*Review*

# (Re)conceptualising Risk: What (Seems to) Work for At-Risk Students [i]

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**Abstract:** This review of current research into at-risk programs serves to categorise and characterise existing programs and to evaluate the contribution of these programs to assisting students at-risk from marginalised backgrounds. This characterisation questions the (sometimes) implicit assumptions and the consequences of those assumptions inherent in and behind these various accounts. Using as a lens the (various and varied) understandings of social justice and the goals of education (Gale & Densmore, 2000; 2003), three sometimes overlapping and sometimes contesting standpoints are identified in relation to at-risk students, characterised as instrumentalist or rational technical, social constructivist or individualist and critical transformative or empowering. I argue that a critical transformative understanding of at-risk may deliver improved outcomes for young people by challenging 'the school context in which the young people are located' (Stewart, 1998, 4).

**Keywords:** student risk; social justice; critical pedagogy; critical pedagogy

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## *Introduction*

> Schooling should be socially just so that ... all students have access to the high quality education necessary to enable the completion of school education to Year 12 or its vocational equivalent … . (Ministerial Council on Employment Education Training and Youth Affairs, 1999)

> If a business is losing clients it doesn't blame the clients, it looks at itself and makes the changes that need to be made [School Principal]. (Strategic Partners, 2001a, 74)

The literature on at-risk students is large to the extent of being overwhelming. However, there are a number of research works cited repeatedly across the literature, in particular longitudinal research from the OECD. From work that originates in Australia, a number were commissioned by the Australian Department of Education and Youth Affairs and written by various academic researchers. Research conducted for the Australian Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) has suggested that the usual term, *best practice* be replaced with *good practice* (Strategic Partners, 2001b), because of the inexactness of the studies and measures involved in assessing the benefits and outcomes of various programs. I adopt this same cautionary approach here using the latter term, *good practice* throughout.

This analysis of the research literature attempts a synthesis and reformulation, based on the epistemological standpoints, both explicit and implied, of the various researchers in relation to their (various and varied) understandings of social justice and the goals of education (Gale & Densmore, 2000; 2003). In this process I identify three sometimes overlapping and sometimes contesting standpoints in the research literature in relation to at-risk students, which are referred to as *instrumentalist* or rational technical, *social constructivist* or individualist and *critical transformative* or empowering. Taking a recognitive social justice position (Gale & Densmore, 2000), I explain why programs 'which simply seek to achieve change in the individual young

people are doomed to failure' (Stewart, 1998, 4) and why a critical transformative understanding of at-risk may deliver improved outcomes for young people by challenging 'the school context in which the young people are located' (Stewart, 1998, 4).

### One problem, many interpretations

The Dusseldorp Skills Forum reports that in the years 2004 to 2005, at least 15 per cent of 15-24 year olds, (an estimated 560,000) in Australia were not in full-time learning or work; 30 per cent of Australia's school leavers were unemployed, in part-time work or not in the labour force six months after leaving school; and 43 percent of early school leavers and 23 per cent of school completers experienced a troubled transition from school in 2004 and 2005 (Long, 2005). In addition, in 2006, 27.6 per cent (399, 000) of males aged 15-24 were out of work, but not looking for work (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Long states that early leaving from school (Year 10 or below) is a considerable risk: in 2004-2005, 45 percent of Year 10 leavers were at-risk of unemployment in the labour market six months after leaving school. OECD figures estimate that in 1999 somewhere between 15-20 per cent of young people leave school without *worthwhile* qualifications and that 15-30 per cent are classed as at-risk of failure in school. A total of 30 -50 per cent are at-risk according to these figures (Budge, 2000). It is notable that according to the Bureau of Statistics in 2006, 8.5 per cent (249, 000) of men were still at-risk, out of work but no longer actively seeking work (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

Previous OECD longitudinal research (OECD, 1998; 1999) concludes that there is no single factor associated with education success or failure. It seems that being at-risk of failure at school is the product of the interaction of many variables: some are student based (various forms of special educational need and adolescent developmental problems); others may relate to factors in the student's home and community environment (low income, ethnic minority or migrant background); and still others are school based (inappropriate teaching methods, inadequate resources, poor curriculum). The OECD research reviewed here has variously attempted to provide overarching explanations of educational failure by stressing the causal effect of psychological, socio-cultural or institutional variables (or a combination of these). As is concluded below, it is not uncommon for contrasting and complimentary perspectives to be located together.

