Students at Risk:
Policy, Practices and Perceptions.

Do they make a difference?

by

Norma Elizabeth Smith

This Dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements of the Master of Education
The University of Western Australia
Graduate School of Education June 2001
DECLARATION

In accordance with the regulations for presenting theses and other works for higher degrees, I declare that this dissertation is my own work and that it has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree in any other university.

Norma E. Smith
ABSTRACT

The study investigates the perceptions that teachers in WA Government Schools have of the phrase “student at risk”. It examines how those perceptions have changed with the introduction of the Students at Educational Risk policy, which also introduced a formal definition of a student at educational risk.

Data were collected in three ways. Firstly, a Stimulus Sheet was distributed to two primary and two secondary government schools in country and metropolitan Western Australia. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine teachers and educators in schools and in the Central Office of the Education Department of WA. Finally, four case studies from the researcher's own experience are described that demonstrate aspects of the research.

The data collected indicates that teachers have different perceptions of 'at riskness' that may be related to their positions, and whether they are working in the primary or secondary sector. The definitions may also be influenced by different theoretical models that underpin them, that is whether an epidemiological, social-constructivist or ecological model of 'at riskness' is being used.

All participants itemised factors that, in their view, are implicated in the at risk status of the student. These factors can be classified in a number of ways ranging from personal through to educational. The responses also indicate that identification, in particular early identification, and program implementation are seen as crucial.

The propositions that have been generated from the data lead this researcher to believe that the introduction by the Education Department of Western Australia of the strategy, Making the Difference has had little impact on classroom teachers' perceptions of 'at-riskness' at the present time. It is also apparent that government policy, which has devolved the responsibility for developing
strategies and programs to address the needs of students at risk to individual schools, may currently be disadvantaging particular groups of 'at-risk' students.

As the concept of group outcomes is superseded by that of individual outcomes there is also a danger that groups of students once identified as being 'at risk' will no longer have their needs addressed by the current policy, and that by not having adequate procedures in place to identify them, schools will not be able to respond to their needs proactively.

It is also apparent that although interactive models of 'at riskness' take into account all areas of a student's life that may impact on their education, at a school level it is difficult for a teacher to address issues that originate from situations occurring outside of the school or classroom. There are also factors within the education system itself that teachers believe may affect a student's academic progress. To affect change in this area will require a considerable change of emphasis and direction by educators and administrators.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks must first go to all the teachers and educators who participated in the various stages of the data collection; in particular to the people I interviewed who gave of their time so willingly. If nothing else the comments made by the participants throughout this study demonstrate the high level of care and commitment that teachers show towards their students.

Secondly my sincere thanks to my friends and colleagues who encouraged me and gave me the confidence to continue and in particular to Julie Tombs, who kept me motivated throughout. My thanks also to my daughter Lea for her unwavering belief that I could do it.

Finally, my sincere appreciation to Dr Penny Lee for her expertise and advice in the preparation of this dissertation.

Norma E Smith
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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ADD  Attention Deficit Disorder
DC     Developmental Continuum
DEET  Department of Employment, Education, and Training
DETYA Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs
EDWA  Education Department of Western Australia
ERIC  Educational Resources Information Centre
ESL   English as a Second Language
HOD   Head of Department
ILC   Intensive Language Centre
IEP   Individual Education Program
ILP   Individual Learning Program
NEPS  National Equity Programs for Schools
OLOs  Overarching Learning Outcomes
PD    Professional Development
SAER  Students at Educational Risk
STAR  Students at Risk
TAGS  Talented and Gifted Students
TEE   Tertiary Entrance Examination
TIC   Teacher in Charge
TORCH Test of Reading Comprehension
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

CONTEXT

The context for this study began in July 1997 when the Education Department of Western Australia (EDWA) presented its triennial Plan for Government School Education 1998 - 2000 (EDWA 1997) to direct the course of government school education into the new millennium. This plan heralded a major change for education in Western Australia's schools from a content driven, subject specific curriculum to an outcomes based approach using the Education Department’s Outcomes and Standards Framework as a basis for student assessment and reporting.

In order to achieve its four stated objectives the Plan outlined six major strategies. One of these is Students at Educational Risk (SAER). The fact that this strategy is linked to three of the four objectives is some indication of the importance with which it is regarded by the Education Department. The SAER project first commenced in 1996; by 1998 the strategy had a name - Making the Difference. Figure 1.1 illustrates the links between the Making the Difference strategy and the Plan for Government School Education.

Making the Difference is a major strategy of the SAER Policy. The documentation that accompanies the strategy states that:

The strategy aims to coordinate and improve the provision and delivery of programs for the diverse group of students at educational risk. Its purpose is to empower schools and staff members to significantly improve the educational outcomes of students at educational risk. (EDWA 1998b, Introductory Page)
KEY OBJECTIVES OF THE PLAN FOR GOVERNMENT SCHOOL EDUCATION 1998 - 2000

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<td>To establish an outcomes approach to curriculum with clearly defined standards.</td>
<td>To strengthen professional excellence.</td>
<td>To provide more scope for decision making at a local level.</td>
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Major Strategies

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Making the Difference 1998 Objectives 1, 2 & 3

Figure 1.1: Development of the Making the Difference Strategy

Although schools and staff members are considered to be ‘empowered’ by the policy, they also have considerable accountability. For example, the document, Policy and Guidelines for Students at Educational Risk (EDWA, 1998e) states:

Western Australian government schools:

1. will establish and implement procedures within school planning for the identification of students at educational risk
2. will develop and implement appropriate educational programs for individuals and groups of students at educational risk
3. are accountable for the educational progress of individuals and groups of students at educational risk. (p 4)
The Resource File (EDWA, 1998b) developed by the Education Department brings together the major components of the project, these being:

- A Strategic overview
- Policy and Guidelines
- Successful Practice
- Students at Educational Risk - Who are They?
- An informational Video

The Education Department initially allowed five years for the implementation of the strategy with the aim that by 2002 Making the Difference would be fully operational in all government schools. This timeline has now been extended to 2005.

Making the Difference was a major policy change of the Education Department of Western Australia and many teachers were concerned about its implications; how the policy would impact on them and their students and how it would affect their classroom practices. The notion of a student being “at-risk” was not new by any means, but the fact that there was now an official definition of a ‘student at educational risk’ which included specific indicators, and that schools and teachers had to be accountable for and address the needs of these students in their schools, was new and it was this that was concerning teachers.

DEFINING A STUDENT AT EDUCATIONAL RISK

Making the Difference is certainly not the first strategy to be put in place to address the needs of ‘students-at-risk’ but it differs from its predecessors, including the Commonwealth funded Students at Risk (STAR) program
which targeted alienated youth in secondary schools by focussing attention on the K - 12 years of schooling and, in particular, the identification of at-risk students in their pre-primary year.

How therefore does the Education Department define ‘at-risk’ students? In the research paper, *Students at Educational Risk – Who are They?* prepared for the SAER Resource File (EDWA, 1998b), Ann Butorac examined the labels that have been given to students considered to be ‘at-risk’. She found that a number of generic and specific labels were used to describe the same broad population and that the term ‘students-at-risk’ has come to be used to describe students who have experienced difficulties at school and often do not complete their schooling. Following Butorac’s research, the Education Department of Western Australia changed the definition of ‘students-at-risk’ by adding the word ‘educational’ and in the *Making the Difference* strategy such students are defined as: “those students who may be at risk of not achieving the major learning outcomes of schooling to levels which enable them to reach their potential” (EDWA, 1998e, p.3). The Making the Difference Project team proposed the addition of the word ‘educational’ so that: “By referring to educational risk the term is less likely to incur the negative connotations associated with deficit concepts which attribute risk to the students themselves”. (Butorac 1998 p. 3)

However, Newman (1998) states that: “By definition every child in the Western Australian government school system has the potential to be educationally ‘at risk’ at some stage during their schooling.” (Introductory page) The phrase “By definition” requires further clarification if teachers are not to be overwhelmed by the above statement.
EDWA also reported that 20% of “our classroom population may not be developing the understanding, skills and confidence to achieve their individual potential ...” (EDWA, 1998e p5). Donmoyer & Kos, (1993), writing about students at risk in America, reported the figure of 70,000 students who do not complete high school and made a link between this figure and lost earnings and foregone taxes. Statistics like these relating to students who are at risk of not completing high school or not graduating from school without the necessary academic, social and emotional skills to live a full and productive life have created a climate of concern in both Australia and America that has become a national issue.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The Policy and Guidelines for Students at Educational Risk (EDWA, 1998e) outlined the responsibilities that teachers have with regard to identification of students at educational risk and the development of strategies to improve their learning and educational outcomes. A Key Area of successful practice for Students at Educational Risk is Identification and the descriptor states: “Students at educational risk are identified, their learning achievements and gaps are defined and individual risk status is continually assessed and monitored” (EDWA, 1998a piii). However, there is no guidance on how this is to be done and the identification, assessment and monitoring are the responsibilities of individual schools.

The policy was introduced at a time when there were already major changes taking place in the way the curriculum was to be delivered in Western Australian schools. There was a fundamental change in educational philosophy to an outcomes-based education system which
believes that there are certain things that all students should learn as a result of attending a government school. (EDWA, 1995)

The purpose of this study therefore, is to examine the term 'at risk' as it has been applied to students by teachers and educators, to explore its historical background and the models that underpin the definitions and determine the policies that have directed its use in education. The research explores how teachers and educators themselves define the term 'at risk' and how they use it in an educational setting. It will also try to determine whether any changes have taken place in teachers' perceptions since the addition of 'educational'.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

When the research began, two years had elapsed since the Making the Difference Strategy was introduced into schools with the definition of a student 'at educational risk', consequently the central question of the study was:

Has the definition of students at educational risk, as stated in the Making the Difference Strategy, changed teachers' perceptions of the meaning of the term when applied to students in their school or classroom?

The study and data collections have been guided by the following questions:

- How do teachers and educators define and use the term 'at risk' as applied to students?
- Has the broadening of the definition to include 'educational' changed perspectives of the notion of 'at riskness'?
- Are there common factors that teachers and educators believe place students 'at-risk' in the school environment?
- Has the identification of students at educational risk been further clarified since the introduction of the Making the Difference Strategy?
What are the implications of EDWA's definition of 'students at educational risk' for the provision of programs for particular groups of students?

RESEARCH METHODS
The methodology used in the study is qualitative. It is not based on any hypothesis, rather the research is loosely based on Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Punch, 1998) where the analysis of the data collected is used to generate a theory which will explain what is central to the data.

Three methods of data collection have been used in the study.
- The first was a mini-survey involving the use of a Stimulus Sheet
- The second data collection involved a number of semi structured interviews.
- The third part evolved from an examination of the personal experiences of the researcher, which resulted in the presentation of four case studies to illustrate aspects of the findings in the other two data collections.

A detailed explanation of the data collection processes is provided in Chapter Three.

The Data collected in the first two stages of the study were analysed through the use of key words and recurring themes to determine what understandings teachers and other educators have of the term 'at risk'. Through the questioning and comparison of data, patterns of recurrence were identified so that different understandings of 'at educational risk' and how it applies to students could be classified.
The results of the questioning and interviews give an indication of the impact, if any, that the Making the Difference Strategy has had on teachers' perceptions and what the implications have been for students at educational risk. The case studies are included to provide actual examples of how one school attempted to address the needs of 'at risk' students.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

In Chapter Two, a review of the literature is offered that examines four interrelated aspects of the 'students at risk' debate. The first is the historical context for the definition of the term 'at risk' as it applies to children and young people, and how perceptions of 'at riskness' have changed up to, and including, the current use by the Education Department of Western Australia of the term 'at educational risk'. Secondly there is an overview of the programs that have been developed since the 1960s, followed by a brief review of the major policies and trends that have shaped educational programs and strategies for students at risk in the last fifty years. Finally a number of models that have underpinned the philosophy and influenced the decision making process will be reviewed.

Chapter Three describes in detail the research methods used in the study whilst Chapter Four analyses and discusses the findings from the first stage of the data collection. Chapter Five analyses and discusses the responses of the interviewees in the second stage of the data collection. In Chapter Six the four Case Studies, which comprise the third stage of the data collection, are presented. Finally, in Chapter Seven the relationships that have emerged during the coding process are integrated and presented.
as propositions. To end the study there are a number of recommendations for further research.

The Appendix contains copies of the Stimulus Sheet, a list of the Interview Questions, an example of a SAER Identification Form and an Identification Flow Chart.

In the following chapter the literature relating to students 'at risk' will be explored under four headings: definitions, programs, policies and models.

