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Breaking the "At Risk" Code: Deconstructing the Myth and the Label

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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Breaking the "At Risk" Code: Deconstructing the Myth and the Label

by

Kara C. Allen

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2014

Breaking the "At Risk" Code: Deconstructing the Myth and the Label

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by

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This dissertation written by Kara C. Allen, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

Date 3/24/2014

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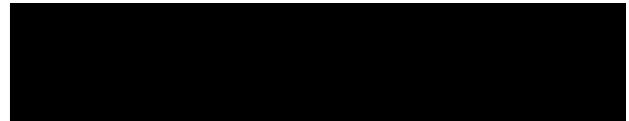
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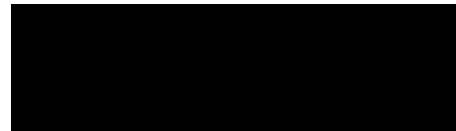
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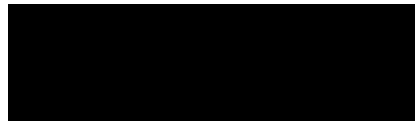
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am evermore grateful for the brave humans that have raised me. Thank you, mom and dad, for giving me the tools and skills to charge on passionately towards my own destiny. Thank you for believing in me, for guiding me, for rescuing me and for letting me sink enough to swim well. Thank you to the most invaluable siblings on earth, too. Elise and Ross, I'm such a frustrating middle child. Thank you all for choosing not to find a way to un-family me despite less-than-stellar phone call responses and shorter-than-helpful email updates. And to my marriage-family, thank you for not encouraging Gary to find someone "less busy." My love and gratitude for all of you is far greater than my poor performance across the States. Despite it all, thank you for continually supporting my quest for this dream.

To Dr. Antonia Darder, you are truly the most inspiring adult I have ever had the opportunity to hug. Thank you for giving me the confidence to find the words that tell the story in my head. Thank you for taking my hand at those terribly dark areas in the writing tunnel, fearlessly letting go and trusting that I'd find my way. You're brave and brilliant and truly amazing. To my Committee, Dr. Ref Rodriguez and Dr. Ani Shabazian, thank you for your support in this journey and for, even at nine months pregnant, boldly trusting that I had a research foundation worthy of your own time and effort. And to C8, the beloved Cohort 8, thank you for inspiring me to do this work, for allowing JJ to join our class and for always knowing just the right amount of wine to pour each other.

Nearly seven years ago, I asked Gary Michael two simple questions: favorite basketball player and favorite book. I never imagined marrying anyone, let alone a stunningly handsome actor and writer living in Los Angeles, but you answered those questions very well. So well in

fact that I get to spend every night next to the most amazingly challenging, compassionate, charming, hysterical and brilliant Power Forward that I've ever met. To that Power Forward, I have a lifetime of gratitude for the incredible human that you are and for all of the support you have given me. I could have never done this without you. Thank you for making dinner, for walking the dog, for changing countless diapers and for never, ever complaining when my only answer to every question was, "I don't know, I have to write." Thank you for also being my favorite writing break. I suppose now is as good of a time as any to tell you that I often took off my headphones just to listen to you and JJ playing together downstairs. I'm sorry that this might have slowed the writing process but I just don't think you realize the beauty of your fatherhood.

To little JJ, who knows only a mother-in-writing. I cannot wait to tell you the stories of your first year of life and about the countless hours I spent writing with you in my belly and in those precious 45 minutes in between our nursing sessions. Most of all though, I cannot wait for you to learn to tell your own story and to find your own voice in this enormous world. You are, my little love, one powerful and gritty goddess.

And finally, to my sunshines. It is true that you were sunshines long before I knew your names. But do not ever take the name blithely, you are truly and completely the lightest and brightest spots in my life. Thank you for giving me the invaluable opportunity to be a witness in your lived history. I'll never forget about you throwing the bike, confessing about your first Corona, celebrating your track meet at Griffith Park, or watching in awe at the moment you first held JJ. You are, in every way, just the reason this project is so significant. You are so much more than any word someone else might bestow upon you. Thank you for risking it all and daring greatly to become the star of your own story.

DEDICATION

To the act of love,

may it find its way into the spaces

where young people learn and grow and

gain the voice to tell their own brilliant stories.

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ABSTRACT

Breaking the "At Risk" Code: Deconstructing the Myth and the Label

by

Kara C. Allen

The term "at risk" is a label that is used to describe students who encompass a host of prominent socially and politically constructed titles that are intended to simplify student understanding and awareness and allow for clear reporting. The purpose of this study was to demythologize the concept of "at risk" by creating the conditions for student voice and critical dialogue to emerge, through the use of narrative inquiry. This research hoped to provide an outlet for young people to find and use their own voices, while finding their own place within their lived histories. The research also aimed to raise awareness of the reality of the contemporary U.S. educational system: we often create policies and programs without considering the perspectives of the young people whom these services are designed to serve. Through critical narrative inquiry, six former student's engaged in unstructured interviews and a focus group. Through analysis of the data set, five themes emerged and include 1) relationships with bicultural adults who understand, 2) instrumentalizing pedagogy, 3) the impact of money-driven policy, 4) the awareness of limitations of opportunities, and 5) the overall theme of the transparency of hegemony. This research hoped to problematize the label in an effort to move toward an emancipatory

understanding of how we speak about young people and make sense of the circumstances these young people must navigate through their education and their world.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Forty-five percent of Asian and Pacific Islander children, 62 percent of Hispanic children, and 72 percent of Black children, report at least one of the risk factors necessary for labeling a student "at risk" within the K-12 public education system. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010)

From the moment I stepped foot on the gravel driveway at Camp Lapham[1] eleven years ago, I've known how I wanted to spend my life. I've been fortunate to work with young people in Oakland, Boston, Kampala in Uganda, Port au Prince in Haiti, and Los Angeles. I have served as an educator, social worker, coach, mentor, and "auntie" to youth labeled "Severely Emotionally Disturbed," "orphaned," "Wards of the State," "juvenile offenders," "SPED," and "illegal immigrants." These young people have taught me how to teach and learn, how to engage and support, and how to advocate and dialogue. But most importantly, these young people have taught me how and why it is necessary to think critically about this work. Kemi, for example, has been part of my family, in this context, dating back to the days that we first celebrated both our birthdays: her 10th birthday and my 18th birthday. As a member of my Mohawk cabin at Camp Lapham, Kemi and I learned quite a bit together that summer and we formed a bond that has withstood a multitude of challenges. Kemi and I live across the country and see each other

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[1] Camp Lapham, a Crossroads For Kids program, provides traditional summer camp experiences for youth who have or are experiencing crisis situations and require more individualized attention to experience success. Youth who attend are experiencing a low self-image, feelings of hopelessness and an inability to understand and communicate their personal feelings in healthy way.

two or three times per year, but she has an uncanny ability to raise my critical awareness, despite distance and time. The following dialogue between us reveals one such lesson.

Kemi was not rude, condescending or angry.   She was simply very clear.

Kemi: "…so, that's what you really call us."

Me: "What do you mean, Sheena?"

Kemi: "It says here, 'Kara has dedicated her life to supporting at-risk youth.'"

The phone line from Boston to Los Angeles was agonizingly silent. I failed at an opportunity to admit my poor word choice. Instead, I floundered.

Me: "Well, Kemi, yes that's what I write in my bio, because that's just what everyone says…"

I attempted to justify those two little words but I felt their weight between us. At 17 years old, Kemi was evermore aware than me. She spoke above me.

Kemi: There's a lot of other things that EVERYONE says that you don't do, and you tell us not to do, too. I'm just sayin' there's a lot more things about all of us than the chance we have of dropping out. If y'all are calling it though, seems you're pretty convinced it's going to happen. Call it whatever, but I like sunshines a lot more. Seems like you still believe in us at least."

I should have known that our students would perform a Google search on me. I should have known that my LinkedIn page would reveal my short biography. And, most importantly, I should have known that haphazardly labeling the very same young people who relied on me, merely to ensure that other professionals might grasp my work focus, would prove a challenging

imbalance. And, thus was born my quest for understanding and demythologizing the label of "at risk."

The Label of "At Risk"

The label of "at risk" is not new; rather, this label serves among countless others, as part of a mechanism for sorting and dividing specific students from the mainstream. Historically, within the discipline of education, there have been endless acronyms and jargon employed to codify, quantify, and qualify adults as the professionals in the field (Best, 1990). Aspin (1984) pointed out that even early education reform movements used ample metaphors and language to label the people or the conditions they were addressing in their work. These metaphors are perceived as politically useful; they are ambiguous enough to mean something to everyone. At first, this new language signifies innovation but soon the language can become standardized, at which point another term arises. For many, this change gives hope (whether perceived or real) that a better "something" is coming (Taylor, 1994).

Prominent labels within education discourses are not singular or limited only to the current term under discussion, "at risk." This term encompasses a variety of other labels as well, providing advocates the latitude to capture all students who might exemplify any of the prescribed characteristics. "At risk" is a blanket label used to describe students who are also labeled as foster youth, juvenile offenders, homeless, minority, Special Education, English Language Learners, and a host of other prominent socially and politically constructed titles. These seemingly insignificant labels are intended to simplify student understanding and awareness and allow for clear reporting that can be both systematized and scaled to model.

Unfortunately, the reality exists: these labels are inextricably linked to power; they are used to define a student's self-worth and self-efficacy (Lesley, 2008). Furthermore, these labels become handy devices for both defining and controlling specific populations. Through a critical narrative inquiry, the present research study sought to deconstruct and challenge the term "at risk," in an effort to support a more humanizing approach in engaging the conditions disenfranchised students face and how these effect their learning and their lives.

Statement of the Problem

The majority of research on youth outcomes is overwhelmingly focused on detrimental outcomes that may mark a child's life, leading to increased difficulty in adulthood (Koball, 2011). Youth are often assessed through the single lens of educational success and, thus, these outcomes are linked to school policies and practices and are subsequently connected to "risk factors" that indicate student "at riskness." In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation At Risk (1983)*, which described the United States as a nation that is both economically and socially endangered (Thornburg, Hoffman & Remeika, 1991). The report defined "at risk" students as those who have been formally or informally labeled as being in danger of academic failure.

Today, a similar understanding of "at risk" students exists, but there is no universally adopted definition of this label. Nevertheless, the National Center for Education Statistics lists factors that lead to an "at risk" label for high school students (Smerdon, 2002). These include low socioeconomic status, living in a single parent home changing school at non-traditional times, below-average grades in middle school, being held back in school through grade retention,

having older siblings who left high school before completion, and negative peer pressure (Smerdon, 2002).

A meta-analysis of literature on "at-risk" youth indicators further expanded the indicators posited by the National Center for Education Statistics, by also identifying factors in the following four categories, 1) individual (or student), 2) family, 3) school and 4) society (or community) (Batten & Russell, 1995). More specifically, these categories include:

Individual or student-related factors

- Poor school attitude,
- Low ability level,
- Attendance/truancy,
- Behavior/discipline problems,
- Pregnancy,
- Drug abuse,
- Poor peer relationships,,
- Nonparticipation,
- Friends have dropped out,
- Illness/disability, and
- Low self-esteem/self-efficacy;

Family-related factors

- Low socioeconomic status,
- Dysfunctional home life,
- No parental involvement,
- Low parental expectations,
- Non-English-speaking home,
- Ineffective parenting/abuse, and
- High mobility;

School-related factors

- Conflict between home/school culture,
- Ineffective discipline system,

- Lack of adequate counseling,
- Negative school climate,
- Lack of relevant curriculum,
- Passive instructional strategies,
- Inappropriate use of technology,
- Disregard of student learning styles,
- Retentions/Suspensions,
- Low expectations, and
- Lack of language instruction;

Society or community-related factors

- Lack of community support services or response,
- Lack of community support for schools,
- High incidences of criminal activities, and
- Lack of school/community linkages. (Batten & Russell, 1995)

These "risk factors" have prompted policymakers and educators alike to label students identified with at least one of these "risk factors" as "at risk" youth. As indicated above, research in the field has defined the label of "at risk" and identified the conditions by which young people "become at risk." Current "at risk" students resemble previous unsuccessful students: students who did not graduate high school (Solberg, Carlstrom, Howard & Jones, 2007). "At risk" students, then, are considered those who are most apt to drop out of school (p. 45). In conjunction with this definition, policymakers and educators have also identified what "at risk" youth need and have measured what has been provided.

However, a clear gap exists in current research: the voices of students are, for the most part, absent. This has resulted in a systemic disconnect between how "at risk" students are perceived by educators and policy-makers and what they are thought to require. Education philosopher, Gloria Ladson-Billings, shared in a 2006 address that the label itself actually contributes to the challenges. Ladson-Billings (2006) stated, "We cannot saddle these babies at

kindergarten with this label and expect them to proudly wear it for the 13 years, and think, 'Well, gee, I don't know why they aren't doing good.'"

To date, there has been little research that addresses the unheard voices of youth subjected to this categorization. The process of understanding experiences of marginalized and disenfranchised youth and effectively engaging their needs must include students as an integral component (hooks, 1994; Nieto, 2000). There is no shortage of adults who have the opportunity to act as advocates and decision-makers: teachers, administrators, school board members, and district superintendents, parents, politicians, school counselors, and researchers. Students, however, are seldom integrated as participants in the conversation, especially students who either have dropped out of school or are thinking about leaving (Gallagher, 2002). In fact, research tends to focus on those students who "succeed despite struggle," and thus, social policy drives the belief that the "survivors" become the expected norm, further marginalizing those students who do not succeed under such definitions. Hence, there is a dearth of research about "at risk" youth outcomes that specifically highlights how students understand and make meaning of the label "at risk" and its relationship to and impact on their lives.

Additionally, research has yet to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the systemic failures that exist in connection with the process of labeling students "at risk." Within educational research, there is a tendency to overemphasize the cataloguing of problems through a deficit lens of personal pathology that, in turn, skews theory, research, public policy, and practice (Behrmann, 2006). Youth labeled "at-risk" re viewed as hindrances to our educational system and, as often, the deficit language used to describe student experiences becomes the lens by which society views the student and creates allowance or justifications for student failure.

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Applying diagnostic labels to youth, in fact, makes young people the focus of intervention, which diverts attention away from systemic deficiencies that are the central cause of the problems in the first place (Adelman & Taylor, 2002). In reality, the problems attributed to youth are not rooted in internal pathology but rather environmental circumstances that are arguably beyond personal control The bias towards attributing problems to personal shortcomings rather that societal ones is bolstered by factors such as (a) attributional bias, or the tendency to perceive others' problems as rooted within personal dispositions (Miller & Porter, 1988) and (b) economic and political influences that can often be seen as society's current priorities and which then inform professional practice (Becker, 1963; Chase, 1977; Schact, 1985).

As will be further explored in Chapter Two the overemphasis on classifying problems in terms of personal pathology skews theory, practice, and public policy: an expected phenomenon within the movement to label youth "at risk." Simply stated, the education system is failing an exorbitant number of youth. The dropout rate for youth of color in California alone, for example, is 50 percent (Roscigno, 2010), yet research on this question to date focuses on expert voices. These voices, even when well-intentioned, speak on behalf of—but also, significantly, in lieu of—those most in need of a voice: the students at the center of this debate.

Research Question

This study brings student voices to the center of the dialogue by gathering first-person narratives from former students whom attended, regardless of graduating, public high schools in a large city on both the Eastern and Western United States. To facilitate a critical analysis of the narratives collected, a review of the scholarly literature was organized into four primary areas

related to the term "at risk": 1) defining "at risk," 2) understanding the indicators of "risk," 3) learning about the needs and provisions of "at risk" students as indicated through research, and 4) understanding the implications behind the "at risk" label.

Larry Cuban (1989) notes that the history of "at-riskness" is lengthy and that "this description of at risk students and their families should be familiar…it is almost 200 years old" (p. 780). Additionally, "at risk" policy and discourse has addressed numerous concerns, including the 1980s' movement that proposed a previously unrecognized problem label, "missing children" (Best, 1990). Finally, an understanding of the categories of "at riskness" was considered vital to this investigation. The term "at risk" is used today as a blanket label to capture the stories and lived experiences of many different populations; however, it has the unfortunate consequence of imposing power and control over these youth and their families. Though no formal or standardized categorizations of "at riskness" have been established, the dominant literature supports the previously discussed key indicators, which are presumed to accurately define students who are labeled as "at risk." These indicators, again, include individual, family, school and society.

With these concerns in mind, this narrative study was guided by a single over-arching research question: How do former students identify and understand the conditions that labeled them "at risk"?

Purpose of the Study

A critical analysis of "at risk," its historical relevance and meaning, and an investigation into its impact on youth labeled "at risk" are both fundamental and integral to future educational research on student outcomes. Accordingly, the specific purpose of this qualitative study was to

gain an understanding of how students labeled "at risk" interpret and make sense of their educational experiences. By so doing, the research sought to demythologize the concept of "at-riskness" by creating the conditions, through the use of narrative inquiry, for both student voices and critical dialogue. Narrative inquiry is rooted in the foundation that we as humans understand and give meaning to our world through telling our stories (Andrews, Squire & Tambokou, 2008).

Critical pedagogy provides a set of principles for educators, grounded in a humanizing problem-posing approach (Freire, 2010), to assist students in developing critical consciousness and, among other things, to connect knowledge to power and action. By providing students with a space to think critically about the labels society has bestowed upon them (or the hidden curriculum of labeling), this approach supports the critical development of an emancipatory curriculum (Freire, 2010). Furthermore, conditions for voice give students an opportunity to reflect upon their own education, community, culture, policy and self-determination, while providing educators with an opportunity to enact and embody social justice leadership in our work with vulnerable populations.

With this framework in mind, this study explores the meaning of "at riskness" and examines student stories of "at riskness," in the hopes that through their voices we can gain a better understanding of how students define the conditions that label them "at risk" and the subsequent impact of that label on their lives. Further, the study serves as a necessary catalyst for critical dialogue, exploration, and engagement with youth who have been labeled "at risk," while also supporting the rethinking of the educational needs of youth in these conditions. Such a reconceptualization is necessary to improve students' quality of life within schools and

communities and to challenge the practice of labeling as a disabling mechanism of sorting marginalized youth and families.

Significance of the Study

Student voices are at the center of this critical narrative study. Through this engagement, the voices of those youth formerly labeled "at risk" were heard—voices necessary to the rethinking of our pedagogical efforts, if we are to truly transform the existing educational system (Freire, 2010; hooks, 2010). Through this process, this study provided a space for former students to engage in the transformative process of narrative inquiry. The research also compared the perceived needs of this population to the lived experiences and stated needs of a sample of former students who were labeled "at risk." Moreover, this study serves as a starting place for further research and dialogue, to both gain an understanding of the phenomenon and bring specific faces and voices to "at risk" discourses about disenfranchised youth, in the hopes of deconstructing the label and supporting a more democratic educational process that addresses their needs.

Many current educators and policy-makers contend that labels are needed in public education as a requirement for targeting funding opportunities on federal and state levels, for understanding and explaining students' status to various stakeholders, and for efficiently classifying students through the use of common terms. Though the necessity of labels is hotly debated, this study sought to highlight the voices missing in this debate, namely those of the youth in question. Key to this examination is the impact of these labels on the very youth they are intended to "serve" and the direct and indirect power that these labels hold over their lives. Hence, more specifically, this research was carried out to guide future public policy through two

key avenues: 1) in work on local and state task forces and 2) in the creation of state and national student task forces to advocate on these issues.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that underlies the conceptualization, design, and analysis of this study is critical pedagogy. The following section provides a brief discussion of critical pedagogy and some of the major thinkers who have informed this educational philosophy and practice.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is founded in "philosophical traditions that critically interrogate the pedagogical interrelationships between culture, economics, ideology, and power" (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009, p. 8). Critical Pedagogy thus forms the appropriate theoretical framework upon which to ground this study. By engaging in a process that encourages the empowerment of students, through challenging dominant educational discourses, students can begin to own their right to become subjects of their world and begin to see their lived experiences as an essential component to understanding their life conditions (Darder et al., 2009). Brazilian educational philosopher, Paulo Freire (2010), refers to the process of developing critical social consciousness as "*conscientizaçao*." *Conscientizaçao* (conscientization) is defined as "the process by which students, as empowered subjects, achieve a deepening awareness of the social realities which shape their lives and discover their own capacities to recreate them" (Darder et al., 2009, p. 14).

Through supporting a narrative process with former students, a critical pedagogical lens enables students1) to garner the courage to start the process of questioning structures that are

dominating or have dominated their own lives, 2) to have an opportunity to develop a new discourse (of hope) anchored in their lived experiences, which allows for exploration of the tensions, conflicts and contradictions that these former students have encountered, and 3) to access a language by which to identify and explore the world, where the dominant culture affects student's views of the world and of themselves as human beings and members of communities (Darder, 2012).

The study, thus, utilizes a critical framework to engage students in the process of exploring their own understanding and identification of the conditions that labeled them "at risk" during their formal schooling. This critical approach places an emphasis on the empowerment of disenfranchised populations, focuses on the development of student voice, seeks to unveil hegemonic notions or the hidden curriculum that reproduces inequalities, and considers the significance of critique for transforming inequalities. Moreover, through the use of a critical narrative process as an open counter-hegemonic space for dialogue, critical pedagogy provides a clear line of inquiry and creates a viable roadmap for analyzing the youth stories gathered as part of this inquiry.

Furthermore, this study utilized critical pedagogy as articulated in the foundational work of Antonia Darder (2012), in which she posits a theory of critical bicultural education. Darder emphasizes the notion of "cultural democracy," through engaging dialogically questions of language, authority, and curriculum. Students from working-class bicultural communities who have had the "at risk" label imposed upon them are expected to navigate effectively the educational system, while being sorted based on the values and worldview of the mainstream or dominant culture. Consequently, critical bicultural education theory complements and, more

specifically, expands on an understanding and exploration of the conditions of inequality that lead to labeling these students "at risk."

Critical pedagogy encourages educators to create opportunities that assist students in developing social consciousness and to, among other things, connect knowledge to power and action in their own lives. By providing youth who have been labeled as "at risk" with a space to think critically about the label, one can support a problem-posing approach and the development of voice and critical consciousness (Freire, 2000). Furthermore, this process facilitates students' reflections on their own being with regard to their education, community, culture, policy, and the impact of these upon their ability to exercise freedom in their lives. Similarly, it equips educators to act and embody social justice in their practice as educational leaders, through engaging forthrightly structures of inequality that shape the lives of youth.

In *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversation on Education and Social Change* (Horton & Freire, 2000), Myles Horton, educator and founder of the Highlander School in the American South, and Paulo Freire, Brazilian educator and critical theorist, considered together the question of education and its embodiment in the process of social change. In their dialogue, Freire and Horton considered closely the dialectical nature of theoretical knowledge and an understanding that "theory is always becoming" (p.101). This research is, thus, rooted in Freire's notion of transformative knowledge, which embodies a theoretical framework that is well grounded in the lived experiences of students as "always becoming."

Critical pedagogy, moreover, is founded upon the interrogation of the interrelationship of power, ideology, economics and culture as a philosophical tradition (Darder et al. 2009). And although there exists no "uniform movement of critical pedagogy," the overarching objective of

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critical pedagogy, according to Peter McLaren (2007), is "to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequities and injustices" (p.186). The roots of critical pedagogy theory, including a Marxian analysis of class struggle and an alternative to the scientific notion that facts and knowledge are objective, are widely established by way of the Frankfurt School's articulation of a critical social theory (Darder, et al., 2009; McLaren, 2007).

Myles Horton

During the first half of the twentieth century, many Progressive educators advocated for the restructuring of the education system because schools and society were caught in a dualistic relationship (Zuga, 1992). Consequently, schools were separated from mainstream society and were isolated from the greater social movement (1992). As a result, Progressives argued for schools to create a new social order: Social Reconstructivism. Myles Horton's educational contribution in the 1930s and 1940s made him an American forbearer to social reconstructivism, just as John Dewey was in the 1900s (Darder et al, 2009). Dewey identified schools as "embryonic societies" (Dewey, 1915) and recommended that these institutions both encourage and reflect a just and egalitarian society. These concepts helped lay the framework for much of the progressive pedagogy that followed in the 20th century (McLaren, 2007). Peter McLaren (2007) states that this contemporary critical pedagogy "allows us to scrutinize schooling more insistently in terms of race, class, power, and gender" (p.189). Horton's unique role in the education of civil rights leaders and the civil rights movement was rooted in much of Dewey's language and thought and grounded in popular education: the notion that activism and education must begin and end with the people (Darder, et al., 2009; Jacobs, 2003). Horton's (1983) "pedagogy of questioning and dialogue" (Jacobs, 2003, xiii) concludes that "for people to be

really free, they must have the power to make decisions about their lives, so that they can acquire knowledge as tools to change society" (p. 119) and, on the contrary, imposing specific ideologies, theories and ideas on people is both futile and oppressive.

