *The School Administrator*, 6(65). Retrieved from: <http://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=5096> November 25, 2010.
- Burney, V. & Beilke, J. (2008). The constraints of poverty on high achievement. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 31(3), 295-321.
- Campbell, C. & Levin, B. (2009). Using data to support educational improvement. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and accountability*, 21, 47-65.
- Carlson, P. (2003). The Relatively Charmed Life Of Neil Bush: Despite Silverado and Voodoo, Fortune Still Smiles on the President's Brother. *Washington Post*, Sunday, December 28, D01.
- Chubb, J. & Ravitch, D. (2009). The future of No Child Left Behind: End it? Or mend it? *Education Next*, Summer, 49-56.
- Dei, G., Holmes, L., Mazzuca, J., McIsaac, E., & Campbell, R. (1997). *Reconstructing "drop-out": A critical ethnography of the dynamics of Black students' disengagement from school*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Education Information and Accountability Services (2009). Data Report. Retrieved from: <http://www.fldoe.org/eias/eiaspubs/pdf/tchsal09.pdf> April 21, 2010.
- Faulkner, G., Adlaf, E., Irving, H., Allison, K. & Dwyer, J. (2009). School disconnectedness: Identifying adolescents at risk in Ontario, Canada. *Journal of School Health*, 79(7), 312–318.
- Florida Department of Education. (2009a). Florida school grades. Retrieved from: <http://schoolgrades.fldoe.org/> December 12, 2009.
- Florida Department of Education. (2009b). School accountability reports. Retrieved from: <http://schoolgrades.fldoe.org/> March 10, 2010.

- Florida State.(2011). Government program summaries: Department of Corrections. Retrieved from: <http://www.oppaga.state.fl.us/profiles/1074/> September 8, 2011.
- Gabbard, D. & Atkinson, T. (2007). Stossel in America: A case study of the Neoliberal/Neoconservative assault on public schools and teachers. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 34(2),85-109.
- Goodman, A. & Gonzales, J. (2004). No Bush Left Behind: When You're Barred From Banking, Why Not Bank on Education? *Democracy Now: The war and peace report*. Retrieved from: http://www.democracynow.org/2004/3/12/no_bush_left_behind_when_youre September 09, 2011.
- Haberman, M. (1995). *Star teachers of children in poverty*. Indianapolis, IN: Kappa Delta Pi.
- Hixson, J.& Tinzmann, M. B. (1990). *Who are the "at-risk" students of the 1990s?* Portland, OR: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory.
- Johnson, A. & Perkins, G. (2009). What we know about at-risk students: Important considerations for principal and counselor leadership. *NASSP Bulletin*, 93(2), 122 – 134.
- Leyva, R. (2009). No Child Left Behind: A Neoliberal repackaging of Social Darwinism. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 17(1), 364-381.
- Marrs, H., Hemmert, E.,& Jansen, J. (2007). Trouble in a small school: At-Risk students in a rural high school. *Journal of At-Risk Issues*, 13(2), 29 -35.
- McKinney, D., Haberman, M., Stafford-Johnson, D. & Robinson, J. (2008). Developing teachers for high-poverty schools: The role of the internship experience. *Urban Education*, 43(1), 62-82.
- McMahon, B., & Armstrong, D. (2003). Racism, resistance and resilience. The 3 R's of educating students of Caribbean origin in Canadian schools. In T. Bastick & A. Ezenne (Eds.), *Teaching Caribbean students: Research on social issues in the Caribbean and abroad* (pp. 249-284). Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies.
- McMahon, B.& Armstrong, D. (2010).Unraveling the knots and strengthening the ties: Countering democratic racism. *International Journal of Urban Educational Leadership* 4(1), 160-172.
- Nagy, P. (2000). The three roles of assessment: Gatekeeping, accountability, and instructional diagnosis. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 25(4), 262-279.
- Nieto, S. (2005). Public education in the Twentieth Century and beyond: High hopes, broken promises, and an uncertain future. *Harvard Educational Review*, 75(1), 43-64.

- Peim, N. & Flint, K. (2008). Testing times: Questions concerning assessment for school improvement. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 41(3), 342-361.
- Peterson, P., & Hess, F. (2008). Few states set world-class standards: In fact most render the notion of proficiency meaningless. *Education Next, Summer*, 70-73.
- Public School Funding. (2003). Retrieved from:
http://www.epodunk.com/top10/per_pupil/index.html May 10, 2010.
- Rosenthal, R., & Jacobson, L. (1968). *Pygmalion in the classroom; teacher expectation and pupils' intellectual development*. New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston.
- Shields, C. M. (2009). Leveling the playing field in racialised contexts: Leaders speaking out about difficult issues. *International Journal of Educational Administration*, 37(3), 55-70.
- U.S. Census Bureau (2008). Retrieved from:
<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/12000.html> April 22, 2010.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2002). *Access to High School Students and Information on Students by Military Recruiters*. Retrieved from:
<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/hottopics/ht-10-09-02a.html> September 8, 2011.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2004). *Elementary & Secondary Education Title I — Improving The Academic Achievement Of The Disadvantaged*. Retrieved from: <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg1.html> September 09, 2011.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2010). Choice and Supplemental Educational Services Frequently Asked Questions. Retrieved from:
<http://www2.ed.gov/parents/schools/choice/choice.html#1> December 16, 2010
- (2009). Bringing learning to life. Retrieved from: www.education.com April 22, 2010.



COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: The Perpetuation of Risk: Organizational and Institutional Policies and Practices in a Title 1 School

SOURCE: J Crit Educ Policy Stud 9 no2 N 2011

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:
<http://www.jceps.com/>