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The Social Construction
of Children and
Families "at Risk":
An Introduction

The pervasiveness of the construct "children and families at risk" hardly needs an introduction. Since 1989, over 2,500 articles and conference papers have focused on this topic, and a growing number of state and national reports continue to address the "at risk" theme. Countless task forces and school district and state committees have made recommendations for addressing this "crisis" in American education and have received widespread media attention (Swadener, 1990). Partly in response to the implementation of Public Law 99/457, which mandates states to serve preschool-age children with developmental disabilities or "at risk" status, many states have begun programs for "at risk" children. The term "at risk" has thus become a buzzword much like "diversity," "choice," or "privatization," and, like these terms, the assumptions that underlie its usage have gone largely unexamined.

2 Introduction

This book suggests that the term obfuscates as much as it informs and advocates both a deconstruction of this construct and a reconceptualization of how families are viewed. Instead of seeing children and families as "at risk," *all* children and families might be viewed as "at promise."

Currently, one of the most striking images of "children and families at risk" is that of families of low income. This volume offers an analysis and interrogation of the rhetoric of risk as it relates to the persistent social stratification in U.S. society and the ways in which it uses a medical *language of pathology* to label persons based on their race, first language, class, family structure, geographic location, and gender as "at risk for failure" (Swadener, 1990). Historically, the language of maladjustment evolved to a discourse of cultural deprivation, with families labeled as pathological, broken, non-intact and dysfunctional; "from the pauper child as potential criminal to the at-risk student delinquent" (Polakow, 1993, p. 103).

This deficit model discourse typically gets framed as private and personal, often taking the form of blaming the victim—particularly in a nation whose dominant culture perpetuates the myth of meritocracy (McIntosh, 1988, 1992), in which all privileges are assumed to be earned or deserved, a nation which systematically denies or attempts to ignore the pervasive exclusionary and oppressive practices in society. This, in turn, reflects the much-noted popular ideology of private, competitive individualism, as reflected in child and family policy in the United States. Strikingly absent from discussions of risk factors and poverty is an interrogation of privilege and the possibility that a more equitable distribution of materials, resources, education, power, and self-sufficiency may put the stark discrepancies of privilege at risk. Valerie Polakow (1993) has recently discussed how underlying the public discourse of a nation at risk, children at risk, and families at risk is the corollary, *privilege at risk*. It is also interesting to note the tacit assumptions which many children of privilege receive and internalize concerning both their right to such privileges and the limitations of those who do not enjoy their standard of living and quality of schools (Arnold & Swadener, 1993).

How have pervasive images of "the underclass" and assumptions about children and families "at risk" become "deeply entrenched common sense" (Reed, 1992) in the United States? The racism and sexism inherent in much of the current popular discourse on "the urban underclass" or the "culture of poverty" is

evident. Reed (1992), Fine (1990, 1993), and others have attributed the popularity of such concepts to the shift to the right during the late 1970s and 1980s in terms of policies and public debate about social welfare and education policy. Reed (1992) asserts that right-wing beliefs about poverty have pervaded the discourse and policies of even "self-consciously liberal friends of the poor," who have come to "assume the need to correct, or at least take into account, poor people's defective tendencies as an essential limit on social policy" (p. 22). This strong attribution of behavioral characteristics, personal (versus income) deficiencies, and marginal or even "deviant" lifestyles to those living in poverty is another persistent theme. Mead (1986), for example, suggests that "unstable family life marked by absent fathers, erratic parents, and low self-esteem and aspiration" (p. 22) can be used to identify underclass families.

There is a long history of such "othering" and of class stratification which operates painfully in the lives of poor children and parents in the United States (Swadener, 1993). Unlike many nations which have made a strong commitment to families and have viewed children as a public responsibility and resource, U.S. government policies do not yet consider the care and welfare of children a basic social right (Lubeck, 1991, p. 236). As Polakow (1993) states:

Still, in the late twentieth century, it is the poor who have only themselves to blame. The Pygmalion predictions persist, implicating poor young children as the "dangerous classes." Early education becomes another form of cost-effective crime prevention. . . . But a different question hovers about this instrumental discourse—Do poor children's lives matter? . . . are poor children cheap? (p. 102)

A basic premise of this book is that the generalized use of the "at risk" label is highly problematic and implicitly racist, classist, sexist, and ableist, a 1990s version of the cultural deficit model which locates problems or "pathologies" in individuals, families, and communities rather than in institutional structures that create and maintain inequality (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990). The critique of this pervasive construct has been relatively limited, particularly as it applies to young children and their families (Castell, 1991; Fine, 1990; Ford & Harris, 1990; Lubeck & Garrett, 1990; Polakow,

4 Introduction

1992, 1993; Popkewitz, in press; Soto, 1992; Swadener, 1990; Swadener & Niles, 1991). Thus, this edited volume has two foci:

1. to deconstruct the "at risk" label through an analysis of historical and contextual issues, and discussions of contemporary critiques and to include voices and perspectives which have been largely absent from the discussion, and
2. to suggest that we begin to utilize the construct "children and families at promise" to convey the potential *all* children hold (Ford & Harris, 1991; Shaklee & Biedler, 1992; Swadener & Niles, 1991; Arnold & Swadener, 1993).