Horton's steadfast insistence on ensuring the needs and honoring the voices of disenfranchised and marginalized people is echoed throughout critical pedagogy's perspectives on student voice (Brooker & MacDonald, 1999; Christensen, 2000; Mitra, 2004). Furthermore, Freire (2010) echoes these sentiments with respect to conditions for voice, which give students an opportunity to reflect upon their own being with regard to their education, community, culture, policy and self-determination. It is through this commitment to student voice that critical educators can create opportunities to enact and embody social justice forms of pedagogical leadership in their work with vulnerable populations.

Paulo Freire

Brazilian-born educator Paulo Freire is frequently credited as the most influential theorist of critical pedagogy (Darder et al., 2009; McLaren 2007) and the founder of the practices of critical teaching and learning (Bartlett, 2005; Shor, 1992; Shor & Pari, 1999a). Like other critical pedagogues, Freire considered education to be a political act, with the capacity to either oppress or liberate (Darder, et al., 2009; Freire, 2000; McLaren, 2007). Throughout his work, Freire (2010) focused on an emancipatory process of education for the oppressed, as opposed to a traditional "banking" model wherein the teacher produces knowledge that is deposited into students to "receive, file and store" (p. 72). By working toward an emancipatory pedagogy that denounces the dominant ideology and "taking a risk of course" (Horton & Freire, 2000, p. 118), Freire encouraged educators to fight domination within the context of a political understanding

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of education. This framework played an integral role in Freire's philosophical contributions to education in general, as well as his involvement with literacy campaigns in Brazil, both before and after his exile and work in Chile, Guinea Bissau, and Mozambique (Freire, 1992; Freire, 2000; Horton & Freire, 2000).

Three other Freirean concepts are aptly applied to this study: conscientizaçao, praxis, and dialogue. Freire (2010) coined the process of developing critical social consciousness as "conscientizaçao." Conscientizaçao (conscientization) is defined as "the process by which students, as empowered subjects, achieve a deepening awareness of the social realities which shape their lives and discover their own capacities to recreate them" (Darder et al., 2009, p.14). By engaging in a process that allows and encourages the empowerment of students, through the process of challenging dominant educational discourses, students begin to own their right to become subjects of their world and begin to see their actual lived experiences as an essential component of their personal exploration.

Freire (2010) was adamant that "there is no transformation without action" (p. 87). Theorizing alone is abstraction without action, and in the real world, theory loses its capacity to transform. Freire referred to this necessary action as "praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (p. 79). Likewise, Freire believed that activism which is void of theory is thus reduced to reflect only verbalism (p. 81). Praxis, therefore, is central to this study, in that it creates a place for respondents to critically reflect, in order to transform their world.

Finally, and most central to this study, is the Freirean concept of dialogue which he explores in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2002), first published in 1970. Freire viewed dialogue,

in contrast to the "banking" concept of education, as "the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are address to the world which is to be transformed and humanized" (p.89). This informs his concept of "reading the word and the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1997) reciprocally with those who wish to change it. Guided by Freire's emancipatory ideas, Darder (2012) advanced her treatise on critical bicultural pedagogy, which will be explored later in the discussion.

Henry Giroux

Critical theorist Henry Giroux was one of the first authors to use the term "critical pedagogy" in a published text (Darder et al., 2009). Giroux's writings are particularly useful with respect to the current study based on his application of critical pedagogy in the North American context. Giroux focuses specifically on aspects of critical literacy, but many of his beliefs and findings are directly relevant to research on the power of labeling, including his belief that literacy, at its best, has the capacity to be emancipatory and, thus, counter domination (Freire & Macedo, 1997; Giroux, 1998, Giroux, 2006). Giroux argues that, "a discursive intervention is an essential step toward not only a broader notion of self-representation, but also a more global notion of agency and democracy" (as cited in Darder et al., 2009, p. 191). Finally, Giroux offers a Neo-Marxian-inspired view of resistance theory and radical education, which insists that in order to create a more just society, relationships within schools must become ever more critical in their efforts to establish genuinely emancipatory sites for students (Giroux, 2006).

Michael Apple

Michael Apple (1999), another critical educational theorist, discusses the "hidden curriculum" and "official knowledge" and explains how class and cultural power manifest

themselves in students' lives within and around schools. His commitment towards clarity of

expression and inclusion of others in the development of theory finds special relevance with the

methodology utilized to explore student understanding and voice. Apple (1999) speaks to the

balance required:

> We must balance theoretical elegance with a commitment to do a number of other
>
> things. We need to have respect for the actual daily lives and insights of people in
>
> the institutions of schooling and in communities and in social movements who are
>
> often struggling mightily in tremendously difficult conditions. (p. 19)

Apple's promotion of critical pedagogy as a real-life phenomenon that includes the experiences

of students is directly aligned with Freirean concepts of authentic voice and emancipatory

education (Apple, 1999; Freire, 2010). By providing students with a space to think critically

about the labels society imposes on them (or the hidden curriculum of labeling), this approach

supports the critical development of an emancipatory curriculum of education (Freire, 2010).

Peter McLaren

Peter McLaren (2007), in his articulations of critical pedagogy, focuses on globalization

and the damaging effects of capitalism on working people. He states the "need to create a

socialist alternative based on radical humanism" (p. 295) and promotes a radical critical

pedagogy, while criticizing American "so-called progressive, critical classrooms," which

McLaren believes function primarily to reinforce a "domesticated approach to Freirean

teachings" (p.302), lacking a goal of helping students truly "read" or transform a world that

keeps them at the bottom of a filing system. McLaren argues that critical pedagogy must be

grounded in the humanizing principles of a problem-posing approach (Freire, 2010), in order to

assist students in developing their own critical consciousness and to, among other things, connect knowledge to power and action (Freire, 2010).

Antonia Darder

Using critical pedagogy as the foundation, Antonia Darder (2012) extends theory into the classroom through a discussion of language, authority, and curriculum that each work towards creating the condition for "cultural democracy in the classroom" (p. 103). Darder draws upon the seminal work by Ramírez and Castañeda (1974) on the bicultural identity of Mexican American students, described as "permit[ting] the child to enjoy satisfying relations in more than one cultural world and to identify with aspects of both of those cultures" (p. 16), and moves traditional notions of bicultural development and education into the realm of critical pedagogy.

Furthermore, Darder links the intersection of culture and power with her articulation of a critical bicultural educational theory, utilizing the lens of critical pedagogy to inform a "dialectical continuum" between the dominant culture and the subordinate culture (Darder, 2012). Darder encourages educators to approach teaching students of color through a critical bicultural framework and argues that those educators who "possess this dialectical understanding of biculturalism will be better equipped to assist their students of color in critically examining their lived experiences in an effort to reveal genuinely the impact that cultural domination has on their lives" (p. 54). Thus, critical bicultural education serves as a useful lens in exploring students labeled "at risk," who must navigate the tensions inherent to a bicultural identity.

Hence, the study utilized Critical Pedagogy and Critical Bicultural Education to engage students in the process of exploring their understanding and identification of the conditions that labeled them "at risk" during the process of their formal schooling. Critical pedagogy combines

emphasis on the empowerment of disenfranchised populations; focus on the development of student voice; the unveiling of hegemonic notions or the hidden curriculum that reproduces inequalities; the significance of critique for transforming inequalities; and the use of the critical narrative process as a counter-hegemonic space. Thus, critical pedagogy as the overarching theoretical framework for this study provides a clear line of inquiry and a viable roadmap for analysis of youth stories gathered as part of the study.

Methodology

The methodology employed for this study is qualitative and investigative, gathering data through open-ended methods. This approach was most relevant and useful for this study, as it allowed for student voices to be heard and provided a space for the analysis necessary in order to best understand the lived experiences of the students as well as the systems of power most prevalent in their lives. The methods employed for this qualitative study centered on the collection of youth narratives through unstructured interviews, in line with a critical narrative inquiry method.

Critical narrative inquiry, more specifically, is based on the principle that, as humans, we come to understand and give meaning to our lives through opportunities to tell our own story (Andrews, Squire & Tambokou, 2008). Narrative inquiry requires researchers to attend to the ways in which a story is constructed, for whom and why, as well as the cultural discourses that inform the story (Trahar, 2009). Critical narrative inquiry evolves from the growing participatory research movement, where there is a higher sensitivity to both cultural and social differences, as well as the power relations that inform student lives (Darder, 2012). Pinnegar and Danes (2007) discuss the embrace that occurs within narrative inquiry as the narrative

becomes both the method and the phenomena of the particular study. Moreover, it "characteristically begins with the researcher's autobiographically oriented narrative associated with the *research puzzle*" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Critical narrative inquiry then provides the conceptual framework by which the theoretical basis and foundational elements of the study are developed, particularly with respect to the interpretation of how youth in this study name their world (Freire, 2010). Through critical narrative inquiry, this investigative process also sought to define the constructs of power that shape the lives of youth labeled "at risk" and show the relationship of these constructs to current policies and practices.

This study specifically engages the narratives of six former students labeled "at risk," each of whom belonged to at least one of four indicator categories that the literature has defined as inclusive of all "at risk" students. These categories include students who have been labeled due to internal or external characteristics related to factors related to: 1) the students themselves, or their individual identity, 2) the family, 3) the school, and 4) the greater community or society. All six participants were young adults (at least 18 years old) who were selected through relationships with existing organizations. As part of this study, they all participated in two to three individual unstructured interviews. Each conversation was recorded and transcribed. A focus group was held with three of the participants. However, based on geographic restraints, three participants were not able to participate in a smaller group dialogue. All conversations with participants were recorded and the focus group dialogue was held in a natural setting, a location where the participants felt comfortable and willing to engage.

Assumptions and Limitations

Embedded in this study are several noteworthy assumptions and limitations on the part of the researcher. My experiences personally and professionally over the past twelve years have provided "on the ground" insight into the lives of youth "at risk." At the same time, this involvement with youth who might share similar backgrounds or experiences as the youth with whom I have worked also shapes the lens through which I view youth, culture, power, and learning. This lens inevitably influenced the design of the study and my engagement with participants.

Additionally, through the process of engaging former students in the recollection of these conditions, various events could alter students' perceptions of their prior experiences. However, this recalling of stories is part of the critical narrative inquiry process, as researchers seek to explore the meaning and sense-making of lived histories. Participant selection is key to the study and could have presented limitations, as well. Given the nature of the selection process, the researcher identified six former students through existing networks and, hence, selection was not randomized.

This study did not seek to provide generalizable data for all youth labeled "at risk" or conclusive evidence based on statistical analyses of quantitative data gathered. This study did not hope to re-define previously created definitions of "at risk" or provide a systematic critique of existing programs aimed at serving "at risk" students in educational settings. Finally, this study did not set out to specifically challenge the larger phenomenon of labeling, but rather to challenge the practice of labeling students "at risk" within the educational system.

Delimitations

This study focused on former students, including both students who have graduated high school and students who left high school prior to graduation. Both groups are of interest as the study's focus is not the impact of the label on educational attainment, but rather students' understandings of the conditions that led to their being labeled and their perceptions of the consequences of this label. Participants were limited to former students between the ages of 18 and 24 to ensure that the time lapse between the current time and each student's past educational experiences was small enough for participants to recall important details, which guided the research process and conclusions. Respondents were also selected for their membership in the four specific indicator categories that capture factors that have been identified in the research as encapsulating all "at risk" youth. These categories, as mentioned earlier, have been identified as factors attributed or related to individuals, families, schools, and society.

Definition of Terms

Terms used within this study that may require further clarification are as follows:

a) *"At risk":* the descriptive term used commonly in educational contexts and throughout educational policy to describe students who are likely to leave school prior to graduating; the umbrella term for students who fall into one of four categories (either implicitly or explicitly through educational practices): youth of color, youth who emigrated to the United States, youth with disabilities, and youth involved in the Juvenile Court System; "at risk" will be indicated with quotation marks throughout the study to indicate the researcher's awareness of the label's presence and implications.

b) *Bicultural youth:* youth who must navigate the social, political, and economic tensions between the dominant culture and their subordinate cultural/class context (Darder, 2012).

c) *Conscientization:* the process where subjects are able to achieve an awareness of the social realities that shape their lives and then to acknowledge their own ability to recreate them (Freire, 2010).

d) *Counter-hegemony:* the space where power relationships are reconstructed in order to allow for voice and experience of those who were previously at the margins of institutions (Darder et al., 2009).

e) *Dialogue:* a critical process of communication, teaching, and learning that is committed to the empowerment of students through challenging the dominant educational discourse.

f) *Inner city:* refers to a particular kind of urban setting: one that serves largely poor, minority students (African-American, Hispanic, Native American, immigrant Asian) and that is situated in or draws its students from economically depressed neighborhoods (Brunetti, 2006).

g) *Resistance:* the process of uncovering the degree of connection between a student's oppositional behavior and a student's need to struggle against dehumanizing elements (Darder et al., 2009).

h) *Retention:* the act of retaining or keeping student enrolled.

i) *Social justice:* requires that everyone receive respect and equal access to basic necessities such as jobs and education regardless of their place in society (Andrzejewski, Baltodano, & Symcox, 2009).

j)   *Urban:* of or related to a large metropolitan area. Throughout this study the terms "inner city school" and "urban school" will be used interchangeably.

k)   *Youth of color:* youth who do not identify as Caucasian or White; one of four subgroups of youth labeled "at risk."

l)   *Immigrant Youth:* youth who traveled to the United States from an alternative location outside of the country (could have been born in U.S.); one of four subgroups of youth labeled "at risk."

m)   *Youth with disabilities:* youth who have or were previously tracked through the education system's "Special Education" courses; one of four subgroups of youth labeled "at risk."

n)   *Youth involved in the Juvenile Court System:* youth who, at some point, have been tracked either through the foster care system as wards of the state or through the state's juvenile probation and detention departments; one of four subgroups of youth labeled "at risk."

Summary

This chapter reviewed the major components of the study. The study is focused on one primary research question: How do former students identify and understand the conditions that labeled them "at risk"? This question was explored and engaged through the theoretical lens of critical pedagogy and critical bicultural theory, which support the conceptual underpinnings of a critical narrative inquiry. The researcher sought to engage students in dialogue and, through the process of conscientization, support their empowerment by providing an opportunity to achieve a deeper awareness of the social context and conditions within their own lives and those that inform the educational system.

In Chapter Two, relevant literature surrounding the research question is explored. Such literature examines the sociopolitical and historical contexts of labeling as well as the history of the "at risk" label. Other scholarship has focused on the four indicators of risk, the presumed needs and provisions of at-risk youth, and the implications of labeling. Finally, the literature review discusses research on the transformative potential of narratives.

Chapter Three describes the methodological approach and specific methods that were used to conduct the study. Individual unstructured interviews, true to the narrative research tradition, along with focus groups were conducted, audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for the purpose of this study.

The findings that emerged from the data collection process are presented in Chapter Four. The analysis is based on the qualitative data and themes identified through a critical analysis of the dialogical process of interviews and focus groups.

In Chapter Five, the research findings are discussed in light of previous literature presented and implications are drawn vis-à-vis the current educational context.

The concluding chapter provides a summary of the study, an overview of the findings, implications, and recommendations, as well as a discussion of the potential impact of the study on future research, practice, and policy, particularly as it relates to change within a variety of educational settings.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Freire, 2010, p.34)

Within the educational sector, there exist endless acronyms and jargon used by professionals in the field to codify, quantify, and qualify students. This vernacular provides labels that quickly and efficiently sort students into a variety of categories. These seemingly insignificant labels are intended to simplify understanding and awareness of students and allow for clear reporting that can be both systematized and scaled to model according to institutional needs. One would generally presuppose that the consequences of these actions are benign or unintended.

Unfortunately, the reality seems to be that labels have the power to define a student's own self-worth and self-efficacy (Solberg, et al., 2007). Furthermore, these labels have detrimental effects on students, schools, administrators and society and act as barriers, rather than inroads toward a more socially just and critically-minded education system. Simply stated, labeling students without critical awareness, understanding, and dialogue can have serious social justice implications for all labeled students, as well as their parents and communities (p.316).

To frame this study, the following literature review examined ethnic and racial antecedents for labeling, the contradiction between the utilization of a sorting and labeling mechanism in contrast to knowledge regarding neuroscience and pathology, the politics of labeling, and the "at risk" label as a metaphor that can encourage the tendency to attach labels to students and their academic performance.

Labeling: Sociopolitical and Historical Context

The discussion in this section is rooted in the assumption that students who are marginalized, excluded, or labeled experience social injustice through the ways in which oppression has been institutionalized within the current educational system (Mirci & Hensley, 2011). This assumption informs the larger politics, policies, and practices of labeling.

Pathologizing Labels

Common practice courses in therapeutic programs assert that students must gain an understanding of the interplay of "person" and "environment." Often, practitioners used prevailing diagnostic labels to describe individual human functioning, though they are aware of this environmental interplay (Addressing Barriers to Learning, 1996). As previously mentioned, one can assert that overemphasizing the classification of a problem through personal pathology has the inherit risk of negatively skewing theory, research, policy, and practice. Within classrooms, little emphasis is placed on the physical and social context of instruction, the process or content of instruction within a given situation, or a student's own capacity, attitude, state of being, or behavior at a given moment. Alternatively, little emphasis is placed on the interplay of the environment with the student. Instead, policy has forced the practitioner's hand. The

consequence here is that the students are labeled with an overemphasis on internal pathology and too little critical engagement of conditions that surround their lives.

When behavioral, emotional, and learning struggles were labeled in this way, the intervention (or response) is clinical or remedial, with a focus on a single strand or aspect of a larger problem (Addressing Barriers to Learning, 1996). These interventions, moreover, were isolated from one another and have not not addressed the more complex environmental or societal problems from which they arise. Consequently, imposing these labels on students tended to convey pathology, driven by social policy, often incentivized by reimbursements (e.g., special education, mental health services). This, in turn, caused a major dilemma for practitioners, who have struggled ethically to understand how to "resist the pressure to inappropriately use those labels that yield reimbursement from third party payers" (p. 5).

Furthermore, these response interventions became piecemeal, "quick fix" solutions that both failed to consider the larger political and economic concerns. Similarly, the use of short-cut linguistic devises failed to acknowledge the impact of environmental conditions on the functioning and physiology of the brain and its impact on the learning process. Research has acknowledged that the brain is changed by learning (Damasio, 2010) and that "stimulus rich environments can increase our intelligence" (Skoyles & Sagan, 2002, p.76), while standardized tests, which are heavily bound by the ethnocentrism of the dominant culture, have not actually tested student thinking ability but whether they can answer a very particular set of limited questions (Darder, 2012). Moreover, the concept of ability as innate or unitary is still reinforced through standardized testing, which simply sorts students into hierarchical groups, based on a limited assessment and perception of ability (Kohn, 2000).

In her work on testing, inequality, and the brain, Darder (2012) contended that students who do poorly on standardized tests tend to be perceived as intellectually deficient. Consequently, they can be tracked into disabling conditions of learning that negatively impact the healthy development of the brain. Here began the insidious pathologizing process of labeling. Unfortunately, what has often been overlooked at this initial stage is that the learning needs of bicultural students can be culturally and linguistically out of sync with the mainstream environment. In speaking about the importance of the environment and learning, Darder argued,

> …many poor working class children are unable to learn to read because they are taught within environments that fail to provide them adequate experiences to support the formation of new and lasting synaptic connections linked to learning. And the longer they remain in such environments, the more alienated and frustrated the child can potentially feel. (p. 76)

Despite obvious concerns about standardized testing and their impact on students of color, practices inspired by No Child Left Behind were built fundamentally on the meritocratic logic of high-stakes testing as the major indicator of student achievement and school accountability (Brantlinger, 2001; Price, 2003). *Detracking: The Social Construction of Ability, Cultural Politics and Resistance to Reform* argued that "the primary reason this historical ideology has endured is that educational stakeholders accept the ideas involving race, social class, and the content and structure of schooling as being correct and common sense without considering that this reality has been socially constructed to fit beliefs about intelligence, testing, and accountability" (Oaks, Wells, Jones & Datnow, 1997, p.482).

Ethnic and Racial Antecedents

In addition to pathologizing labels, other antecedents have presented themselves in the context of school settings and labels. Mirci, Loomis and Hensley (2011) stated, "According to constructivism, learning is the making sense of experience using one's existing knowledge base that is primarily dependent on previously interpreted experiences" (p.1). Furthermore, Joe Kincheloe (2008) noted that when school effectiveness "is based on uncritically grounded constructions of intelligence and performance" (p.15), and the use of "high stakes" standardized tests are employed to measure student achievement and teacher/administrator performance, interpretations of reality are destined to arise (Mirci, Loomis & Hensley, 2011). It became, therefore, crucial to examine the history tied to this ranking and sorting of students based on perceived student ability, which underlies the present system.

Despite the current high-stakes driven and curriculum-centered model of education, the process of ranking and labeling students is not a recent phenomenon. George Madaus & Daniel Stufflebeam (2000) traced quantitative student ranking practices back to at least 1792, when William Farish, a professor at Cambridge University (England), scored examinations quantitatively and produced an ordered list of students based on their performance. Farish believed that "a quantitative value could be assigned to human thoughts" and that this finding was "a major step toward constructing a mathematical concept of reality" (Postman, 1993, p.13). Then in 1845, Horace Mann used quantitative examinations with adolescents in a public school in Boston, even though essay examinations dominated assessment until the early 1900s (Klassen, 2006) and grouped students according to chronological age, which lead to the graded classrooms model currently used within school structure (Garrison, 2009).

The early 20th century marked the beginning of large-scale standardized intelligence and achievement testing. Lewis Terman, from Stanford, believed in "deterministic innate intelligence" and developed both intelligence tests and the first Stanford Achievement Test. Both of these tests were "anchored in an ideology that students possessed different capacities to absorb information" (Mirci, Loomis & Hensley, 2011), or more specifically in Terman's view, that innate ability explained the achievement gap witnessed between Whites and non-White groups. Thus, connections were forged between the eugenics movement and standardized achievement testing, as evidenced in Terman's (1916) own account:

> Their dullness seems to be racial, or at least inherent in the family stocks from which they come. The fact that one meets this type with such extraordinary frequency among Indians, Mexicans, and Negroes [sic] suggests quite forcibly the whole question of racial differences in mental traits will have to be taken up anew and by experimental methods. The writer predicts that when this is done there will be discovered enormously significant racial differences in general intelligence, differences which cannot be wiped out by any scheme of mental culture…There is no possibility at present of convincing society that they should not be allowed to reproduce, although from a eugenic point of view they constitute a grave problem because of their unusually prolific breeding. (p. 91-92)

Through the use of intelligence testing and sorting, the reorganization of schools began (Terman, Dickson, Sutherland, Franzen, Titper & Fernald, 1922) and eventually led to new terms, or labels, as social constructs for differing degrees of student knowledge (Chapman, 1988). In the early 1900s, students were ranked on a five-tiered sorting system: "very inferior, inferior, average, superior and very superior" (Terman, 1916, p. 72). Soon after, a similar five-

tiered system was used for grades, but closely resembled and reflected the concept of innate intelligence: "failure, below average, average, above average and superior/excellent."

Current definitions of grading in California and many other states bear a striking similarity to the older systems: far below basic, below basic, basic, proficient and advanced. Both then and now, systems for sorting and labeling students have economic implications as well. For example, in discussing the workforce needs of factory-line jobs, Bagley (1925) stated, "[O]f late, too, the determinist has discovered that the inescapable differences in native intelligence fit in admirable with our industrial development" (p.23).

Some early twentieth century researchers and educators began to assert that standardized tests were constructed within specific cultural contexts and thus were inherently not neutral (Anastasi, 1937). While E. G. White (1886) and others discussed the abuse of testing and its mechanical instruction, Terman (1916) continued to challenge such beliefs by stating that it was "an entirely gratuitous assumption" (p.115) to believe that some students were more advantaged than others and continued to advocate for the tracking of students, much of which continues to the current day. Terman's perspective speaks to a still commonly held belief that schooling and testing are neutral affairs and that society provides equal opportunity for all students. In response, Darder (2012) asserted that

> Student failure is often directly tied to practices of cultural irrelevancy and class biases, which are hidden in the conceptual construction of and language use of standardized assessment and evaluation. Hence, an emphasis on standardized testing serves to effectively veil the manner in which educational institutions produce classroom

environments that grossly limit…intellectual formation of healthy bicultural children. (p. 69)

Social Racialization and Hegemonic Ideologies

The act of labeling a student is rooted in a dominant ideology established over centuries, which supports commonsensical practices of human sorting and categorizing and leads to the reproduction of social inequities. One obvious example of institutionalized racialization in the United States was the racialization of language through the United States Census. It could be argued that the US Census has used language as an index of race and, furthermore, as a means to racialize speakers of languages other than English, constructing them as different (Leeman, 2004). In the late 19th century, when patterns of immigration were shifting and more immigrants were coming from Southern and Eastern Europe, anti-immigrant sentiments and beliefs intensified (Leeman, 2004). Leeman (2004) contends that, "because language had been ideologically linked to national identities since the Romantic period, the construction of national identities as racial, as well as political and cultural, allowed language to take on a role as an index of race" (p. 517).