Mortimore and Mortimore (1999) identified three separate categories or different approaches to improve students' outcomes in at-risk programs. The three approaches include special endeavours for the benefit of individuals within already effective schools that concentrate on building on existing good practice, the focussed intervention by projects and programs in schools that are failing; and system wide reform. They note that there are frequent and obvious overlaps between them but make the point that it is not just a question about '*what works*' but equally important 'what works *for whom* and under *which circumstances*' (Mortimore & Mortimore, 1999, 110, original emphasis). Gale similarly suggests that:

> At times the differences between these categories appear minimal and the differences within them great, yet … the categories offer plausible and useful accounts that warrant their separations. (Gale, 2000, 253)

These three approaches impact on the development of different implementation and policy strategies (OECD, 1998) and will be characterised below on the basis of their social justice perspective(s) and understanding of the purpose of education, for whose benefit the education system functions and what is privileged as a result (Gale & Densmore, 2000). While Connell termed these three standpoints *compensatory*, *oppositional* or *counter-hegemonic* (Connell, 1993, 51-52), I have previously called them *instrumentalist* or rational technical, *social constructivist* or individualist and *critical transformative* or empowering (Author, 2005). Connell proposes that the imperative of social justice is 'to generalize the point of view of the *disadvantaged* rather than

separate it off' (Connell, 1993, 52; original emphasis). Like Gale (2000), I favour a 'recognitive approach to social justice, concerned as it is with rethinking social arrangements thought to be just, giving status to things thought to be counterproductive and decentring concerns thought to be pivotal' (Gale, 2000, 253). These three perspectives are now examined below as a way of categorising the research on at-risk students.

### Compensatory, deficit or instrumentalist view

A compensatory or instrumentalist approach to the issues of risk are characterised by a retributive view of social justice (Gale, 2000; Gale & Densmore, 2000), seeing the goals of education as largely vocational in order to prepare students for (sometimes, but not always) meaningful and productive work. Workplace skills and competencies are privileged in a curriculum that is overlaid with programs of school reform often determined or driven by national testing regimes. The beneficiaries of this approach are the broader economy and employers of labour in particular. Connell (1993) suggests that the logic underpinning this perspective is that it aims to 'bring the disadvantaged to the same table at which the advantaged are already eating' (Connell, 1993, 51).

Research into youth resilience suggests that certain youth are more or less resilient or socially competent. Fuller (1998; 2000) speaks about young people in terms of their individual vulnerability, which characterises the lives of many children at-risk and focuses on their psycho-social and environmental circumstances in terms of their deficits. Children who do not have a healthy or competent temperament, or who are born into families that cannot provide rich relationships, are seen to lack "natural resilience". In this view, these deficits almost inevitably and inexorably lead children to succumb to risk. That is, risk is seen as pathological. Fuller (1998) describes at-risk in terms of inadequate or inappropriate psychological development and behaviours attributed to individuals and their families, seeing it in terms of a "war", using the metaphors and clichés of battle, of schools as the first line of defense, and the "early identification" pathology of deficit behaviour. This essentialist and positivist typology has been clearly rejected as self-fulfilling labelling (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992) of risk factors to include individual, family, school and social circumstances. Rosenthal ventures only one conclusion of a prescriptive nature from his research, that:

> superb teachers can teach the unteachable; we know that. So, what I think this research shows is that there's a moral obligation for a teacher: if the teacher knows that certain students can't learn, that teacher should get out of that classroom. (Rhem, 1999, 4)

A deficit view also shifts the blame for student failure at school onto ineffective parenting, the inability of youth to control their impulses, to delay gratification or cope with stress. Emphasising psycho-social issues, deficit research proposes programs and measures that focus on individual behavioural modification and other psychological strategies that attempt to remove community and environmental risk factors, correcting students' and family behaviour, so that all, or most at-risk youth can become more resilient, that is, bouncing or springing back from these risky situations (Szirom, Jaffe et al., 2001). Instrumentalist perspectives focus on the individual, whether it is the young person or the family unit and suggest that 'while not all young people face the same degree of risk, all young people are vulnerable to some extent' (Szirom, Waller et al., 2001, 26). Fuller (1998) stresses that peer connectedness, fitting into school, and feeling attached to significant adults, promote such student well being. Stewart (1998) comments on this model as 'fail[ing] to recognise the significance of gender, race, sexuality or ethnicity on young people's experience of these risk factors (Stewart, 1998, 1). This approach identifies 'problem behaviours' as the core of the at-risk issue and therefore suggests intervention strategies to either prevent or ameliorate these problems because '[e]ach young person [has] a unique set of needs and capacities, and [is] exposed to a unique combination of risk factors, requires individualised instruction and if at-risk, individualised pathway planning' (Withers &

Russell, 1998, 8). These deficit explanations give rise to programs and pedagogies that provide for separate provision, streaming, withdrawal and a plethora of remedial education programs (Zyngier & Gale, 2003a; 2003b). As a result of this and other research for example, the Victorian Suicide Prevention Taskforce, 1997, the Victorian State Government increased spending for school counsellors by $8m a year, and initiated the School Focused Youth Service (SFYS) program. The Victorian Suicide Prevention Task Force (1997) identifies family connectedness, school and peer connectedness, and community and neighbourhood connectedness as crucial factors inhibiting risk and encouraging resiliency (Szirom, Waller et al., 2001).