The chapters in this book move from historical, demographic, and critical analyses of the literature and popular perceptions of "children and families at risk" to success stories, drawn from multiple cultures in the United States, and collaboratively written chapters describing partnerships and initiatives between teachers and students and between families and schools. The voices in the chapters comprising this book move the discourse of children "at risk" from a discussion of "them" or "the other" to a discussion of "us" and "our children" and offer a number of recommendations for policy, research, pedagogy, teacher preparation, and parent and community empowerment.

Our intent is that this volume provide a needed interrogation of the ways in which poor and racial and ethnic "minority" children and families are perceived within American society. Chapter authors share a concern about issues of race, class, gender, linguistic diversity, and developmental differences. Chapters draw from critical theory, feminist theory, life history and teacher-as-researcher studies, and other perspectives that both illuminate and begin to reconstruct several dimensions of the "at risk" rhetoric and assumptions. Contributors include a parent fighting for full inclusion for her son who has cerebral palsy; life history interviews with African American mothers; academically successful Native American students; the powerful poetry of young Latino, Southeast Asian and African American writers; and the voices of Hmong, Latino, and African American children and families and the teachers who work with them.

Throughout this volume, we will raise questions, many of which a growing number of parents, educators, researchers, and child advocates have been discussing for the past several years:

1. Who is at risk?
2. At risk for what?
3. Who defines risk? How have the criteria for or definitions of risk changed?
4. What is the “etiology” of this term and its related discourse? How is this discourse one of instrumental crisis, pathology, and blame? Is “at risk” merely a cultural deprivation/deficit model retooled for the 90s? In what ways is it socially constructed and to what ends?
5. What myths and folklore have been generated about risk and risk factors? In what ways is our “common sense” about children and families “at risk” racist, classist, sexist, ableist, and paternalistic?
6. How can the discourse transcend mere stereotypes and debates of semantics and contribute to real gains for children who are poor and children of color?
7. How are those of us who engage in child advocacy, work with families, grant writing, or related policy research reinforcing it? Who are the stakeholders in the use of the “at risk” label, and what roles do each of us play—personally and professionally—in maintaining its use and abuse?
8. In what ways is the discourse of risk essentialist, reductionistic, and dogmatic? What are some of the complexities and contradictions in the dominant discourse of risk—and what are their costs to children?
9. How might “success stories,” culturally sensitive and inclusive pedagogy, family literacy, and community empowerment interrupt the hegemony of the risk rhetoric and ideology—and get needed programs funded and oppressive policies and practices changed?
10. How are people to whom this label is applied resisting, questioning, or contradicting it? How can those who exist at the margins of power gain more power and more control of their discourses and practices?

Finally, we are curious about what interest the powerful have in correcting the problems described in much of the pervasive literature of risk—the apartheid of U.S. public schools as described by Kozol (1991), life in the “projects” as described by Kotlowitz (1991), and other “texts of despair,” as Michelle Fine describes them (1993). How are the economically privileged and powerful affected, directly and indirectly, by the “savage inequalities”

described by Kozol and others (Arnold & Swadener, 1993)? Our questions are underscored by the following issues raised by Adolph Reed Jr. in an article entitled "The Underclass as Myth and Symbol: The Poverty of Discourse About Poverty" (1992).

In recent years the image of an urban "underclass" has become the central representation of poverty in American society. It has come also to shape much of public discussion—both academic and popular—and policymakers' agendas concerning racial democratization, cities, and social welfare. In less than a decade the notion has taken hold of the public imagination and has gone, across the ideological spectrum, from novel, sensational expression to deeply entrenched common sense. But what does it all mean? What is so compelling about the underclass image? What is its significance in American political life? And, finally, how should we talk, instead, about those who are stigmatized as the "underclass"? (p. 21)

Similar to the questions being asked by feminists and post-modernists (e.g., Ellsworth, 1989; Greene, 1986; Lather, 1991; Polakow, 1993), many of the contributors to this volume would join us in asking the questions, "How can educators and parents gain control of their discourses and practices, instead of being controlled by them?" and "How can we better listen to, rather than always talk about or speak for, those who are at the margins of the culture of power?" (Arnold & Swadener, 1993). Thus, we have tried, in this collection of essays and research reports, to promote inclusion and to avoid some of the problems of researcher as "ventriloquist" (Fine & Weis, 1993), speaking for the "other" in a discourse of risk, rather than from a perspective of promise.