In the early 20th Century, "less American" sentiments arose as acceptance of multilingualism declined, maintenance of cultural, political or linguistic connection to country of origin were discouraged, and individuals were expected to learn English and discontinue the use of other languages altogether, in a show of national loyalty (Pavelenko, 2002; Wiley, 2000). A social policy of Americanization shaped public access to education. Accordingly, by the turn of the 20th century, public education was offered in English only, post officers restricted non-English periodicals, and libraries were exempt from sharing German books (Wiley, 1998).

By the mid-20th century, after several decades of restriction on immigration, Whiteness was consolidated as a construct, with differences among White groups viewed as ethnic, rather than racial (Jacobson, 1998; Urciuoli, 1996). Whiteness remained integral to American identity, and concurrently, the link between American identity and English language use was strengthened which, in turn, reinforced the link of non-English languages to "Otherness" (Leeman, 2004). Then, in the 1960s, dramatic changes in racial and ethnic politics (and in the significance of the Census) took place, as there was an obvious increased sense among demographers and others that race was a social construction, as opposed to a quantifiable fact (Leeman, 2004).

At the same time, minority groups realized the benefit of official statistics and accurate data collection, both of which were integral to ensuring employment verification and economic discrimination (Choldin, 1986). Additionally, during this period, despite explicit statements that Hispanic origin was not a racial category, the Census Bureau defined Hispanic origin as a permanent feature of identity, which was passed from generation to generation but not predicated on an individual's linguistic behavior. The 1990 definition stated:

> A person is of Spanish/Hispanic origin if the person's origin (ancestry) is Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Ecuadorian[sic], Guatemalan, Honduran, Nicaraguan, Peruvian, Salvadoran; from other Spanish-speaking countries of the Caribbean or Central or South American; or from Spain. (US Census 1988: 51, as cited in Oboler, 2000)

This definition, obviously, failed to officially recognize the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity within the nations included and reinforces the "foreignness" of people classified under "Hispanic origin," which the Census Bureau defined in terms of categories linked to national

identities and in turn linked to Spanish (Leeman, 2004).Thus, this method renders people so categorized as less American (Leeman, 2004).

By the early 21st Century, cultural characteristics gained ground as the ideological basis of inequities within groups, rather than perceived physical attributes (Oboler, 2000). These realities promote specific ideologies with respect to the relationships between language and national identity and between language and race. This focus on language usage, Suzanne Oboler (2000) posits, "reinforces the hegemonic hierarchy of difference, realized in various guises through the history of the Census, that constructs the White/non-White distinction as perfect and everlasting and intra-White difference as potentially surmountable" (p. 530). Of particular interest here is the fact that, in the history of the US Census, there has never been an effort to gather information on linguistic proficiencies in other languages, which revealed a dominant ideology of language and a portrayal of the United States as a historically monolingual nation; an obvious link to specific sociopolitical and legal positions (Leeman, 2004).

Thus, the relationship of the US Census to race and language shined light onto the ideology that informed its construction, given that the Census "creates and acts in a social world while masquerading as a description of that world" (Freirean, 1988, p.11). In this sense, the US Census, like the labeling systems applied to American youth in public education, officialized the very hegemonic ideologies it reflects: the racialization and social exclusion of subordinate cultures.

"Hispanic" as a Metaphor for "At Risk"

Furthermore, Oboler (1995), in "Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives," stated that "the ethnic label 'Hispanic' homogenizes the social and political experiences of more than 23 million people

of different races, classes, languages, national origins, genders and religions" (p.173). This label obscured the various experiences of diverse Latino populations within the United States and, as such, this ethnic label became a sorting and dividing mechanism, which separated this group from mainstream society, through such avenues as denial of full citizenship rights and opportunities for political representation. This label, then, effectively imposed both definition and control, by way of social and political avenues that are directly linked to power.

The term 'Hispanic' however also becomes a tool by which young Latino students have established their identity and perceived role within society. The US education system, Oboler (1995) contends, has systematically failed to educate society about the heterogeneous experiences within Latino communities, both in the United States and in their own homelands. In response, Latino students themselves have needed to be both heard and understood, so they can determine how to define themselves as critical and social beings within the education system and the larger world (Darder, 2012). This insight, coupled with an understanding of the historical relevance and racializing role of such national public entities as the US Census, highlighted and provided a glimpse into the far from benign or neutral process of labeling a student "at risk."

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Historical Analysis of Definitions of "At Risk"

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The most popular label used for students from disenfranchised communities, especially at the high school level, is that of "at risk." The research, however, did not subscribe to one definition of "at risk." Instead, the definition of this commonly-applied term has a history of being adapted to fit the different needs of various researchers, practitioner, schools, communities, and governments. Definitions of "at risk" have also varied depending on the population being

described. A critical analysis of the history of this label's definitions was therefore both necessary and illuminating. Moreover, familiarity with this history was essential for those working with youth whom have been socially and academically marginalized.

Pre-1985 Definitions of "At Risk"

The concept of what it means to be "at risk" is highly ambiguous and dependent upon who is utilizing the label. Hixon and Tinzman (1990) contended that defining and identifying "at-risk" students remains highly controversial. The earliest definitions of students labeled "at risk" were in fact "those students whose appearance, language, culture, values, communities, and family structures did not match those of the dominant white culture that schools were designed to serve and support" (Hixon & Tinzman, 1990, p. 11). Furthermore, students who were labeled "at-risk" have been categorized using many terms including educationally disadvantaged, culturally deprived, low income, drop out, alienated, marginalized, handicapped, disenfranchised, disabled, impoverished, underprivileged, low achieving, and low performing (p.17).

Hence, the label of "at risk" is not new. In 1805, the New York Free School Society requested that the state legislature establish a school solely to provide education for poor children (Cuban, 1989)—prior to the existence of public education in the U.S. The group framed their request using deficit language this is not too far from today's at-risk discourse:

> [We] have viewed with painful anxiety the multiplied evils which have accrued ... to this
> city from the neglected education of the children of the poor.... The condition of this class
> is deplorable indeed; reared up by parents who ... are ... either indifferent to the best
> interests of their off spring, or, through intemperate lives ... The consequences of this

neglect of education are ignorance and vice, and all those manifold evils resulting from

every species of immorality by which public hospitals and alms-houses are filled with

objects of disease and poverty. (Palmer, 1905)

Then, in 1898, after public schools had been established, the annual Report of the Board

of Education in Chicago noted concern for truant children (Cuban, 1989) with the familiar deficit

discourse:

All good citizens desire to have these children educated, and we certainly should not

permit a reckless and in different part of our population to rear [its] children in ignorance

to become a criminal and lawless class within our community. We should rightfully have

the power to arrest all these little beggars, loafers, and vagabonds that infest our city, take

them from the streets and place them in schools where they are compelled to receive

education and learn moral principles. (p. 91)

Then again, in 1961, former Harvard University President James Conant documented the

differences between affluent suburban schools and city schools in which the majority of students

attending those city schools were identified as poor and Black (Cuban, 1989). Conant (1961)

concluded:

I am convinced we are allowing social dynamite to accumulate in our large cities. I am

not nearly so concerned about the plight of suburban parents whose offspring are having

difficulty finding places in prestige colleges as I am about the plight of parents in the

slums whose children either drop out or graduate from school without prospects of either

further education or employment. In some slum neighborhoods I have no doubt that over

half of the boys between sixteen and twenty-one are out of school and out of work.

Leaving aside human tragedies, I submit that a continuation of this situation is a menace

to the social and political health of the larger cities. (p. 2)

The New York Free Society, members of the Chicago Board of Education, and former

Harvard President Conant each captured the highly deficit concept of "at risk" in their texts.

With this historical lens intact, it was evident that the pre-1985 terminology by which society

labeled marginalized students sustained an effective racializing mechanism for creating social

order and understanding differences in student academic and overall success. After 1985, the

definition of "at risk" shifted from a piece of "expert jargon" used by educators and those in

education-related fields (e.g., social sciences, mental health) to a term used in the public rhetoric

of social policy reform.

Post-1985 Definitions of "At Risk"

Due in large part to *A Nation At Risk (1983),* post-1985 definitions of "at risk" replaced

the earlier well-treaded notion of "culturally disadvantaged" students. *A Nation At Risk (1983)*

was the first major, empirically-based publication to present a new way of using the label "at

risk" to describe students:

The Federal Government, in cooperation with States and localities, should help meet the

needs of key groups of students such as the gifted and talented, the socioeconomically

disadvantaged, minority and language minority students, and the handicapped. In

combination these groups include both national resources and the Nation's youth who are

most at risk. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983)

At the 1987 National Forum on Youth at Risk, Jonathan Kozol pointed out that "the title

of this conference, though apt, is a 'trifle antiseptic.' 'Youth at risk' is, in fact, a sanitized term.

Devastated children would be closer to the truth in many cases" (Kozol as cited in ECS, 1988).

However, the very limitations that Kozol described were exactly the term's linguistic strengths in

the early education reform movement: for conservatives, "at risk" was associated with *A Nation*

At Risk (1983) objectives and the need for recommitment to academic excellence (Placier, 1991).

For liberals, the term was associated with a renewal of interest in educational equity and

engagement with social inequalities.

In 1985, this new definition of "at risk" was reinforced by the National Coalition of

Advocates for Students (NCAS) in their report entitled *Barriers to Excellence: Our Children at*

Risk. The report described certain groups of children as "at risk" of discrimination and unfair

treatment in schools. These groups included poor, minority, immigrant, female and "special

needs" students (Placier, 1991). While this report attempted to force a re-examination of

practices in classrooms towards disenfranchised students, the report is often credited, as with *A*

Nation At Risk (1983), in "making the term 'at risk students' part of the educational reform

lexicon" (Hill, 1989).

Over the past 25 years, research institutions, policymakers, teachers and non-profit

organizations created to serve the "at risk" population have each identified their own definitions

of "at risk." The overwhelmingly majority of these definitions are rooted in similar deficit

notions as the earliest definitions, in spite of politically correct verbiage used as a replacement

for earlier vernacular that is now viewed as unacceptable. The North Central Regional

Education Laboratory (NCREL) adopted the following definition of "at-risk": "students are

placed 'at risk' when they experience a significant mismatch between their circumstances and

needs, and the capacity or willingness of the school to accept, accommodate, and respond to

them in a manner that supports and enables their maximum social, emotional, and intellectual growth and development" (Costello, 1996).

Earlier research focused on definitions that are still in line with current research, which commonly subscribed to a definition of "at risk" that paralleled the label to the chances have of leaving the formal educational system. Solberg, et al., (2007) defined "at risk" students as those who model previous unsuccessful students, students who have dropped out of high school, and students who are at risk of dropping out of school. Similarly, according to Frostig and Essex (1998), "students at-risk are children and adolescents prone to academic failure due to a variety of risk factors that include emotional disturbance and /or social adjustment problems that can be further compounded by family issues of neglect, violence, and/or poverty" (p. xvi).

As an externally-funded agency created to promote student success, Communities in Schools (CIS), similarly defined "at risk" status based on a student's probability for dropping out of high school. The risk factors consisted of students who: have failed two or more classes, have not been promoted to the next grade level, are pregnant or teen parents, are homeless, are eligible for free lunch, are Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) eligible, have failed a state mandated standardized test (in this context, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test), are on probation, are currently in a family crisis, or have an incarcerated parent (Lesley, 2008).

While the majority of research and policy over the past twenty-five years continued to engage in conversations of definitions of "at risk" with respect to a student's risk or likelihood of dropping out or being pushed out of high school, some scholars focused efforts on the importance of debunking such prescriptive approaches to specific groups of students. Hixon and Tinzman (1990) described four approaches most commonly used in the identification of "at risk"

students: predictive, descriptive, unilateral, and school factors. The predictive and descriptive approaches, most commonly used, focused on students' deficits. Hixson and Tinzman (1990) have criticized such traditional definitions of risk because "labels of risk are generally ascribed by members of the dominant culture to individuals whose lives are not reflective of dominant culture." (p. 93)

Alternatively, Hixson and Tinzman called for "ecological definitions of risk," which incorporate community and cultural factors (p. 5). Like Hixson and Tinzman, Higgs and Tarsi (1997) argued that "the language used to describe students who are labeled at-risk impacts their experiences and constructs their social reality" (p. 119). Because of the label's negative connotations, "at-risk" is synonymous with failures: in school, in their family, and in relationships, and suggests "persons-at-trouble" (p. 119).

Likewise, Hilliard (1988) viewed these descriptions of "at-risk" student identification critically as "… blam[ing] the child for what we have failed to provide and [searching] for solutions through an examination of the child rather than systems" (p. 199). Hilliard described the "at risk" student as one whom, "through no fault of his or her own, may be placed in a situation where access to an appropriate quality of regular education is restricted" (p. 198). Bomer, Dworin, May and Semingson (2008) and Ladson-Billings (2004) have agreed that there is a tendency to both define and blame students or their families for the academic labels placed upon them.

According to Ladson-Billings (p. 201), much of the language used to describe students who struggle in school because of supposed factors outside of school has led to viewing "at-risk" students and their families as deficient, as opposed to viewing schools and society as unwilling

or unable to meet students' needs. For these reasons, beyond looking at the historical definitions of "at risk" students, it was incredibly useful to further examine indicators of risk in studies of "at-risk" youth.

Indicators of Risk

Youth "at risk" was the label used continuously in policy to capture students whose educational outcomes were considered "too low." Sometimes implied and, at other times, explicitly stated, the emphasis for labeling youth "at risk" is on the risk of them either not completing high school or exiting the formal public education system prior to graduation. To many educators, students who had been given the at-risk label were referred to as *those kids*; in many educator's experiences, students referred to as "at risk" were "kids who don't care," "kids whose parents don't care about them," "kids who won't make it," "kids who don't have a chance," "kids who have fallen through the cracks," and "kids who aren't willing to work hard enough" (Roberts, 2008).

Little research has systematically investigated how complex individual and family circumstances might have interacted with school and community characteristics to contribute to students' "at riskness." Instead, research indicated that "risk determination" is focused on the presence of one indicator of risk that falls within a specific category. Resulting here is was false distinction between a supposed deficient minority population versus a "normal" majority population (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001). This dominant conceptualization of "at risk" youth located the problem within individual students rather than assuming institutional flaws in the educational system while denying any possibility of common concerns held across all (or most) youth (Cieslik & Pollock, 2002; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). This dominant interpretation looked to

schools for the solution, without recognition of their potential role in contributing to the problem; and, moreover, established an extremely limited definition of "success" (Alexiadou, 2002).

As discussed previously, *A Nation At Risk* (1983) outlined specific indicators of risk, including, the statistics that

about 13 percent of all 17-year-olds in the United States can be considered functionally illiterate … Functional illiteracy among minority youth may run as high as 40 percent … [and] … many 17-year-olds do not possess the "higher order" intellectual skills we should expect of them. Nearly 40 percent cannot draw inferences from written material; only one-fifth can write a persuasive essay; and only one-third can solve a mathematics problem requiring several steps. (A Nation At Risk, 1983, p.14)

Risk became a national crisis, resulting in immediate and ongoing educational reform, in an effort to search for educational solutions to ensure our global economic standing. In the process, political powers sought to provide an explanation for these outcomes. An overwhelming amount of literature, still predicated upon conservative or neoliberal political ties, continued to place the "blame" for "at riskness" on students themselves, rather than to consider the longstanding impact of historical inequalities on lives of racialized and impoverished communities.

Literature focused on understanding and identifying "at risk" students commonly suggested that numerous factors, or indicators, caused this risk of non-completion (Reile, 2006). Rarely, however, was the emphasis on such indicators the same throughout a variety of scholarly sources. Nevertheless, these factors overwhelmingly showed a trend towards seeing the problem as stemming from multiple factors including the person, the family, the school, and/or the broader community (Reile, 2006). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and

Development (1995), for instance, listed poverty, ethnic minority status, family issues, poor knowledge of the majority language, type of school, geographic isolation, and community factors in its review of the concept of "at risk," as used in a variety of countries. Batten and Russell (1995) had also identified factors in these same four categories: individual, family, school, and society.

Individual Risk Indicators

Individual indicators that were considered to place students "at risk" included psychological factors such as poor self-esteem and lack of motivation; physical factors including illness and disability; and behavioral factors such as disruptive behavior, drug use, involvement with the juvenile justice system, and pregnancy (Batten & Russell, 1995; Kominski, Jamieson & Martinez, 2001; Stepney, 2001). Wells (2000) expanded upon these risk indicators by way of individual or student-related factors that include:

- Poor school attitude,
- Low ability level,
- Attendance/truancy,
- Behavior/discipline problems,
- Pregnancy,
- Drug abuse,
- Poor peer relationships,
- Nonparticipation,
- Friends have dropped out,
- Illness/disability, and
- Low self-esteem/self-efficacy.

One example of individual risk factors included youth with learning disabilities. Research commonly noted that policies were needed to promote greater school engagement and retention of high-risk youth, particularly students with learning and behavioral difficulties (Sinclair, Chirstenson, Evolo & Hurley, 1998). Without exploration of factors outside of the

individual's control, knowledge, or sphere of influence, research has drawn conclusions

regarding the "drop-out rate" of students with learning disabilities. Many students with learning

disabilities have dropped out of school before completing their ninth and tenth grade

requirements and, thus, are considered to require more strict policies (Marder & D'Amico, 1992;

Thornton, Liu, Morrow, & Zigmond, 1989).

Family Risk Indicators

Risk indicators that were associated with a student's family included family structure

such as single parent families; family functioning such as family conflict and abuse; family

socioeconomic context such as low income and low level of parental education; and separation

from one's family through homelessness, foster care placement, or being a ward of the state

(Batten & Russell, 1995). Wells (1990) expanded this list of family-related factors to include:

- Low "SES" (socio-economic status),
- Dysfunctional home life,
- No parental involvement,
- Low parental expectations,
- Non-English-speaking home,
- Ineffective parenting/abuse, and
- High mobility.

Kominski Jamieson, and Martinez (2001) captured *familial* risk characteristics as not

living with both parents, parents emigrating within the past five years, family income below

$10,000, and parental or guardian employment status. According to this study, at least 46 percent

of children from ages 5-17 have experienced at least one of the *personal* or *familial* risk factors.

School Risk Indicators

Risk indicators stemming from school include student-teacher relationships; requirements

to be passive learners; little to no choice in what (or how) to study; feeling not listened to by

teachers; uninteresting or irrelevant curriculum; lack of flexibility; and lack of school counselors

and other support services (Batten & Russell, 1995). Wells (1990) expanded school risk

indicators to include:

- Conflict between home/school culture,
- Ineffective discipline system,
- Lack of adequate counseling,
- Negative school climate,
- Lack of relevant curriculum,
- Passive instructional strategies,
- Inappropriate use of technology,
- Disregard of student learning styles,
- Retentions/Suspensions,
- Low expectations,
- Lack of language instruction.

Society or Community Risk Indicators

Society and community factors that contributed to student's "risk" have included the

local level of unemployment, the availability and cost of housing, the availability of welfare

services and support, and poverty (Batten & Russell, 1995).   Wells (1990) again expanded on

this definition to capture society or community risk indicators:

- Lack of community support services or response,
- Lack of community support for schools,
- High incidences of criminal activities, and
- Lack of school/community linkages.

These societal risk factors were influenced directly and indirectly through state and

national policies and global trends. For example, policies to increase retention could potentially

have increased dissatisfaction with school if students feel coerced to stay at school even if the

schooling process disregards the students' interests and needs (Whitty, 2001). Furthermore, the

current structure of the U.S. education system allows for students with the economic means to

opt into contexts that are tailored to their culture and development. In contrast, other students are

legally obligated to remain in school contexts that are insensitive to their particular cultural and developmental needs (Reile, 2006). In fact, secondary education is rooted in post-World War II aims to promote social and economic development and to act as a vehicle for social mobility (Bernstein, 1977). Despite these intentions, however, it became clear that educational opportunities and outcomes have remained unequal, and that these inequalities are maintained in part by sorting students on individual or cultural characteristics including social class, ethnicity, and gender (Connell et al., 1982).

One "risk indicator" alone has qualified a student to be labeled "at risk." Often, though, various risk factors co-occur, operating together on a student simultaneously or in sequence over certain duration of time (Batton & Bussell, 1995). These various indicators have become intertwined and capture the whole of the schooling experience for students labeled "at-risk." Trent and Slade (2001) capture this through their research on teenage boys:

> When the boys talk about both the work and teachers being boring, irrelevant and repetitive, they do this as though these were inseparable aspects of one process that they simply call "school". This includes school organization and its culture; the length of lessons, the day, the school week, the term and so on, as well as homework, uniforms, attendance and behavior expectations by teachers. They include aspects of the built environment, like enclosed classrooms, toilets that can't be used, as well as gates and fences 'that make you feel like you're in prison. (p. 33)

For the boys in this study, these interdependent and causally interrelated aspects of their attitudes toward the work contribute to their commitment to schooling as a whole. For each student, there

is usually a specific combination of in-school and out-of-school factors responsible for that individual's marginalization.

A common alternative to defining "at risk" indicators is based on examining groups of students, instead of individuals. Often, this differentiation did not avoid the "blaming the victim" perspective (which is equally problematic in individualized approaches) because the focus is still on the identification of characteristics shared by these youth (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). On this point, Swadener and Lubeck (1995) attested, "What is particularly troubling and problematic is the degree to which children's race, gender, class, first language, family makeup, and environment all target them for this 'at risk' label and associated interventions" (p.25).

Needs for and Provisions of "At Risk" Youth

Throughout the past century, politicians, educators, researchers, and theorists alike have created and recreated the definitions and implications of students labeled "at risk." The label is inextricably linked to the context of education and the process of attainment (Abbott-Chapman & Patterson, 1990) that, over time, has been established as the dominant and "self-evident" concept of American education and youth policy (Reile, 2006). "Self-evident" is used here by Reile (2006) as a shorthand and is, thus, presumed to require no further explanations as to what it is that youth identified with this label may be "at risk" of. A sample of publications illustrates this glib usage of the term:

- "Traveling in the wilderness: experiential learning and youth-at-risk" (Sveen, 1993)
- "School students at risk" (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 1996)
- "An investigation into a values-centered approach designed for at-risk adolescents" (MacFarlane, 1997)
- "School engagement and students at-risk" (Riley, 1993)
- "Understanding at-risk youth and intervention programs that help them succeed in school" (Dobizl, 2002)

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- "Colleges for youth at risk" (MacKenzie, 1999)
- "Targeting clinical and health education services to youth at risk" (Bourke & Rudowski, 2003)

As these publications have well illustrated, referring to youth "at risk" appears to be typically deemed sufficient, in order to clarify both "the whom" and "the what" of the publication's content and target. Although both the individual and societal presumed causes and the consequences of being "at risk" were usually made explicit within each publication, it became clear that the phrase has, in fact, become "self-evident" (Reile, 2006).

Over time, as various intervention strategies have emerged, and as the "at risk" label has both become a measure of a student as well as potential funding stream for schools, praise has been bestowed on those who have "saved" the "at risk" student from his or her impending negative future. Despite the foundation of public education to serve all youth, praise has been particularly given to those teachers, schools and districts that have made the seemingly difficult decision or sacrifice to serve youth labeled "at risk."

For example, reporting on a Colorado high school, the *Denver Post* (October 31, 1999) remarked that "the School Board and a new District Superintendent 'were now as committed to at-risk students as they were to the cream of the crop'…rallying to keep those kids in school made the school's drop-out prevention program a success" (Wheeler, 1999). Similar to the program in this Denver school district, numerous intervention and prevention programs have been established with the intention of serving "at risk" populations. The foundation for each of these programs is well entrenched in what decision-makers believe regarding what "at risk" youth need in order to succeed or graduate from high school.

An overview of research on the provision of services for "at risk" youth has shown that youth need at least one of five different modifications or additions to their educational experience, to achieve "success" or high school graduation. These provisions have included therapy, separate settings, additional learning time, higher accountability expectations, and adult relationships. These are discussed briefly, to provide examples of how these needs are commonly addressed.

"At Risk" Students Need Therapy

Many researchers have believed that "at risk" youth need therapy or counseling services. While there were limited participant studies as to the effects of counseling interventions, researchers have believed that a key to promoting "at risk" student success was to ensure that students feel important and have a higher sense of self-esteem (Dobizl, 2002). Numerous forms of therapy and counseling services exist specifically to serve "at risk" youth. The most common therapeutic forms explored include in-school individual and group counseling (Herr, 1989), art therapy, wilderness therapy, and multi-faceted programs that provide therapy in conjunction with another self-esteem raising component (Darbizl, 2002). At "Project Bootstrap" in Alabama, for example, "at risk" high school students received one-on-one therapy while concurrently tutoring grade school children. This intervention "is a win-win situation for both parties … looked upon highly by the young students, the high school students felt important, thereby increasing their self-esteem" (Curriculum Review, 1990).