A point to be made before commencing the literature review concerns that of nomenclature. Throughout this study, Students at Educational Risk and Making the Difference are used interchangeably to describe the major strategy, outlined in the Plan for Government School Education 1998 – 2000 (EDWA, 1997), and introduced by the Education Department to address the needs of students 'at educational risk' in government schools (Figure 1.1 p.2)
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

When the study began in 1998, the intention was to focus on how the term 'at risk' was defined by teachers when discussing children and young people in a school environment. Consequently, the first data collection phase was concerned with ascertaining teachers' definitions and usage of the phrase and the initial review of the literature focussed on how educators and others had defined 'a student at risk'. However, as the first set of data was analysed, other concepts emerged which directed the second data collection and required further reading. By the end of the data collection process, it was apparent that there were four main areas of interest that needed to be addressed by the literature review. These were: how 'at risk' was defined, what programs had been designed to address the needs revealed by the definitions, what policies had resulted from or been influenced by the various definitions and finally, what the models were that underpinned the definitions. Natriello et al (1990), identified the relationship between definitions, policies and programs when they said:

The definition and identification of disadvantaged youth also influences educational policy. The way in which we define and conceptualise such groups shapes the policies and programs we develop to respond to the problems associated with them. (p4)

This quotation illustrates another aspect of the 'at risk' debate, the identification of 'at risk' students. Defining 'at risk' students is in itself a means of identifying the students. It is difficult, for example, to define an 'at risk' student without also stating the factors which may cause the risk. These factors may then become a means of identifying the student and the
Factors may be as broad as poverty or as personal as low self-esteem. (*Australian Council of Educational Research* 1996). Figure 2.1 shows the relationships between these four areas. The literature review could begin at any point in the relationship, however as the first data collection focussed on definitions, the question of how a student ‘at risk’ has been defined in the literature appears a logical place to start the review.

![Figure 2.1 Relationships Between the Four Areas of the Literature Review.](image)

### 2.1 Students at Risk: How They Are Defined

In educational terms the phrase ‘at risk’ is relatively new. For example, fourteen years ago the *Education Resources Information Centre* (ERIC), a data base for education reports, had no separate data base for ‘at risk’ students. It was not that there weren’t any ‘at risk’ students fourteen years ago; it is simply that they were identified using different descriptors. Terms such as, ‘disadvantaged’, ‘low achievers’, ‘underachievers’, in use since the 1960s, would lead to the highlighting of at ‘high risk’ in the database suggesting that the term was a new label for a “phenomena which is as old as public schooling itself.” (*Richardson* 1989, p3)
The historical context for the introduction of the term 'at risk' was the growing understanding during the 1980s of the number of children who, through wars or socio-economic conditions, were in 'at risk' situations in the "global educational landscape". (Davis & McCaul 1994) In the United States, the term 'at risk' had its genesis when it was used in the report *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 to describe a culturally and economically endangered society (Placier 1993). The publication of this report resulted in a number of school reform programs which were designed to produce students who had the skills and knowledge to compete in a modern workplace and, in particular, who were competitive with their counterparts in Germany and Japan. (Davis & McCaul 1994) Eventually, 'at risk' became an educational "buzz word ... to describe students endangered by their high probability of school failure" (Placier 1993). However, although educators recognised that many students were 'at risk', they did not know what the term actually meant.

Recently, educators have begun to use the term 'at risk' to describe a certain category of student. The meaning of this term is never very precise, and varies considerably in practice. (Slavin, Karweit & Madden 1989, pp4-5)

As "definitions implicitly suggest what should be done" (Lubeck & Garrett 1990, p328), so the need for more precision became necessary. Without a clear understanding of the term, educators felt overwhelmed when it came to developing policies and programs to address the issue (Placier 1993, Davis & McCaul 1994). The relationship between definitions, policies and programs had already been noted by Natriello et al (1990) quoted above, and is illustrated in Figure 2.1.
The *Nation at Risk* report was published in the United States in 1983. It is interesting that in Western Australia, Currie produced a review of research just prior to this. It related to "children in primary and pre-primary years who may be labelled as educationally 'at risk'. (1979, p.iii) Currie developed an operational definition which was long and comprehensive. The definition stated that:

the educationally 'at risk' pupils are by definition and usage those with normal or above average general intelligence, whose educational progress is not considered satisfactory by their teachers. They do not include pupils who are mentally retarded, visibly handicapped, severely impaired in speech or hearing, the blind, or those whose handicap has been accepted to the extent that they are generally not admitted to normal classrooms or schools. They are pupils who are expected by their teachers or their peers of being capable of better performances, but for some often obscure reason or group of causes are in difficulties. This definition also includes an in-built expectation that these pupils are capable of improving their performance provided they receive the correct type of training, remedial treatment, understanding and a suitable educational environment; also an implication that sometimes the school or the teachers, rather than the pupil, may be at fault (p iii).

Writing as he was at the end of the 1970s it is hard not to believe that Currie was not also influenced by the "global educational landscape" especially as the focus of his attention were students who were of "normal or above average intelligence" who were considered to be able to perform at a higher standard.

The definition is interesting for a number of reasons; first Currie considered early intervention was crucial. Secondly, he recognised that many factors were involved and that the school environment was
important. Finally, the fact that he considered that the school or the teachers could "sometimes" have an impact on the performance or achievement of a student can be seen as a precursor to the Education Department of Western Australia's (EDWA's) addition in 1998, of the word 'educational' to their definition of a student 'at risk', so that it became a student at 'educational risk'. The explicit aim of the addition was to remove the 'fault' from the student and place it with the system (EDWA 1998b).

Although the definition Currie developed was comprehensive, it was still not specific enough to identify the students at 'educational risk'. In order to do this Currie classified students into ten categories or 'types'. He believed that these could be used to help teachers develop "checklists" to identify the students who needed extra help. The categories ranged from general classroom behaviour through skills and sensory patterns to environmental factors and what Currie called "deprivation areas" (pp.103-110) which included students who came from a different language or cultural background, or who were 'culturally deprived'.

The notion that students could be 'culturally deprived' underpinned many of the definitions that developed during the 1980s, for example the entry for "Definitions of 'At risk'" in the International Encyclopaedia of Education (Davis & McCaul 1994) begins by stating that the "social, economic and cultural environment" of the child must be taken into account. Catterall & Cota-Robles (1988) cited by Davis & McCaul, considered there were common perceptions of 'at risk' children which included poverty, cultural and linguistic background and membership of a minority group. Natriello et al (1990) however considered the notion of
'cultural deprivation' as inappropriate as all children possessed a culture of their own. Nevertheless, they believed that students could be 'educationally disadvantaged' because of their socio-economic circumstances. The meaning of 'at risk' has become, in many definitions, "synonymous with disadvantage" (Batten & Russell 1995) because these are based on the presence of active negative factors in the 'at risk' student's life. Educational disadvantage was and still is, the basis for many compensatory programs. These will be discussed in more detail in the section on the programs that have been developed to address the needs of 'at risk' students.

Factors, Indicators and Characteristics of 'At Risk' Status

In order therefore to bring precision into the definition of 'at risk', lists of factors, indicators or characteristics have been developed by educators. A distinction is made between indicators or characteristics and factors. Indicators can be described as behaviours that students display in a school environment that may put them 'at risk', such as truancy or low achievement. Factors, on the other hand, may also be found outside of the school environment, for example low socio-economic background, cultural and linguistic background, family situation (Natriello et al 1990, Donmoyer & Kos 1993). There is considerable overlap between factors and indicators and in certain circumstances they may be one and the same, for example disruptive school behaviour can be seen as a risk factor but it may also be an indicator of low achievement or potential early school leaving (Batten & Russell 1995). However, there is considerable debate about whether causal factors do, of necessity, put students 'at risk'. Donmoyer & Kos (1993) for example, do not believe that this point of view can be sustained by the research available. They consider that there are
many students who may belong to a minority group, come from a single-parent family or a low socio-economic background and yet still be able to achieve well at school. Other educators (Richardson et al 1989, Hixson & Tinzmann 1990, Batten & Russell 1995) agree with this point of view, suggesting that some factors may lie within the school environment, even between classrooms, and that these factors may interact with the characteristics students bring to school with them to create an 'at risk' situation for that student. In relation to this point, it has been the researcher's experience that students from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds may be at 'at risk' in a school environment not because of their background but because they have to continue their education in a second or third language. It is also the researcher's experience that once they have achieved mastery of English, many ESL students achieve well and are no longer educationally 'at risk'.

In Batten & Russell's (1995) *Review of Australian Literature 1980 – 1994*, they categorised the risk factors they had identified. They divided these into three areas: those that affected the individual student, factors associated with the school and those associated with the home environment. However, although the factors were categorised, they were also interrelated, a point emphasised by Batten & Russell when they said that "risk factors rarely operate in isolation" (p13). Richardson et al (1989) too believed that factors do not occur in isolation. The lists of factors identified in the three categories, individual, family and school, by Batten & Russell are shown in Table 2.1. Batten & Russell also identified poverty as a societal factor that can put a student 'at risk'. The ramifications of poverty are poor housing, lack of resources and lack of community support and
services which produce effects on the educational outcomes of the students. A relationship between poverty and low school achievement was identified in the *Western Australian Child Health Survey* (1997). It is not the low income per se that affects school performance but the other factors associated with it, such as those outlined above which may reduce the parents' social and psychological capital. Many compensatory programs have been developed to address the perceived effects of poverty on students. These will be discussed in a later section.

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<tr>
<th>FACTORS</th>
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<th>School</th>
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<td>fragmented</td>
<td>organisational policies and practices</td>
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<td>low motivation</td>
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<td>young offenders</td>
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<td>school/home relationships</td>
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<td></td>
<td>academic performance</td>
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<td>staff professional development</td>
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Table 2.1 Risk Factors according to Batten & Russell (1995)

A separate category defined by Batten & Russell but which they did not include in Table 2.1 is that of group differences. They cited statistics that demonstrate that belonging to a particular group in Australian society
may have an effect both on school performance, and on retention rates, that is the age a student leaves school (p.9).

The group differences were:

- gender
- ethnicity
- socio-economic status
- geographic location

'At risk' of What?

Although it appears necessary to include factors in definitions of 'at risk', there must also be an understanding of what the risk is – 'at risk' of what? The following are a number of definitions from the literature in answer to this question:

- 'at risk' refers to the greater likelihood for students in grades 7-12 with certain characteristics to drop out of school. (Wilkinson et al 1989, p. III-1)
- a student with normal intelligence failing to achieve the basic skills necessary for success in school and in life. (Slavin et al 1989, p.5 )
- The term 'at risk' describes a significant population of youth who are 'at risk' of dropping out of school... (James & Smith 1990 p1).
- ...those students most 'at risk' of not completing or benefiting from their elementary and secondary experiences.(Hixson & Tinzmann 1990, p.1)
- students who are 'at risk' of either not graduating from school or of graduating without the necessary academic, social and emotional skills to function as productive citizens and workers. (Donmoyer & Kos 1993, p.8)
- In general [the term is used] to describe or identify young people who, beset by particular difficulties and disadvantages, are thought likely to fail to achieve the development in their adolescent years that would provide a sound basis for a satisfying and fulfilling adult life. (Batten & Russell 1995, p.1)
- The concept of 'at risk' meant children and youth at significantly greater risk of underachievement and eventual unemployment than

- ...those students most 'at risk' of not completing secondary school. (Department of Employment, Education & Training 1996, p.58)

Finally, the definition of a student at 'educational risk' as used by EDWA in Policy and Guidelines for Students at Educational Risk is:

- ...those students who may be 'at risk' of not achieving the major learning outcomes of schooling to levels which enable them to achieve their potential. (EDWA 1998e, p.3)

This definition is supported by a number of descriptors, which are:

Those students

- who are at risk of not achieving the major learning outcomes
- whose achievement level, rate of progress or behaviour differ noticeably from past performances and/or that of his/her peers
- who are underperforming
- who are not engaged in their schooling.

It is implicit in all these definitions that an 'at-risk' student is not achieving at school to the extent that some of them may not complete their secondary schooling. In some definitions this school failure is linked with success in their life after school. There is even an implication of an economic consideration for the country. EDWA's definition is interesting for a number of reasons, first the inclusion of the word 'educational' with the intention of linking the 'risk' to education rather than to the students themselves and the notion that the students have 'a potential' that they are 'at risk' of not reaching. This notion of 'potential' is a descriptor that is not possible to measure. It is not a concept that appears in the literature in the definitions of an 'at risk' student. The EDWA descriptors however, still retain the notion of low achievement or poor performance.
A significant feature of the definitions from the literature is the focus on a student’s failure to complete secondary schooling. The factors that have been cited can be considered as reasons for, as well as indicators of, failure at school. James & Smith (1990), in an evaluation of a pre-teen bridge program in the USA, created a “multidimensional operational definition” of at-risk students which could be used as a planning list both to identify ‘at-risk’ students and structure programs for them. The list itemised nine characteristics with associated behavioural indicators. The purpose of the list was to identify particular groups of students so that they could be ‘targeted’ and special intervention programs could then be developed in order to help them. The following section will examine the “program” part of the relationship illustrated in Figure 2.1.

2.2 PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS AT RISK

It is not within the scope of this research to review all of the programs that have been implemented over the years to address the needs of ‘at risk’ students. However, an understanding of how such intervention programs developed, who funded them and for whom they were intended provides a context for the present situation in Western Australia and background for the Making the Difference strategy. (EDWA 1998b)

Compensatory Programs

Many programs for ‘at risk’ students have been compensatory, that is designed to ‘compensate’ for perceived disadvantages. Compensatory programs were first set up during the 1960s and 1970s, before the concept of ‘at riskness’ entered the literature. During this period, poverty was identified as one of the main reasons for children’s failure to achieve at school and one of the first, and perhaps best known programs, was the
Head Start program launched in the United States in 1975. It was a federally funded program which aimed to address the needs of children from poor backgrounds. (Currie 1979, Richardson et al 1989, Connell, White & Johnston 1992) Head Start included medical, nutritional, and social as well as academic elements. It was an early intervention program and targeted pre-school children.