We share with Cameron McCarthy (1993) a concern about the various forms of essentialism, reductionism, and dogmatism found in much of the discourse about children and families "at risk." This discourse tends to reduce the complexities and contradictions of children's lives. Though the prevailing literature does not typically attribute a single cause for children "at risk," explicit, in fact ever-expanding, categories which generalize across individual situations and complex dynamics are employed in the identification of such children.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book is organized into three sections. The first section provides historical, political, and theoretical contexts for deconstructing the discourse on children and families "at risk." In the first chapter, Beth Blue Swadener provides an "etiology" of the terminology and social constructions of risk, analyzing the many disciplines and theories which have contributed to the construct "at risk." A systematic deconstruction of this term is presented, including an analysis of ways in which several disciplines (e.g., child welfare, medicine, early education/special education, and sociology) have formulated models of risk and an analysis of the implicit deficit model in these discourses. The metaphor "children and families at promise" is further developed, and questions raised in the introduction are used to engage a number of "what if?" questions and to explore directions for addressing these problems.

In chapter 2, Sally Lubeck maintains that it is mothers who are at risk, because increasing numbers are in extreme economic and social circumstances that make it unlikely that they will be able to care for children in ways mythologized to be normal and optimal. The chapter has four sections. The first and second examine and critique how women are blamed, overtly and covertly, for children's "at risk" status and detail how risk status is defined. The third explores how national statistics have been used in interpretive contexts—conservative and progressive/liberal—which define the nature of problems and their likely resolution in very different ways. The final section argues that much political rhetoric continues to translate social and economic inequity into tales of individual recalcitrance and deficiency. Thus, women come to be implicated in the reproduction not just of children, but of poverty itself.

In her chapter on "The Politics of Who's at Risk," Michelle Fine peels through the layers of debate that give ideological shape to the current "dropout problem." She analyzes ways in which the language of risk pervades our daily consciousness, educational practices, and bureaucratic policy-making. Fine contends that we have all been quick to name, identify, and ossify those who presumably suffer at the mercy of "risk factors," satisfying the desire both of the Right to isolate such people and the Left to display them. This chapter waves a reminder: The cultural construction of a group defined through a discourse of "risk" represents a "shaved

and partial image." It is an image that typically strengthens those institutions and groups which have denied connection to and then promised to "save" those who will undoubtedly remain "at risk." Most fundamentally, "the rhetoric of risk keeps us from being broadly, radically, and structurally creative about transforming schools and social conditions for today's and tomorrow's youth."

It strikes us as particularly ironic that the voices typically most absent from, or at best at the margins of, the discourse of risk are those that have been assigned the label of children and families "at risk." Just as narratives, success stories, and other forms of "heteroglossia" (Bakhtin, 1981) or multiple discourses and voices are increasingly evident in educational theory, research, and related disciplines (e.g., Carter, 1993; Paley, 1990; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992; Soto, 1992; Weis & Fine, 1993; Witherell & Noddings, 1991), we feel such stories and their critical framing are necessary to a deconstruction of risk. We share with Jameson (1984), however, the view that all narratives must generate an "imaginary resolution of real contradictions" (Levi-Strauss, quoted in Jameson, 1984). We do not seek to create another "master narrative" but to engage a dialogue which includes perspectives of those whose narratives have been absent in much of the "masterscript" on risk.

The second section of the book is a collection of "success stories," beginning with two chapters that look at issues of empowerment, family literacy, resistance, and resilience in children and families of color and in poor families. In "Voice Unaltered: Marginalized Young Writers Speak," Elizabeth Quintero and Mary Kay Rummel analyze the writing of young girls and children from culturally and linguistically diverse families, using a methodology that combines reflections of unique detail and metaphor as strong indication of voice. The voices in this chapter—primarily Latino, African American, and Southeast Asian kindergarten and primary students who had participated in family literacy projects—provide dramatic evidence of voice in children before this voice has been "socialized away." The authors contend that this evidence supports a classroom context that encourages and enhances voice "in a generative transformative way," while, at the same time, helping to deconstruct the myth that children are "at risk" by virtue of their racial or ethnic status.

In chapter 5, Donelda Cook and Michelle Fine analyze ways in which low-income African American families are being blamed for the nation's social problems, while the dominant discourse fails to acknowledge political, social, and economic conditions and

the abandonment of urban communities. In order to reframe the conversation about urban families "at risk," they utilize narratives drawn from interviews with twelve African American mothers who participated in a program designed to activate and involve parents.

