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Supporting At-Risk Learners: Introduction

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Abstract

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Cover Page Footnote

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Special Issue: Supporting At-Risk Learners

Introduction

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In the past decade, school districts and ministries and departments of education across Canada have placed increased focus on meeting the needs of youth in secondary schools who are “at risk” for experiencing negative outcomes (e.g., youth who struggle academically or socially, engage in risky behaviour, or disengage from or drop out of school). For example, Nova Scotia has developed the *Options and Opportunities* (O₂; see <http://www.ednet.ns.ca/O2/>) program, offering hands-on learning opportunities with a career focus for adolescents “who may not be fully engaged with their learning and with school.” Ontario has developed *Specialist High Skills Majors*, which “let students focus on a career path that matches their skills and interests” while completing the requirements for graduation (<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/morestudentsuccess/SHSM.asp>). Alberta has a strategy for *Success in School for Children and Youth in Care*, a cross-ministry initiative to meet the needs of “a particularly vulnerable group of young people who often have extraordinary needs due to their life circumstances” (<http://education.alberta.ca/admin/supportingstudent/collaboration/ppf.aspx>).

In its final report, the At-risk Working Group, which reported to the Ontario minister of education, described at-risk secondary students as performing significantly below the provincial standard, failing to meet curriculum expectations, and being disengaged from school (O'Connor, 2003, p. 5). Further, these youth are defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as “failing in school and unsuccessful in making the transition to work and adult life and as a consequence unable to make a full contribution to active society” (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 1995, p. 21). The findings of recent studies, in which researchers have listened to disengaged youth, suggest that for many students, school itself is a context of adversity (e.g., DeLuca et al., 2010; Hutchinson et al., 2010).

In this special issue, authors examine this topic, supporting at-risk learners, from many perspectives and report on recent research conducted across the country. Each of

these seven papers reports on a group of students who are at risk in school and whose challenges we must address. Each paper also focuses on what educators can do to intervene to create contexts that enable resilience for these youth. Qualitative and quantitative data are reported in this suite of studies along with conceptual papers all focusing on how we can intervene to enhance the education and the lives of at-risk youth. These studies, informed by theories of motivation, learning, and social cognition (e.g., Buzza, 2013; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Jutunen & Wettersten, 2006; Klassen, Perry, & Frenzel, 2012), acknowledge the complexity of the challenges facing educators who are working with at-risk youth in Canada and demonstrate the range of innovative approaches in use across the country to respond to individual needs.

Contributors to this issue are addressing questions concerning the following issues: (a) motivational issues that both contribute to and result from at-risk status; (b) mental health issues that may arise as students experience low achievement and disengagement and that may also cause students to experience poor achievement and disinterest in school; and (c) challenges associated with the transition from adolescence to adulthood, from school to work. In each cluster of studies, the experiences and perspectives of students are reported as well as the adult perspective, usually the point of view of teachers working with at-risk youth.

Motivational Issues

Three papers in this issue focus directly on motivation as it pertains to at-risk youth. Perry and her colleagues make the case that teachers who report high levels of motivation (i.e., efficacy, commitment, and engagement) are more resilient in highly challenging teaching contexts. They argue that such resilient, self-determining teachers are better able to positively influence self-determination in their students. They report the case of one teacher who thrives on the challenges inherent in teaching at-risk youth and demonstrate how this teacher's sense of autonomy, belonging, and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2002) support other aspects of his motivation (efficacy, engagement, and commitment; Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010) and well-being (adaptive responses to potentially stressful situations; Williams, 2003). Their study suggests that motivational frameworks, such as self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002), can enrich understandings about how some teachers thrive when teaching at-risk youth. Buzza and Dol also employ motivational frameworks; their purpose is to understand how teachers can help at-risk youth to set their own learning goals with the long-term aim of enhancing their capacity for self-determination. This classroom-based research involves a goal-setting intervention in which teachers taught students to write learning goals and then rated students on aspects of engagement, learning from mistakes, and effort in goal-setting. Students responded to a questionnaire about the value of writing goals and reported their motivational beliefs (interest in math, perceived value of school, and self-efficacy). The students improved in the quality of the goals they wrote for themselves although there were no differences over time in any of the other variables. Individual profiles show the unique patterns of change for six of the students, and the overall findings highlight the challenges that arise when at-risk youth have high rates of absenteeism. In his quantitative study of yet another aspect of motivation, Matheson focuses on efficacy for self-regulation; that is, the confidence students have in their ability to regulate their own