While the *Full Service School* research reflects a deficit approach, some valuable outcomes for good practice have developed, such as the need for effective leadership, the need for a core of committed teachers, an interventionist welfare approach, dynamic full-time counsellors, strong community links, and clear at-risk identification practices. Budge (2000) describes these developments as dealing with student social and self-esteem issues, counselling of students and basic literacy and numeracy. Only in a minority of programs is appropriate teaching and curriculum highlighted and in a majority of cases this is in a context of basic skills and remediation. That is, the focus was still on changing the student (Budge, 2000, 29).

In short, much past research (for example Batten & Russell, 1995) defines at-risk as a pathology (Strategic Partners, 2001b, 2) related to a lack of connectedness between the individual student and the family, community, school and peers. Batten and Russell (1995, 2) in their meta-review of the Australian literature of at-risk from 1980 to 1994, are sympathetic to this deficit view and suggest that it is 'virtually synonymous with disadvantage (absence of beneficial factors such as adequate family income) or maltreatment (presence of active negative factors such as physical abuse within the family)' (Batten & Russell, 1995, 2). They propose that students who underachieve and fail at school can be characterised by their lower socio economic status families resulting from a deficit of cultural and economic capital.

This view of resilience as the antidote to student deficiencies has had a significant impact on the development of programs in schools with large numbers of students identified as at-risk. The programs can be characterised as seeking to enhance student attachment to school through a behavioural or psychological process enhancing student well-being so that students feel wanted and loved, fitting in and belonging to school (Zyngier & Gale, 2003b). Dependence on "protective" factors is also acknowledged by Fullarton (2002) as fundamental in relation to student engagement. Fullarton's conclusion that student engagement is located in and owned by the individual student and that connectedness and well-being according to this view is measured and promoted by student participation in extra curricular activities at school has been critiqued and rejected (Zyngier, 2003; 2005).

Challenging this position, Wright, McGlaughlin, and Weekes' (2000), discussion of the effects of race, class and gender on school exclusions in the United Kingdom, acknowledges the effects of school cultures on retention rates. While schools are forced to compete against each other, these "challenging" few students are viewed as a danger to the educational chances of the mainstream, well-behaved majority. Marginalised students are stereotyped as deviant and like the pathology view of at-risk are seen as capable of "contaminating" the school culture. This can cause parents to think twice before sending their children to the local state school, creating a school culture that emphasises discipline and correct behaviour, and programs designed to 'reinforce structures that have broken down' (Wright et al., 2000, 35), rather than question the structures themselves. These deficit views ignore the issues of socio-economic disadvantage, coupled with cultural diversity, gender and geographical location (Luke et al., 2003).

### Oppositional or social constructivist individualist view

The oppositional or social constructivist view regarding student success and failure is an individualist approach to dealing with student risk. It often includes the streaming of at-risk students either into separate school systems (technical colleges or vocational schools for the students "good with their hands"), "separate but equal" courses for students at-risk within an academic school (the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) introduced in 2003 is an example of this), selective specialist schools in News South Wales and elite private schools. It is widely described in the literature as the move for more *effective* schooling reflecting a (re)distributive view of social justice (Gale, 2000; Gale & Densmore, 2000; Mills & Gale, 2002). Education goals are largely academic for the personal edification and individual enrichment of students, achieved by individual advancement and competitive assessment, through hierarchical subject disciplines that especially privilege and benefit society's elites. Connell (1993) describes the logic of this approach as 'you don't try to bring the poor to the same table as the rich because the table itself is not level, and the poor can't get a fair feed at it' (Connell, 1993, 51-52). While this often produces more dignified and interesting classrooms (Zyngier, 2005), it does not necessarily raise substantive (and critical) student inquiry that questions the acceptance of official knowledge (Apple, 1996; for students other than the middle class. Connell concludes that 'at its best, this could produce an educational ethos which built on working-class experience and ideas about learning' (Connell, 1993, 51).

The Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) commissioned research (Strategic Partners, 2001a; 2001b) argued for a 'more holistic approach' (Strategic Partners, 2001b, 23) where schools and education require significant structural reform, at the same time as providing support services and programs for students at-risk. It argues for 'high quality education'; disregarding class and socio economic status as issues, there is a conviction by the Report's authors that with sufficient effort from teachers and students themselves, the deficits can be turned around. This approach also points to a number of factors that seem to mitigate risk, especially resilience and connectedness. Resilience is described as those protective factors both internal and external to the individual that seek to 'reduce the impact of risks, or changes the way a person responds to these risks, thus shielding them from negative outcomes' (Strategic Partners, 2001a, 21).