Mary Smith Arnold, in chapter 6, furthers the discussion of family strengths and maternal struggles and stances in the African American community, emphasizing the long-standing tradition of commitment to education and literacy. Drawing on interview data from sixty low-income African American mothers in a large mid-western city regarding their attitudes concerning the education of preadolescent children, this chapter provides strong evidence that such families value educational success and are troubled by the current liberal use of the "at risk" label for children of color. This essay also clarifies many of the family strengths, as well as needed supports, of successful low-income families.

In chapter 7,Carolyn White presents a critical feminist interrogation of the cultural construction of the "at risk" student by focusing upon "contingencies of studenthood" experienced by academically successful Native American students and interrogates her position as a European American crossing borders. White draws from continuing research with former participants in Upward Bound, calling attention to students' perceptions of the consequences of their participation in this program. Eight of the narrators of this chapter are Navajo, three are Hopi, and one is European American. Together, the authors of this collaborative chapter seek political intervention against discourse that portrays families as failures and children "at risk" within professional and popular literatures.

The third and final section of the book focuses on specific case studies of successful home-school partnerships, "at promise" classrooms, full inclusion initiatives, and other collaborations. It raises further issues drawing from "insider" perspectives on the construction and interruption of "risk." Theoretical frameworks for better reconstructing children, families, and programs "at promise" are explored primarily through personal and collaborative narratives from settings across the United States.

In their chapter, Robert Tabachnick and Marianne Bloch discuss related themes and lessons from a three-year qualitative study of home-school relations in two desegregated elementary schools, including the perspectives of Hmong, Latino, and African American families and their children's teachers. Going beyond a cultural

continuity/discontinuity model, this chapter raises a number of methodological issues and argues in support of viewing such families as at promise, rather than at risk for failure, in the schools studied. Some of the challenges and dilemmas of encouraging teachers to hold such a view of children and families are also discussed.

Continuing the focus on the importance of strengthening home-school relations and understandings in culturally pluralistic classrooms, Mary Hauser and Cynthia Thompson explore the concept of risk at the level of the classroom by providing an example of a classroom culture in which students are "at promise." This chapter draws from a three-year collaborative ethnography conducted by an exemplary educator and a university researcher. According to any checklist, all of Thompson's students would be considered "at risk." None of her students were native English speakers, all qualified for Chapter 1 services, all families received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and all belonged to cultural groups that many consider to compare "unfavorably" to the mainstream. Yet, her students demonstrate behaviors that do not allow the observer to be aware of conditions of risk.

In chapter 10, Joyce Waldoch, an elementary special educator, describes a project that merged a special education class with an "at risk" regular education class. The program built on students' strengths, required no extra funding, and was created within the existing school structure. A portion of the school day was restructured to provide unmotivated learners with a variety of teaching styles/learning opportunities, hands-on activities, and opportunities to develop more positive views of themselves in relation to their peers. Through the voice of a confident "teacher reformer," this chapter encourages so-called "students at risk" to become active learners and confident risk-takers in the school environment.

The final chapter provides a narrative account of a mother's experiences in advocating for and attempting to maintain a regular education classroom placement for her son, Aric, who has cerebral palsy and is labeled "multiply handicapped." This chapter is coauthored by a researcher, friend, and ally who interviews Tina Murray about her many challenges, disappointments, and successes. The authors share the perspective that full inclusion is not restricted to the school setting but extends into other community settings as well. Murray and Lisa Leifield's dialogue regarding full inclusion provides a basis for their discussion of barriers, teacher

strategies for promoting full classroom membership, advocacy strategies utilized by this family, implications for teacher preparation, and the benefits of full inclusion in several community contexts.

The epilogue, written by Valerie Polakow, draws from her extensive work with single mothers of low income and their children, both of whom remain in the “shadows of democracy” (Polakow, 1992) and reside in the “other” America. In her critique of the “privatization of poverty” in western policy discourse, Polakow (1993, October) speaks plainly—“poor children are cheap; they matter instrumentally, not existentially” (p.1). She also demonstrates how the risk industry rests heavily on the poverty industry (Funicello, 1993) and further deconstructs the politics and priorities of savage distributions in the United States. A reconstruction of risk, which would effectively address poverty and redistribution, quickly yields the notion of “privilege at risk.”

In rendering the “at risk” metaphor problematic, this book interrogates the ways constructions of “the other” perpetuate the pervasive, often damaging, discourse of risk. In deconstructing risk, we honor the many storytellers whose work is included in this volume, both for their contradictions to common sense assumptions about children and families “at risk” and their vision of children and families “at promise.”

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12 *Introduction*

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