learning (Klassen, 2010). At-risk youth are rarely found in academic stream courses and tend to demonstrate low achievement no matter what stream they are in (DeLuca et al., 2010). Matheson's findings from one Ontario secondary school suggest that students most likely to be at risk have lower self-regulatory efficacy. Specifically, lower performing students have lower self-regulatory efficacy than those with higher grades, and those enrolled in the college stream have lower self-regulatory efficacy than their peers in the university stream. Because motivational and self-regulation variables are highly correlated with effort, persistence, and achievement, and often a root problem for at risk youth, Matheson's study, like the work of Perry and Buzza and their colleagues, suggests a need for further research on the motivation and self-regulation challenges of at-risk youth.

Mental Health and At-risk Youth

In the past few years, schools have recognized mental health difficulties to be one of the major issues they face (Brown, 2011; Hymel, Schonert-Reichl, & Miller, 2006). The evidence supporting a correlation of mental health difficulties with lowered academic achievement and school engagement is considerable (Meldrum, Venn, & Kucher, 2009). There is surprising consistency between the recently proposed mental health promotion and prevention approach Whitley and Gooderham (this issue) reviewed and the views of adolescents who have experienced trauma leading to mental health challenges (see Dods, this issue). Whitley and Gooderham's conceptual paper shows the importance of using a proactive, preventive approach to promote mental health and of using a whole-school approach (Wells, Barlow, & Stewart-Brown, 2003). Their review highlights the need for schools to emphasize social and emotional learning (SEL) as well as academic learning and to create positive environments that foster both kinds of learning, which help students to respond to stressful situations and traumatic events (Bear & Watkins, 2006). Their paper reminds us that these interventions for SEL are more effective when conducted by educators than when carried out by other professionals, and when they involve active learning by students (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Dods' paper presents the case studies of three adolescents who had experienced trauma and describes how traumatic stress affected their school experiences. These youth spoke of their need to feel a connection to their teachers, to feel that their teachers cared about them and were reaching out to them, even if the students were not able to respond to these initiatives at first. The students did not expect their teachers to act as therapists but, rather, to create accepting classrooms where everyone could feel safe. Essentially, the students in Dods' cases recommended teachers take the kind of approach Whitley and Gooderham described in their conceptual paper. Both papers highlight the importance of preparing teachers to assume this role of ensuring that all students, especially at-risk youth, feel supported and safe, so they can focus on learning—academic *and* social-emotional learning—and on participating in the classroom.

School-to-Work Transition for At-Risk Youth

Finally, two papers address the challenges that at-risk youth experience when trying to make the transition from school to work. Godden's paper focuses on the experiences of a teacher, while Taylor and her colleagues report on the experiences of at-risk youth.

Currently, about 75 million youth worldwide are unemployed (International Labour Office, 2013), and the experience of unemployment at this stage of life has been shown to have long-term effects on career expectations, career hope, and career accomplishments (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011). Teachers who attempt to help at-risk youth make successful transitions to the workforce must deal with the global phenomenon within their local context. Godden reports on one experienced career studies teacher's perceptions of the challenges her students faced living in a small, rural community experiencing very high unemployment. This teacher described her efforts to help her students understand the local context and to compete for the few available positions. On the other hand, Taylor and her colleagues listened to and reported on the experiences and perceptions of seven at-risk youth from four schools in a large urban area who felt that work experience in a co-operative education program had "changed" their lives. They described changes in outlook and in expectations of themselves consistent with what has been described in the literature as *work hope* (Juntunen & Wettersten, 2006). They attributed much of their new-found optimism to the support they received from their co-op education teachers and workplace employers—who were flexible and understanding—as well as to opportunities to learn by doing rather than by reading and listening. They were setting goals, viewing themselves as agents in reaching these goals, and actively looking for pathways to attain their goals. These studies, both part of ongoing programs of research, highlight the critical role that adults, especially teachers, can play in helping at-risk youth to meet the challenges of school-to-work transition.

Closing Comments

These seven papers, when taken together, provide reason for optimism about the many innovative ways in which educational psychology is being applied across Canada to support at-risk learners. We see here fresh starting points for re-engaging young people who are not thriving in traditional secondary classrooms. Whether they begin with a focus on motivation, mental health, or school-to-work transition, these researchers provide insights and data to guide policy makers and practitioners committed to meeting the needs of these youth. This issue offers seven papers that challenge us to shift the focus away from what *these learners are not doing* and onto what *we can do* to make schools better contexts for disenfranchised youth in Canada.

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