In response to the perceived needs of young people at-risk, programs have either been portrayed as preventive or ameliorative (remedial) as part of an early intervention strategy (Strategic Partners, 2001b). Schools then come to be regarded both as part of the problem but also a component of the solution. Budge (2000) describes the most common approaches by schools as creating or offering remedial, rather than preventative programs for students at-risk while the problem of risk itself, is rarely addressed (Budge, 2000; Istance, 1999; OECD, 1998; 1999).

The fixation on improving outcomes for students in the so-called "problematic" middle years of schooling in all Australian States and Territories is a direct result of the social constructivist position adopted in the early middle years' research (Barratt, Cormack, & Cumming, 1998; Centre for Applied Educational Research, 2002; Cumming, 1996). Luke and Elkins (2003) investigated the perceived efficacy of these middle years' programs across Australia in improving the quality of teaching, learning and student outcomes, in literacy and numeracy and especially for student members of at-risk groups. These groups included students from lower socioeconomic communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI or Indigenous) communities, students with a Language Background other than English (LBOTE), rural and remote students, and students struggling with the transition from middle/upper primary to the junior secondary years. Luke et al. (2003) concluded that where schools were focusing on:

> dedicated whole-school middle years' programs that emphasized pastoral care and the well-being of students, there was no corresponding indicative data reported that demonstrated improved social outcomes for such students. Where interventions were

characterised by withdrawal and 'pull out' programs – encouraged in traditional high school structures and where there was a strong 'test score driven' state mandate in primary schools – student outcomes gain as reported by school leaders proved more difficult to sustain unless such interventions were linked and articulated back into mainstream classroom pedagogy and curriculum reform efforts in the school. (Luke et al., 2003, 9)

The current questioning of unequal outcomes for "boys" in Australian schools is a similar phenomenon of this individualist approach (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training & Kerry, 2002; Kenway & Australian Curriculum Studies Association., 1997; Slade & Trent, 2000; West, 2001). In this discourse, questions are seldom asked about which boys are at risk, assuming that all boys are equally seriously being disadvantaged in schools. Luke et al. (2003, 10) stress that interventionist school-based programs must go beyond a focus on current:

philosophical orientations towards adolescent psychological development patterns and pathologies … to directly address how new economic conditions, social contexts and diverse patterns of youth identities, cultures and learning styles are intersecting with issues of growing cultural and linguistic diversity in communities.'

These 'dilemmas of students' intervention' which face schools in their attempts to intervene in and prevent early school leaving, and their reaction to at-risk students are not easily resolved (Angwin, Blackmore, Harrison et al., 2001). Angwin et al. (2001) suggest that some schools are more inclined to have students elect, drift or be driven out either by design or by the school's actions or inaction, sometimes even in 'unofficial forms of exclusion by which schools persuade both parents and students themselves to collude in their own exclusion' (Cooper et al., 2000, 7). Mortimore and Mortimer (1999) highlight the effect of disproportionate enrolments of at-risk students in certain schools, where the concentration of students at-risk can create a culture of disadvantage within the community, further compounding an already difficult situation for schools. Although changes in curriculum and pedagogy will be beneficial for these students, the common practice of disproportionately large enrolments of such students in particular schools runs the risk of these schools being labelled as at-risk specialists. Even research into at-risk students at such schools can cause a flight of mainstream students to 'more balanced school populations' (Mortimore & Mortimore, 1999, 131). Publication of comparative academic results and/or national and state assessment benchmarks, league tables, parental choice programs and voucher systems being promoted by various ministers of education, may only accentuate any flight of cultural capital (Mortimore & Mortimore, 1999, 121). This is where children of relatively advantaged parents are able to be educated exclusively with children from similar backgrounds in schools that are able to attract those parents (most able to support the school) and those students most likely to succeed academically (Gale, 2005). The impact of this "exodus" on schools then becomes a concern. Wells and Serna (1997) argue that this problem will remain:

As long as elite parents press the schools to perpetuate their status through the intergenerational transmission of privilege that is based more on cultural capital than "merit", educators will be forced to choose between equity-based reforms and the flight of elite parents from the public school system. (Wells & Serna, 1997, 734)

This also creates in disadvantaged schools a 'climate less likely to be sympathetic to children not only not producing no positive contribution to these indicators, but who may also prevent others from doing so' (Cooper et al., 2000, 8). This is 'directly related to the introduction of a market system of education' (Cooper et al., 2000, 8), where the reduced tolerance of at-risk pupils creates a scenario where 'we have to have losers in order to sustain the winners' (Stirling, 1996, 61). Instead of 'promoting equality of opportunities through education, inequality is a necessary driving force within a competitive system' (Stirling, 1996, 61). Alleviation of the actual disadvantage in these cases may be more useful than localised school interventions.