A link was made between poverty and failure at school and children from minority groups or low socio-economic backgrounds were consequently thought to be "culturally deprived" (Currie 1979, Natriello et al 1990). This notion, although spurious, was a popular image in the 1960s and 1970s and led to many compensatory, early intervention programs.

Federally funded programs

Compensatory programs in Australia began with the establishment of the Australian Schools' Commission in 1973 and the funding by the federal government of Specific Purpose Programs, which targeted Special Education, ESL and 'disadvantaged' schools. The Commission linked poverty with school failure and developed an 'Index of Disadvantage' in order to allocate funds to the states for a number of compensatory programs under the banner of the Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP) Grants. Currie (1979) who believed that "cultural deprivation" could lead to children being "educationally disadvantaged" supported the DSP programs which, in his words provided "experiential activities" for "underprivileged children". He also believed in early intervention and felt that compensatory programs were necessary to provide for "equality of educational opportunity". Students were considered to be disadvantaged because of: low socio-economic, ethnic, geographic, cultural, lingual (sic)
or similar reasons. (Australian Schools Commission Report, 1981)

Although the Schools Commission ceased to exist in 1989, its functions were taken over by the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) and the programs continued to be funded throughout the 1980s.

In 1990 a new program was introduced, the Students at Risk or STAR Program. This was the first time that the phrase ‘at risk’ had been used in the reports on Commonwealth Programs. It eventuated from a Social Package for Young Australians introduced in the 1989/90 budget. (DEET 1990) It was initially funded for three years and its aim was to: “identify students in government schools most at risk of not completing secondary schooling and to encourage their continuing participation by supporting a range of school-based projects”(p93).

In 1993, the Specific Purpose Programs were broadbanded and the National Equity Programs for Schools (NEPS) came into being to target particular groups. There were four elements, Access, Equity, National Priority and Incentives, and programs were arranged across these elements. For example, the STAR program continued to be funded under the National Priority Element, which also included Country Areas, Literacy and Learning and Gifted and Talented students. The following year the programs were renamed ‘components’. In 1996 NEPS came to an end and forty smaller programs were reorganised under five priority areas. In 1997 the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) took over the administration of Commonwealth funding for education. Although “support for educationally disadvantaged students continues to be a Commonwealth priority” (DETYA 1997 p2) there was a change in
direction and Commonwealth funding was directed through States Grants to the relevant State Government Authorities.

**State funded programs**

In Western Australia, one of the first major, centrally funded projects introduced to address the needs of ‘at risk’ students was *First Steps* (EDWA 1995). The project began in 1988 and was not strictly a ‘compensatory program’ as it was not developed to compensate for some perceived disadvantage, rather it emerged to develop strategies to assist children who were experiencing difficulties in literacy leaning. However, the project did make a link between low socio-economic background of students and low literacy levels as the first trials took place in schools in the *Priority Schools Program* (PSP), one of the federally funded *Specific Purpose Programs* discussed above. EDWA argued at the time that: “There is a clearly established link between socio-economic factors, indices of transiency and absenteeism with student learning outcomes”. (p13) The project began with the aim of ensuring:

> that all K-5 children, especially those at risk, make measurable progress in the areas of mathematics and early literacy learning, and are able to sustain that progress in their later primary years.  

*(Executive Summary)*

The focus later changed to include K-7 when the strategies that had been devised were seen to have relevance for the whole school population.

In the initial stages of the project the focus was on children who were “most at risk”:

> Teachers will be equipped with skills, strategies and resources to help them evaluate, teach and monitor children at risk in the classroom. The whole school will work together, on the basis of
shared understandings, to cater for children at risk in the school population. (EDWA 1995, p.14)

The project highlighted a specific group of ‘at risk’ students. These were students for whom English was not the first language or who were not literate in their first language, consequently trials of the Developmental Continua (a central aspect of the program) took place in schools with high migrant and/or high Aboriginal populations. In spite of the emphasis on ‘at risk’ students there is no actual definition of an ‘at risk’ student in the First Steps literature.

By 1993, the focus had shifted from ‘at risk’ students when nearly all schools in the state wished to participate in the program. Teachers wished to access the training provided in the strategies and procedures that had been developed and which had proved so successful in the trial schools. Consequently, First Steps ceased to be managed centrally and the management devolved to the schools themselves with support from the District Office Staff.

The First Steps project also had an influence at the secondary level as many of the strategies developed by it were included in Stepping Out, a secondary level literacy project. This was trialled in 1991 and it brought together a number of best-practice teaching and learning strategies for cross-curricular literacy learning in secondary schools. (EDWA 1996)

In 1998 a major change occurred in education in Western Australia with the introduction of the Curriculum Framework and an outcomes-focussed education system. (EDWA 1997) A program that has been influenced by these developments is the Literacy Net which is a screening tool to help
“P-3 teachers to identify and support those students who may be ‘at risk’ in literacy learning”. (EDWA 2000) The *Literacy Net* comprises a set of Literacy Checkpoints against which a student’s achievement and progress is measured at particular times. Identification is through the development of individual and class profiles and when a student is identified as ‘at risk’ in literacy learning, the *Literacy Net* provides a means of addressing this through the implementation of a Literacy Plan. It is intended that the *Literacy Net* will be extended to identify ‘at risk’ students in all years of primary school.

The *Literacy Net* addressed two of the Major Strategies in the *Plan for Government School Education 1998 – 2000*; Curriculum Improvement and the Students at Educational Risk. *Making the Difference* also developed as a result of the introduction of outcomes-focussed education to address the Major Strategy, *Students at Educational Risk*. These links were illustrated in Figure 1.1 on page 2. However, although *Making the Difference* is a major initiative of EDWA to address the needs of ‘students at educational risk’ and is the genesis of this dissertation, it cannot be considered a ‘program’ as such. EDWA has developed a *Resource File* (1998b) and supporting documentation to assist schools and teachers but the responsibility for identification, program development and accountability for students at ‘educational risk’ rests firmly with individual schools.

**School-funded programs**

It is not possible to discuss school-funded programs in Western Australia in any detail as they are the responsibility of individual schools and there is no centralised reporting procedures or systematic recording of the
programs that are being implemented. The researcher however has had experience with a number of school-based programs for students 'at risk'.

For example, programs have been implemented for Aboriginal students in some remote communities to encourage their attendance at school. Some of these programs include showering and breakfast programs not unlike the original *Headstart* program.

There are a number of programs in various high schools to assist alienated youth. At one outer metropolitan school the program required the students to study their core subjects with one teacher who was given great flexibility with the curriculum. This *Lower School Access Program* (Faculty Report 1995) was for years 8 – 10 and the underlying principle was that students could "access" the normal mainstream program when they were ready. In reality for some students this did not happen and they stayed in the program for three years until they left school at the end of Year 10.

The Post Compulsory Intensive Language Centre in Perth has developed a support program for ESL students graduating from the centre into Year 11 and 12 mainstream classes. The support is only possible if the students are within the two-year time-limit for federal funding. This funding enables ESL teachers to provide extra support for students during an *Access & Bridging* program which is a time-tabled subject.

The *Mentor Program* is a program that was developed by a school psychologist to address the needs of lower school 'at risk' students, especially those in transition from Year 7 to Year 8 by providing the students with mentors to assist them with their concerns and difficulties. This program is discussed in detail in Chapter 6.
Finally, *Making the Difference* (EDWA 1998b) requires all schools to identify students at educational risk, to develop programs that address their particular needs, to monitor the effectiveness of these programs and to report to all stakeholders on the students' progress. It was the introduction of this strategy that initiated this research study.

2.3 POLICIES INFLUENCING STUDENTS AT RISK

Government policies influence the programs that are developed for students 'at risk' as well as influencing and being influenced by how students 'at risk' are defined and identified. (Natriello et al 1990, Placier 1993) In Australia three underlying principles have directed education policy since 1945: equality of provision, equality of opportunity and the equality of group outcomes. (Quality of Education Review Committee 1985)

The introduction of equality of provision recognised that all children were to be given equal opportunity to be successful and schooling was to be 'accessible, equal and free'. One result of compulsory schooling was the emergence of a new population of students in schools; those that were 'mildly handicapped' or 'retarded'. (Weiland 1975) It is not appropriate in this dissertation to spend time on the history of special education, however the policies that directed the provision of education for children considered to be in need of special education were the precursors of current policies for students at risk and therefore a brief overview of the major policies relating to these students is in order.
In 1945, the Education Department of Western Australia accepted the responsibility for the education of handicapped children for the first time. Although there had been some state-level provision for these children before this time, the intervention had been medical rather than educational. With the advent of compulsory schooling the number of children in schools increased and, because of the age/grade system prevalent at the time, the number of children considered to be 'mentally handicapped' in any given level also increased. The attention of teachers and schools was therefore focussed on the educational difficulties which handicapped children were experiencing.

A number of other factors combined to increase the numbers of children with educational problems in schools. These factors included the increasing urbanisation of the population, the introduction of mental testing with the complementary increase in grading in schools and medical intervention which resulted in increased life expectancy of handicapped children. (Weiland 1975, Exeter 1986) This overall increase resulted in the growth of special education which, in turn, resulted in the establishment of special schools or special classes within normal schools.

Weiland (1975) defined special education as those:

administrative attempts made to meet the educational needs of those children who, for a variety of reasons, are not able to function adequately in a normal school setting, and/or, cannot cope with the demands of maintaining normal progression within the programmes developed for the typical classroom. (p4)

Weiland makes a very interesting point that there is a difference between being disabled and having a handicap. In his view, a disability does not need to become dysfunctional and within any society there is a level of
tolerance, however a disability may become a handicap when, through societal or environmental pressures, demands change.

Equality of Provision however, did not lead to all students having equal opportunity to learn and succeed. To provide equality of educational opportunity therefore, the Equal Opportunity Act was passed in Western Australia in 1984. This legislated that children with special needs were to be identified and their needs were to be addressed within the system. The definition of 'special needs' included physical, psychological, social or intellectual disabilities. It was accepted that equality of opportunity did not mean that all children could be treated the same if they were to have equal chance of success at school. (Williams 1990)

In the 1980s social justice and equity became issues in education. The Better Schools Plan (1987) for education in Western Australia aimed to democratise education by decentralising decision-making and giving greater powers to schools. However, there was both lack of direction and a lack of mandated policies from the Education Department with regard to children with special needs and they became a low priority in the school system.

There was considerable debate during this period about whether children with special needs should be taught in special classes or be integrated within normal classes. Either way there was no proper provision with regard to facilities, schools were reluctant to commit limited resources and there was a lack of specially trained teachers. However, research evidence in America was indicating that educationally handicapped children were best provided for in a mainstream setting (Wade & Moore 1992, Foreman 1996) and parents in America and Australia began actively advocating for
their 'handicapped' children to be educated in a normal school. Finally, the philosophy of social justice and the principle of equal opportunity created a climate for a change in attitude.

However, there was still debate about the education of children who were considered 'uneducable'. For instance, in 1981 Kaufman and Krause cited by Foreman (1996), argued that some students would never become 'productive citizens' and that therefore there should be a cut off point beyond which they should not be educated. This is a point of view which equates education and the economy, links achievement at school with the prosperity of the nation and considers that some students 'deserve' education more than others. It does not appear to value education for the quality of life it can provide for all students. Thankfully, most countries have policies that state that all students can learn and develop and legislation that ensures that all schools provide the opportunities for them to do so. For example, Public Law 94-142 was passed in America in 1975 to ensure that education was provided for all students regardless of any disability. Similarly in Great Britain the 1978 Warnock Report was influential in improving special education and subsequent legislation has ensured that all students have access to the National Curriculum. In Australia, the Karmel Report (1973) was instrumental in the establishment of the Australian Schools Commission in 1975. The Commission provided funding for the integration of students with special needs into ordinary schools. In spite of this though, progress was slow and many students were not catered for at all within the public education system. In Western Australia the number of special schools actually increased during the 1970s. (Foreman 1996)
It was the recommendations of the Beazley Report (1984) in Western Australia which focussed attention not only on the intellectually handicapped, but other groups such as migrant and Aboriginal children and which thus widened the perspective of 'special needs'. It was a turning point in education for children with special needs – 'special groups' as Beazley called them. Beazley also defined 'handicapped' to include those children with special needs because of sensory, physical or intellectual disability and those with emotional and behavioural disorders.

Gifted and talented students were also being targeted, both at a federal and state level. Beazley's committee considered there was overlap between children who had special abilities over a range of areas – the gifted and talented, and the handicapped, as many of the former came from non-supportive homes or also had physical or emotional handicaps.