"At Risk" Students Need Separate Settings

Researchers have also determined that "at risk" youth need smaller educational settings, which provide a different focus than the larger mainstream systems. For instance, A school-

within-a-school (SWS) was a program that is funded by the local public education entity (school district or county office of education) which offers services with instruction in basic skills, career exploration, and counseling, involves teachers working collaboratively across academic disciplines, curriculum, budget, policies, and procedures (i.e., in-house discipline and enrichment activities) (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2006).

Operating under these same assumptions, alternative schools became an additional intervention approach to serving "at risk" youth (Barr & Parrett, 1997). Alternative schools, like SWSs, offered a variety of educational programs in an attempt to meet the "widely differing needs of individual 'at risk' students" (p.9). Franklin (1992) states that alternative schools assist students in the development of social functioning and behavioral competency skills. Barr and Parrett (1997) argue that "Alternative schools have grown in number and respect because they have continued to demonstrate effectiveness, often with the most challenging students" (p. 9).

"At Risk" Students Need Additional Learning Time

In line with the concept of a separate educational setting, much research has declared that "at risk" students benefit from longer "seat time." Research showed that students who have difficulty learning during the regular school day, many of whom are consequently labeled "at risk, need additional time to comprehend the material and engage in the traditional learning process. For many, this begs the question of whether or not "more" of something that isn't already working will increase the likelihood that "it" will begin working.

"At Risk" Students Need To Be Held Accountable

Some researchers also believed that "at risk" youth (and, at times, their families, as well) should be held accountable for not attending school regularly or not graduating from high school.

When research in this arena focuses on accountability, the resulting action has often involved punishment. Such negative policies established as part of "prevention and intervention programs" for "at risk" youth often have invoked sanctions against the very students the program is designed to serve. For instance, a Wisconsin family's welfare benefits were reduced because their "at risk" child failed to attend school on a regular basis (Lundenburg, 1999; Toby & Armor, 1992). Similarly, in West Virginia, the law to ensure students attend school is entitled "No School, No Drive." These laws, which require good school attendance for new licensees and revokes licenses for dropouts under age 18, have become more popular across the nation as the intention of these laws was to "decrease the drop out rate with hopes to eliminate the social and economic problems associated with these dropouts" (Lunenburg, 1999).

"At Risk" Students Need Adult Relationships

Often, researchers stated that a need to build relationships between teachers and administration with students and families was integral. The research available was impacted by researchers' unexamined assumptions about the causes of student's challenges in connection with this question, which accounted for several of the indicators used to assign "at riskness" (i.e., single parent households, working parents, stigmatized school environment, foster youth). Nevertheless, many programs stemmed from the belief that relationship building between schools and families was a crucial building block to the success of young people. Toward that end, Kronick (1997) asserted the importance of developing relationships with the student's family, stating that "a strong link exists between parent's involvement in the school and their students' success…children whose parents are learning are more eager to learn" (p.295).

The dearth and disconnection in research existed both in terms of the indicators identified for "at risk" youth and the needs and provisions to young people, as well as the larger issue of focusing on individual-level causes while ignoring larger systemic failures. Despite the assumed best intentions of those identifying the needs and developing the interventions for "at risk" youth, each intervention reviewed here addresses only one of the indicators identified earlier. This is in direct contrast to research, which, as was previously explored, stated that nearly all "at risk" youth carry more than just one of the "indicators" commonly utilized for identification.

Finally, research has failed to address the concept that, potentially, some of the very interventions applied to youth labeled "at risk" can or should be applied to assist in the learning, growth, or development of all young people. Research continued to focus on the students who constitute the problematic minority, without ever looking at the larger system surrounding the young person. It is integral, then, to advance opportunities to gain a better understanding of the implications behind this label and its uses.

Implications behind the Act of Labeling

Throughout its history, the "at risk" label has had both severe and life-altering implications for students to whom this label has been given. In an effort to best understand the implications behind this label and the effects of labeling students, it was crucial to understand the relationship between culture and power that exists within the school. As briefly explored earlier, the capitalist logic, linked to social power, which supports a variety of forms of dominant and subordinate relationships in American education, must have been further explored to best understand the implications of labeling on youth.

Dehumanization

In examining the relationship between subordinate and dominant cultures, it was evident that subordinate cultures tend to exist, to one extent or another, within conditions of inequality and social exclusion. The primary function of the dominant culture in the US was principally to conserve and perpetuate the strength of the political economy and legitimate social interests and values that work toward that end. Subordinate groups within the US were generally contained through an ideological process of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) that marginalizes those "cultural values, heritage, language, knowledge and lived experiences" that fall outside the mainstream and are considered problematic to capitalist accumulation (Darder, 2012). Thus, the act of labeling a student "at risk" has been understood within the context of a hegemonic process where teachers and others working with "at risk" youth were provided the moral higher ground upon which to designate the label onto students—many of whom already exist in communities at the margins of the mainstream. The label, as previously discussed, becames a means by which to sort, categorize and to a certain extent contain. The use of labels that, more often than not, resulted in exclusion and containment has been understood as commonsensical product of a capitalist society that is, inherently, dehumanizing to the students as individuals, as well as their communities.

By labeling a student "at risk," the dominant culture has reinforced and implied, within the school, that this dominant-subordinate relationship exists not within a vacuum or as an absolute phenomenon but rather as a process by which members from the subordinate culture are dehumanized. Moreover, given the consensual dynamics of hegemony, they may even be complicit in this process of dehumanization through the internalization of deficit. Finally, the

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label may have been deployed broadly to anyone outside of the dominant culture, as "any individual whose life, in terms of experiences and values, is not reflective of the lives of members of the dominant culture may be labeled at-risk" (Compton-Lilly, 2008).

"At risk" indicators, be they communal such as poverty status or individual such as a learning disability, could increase the likelihood that a student will face an unfavorable educational climate because of systematic practices of inequality and exclusion at work in schools. However, more disconcerting here is the manner in which assigning an "at-risk" label has shifted the majority of ownership and responsibility on to the student and his or her circumstances. This inherently makes the child a problem for the school, while the school and societal problems that have shaped the student's circumstances remain untouched (Compton-Lilly, 2008; Hilliard, 1988).

Power and Truth

Michel Foucault (1980) argued that "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere … power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (p. 93). In Foucault's examination of power, he pointed to the structures inherent within Western society, wherein power quickly becomes isolated or consolidated within dominant social spheres, leaving questions of domination or powerlessness difficult to address (Darder, 2012). Rarely was power understood dialectically as both a negative and positive force (Giroux, 1988a); and thus, this superficial reading of power benefited the dominant culture through a myriad of "covert avenues for

control" (p. 26)—avenues through which *truth* is constructed throughout societies. Foucault (1977) defined the "regimes of truth" that result:

> …regimes of truth…the types of discourse which it [society or culture] accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p. 131)

In concert with Foucault's formulations of power, truth, and culture, Darder (2012) argued "that the ability of individuals from different cultural groups to express their cultural truths is clearly related to the power that certain groups are able to wield within the social order" (p. 27). Thus, the needs or provisions of youth labeled "at risk" became truths, not because these are necessarily so, but rather because the dominant culture, which has the decision-making power determines the legitimacy of those structures, relationships, and practices deemed truths. Hence, bicultural students and students labeled "at risk" have been systematically "educated into the discourse of the dominant culture… that perceives the discourse of the other as inferior, invaluable and deficient in regard to the aims of American society … and manifests itself in various forms of cultural invasion" (Darder, 2012, p. 62).

Transformative Power of Narrative

Congruent with Dewey's beliefs and Freire's teachings, Darder (2012) urged, in *Culture and Power in the Classroom*, that critical educators must create the conditions necessary for schools to become "apprenticeships for democracy" (p. 60). Freire (2010) reasoned that students can only develop skills required for critical engagement with the world through participation in

an educational space that welcomes open dialogue and an authentic sense of participation in genuine democratic life. Thus, in order for open dialogue to occur, one must have found opportunities to participate in the development of voice freely. This entailed a space for students themselves to be both heard and engaged with respect about how they define themselves as critical social beings, within their lived experiences and their interaction with the world (Darder, 2012). Giroux (1988b) describes voice in the following way:

> The concept of voice represents the unique instances of self-expression through which students affirm their own class, culture, racial, and gender identities. A student's voice is necessarily shaped by personal history and distinctive lived engagement with the surrounding culture. The category of voice, then, refers to the means at our disposal – the discourses available to use—to make ourselves understood and listened to and to define ourselves as active participants in the world. (p. 199)

As has been discussed, the framework for establishing voice must begin with the mutual understanding that the dominant pedagogy of American schools largely reflects the values, worldview, and belief system of the dominant culture, which often ignores the lived experiences of subordinate cultures (Darder, 2012; Rubin & Silva, 2003). This dynamic inherently has created an atmosphere where free participation is limited and student voices are stunted, within the school experience of many poor and working class bicultural students. With this in mind, Darder insisted that "students can only develop their voice through opportunities to enter into dialogue and engage in a critical process of reflection from which they can share their thoughts, ideas and lived experiences with others in an open and free manner" (Darder, 2012, p. 62).

Darder (2012) and other leading critical theorists have agreed that an integral component of student voice is the development of a critical process by which students learn to share their lived experiences, in order to integrate themselves as complete beings. Furthermore, Darder continued this belief in lived experiences and their connection to voice in her comment: "By recognizing the truths embedded in their personal reflections and the substance of their everyday lives … [they] awaken the bicultural voice" (p. 63). Just as this research attempted to deconstruct the "at risk" label, it is, thus, integral for students labeled "at risk" (bicultural students), to strip away the oppression and denial and begin to deconstruct their conditioned definitions [i.e.: "at risk" label] of who they are, in an effort to recreate their own sense of existence as social agents able to understand and articulate their world and join in authentic dialogue with those whose lived histories are culturally different than their own.

This process of developing one's own narrative then was, in itself, a transformative process. Just as Freire (2010) urged the sharing of lived experiences and histories as a foundation for developing critically conscious students, Andrews, Squire, and Tambokou (2008) identified this same process of meaning-making in how humans come to understand their lives through narrative. Thus, by engaging youth labeled "at risk" in the process of this narrative inquiry, students have participated in the process of "awakening their bicultural voice" and transforming their lives and their world (Darder, 2012). By creating a place for students who have been labeled and marginalized by the mainstream educational system to engage in a transformative process of both sharing their lived histories as well as engaging with others who have also been marginalized, students have then experienced for themselves moments of freedom from which to rethink the educational system that did not understand or respect them

(Darder, 2012). In so doing, they have entered into a process where their voice, active

citizenship, and transformative potential is supported and welcomed.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the researcher but are the masters of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world. In this context research becomes a means of moving them beyond silence into a quest to proclaim the world. (Freire, 1982, p. 29)

In *Creating Alternative Research Methods: Learning To Do It By Doing It,* Freire (1982) argues, "People have to think about their thinking and not be only objects of my thinking … in doing research I am educating and being educated with the people" (p. 30). This serves as the starting point for further research and sets the conditions through which research begins. In keeping with this perspective, this chapter will explore how critical narrative inquiry served as the most appropriate lens through which to focus on the one over-arching question which guided the research: How do former students identify and understand the conditions that labeled them "at risk"?

A critical analysis of the label "at risk," its historical relevance and meaning, and an investigation into its impact on youth labeled "at risk" was both fundamental and integral to future educational research on student outcomes. As discussed in Chapter Two, the "at risk" label is not new; rather, this label serves among countless others, as part of a mechanism for sorting, categorizing, and segregating particular students away from the mainstream. Key to research on student outcomes in the field was a fundamental need for a critical analysis of the

label of "at risk," an accurate understanding of the historical relevance and meaning of this label, and a discussion of the label's impact on youth, families and communities.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the meaning and sense-making of the educational experiences of students labeled "at risk." By so doing, this research aimed to demythologize the concept of "at-riskness" by providing the conditions, through the use of narrative inquiry, for student voices and critical dialogue. This dialogue was best captured through a process of interviewing referred to as narrative inquiry. "Narrative inquiry is firmly grounded on the foundation that, as human beings, we come to understand and give meaning to our lives through telling our own story." (Andrews et al., 2008, p. 4)

The organization of this chapter was as follows: the Research Approach section introduces the qualitative lens and critical narrative inquiry. The Site and Participant Selection section presents the various avenues through which participants were identified and introduces selection criteria required for inclusion in the study. The Data Collection section discusses how the qualitative data were gathered, and the Data Analysis section focuses on the analytic procedures applied to the data. The section Ethical Concerns, Limitations, and Role of the Researcher explores data validity, the researcher's role, literature on "whiteness," and the role of white educators in their work with bicultural students. The Conclusion reiterates the study's purpose and elaborates on the rationale behind utilizing critical narrative inquiry as the core method employed to answer the research question.

Qualitative Methodology

The methodology employed by this study was qualitative. Qualitative research is a metaphoric process that includes a recursive process by sharing the presence of similar qualities

(Chenail, 2012). A qualitative approach focuses on gathering data through open-ended methods. This method was most relevant and useful for this study in that it allowed for student voices, as crucial components to critical pedagogical dialogue, to be heard and provided a space for an open-ended, interactive approach and analysis of the phenomenon necessary in order to best understand the lived experiences of the students, in conjunction with the environmental conditions related to power at work in student's lives. More specifically, based on the overriding question and purpose that informs this study, the particular qualitative approach utilized in this research was that of critical narrative inquiry.

Critical narrative inquiry complemented the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy in that this method provided the space for the voices of the bicultural participants to be heard, while simultaneously encouraging emancipatory practices of personal reflection, dialogue, and critique of their lived experiences. Critical narrative research constitutes a qualitative research methodology that seeks to arrive at a deeper understanding of one event or occurrence, through working to gain an understanding of how participants derived meaning from such events or occurrences and then working with them to understand how these meanings can guide specific responses or behaviors.

The theoretical framework of this study also directly informed the research methodology employed, in that underlying emancipatory values critically inform data collection, the coding, interpretation, and conclusions of this critical narrative inquiry. A critical theoretical framework, thus, figured prominently into critical narrative inquiry. Key concepts at work also included a critique of the banking model of education, *conscientizaçao, praxis, dialogue, cultural democracy, power and bicultural education* (Darder et al., 2009; Freire, 2010). The methods

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employed for this qualitative study included the collection of youths' lived histories and narratives through unstructured interviews and focus groups, in line with critical narrative inquiry.

Critical Narrative Inquiry

Critical narrative inquiry is based on the principle that, as humans, we come to understand and give meaning to our lives through opportunities to tell our own story (Andrews, Squire & Tambokou, 2008). Narrative inquiry involves the researcher's attention to the ways in which a story is constructed, for whom and why, as well as the cultural discourses that inform the story (Trahar, 2009). Critical narrative inquiry evolves from the growing participatory research movement, where there is a higher sensitivity to both cultural and social differences, as well as the power relations that inform students' lives (Darder 2012). "Narrative inquiry embraces narrative as both the *method* and the *phenomena* of study" (Pinnegar & Danes, 2007) and "characteristically begins with the researcher's autobiographically oriented narrative associated with the *research puzzle*" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Critical narrative inquiry supported the conceptual design by which this study sought to identify the conceptual basis and foundational elements of the study, particularly with respect to the manner in which youth name their world (Freire 2010). Through critical narrative inquiry, this investigative process helped to define the constructs of power that shape the lives of youth labeled "at risk" and helped to show the relationship of these to current policies and practices.

Freire believes that knowledge is socially constructed through dialogue and a subjective view of the local world (Freire, 1982; Torres, 1995). In fact, Freire (1982) insisted that "instead of taking the people here as the object of my research, I must try, on the contrary, to have the

people dialogically involved also as subjects, as researchers with me" (p. 30). This goal of Freire's research in Tanzania served as a model for the current study. Knowledge produced over the course of this project was not simply to increase the researcher's own knowledge of students, but rather for students to dialogically engage in the reflection together.

Participant Selection

Participant selection was key to the study. The researcher identified six former students through existing relationships and networks; selection was not randomized. The researcher reached out to many people in her networks to discuss the population being studied and shared the four categories under which "at risk" youth fall. Following these discussions, individuals and members of the researcher's existing networks did outreach to any potential participants who met the criteria for inclusion in the study. During this outreach, several organizations shared a simple one-page letter and flyer (See Appendices B and C) that outlined the study. These organizations included high schools and non-profit organizations in both a large city in the Eastern United States as well as a large city in the Western United States with which the researcher had previously established professional ties. The researcher then followed-up with any interested former students to explain the research study in additional detail. Next, interested participants signed a consent form (See Appendix A).

This study was focused on former students, including both students who had graduated high school despite the "at risk" label and students who were unable to complete high school. Both of these groups were of interest because the study's focus was not the impact of the label on educational attainment but rather a student's understanding of the conditions that caused the label to exist and student's perceptions of the consequences of this label. The participants were

limited to former students between the ages of 18-24 to ensure that the time lapse between the current time and the student's past educational experiences was short enough to enable participants to recall accurately important details that guided research and dialogue. Despite outreach to numerous organizations, only students who had a first- or second-degree connection to the researcher were interested in participating in the study. These former students were willing to share because a sibling or friend had an existing relationship with the researcher. The six participants selected included four 21-year-olds and two 22-year-olds, four Latino Americans, two African Americans, three females, three males, four who lived or attended school on the East Coast and two who lived or attended school on the West Coast, and two who identified as gay or lesbian. Of the six former student participants, all of them now have a high school degree, three of them are currently attending four-year universities and three of them are enrolled in vocation or community college programs while also working at least part-time.

Data Collection

The methods employed for this qualitative study included the collection of youth narratives, in line with critical narrative inquiry, through unstructured interviews and focus groups. This included engaging in dialogue, through the process of critical narratives with six former students labeled "at risk," each of whom falls into one of the four categories that the literature has indicated as inclusive of all "at risk" students. These subgroups again include characteristics pertaining to individual students, their families, the school, and the wider community/society. Six former students, each older than 18 years of age, from each of these categories participated in two to three individual, unstructured, narrative process interviews. Additionally, three of these individuals participated in a focus group.

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After obtaining consent but prior to each individual interview, the researcher collaborated with the participants to schedule their interviews. Participants chose times and locations for the interviews that were convenient and comfortable for them. Interviews were conducted in a variety of settings including respondents' homes, a church, a park, and other locations preferred by the participants. For this study, it was important for the participants to select the location, as this enabled the creation of a critical framework for an open dialogue, with a horizontal power structure wherein the participants could feel that they were involved in a process of both teaching and learning with the researcher. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher obtained verbal permission to audio record the conversation that would follow. The unstructured interviews were then recorded for later transcription.

While participant narratives were unstructured, the researcher utilized specific topic questions to ensure that the data were gathered in a consistent manner throughout the narrative process within a given interview as well as across respondents. The following topic questions guided the narrative process with each participant:

- Tell me about your educational experiences.
- During your education, did you hear the term "at risk" used? If so, where did you hear this label? When did you hear it? Do you remember the context?
- What does "at risk" mean to you now? What did it mean to you when you heard it?
- What has been your personal experience with the term "at risk?" Can you tell me about what happened in this experience?
- Why do you think you were labeled "at risk?"
- How did this label impact you? Your educational experience? Your view of adults/teachers/administrators? Your family? Your community?

The audio recordings of participants' narratives were transcribed within one week of the interview date. These interview conversations ranged in length from one to three hours. Four of

the participants chose to engage in a second interview together. These participants chose to do so due to various time constraints including work, school or family commitments. These interviews followed the identical format of the first interviews and were, in many cases, simply a continuation of the first conversation together.

The three participants who lived locally (one whom attended school on the East Coast but was on break and living on the West Coast during this time) and were available to meet were brought together for one focus group discussion, following the completion of all the interviews. The focus group, another aspect of critical narrative inquiry, gave young people the opportunity to engage in this dialogue with other similarly aged individuals who were also labeled "at risk." The focus group conversation, which took place after all individual interviews, was completely unstructured and the conversation was organic from the beginning of the dialogue. The researcher guided the conversation through topic questions that stemmed from individual interview topic questions. All focus group conversations with participants were recorded and the focus group dialogue, as with the individual interviews, was held in a location where the participants felt comfortable and willing to engage. Each participant selected the location to be interviewed and these locations included: a parked car, a library meeting space and a multi-purpose room at a church.

<div align="center">**Data Analysis**</div>

The data analysis for this critical narrative inquiry was both reciprocal and iterative. Data analysis was also inductive, meaning that the researcher looked for patterns and relationships throughout the data, which thus allowed the story to emerge from the data (Hatch, 2002). Analysis proceeded through a search for recurring patterns and themes that presented themselves

in multiple interviews, as these could help indicate how the participants perceived the "at risk" label that had been applied to them. Of particular analytic interest were patterns in the data that suggested relationships between the label and the sense-making that students as silent recipients of this label have created. This inductive process differs from deductive approaches that identify themes and create hypotheses prior to data collection.

Data analyzed included the transcripts from both interviews and focus groups. Additionally, each transcript was analyzed and coded within one week of the original conversation in an effort to ensure that information was fresh in the researcher's mind. The researcher always worked to have narrative transcripts coded prior to beginning a new narrative interview, so as to ensure that comments and conversations did not get crossed. Furthermore, by coding data soon after data collection, the researcher was afforded the opportunity to revisit any potential misunderstandings or ask for the participant to elaborate on comments made during future meetings.

<div style="text-align:center">Limitations and Role of the Researcher</div>

Access and Negotiation

The researcher's connections to community organizations and individuals who were willing to support this study have made it possible. Access to students labeled "at risk" who represent the factors which fall into at least one of the four categories is superbly beneficial for the project, but this also created additional limitations due to the subjectivity of participant selection on behalf of the partner organizations.

Limitations

Certain assumptions were inevitable given the study's design. The researcher's experiences personally and professionally over the past twelve years have provided "on the ground" insight into the lives of youth and young adults who have been labeled "at risk" throughout their schooling experience. At the same time, this involvement with youth who might share similar backgrounds or experiences as the youth whom I have worked with in the past has helped to shape the lens through which I view youth, culture, power, and learning. This lens inevitably played a role during our dialogue and throughout the study.

Through the process of engaging former students in the recollection of these conditions, it was possible that various events could alter students' perceptions of prior experiences. However, this recalling of stories is part of the critical narrative inquiry process as researchers seek to explore the meaning and sense-making of lived histories. Additionally, as discussed earlier, participant selection was key to the study and could present limitations as well. Given the protocol followed to select participants, the researcher worked within her existing networks in an attempt to identify potential respondents. Selection, therefore, was not random.

"Valid" Outcomes

This study aimed to search for Peshkin's (1993) outcomes of "description, interpretation, verification, and evaluation" (p. 24). Rather than seek traditional forms of validity, this research project aimed for catalytic validity. Lather (1991) mentioned that "[c]atalytic validity represents the degree to which the research process re-orients, focuses, and energizes participants towards knowing reality in order to transform it" (p. 68).

This approach to validity is Freirean and lends itself directly to the theoretical framework of the study. The notion of catalytic validity can also be viewed as "spiraling" (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 2007), wherein participants grow their reflection and understanding in regards to the social realities being studied with an ultimate goal of either taking action to change it or to reaffirm its support.

Finally, this research study did not seek to provide generalizable data for all youth labeled "at risk" nor conclusive evidence based on statistical analyses of quantitative data gathered. This study did not hope to re-define previously created definitions of "at risk" or provide a systematic critique of existing programs aimed at serving "at risk" students in educational settings.

Role of the Researcher

In his writing on dialogue, Freire (2011) speaks to the requirements of dialogue that are integral to a critical narrative research process.

Dialogue further requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and recreate, faith in their vocation to be more fully human (which is not the privilege of an elite, but the birthright of all). Faith in people is an a priori requirement for dialogue… founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence (p. 77-78).

White educators who work with bicultural students must first be able to acknowledge their own limitations, prejudices, and biases and be willing to enter conversations with a "spirit of humility" and respect for the students' knowledge before even beginning the process of

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authentic dialogue with students (Darder, 2012; Landsman & Lewis, 2007; Howard, 2006). The researcher in this project was explicit and transparent with former students regarding both her positionality of power within the education systems, as well as within the society in which we live.

As a White, middle-class, college-educated educator and member of the dominant class, the researcher worked to engage self-consciously and honestly throughout the research process. Darder (2012) speaks clearly to Euroamerican educators and their need to engage horizontally, meaning that the educator must be: 1) aware of and willing to engage the question of power justly, 2) able to recognize their authority and to use it in the interest of cultural democracy, and 3) able to invite and permit students openly to become learners and teachers simultaneously (Freire, 2010).