Typical of a social constructivist approach is the call for more effective schools, to try to raise the standard of as many schools as possible so that *choice* becomes less of an imperative for families. However, as 'more and more people desire access to fewer and fewer schools' the issue of limited social and cultural capital is further accentuated (Teese & Polesel, 2003). Dividing the students more equitably between schools or even bussing students from more affluent to less advantaged schools has been suggested (Mortimore & Mortimore, 1999, 129). Defending social constructivist intervention, Mortimore and Mortimore argue that it is 'impossible to make a fair judgement of what [a school is doing] without taking into account the nature of its student intake. … It is foolish to pretend that the social background of the students makes no difference' (Mortimore & Mortimore, 1999, 131). According to the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) (Szirom, Jaffe et al., 2001, 26-27), educational programs for students at-risk should include a focus on real-life issues of immediate relevance to students through 'education by stealth or in disguise' (Apte, 2001, 32) through an integrated approach across many subject areas that link young people to key people in their community. Luke et al. (2003, 10) reject this and conclude that 'schools are required to move beyond the current professional emphases on curricular integration, student care and behaviour'.

Student engagement is often cited as crucial to counter student risk. It is rarely defined, usually as an opposite of alienation or disengagement (Zyngier, 2005). Apte (2001, 42) suggests that engagement is:

> some reference to the idea of *joining* with another person, the process of forming a relationship, of getting to know each other in a way which is meaningful to what you might need to do together.

Reflecting both deficit instrumentalist and oppositional social constructivist discourses, Brown and Holdsworth (2001) suggest programs to engage youth need to include a mix of student focus and school focus issues. Apte (2001), taking an oppositional social constructivist position, concludes that *maintaining* student engagement can be achieved through a focus on curriculum and pedagogical (school/teacher) factors, including work that requires responsibility and challenge within a cultural sensitive environment. The Full Service School (FSS) model (Szirom, Jaffe et al., 2001, 26-27) includes integrated multiple strategies across many contexts for effective intervention that focus on a comprehensive set of factors, but not the deficits of the individual. Brown and Holdsworth (2001), Apte (2001) and Szirom, Jaffe et al. (2001) acknowledge that curriculum and pedagogical change in schools cannot be successfully implemented without teacher professional development that will enhance the capacity of all teachers (Brown and Holdsworth, 2001; Apte, 2001).

While the social constructivist literature acknowledges that schools have a 'critical role' in both prevention and early intervention for at-risk students, there are also many outside factors. Hence successful programs will extend beyond the school but 'how far is still the subject of debate' (Strategic Partners, 2001b, 25). Brown et al. (2001, 126) confirm that students at-risk also clearly understand that the nature of the school culture and ethos is critical to their attachment to school, in both a positive and negative sense. Luke et al. (2003, 8) reject both the instrumentalist and social constructivist approaches arguing that dedicated, tied-funding provided for at-risk 'target groups appears to encourage piece-meal and pull-out approaches' make student improvement more difficult to sustain unless such interventions were linked and articulated to the mainstream program. They suggest that whole-school programs that emphasized pastoral care and the well-being of students do not improve social outcomes for at-risk students. They maintain that what is required is the revision and modification of whole-school mainstream pedagogy and curriculum programs, and teaching, learning and assessment in order to improve outcomes for target group students (Luke et al 2003). Approaches to teaching and learning need to stress higher order thinking and critical literacy, greater depth of knowledge and understanding and increases in overall intellectual demand and expectations. Luke et al. (2003)

indicate that programs that have 'connectedness to the world' in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, can generate improved academic and social outcomes for all students, but especially those from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds, while programs that recognise and engage student differences in classroom teaching can produce systematic and sustainable interventions that could serve the needs of at-risk students. While higher order intellectual engagement is necessary in programs in order for all students to access employment and to pursue improved life pathways through school to post-compulsory study, work and community life, there needs to be an emphasis on the intellectual demands of school work and student engagement in mainstream pedagogy that moves beyond increased participation rates and basic skills development. This includes assessment procedures that also focus on higher order intellectual outcomes from all schooling programs, with emphasis on curricular integration. This change needs teacher-leaders with a clear philosophy, coupled with a strong pedagogic and curricular focus, who can act as internal change agents (Haberman, 1991; Luke et al., 2003).