The recommendations of the Beazley Report were far reaching and emphasised the policy of integration in Western Australian schools. Schools were to be supported and resourced to address the needs of the disadvantaged, the handicapped and those with special needs within the school situation. Program development and in-servicing for teachers was recommended and school, principal and staff performance appraisal was to be used to evaluate the success of the reforms. This was the precursor of the current Quality Assurance Strategy which monitors and reports on performance standards in schools (Plan for Government School Education 1998-2000). The State Teachers Union adopted all of the recommendations of the Beazley report as union policy in 1986. (Exeter 1986)
The idea of group outcomes began to emerge in the middle of the 1980s. Prior to this, although teachers and administrators were always concerned with performance and the results of their teaching, policy makers were often more concerned with funding and the allocation of resources for a burgeoning school population rather than with the quality of the educational services (Karmel 1996). However, by 1985 a shift had taken place to one in which education was viewed in terms of outcomes and which measured success by measuring the achievements of students: it had a future orientation. In *The Quality of Education in Australia* (1985) Karmel’s second report as chairperson of the review committee, he called this, the “Principle of Group Outcomes”.

The Principle of Group Outcomes refers to the fact that the educational attainment, eventual occupations and income for defined groups should be the same as any other group and not be related to the factors that define those groups, for example: gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic status. There was a desire that the educational standard of all students should be increased and one of the tasks of Karmel’s committee was to identify disadvantaged groups of students in need of specific assistance who were not achieving “desirable outcomes from successive levels of schooling and who could be comparatively disadvantaged by a general rise in overall attainment”. (Quality of Education Review Committee 1985, p161)

By focussing attention on group outcomes the Commonwealth’s special provision was to be given to groups rather than individual students. The intention was to avoid the negative labelling of individual students through the belief that by targeting a group, the stigma of disadvantage was shifted from the student to the circumstances that caused the
disadvantage. Karmel's committee favoured targeting schools with a high concentration of the groups in question and supported the continuation of the *Disadvantaged Schools Program*. This program has been discussed in Section 2.2 Programs for Students at Risk.

Another significant report, the *Shean Report* on the education of students with disabilities and specific learning difficulties was published in 1993 in Western Australia. The key recommendations of the report were accepted and funding was given in 1995 for a number of initiatives. These have had an impact on the development of strategies for at risk students in Western Australia. They included professional development for schools and teachers to raise awareness of the needs of these students, funding for the development of programs, policy development and the adoption of a policy of inclusion for students with disabilities into mainstream and the provision of additional services for them. The Shean funding has been very important in developing programs and raising awareness for many groups with special needs in Western Australia.

Another major report in Western Australia was the *Western Australian Child Health Survey: Education Health and Competence* (1997). The survey found that 20% of children in metropolitan and rural schools in Western Australia were likely to be at educational risk. The report became instrumental in the development of a broader definition of 'at risk' students and drew attention to the need for a preventative approach when planning for them.
In 1998, EDWA published its triennial *Plan for Government School Education*. It was this document that introduced *Students at Educational Risk* as one of its major strategies.

Also during 1998 in Western Australia the *Curriculum Framework* (Curriculum Council 1998) was introduced into all schools. It is not intended in this dissertation to comment in detail about the changes this has brought about to the delivery of curriculum in Western Australian schools apart from commenting that it is a major reform which will have significant effects on schooling for some time to come. The Framework is underpinned by seven principles, one of which is 'Inclusivity' which states that the Curriculum Framework is for 'all students in Western Australian schools' (p 15). There are thirteen Major Learning Outcomes which are intended to be applicable to all learning areas and which all students are expected to achieve by the end of their schooling. The Outcomes are of particular interest in the present discussion, as they have become the basis of the current Western Australian definition of a 'student at educational risk'.

To summarise, for many years education policy concentrated on inputs, especially as funding in the early years was low: there was a lack of resources and trained teachers as the school population grew and became more diverse. However, by the middle of the eighties people were questioning whether education was giving value for money and the effectiveness of programs was questioned. This led to a focus on the outcomes of education policy and programs and greater accountability: the principle of Equality of Group Outcomes. By the late 1990s, outcomes focussed education for all students was well established in all states. The
intention for education in Western Australia in the early 2000s is that it is characterised by flexibility in curriculum delivery, has outcomes-based assessment practices and has an education policy which is driven by standards and principles.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s changes took place both with regard to the terminology used to denote students with special needs and the educational philosophy that directed how and where they were to be educated. The policy of integration is now fully implemented, all students have a right to be educated, whenever possible, in a normal school setting, with appropriate assistance. Assessment of all students is outcomes based and it is whether a student can achieve those outcomes or not that decides whether a student is at “educational risk” or not. It is the aim of the Students at Educational Risk policy that, when fully implemented in 2005, each student will have an individual learning program that will ensure they achieve all the major learning outcomes. Perhaps it may eventually be called the principle of “Equality of Individual Outcomes”.

2.4 MODELS THAT UNDERPIN NOTIONS OF STUDENTS AT RISK
In the introduction to this chapter it was explained how definitions, policy and programs for ‘at risk’ students were interrelated (Natriello et al 1990). The models that underpin the various definitions constitute the fourth element in this relationship. This final section of the literature review will examine the philosophy behind three of these models, namely

- the epidemiological model
- the social-constructivist model
- the ecological model.
The Epidemiological Model of ‘at riskness’

The notion of factors or identifying characteristics that put students ‘at-risk’ is a perspective that has its basis in the field of medicine. Placier (1993) points out that the term ‘at risk’ has been borrowed from the field of epidemiology and Donmoyer talks of an “epidemiological metaphor of school success and failure”. (1993, p10). Richardson (1989) calls it the “epidemiological model of school success and failure”. (p 3)

The purpose of medical epidemiological research is to identify categories of people who have a higher probability of contracting certain diseases and, having been identified, intervention programs can then be implemented so that the disease is prevented or lessened in the target group. For instance, research into breast cancer has followed this pattern with groups of women being identified who, through age or family background, are more likely to contract the disease. Preventive measures such as mammograms and breast examinations have been developed for women in general, but those over a certain age or with a family history of breast cancer that is, those considered to be most ‘at risk’, have free examinations and regular screening. Recently even more aggressive preventive measures have been suggested for women in particularly high risk groups; these measures include anti-hormone drugs and surgery.

This epidemiological model can be described in terms of a sequence:

IDENTIFICATION ——> INTERVENING TREATMENT ——> PREVENTION
(examinations screening, drugs, surgery)
The education model based on the above would be described thus:

![Epidemiological Model of At-Risk Status](https://example.com/figure2.2)

**Figure 2.2: Epidemiological Model of At-Risk Status**
(Richardson 1989 Figure 1, p5)

In this model the personal and/or familial characteristics of the students are used to identify those who may be 'at risk': the sort of characteristics already discussed in the Section 2.1 such as minority status, poverty and language background. Schools are unable to prevent the socio-economic or socio-cultural conditions of their students so their function becomes one of intervention. However, many compensatory programs were
preventative in nature as they were intended to address perceived deficits in the home or cultural background of children, for example the "the Head Start program was based on the statistical association between poverty and school failure" (Richardson et al 1989, p4).

The belief that particular risk factors lead to school failure can be related to the medical belief that particular risk factors lead to a probability of contracting particular diseases. In its 1988-89 report on drop-out prevention, the Austin School District in the State of Texas stated that the term 'at-risk' "refers to the greater likelihood for students in grades 7 - 12 with certain characteristics to drop out of school". (Wilkinson et al. 1990) The report made it quite clear that the term referred to students not schools and the most frequently cited characteristics that had a correlation with students dropping-out were grouped into the following four categories:

- Academic eg: low basic skills, grades, performance
- School/Social eg: truancy, behaviour/discipline problem, retention, special program placement
- Home/Family eg: low economic level, unstable home, abused, non-English speaking background, minority status
- Personal eg: illness, low self-esteem, poor attitude, alcohol or drug abuse, pregnancy.

The State of Texas developed criteria for the purposes of identifying and tracking 'at-risk' students in grades 7-12 by using these characteristics. However, using the epidemiological model to identify students who are at-risk of failing or dropping out of school has limitations as it can reduce
the number of characteristics that are considered and places the responsibility for lack of success on the student and/or their background.

As Richardson et al (1989) have noted:

Unfortunately, the decision to employ an epidemiological model for the study of these problems limits educators' ways of thinking about these phenomena. Since the problem is believed to be inherent in the student, then the search for the cause is limited to the characteristics of the students themselves. Characteristics of our society and school are left unexamined. (p.6)

Educators' concern with the epidemiological model centres on the effects of labelling students on the basis of family background, minority status and language and/or cultural background, all of which are characteristics over which students have no control (Richardson 1989, Lubeck & Garrett 1990, Donmoyer & Kos 1993) and as Placier points out, if educators use a model which has its origin in medicine there must be "congruence in meanings in the two fields" (Placier 1993, p385).

The Social Constructivist Model of 'At Riskness'

A model that looks at 'at-riskness' from a non-medical point of view and considers the characteristics of society and school rather than the personal characteristics of the student, is the social-constructivist model. The model views 'at riskness' in terms of the social environment of the child; "'at riskness' is not considered to be a personal attribute but rather a social construction" (Edelmann quoted by Lubeck & Garrett 1990, 329). This is an interactive view in which a student's at-riskness is seen as being influenced by a number of factors within a social or cultural context.

The child brings to the classroom a certain number of characteristics that have been shaped by background and personal factors and past experiences in school. This child interacts with a classroom context that includes other children, teacher(s), and materials. In
addition, what happens in the classroom is shaped, in part by school level factors that are often influenced by district level factors. The focus in this approach is not on the child alone, but on the interaction between the child and these nested contexts. (Richardson et al 1989, p.7)

To illustrate this concept Richardson et al developed a graphic model of this interaction which is reproduced as Figure 2.3.

The social-constructivist model thus considers that there are identifiable conditions which may include physical, emotional or cognitive factors, family background or circumstances that can preclude a student from learning effectively in a normal classroom environment and for these students special assistance or intervention is required.

Educators who hold this view believe that by changing the school/classroom environment large numbers of ‘at-risk’ students can become successful (Donmoyer 1993). Instead of concentrating on predicting ‘at-riskness’ by identifying groups of students as in the epidemiological model, the social constructivist model focuses on the “properties of schools and classrooms which encourage success and failure” (p.11). An interesting point is also made that it is easier for educators to control or change school and/or classroom variables than it is to deal with personal, family or socio-economic variables that are outside the context of the classroom and which have been traditionally associated with the term ‘at-risk’. (p.12)
There is, however, an extension of the social-constructivist model which does consider outside variables. This model has a much broader perspective than Richardson’s and focuses on the socio-economic and health conditions that may limit students’ life chances. Marian Wright Edelmann, President of the Children’s Defense Fund is quoted by Lubeck & Garrett (1990) as saying: “The list of children at risk includes, minority children, poor children, teenage parents and their children, the physically or emotionally handicapped, abused and neglected children and others in the child welfare system and the homeless” (p. 329).

This perspective, which views at-riskness as a social condition and not a personal attribute, sees the solution for children ‘at-risk’ in changing the socio-economic climate in which they live by, amongst other things, redistributing wealth, raising the minimum wage and changing the income tax system. However, it is a perspective that, according to Lubeck & Garrett, limits educational reform because: “The current language of
children at risk orients the expression of outrage against individuals rather than against the conditions that constrain their lives and the life changes of their children." (p.338) This social construction of the 'at-risk' child allows educators to blame the parents of the child whilst ignoring the situation or conditions of the school or classroom that may mitigate against the child’s academic success. In Lubeck & Garrett’s view, “A new vocabulary is needed to deconstruct notions such as children ‘at-risk’ if schools are to reform in any way other than to create endlessly new versions of the old.” (p.338)

At the end of their study of the experiences of twelve ‘at-risk’ elementary school students in the USA Richardson et al (1989) acknowledged the effects of outside variables when it became obvious that the school context and, in particular individual classrooms, were affected by the policies and curricula of the school district and they revised their interactive model to include the school district. Figure 2.4 reproduces their revised model.
Richardson et al's study also found that the relationship between a student and teacher and the other students in the classroom were all interrelated. The teacher’s own beliefs and expectations also affected how they viewed a student’s family and background - this is illustrated in Figure 2.4 by the dotted lines. This model, which puts the school and classroom into a wider context, begins to approach the final model considered here.

The Ecological Model of ‘At Riskness’

A third approach to defining and identifying students ‘at risk’ which broadens the concept further was developed by Hixson & Tinzmann (1990) who included the community as a whole and considered that all areas were interrelated in one way or another to affect the learning environment of a student. They called their model an ‘ecological’ approach. Although it too is an interactive model which aims at not labelling or categorising students, it is also a model that attempts to avoid laying ‘blame’ by targeting people, groups or institutions for the students’ lack of success. The model illustrates the concept that education takes place within several contexts. There is the context of school and community and there are factors in both these areas that affect the success or failure of a student. The factors include: the social and academic organisation of the school, the personal background of the student, their family background and circumstances, the community context in which the student lives and the school operates and the relationship of all these factors to one another.

In the ecological model a student becomes ‘at-risk’ when factors in one or other of these contexts is found to be inadequate and this inadequacy is not compensated for in another area. A mismatch may occur between
requirements and expectations so that the student is not defined as being at risk, rather it is the "combined characteristics of educational environments taken as a whole in which a significant proportion of students are consistently unsuccessful". (Hixson & Tinzmann 1990, p 4)

Although Hixson & Tinzmann did not provide a diagram of their ecological model, the relationships between the contexts they describe may be represented as in Figure 2.5.