The researcher, in her attempts to be and become a critical educator, and as a member of the dominant class, worked to both learn and engage in this project with hopes that the participants, former students whom have been labeled "at risk," would feel empowered as critically-conscious members of society, with lived histories and stories that provided an invaluable avenue for understanding how to support culturally democratic life within schools and communities.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The perception of students as integral human beings is paramount to both questions of ethics and the development of critical consciousness. (Darder, 2008, p. 98)

The central purpose of this study was to explore the meaning of "at riskness." Through an examination of students' stories of "at riskness" gathered by way of critical narrative inquiry, the voices of students who were in the past immersed within the context of this phenomenon can now provide a grounded account of their experiences. The research was carried out with the hope that through the voices of the participants, we can gain a better understanding of how students define the conditions that caused them to be labeled "at risk" and how they make sense of the impact it has had on their lives. With this in mind, the study has served as a vital catalyst for critical dialogue, exploration, and engagement with youth who have been labeled "at risk," which can then support a rethinking of the educational needs of youth in these conditions. The following presentation of the data, moreover, is provided with an eye toward what we can learn from participants, in order to improve the quality of life for other disenfranchised youth within schools and communities and, through these insights, compose a more accurate picture of how the practice of labeling, as a sorting mechanism impacts the lives of marginalized youth.

Through this qualitative study, the researcher interviewed six former students who were labeled "at risk" at some point during their educational experiences. This chapter summarizes the key issues raised by the participant in their narrative accounts of their experiences, highlighting those aspects of their stories that most powerfully speak to their personal and educational

histories. Each participant's story also includes a summary of their own reflections of one specific moment that, in sharing their story, arose as a "defining moment" in their understanding of the acquisition and impact of the at-risk label with respect to their lives.

Profile of Kemi

Personal History

Kemi was a 22-year-old female who identified as African American. Kemi describes herself as "stocky" and "rough around the edges." She was about 5'1" tall and very curvy. She identified as a lesbian and was not currently in a committed relationship during the time of the interview. Kemi was born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts. She was raised by her mother until the age of twelve, at which point she moved to her maternal grandmother's home about two miles from her mother. She met her father only one time in her life. Her stepfather, the father of her brother, had been in and out of prison throughout Kemi's life. She was the oldest of four children who shared the same mother. She had a 15-year-old brother and 11-year-old twin sisters. Kemi had not lived with her siblings since her twin sisters were two years old, nearly ten years ago.

During our first interview, Kemi began to cry when discussing her early childhood. Kemi shared that she was physically and verbally abused in her household. She was "alone" for many years before the birth of her brother and thus explained that she was the only one to whom anger, frustration, and resentment was triggered in her home. Kemi recalled being left alone for hours at a time and shared that her mother engaged in prostitution and frequently used (and sold) illegal drugs, while Kemi was present. Kemi's stepfather was also abusive to both Kemi and her mother. Kemi stated that she did not want to continue to discuss her early childhood

experiences. Throughout her childhood, Kemi's home environment was tumultuous. She described living in "extreme poverty" and remembers welfare checks used on drugs and hungry nights with little food in the home. She also recalled stealing food or scavenging for her siblings, to ensure that they had enough to eat.

Later childhood presented itself with many challenges, though different than those she experienced while living with her mother and siblings. At twelve years old, Kemi was kicked out of her mother's home and moved in subsequently with her Grandmother (Nana), her mother's mother. Kemi's grandmother provided for her, but the constant worry of Kemi's siblings and their safety and well-being created an ever-present "dark cloud" over her world. Furthermore, while Kemi was taken care of, she stayed at her grandmother's home, an apartment complex with very strict housing authority rules. Because the unit was suspicious of Kemi's residency, she remembers many times hiding underneath the bed, while the inspector checked Nana's home. Nana identified as a lesbian and had a girlfriend whom stayed in the home periodically as well. Kemi stated that the complex was situated in the middle of a "hotbed of gang life"; and thus, she had to constantly work to keep in balance the relationships and alliances created within that community.

Young adulthood continued to present Kemi with many challenges. At 19 years old, Kemi decided to contact her father. She succeeded in reaching him but the outcome was not as expected. When discussing this event, Kemi became very emotional. Kemi talked about the experience in the following way,

> I searched for him on Facebook, he was right there, and he looked just like me, and then I
>
> sent a message to the dude and I said, "yo, I'm Kemi," and then Bill called me right away

and was like, "why you reaching out, I been looking for you all these years" and that was a lie or whatever and then I talked to my real father's stepmother, the woman who adopted him, and she was I don't know, she wanted to meet me …we went out to eat and he didn't say anything, the whole time he didn't, he really was just like a person there, a body, in the mall, and then he didn't want anything to do with me … he was upset that I reached out. (Kemi, Interview One)

Kemi traveled four hours to get to her father's home in Connecticut to meet him: she shared feeling very upset with the outcome. Her biological father, whom she desperately wanted a relationship with, did not reciprocate these feelings. Furthermore, while at the mall, his relatives shared how much they loved and respected her father and what a great father figure he had been to his nieces and nephews. Kemi became noticeably upset discussing the relationship that her father had with other children and the abandonment and neglect that she experienced in return.

Nana frequently reminded Kemi that she had "kicked all of her own children out" of the home at 18 years old. Kemi, at twenty years old, still lived with her Nana and had not graduated high school. After an argument, that she chose not to discuss, Kemi was kicked out of the home. This event caused Kemi to live a transient life for about 18 months. Kemi stayed at three different s homes with friends, was homeless for time, and entered and exited Nana's house for a few nights at a time, as well. Kemi met a woman who connected her with a "traction house." A traction house is a house with two - ten bedrooms that helps young adults gain stability, sustainable living situations, multi-faceted wellness, and become positive contributors to their

communities. At the time of the interview, Kemi resided at the traction house with other young women.

Educational History

Kemi attended eight schools from Kindergarten through 12th grades. Kemi did not attend preschool. She attended one elementary school, four middle schools, and two high schools. Kemi was held back five times, during the process of her schooling. Kemi is unclear on whether she received a "Special Education" label but acknowledges that she was given an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) at a local charter school the day before she was sent to attend an alternative high school.

Kemi said she hated elementary school. She recalled when her mother visited the school once:

> She dropped me off at kindergarten because she had a guy with her, she could never do shit on her own, even care for me. She didn't come back to that school till I was in fifth grade and they said that they were going to keep me back, she up there for the first time in five years she was there and, you know what, all she did was came and was like, "yes, fuck it, keep her back" and then that was it, she pulled me out of the school and we left. (Kemi, Interview One)

Kemi also recalled being in a "small classroom." She shared that she was pulled out of a larger traditional classroom in first grade and put into a very small classroom for second graders.

Kemi attended four middle schools. She remembered being kicked out of one middle school at mid-year. While Kemi expressed anger and resentment over the majority of her

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educational experiences, she spoke of one of her middle schools with immense love and pride. Kemi described the teachers and administrators at this school in the following way,

> They didn't let me fail. They knew I could make it happen, that I could learn shit, that I wasn't stupid and you know, because I didn't get it the first time or the second time, that I could just keep trying until I would be able to and if I don't get it, I'm not stupid. (Kemi, Interview One)

Even after graduating from this school, Kemi shared her love for that school: "that was my spot to be at, so I went over there all the time. I used to help like do stuff in the hallways, or like help decorate, that was my safe haven, you know?" (Kemi, Interview Two)"

From the success that was experienced at this school, Kemi was recommended to attend a pilot school. Kemi stated that she felt "accepted" even though she did not have a parent or family member who would advocate for her or attend meetings. While at this school, Kemi reflected on one student who was non-verbal and discussed the ways in which this school treated the student.

> He wasn't good with English but he was a great person, like I used to talk to him, but we didn't really talk because he didn't speak English, he like talked with his eyes, you know he had trouble communicating but we could talk. (Kemi, Interview One)

Kemi then shared that a teacher at the school yelled at this student and demanded that he speak English. Kemi became frustrated with their treatment of this student, so she voiced her opinions. The school did not support Kemi's voice and subsequently determined that she was "not a good fit for the culture of the school" (Kemi, Interview Two). Kemi did not share if she was formally expelled or if she left on her own.

During our time together, Kemi reflected on the educational system as whole, as well. She shared,

> It's really, it's always been fucking corrupt, the people who are running it, need to get some right people in there. Kind of, the education system, it's different for different places, and that's also stupid, like I had people, it's just stupid. It's really all over a little bit of money… it's really stupid, like it's really stupid… like because I live in a certain place, my school doesn't have people that care about them, their job isn't good enough… there aren't any principals that's not afraid to do the right thing, but I know people have bosses so like the superintendent too. (Kemi, Interview One)

Kemi also reflected on what has happened to her favorite school, the middle school, and shared that it has been converted into a charter school. Kemi's understanding of the school is that,

> Now you have to have parents that care about you. Not everybody parents care about them, you know, that's not their first priority though, it's not their kind of kids then. Some people just want to go to school but you have to have the right uniform and like you have to pay for stuff now and you're from away across town to go to that school now. (Kemi, Interview One)

"At-Risk" Qualifications

Kemi reflected on why she "qualified" as an "at risk" student. She stated specific reasons why she felt she was labeled:

I guess, they always called me at risk, because where I came from I guess, where I lived

at, what school I already went to, it's because of where I came from, high risk, because I

lived in the projects, you're at risk. If I lived up the street I wouldn't be at risk, because I

had two parents and a house… my mother would, she turned 16 when she had me. A lot

of people don't have jobs in my neighborhood, so I guess I'm at risk, I don't know, at risk

to be pregnant early, at risk to get, you know get sick, I don't know, at risk, I don't

fucking know, I don't know, all of that. (Kemi, Interview Two)

Through our discussion, it became clear that Kemi felt she was first labeled at-risk because of

where she lived, but Kemi, throughout the interview, continued to share that other factors played

a big part in her being assigned the label: single-parent household, mother's inability to hold a

job, mother's mental illness and household drug abuse. Despite these many indicators, Kemi

still recalls a moment from school which highlighted the "defining moment" of her own

"riskness."

Defining Moment

When asked when she actually realized that she was labeled "at risk," Kemi thought

quietly for a few moments. She then enthusiastically shared that she knows exactly when she

was first labeled. Kemi was told in First grade that she was going to go to a "different

classroom" later in the day. Then, Kemi remembered in Second grade that she was moved into

the "smaller classroom." She explained,

I know they know I was fucked up and shit like then. That class was much more

different than the rest of the school. It was called "at risk" and I was in that room. There

was certain times of the day that we didn't do shit with anybody else, but that was like, I

went into that class during those times. Sometimes with a really little group of people, it was weird, I don't know, it was weird. I think, I am pretty sure I know that they did that without my mom's permissions, having me in that class, because I'm sure my mother didn't sign no papers and shit, because like she never came to school or anything like that. They knew that I was "at risk" then, early in my life. (Kemi, Interview One)

Label Impact

When asked about the label's impact on her life, Kemi reflected candidly. She shared that the label became how the world saw her and how she viewed herself, as well. She discussed, at times, trying to "be bigger than" the label, but that it was almost impossible to do so. As Kemi talked about the label's impact on her own life, she also discussed how she has seen the label impact her brother's life. She became angry and animated, even more than discussing its impact on her own life, when sharing how the label gave "BPS" (Boston Public Schools) an excuse for letting her brother fail. She said,

> It means that, it's just fucked up, it means the city is fucked up, it's a fucked up ass city, I don't know like, people, the kid is so damn young, they just, they do, he make a mistake and they label it as "at risk" and its fucked up, because you know they don't have support or anything, it's not my brother's fault that he was, well anything at that young, none was his fault, but they just took the easy way and labeled him right there. (Kemi, Interview One)

Kemi shared that she believed it was at the moment when the school system labeled her brother that his life changed. It was such an impactful experience for him that it seemed like all

"positive opportunities" vanished. She felt that he actually began to adopt the identity of the person that the district labeled him to be.

Profile of Melissa

Personal History

Melissa was a 21-year old Latina who was born in Los Angeles, California. Melissa had lived in numerous homes in a wide variety of cities since her birth. For the first five years of Melissa's life, she lived in several different foster and kinship care placements within Los Angeles (likely 9-12, but this number has not been confirmed). At five years old, Melissa's parents regained custody of her and her older sister and fled back to El Perote, Veracruz in Mexico, where her parents were born and raised. After two years in Mexico, Melissa returned to Los Angeles.

She again ended up a ward of the state and was placed in emergency foster care, before being placed in La Puente. She remained there for about two years, at which time she was moved to East Los Angeles. Melissa lived in East Los Angeles for three years. Soon after, Melissa's mother fled with her children to Denver, Colorado, where Melissa lived for a few months, before a Child Protective Services worker located her and placed her back in a foster home in the Silverlake neighborhood of Los Angeles. After a year in Silverlake, Melissa returned with her parents to Tijuana, Baja California. Soon after, Melissa then left Tijuana, re-entered the foster care system in Los Angeles County, and was placed in various foster and group homes from Commerce to Pico Rivera, Montebello, Long Beach, Norwalk, South Los Angeles and then finally to Whittier, where she lived for three years, before leaving for college. At the time of the

interview, Melissa was a senior at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, considered a very prestigious university.

Melissa had nine biological siblings. Melissa had three older sisters who are 24, 23, and 22 years old. She also had two younger sisters who are 19 and 17 years old and two young brothers who are 13 years old and a younger brother that she has never met, who she believes is younger than seven years old. Melissa disclosed during the interview process that she had not spoken to many of her siblings in over eight years. She has received messages from her older siblings on Facebook, but has chosen not to maintain a relationship with them. Melissa also has two siblings, a brother and a sister, through her foster parents. These siblings are seven and two years old respectively. Melissa had also had countless other "foster siblings" through her numerous placements over the past 21 years, but she did not maintain a close relationship with any of them.

Melissa's early childhood, as indicated by her numerous foster care placements and housing instability, was tumultuous. Melissa was abused by her biological parents, as well as in her foster care placements. Just before her fifth birthday, Melissa's parents regained custody of all of their children and they immediately fled to Mexico. Melissa's father was frequently in jail or had warrants out for his arrest, based on various illegal activities. Melissa's parents both drank and engaged in drug use and abused their children frequently, memories that Melissa remembers vividly. Melissa's father was also deported, the cause of their second move back to Mexico. During this time, Melissa recalls, "selling chewing gum and roses on the streets of Tijuana" (Melissa, Interview One) with her sister while her father was drinking on the side of the road. Though her father was deported, their CPS case was not formally closed and a termination

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hearing was never held; thus, when she returned to the states, she was placed back into state custody. Upon returning to the states, Melissa also shared that she and her siblings were "severely malnourished … we were just like very, really thin … we were in like really bad physical condition" (Melissa, Interview One).

Melissa explained that her later childhood was spent in various foster care placements. While she lost connection with her biological parents and family and the abuse inflicted, she was moved often and placed in various foster homes, sometimes for as little as a few nights, before being moved to another home. Melissa ended up in a group home with other young women. During that time, Melissa became very depressed. She expressed frustration, anger, sadness and resentment. She also talked about her struggle with her self-image. As a result of these and other factors, Melissa began cutting her wrists. She also developed an eating disorder and then overdosed on Advil. After swallowing over twenty pills, Melissa was rushed to the hospital and treated.

Despite strong urgency from numerous adults in her life that Melissa needed to be seen and treated at a mental health facility, the judge ordered that she not be placed in a separate facility and instead ruled that Melissa return to the group home and be placed in Honors classes. Melissa stated that "that judge saved my life; she's the only one who knew that I wasn't sick, I just needed what she gave me." Melissa began to thrive and, at her shared *Quincienaera* with other girls from the group home, Melissa reconnected with her middle school Students Run Los Angeles (SRLA) coach. After confiding in her coach, Melissa was given the opportunity to move in with her former coach and her coach's husband (and their 9 month old son). Melissa

quickly took them up on that opportunity and moved to Whittier, where she stayed through her high school graduation.

During the time of the interview, and while Melissa was in college, she share that she continued to hear from her biological family members from time to time, either through email or social media. She struggled to determine how, or if, she wanted to respond to these messages, but shared that she has chosen not to engage with them over the past three years. Melissa continued to struggle with her body image, which she attributed to many years of abuse, but noted that she no longer has an eating disorder. Melissa had recently been seeing a therapist and psychiatrist, as she was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. She was prescribed a small dosage of medication that she has only taken when she feels very stressed or when she feels that an anxiety attack is "coming on."

Educational History

Melissa attended at least 13 schools, from Kindergarten through 12th grade: six elementary schools, four middle schools, and three high schools. Melissa recalled three times when teachers attempted to classify her as "Special Education" but recalled that she kept "going crazy" when this happened, as this was her teacher's attempt to get her out of the classroom, so "they didn't have to spend time trying to catch me up mid-year, because they just assumed I didn't know any of what they were teaching" (Melissa, Interview One). Overall, Melissa shared that she always absolutely loved school. She was often very frustrated with the experience and did not often receive the support or resources she requested or needed, but she enjoyed school because it was safe and because she loved learning.

Melissa's biggest educational barriers were simply attempting to get the system to work with her, as she would try to "make a home and get into Honors classes;" and then she would be moved, only to have to "prove herself again, just because schools could never share my file with the next school" (Melissa, Interview One). Melissa struggled when she was placed into classes that required her to relearn information and learn at a slower pace than she wanted or needed. Despite the many challenges she faced, Melissa worked hard in school and wanted to be in the "hardest classes."

Melissa's elementary school years were the most difficult, because of the amount of times that she was placed and then replaced in different schools and in different homes. In addition, she struggled during these years because her basic needs were rarely met and she was also preoccupied with her own safety. During this time, Melissa was also being moved to and from Mexico, which made her schooling more difficult. Melissa knew very little English upon her arrival to California and, thus, worked to learn English quickly and on her own accord.

Melissa attended four middle schools in three years. During this time, while navigating a continuously changing environment, Melissa also struggled personally. Melissa shares briefly that he middle school years were, in many ways, "a blur" based on so many other factors and forces outside or beyond her own control.

Melissa graduated high school ranked Fourth in her large public school class at Pioneer High School in Whittier, CA. Melissa loved her high school experience. She was a cross-country runner, cheerleader, and track runner as well. Melissa was given a full scholarship to attend Brown University. Melissa loves Brown and speaks very highly of her college experience, even with the various hurdles that she continues to face and overcome. Melissa has

traveled and served in Haiti and Washington, DC, over the past four years. She plans to graduate from Brown in December of 2014 and hopes to do one or two years of service, through a national service organization prior to attending medical school. She hopes to receive a joint Medical Doctorate and Masters of Social Work or a joint Medical Doctorate and Masters of Public Health.

"At-Risk" Qualifications

Melissa had a very honest and articulate reflection when we discussed the kinds of indications, as perceived by others, that she exhibited the characteristics and traits of a student who should be labeled "at risk." She said:

> I got labeled, because, um, because I had a concentration of a lack of resources. I did not
> have any of the things that people said I had to have to be successful like I lacked what
> they expected me to have or what they wanted me to have for their school to be good. I
> lacked those things like a strong family and a strong relationship and enough money. Just
> a high concentration of lacking, I guess. (Melissa, Interview One)

Melissa discussed that being a foster child and thus having no wealth of her own or of her family, and moving around so much made her a "target for risk."

Defining Moment

There were numerous times in Melissa's life where the label dictated a decision that an adult made, which had a direct impact on her life. She recalled one such moment in her earliest recollection of the label.

> Yeah, um, for example, the earliest experience I remember in school, it was like when I
> when I was in fourth grade and my teacher told the class not to be like me. Like she told

them not to do what I would do but to do what Alisa did because Alisa was going to college and I wasn't going to graduate high school. I remember when she told that to the class, like to everyone in the middle of a lecture because I asked a question that I didn't understand something. (Melissa, Interview One)

Label Impact

Throughout our conversation together, Melissa had a tough time articulating specifically how the label had affected her life. Melissa acknowledged during the discussion that she complied with the limitations that the label put on her life, in many ways. She shared that she accepted that she was "less likely to" do nearly everything that students from the dominant culture would be expected to do. Melissa discussed that "they" (whom she identified as "WASPs" or "White, Anglo-Saxon protestant" men) were always finding ways to impact her life through tagging her "at risk." She shared that this label was a way her life taught her about power, but she also recognized that this "power" over her motivated her to prove to other people they were wrong. Melissa explained that she didn't want others to "realize that they were right about who I was" (Melissa, Interview Two).

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Profile of Trina

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Personal History

Trina is a 21-year-old Latina female. She is the middle child with one older sibling and three younger siblings. Her elder sibling, a brother, is 23-years-old. She then has three younger siblings who include a 20-year old sister, a 14-year-old sister, and a 15-year-old brother. Trina was born in Lawndale, California, but grew up in Tonaya, Jalisco, Mexico, and in Inglewood, California. Trina's parents have been divorced for many years and both are now remarried.

When asked her about her early childhood, Trina explained, "Honestly, I don't have a lot of memories from my childhood. I just remember them being really hard … I remember everything being really hard. And I remember crying a lot" (Trina, Interview One).

Trina has few recollections of her time in Mexico as she was so young when her family lived there. When asked about her earliest memories, Trina shared,

I don't remember much and I don't remember my parents ever being together. I don't have really, I have very faint memories of seeing my dad. I don't remember when they were last together like, married. All I know is that I lived in Mexico for a few years, oh, I was born here but my parents were living in Mexico so after I was born my Mom spent some time there with my grandmother. My parents were both born in Mexico and they came here illegally to have us be citizens. And then, I went back to Mexico and I was there for a couple of years. And then, my parents separated after having my older brother, me, my sister, Daisy who's a year younger. And then, we moved back over here and I've been here since then. (Trina, Interview One)

Trina shared that her parents separated, from what she knows, as soon as they got to Los Angeles. Trina also shared that "my dad did some very … he did some actions, he made some actions that caused all of us to really not like him. My sister and brother hate him. I do not hate him. But I cannot talk about what he did but he did not keep us safe and did not take care of us how you should take care of children. He had anger on all of us kids and my mom." Aside from this comment, Trina did not speak of her father's actions. Trina and her siblings moved around the Los Angeles area eleven times between age three and age 12. Trina did not share any additional home or family information to note here.

Trina's mother remarried when Trina was in middle school and, since that time, her mother has had two more children. Trina and her four siblings have lived in their Hawthorne home since age 12. Trina shared that she doesn't love her stepfather, but she "is at peace with him for everyone." Trina shared that this relationship has been strained at times because "he just cohabitates with my mom. He wanted to have children but then he expects my mom to work at pay 50 percent of everything while also taking care of everything at the house and raising the little ones, too. He just doesn't show love well, or at all, and he fights with my mom about things that he shouldn't even bring up" (Trina, Interview One). Although Trina is now at college, when she comes home, she stays in the two-bedroom home that her two younger siblings and her older sister still live in. "It's cramped, I mean it's great to be around everyone and I love my siblings so much, but I want the little ones to sleep in a good bed so Daisy and I just rotate who sleeps on the couch and the floor. It's not great but it's good to be there for now," Trina (Interview One) shared.

Trina is, no doubt, "finding herself" as a result of the critical thinking she has engaged in throughout her college experience. Trina is also "overwhelmed with the pressure and expectations" associated with being the first in the family to attend and graduate from college. She hopes to work with domestic workers and immigrant rights, but is struggling to find a balance between starting a career in a field that she is very passionate about but also finding a job that she can support herself and her family through. During the critical narrative process, Trina and I discussed this struggle at length. Trina shared,

> I think I've never felt so … so much pressure from my family before because they know
> that I'm graduating and a lot of them don't know what it means to be in college. I think

nowadays, more and more people go to college so it doesn't really matter as much. Now

you have to continue school or you have to have connections. So, it's really scary

because I feel like I have to live up to those expectations from my family and support

them and provide for them and you know, my mom's been helping me so much through

school with whatever she can do … I really hope that I can help her so she will stop

working or at least a little bit or stop having to pay for me so if I can at least be okay like,

provide for myself at least for a while. I think that would be a big help for her because

my two younger siblings are my stepdad's kids and he provides for them but my other

siblings still live there and my mom provides for them. I don't want them to feel my

struggle, I just want to take care of them but I don't know if I'll be able to find a job that

can do that here. (Trina, Interview One)

Educational History

Trina had very different experiences over her twelve years in school. Trina attended two

elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. During those twelve years, Trina's

family relocated homes locally eleven times. As a result of these frequent moves, Trina shared

that she experienced an enormous amount of instability, which manifested itself in her approach

to and interactions with school, adults and students.

Again, when asked, Trina said she had few memories of her earliest educational years, as

she remembered little about her early childhood. She believed it is likely that she "blocked most

of these days out of memory." Trina remembered most vividly the walks to and from school

from her grandmother's home, and she recalled crying very often because she hated school so

much. In 2nd grade, however, Trina switched schools and befriended a neighbor who attended

school with her as well. This neighbor bullied Trina and, over the next four years, Trina became the accomplice to whatever her neighbor wanted to do. Consequently, she also incurred the pain of her neighbor's dysfunctional relationships. Trina recalls,

> I was bullied, a lot. I was scared of her and was her best friend at the same time. I cheated for her, I stole for her; I even remember pretending to get the wrong answer on tests because she threatened me if I was smarter than her. She controlled everything that I did and I was secretly so sad but no one even ever saw it. I was just alone and sad. (Trina, Interview One)

Trina said she had a better middle school experience. She recalls one specific incident that she believes changed her own educational trajectory. Trina shared,

> Even though I was really young, I knew that I wasn't myself during all that time and I was tired of just hiding things and being in so much pain that I knew that I had to do something for myself. That was part my teacher actually in elementary school because he… he talked to my mom with me and he said like, I don't know why this is happening. It's not normal like your kid is very bright but she fails. And so, I think that just awoke me. In middle school I just kind of pushed myself and I started getting involved and I did all these things and that's where everything changed. (Trina, Interview One)

At different moments, Trina reflected fondly upon her middle school years. Despite the struggles within her family and the numerous moves, she remembers that she enjoyed school during that time,

> High school presented itself with a new and different set of struggles for Trina.