### Counter hegemonic or critically transformative

A third approach dealing with students at-risk is a counter hegemonic or critically transformative view, based on a recognitive view of social justice (Gale, 2000; Gale & Densmore, 2000) where the goals of education are social-democratic in order to develop students' knowledge of their world and their ability to act within it. A critically transformative view of at-risk students recognises that:

> the mainstream curriculum is hegemonic in the society at large in the sense that it is part of the cultural and practical underpinnings of the ascendancy of particular social groups - capitalists and professionals, men, Anglos. (Connell, 1993, 38)

While benefiting all students, this view specifically seeks to privilege the standpoint of the least-advantaged through their participation, critique and a focus on diversity, because 'in general the position of those who carry the burdens of social inequality is a better starting-point for understanding the totality of the social world than is the position of those who enjoy its advantages' (Connell, 1993, 43). This view assumes that schools have the power:

> to make a positive difference to pupil behaviour, a willingness to listen and to learn from the perspectives of others - especially including the pupils themselves - and a commitment to taking whatever action possible to enhance the quality of pupil's engagement with all aspects of school life. (Cooper et al. 2000, 14)

A critically transformative standpoint presupposes a belief that all students have the capacity to become willing, active and positive participants in school. This view acknowledges that this capacity is rarely automatic, but has to be developed otherwise it 'remains dormant or sometimes masked by attitudes and behaviours which actively deny the existence of the students' power to engage and learn' (Cooper et al., 2000, 14).

While the diversity of attributes of the early school leaver become 'a cliché of the literature, there is no dominant typification of an early school leaver' (Strategic Partners, 2001b, 15). Furthermore, Thomson (2002) and Mortimore et al. (1999) warn about the dangers of a public discourse that labels schools as welfare, disadvantaged and at-risk specialists. Teese et al. (2003) have described the social geography of disadvantage, which Thomson (2003) has described as 'rustbelt schools'. However Connell (1993) critiques what he terms a *false geography* of poverty (Connell, 1993, 23-24) that holds that educational inequality is a problem of the disadvantaged or poor minority who are culturally different from the majority. He rejects the:

> remarkable amount of research [that] still goes looking for evidence of the psychological, altitudinal or cultural distinctiveness of poor children. With little success. The bulk of the evidence actually demonstrates the cultural similarity between the poorest groups and the less poor. (Connell, 1993, 23)

Connell (1993) also critiques the instrumentalist neo-conservative approach to school reform via national testing and the implication of the social constructivist or liberal *effective schools* movement, that all that is needed is to find the right educational fix. The end result of both approaches, he concludes, is:

> A false geography of disadvantage [read risk] that locates the problem in the heads of the poor or the errors of the specific schools serving them [where] the virtues of the educational mainstream are taken for granted. (Connell, 1993, 24)

A critical transformative view locates students' disadvantages or risks in the conventional subject-matter and texts, the traditional teaching methods and assessment, which turn out to be the sources of systemic difficulty. Connell (1993) and Luke at al. (2003) argue that to improve the educational outcomes of these students, schools and teachers requires a paradigmatic shift in curriculum and pedagogy.

The fact that certain groups in Australia seem more likely to be at-risk than others does not come as any surprise. Students from lower socio-economic status families, single parent families, remote or indigenous youth, youth with little or no family history of further study or even completion of 12 years of schooling are factors frequently nominated as causing or associated with risk (Luke et al., 2003; Mortimore & Mortimore, 1999). Ball and Lamb (2001) also found that a determinant of being at-risk was attendance at a government school. Given the breadth of these factors, almost all students are potentially at-risk, but significantly, some are not.

**A new empowered role for teachers**

Student failure has been identified not in relation to the individual student's performance, but in terms of what the school is or is not doing (Strategic Partners, 2001b). There is a need then to address the three message systems of education (Bernstein, 1971) - the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment needs of all students, not just the marginalised minority if outcomes for students are to be improved.

Eldridge (2001a; 2001b and Keys Young (2000) divide the factors facing at-risk students into two very different types: social, cultural and community factors and educational factors. Withers and Batten's review of 10 years of at-risk literature suggests that what the teacher and school does to enhance and maintain the engagement and the involvement of students is more important than an individual student focus. Lingard (2001a) indicates that teachers indeed can tip the balance especially for marginalised students, to which Hattie adds that 'excellence in teaching is the single most powerful influence on achievement' (Hattie, 2003, 4). The Department of Education and Training (Victoria) (SOFweb, 2003) also acknowledges that 'the most powerful lever for reform is the transforming of teachers' practice'. The OECD review (Lowe & Holt, 1998, 13) of the literature suggests that 'school factors account for some 25 percent of the variance in student performance' while Hattie (2003, 2) claims that teachers alone contribute 30 percent towards student achievement stressing that 'it is what teachers know, do, and care about which is very powerful in this learning equation. As Hattie shows in the diagram below (see Figure 1), teachers together with schools make up more than 40 percent of a difference in student achievement, while home background contributes less than 10 percent. Rejecting the social constructivist position, Hattie emphatically states that:

> Schools barely make a difference to achievement. The discussion on the attributes of schools – the finances, the school size, the class size, the buildings are important as they must be there in some form for a school to exist, but that is about it. (Hattie, 2003, 2)
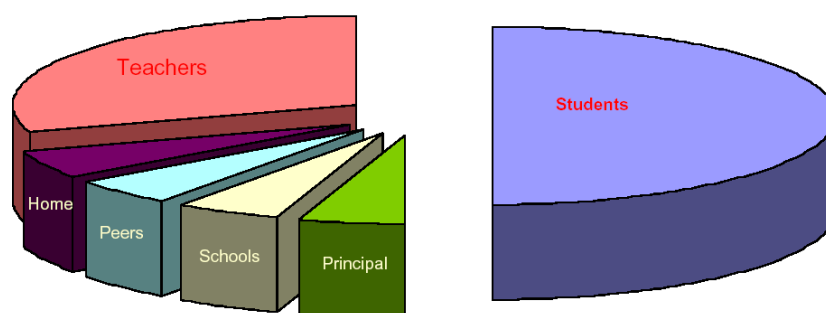
**Figure 1 Factors contributing to student achievement (Hattie, 2003, 3)**

From recent research related to educational effectiveness (Darling-Hammond, 1996; 2000; Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2004; Rowe, 2003; Rowe, 2004a), much has been and continues to be learnt about key factors affecting students' general academic achievements, attitudes, behaviours and experiences of schooling. Whereas instrumentalist and social constructivist research suggests that outcomes are influenced by students' home background and individual characteristics:

> *the magnitude of these effects pale into insignificance* compared *with class/teacher effects.* That is, the *quality of teaching and learning provision* are by far the most salient influences on students' cognitive, affective, and behavioural outcomes of schooling, *regardless of … students' backgrounds.* (Rowe, 2004b, 4 original emphasis)

The overwhelming evidence is that 'good' teachers can have positive impacts on students' experiences and outcomes of schooling, and 'poor' teachers can have deleterious effects. Darling-Hammond (2000) summarises extant research findings for the effects of teacher quality on student outcomes as follows:

> The effect of poor quality teaching on student outcomes is debilitating and cumulative. … The effects of quality teaching on educational outcomes are greater than those that arise from students' backgrounds. … A reliance on curriculum standards and statewide assessment strategies without paying due attention to teacher quality appears to be insufficient to gain the improvements in student outcomes sought. (Darling-Hammond, 2000, online no pages)

Programs for at-risk students which are either instrumentalist or social constructivist can be characterised as advocating structural changes for systemic, standards-based reform (including curriculum deconstruction and reconstruction) that 'have a long and not-so distinguished history of rarely penetrating the classroom door' (Rowe, 2003, 16). This is consistent with the adoption of corporate management models in educational governance and a climate of outcomes-driven economic rationalism where such models operate and where together with issues of accountability, assessment monitoring, performance indicators, quality assurance and school effectiveness, are widespread (Rowe, 2003). While paying some attention to issues of social equity and the influence of the school relative to that of 'sociologically-determined' (Rowe, 2003) background characteristics of students, these standpoints doubt the capacity of teachers to make a difference relative to the influence of the socio-cultural and economic capital of home background. During the past 40 years, influential studies such as those reported by Coleman et al. (1966) and Jencks et al. (1972) in the USA, and Bernstein (1971), Peaker (1967) and Plowden (1967) in Britain, 'provided evidence that schools and teachers are not effective in enhancing achievement' (Hattie, 1992, 9) and that schools have little impact on students' outcomes. For example, after estimating that only nine percent of the variance in student achievement measures was due to school effects, Coleman et al. (1966) came to the conclusion that '...schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context' (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson et al., 1966, 325). These deficit and compensatory

studies and the policies and programs based on them, reflected the dominant social and political discourses that ethnic and family socio-economic (SES) background factors constituted the prevailing determinants of students' educational outcomes. However, a growing number of researchers have been critical of these findings and have since provided contrary evidence to the earlier claims that relative to home background influences, the effects of schooling are negligible (Rowe, 2003; 2004a).

Work with youth by Brown et al. (2001) suggests that the relationship between young people and teachers is of paramount importance. To build such positive relationships between students and teachers requires goodwill and commitment from both parties, but also structural support that facilitates and encourages the time and opportunity for engagement and relationship building. Brown et al. (2001, 126) highlight 'substantial pressures and barriers within schools that act to restrict or prevent the development of such relationships'. In particular, these pressures can be found in the practices and institutions that serve to informally exclude students at-risk from school (Angwin et al., 2001).