![Figure 2.5: An Ecological Model of At-Riskness (Based on Hixson & Tinzmann)](image)

SUMMARY

In this chapter, literature related to the four elements that affect the education of students 'at-risk' has been reviewed: the definitions and identification, the policies, the programs and finally, the underpinning models.

The current debate has been set in a context which had its roots in concerns dating back to the late 1970s and early 1980s and began with the
understanding that groups of students were not succeeding in school and the search by educators for answers. It is apparent that the groups of students identified over twenty years ago as being 'at risk' are still identified today as being 'at risk'. However, the changes in educational thinking in the new millennium have moved away from the notion of 'group outcomes' to the notion that every student may be at educational risk during their school career and that there are factors within and without the system that can have an impact on the success or otherwise of individual students.

In spite of the change of emphasis to outcomes focussed education in Western Australia, 'at-risk' students must still be defined and identified within the system in order for appropriate programs to be developed. This is the basis of the Student at Educational Risk policy. (EDWA 1998e) This research began, therefore, with the intention of exploring how teachers and educators in Western Australia define a 'student-at-risk'. The following chapter outlines the research methods that were used in order to do this.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODS

INTRODUCTION
This Chapter describes the research methods used in the study. The data were collected in a number of evolving stages. The first stage involved the use of a Stimulus Sheet in a small-scale survey of teachers in four schools, the second stage involved semi-structured interviews of a number of teachers and educators and the third stage involved four case studies. The analysis of the first set of data collected from responses to the Stimulus Sheet, directed the range and scope of the interview questions, which in turn led to the development of the case studies drawn from the researcher’s personal experience. The situations described in the case studies occurred as the data collection was proceeding. They serve as practical demonstrations of the effect the Students at Educational Risk Strategy, Making the Difference, was having in one government school in Western Australia. The data collection can be described in the following way:

![Diagram showing data collection relationships]

Figure 3.1 Data Collection Relationships
3.1 DATA COLLECTION – STAGE 1

The research method or strategy that underpins this study is that of Grounded Theory (Punch 1998). Although there are research questions, the study did not start in the conventional way with the formulation of a hypothesis, instead the intention has been that the hypothesis or theory would develop as the data was collected and analysed.

The first part of the study began in 1998, before Making the Difference was fully implemented into the school curriculum, as an investigation to determine the nature of teachers’ perceptions about students ‘at-risk’. As explained in Chapter One, the motivation stemmed from late 1997 when a new term entered the education lexicon: ‘students at educational risk’. The phrase, ‘student-at-risk’ was already familiar to teachers; for example there had been a Commonwealth funded Student At Risk (STAR) program for alienated and disenchanted youth in secondary schools which ended in 1997. Teachers, in both primary and secondary schools, also used the term ‘at risk’ to describe students not succeeding academically or having difficulties in a number of other ways. The purpose of the first part of the research therefore, was to ascertain how teachers perceived and used the term ‘at risk’ and the question that guided this initial data collection was:

How do teachers and administrators define and use the term ‘at risk’ as applied to students?

In order to collect the data in this first stage, a short questionnaire was designed (Appendix 1) and sent to staff at four schools. The distribution was not restricted to classroom teachers but was given to all school personnel, for example, administrators, nurses, psychologists and chaplains. There were only two questions on the questionnaire, namely:
1. How do you define the term 'at risk'?
2. How would you use the term in a sentence of your own?

The survey instrument was kept short for two reasons: firstly, being mindful of the political atmosphere in schools at the time and the pressure that teachers were experiencing with the introduction of outcomes-based education and the Curriculum Framework and, secondly, in order to try to elicit as far as possible teachers' unpremeditated responses to the concept of 'at riskness' -- in other words to get their 'gut-feeling' about it. Because of its function and the fact that the survey instrument was so brief and informal it was decided to call it a Stimulus Sheet rather than a Questionnaire.

The Stimulus Sheet was distributed to staff at the four schools: two primary and two secondary schools. The selection of schools was purposive in that they had particular and different features that would provide the views of a cross-section of teachers, working in a number of different educational environments.

School A was a large outer metropolitan high school in a low socio-economic area. There were many challenges for this school which had been addressed in a number of ways, for example, there were special programs for students in Years 8 – 10 who were unable to access the mainstream curriculum because of behavioural and/or other problems. There was also a well-developed Vocational Education program in Years 11 and 12 which had a high degree of success, with the majority of students accessing TAFE courses or apprenticeships at the end of the program. In addition there was a Flying Start program on site. This
program catered for post compulsory students who had left school, not necessarily from School A, without graduating and without the necessary life skills to gain employment or further training; the program gave them a 'second chance'.

**School B** was a medium-sized secondary school in Perth. This school was a very old school with a long tradition of high academic achievement. There had been a specialist music program at the school for many years and in 1998 this was extended to include a specialist dance program. There was also a lower secondary Intensive Language Centre (ILC) for on-arrival students from non-English speaking backgrounds, which was a part of the school. As many of these students continued into the mainstream school program after twelve months, English as a Second Language (ESL) was also part of the mainstream curriculum and was offered in Year 12 as the university entrance literacy requirement for eligible ESL students. There was a support and resourcing program for the second language learners in their mainstream classes. Because of the nature of the school, students came from homes widely distributed across the metropolitan area and across school boundaries.

**School C** was a long-established, medium-sized primary school located in an inner Perth suburb. It was in a high socio-economic area within a settled community which was supportive of the school. There was also a Primary Intensive Language Centre on site catering for on-arrival primary age ESL students. After completing their twelve months at the centre, most of these students generally went to schools in their own areas, however some of the children remained at the school and went into mainstream classes. The school had other strong ESL connections, as there
was an ESL Resource Centre on site. This centre was available for all ESL teachers in both primary and secondary locations throughout the state, for resources, information and professional development. The ESL Visiting Teachers for the northern suburbs were also based at the centre.

**School D** was a large primary school in a country area. It was located in a new and affluent suburb of a large country town. The school buildings were new, well designed and well resourced. Due to the nature of the industries that the town supported, there was a mixture of long term and transient residents. This affected the school population, as many students did not complete their primary education at the school. However, because of the nature of the area the school was in, there was strong parental involvement in the education of their children whilst they were at the school. One concern that the school had, in common with many country schools, was the transiency of its teachers and the on-going difficulty the administration had, in both keeping teachers and attracting mature, experienced teachers. This often meant that the majority of the staff was young, temporary and/or new graduates, many of whom wished to return to Perth at the first opportunity. It was often the case that the school year began without the school having its full allocation of teachers.

One hundred and seventy *Stimulus Sheets* were distributed to the four schools. In Schools A & B the Sheets were placed in teachers' pigeon holes by the researcher; in School C they were delivered to the Principal who placed them in the Staff Room; the Acting Principal of School D distributed the sheets to her staff. Seventy-five *Stimulus Sheets* were completed and returned representing a 44% return. Table 3.1 shows the distribution and return of the *Stimulus Sheets*. 
Table 3.1 Stimulus Sheets Distribution and Return.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Number distributed</th>
<th>Number returned</th>
<th>Percentage return</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Chapter Four there is an analysis of the responses to the *Stimulus Sheet*. Suffice to say at this point that, following the analysis, three major themes were identified. Although these were not the only themes or concepts identified, they were the concepts used by the majority of respondents in their writing of a definition of a ‘student at risk’. The identification of themes, or substantive codes, is in accordance with the theoretical sampling method of Grounded Theory. It was the ‘emerging directions’ (Punch 1998) from this first analysis that guided the next stage of the research – the second data collection.

3.2 DATA COLLECTION – STAGE 2

By the time the second data collection took place in 1999, another factor affected the research, namely, that, the *Students at Educational Risk* (SAER) policy had been introduced into all government schools and administrators, if not teachers, were becoming more familiar with the policy. In order to find out what difference, if any, this had made to educators’ perceptions of the term ‘at risk’, a number of interviews was organised. These were conducted over a twelve-month period from October 1999 to October 2000. The questions that guided the second data collection stage were:
• In what ways have broadening the definition to include ‘educational’ changed teachers’ perceptions of ‘at-riskness’?

• What are the factors that teachers and educators believe contribute to a student being identified as at educational risk in a school environment?

• What are the processes that are currently being used in schools to identify students at educational risk?

As mentioned above, the first question was intended to ascertain the difference, if any, in teachers’ perceptions of ‘at risk’ since the inclusion of ‘educational’ to EDWA’s definition. Questions two and three however, were generated by the themes that emerged from the responses to the Stimulus Sheet, which indicated the importance that respondents placed on factors and identification in their perceptions of ‘at riskness’.

The purpose of the interviews conducted in the second stage of the data collection was thus twofold: to address the questions stated above and to give depth to a process that began in a relatively simple way with the Stimulus Sheet but had become more complex following an analysis of the responses.

The intention of the interviews was to allow the respondents to talk about what was important to them in the debate about ‘at risk’ students but also to keep the discussion within the parameters of the study by focussing on the three themes identified in the first analysis. It was decided, therefore, that a semi-structured interview would fulfil these requirements (Bell 1993) A series of questions was developed that provided a framework or focus for the interview – an aide memoire of approximately fourteen questions arranged around three categories -- definitions, factors, and identification of educationally ‘at-risk’ students. The majority of the
questions were open-ended with the intention of giving the respondent every opportunity to express their point of view. The questions were not intended to drive the interview but rather to keep it focussed so that although there was the opportunity for depth in the answers, the information was kept within the parameters of the purpose of the interview. The majority of the interviewees were asked the same questions but there were some variations in order to cater for their different positions and areas of expertise. The full list of questions, with variations, is shown in Appendix 2.

The interviews took place in a variety of locations. The interviewees were either personally known or recommended to the researcher: all were employed by EDWA and were chosen because they were representative of a particular group in the government education system. There were teachers, school administrators, Central Office personnel and a school psychologist. Four practising teachers were interviewed, all of whom were working in secondary schools. Three teachers were very experienced, one was also working part-time as a University Lecturer for Diploma of Education students. The fourth teacher was in her second year of teaching and was working in the science/mathematics learning areas. Three interviewees had various roles in the Central Office of the Education Department. One was a psychologist and educator with a primary, special needs background working with the Students at Educational Risk Project. Another participant worked in the Student Services Branch of the Education Department and had started his teaching career as a secondary science teacher before becoming involved in programs for students at risk and those with learning difficulties. The third Central Office participant was a primary educator who had been involved for many years with
literacy learning in the early years and had had experience with a wide range of teachers, including teachers of ESL students, Aboriginal, Deaf, and Visually Impaired students and teachers in Education Support Centres. Of the remaining two interviewees, one was the principal of a country primary school who had an interest in Educational Support and the other was a practising school psychologist in a metropolitan high school.

The interviews lasted on average twenty minutes and were preceded by an introduction, an explanation of the purpose of the interview, a personal guarantee of confidentiality and a request that the interview be taped. Locations for the interviews were varied. Some took place in people’s homes, others in classrooms or offices in schools or in the Central Office of the Education Department. Following the interviews, the researcher transcribed all the tapes before analysing them to identify further emerging themes or categories (over and above those already identified and used in the aide memoire) which illustrated the core elements of the responses.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION – STAGE 3

In this stage of the data collection process the researcher, who had been involved since 1999 in a Student at Educational Risk Committee at the high school in which she worked as a teacher of post compulsory ESL students, was able to collect additional data pertinent to the research. This data is presented in the form of case studies of a number of situations that involved students at educational risk in a high school setting and which demonstrated the practical application of the Making the Difference Strategy in relation to those cases. There were no new questions directing this part
of the data collection but the three questions posed in the second stage were pertinent. The case studies include a description of: a program designed specifically for ‘students at educational’ risk; the development of a student profile; a description of an identification strategy and the outcome of identifying a particular ‘at risk’ student. The case studies help to illustrate aspects of the findings that emerged from the data collection and analysis process.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis in this study was a cumulative process in which the data was reduced by identifying recurring themes and developing relationships between them. In accordance with principles of Grounded Theory, the patterns that emerged from the first data collection influenced the framework and focus of the second data collection. During the data collection process, the relationships and ideas that were evolving were recorded as memos (Punch 1998). These memos provided the basis for a number of propositions which influenced the collection of the case studies. The propositions that emerged as the memoing continued will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

The researcher found a great deal of literature on the subject of definitions of students at risk, but there was little research on how teachers themselves perceived ‘at riskness”. This made Grounded Theory an appropriate methodology to use for the study so that a theory could be generated that may assist teachers and educators in the future when the Students at Educational Risk Strategy is fully implemented in 2005.

Chapter Four, which follows, presents the analysis and findings of the responses to the Stimulus Sheet.
CHAPTER 4

STIMULUS SHEET - ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

The initial data collection for this study was designed to explore what classroom teachers and other personnel working with students in Western Australian government schools understood by the term ‘at risk’ and how they applied it in a school setting. Consequently, teachers and other personnel were asked to complete a questionnaire, which, because of its brevity, the researcher called a Stimulus Sheet. There were two questions: firstly, respondents were asked to define the term ‘at risk’ as they applied it to students and secondly, to use the term in a sentence of their own. This two-pronged approach was to allow people to define the term but also to expand on this by applying the term as they might for example, in interactions with their colleagues. At this stage of the study, the word ‘educational’, as in ‘students at educational risk’, was deliberately omitted, as the researcher wanted to obtain people’s perceptions of ‘at risk’ before the Students at Educational Risk Strategy (EDWA 1998b) was fully introduced into Western Australian government schools.