Throughout our discussion, Trina realized that she tipped the scale "too far" to the other side.

She tried so hard to over-achieve that she ended up hating her high school experience. Trina was Valedictorian at her High School, in addition to being Class President and Head Editor of her Journalism Club. She feels that she was "everything to everyone, except herself" (Trina, Interview One). For this reason, Trina headed to college hoping to close the chapter of high school and begin to invent or reinvent the individual whom she hoped to become.

Trina, at the time of the interview, attended Bryn Mawr College, an all-women's institution in Pennsylvania. Trina shared that she felt very privileged to attend such a prestigious university. However, she also discussed the immense struggles that she has faced over the past four years. For example, Trina shared the struggle of trying to "coexist" in this environment, where she is so fundamentally different than 95% of the other women in the school. Trina reflected on one specific sociology course where she was the only Latina student,

> The worst part about it is that they think they are aware, you know. And sometimes we
> have conversations in class and they're like, "you know, in a place like Bryn Mawr where
> we're all aware" and I'm like, "No. You read about it so you think you know but you
> don't know." You know? Just because you read a book doesn't mean you understand.
> Like, I mean we all learned something. But it doesn't mean that you're now aware. It just
> means that you read a book. (Trina, Interview One)

In concert with her struggle for authentic awareness, Trina also reflected on the university experience as a whole.

> I think part of it though because I'm not impressed by the people that go there. I'm not.
> It doesn't mean anything to them. It doesn't mean anything. So, I'm not you know,
> people see this school like a wonderful institution, like you know, people tell me you're

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going to find a great job, just because you went there? But I'm not impressed by it.

They're not that smart, you know? The people who make the most of this experience are

not the people that I had hoped to see learning and engaging from and with, honestly. The

smartest people in that I believe attend those institutions are the people of color. I'm

always amazed by their comments in class and I'm inspired by them. (Trina, Interview

One)

"At-Risk" Qualifications

Throughout her narration, Trina shared numerous indicators that she believed led to her

to being labeled "at risk." Among these, Trina shared that her parents were divorced, they were

transient, she attended many schools as a result of these moves, and her family fell below the

poverty line. Trina also shared other reasons why she believes she was labeled "at risk."

I'm not surprised because I am first generation, because all odds are, they didn't think I'd

even graduate high school. Because I am first generation, I'm not supposed to be at Bryn

Mawr right now, I don't think, I'm not, that's why it's such a spectacle to people who are

not in the minority, whose kids are already aligned to go there when they're born, you

know. (Trina, Interview One)

Defining Moment

In her effort to identify a "moment" of realizing or understanding that she was seen as

being "at risk," Trina shared that she knew that she was "at risk" at a very young age. She

remembers, even in second grade, when the Principal spoke to her mother about Trina's

behaviors. Trina remembers hearing the Principal tell her mom that she was "on a bad path" and

she knew then that everyone at the school already labeled her; they already "knew" that she

wasn't going to "make it." But, Trina's actual defining moment that defined her "riskness" in her life came much later. Trina shared that this actually happened for her in college. She said,

> Before I went to college I didn't ever truly realize or acknowledge my label and it that never occurred to me. I don't think I would have never ever thought about that but I think being in college, I do not feel personally at risk but I feel like I'm a lot less than everybody else and I said that out loud in the past. I feel like everyone in my classes looks at my like I'm at risk and I've gotten the courage to say it especially in my sociology classes, actually this year only … not only I'm a woman but I'm Latina and I have to work not only twice as hard but three times as hard and I think that's true and I think that has not been more clear to me that it is in college just because I'm around people who hire domestic workers and who grew up with nannies and who get everything spoon-fed and I think because of that … because of the drastic contrast I've been able to reflect on that. (Trina, Interview One)

Trina also shared that she was reminded of being see as "at risk" in college, in a much different environment than she had ever experienced this prior.

> My thesis professor told me, "you are a great student but you are unreliable. I hope you don't take this in the wrong way but as a woman, as a Latina, that is going to be really bad when you get out of college like, you are already at-risk and you don't want to reinforce that. You want to always follow through." And I didn't know how to take that. Part of me was like, screw you, White man! (Trina, Interview One)

Trina's reflections of her college experiences honestly shared her moment of "realizing" her "riskness" as well as the moment that her own college professor reminded her of her riskness. These two moments have had a major impact on Trina and on her perception of how the world sees her and how the world works.

Label Impact

Trina stated that it is difficult to share a few examples of how the label has affected her because, in reality, it has "become part of my whole life." Trina also feels that the label, directly or indirectly, had an impact on her entire family and everyone in her community. Trina discussed the struggles that everyone went through at her school or those lived in her neighborhood because they all were handed an "at-risk" ticket. She explained,

> If you can't get your kids in to a good school, I think it's all about the education system, it really is. I mean, I know people who have, who come from working class backgrounds and who have gone to really good schools and they've gotten a good education, to them it was easier but I don't even know how to make sense of it all because, like, the label impacted all of us at schools in my neighborhood. We didn't have enough money for them to invest in us. I guess it's just like they invest in us if we invest in them. I think my family would invest if we could, but we can't… so, it's impacted every single thing we do. We are "at risk" so we are different. We are less than. To others, I mean. We are less than others are. That's just how it is…but the system is really messed up. (Trina, Interview Two)

Profile of Jonny

Personal History

Jonny was a 21-year old Latino male. Jonny was born in Los Angeles in 1992 and, at 4 months old, moved to Mexico where his parents resided. Jonny stayed in Mexico through his fifth birthday and then moved back to Los Angeles where he has since resided. Jonny had two biological sisters who were 18 years old and 11 years old. Jonny also had two half-sisters on his mother's side (whom he grew up with) who were 25 and 23 years old at the time of the interview. His 23-year old sister had developmental struggles that inhibit her ability to live on her own. Jonny's parents separated formally when he was 13 years old. He attended three elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. At the time of the interview, Jonny was a junior and attended University of California - Riverside [UCR].

Jonny chose not to share much of his personal story from childhood initially, "I am not good talking about that stuff. It isn't, it's hard." However, after discussing his educational history, which will be discussed in the following section, he began to open up about additional facets of his life. Jonny shared,

> Growing up in my family with our personalities, both of my parents, they never finished like language school, or middle school or high school. I thought I was going to be raised by them, where they would have to work during the day and I would go to school, but then, I don't know, things just changed. My dad abandoned my family and, and out of my own will I decided I would go to school. And learn so that I could give my family everything we need like a place to live and food to eat. And then I was pushing myself

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and then I got my mom, well my mom decided to go to school too, and it motivated me

even more. (Jonny, Interview One)

Jonny reflected on his father and his parent's relationship prior to their separation as well as the

immediate housing issues once his mother returned from Mexico:

I remember parts of it, I don't remember exactly how abusive he was, but I just remember

like, whatever he could, he would just like slam the plate to the wall, or to the floor, he'd

throw it at her face, and stuff like that, and from there it just, I remember, from 13 up, I

just remember like he would cheat and bring like different women to the house. When my

mother headed off to Mexico to see my grandpa that was sick, that's when it all separated,

and then we were homeless, and then for some reason we found help from someone, they

gave us housing, the cheap housing, for quite a while. (Jonny, Interview One)

Although Jonny is at school, he remains very close and very concerned about his family. Jonny

shared, in discussing his older sister,

She had her first daughter and then a second and then she added her third, and then she

moved in with her boyfriend's family, she was victim of bad domestic violence, so then

she moved out to a shelter, she started going to college, to take some courses, but then

she dropped out, because of her needs and her family needs, because she didn't have day

care, and she had to work, because she had no money and had three daughters, and then

she was still being part of the domestic violence, even though she wasn't living with him.

He would like stalk her and stuff like that … but even the restraining orders didn't help

out. (Jonny, Interview One)

Jonny reflects on her relationship and why she continues the cycle even while he and his family continue to engage in conversations with her about her unhealthy relationship:

> She always brings up how my mom left, my mom was a victim of domestic violence, when she used to live with her dad, so then she left him, and she brought them here to LA. She always has a belief that the girls have a right to see their dad, because she doesn't want the girls to grow up without their dad like she did, or like, without that chance to grow up with a dad. But even though her dad was abusive, she I think doesn't like our mom because she made a good decision that she doesn't understand. (Jonny, Interview One)

Educational History

As early as elementary school, Jonny recognized and shared the struggles that he endured. He shared, "I was bad, like I wasn't learning English, learning to communicate with other kids. We came to settle down in California but everything about it, it was hard to come and adapt to a new culture."

Jonny also continued and shared his beliefs on the access to resources and his younger years in school:

> I think the economic situation that we were in, everything was hard. Being at home was hard, because we were always left alone, the parents were working or trying to find work everywhere. We never even had good food or soap, and stuff like that, I mean at school, you were never like given the proper materials to go to school, so they would make fun of you and stuff like that. So it feels hard at home and at school. Let's see, growing up … I went to at least seven schools, and we moved on from place to place, because rent was a

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big issue, like they were really poor my parents, because they were undocumented, so it

was harder for them to find jobs, and if they did they were like under paid, taken

advantage of, so difficult for them too. (Jonny, Interview One)

Jonny also reflected candidly about all of his formal school experience overall:

I think, from middle school or elementary, I hated it, because first of all my English was

horrible, and I didn't know how to speak, I didn't know how to write, I didn't know how

to communicate well, I was poorly dressed, so I was bullied a lot, throughout those years

of school… and then that changed when I started going to high school. Just, I think we

just started looking out for more resources out there, then I started going to places like

Goodwill, Salvation Army, and then some of my friends would like help me, some of my

teachers would like take me shopping, and stuff like that, and I was like, real blessed

there in high school. I think that mostly I liked was high school, like I got the most out of

it, and I felt good as a person even though so much was going on at my home all the time.

(Jonny, Interview One)

Jonny spoke freely about both the strengths of his high school experience while also diving into

the struggles of the greater school and school system. Jonny shared,

The Jefferson reputation was horrible. There was always racial conflicts, so there were

problems between races, and there was fights between teachers and students, it was like

never stable. It was like a prison, there was often police everywhere. You weren't able to

move freely, or have any type of events. (Jonny, Focus Group)

Jonny also spoke about wanting to keep in touch with teachers but finding it difficult to do so.

He reflected,

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I really want to keep in touch with some of them, but it's so hard to, they all were, some

of them were laid off or they were sent somewhere off, it's hard to keep in touch with

them. But it's the rule now for the district that, like, young teachers get laid off at big

schools and good teachers are supposed to go to charter schools. You know, because

that's where the teachers will get to work with families that care more. I wish they were

all still there, and the school was so nice, it was like becoming the best school ever.

(Jonny, Focus Group)

Finally, Jonny also spoke highly of a specific teacher who really worked with him to ensure his

success in college. He shared that this teacher gave him useful tips and ideas for how to be sure

that he would be supported in college. Jonny said,

When I started my freshman year at UCR, I researched on programs like that, ones that

would like help and support me to know what was going on, so then I signed up for one

of them, which was the Connect, it's for all freshmen. So you are put into a group of

around 60 students, and all of those 60 students will be in the same classes for the entire

year. And then you have the same peer mentors, for the entire year… this was because

she told me to read signs and just start going to meetings so I did. Now, I still have my

mentor more than two years later. (Jonny, Focus Group)

"At-Risk" Qualifications

Throughout the narrative process, Jonny shared his insight of what indicators or

qualifications of risk he held. First, he shared that he believed that being "at risk" was

predominantly about "race." Jonny said,

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To me it means that we are not capable of hitting probably our goals. We probably might

be failures, we won't get far enough to matter, we're in there, but we just won't make it

far enough as other people will…white people, other, probably other races, that are not

Hispanic or African American. (Jonny, Interview One)

Once Jonny and I discussed this concept in more detail, he shared that there could always

be additional factors but, for him, "race is the biggest factor for people making labels." Jonny

explained his view on this in the following way:

I think there might be others, there's just not as more often as Hispanics or African

American, because it's just belief and truth that they are less likely to be gifted or

talented… I think sometimes you can hear it, there's classes that you can't enroll, because

they are for smarter people and only white people are in them, they are smart, there are

test courses that are higher, you know, sometimes you come from strong background

families with, that don't have economic issues and stuff like that. Those things don't

stand in the way for you, so you get to go into the smarter classes. I don't think it's true

about races being smarter than each other, but I think other people say it's true and they

believe it. (Jonny, Interview One)

Defining Moment

Jonny could clearly articulate the defining moment of his " at riskness," which occurred

during his high school years. Despite speaking highly of his high school experience, Jonny

recalled the day when he became aware that the adults all viewed him as an "at risk" student.

I did hear it a few times, but I remember clearly one time. I was part of the

students group for testing, so that's what we did, we discussed the progress of the CST

scores for the school. We discussed the students that were failing, like that, and they

would use that phrase, "at risk." Then they talked about the students who were failing

and then they said that the students could be more like who I am like that I was at risk too

but at least I was trying not to drop out. It was like, just they knew that all along but still

had to say the label in front of me and everyone else but they just pointed out me as being

at risk. (Jonny, Interview One)

Despite this defining moment of awareness, Jonny knew that he was labeled "at risk"

very early in his life. He shared that he was labeled "since I started kinder, my language barrier,

communication was so poor, all the teachers thought I wasn't going to make it" (Jonny, Interview

One).

Label Impact

Jonny says that he does not generally open up quickly or easily to others. He also is not

quick to share emotions. In fact, even when discussing some of the most difficult times in his

life, Jonny seemed to separate himself from the emotions and explained that he needed "to do

this in order to be the man of the house." Even to the present day, with four sisters and four

nieces, Jonny continues to work hard to be a "father-figure" to all of the women who surround

his life. Despite this effort to maintain himself "composed no matter what," Jonny did became

angry when we discussed the label that others had given to him and to his family.

It gets me like frustrated, maybe angry even too, like why would they label us like that,

not knowing about our background, what we have gone through, the struggle we go

through every single day, like, it's so easy for someone to get labeled, not knowing about

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them. It's even so easy to label someone, especially when you have all the power. And once you find out you're labeled, you can try to change their mind, but you're already labeled that way. Now all we have left to act on, I guess, is to not consider ourselves labeled like that, and continue our education and prove them wrong. Still though, I will stay strong, but that label is stronger. (Jonny, Interview One)

Profile of Emanuel

Personal History

Emanuel was a 22-year-old Latino male who also identifies as gay. Emanuel was born in Bell Gardens, California, and lived there for 11 years. Emanuel then moved with his family to Xela Quetazaltenango, Guatemala, for four years. He then moved back to the Los Angeles area where he lived in Monterey Park, Pacoima, and Bell Gardens. Emanuel currently resides in Bell Gardens with his family. Emanuel's parents were married during the time of the interview and they had two additional sons, a 27 year old and a 14 year old. Emanuel has attended one elementary school, one middle school (in Guatemala) and three high schools. Emanuel worked at a chain restaurant, Applebee's, coached a middle school dance team, and was enrolled in community college.

Emanuel's early childhood in America was "pretty much a normal childhood for children of people who aren't documented here" (Emanuel, Interview One). He shared that he received all of his "basic needs" and he was surrounded with family who "mostly really loved each other and was good at showing it." But, at eleven years old, Emanuel's stability changed quickly. Emanuel's father received a letter from the Department of Immigration that "said that they knew

we were here illegally and were going to force us to leave." Emanuel shared candidly how his

parents responded to this struggle:

> So my dad, he thought if we left probably like our punishment later on would be less than
>
> if we all started running away somewhere else. So we left on our own together, we took a
>
> bus, it was one of those big coach buses, and I remember the day that we, that our family
>
> was saying bye, like aunts and uncles, and we were all crying, like I was crying and my
>
> older brother was crying … it was so dramatic, it was like in a movie, my uncle went up
>
> into the side of the bus and put his hand on the window, and so did we, and it was pretty
>
> heart breaking. (Emanuel, Interview One)

Emanuel and his family moved back into the home that Emanuel's father had built years

ago. They spent the summer together fixing it up and then moved to the top floor so that they

could make an income by renting out the bottom floor. Emanuel has fond memories if these few

years with his two brothers and his parents. But many of his memories were "washed away with

the hurricane." Emanuel reflected on the experience of Hurricane Stan hitting his small town:

> I'm pretty sure I've gone through stuff that were bad, but this was like a physical one,
>
> where I can actually see it, you know and point it out, and it was just a hurricane that
>
> drowned the whole little town we were in. The water covered our first floor, that's a lot of
>
> water …Yes, so, I was, we were all sad, like very sad and so scared, and at some point,
>
> like within the midst of it, like we're in the second floor, and it's all flooded on the first
>
> one right, so we had to get out, and like none of us knew how to swim … So there we
>
> were waiting to get rescued, or what not, and my dad just broke down, and he was
>
> apologizing to all of us, saying I'm sorry I brought you guys here, and super super sad,

for him to say that, or for him to feel that way. You know it's not his fault, he had nothing

to do with the hurricane, but after all of his hard work we were just sitting there huddled

together and waiting for someone to come help us so everything wouldn't be lost,

including ourselves … my dad swam with all of us, like he carried all of us … we got

rescued, we were inside of this public high school for a few days. There was tons of

families there. Everyone was lost. And everyone lost people and lost everything … we

were living, sleeping in classrooms, they would give us blankets, food, actually they took

good care of us, you know like, no luxuries or anything like that, but what else do you

need? (Emanuel, Interview One)

Not long after the hurricane, Emanuel's older brother came back to California. Because

of the opportunity that his brother was not afforded in America, he urged his parents to send

Emanuel back to California to graduate from high school. So, Emanuel finished middle school

in Guatemala and then headed up to the Los Angeles area again:

I didn't know what it was going to be like separating from my parents, it was going to be

that hard. Like I was excited to go, but then when the day came, like I was super sad. The

airport, that's in the capital of Guatemala, it's called Guatemala City, and that's four hours

away from our city, so I said all my goodbyes there in my city, and only my mom went

with me to the capital, so she was crying and I was crying, a lot of crying, but I know

she's trying to keep herself together. So anyway we get on the bus and we're just talking,

and my grandma from my mom's side, she lives there, so we went there, I don't know, a

few days, and then dropped me off at the airport and I was just like, the saddest ever. I

remember my luggage, it was a little overweight, so they were going to charge us more,

or they told us that we can't check it like that or whatever, so my mom, she's still crying

and she's taking stuff from the bag and putting it another bag to try to even it out, and it

was frustrating you know, she felt sad and scared and probably mad that two of her sons

were now leaving, and she was letting it out on the luggage … I flew back here [Los

Angeles] and my aunt picked me up and I started living with her. I started high school

and I worked 40 hours a week at McDonalds to help pay my rent. (Emanuel, Interview

One)

At 22-years-old, Emanuel is truly "finding himself." He shared a very insightful

experience and personal commitment through a simple Pinterest post that he read:

It said something like right now, you are supposed to be your selfish years, and it

includes what you do and things for yourself, you know, things you do, who you love,

you get your heart broken, you love again, you try sushi, or just stuff like that … and I

feel like, you know sometimes I would let people hold me back, you know, and I guess

not them knowing that they were doing that, but I just felt like that was it, like I knew

they knew I wasn't going to succeed, and partially because I was a little scared of like, of

greatness, yes, a little bit …Yes, and I'm tired. I'm tired of not doing great things. I want

to be around people that think alike. (Emanuel, Interview One)

Emanuel was also very much struggling with his identity, though. Because his parents moved

back to America again, and because they did not know that he was gay, he shared that he felt like

he had "gone back into the closet again." When Emanuel and I discussed, in detail, his

experiences over the past 2 years since his family has been back in America, he opened up about

the balance of being "so thankful for his parents who are the best people on earth, just the best

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people who I owe everything" while also struggling to determine who and how to identify himself:

> Yes, I'm gay, but it's not out to everyone and it's definitely because of my culture, my family, my, the religion, religion in general, and I just saw it as, I, well I accepted it, right, through others, but what happened to me like I don't accept this, always being a hypocrite, like I wasn't like, it was wrong, you know I thought it was, you're not, like, that's not going to happen. Like if you're gay, so then, I don't want to go to hell. So I was just saying no, you're not, you're not gay, you know, just chill. And I would always ask God, you know, but I wasn't getting any response or messages, so that's when I was on to something, the people I was around with, although we knew some gay people, like I knew like, behind their backs, like what people would say, like I don't want to do that, I don't want to be that, like I don't want to be their target. I don't know, I feel like high school would have been a lot more difficult, but now if I could go back, I wish I would have came out in high school. I'm still not out, I mean, I'm out to everyone except my parents, which, is still, they still don't know. I wanted to tell them like, every day, but I am still not ready. (Emanuel, Interview One)

Because Emanuel lived in the same house with the rest of his family, he shared that he continues to struggle with how to share his sexual orientation and still be loved by his parents and his little brother.

Educational History

Emanuel attended five different schools throughout his K-12 experience. Emanuel has very faint memories of "any of the specifics" from his elementary school years. He remembered

that he did not attend formal school until first grade but cannot recall much else from these earliest schooling years.

Emanuel attended middle school in his small village in Guatemala and, while he states that he really enjoyed his friends there, he was also "secretly excited to start fresh" when his family decided that he would be moving back to Los Angeles for high school. Emanuel outlined the events that led up to this decision:

> He (Emanuel's older brother) comes by himself, he starts living with relatives of ours, my dad's side, and he had a, like a small degree from Guatemala, he was a tourist guide. Or his degree was in tourism, but since he didn't graduate from high school here, he did in Guatemala, so he also didn't have a high school degree from here, so once he found out that mattered here because people didn't care about his high school or any college from anywhere else but in America, he told my parents that was going to happen to me if I finished school there too, so a year after, my parents, you know they gave me the option if I want to go, and taking everything into consideration, I said yes. It was hard but I also wanted to do it. (Emanuel, Interview One)

Because of various different housing situations, Emanuel attended three different high schools in the San Gabriel and Fernando Valley areas. Emanuel struggled to figure out the college process, as exemplified by his recollection of the fear of filling out the paperwork necessary.

> So I'm super excited about college right, but I'm super scared as well, because the whole process, I really don't know what to do. Like I saw this one picture on Facebook once, where it said that, at school they teach you the wrong thing. They never taught me how to apply for college, or they never taught me how to do my taxes or things like you need to

know in life, that, and I kind of agree with it, and although I did have sources that would

help me, you know, work that out, I just had not help figuring out how to approach that,

or how to get into that, so the whole process was very scary, was very frightening, and I

feel like I just, it scared me to even try when I was a Senior. Like I applied to schools and

I got in. I remember getting my University of California – Irvine acceptance letter and, I

mean, and I was excited, but then it was telling me to do this, this and that, and I didn't

know, what is that, so then I just didn't do it. I didn't do it, I was scared. (Emanuel, Focus

Group)

Emanuel expressed eagerness during his interview to take his education to the next level.

While he was enrolled at East Los Angeles Community College at that time, he shared that he

was ready to move on:

I would like to go to a four-year college, get a transfer, transfer out and go, just to like,

learn and get away and follow my dreams. I guess those math classes are stopping me

from transferring. I really don't know how it works, and I don't know if the counselors

don't know or if they don't have time to help me. I don't know that you can just go away

and apply as a student. I just, I have no idea how it works. No one really taught me this,

or maybe they did and I wasn't hearing it because I never thought anyone thought I

would go to college so I didn't either. (Emanuel, Interview One)

"At-Risk" Qualifications

During the narrative process, Emanuel expressed that he believes there were numerous

reasons why he was labeled "at risk." When I asked him about any "indicators" that gave others

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the idea that he was or would be "at risk" throughout his educational process, Emanuel reflected candidly on some of the reasons and logic behind perceptions that he was "at risk."

