At Risk: A View of "Social Advantage"

The alienated and poor typically join the ranks of the underclass. To reap the benefits of "advantage" they need to learn to think rationally and anticipate the future.

The concern for at-risk children today reflects our nation's reawakening to the causes and consequences of poverty and alienation within a "modern" society. As a society we aspire to become economically and intellectually competitive, and technologically and scientifically developed. As individuals we emphasize personal commitment and initiative—while heralding the virtues of competition, equal opportunity, and achieved status. Yet alienation undermines the modern workplace, and it is the modern workplace that lubricates both the wheels and drive shafts of a modern society. Thus, the at-risk student, already alienated and poor, enters the workplace and falls easily into America's social and economic underclass.

For many, it has become fashionable to identify at-risk children in terms of poverty, alcohol and drug consumption, sexual activity, school attendance, educational failure, and race and ethnicity. Depending on one's social or institutional role, the causes of the condition include the breakdown of the family, the unwillingness or inability of government and schools to meet their responsibilities toward children; the permissiveness of society's value system; or the absence of values in the nation's homes or schools. While others may focus explicitly or implicitly on in-school variables, such as discipline, alienation, curriculum (both hidden and overt), skills and knowledge, technological literacy, or math and science competencies, the starting point for all researchers/observers begins with the question: "At risk" of becoming what? A dropout? An addict? Sexually active? A teenage parent? Illiterate? Dependent? Economically marginal? Uncompetitive?

A Domestic Third World

Many "at-risk" students would have been identified as "disadvantaged" or "minority" during the 1960s. Due to racial and ethnic sensitivity, as well as a recognition that alienation transcends socioeconomic status, today we refer to these youngsters differently. We say that they are uncommitted to deferred gratification and to school training that correlates with competition and its reward, achieved status. Thus, we perceive them as being at risk of becoming unproductive, underdeveloped, and noncompetitive—of becoming a domestic "Third World." Concomitantly, they place society at risk of becoming a Third World inhabited by individuals who are dependent, underdeveloped, uncompetitive, and unreactive to market forces.

A New Definition

The current concerns for at-risk youth differ significantly in kind and intensity from those of the 1960s. Like the "socially disadvantaged" youth of the '60s, today's at-risk youngster faces the political issues of distributive justice, including access to knowledge and literacy skills. While the civil strife of the 1960s forced us to attend to issues of caste relationships, today the focus is on the intellectual and socioeconomic well-being of our entire society. That is, can our nation compete in the international marketplace? If not, how can we restore competitiveness? Whereas the symbol of the '60s was one of explosive and immediate national self-destruction, the image of the '80s is one of decay and terminal malignancy. "Social dynamite" has given way to the "rising tide of mediocrity."
Hidden within the agenda to rebuild America is a definition of social advantage/disadvantage that is unique to a modern society and so taken-for-granted that it is often overlooked. What then is this new definition?

In 1978, Brigitte Berger wrote of “a new interpretation of the IQ controversy,” which is based on an individual’s internalization of modern consciousness.

Contrary to some critics, IQ tests do indeed measure something. But what they measure is neither “intelligence,” as orthodox proponents of the tests continue to claim, nor some putative racist or cultural bias in the tests themselves, as the critics of the orthodox view claim. Rather, IQ tests measure certain specific structures of “modern consciousness” — a cast of mind not equally shared by all who live in our modern world.

For Berger, modern consciousness is composed of four primary ingredients: (1) abstraction (rooted in the scientific rationalism of science, technology, and economics); (2) componentiality (analysis and synthesis, “the technological mentality”); (3) multirelationality (“ability to keep a large number of relationships in mind simultaneously”); and (4) future orientation (long-term planning; emphasis on becoming rather than being). Thus, modern consciousness is a form of cognition and consciousness rewarded in the technological and bureaucratic societies we identify as “first world.” It is rooted in the interaction of secularization, demystification, and scientific/technological rationalism.

As a society modernizes, it gains technological and scientific benefits, productive efficiency (including marketing and distributive expertise), and a relatively higher standard of living than that of a traditional economy. In addition, modernization requires a change in mind-set. To be modern one must think in terms of limited resources, efficiency, maximization, trade-offs, and synchronization with other people and institutions. Further, the modern mind-set requires that individuals and groups create, develop, and maintain their own social networks, which will support and advance their careers and nurture and develop themselves and their significant others. A modern mind-set is framed by competition, achieved status, demystification of all social and institutional relationships, and by the knowledge and experience needed to conduct decision making.

**Contemporary Social Advantage**

The symbolic sculpture of modern society is not the machine, or the soup can, or the image of Charlie Chaplin interacting with the machine at various stages of technological development. Rather, the preeminent sculpture of modern society is “The Thinker.” Rodin sculpts the decision maker, faced with multiple choices and options, each with multiple consequences, some predictable and others unknown.

In this environment, the advantaged individual is the one who can make rational decisions that minimize both risk and randomness. The advantaged person can maintain control amid uncertainty because he or she can discriminate between the variables that are controllable and those that are not. Thus, social advantages go to individuals who focus on “becoming” rather than “being,” on future possibilities rather than the status quo.

Contemporary social advantage and social competency are not measured in relation to machinery but in relation to the creation, use, and evaluation of ideas. Thus, social advantage and cultural enrichment involve a conception of literacy as the power (competency) to influence and mediate individuals and institutions, the competency to create and evaluate a life plan.

**A New Policy Agenda**

Schools and school systems must address the issue of at-risk students from perspectives that move beyond, and yet continue to include, in-school and SES variables. That is, we must reexamine the original value structure of schools to ascertain whether that structure is still valid for today’s schools. Given that the at-risk label reflects the dysfunctions of both the
larger society and the school, those responsible for curriculum design and implementation must temper their concern for in-school variables with a review of the literature on social stratification. That review will reveal significant out-of-school variables that correlate social stratification with language acquisition, thinking skills, literacy, school achievement, and modern consciousness. At that point American education will have the balanced perspective necessary for creating school environments that enhance the achievement levels of at-risk students.

American society needs a policy agenda that legitimizes the school as a mediating structure for those who are powerless to develop their own potential. No “one best system” can meet the needs of all constituent groups served by the school community. Curriculum leaders must recognize the social diversity and the social fragility of their charges if schools are not merely to function as the mechanism that reproduces both social advantage and social disadvantage. When school policy moves in this direction, the number of students now identified as at risk will diminish.


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