4.1 RESPONSES

There were 75 responses to the Stimulus Sheet, 44 from secondary and 31 from primary personnel. In analysing these, the researcher used the open-coding strategies of Grounded Theory and looked for recurring themes or categories. It became apparent in the early stages of the analysis that respondents were using similar words or phrases in their answers to describe an ‘at risk’ student and it was from this terminology that key concepts emerged from which the substantive categories were identified.
Many respondents used more than one key concept, especially in the usage of ‘at risk’, and it was noticeable that, whilst some responses were succinct, the majority required more than the four lines that were provided on the Stimulus Sheet, to answer the questions.

The main concepts that were identified were that students ‘at risk’ were

- failing at school
- did not achieve their potential
- were affected by a variety of factors
- needed to be identified and have special programs provided for them and
- could be in actual danger.

These concepts were summarised as: failure; potential; factors; programs and danger and the number of primary and secondary responses which used these concepts were noted separately. Table 4.1 lists these concepts with the number of responses. It also provides an example to demonstrate how the concept was used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Concept(s)</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Failure</td>
<td>&quot;a high probability of failure&quot;</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential</td>
<td>is unable to achieve to his/her full potential&quot;</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons/ factors</td>
<td>&quot;not able to perform due to physical, emotional reasons&quot;</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Identification/ programs| "imperative that all schools identify "
                        | "Students who require a special program to enable them to function"    | 8       | 3         |
| Danger                  | "liable to physical, psychological or emotional damage"                 | -       | 8         |

Table 4.1 Key Concepts used in Stimulus Sheet Responses to Define and/or Use ‘At Risk’.
The expectation of the researcher was that there would be a difference between the schools related to their location and type of program delivery, however this did not eventuate. Instead, the difference that was noted was between primary and secondary respondents which was unexpected and interesting. Figure 4.1 graphically represents the percentage in each concept category and compares the responses of primary and secondary personnel.

![Figure 4.1 Graph of Key Concepts in Primary and Secondary Responses](image)

The number of responses in Table 4.1 and Figure 4.1, adds up to more than the total number of returned Stimulus Sheets, because many respondents used more than one concept in their definitions and/or usage and were therefore counted in more than one category. There were very few responses that used only one concept. Following this initial analysis, the identified concept categories were then explored in more detail.
4.2 **KEY CONCEPTS**

**Category 1: The Concepts of Failure and Potential**

Although these two categories were considered separately in the initial analysis, they are combined here as the notion of not achieving a potential has an assumption of failure, as in this definition of an ‘at risk’ student: “A student who is in danger of not reaching their potential or not achieving to their level” (D13 = respondent thirteen from school D) This definition illustrates another feature of the responses, which was the use of phrases that mean the same as failure but are not as emotive, for example:

- Not succeeding
- Not reaching
- Not achieving
- Below level
- Difficulty in achieving
- Not progressing
- Falling behind

As Figure 4.1 illustrates, a considerable number of respondents, both primary and secondary, considered an ‘at risk’ student to be one who was failing in some way – educationally as in: “John’s failure to concentrate in class has placed him ‘at risk’ of failing” (A3) or after leaving school: “‘At risk’ means is likely to fail at what they are doing – leading to failure in the workplace” (B8) Other respondents considered ‘at risk’ students to be those who were not achieving their potential: “Children who are not able to perform to their full potential”. (D24) 35% of primary teachers defined ‘at risk’ in this way, compared to 25% of secondary teachers. What the ‘potential’ was, was not defined in these responses.
However, there were also respondents who linked the two concepts of failure and potential as in “students demonstrating skills, ability below individual potential” (D14) and “any student ... who may be achieving below his/her capacity/potential” (C2). This linking accords with EDWA’s official definition of a ‘student at educational risk’, which is:

those students who may be at risk of not achieving the major learning outcomes of schooling to levels which enable them to achieve their potential. (EDWA 1998e, p.3)

One secondary response was interesting as both the concepts were used but in rather different ways. In this respondent’s definition of ‘at risk’ students it was ‘potential’ that was a key element – “students who are not achieving their educational potential (or even close) at school”. However in the second question in which respondents were asked to use the term ‘at risk’, this respondent was much more specific; “Selma is at risk of failing four of her Year 9 subjects due to extended absences from school”. (A5) So although the notion of potential is in the definition of ‘at risk’, when the term is used by this teacher, the focus is very definitely on failure. The assumption in this usage is that the ‘Selma’ would not fail those subjects if she attended school regularly.

Eight of the primary responses considered failure in terms of literacy skills, so that: “Those ‘at risk’ include children who are at risk of failing literacy, numeracy’. (D9) In the category of factors (which is discussed in more detail below), lack of literacy skills is seen as a factor in students being ‘at risk’, so that we have lack of literacy skills as both a definition of ‘at riskness’ as well as the reason for it in the responses to the Stimulus Sheet.
A number of both primary and secondary teachers considered ‘at riskness’ in future terms – the effect on a student later in life. For one primary respondent this was when the student was “illiterate in secondary school”. (D3) This respondent believed that “not being able to read and write” could affect the student’s ability to “live independently”. A secondary respondent echoed this sentiment in their response; “Fred’s literacy and numeracy are so poor that he is risk of not being able to obtain employment and fulfil everyday tasks required in society”. Seven other respondents were also concerned about an ‘at risk’ student’s ability to succeed beyond school, for example an ‘at risk’ student had “little prospect of moving successfully into the workforce or further training” (A4) or was in danger of “not achieving full potential as a citizen” (B10) It is clear that these teachers viewed ‘at riskness’ as being a very serious problem indeed. This view is reflected in literature definitions of ‘at risk’ youth, for example “young people who ... are thought likely to fail to achieve the development in their adolescent years that would provide a sound basis for a satisfying and fulfilling adult life.” (Batten & Russell 1995, p.1)

Category 2: The Concept of Factors

Twenty-six out of the forty-four secondary responses considered students at risk to be those who were not succeeding in some way but, from the Stimulus Sheet data, it appeared that at the secondary level it was not only a student’s academic potential that was seen as critical but also their ability to succeed at life skills, that is their social/emotional behaviour, and the reasons or factors that prevented such success were seen as an important part of ‘at riskness’. All the responses were re-analysed to
determine which ones viewed the concept of being 'at risk' only in academic or educational terms and those which saw 'at riskness' from a social or behavioural point of view. The researcher found that at the primary level the vast majority of teachers (100% in the case of School C) considered 'at riskness' in educational terms whilst at a secondary level the responses were more evenly distributed between educational and behavioural concerns. Table 4.2 illustrates the difference between Educational/Academic responses and Social/Behavioural responses. As some responses did not mention either focus, the percentages do not necessarily add up to a hundred.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Type</th>
<th>Secondary Schools</th>
<th>Primary Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education/Academic</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/Behavioural</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3 Responses Based on Types of 'At Risk' Factors Used.

The responses from the primary personnel in the study indicate that they placed more emphasis on the educational or academic needs of their students – in particular the need for the children to be able to read and write, whereas by the time children reach secondary school, teachers are not only concerned about their students' abilities in the classroom, but also their well-being beyond the academic.

Chapter Two examines in some detail the way the term 'student at risk' has been defined in the literature and there the point is made that in order to define 'at riskness', educators often list the reasons or factors that they believe cause it. For example, *The International Encyclopaedia of Education* (Davies & McCaul 1994) begins its entry by stating the factors that must be
taken into account when defining ‘at risk’, namely: the “social, economic, and cultural environment of the particular child”. (p.706) In this part of the analysis the researcher listed all the factors that were used by the respondents and then determined whether they could be classified into related groups. The researcher found that there were four main categories of factors: Personal, Family, Health and School. The factors are listed in Tables 4.3 and 4.4 below under these four headings, although it must be pointed out that some factors referred to can be listed under more than one heading, for example ‘peer pressure’ can occur in many different areas of a student’s life and emotional and psychological factors may be considered to be either Personal or Health factors, so the headings are to be seen only as an approximate classification tool at the first level of abstraction, and many factors can and do overlap. In the tables the actual words or phrases that respondents used are quoted.

List A: Secondary Responses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTORS</th>
<th>Personal</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social -lack of social skills</td>
<td>Poor home environment</td>
<td>Psychological well-being</td>
<td>Lack of literacy/numeracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Deprivation</td>
<td>Physical well-being</td>
<td>Frequent absences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Lack of support Family trauma</td>
<td>Emotional health</td>
<td>Truancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer pressure</td>
<td>Lack of opportunity</td>
<td>Physical trauma</td>
<td>Lack of concentration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low self esteem</td>
<td>Lack of resources</td>
<td>Mental trauma</td>
<td>Lack of specialist teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural barriers</td>
<td>Lack of opportunity</td>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>Peer pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural behaviour</td>
<td>Lack of opportunity</td>
<td>Sickness</td>
<td>Non-participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alcohol abuse</td>
<td>Lack of opportunity</td>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>Need for extra attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drug abuse</td>
<td>Lack of opportunity</td>
<td>Diet</td>
<td>Specific learning difficulty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>Lack of opportunity</td>
<td></td>
<td>Learning dysfunction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>On the streets</td>
<td>Lack of opportunity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suicidal</td>
<td>Lack of opportunity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Isolated</td>
<td>Lack of opportunity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of motivation -</td>
<td>Lack of opportunity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disinterest</td>
<td>Lack of opportunity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Antisocial</td>
<td>Lack of opportunity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of opportunity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students at Risk – Policy, Practices and Perceptions. Do they make a difference?

- Lazy
- Disorganised
- Poor attitude
- Lack of ability/skills

Table 4.3 List of Factors Used by Secondary Teachers to Define 'At Risk.'

List B Primary Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTORS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural bias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental delay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive, social, physical weakness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.4 List of Factors Used by Primary Teachers to Define 'At Risk'.

The first point to be noted is the extent of the lists and the number of factors that the respondents used. As can be seen from the tables, both primary and secondary respondents used similar factors in their definitions, particularly in the Personal and Family categories. However, there were some notable differences when the category of Health was considered. Some primary respondents saw the physical health of a student as having an effect on a student’s ability to learn, for example, “Within the context of the classroom, a child ‘at risk’ is one who is likely to seriously underachieve due to cognitive, social or physical weaknesses.”
Students at Risk – Policy, Practices and Perceptions. Do they make a difference?

(C6); "children with emotional problems which hinder learning or physical problems" (C22). On the other hand the secondary respondents tended to be more specific when citing health factors, for example "poor dietary habits" or "sickness" and they did not confine themselves to the school context, for example, "participating in behaviour which will put their life/health in jeopardy." (A27). As discussed in Chapter Three, the Stimulus Sheets were distributed to all school personnel so that some responses may be from school nurses, psychologists or chaplains who were included in the data as they worked closely with students and teachers.

Although not all the respondents used factors in their replies to the questions on the Stimulus Sheet, 39% of primary respondents and 45% of secondary responses did mention factors in their definitions. According to the responses available, it appears that teachers' perceptions of the factors that affect students and may cause them to become 'at risk', change as they progress through school. This is illustrated in Table 4.3 List A Secondary Responses by the inclusion of responses referring to psychological, drug and alcohol abuse, suicidal and sexual behaviour and also more specific attitudinal factors, for example, "lack of motivation – disinterest". The concerns of the teachers in the study, in particular those in the secondary schools, regarding the factors that can put a student 'at risk', is borne out by the Western Australian Child Health Survey (1997) which discusses the fact that there are many challenges that adolescents must face and that the majority meet them successfully but it warns that there is evidence that the behavioural and mental health problems suffered by teenagers, for example, depression, suicidal behaviour, and
drug and alcohol abuse are increasing in Australia and other first world countries (p. 63).

**Category 3: The Concept of Identification and the Need for the Provision of Special Programs.**

This theme, which also emerged from the *Stimulus Sheet* responses, again demonstrates a considerable difference between secondary and primary responses. Twenty-six percent of primary personnel in the sample indicated that early intervention and program development were important concepts when considering a student 'at risk' but only 7% of secondary responses mentioned identification or the need for a special program in their responses. As one primary teacher wrote in their use of the term 'at risk': "It is important that children deemed to be 'at risk' are identified as early as possible for intervention plans to take place" (C1)

An explanation for this viewpoint could lie in the fact that primary schools and teachers have been at the forefront of developing Independent Learning/Education Programs (ILP/IEPs) and intervention programs for students 'at risk'. This has been an integral part of the *First Steps* (EDWA 1995) teaching methodology discussed in Chapter Two and in which many primary teachers have had extensive professional development. Similarly, the *Literacy Net* (EDWA 2000), also discussed in detail in Chapter Two, was developed specifically to identify students at risk. This was being trialled with K – 3 children in 1998 when the *Stimulus Sheet* was distributed. Primary teachers, as has already been noted, tend to be very aware of their students' progress in literacy and numeracy and are quickly aware of any student experiencing difficulty in these areas. As discussed in the section above on the Concept of Failure many primary teachers in
the survey related ‘failure’ to students not achieving their potential “emotionally, socially, educationally”, and therefore saw early intervention as a means of addressing this. Early intervention has been the basis of many compensatory programs developed over the years, again these were discussed in detail in Chapter Two. One of the most famous programs was the American *Headstart* program introduced in 1975 and which resulted in the television program *Sesame Street*. What is pertinent here is that the program was originally intended for pre-school children considered ‘at risk’ because of their minority status and low socio-economic backgrounds, factors mentioned by both primary and secondary teachers in their responses on the *Stimulus Sheet*.