> Because about my parents, I wasn't in a stable lifestyle, I didn't have a stable lifestyle. I think I lived in Guatemala for a few years. Like then, like I feel, like back then, I feel like because of that, that already made me have a disadvantage. So just because of that .…
>
> And like even now, like just the whole coming from a different country, like if it's not a European country, or somewhere where you can have a nice accent, like you're just, like you're probably not going to succeed here, and you see it everywhere. You see it even in relationships, when you have a person that's fluent in English and they are chatting to one person, and they speak little English, but they speak good Spanish, that kind of throws you off and you don't want to pursue that any more. And I notice that with some of my friends. I know that I was labeled "at risk" because of those same characteristics when I was in school and I even know friends who left school because they were labeled. I mean, they never said it was because they were labeled, but it was because of what happened as a result of the adults labeling them "at risk." (Emanuel, Interview One)

Defining Moment

Emanuel shared that he knew, at a very early age, that he was "targeted as someone who probably wouldn't make it very far, and probably wouldn't attend or graduate college." But, Emanuel's defining moment as someone who was "at risk" was later and linked to an unexpected event. During his junior year of college, Emanuel received a scholarship called "Beat The Odds" from the Children's Defense Fund. He shared,

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Yes, maybe I totally never acknowledged it fully before, though, then I applied for that

scholarship, the Beat The Odds scholarship, and I know they mean well, of course they

mean well, but yes, like that's when I knew that I was, or when I thought I was "at risk",

when I realized it. I mean, it was a great opportunity, but I was being celebrated for being

"at risk" you know, and it was like celebrated at the Beverly Hills Hotel and stuff and

with a documentary about me but it was all, I know you won't take this the wrong way,

but I mean, yeah, it was all like white people. It was weird, like white people celebrating

me being almost like less than them.   (Emanuel, Interview One)

Label Impact

When Emanuel discussed his perceptions of how he was labeled "at risk," he also shared

how the label had an impact on him. He candidly explained,

And you know how crazy it is, back then I was capable of thinking that way, and yes, I

felt like I was, and sometimes that was my drive, to like exceed or to excel, but

sometimes that was also my justification of why I would fail. Like if something didn't go

how it was supposed to go, I was like, oh well, that's okay, because you're kind of at risk,

like nobody is really going to say anything about that. That's how I felt. (Emanuel,

Interview One)

<center>**Profile of Bret**</center>

Personal History

Bret was a 23-year-old African American male who resided in Providence, Rhode Island.

Bret was born in the Boston area, lived in Brooklyn for 18 months, moved to Boston for 12 years

and then to Randolph (a suburb of Boston) for six additional years. Bret had lived in Providence

for the past two years. Bret had three siblings, ages 26, 28, and 29 years old. Bret attended two

elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school, despite moving to numerous homes

within the same areas. Bret's parents were never married, and he has no recollection of "any

type of healthy relationship or friendship between them" (Bret, Interview One).

Bret's parents, while they met on the East Coast, were both from Liberia, West Africa.

Bret shared that his "dad came to the United States in 1970 and he lived in Washington D.C. for

fifteen years and then ended up in Rhode Island. My mom came to the United States in 1989 and

she lived in New York, then Rhode Island, then Massachusetts … my dad is twelve or fifteen

years old than my mom" (Bret, Interview One). Bret lived with his mother for his early

childhood years.

> It was pretty hard, there were a lot of challenges, there was one point where me and my
>
> mom shared the same room that was the couch and, when I was a kid, there was a time
>
> when we literally had one room and another room that was a kitchen and living room and
>
> everything and then a bathroom, and then again there were times when I lived with seven
>
> or eight other people and we all had to share the same bathroom, and I moved around a
>
> lot like I lived in a shelter at one point, I lived in different places in Boston, and I went to
>
> different schools, like I have been to like, before I hit high school I had been to at least 6
>
> different schools. (Bret, Interview One)

Bret chose not to engage in much conversation about his upbringing or his own lived

history. He shared that he wanted to "do the interview and share enough about my story, but I

just don't trust people that I don't know and I don't know anyone that will read this and if they

don't know then they will make up a story that judges me and I … I don't want to be with that

story" (Bret, Interview One). Bret shared brief moments of different memories throughout his early childhood. When he discussed family, Bret disclosed that "we don't have that family that hugs or talks about important stuff … we are just not like that" (Bret, Interview One). Bret also shared insight into his family dynamics:

> I remember a lot of arguing with my family, I mean we have been through a lot of things. Like the stuff that we have been through is not like normal family stuff, it's just stuff like hell, that is how I am feeling, you have got to relate it, kind of like that. I have been in a lot of fist-fights with my family members. (Bret, Interview One)

> At the time of the narrative process, Bret lived with his father in Providence, Rhode Island. Bret speaks to his mother "about every month or so." Bret chose not to share more of his childhood experiences, outside of what will be shared through his educational history. Bret, having recently graduated from technical college, was working as a contractor. He shared insight on his current job as well as his dream job:

> It's different everyday, like sometimes we do house preservation, some days we do analyze different homes and we do clean up, a clean up is when someone has been evicted and all their belongings are still in the house so they need to be removed effective immediately … yes, I have to you know kick people out of houses, I go in the houses and like hey you know you got to leave, you know I have had to wake people up and say you got to get up and leave … but this isn't the dream, this is a job that someone has to do and that's me right now … I would love to work with up and coming artists, like mentor and manage them, as my dream. (Bret, Interview One)

Educational History

Bret shared that he attended "at least six" different schools throughout his K-12 experience. Bret shared that he likely "chose to forget a lot of the things that happened before I could make my own decisions." Bret had a very unique way of viewing the education system as exemplified by this analysis of his experiences:

> To me school was what I needed to get to the next place, so like you know what I mean, you know how people say life is what you make it?... I felt like I had to go to get what I was to pick up. I knew I was going to need to learn to count and to do math, I knew I was going to need to read and know how to do computer skills, and I knew I was going to need to learn history. I was told a lot of information that I know I didn't need to know and I didn't want to be there. I have patience and I just waited for the opportunities to get that information that I needed. I got it eventually. That's the only reason I graduated though, it just took me that long to get what I needed to go. (Bret, Interview One)

"At-Risk" Qualifications

During our conversation together, Bret shared that he felt he had been labeled based on "every part of his being" (Bret, Interview One). When we explored this comment more, Bret explained further,

> We were in situations where everyone around us was the same. I mean, we all really had nothing. No one really believed we could do much, they were friendly to us because they felt bad for who we were and where we came from. We were all in situations that don't end good. Everyone knew that. They just don't end good, death or illness or prison or homeless. Just not good. (Bret, Interview One)

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Bret is a quiet and introspective individual and thus, often, he shares that his lack of emotion or spoken word is interpreted as him being aloof. Instead, Bret is actually highly critical. He is frustrated and angry and, at times, non-compliant with "them." When we discussed what made him an unwilling recipient of the label, he did not elaborate on one characteristic or one group of characteristics. He just stated numerous times that he and "kids like him" (Bret, Interview Two) were in situations that simply do not end well.

Defining Moment

Bret shared that he felt he was labeled "at risk" the moment he walked into any school door. Moreover, he felt that as a black man, he was always seen as a threat to others. He said that he never actually heard someone say or write "at risk" in describing him, until he attended summer camp. Bret started attending camp in third grade and remembers hearing the school counselor read off the names of children who were attending two different types of camps. Bret was attending the one for the students who were at "highest risk" (Bret, Interview Two). He knew that he was different than hundreds of other kids because he was at a small camp, far away from the other children. When I asked if he could think of something in Third grade that might have triggered them sending him to camp, Bret remembered that, during that year, his mom was in a very unhealthy relationship and he knows that his mother never showed up to school for parent-teacher meetings.

Label Impact

In reflecting on and making sense of this label, Bret shared how this label has (or has not) impacted his education, his story and his lived history. In discussing the impact of the label on his life, Bret was clear that he believes the label is just one of the many ways that societies sort

through lots of people. He stated, however, that he was not able to list specifically the ways the label has had an impact him, because so many other things were also affecting him when he was growing up. When pressed, Bret remarked, "I don't know, I don't make the rules, I just live by them like everybody else like me" (Bret, Interview One).

Summary

Graphic representations have been constructed (See Tables 1 through 4) based on the data shared, to help better summarize the findings. One "X" signifies that during the course of the critical narrative process, the participant implied or inferred to this factor. Two "XX" symbols indicate that the participant explicitly stated this as an indicator for themselves or their family, school or society. All representations of the indicators were based on the presence or absence of an indicator at any point in their lives. Thus, a participant could have shared their "poor school attitude" during his or her elementary years, even if this indicator was not present during middle school or high school. The indicators shared here are based on a meta-analysis of research on factors contributing to risk and include: (1) individual, 2) family, 3) school, and 4) society/community (Batten & Russell, 1995; Wells, 1990).

Table 1 provides an analysis of the six interview participants with respect to eleven individual risk indicators. The only indicator of risk that every student implied within this category is the indicator of "low self-esteem / self-efficacy."

Table 1

Individual Indicators

	Kemi	Melissa	Trina	Emanuel	Jonny	Bret
Poor school attitude	XX		XX			X
Low ability level						
Attendance/ truancy	XX	X		X		
Behavior/ discipline problems	X		XX			X
Pregnancy						
Drug abuse	X	X		X		X
Poor peer relationships	XX	XX	XX	X		
Nonparticipation	X		X			X
Friends have dropped out	X	X		X		X
Illness/ disability	X					
Low self-esteem/ self-efficacy	X	X	X	X	X	X

Table 2 presents an analysis of seven risk indicators commonly associated with family life as they are compared to the six interview participants. Each of the research participants explicitly discussed the impoverished nature of their family and household in addition to discussing their high mobility throughout their lives. In fact, of all of the factors explicitly discussing or implied throughout the various interviews, this one factor was the most discussed aspect in reflection of the "at risk" label. Every interview participant spent an extended amount of time and referred back at least one time to the concept that that were (or are) labeled "at risk" because of where they live, the neighborhood in which they grew in, or the home(s) that they occupied which all existing within their definition or understanding of the most impoverished of

locations. All participants also discussed their dysfunctional home life and nearly all discussed

or alluded to abuse within the household at some point throughout their life.

Table 2

Family Indicators

	Kemi	Melissa	Trina	Emanuel	Jonny	Bret
Low SES	XX	XX	XX	XX	XX	XX
Dysfunctional home life	XX	XX	XX	XX	XX	XX
No parental involvement	XX	XX		XX	XX	XX
Low parental expectations	X	X				X
Non-English-speaking home		XX	XX	XX	XX	XX
Ineffective parenting/ abuse	XX	XX	XX	X	XX	XX
High mobility	XX	XX	XX	XX	XX	XX

Table 3 provides a comparison of eleven school indicators and their presence or absence

in the six former students. An important point of comparison is that each student eluded to, or

explicitly discussed both the conflicting nature of home and school culture as well as the lack of

adequate counseling, disregard of student learning styles and negative school climate. Finally,

and most importantly, participants explicitly stated that there were low expectations placed upon

them by the school during the school years.

Table 3

School Indicators

	Kemi	Melissa	Trina	Emanuel	Jonny	Bret
Conflict between home/ school culture	X	XX	XX	XX	XX	X
Ineffective discipline system	XX	X	XX			
Lack of adequate counseling	XX	X	XX	X	X	X
Negative school climate	XX	XX	XX	XX	X	X
Lack of relevant curriculum	XX	X	X	X		XX
Passive instructional strategies	X	X	X		X	X
Inappropriate use of technology	X					
Disregard of student learning styles	XX	X	X	XX	XX	XX
Retentions/ Suspensions	XX					X
Low expectations	XX	XX	XX	XX	XX	XX
Lack of language instruction	X	X	X	X	XX	

Table 4 compared four societal indicators to the six research participants. Most obvious

here is the fact that four of the six participants spoke of having a lack of community.

Table 4

Societal Indicators

	Kemi	Melissa	Trina	Emanuel	Jonny	Bret
Lack of community support services or response	XX	XX	XX	X	XX	X
Lack of community support for schools	XX	X	X	X	X	X
High incidences of criminal activities	XX	X			X	X
Lack of school/community linkages	X	X	X	X	X	X

While nearly every indicator listed was discussed throughout the critical narrative inquiry with at least one participant, it was worth noting that, throughout discussion with each former student, four specific indicators were explicitly discussed in every interview. These four indicators include: poverty level (or "SES" as defined through research), dysfunctional home life, high mobility, and low expectations from the school itself. These four factors alone as indicators of and /or reasons for being labeled "at risk" are an important insight into young people's understanding and perceptions of being labeled at risk. Of course, none of these four indicators are "controllable" or based on a decision or numerous decisions which the young person his or herself was an active participant in, but rather factors entirely outside of his or her own control. For this reason and others, it is evident that clear themes of dehumanization and the reality of external and hegemonic forces become obvious points of concern.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human.

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless,

impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world,

and with each other. (Freire, 2010, p.34)

Introduction

This research hoped to provide an outlet for young people to find and use their own voices, while finding their own place within their lived histories. The research also aimed to raise awareness of the reality of the contemporary US educational system: we often create policies and programs without considering the perspectives of the young people whom these services are designed to serve. This chapter brings these voices to the forefront and explains the necessity of their inclusion in future discourses. In addition to being relevant and critical, students' voices bring new knowledge to the table. By contextualizing the findings of the present study in relation to the broader scholarly literature on liberatory pedagogy, "at risk" students, and debates over labeling, this chapter explains why we must shift how all people talk about students who are struggling and/or have been marginalized. And finally, this chapter explores how these voices will help to inform both policy and practice. The discussion here will also provide an analysis of the major findings with respect to the research question that prompted and guided this investigation. Because of the nature of this study, themes emerged through dialogue with participants, true to the specifications of a critical narrative inquiry.

This discussion first reviews the "at risk" indicators gleaned from previous literature and discussed in Chapter Four and then describes five clear themes that have emerged through an analysis of the critical narrative dialogues that comprised the data set. The five themes include 1) relationships with bicultural adults who understand, 2) instrumentalizing pedagogy, 3) the impact of money-driven policy, 4) the awareness of limitations of opportunities, and 5) the overall theme of the transparency of hegemony. Previous research and relevant context for exploration are provided throughout then discussion of the five themes, in order to ensure that the connections between the themes and existing critical pedagogical perspectives are clearly articulated.

"At-Risk" Indicator Results

As previously discussed, mainstream policymakers and educators have generally dictated the defining characteristics and implications of the "at risk" label. The descriptions and descriptors, as we have seen, tend to uniformly place blame on the student and thus encourage the student to internalize characteristics of "risk," as opposed to focusing on the system and potential struggles or solutions to problems within the system. With this in mind, participant narratives in this study provided insight into the "internalization" of the "factors" that contribute to the labeling of student "at-riskness."

Individual indicators place students "at risk" through psychological factors, physical factors and behavioral factors (Batten & Russell, 1995; Kominski, Jamieson & Martinez, 2001; Stepney, 2001). Family risk indicators are attached to students who have tumultuous or unpredictably family circumstances (Batten & Russell, 1995). School risk factors encompass all of a young person's history through the lens of the educational system (Batten & Russell, 1995;

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Wells, 1990). Society (or community) risk indicators capture those factors that contribute to a student or families social or material capital in the community (Batten & Russell, 1995; Wells, 1990).

Critical narratives do not require structured interviews and thus, there is always potential that, if asked explicitly, these indicators could present much differently. However, the information presented in Tables 1 through 4 in Chapter Four, provide some basic descriptive details about the participants and usefully inform a comparison of policy norms to student experiences. These tables tell us that each of the six young people in this study presented with multiple indicators. Batten & Russell (1995) and Wells (1990) state that students whom present with "one or more" of these indicators are immediately labeled "at risk." These indicators increase the likelihood that students will face an unfavorable educational climate based on existing institutional conditions. However, assigning the "at risk" label to these young people effectively shifts the ownership of the problem to the student and his or her circumstances. This practice, in exchange, has reinforced, as the data indicates, that the child is a problem to the school, instead of acknowledging that the school is a problem in and of itself to the well-being of these students. Furthermore, the system created to support and educate all students is the very system in which all six participants explicitly stated that they knew that their teachers viewed them with "low expectations."

As was explored in Chapter Two, power and truth are pervasive concepts with respect to the practice of labeling students "at risk" and the act of determining the needs of students within this population. In practice, the "needs" of youth labeled "at risk" are, in fact, considered truths that the dominant culture determines, often in concert with the desire to reinforce the dominant

culture and underpin, through institutionalized power, the marginalization of subordinate cultural values, beliefs, and practices. This research sought to give voice to students who have been recipients of this label and to explore with them the impact of this experience from their perspectives.

Throughout conversations with students, two issues related to power and truth were evident: first, that each of the four "needs" explored and identified by the dominant culture were disputed by the very bicultural students for whom these needs were prescribed; and second, that the dominant culture has so invaded the lived histories of these students that they had, in various forms, denied their own cultural knowing, in exchange for the truth that the dominant culture had imposed upon their lives.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Darder (2012) shows that the voice of marginalized students, families, and communities are generally absent, ignored, or dismissed within the context of educational discourses (Kohn, 2000). In concert with this perspective, the participants' narratives inferred that the needs established for youth labeled "at risk," including the provision of therapy, a separate educational setting, additional learning time, and the expectations that students should be held more accountable and build relationships with adults (presumably, from the dominant culture) seem to be superimposed upon their lives without their voice or participation. Through our conversations, all six of the participants shared their experience with at least one of these "needs." As such, it is important to note that this research did not seek to disprove that these needs are supportive of the students whom have been labeled "at risk," but rather to shine a light on the reality of the impact of these policies, when students' voices are not authentically heard and included in defining their own social and educational needs.

Relationships with Bicultural Adults Who Understand

The first theme that immediately arose through the data gathered was the need for relationships with bicultural adults who understand their context and the larger social conditions that shape the lives of young people labeled "at risk." Kemi supported the importance of having relationships with bicultural adults or those adult who truly understand their life circumstances when she concluded in here narrative, "just put counselors like us on every corner." Through the narrative inquiry process with the six participants in this study, it became evident that the young people themselves understood the need for "caring adults." Current policy supports the belief that young people who have been labeled "at risk" need "adult relationships" and that developing and maintaining these relationships is the building block for the success of young people (Kronick, 1997).

What is missing in this provision of both policies and programs are seeking to satisfy heir needs, however, is the cultural relevancy and bicultural connection that these adults should maintain with the young people they are serving. Caring adults, but in particular bicultural adults, who genuinely understand and can authentically engage young people, understand their lived histories, and who have lived their similar conditions are critical to the well-being of young people. Unfortunately, the importance of bicultural adults is often still a missing discourse in the policymaking and programs aimed to assisting students of color whose lives echo the difficulties of economic disempowerment.

Instrumentalizing Pedagogy

Another theme that arose from the narrative process was the respondents' sense that, within this system, they were perceived as "instruments" or "numbers" instead of human beings.

Through educational institutions and educational non-profits, with teachers as well as administrators and program providers, the former students who participated in this study discussed ways in which they were utilized and sensationalized as "instruments" in their educational experience instead of being treated as active participants in their own learning or lived history. Furthermore, they felt they had been seen as a "number" or a quota to attain, as if to model service. The process of minimizing young people to numbers as the youth participants have shared is a dehumanizing process in and of itself, which results from an instrumentalizing pedagogy that is more concerned with the control and containment of these students than in their genuine participation in the process of their education (Darder 2012; Freire 2010).

Research shows that students are legally obligated to remain in school contexts that are insensitive to their particular cultural and developmental needs (Reile, 2006). As was shared in Chapter Two, dehumanization occurs whenever the dominant culture represses the subordinate culture through oppressive conditions that legitimate dominant interests and values and further the mission of those in power, while marginalizing (either intentionally or inherently through ideology) the subordinate cultural and class populations (Gramsci, 1971). Through the critical narrative inquiry process, the young people interviewed described numerous ways in which their own culture, language, heritage, and lived experiences had been marginalized, and oftentimes, how their own oppressed conditions were reinforced throughout their experiences in the educational system.

While specific recollections varied across participants, every narrative reflected on at least one instance where this dehumanization was seen, felt, or heard. Bret candidly shared,

No one knew anything about who I was really was. They didn't care. I don't think they would know what to do if they knew where my family came, I mean… they weren't interested in Nigeria or my family… and I didn't share. I'm not sharing me with people who I know don't care and don't respect who I am or where I am from. They just knew I was someone who would fill in that checked box. It was just an excuse in the end, another mark against my success. (Bret, Interview One)

Through analysis of the narratives, it also became evident that these young people feel as though they are expected to, required to, or given no other choice than to become complicit with this dehumanization. Bret exemplified this complacency in is his final statement, where spoke to remaining silent and to quietly conforming to the dominant culture, which was so pervasive throughout his academic experience.

Each participant, in their "moment of realization," proved that the act of being labeled "at risk" was reinforcing the practice of minimizing young people to a number or a thing. Their schools, the organizations that provided them scholarship funding, or even at the camp and youth development organizations that were meant to serve as "safe spaces" for young people, seem to all reproduce an instrumentalizing pedagogy that reduced these students to a number. Trina in her interview shared, "I actually had to get a letter of confirmation from my advisor that confirmed that I was really at-risk. Like then, I know that they just wanted that so they can say they serve 100% at risk youth." This insight is not unique to Trina, but rather a poignant reminder that the educational system surrounding young people continues to instrumentalize their being, for the benefit of the institution, echoing "poverty pimp" concerns of another era.

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Impact of Money-Driven Policy

In concert with the concept of an instrumentalizing pedagogy, the narratives shone a bright light on the impact of money-driven policies. The young people unanimously shared that the label was attached to them in order for their schools and programs to obtain funding and resources, without a firm or clear understanding of their actual needs or how those monies could be best used to meet their needs. Nevertheless, the language and policies that drive the quest for program money impacts how racialized and impoverished students are perceived and in what ways programming is provided to and for them. Young people then are being defined by where the money is instead of where the need is. Those in positions of power then continue to exert this power by reaffirming their own superiority through the policies they enact and they language they subscribe to. Darder (2012) speaks to this phenomenon, when she asserts,

> In today's world, economics is the driving force behind assessment and evaluation of out children…[and] the exceedingly prescriptive nature of these practices leaves little doubt that [they] are, directly or indirectly linked to an academically limiting system of social control—a system that successfully sustains the reproduction of class formation with both public schools and the larger society. (68-69)

Hegemonic notions of power and truth, as defined by Foucault (1977), are pervasive with respect to the practice of labeling students "at risk" and the economic incentives used to determine the needs of this population. In practice, the "needs" of youth labeled "at risk" are, in fact, derived by regime of truths determined by the dominant culture which perpetuate economic and social inequalities, often in concert with the desire to reinforce and reproduce dominant cultural values, beliefs, and practices (Darder 2012; Freire, 2012). It is precisely for this reason

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that this research centered the voices of disempowered students who have been recipients of this label and have had to contend with the impact of these "truths," associated with their needs and educational provisions.

Throughout conversations with students, two issues related to power and truth in relation to money-driven policies and organizations were evident: first, that each of the four "needs" explored and identified by the dominant culture were disputed by the discourses of the bicultural students for whom these needs were prescribed; and second, the dominant culture has so invaded the lived histories of these students that they had, in various forms, denied their own cultural truths in exchange for the truths and "needs" that the dominant culture had imposed about their potential and abilities.

One reflection of these needs effectively summarized what all the young people in this study seemed keenly realize during their educational experience. Kemi recalled her Second grade classroom and her awareness at the time that she was not in the same kind of classroom as most of the other students. She was in a room that was far in the back of the school and there were many fewer students in her class. She also shared that they did "lots of untimed stuff" with the students in this new classroom and that she "got therapy from some lady that got all up in my business." Kemi then paused before stating,

> Honestly, some of that stuff didn't help me ... I didn't want it and it wasn't helpful. It was forced. But some of it was so good, like I actually learned stuff in that back class... not because of what was wrong with me, everyone could learn well from that teacher and with a small room to learn in … but really, it was never about what would work for me I think. It was about labeling me something so they got money. You know, like they get

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money to say I'm 'at risk' so that's why they do it and if they do some good for me too then that's great but really they just, they just want money. (Kemi, Interview One)

While the process of sharing their lived histories and igniting their own authentic voice was impactful, the greater impact felt was the disheartening and overwhelming loss which the students also felt once this recognition of power was realized, as exemplified by Kemi above. In his first interview, Bret shared, "its just the way it is." Through so much of our dialogue, this phrase, which echoes Freire's (2010) concerns with internalized fatalism among the oppressed, was uttered. In fact, in 57 minutes, Bret ended his reflection, often mid-sentence, with this phrase an overwhelming 13 times. In his second interview, though still not able to identify it specifically, Bret referenced this power. He stated, "I feel like they owe me something … for all the money they made off me." As Bret and I explored who "they" were, he boldly stated, "White men owe me my education … or at least they owe me the opportunity to get what they all got for giving me a label and for lying."

Bret and the other former students recognized that, while there are instances where the dominant culture's definition of needs for students labeled "at risk" could in fact be helpful, this displaces the problem and thus addresses not a systemic solution but a Band-Aid approach, through which the dominant culture is reinforced. Moreover, the services provided were overwhelmingly a response to funding streams, a factor all young people referenced. Policies were made and thus services provided based on adult perceptions of "needs," In the process, the overriding response to these policies and services became money-driven services that served to reinforce the superiority of the dominant culture and class as genuine knowing, in contrast to marginalized populations perceived to lack legitimate knowing.