A critical transformative understanding rejects instrumentalist and social constructivist proposals to fix education systems by "bits and pieces" as these 'will not deliver long term sustainable change' (Luke et al., 2003; Strategic Partners, 2001b, 26). Teachers indeed can 'tip the balance' (Hattie, 1992; Hattie, 2003), especially for marginalised students with a new approach and conception of pedagogy (Lingard et al., 2001a). Change will require not only the:

> proliferation of new practices of student support, but also whole of school change will have to be backed up and mandated by systemic guidelines, policies and appropriate resource allocations. (Strategic Partners, 2001b, 26)

**Conclusion**

The social constructivist and critically transformative literature reviewed (Apte, 2001; Brown et al., 2001; Cumming, 1996; Cumming, 1997; Dwyer, 1966; Dwyer et al., 1998; Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Fullan, 1992; Luke et al., 2003; Mortimore & Mortimore, 1999; OECD, 1998; 1999), makes it clear that schools in the past have been largely responsible for the weak connections between students and their communities, as a result of inflexible curriculum pathways, lack of relevance of teaching and learning programs, inadequate skills of teachers, and the inability of students to participate in school life. Mortimore and Mortimore (1999) conclude that these risk factors do not operate exclusively and that the:

> effects of socio-economic disadvantage are cumulative [so that] individual, familial and societal factors interact in multiplicative ways. The actual impact of a bad school on a particular student's education will depend mostly on the resilience of the individual and on his or her willingness to continue learning. But the potential impact – in conjunction with the other factors – is daunting. Added to this is the effect of those national school systems that place more students at-risk of failure. For the most disadvantaged, each new factor adds considerably to the problems faced by those least able to compete – with any possibility of success – and so increases the probability of their failure. (Mortimore & Mortimore, 1999, 110)

Similarly, Budge (2000, 29) adds that 'dropping out is the culmination of a process of disengagement that often begins in the [youngest] class'. In order to improve the outcomes of all, but in particular at-risk youth, school curriculum must be relevant, negotiated, integrated and connected, linking to personal and social concerns, emphasising self direction and constructive learning that include purpose, empowerment, rigour and success (Barratt et al., 1998; Cumming, 1996).

A critical transformative view suggests a 'fundamental shift in thinking about the purpose and value of education, and how the educational system should fit into the rest of society' (Strategic

Partners, 2001b, 26). Cooper et al., (2000, 14) while not denying the importance of the wider social and political factors, conclude it 'remains possible for teachers … to take positive action' and resist the pressures that lead to increased student risk.

The QSRLS research (Lingard et al., 2001a) rejects a deficit and blame-the-victim approach, while pointing specifically to school related issues of organisation, curriculum and school climate as important factors, most significantly for at-risk students is pedagogy, what the teacher does. Mortimore et al., (1999) add that students at-risk need more help than schools and individual teachers can offer or provide. Yet, in order for students at-risk to achieve even the national average outcome, they will have to:

> leapfrog over many of their more advantaged peers. It is a pious hope to assume that this can be achieved by the majority of at risk students in many countries' systems. This is not to be patronising about such students, but simply to recognise that they have to compete with their peers in what amounts to a schooling race in which they begin from way behind the starting line. (Mortimore & Mortimore, 1999, 132)

Gale and Densmore (2000, 112-113) come to a similar conclusion. Willis (2001) makes similar claims in relation to those most at-risk in Australia - Indigenous Australian students. Such deep seated problems require systemic change, however 'the ceding of privilege from the advantaged to disadvantaged' (Mortimore & Mortimore, 1999, 133) would be fraught with political problems and strident opposition to achieve this (Mortimore & Mortimore, 1999; Teese & Polesel, 2003).

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[i] The title of this paper comes from Noddings (1997), Pye (1988) and McCrae et al. (2000). Noddings (1997) argues against an ideology of control that forces all students to study a particular, narrowly prescribed curriculum devoid of content they might really care about where 'the reality of the classroom life in most schools [is] the press of teaching, getting through the curriculum, even if the students are being left behind (or left numb and unengaged) as the curriculum marches on, page by page and day by day' (1997, 44). Pye (1988) maintains that students are often forgotten abandoned invisible or lost in a no-man's-land in classrooms, where they are disengaged emotionally and intellectually from the education process, passively excluded not necessarily as a result of conflict, but indifference or worse, benign collusion. Finally McCrae et al. (2000) ask in their research what has worked (and will work again) for the most disadvantaged and most marginalised at-risk group in Australia - Indigenous Australian students.