A compensatory program that many Australian secondary schools participated in prior to 1998, was the *Students at Risk* (STAR) program funded by the Commonwealth Government. This program targeted four particular groups of students over fifteen years of age who were seen to be disadvantaged in some way, for example English as a Second Language students, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, those with disabilities and geographically isolated students. (Ashenden Milligan 1994) The ‘National Equity Programs for Schools’ (NEPS) definition of an ‘at risk’ student was a student “most at risk of not completing secondary school.” (Batten & Russell 1995, p1) Completing or graduating from high school, is seen by many secondary teachers as an important achievement for their students. Perhaps because of this, none of the secondary teachers in the sample perceived ‘students at risk’ simply in terms of lack of literacy skills: such a lack was considered a risk factor but it was one of a number whereas it was an important consideration for many primary teachers.
Category 4: The Concept of Danger

This theme was only identified in secondary responses. Secondary students or youths may be considered to be simply because they are adolescents and it is a time of physical, emotional and social upheaval in their lives (Withers & Batten 1995). This perception of 'at risk' equates it with the students being in danger or 'at risk' of something and several responses of secondary teachers reflected this view, for example, "'at risk' means in danger of being isolated or abused" (B22); "'at risk' of being in trouble with the law [or] 'at risk' of not achieving full potential as a useful citizen." (B10). Secondary teachers are working with students as they approach the end of their schooling and this appears to have a considerable effect on the way the teachers perceive 'at riskness'.

SUMMARY

From the analysis of the responses to the Stimulus Sheets, it became apparent that there was a difference in the perceptions of 'at riskness' between primary and secondary teachers, which appears to relate primarily to the emphasis that primary teachers place on the literacy skills of their students. A student 'at risk' was seen by many primary teachers to be a student who lacked literacy skills which put the student 'at risk'. This lack would also lead to the student not achieving their potential which, in turn put them further 'at risk'. The links between being 'at risk', lacking literacy skills and not achieving potential is illustrated diagrammatically in Figure 4.2.
At the secondary level however, a student ‘at risk’ was one who was failing at school, which may be for lack of literacy skills, but this was seen as only one of several factors that were implicated in ‘at riskness’\textsuperscript{2}. The factors may put the student ‘at risk’ or may cause the student to fail, so that the concepts are interrelated and circular. This interrelationship is illustrated in Figure 4.3.

![Figure 4.3: Secondary Teachers' Perception of 'At Risk'.](image)

The \emph{Stimulus Sheet} was a short and simple questionnaire that asked school personnel to define and use the term ‘at risk’ as applied to students, and the researcher believed that the benefits to the study would be slight. However, the responses proved to be thoughtful and well considered and produced a number of concepts that were worthy of further consideration. Consequently, with these emerging themes in mind, the study proceeded with a number of semi-structured interviews. Chapter Five analyses the interviewee’s responses.
CHAPTER FIVE

INTERVIEWS: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

The interviews which were conducted by the researcher comprised the second stage of the data collection for the study. They were semi-structured and an aide memoire was used to focus the questions (see Appendix 2). As explained in Chapter Three, the Stimulus Sheets, were distributed at the beginning of 1998 when the notion of ‘students at educational risk’ was only just being introduced into schools with the advent of the documentation for Making the Difference, the students at educational risk strategy. Consequently, when the interviews were conducted in 1999 and 2000, the notion of ‘educational’ risk and the implications of the Making the Difference strategy were made explicit and became part of the aide memoire.

There were nine interviewees who were purposively chosen by the researcher in order to add depth to the research process. They were all teachers or educators and the majority had an interest in or experience with ‘at risk’ students. All the interviewees worked for the Education Department of Western Australia. To ensure confidentiality, all the respondents in this stage were given pseudonyms for the purpose of reporting their comments here.

The questions for the interviews reflected the major themes identified in the analysis of the Stimulus Sheets and were organised into three parts namely:

- Definitions
- Factors
• Identification

As explained above, these concepts had emerged from the analysis of the responses to the *Stimulus Sheet* during the coding process. The researcher felt that they constituted a new set of codes that could be elaborated through the interview process. It was also intended, in this stage of the data collection, to take the study one step further and to explore if the addition of *educational* had changed teachers' perceptions of 'at riskness' in any way since the introduction of *Making the Difference*. Interviewees' responses to the questions grouped under each of the three concepts will be analysed and discussed separately in the following sections.

5.1 SECTION 1 - DEFINITIONS

There were five questions in this category all concerned with teachers' perceptions of the term, 'at risk' as compared with 'at educational risk' and whether their understandings had changed with the introduction of the *Making the Difference* strategy. The questions were:

1. As a teacher/educator how would your define the phrase 'student at risk'?

2. When 'Making the Difference' came out in 1998 the word 'educational' was added to the phrase 'at risk' that is, 'students at educational risk'. Did the addition change your perception or understanding in any way?

3. The intention of adding 'educational' to the phrase was to remove possible negative connotations. Do you believe that students are less stigmatised or labelled since 'educational' was added to the term?

4. In general do people use the full phrase or still say 'student at risk'?

5. In your opinion has the current thinking allowed for the needs of more, or less students to be addressed?
This category is an important one, not just for the interviews but also for the study as a whole and the responses were very comprehensive, consequently the responses to each question were analysed separately.

**Question One**

The first question was very similar to the first question on the *Stimulus Sheet* and it was therefore particularly interesting when the interviewees spontaneously used the concepts of 'failure', 'potential' and 'factors' in their definitions of a student at risk. This was a verification of the concepts which were identified in the first stage of the data collection.

The key concepts used by the interviewees are shown in Table 5.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Concepts</th>
<th>Potential</th>
<th>Failure</th>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responses</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.1 Key Concepts used by Interviewees to Define 'At Risk'.

**The concept of potential.**

More interviewees considered potential in their definitions than failure. ‘Potential’ for example was used by Anne, an acting primary principal, when she said, “a student at risk is a student who has not reached their potential in the school environment” whilst Grace, a secondary teacher believed that, “‘at risk’ ... means a student who is not going to be able to meet their potential”. Grace added an interesting explanation of what ‘potential’ meant for her – “so ‘at risk’ implies for me that there is a potential to be able to make that situation better.”

**The concept of failure.**

There were also responses that used the concept of failure on its own such as Charles’s, a secondary ESL teacher, who defined 'at risk' as, “a student
at risk of failing a program of study”. This was very similar to Diane’s, a secondary science teacher, comment that a student at risk was one who “can’t get through a class they should get through.”

The concept of factors.
Both Charles and Diane considered there were “reasons” why the student was ‘at risk’. Reasons or factors were used by seven of the nine respondents in their definitions, for example, “family problems which are just overwhelming” (Beth). Frank called the factors “descriptors” and believed there was a continuum of ‘at riskness’ so that at one end – the “pointy end” there were factors such as “a dysfunctional family, drugs etc” whilst at the other end an ‘at risk’ student may be one who is “a ghost, passive, just sits there, doesn’t get into any trouble”.

The concept of outcomes.
This was an interesting new concept - that of ‘outcomes’. The respondent, Emma, who used this concept in her response was, predictably perhaps, working with the Students at Educational Risk project in Central Office: Emma’s response was, “I’m going to give you the definition that’s described in the Policy ... and that is, that students at risk are those who ... are at risk of not achieving any one or more of the overarching outcomes that are specified in the Curriculum Framework.” She did not elaborate in any way and she omitted ‘to achieve their potential’, which is also part of the official definition. There was an interesting addition to this response by Helen, who was also working in Central Office as she believed that the Education Department’s definition, that Emma quoted above, “describes more the child as being ‘at risk’ of not reaching a potential rather than defining exactly what ‘at riskness” is”. She
elaborated by listing the sort of factors that can cause a student to be 'at risk' such as, drug taking, family problems, transiency and so on; factors which are not mentioned at all in the official documentation.

**Question Two**

The purpose of the second question in the definition category was to address the changes discussed in the first paragraph of this chapter, by introducing the topic of 'educational risk'.

Rather surprisingly, three of the respondents, all secondary teachers, were unaware of the introduction of the *Making the Difference* strategy. Two of them were aware of the notion of a student 'at risk' but neither knew about the new definition nor of the addition of 'educational'. On reflection, one of these teachers felt that it did not change his perception whereas the second teacher, the most inexperienced of all the interviewees, felt that it had "redefined" it for her and that it now had a more academic than emotional emphasis. The third teacher in this group was unaware of the official change but had always believed that the term was "student at educational risk".

All the other respondents were aware that there had been a change but did not feel that it had changed their perception. Anne, for instance, who had defined 'at risk' in terms of a student's potential, clarified this statement in her response to question 2 by relating the potential to outcomes: "So the 'at riskness' of not reaching their potential was related very much to potential in terms of education and the outcomes that we're seeking".
Two respondents felt that whilst adding ‘educational’ had not changed their perceptions, it had changed those of others. For example, Frank, a Project Officer in Central Office, believed that the principals he had worked with had a negative view of a ‘student at risk’, “their idea of an at risk student was of a bad student”, and that they focussed on behaviour without considering prevention or intervention. Now he felt that the addition of ‘educational’ had made them look “outside the square” and consider other students. He also felt that because Students at Educational Risk had become Education Department policy and had funding attached to it, it achieved more “credibility” with school administrators. Iris, a school psychologist working in a secondary school, also believed that there had been too much emphasis on the social/emotional issues relating to ‘at risk’ students and she believed that the addition of ‘educational’ had made it “more of a responsibility of all personnel within the education system to support the students at educational risk.”

However, whilst these respondents saw the shift from ‘at risk’ to ‘at educational risk’ as changing perceptions to include both behavioural and academic issues so that a greater number of students would be included, another respondent felt that it narrowed the definition. Grace felt that by making it ‘at educational risk’ the Education Department could imply that it did not feel itself responsible for other areas of a student’s life, and she believed that the definition “should be broadened to include the physical risk as well”.

The researcher had believed that as question 2 had been a closed one, the responses would be easily summarised or reduced. However, the interviewees had quite definite, and at times, conflicting views on the
addition of ‘educational’ and it would appear that at the time the interviews were held (1999-2000) there was still considerable difference in the perceptions of the term ‘at educational risk’ even among EDWA personnel. Table 5.2 (a) classifies the responses with regard to whether the respondents were aware of the addition of ‘educational’ to the Education Department’s definition of ‘at risk’. Table 5.2 (b) shows whether the addition had changed the respondents’ perception in any way.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Aware of the Change?</th>
<th>Had the Change Affected their Perception?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tr>
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<td>F</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tr>
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<td>G</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2 Changes in Interviewees’ Perceptions Following the Addition of ‘Educational’ to ‘At Risk’.

To summarise the responses to Question 2: as was expected, the interviewees who were administrators and educators were aware of the new policy, *Students at Educational Risk* and of the inclusion of ‘educational’ into the official definition, however, it was a matter of concern that the three practising classroom teachers were not. Three of the
five interviewees considered that the addition of ‘educational’ to the term ‘at risk’ had changed their perception but the interesting point was that, instead of it broadening the definition, as was the intention of the Education Department, for two of the interviewees, Grace and Charles, both secondary teachers, the change had narrowed it.

**Question Three**

When EDWA added the word “educational” to the term “students at risk” so that it became, “students at educational risk” (SAER) it believed that the definition was being broadened. In her research paper for EDWA, Anne Butorac (1998) explored the labels that are currently used to describe certain groups of students, labels such as: ‘disadvantaged’, ‘underachieving’, ‘minority’ and ‘at risk’. She argued that labels such as these imply a deficit or lack on the part of the student. This deficit concept is discussed in more detail in the literature review in Chapter 2. The point here is that EDWA believed that by adding the word ‘educational’ to ‘at risk’ the inherent negative connotations would be removed as the ‘risk’ is no longer being attributed to the students themselves, “the term in its expanded sense links ‘risk’ to ‘education’”. (Butorac p 3) In consequence, if students were regarded as being at ‘educational risk’ they would no longer be stigmatised or labelled. It was this issue that the next question was designed to explore.

Of the nine people interviewed only two were unequivocal and felt that the addition had removed negative connotations. Diane felt that students were less stigmatised because they had been “redefined”, however she did not expand on how this had reduced the stigmatisation. Iris, on the other hand, believed that the stigma was lessened because teachers now had to
consider the educational factors that could be putting a child 'at risk' so
the addition of 'educational' had "broadened the outlook at lot more".