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Awareness of Limitations of Opportunity

Through our conversations, the participants in this study each expressed their own awareness that "those people" see them as needing to exist within a mainstream system, despite the limitations of opportunities they face. Melissa called it out so clearly when she stated, "I'm without. Like, I'm actually void of, of what is normal, what is expected, what they think everyone should have. But really only they have it … it's just really the white people mostly" (Interview One). Through these narratives, it was evident that the young people who were labeled "at risk" were overwhelmingly and painfully aware that the educational system works to mainstream them into dominant cultural and class constructions of normalcy and that, inherent in this action, these young people saw themselves viewed as deficient.

The deficit model is, of course, not new to education. Essentially, deficit thinking is the belief that students' academic (or social) struggles exist because they (or their families or culture) lack the "desirable" attributes needed (Cooper, 2014; Darder 2012). These homogenizing cultural attributes are essentially what those in power see as individual traits that everyone should want for their children, regardless of race, ethnicity, or lived history). This thinking places blame for student failure on students and the lack of traits thought to be needed by the mainstream to be successful. Under this framework, children are "at risk" of academic failure because they are unable to read English, not because their school is unwilling to teach them English through effective bilingual education. Young people labeled "at risk" are labeled so because socially, culturally, and materially they are perceived to be deficient, not because the schools they attend fail to meet them where they are or the society fails to transform it structures of inequality and social exclusions to meet the needs of all children and their communities.

This deficit notion seems to have become engrained or internalized in the student

perceptions of their place within the education system. Many of the youth in this study

expressed anger, frustration, or resentment at this perceived "lack," and all of the former students

here expressed an explicit recognition of this notion, through statements and phrases that marked

them as outside of the mainstream expectations. Examples of this recognition include Bret's

discussion "as a black man" and Emanuel's discussion about coming from another country, "not

a nice European one." These former students were overwhelmingly aware of what they did not

have and, more importantly, aware that others viewed their intellect or way of life through a

deficit lens.

The Transparency of Hegemony

Analysis of the narratives suggests that all six respondents became conscious participants

in one of three modes of resistance throughout their formal educational experiences. Individuals

responded to the power of dominance of one social group over another in one of three different

ways: through acquiescing, rebelling, or checking out completely. While each of the former

students interviewed shared moments or experiences throughout their educational history in

which they rebelled and even checked out, all of the participants alluded to their need to

acquiesce, in order to "succeed." "Succeed" in this instance refers to what the former students

identified as success according to the dominant culture: graduation from high school (Smerdon,

2002; Thornburg, et al., 1991). The expectation to acquiesce seemed so prominent in their

responses, because the students were very aware that they were "giving something up." Even

when disclosing their own lived histories, the former students shared that they reluctantly

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accepted their label and their place in history. They did so without protest, without voice, and without finding the opportunity to speak their own truth.

Participants, as such, seem keenly attuned to the transparency of hegemony. To these young people labeled "at risk" who are outside the mainstream, the view of the world inside is so obvious. They see themselves as living outside that mainstream world of opportunity and success. As explored in Chapter Two, the label has been deployed broadly to anyone outside of the dominant culture, as "any individual whose life, in terms of experiences and values, is not reflective of the lives of members of the dominant culture may be labeled at-risk" (Compton-Lilly, 2008). This transparency seemed very clear for the young people themselves, yet those who are "on the inside" seem oblivious to the knowledge that they exist in a different reality. People on the inside are immersed in the hegemonic values, engaged in reinforcing the status quo, and invested in the mainstream definitions that exist for those who are not privy to these spaces. The creation of policies and the implementation of practices are then enacted with these "commitments" in mind, despite the reality that those who are on the outside looking in, whom the policies and practices are designed to support, are the very people whose voice and gaze and noticeably absent from the conversations themselves. These former students shared that they were both aware of this transparency as well as the inability of those from the dominant culture and class to recognize what these young people themselves could plainly see—the haves work to control and dictate to the haves not. In concert, therefore, with the previous themes, the young people engaged in this critical narrative inquiry were well aware that 1) they were being "used" as instruments and numbers; 2) they were labeled as "different and lacking in" whatever the

mainstream had; and 3) people who exist within the mainstream assumed that the students themselves "don't know" what is transpiring in their own lives.

Summary

Through this analysis and through engaging the literature addressing the history and discourses regarding the act of labeling, it became evident that student voice was minimized or absent in an effort to reinforce and promote dominant ideology. Thus, as the participants engaged in the critical narrative process, a new or bicultural voice was unlocked. Each of the students shared, either during our dialogue or after the formal recorded dialogue was complete and as a result of independent reflection share in later conversations or emails, that he or she experienced a sort of realization of their own power and voice, as a consequence of participating in the study.

One week after our interview, Melissa texted me: "I need to talk." I stepped out of a meeting and called her back. Before I had a chance to say hello, Melissa started talking, "I can't stop thinking about this, Kara! I hate that you like, made me think. I hate it, I love it, but like I hate it. You get it?" (Interview One). Darder (2012) discusses this process of "awakening the bicultural voice" as an opportunity for students who have been labeled and marginalized to engage in the transformative process of sharing their lived histories. Melissa's comment is reflective of this transformative process. As Melissa continued to explore her own lived history, she began to develop a more critical awareness of the system (or systems) that did not welcome her and the opportunity to explore critically her citizenship and become a more active participant in her own world.

Research (Freire, 1968) shows that through this "awakening" process, students are reconditioned from a state of dependency on a system that didn't support them toward a greater emancipatory understanding of themselves (Darder 2012). Of all of the overwhelming stories and feedback shared throughout these critical narratives, it was most incredible to witness the process of these young people re-engaging their own lived histories through a lens not prior known; and in the process, tap into a deeper awareness of the social realities that have shaped their world. Trina reflected on this process when she stated, "it feels like there is a new aspect, almost like a new piece of me. It's both angry and aware and it reminds me of society's inequities of access and excess that have actually shaped my life so far." This awakening itself, the process of developing critical social consciousness or "*conscientizaçao*" as described by Freire (2010) was evident throughout the six narratives of the participants, who had formerly been labeled "at risk" and considered to be deficient in the individual required to grown, develop, and succeed in school.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into a dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side. (Freire, 2010)

The purpose of this study was to demythologize the concept of "at risk" by creating the conditions for student voice and critical dialogue to emerge, through the use of narrative inquiry. By doing this, I hoped to gain a better understanding of how students labeled "at risk" understand the meaning of the term and their "sense-making" of this experience, within the greater context of their own lived histories. Through a critical pedagogical lens, and grounded in a humanizing problem-posing approach, I also sought to assist students in developing their own critical consciousness and to support their process of connecting knowledge and power to action. As Freire (2010) described, I hoped to provide a space for students to move beyond the hidden curriculum of labeling and support their critical development of an emancipatory curriculum related to their lives and the forces that have had an impact on their destinies. By doing so, I also hoped to provide a space to enact and embody social justice leadership in my work with vulnerable populations.

This chapter seeks to apply the results of the research to create recommendations for critical educators who daily participate in the hegemonic process of labeling. In addition, recommendations are made for further inquiry into the practice of labeling students "at risk" as well as strategies for engaging youth in the process of critical narrative inquiry. These recommendations emerged from the perceptions, experiences, and lived histories of the six former students in this study, who themselves had been labeled "at risk."

Significance

Because there is such a dearth of research that focuses specifically on the voice of students through a critical bicultural framework (Darder, 2012), this study is significant in that it provides a starting point for further research and dialogue. This refers to a dialogue that should strive both to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of the practice of labeling and also to put a face to "at risk" discourse about disenfranchised youth, in the hopes of demythologizing the label and supporting a more democratic educational system. This study is also significant in that it is centered solely on student voices and critical narrative as the integral component of the rethinking of pedagogical efforts to transform existing systems and their use of the "at risk" label.

This study does not claim the definitive knowledge to call for the educational system to abandon the act of labeling, but rather to critically explore the practice of labeling and the impact of labels on the youth whom they are intended to serve, while acknowledging and exploring the direct and indirect power relations and impact that these labels have over students' lives. Further, this research hopes to problematize the label in an effort to move toward an

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emancipatory understanding of how we speak about young people and make sense of the circumstances they must navigate out in the world.

<div align="center">**Recommendations**</div>

Rethinking Educational Needs

It is critical that a new conversation arise regarding the educational needs of all young people. When I started this work, I was certain that we needed to rethink the educational needs of young people who have been labeled "at risk." Now, more than ever, I am convinced that this must be a crucial and vital component of all contemporary educational conversations. But, through listening, learning, and engaging in this dialogue together and alongside the participants in this study, it is evident that we must rethink the educational needs of all young people, so that we can improve the quality of life not only within schools but also within communities and ensure that we are growing a community of leaders and learners who can think critically about their own educational experiences and inform and engage social change. In the process of rethinking these needs, we must seek ways to support young people as they begin to challenge the practice of labeling as a sorting and disabling mechanism for marginalized youth and families; and, further, to support them as they begin to own their own space for participation in the democratic process of their education.

Space for Student Voice

For the six young people who were engaged in this research study, there are thousands of young people who have not been given the opportunity to deconstruct the labels that have been imposed upon them. The biggest risk we run as educators is the inability to cultivate space for those who have been marginalized to examine the impact of asymmetrical power relations and

participate more actively in the formation of critical consciousness. There must exist a space, grounded in a humanizing and problem-posing approach (Freire, 2010), where young people can safely reflect, explore, and engage through their (and others') lived histories so that we can ensure a community of leaders, learners, and educators who can support the development of not only an emancipatory curriculum, but a genuinely democratic society.

Creating Critical Educator Opportunities

There is overwhelming pressure for educators to meet the needs of adult (power holders, policy makers, administrators) expectations, and the desire to do so comes with a price. In many cases, the alternative to ensuring success through meeting and exceeding political and institutional requirements is the threat of job loss. Even the most critical of educators then must balance institutional and political expectations with their own understanding of the lived histories of the students they serve and support. Doing so requires that educators begin to establish their own sense of political maturity through a clear understanding of the ways in which notions of truth and power intersect to reproduce inequalities within U.S. society. Educators must learn how and when to intervene through creating the conditions for voice, emancipatory practices, and the development of critical consciousness. The last of these three strategies requires that educators remain informed of their own biases and commonsensical ideas of those seen as disenfranchised, as well as to be self-vigilant in how they speak and write of these issues with respect to their educational practice (Darder 2012).

In our mission to rethink the pedagogical efforts through engaging student voice, we must also establish opportunities for critical educators to voice their own concerns, feelings, expectations, and struggles, when working with students from racialized and economically

oppressed communities. It is only through on-going dialogue with students and one another that educators working in oppressed communities can develop the understanding, compassion, and knowledge required to build on the strength of these students.   And further, through a humanizing pedagogy (Freire, 2010) that aims to meet the genuine needs of the students, we must encourage and embrace the indispensable values, including humility, faith in and respect for students, trust in their capacity to make sense of the world, empathic to the authentic needs of students, capacity to engage with youth dialogically and the support of an emancipatory vision of education, that must be present in their formation.

Person First Policymaking

In our quest to provide opportunities for young people to engage authentically and for educators to examine the structures within which they work so as to ensure that all young people are provided the education that they deserve, we must move to a humanizing form of pedagogy that places the person at the center of the discourse. Doing so requires a new paradigm: one where those on the inside of hegemonic institutions be willing and able to step "outside" their circle of power (and comfort), also in order to welcome and respond to the voices of those whom have been marginalized, those on the "outside", those who are aware of the transparency of the hegemony that exists.

Most importantly, a new paradigm requires that policies be established and programs be implemented in response to the young people, whose voices have yet to authentically be heard and integrated in a "person-first" policymaking approach. This speaks to a critical policymaking approach that is driven by the genuine needs and concerns expressed by young people and those educational programs that are established in direct response to their voices. Moreover, a person-

first policy approach sees the humanity and personal struggles of these students as the overriding impetus for policy development and the programs that are built to support the enactment of policies in their name. One such example of an attempt to move in this direction includes the Individual Education Plan (IEP) as used within the Special Education systems. An IEP in and of itself was likely originally rooted in a person-first policy but even the policy approach is fundamentally grounded in a deficit model that then becomes most apparent through the ways in which we talk about its execution and think about youth from oppressed communities.

Eradicate the Deficit Lens

Finally, it is time that we begin to learn, in substantive ways, about the lives of young people within and beyond school walls, in ways that allow us to better understand students and their cultural communities as possessing particular "funds of knowledge," which when integrated in their schooling can help educators to more effectively serve their emancipatory needs (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Schools themselves must be reshaped by the presence and participation of students and families from diverse communities, with their unique lived histories and cultural knowledge. This demands that educational policy makers and leader discard the pervasive deficit lens that often shapes classroom life (Cooper, 2014). This will require, at the very least, that we begin to rethink the diagnostic exercises currently used to assess students' needs and replace these practices with greater opportunities to assess students' strengths and potential contributions to their own process of learning.

<div align="center">

Future Research

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In analyzing the data presented through interviews, additional research on the concept of "low expectations" seems vital to explore with respect to students labeled as "at risk." While

this study did not focus on students' perceptions of the school culture, it became evident that this concept of "low expectations" was pervasive in their lives and, in many cases, had a profound negative impact on student experience, even as early as Second grade. Research exploring student perceptions of school expectations and culture would also be beneficial and informative for educators looking to transform and recreate school environments, in ways that genuinely enhance their opportunities for learning.

Throughout the critical narrative process, participants spoke of "That One Person," that individual within their lives, usually a teacher, who was different than everyone else at school, in that they saw and treated them as having potential and intelligence. Often, students described numerous negative experiences and interactions with adults within the context of their school experience. They would, however, invariably also discuss one person who they felt did not label them, did not see them as "at risk," assisted them in acquiring the knowledge they were seeking, never gave up on them, set high expectations for them, or advocated for them within or beyond the school walls. Further research to explore the underlying attitudes and characteristics of "That One Person" and ways in which he or she created that space would be beneficial for critical educators within the current system who are working to transform those structures that negatively impact the most vulnerable student populations.

The current study provided the researcher astounding insight into students' perceptions of being labeled "at risk." An interesting partner study would be a qualitative study of adults' perceptions of labeling students "at risk." Adults' perceptions could potentially include parents, administrators, program directors, grant managers, teachers, and policy-makers. This study would provide a fascinating comparison of students' realities to various adults' assumptions and

expectations. It would also be interesting to engage adults in a pre and post study wherein adults first discussed their beliefs and assumptions on labeling students "at risk." Adults would then be asked to engage critically with the voices of students who have been labeled, in order to determine if understanding the perceptions of those upon whom the labeled has been imposed would impact in humanizing ways the beliefs and practices of educators in the field.

Finally, in this research, participants were not selected at random as they were contacted through the researchers existing networks in large cities on both the East and West coasts. All of the students who participated in the study did eventually graduate from high school, and at least in that respect, they are not representative of all students who are assigned the "at risk" label. This to say that research (Smerdon, 2002; Thornburg, et al., 1991) shows that "at risk" most often refers to students whose likelihood to graduate high school is poor. Hence, it would be interesting to replicate this study with former students in the same age bracket who never completed high school.

Concluding Thoughts

If one thing became clear to me throughout this research, it was the significance that the very act of creating counter-hegemonic spaces for students to speak their truth has on their understanding of self. Counter-hegemonic spaces provide one of the best opportunities for assisting young people in the process of developing critical consciousness.   As the young people in this study explored their own lives, engaged in dialogue with me, with each other, and with their own lived histories and assumptions, I became witness to instances of transformation, where in the very moment participants gained insights that caused them to rethink their former

definitions of their experiences. At times, I felt as though I was watching Freire's words lift from the pages and become enacted in the process of this critical narrative inquiry.

It has also become so overwhelmingly evident that six young people is not enough. All young people need opportunities to critically engage in the process of finding their voices and exploring their particular histories by way of an emancipatory educational process. It is my hope that I can continue to engage educators and students alike, so that we might find together other ways to create authentic learning spaces. So that in our quest to rethink the educational needs of disenfranchised youth, we might improve their quality of life within schools and communities. And, moreover, in our efforts to challenge hegemonic structures and practices—such as that of labeling youth and using this label as a sorting and disabling mechanism for marginalized youth and families—as we can continue to create counter-hegemonic educational spaces to learn and transform *with* them. It is this space that truly is inherent in a pedagogy of love that is critical to student voice (Darder 2012, 2004; Freire 2010).

So often, over the past three years, I have been asked, "well, if not 'at risk' then what do we call them?" This study has provided me the grounding necessary to be able to describe and advocate for disenfranchised youth, so that we as a society can begin to move from discussing the act of labeling to critical conversations regarding the manner in which the practice of labeling, wittingly or unwittingly, supports existing hegemonic structures that reproduce material inequalities and social exclusions. We must then find ways to discuss openly structural inequities that exist within the current educational system so that we can find humanizing approaches to rethinking and recreating a democratic educational system that can truly support the genuine needs of young people from racialized and impoverished communities.

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Epilogue

This study has been a challenging, frustrating, eye-opening, and transformative process for me. Over the past year, I have found myself feeling like the person writing this dissertation was, in ways, disconnected from the person working day to day. I have struggled to repeatedly define and redefine the struggle within me, a white progressive educator committed to social justice. I have at once questioned the education system, its values, and my place within it. I have struggled to define my place in this story and, in many ways, struggled with my worthiness of the privilege of sharing these stories. At the core, I have also struggled to understand the role and impact of the public education system in the historical reproduction of injustice.

I have overwhelmingly struggled with the challenges (both real and perceived) that I have faced as a woman from the dominant culture whose very existence calls for this research. Through a humanizing approach to this work, I have learned to engage within my own self the capacity to listen, respect and support the voice and the social agency of the young people with whom I have had the honor of working. Through this struggle, I have learned and embraced the belief that no knowledge is absolute but, through humanizing approach, I must remain keenly aware that we all hold only partial knowledge (and, at once, potential limitations), which are defined by our culture, class and lived histories. Through this, I have learned and relearned that there is invaluable wisdom to be gleaned from everyone's stories, not alone the privileged.

As a result of these struggles and realizations and in concert with this research, I have worked to better define my own philosophy and beliefs about the educational system. I am thankful and hopeful that I will be able to live this philosophy in my work and my writing.

I believe in education as a democratic process.

I believe in education as a safe place for young people to grow, learn, teach, explore.

I believe in education as an emancipatory opportunity.

I believe in education as a space for community.

I believe in education as a continuum of teaching and learning for student and educator.

I believe in education as an avenue for counter-hegemonic ideology.

I believe in education as a road toward critical consciousness.

I believe in education as a training ground for enduring transitions.

I believe in education as a true collaborative learning process.

I believe in education as an opportunity to engage and inspire authentic learners and

leaders in a trusted, safe, and respectful environment.

I believe in education as a transformational experience.

I believe in education as an act of love.

Informed Consent

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Informed Consent Form

Date of Preparation: March 25, 2012

Loyola Marymount University

Narrative Inquiry of Former Students Labeled "At Risk"

1) I hereby authorize Kara Allen Soldati, MSW, Doctoral Student at Loyola Marymount University, to include me (my child/ward) in the following research study: *Breaking the "At-Risk" Code: Deconstructing the Myth and the Label.*

2) I have been asked to participate on a research project which is designed to gain an understanding of the meaning and sense-making of the educational experiences of students labeled "at risk" and which will last for approximately three months, including two in-person 1:1 interviews and one group interview.

3) It has been explained to me that the reason for my inclusion in this project is that I am a former student who was labeled "at risk" during my high school education.

4) I understand that if I am a subject, I will be asked questions during two individual interviews and will also be asked to participate in one group interview with other former students who might have similar backgrounds as myself.

   The investigator(s) will ask me questions during these interviews and will audiotape these interviews only.

   These procedures have been explained to me by Kara Allen Soldati, MSW, Principal Investigator and Doctoral Student at Loyola Marymount University.

5) I understand that I will be videotaped, audiotaped and/or photographed in the process of these research procedures. It has been explained to me that these tapes will be used for teaching and/or research purposes only and that my identity will not be disclosed. I have been assured that the tapes will be destroyed after their use in this research project is completed. I understand that I have the right to review the tapes made as part of the study to determine whether they should be edited or erased in whole or in part.

6) I understand that the study described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts: a sense of personal vulnerability with regard to my personal experiences and the difficulty or lack of comfort associated with the process of revealing these personal experiences to others.

7)   I also understand that the possible benefits of the study are a heightened awareness of my own personal narrative and it's impact on my experiences both within and beyond my high school education, the opportunity to engage in conversation with other former students who share similar stories and the chance to reflect on my overall high school educational experiences.

8)   I understand that Kara Allen Soldati who can be reached at (323) 313-3798 or at karachristine@gmail.com will answer any questions I may have at any time concerning details of the procedures performed as part of this study.

9)   If the study design or the use of the information is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent reobtained.

10) I understand that I have the right to refuse to participate in, or to withdraw from this research at any time without prejudice towards myself, the non-profit organization or groups that I am involved with, or Loyola Marymount University.

11) I understand that circumstances may arise which might cause the investigator to terminate my participation before the completion of the study.

12) I understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent except as specifically required by law.

13) I understand that I have the right to refuse to answer any question that I may not wish to answer.

14) I understand that in the event of research related injury, compensation and medical treatment are not provided by Loyola Marymount University.

15) I understand that if I have any further questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact David Hardy, Ph.D. Chair, Institutional Review Board, 1 LMU Drive, Suite 3000, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles CA 90045-2659 (310) 258-5465, david.hardy@lmu.edu.

16) In signing this consent form, I acknowledge receipt of a copy of the form, and a copy of the "Subject's Bill of Rights".

Subject's Signature _____   Date _____

Witness _____   Date _____

Organization Outreach Template

(Official Letterhead)

April 25, 2013

To Whom it May Concern,

Kara Allen Soldati, a doctoral student at Loyola Marymount University, has requested permission to conduct research at (Name of Organization). As the (Title) for (Name of Organization), I have reviewed the following information regarding Mrs. Soldati's proposed study:

- The research background including the purpose of the study towards understanding student's perceptions of the conditions that cause them to be labeled "at risk"
- The research questions including how students identify the conditions that label them "at risk"
- Selection of participants including up to 8 young adults over 18 years of age that have been labeled "at risk"
- The process of individual and group interviews to be set at the young adult participants convenience and in the location of their choice
- The process of consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, risks and benefits of the study.
- Copies of the "Informed Consent," "Sample Questions," and Application to the IRB were shared with the district.

Based on the importance of this topic and potential benefits to our work at XX, permission is granted for Mrs. Soldati to conduct her research with our young adults in the Summer of 2013.

If there are any further consent or permission forms needed from our organization, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Name
Title
Email
Phone

Participant Outreach Flyer

"BREAKING THE AT-RISK CODE"

"45 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander children, 62 percent of Latino children, and 72 percent of Black children,
report at least one of the risk factors necessary for labeling a student "at risk" within the K-12 public education system."
-Annie E. Casey Foundation (2010)

WHO: Former high school students, from ANY High School, that have been labeled" at risk"; do <u>not</u> need to have a high school degree to participate; must be over 18 years old and no longer in school

WHAT: Your opportunity to share about, reflect on and discuss your high school experiences and answer questions like:
- *Tell me about your educational experiences.*
- *During your education, did you hear the term " at risk" used? If so, where did you hear this label? When did you hear it? Do you remember the context?*
- *What does "at risk" mean to you now? What did it mean to you when you heard it?*
- *What has been your personal experience with the term "at risk?" Can you tell me about what happened in this experience?*
- *Why do you think you were labeled "at risk?"*
- *How did this label impact you? Your educational experience? Your view of adults/teachers/administrators? Your family? Your community?*

WHEN: Anytime that is convenient for you; you will need to be available from 5-8 hours total between May – August, 2013

WHERE: @ any location most comfortable or ideal to you; this could be here at _____ or it could be at a church, home, park or library… anywhere that allows us to audio-record the conversations

WHY: 3 reasons…
1- To **challenge the practice** of labeling students "at risk"
2- to **gain an understanding of the meaning and sense-making** of the educational experiences of students labeled "at risk"
3- to **demythologize the concept** of "at- riskness" by creating the conditions for student voices and critical dialogue

HOW: By participating in interviews and sharing your experiences
WANT TO KNOW MORE?
Sign up with _____ in Room #_____ or call or email Kara Allen Soldati at karachristine@gmail.com or (323) 313-3798.

Who is Kara? Kara is a Doctoral Student at Loyola Marymount University here in Los Angeles. She is studying student's perceptions of the impact of labels, specifically this label "at risk." Kara has a Master's in Education and a Master's in Social Work and has, over the past 8 years, been a teacher, social worker, director of a nonprofit and is currently Vice President of arc, a youth development organization. Kara has worked in Indiana, Boston, Oakland, Los Angeles, Uganda and Haiti and volunteers often with various youth-serving organizations in the Los Angeles area. She lives in Lincoln Heights with her husband and their 2 daughters, one who is a very crazy adopted dog.

"As human beings, we come to understand and give meaning to our lives through telling our own story." Andrews, Squire & Tambokou, 2008

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