Two interviewees qualified their answer by saying that it depended on
who was using the phrase. Emma, for example, believed that when
educators used it there were still negative connotations because the focus
was on a medical model, which was a deficit model, and whilst the culture
associated with this model continued to exist in the education system,
students would still be labelled or stigmatised. The models that may be
used to describe a student's success or failure are explored in detail in
Chapter 2. Briefly, the model that Emma referred to here is one that lists
characteristics associated with particular types of behaviour in order to
identify a student 'at risk'. It is a model that has its basis in the medical
field where groups or categories of people are identified who have a
higher probability of contracting certain diseases. (Placier 1993) Grace also
felt that it depended on who was using the term and that if it was used
amongst teachers and educators then the addition of 'educational' could
be seen as a "clarifying addition" and she felt, like Iris, that the addition of
'educational' broadened the term. But she also said that calling a student
'at risk' or 'at educational risk' may not change the negative perception as
it was still a label that other students did not have -- "So, I think that by
calling students at risk or educational risk may not be perceived as all that
different. It's still identifying and singling them out from their cohort as
needing something."

Helen agreed with this point of view but also felt that since Students at
Educational Risk had become policy, there was a likelihood of students
suffering more from labelling because in her words, "as soon as you have
a policy you then start grouping children, you start to identify particular groups". Once identified, these groups had to have "experts attached to them to address the problems". She used the example of the Health Survey (Zubrick et al 1997) which identified a significant number of students with language problems and which resulted in the push to have more speech pathologists in schools. Her point was that language problems may not be caused by a speech difficulty but be due to the language background or dialect of the child and that by bringing in someone from outside to address the difficulty, teachers may not develop programs within the classroom to help the child. In Helen’s words, “That’s been one concern in putting children into boxes of at-riskness”.

Of the other interviewees, Charles and Beth both felt that the addition of educational had not changed the negative perception of “students at risk’ and that they were still stigmatised. Beth was also concerned about the lowering of teacher expectations when students were grouped or labelled. Anne felt that the addition did not make any difference to her own perception because she viewed students at risk within an educational context where she believed they were not stigmatised. However she then went on to say that although the students were not stigmatised by the system, there were factors outside the system which did stigmatise ‘at risk’ students. In explanation she described children who presented poorly in terms of their general physical appearance at school and the way other students, as well as teachers, viewed them. She felt that this was an issue that needed addressing but the problems that were creating the situation involved factors that were outside of school where teachers did not always have any influence.
Frank gave the most interesting response to this question. When asked whether he felt that students were less labelled now, his first response was "yes and no"! His point was that the move towards inclusivity in education meant that some students were not getting the individual attention they needed and in his words "some students are better off labelled". For example, he pointed out that in the present climate it is no longer acceptable to say a student has a "learning difficulty" and because of that the student may not get the attention he or she needs when they are described by the broader term as being at 'educational risk'. In spite of this though, Frank went on to say that in a broader context, and remembering some of the labels of the past, for example, "an alienated student" or "a disaffected youth", 'student at educational risk', is a far more "palatable title".

Once again, it is difficult to summarise the responses to question three. Seven of the nine interviewees believed that referring to students as being at 'educational risk' still had negative connotations but there were different points of view as to why this was so. There was a belief amongst the majority of the interviewees that any label, simply because it identifies a particular group, will always have negative connotations but that in a broader context, to paraphrase Frank's words, 'student at educational risk' is a more acceptable label than those that have been used in the past. A breakdown of the responses to this question is shown in Figure 5.1.
Students at Risk – Policy, Practices and Perceptions. Do they make a difference?

**Student at Educational Risk**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students less stigmatised by addition of 'educational'</th>
<th>Students still stigmatised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diane: redefined</td>
<td>Emma: medical model focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iris broadened the outlook</td>
<td>Grace: clarifying addition but still a label</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helen: policy meant more students labelled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Charles: students stigmatised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beth: lowering of teacher expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anne: students stigmatised by outside factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frank: yes/no – label more palatable but some students better off labelled</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.1 Are students Less Stigmatised by the Addition of 'Educational' to At Risk? Interviewees Responses with Key Words.

**Question Four**

As we have seen, prior to the introduction of 'educational risk', teachers and other educators were familiar with the term a student 'at risk' and used this in discussion with their colleagues. The researcher was interested to know whether this had changed and whether *Making the Difference* had affected the way people used the term.

Responses to the question appeared to be influenced by the position of the respondent and whether there had been any professional development in that area or, in Beth's words, they had had their "awareness raised" in discussion with other educators.

Diane and Charles, both secondary teachers, said they still used the term 'student at risk', although Diane believed that it implied at 'educational'
risk. Charles used 'at risk' himself and felt that other teachers were still referring to 'students at risk' rather than 'students at educational risk'. Grace, also a secondary teacher but one who was also teaching a university course believed that the context determined whether 'at risk' or at 'educational risk' was appropriate. For example ESL students exiting an Intensive Language Centre would be at 'educational' risk in a mainstream situation. She said that in general discussion with her colleagues however, 'at risk' would have wider implications, including implications for coping or not coping in the world beyond school. Anne's response was interesting, as she had made clear during the interview that she was personally very aware of the contents of the Making the Difference document in her position as an Acting Primary Principal, but her response to this question was simply that people still talked about 'students at risk'.

Frank said that he would deliberately use the full phrase, 'student at educational risk', especially in his discussions with secondary principals, in order to differentiate from the old Student at Risk (STAR) definition which had only addressed the needs of 15 to 17 year old alienated students. Both Helen and Iris used the full phrase themselves and with their colleagues as they were using the Making the Difference documents all the time. Interestingly, Iris was the only respondent who talked about the acronym: S-A-E-R being in use in discussion with her colleagues and how, in her opinion, this had superseded the use of the full phrase. This was also the experience of the researcher, who, by this time, was a member of the S-A-E-R committee and helped draft the S-A-E-R profiling document at her school. Table 5.3 illustrates the use of 'student at risk' and 'student at educational risk' by the interviewees.
Table 5.3 Respondents use of STAR or SAER

In summary, at the time of the interviews, the phrase ‘student at risk’ was used by respondents in both primary and secondary schools. All the other respondents – educators and/or psychologists were using the full phrase or its acronym. One exception was Beth who was a teacher in a secondary college. She used the full phrase ‘student at educational risk’ because there had been “awareness raising” sessions in the college on this issue.

Question Five

This was the final question in this section. At the time of the interviews, that is, 1999/2000, the SAER Strategy *Making the Difference* had not been fully implemented in schools; as one interviewee remarked “we are still tinkering around the edges” and the timeline for doing so had already been extended to 2005. However, the researcher wished to find out if, at this early stage, the broadening of the definition had started to have an effect on students who could be expected to be identified as ‘at risk’ in the past.
There were eight responses to this question. Diane, in her second year of teaching, remarked that she did not have the experience to answer the question. However, the other seven interviewees were all very well experienced and it is possible that the secondary teachers would also have had experience of the Commonwealth funded *Students at Risk* (STAR) program which only came to an end in 1997.

Two respondents focussed on the 'educational' aspect of the new definition and thought that it could affect the area of risk that would be considered. Charles, for example felt 'educational risk' was more definitive because it had isolated the area of risk. Beth felt that in the college where she taught there were no groups of students whose needs were less well addressed with the advent of the new policy. However, she felt that teachers of Aboriginal students might not agree if only their 'educational' risk was addressed without addressing all the "other deficits" in their lives. The comments of both of these teachers are interesting as the thirteen overarching outcomes that are referred to in EDWA's definition of a student at 'educational risk' include outcomes in the affective domain but neither Beth nor Charles took that into account in their comments.

Iris and Frank were quite definite in their responses and felt that the needs of more students would be addressed by the SAER strategy. Frank believed that there would be a more equitable level of support with the move away from the 'students at risk' understanding of the old STAR program, that is for 15 – 17 year old alienated youth to a spread of support across all years, K- 12. Iris was quite unequivocal in her answer to this question which was, "more, definitely more". This related to her earlier
comment where she said she felt that the responsibility for students at ‘educational risk’ was now being accepted by all school personnel.

In their responses, both Anne and Helen brought up the issue of funding for programs for special needs groups, including students ‘at risk’. Prior to 1997, the Commonwealth, through its *National Equity Programs for Schools* (NEPS) (DEET 1996) had funded a number of targeted programs for students at risk, including the STAR program. Amongst the groups identified by the STAR program were Aboriginal, ESL and students with disabilities as well as those from low socio-economic backgrounds. At the time of the interview (late 1999) Anne felt that not much change had been noticed since the change in funding and the introduction of the SAER policy but, she felt that in the future, special interest groups might need strong lobby groups to ensure adequate funding. She cited the example of *Students in Isolated and Distance Education* (SIDE) who had recently got “quite a good deal” because they had a strong lobby group.

Helen, who at the time of the interview was working in Central Office, saw problems with funding in more local terms in which funding allocations were being given directly to schools but, in her opinion, there did not appear to be any coordinated planning by Districts, and schools were not accountable for how the money was spent. Her comments gave cause for concern as she explained that, determined by the interest and/or expertise of people in a district, money provided for students at educational risk could be allocated to specific projects, for example, in one district it could be a phonemic awareness program and the money and strategies in that district would be directed to address that issue. However, in another district a quite different issue could be targeted so
that, as Helen pointed out, "a child can go across districts and be labelled 'at risk' in a different area depending on what the district's pushing the money through".

Emma, in her response, returned to the notion of models which she had first raised in her answer to Question three which dealt with the question of whether students were less stigmatised or labelled since the addition of 'educational' to the definition. This time she felt that the philosophy behind Making the Difference was moving away from the deficit model she had mentioned previously towards a more ecological model (models are discussed in detail in Chapter Two) and that potentially, at least, the needs of more students would be addressed. In fact, she felt that the needs of 100% of students could be addressed because of the emphasis on the promotion of successful practice and prevention in the supporting documentation for Making the Difference.

Table 5.4 shows whether a respondent felt that there was more, less or no change in the number of students whose needs would be addressed by the broadening of the definition. Pertinent comments have been included. The results are interesting when the positions of the respondents are taken into account. The three respondents who felt that there had been no change were all working in schools, whereas the respondents who believed that the needs of more students would be addressed by the new policy were the non-teaching educators in Central Office and a school psychologist. An explanation for this contrast might be that it was a reflection of the early days of the implementation of the SAER Policy in schools and also the fact that, as teachers, they were dealing with students at educational risk in the classroom on a daily basis.
### Table 5.4: Students Affected by the Change in Definition of 'At Risk'.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responent</th>
<th>Students affected by broadening the ‘at risk’ definition</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Notice a difference in the future. Need for a strong lobby group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Might affect Aboriginal students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Isolates risk factor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Move away from deficit model.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>More equitable spread K – 12.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Depends on funding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>It has become the responsibility of all concerned.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SECTION 1 SUMMARY: DEFINITIONS**

This section has examined responses to questions about the definition of a ‘student at risk’ and the changes that the addition of ‘educational’ had had on perceptions and usage in 1999/2000.

Interviewees in the sample identified the key concepts of failure, potential and factors in their definitions of an ‘at risk’ student. These were similar concepts to those used by the respondents to the *Stimulus Sheet* discussed in Chapter 4. However, there was an additional concept – that of “outcomes” as in “not achieving ... the overarching learning outcomes”.

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This is part of the Education Department's official definition of a 'student at educational risk' and it was quoted by Emma in her response. However, three respondents were not aware of the official definition or that there had been a change with the addition of 'educational' so that students were now considered to be 'at educational risk'. Five respondents did not feel that the addition had changed their perceptions in any way.

It was the Education Department's belief that by adding 'educational' to 'at risk', negative connotations would be removed, however only two respondents thought that students were less stigmatised since the introduction of the new policy. The other seven respondents felt that, whilst there had been some clarification, in their opinion students were still being labelled negatively. However, 'students at educational risk' was felt to be an improvement on the labels that had been used in the past, for the same cohort of students. Generally, teachers were still using the phrase, 'students at risk' but the Central Office educators were using the full phrase and the acronym S-A-E-R was gaining some favour.

Finally, the classroom teachers in the sample did not feel there had been any change in the number of students whose needs were being addressed since the introduction of the SAER policy. However the educators in the sample believed that current thinking had the potential to address the needs of more students.

5.2 SECTION 2 – FACTORS

In the previous section, seven of the nine people interviewed used the notion of factors in order to define the term 'at risk'. This finding, corresponds to that noted in the responses to the Stimulus Sheet where the use of factors in the definition of 'at risk' was first recorded. As the
interviewees had already used the concept without prompting, the purpose of the questions in this section was to focus specifically on factors to determine what the interviewees believed were the main ones that may put a student at risk and then to determine whether the interviewees could identify any factors within the education system itself, and if there were any critical times in a child’s school life when they could be considered to be more ‘at risk’ than at other times.

There were three questions in this category, namely:

1. In the literature many factors for ‘at riskness’ are cited. In your experience what are the main factors that put students at educational risk?

2. Are there factors within the education system itself that may put a student at risk?

3. Do you believe that there are some factors that may only occur at particular stages of a student’s life? Conversely, are there factors that are always present for some students and that put the student at educational risk throughout their school career?

Not all respondents were asked all three questions, as this section developed over the period that the interviews took place and the experience and expertise of the later interviewees was also taken into account. Rather than dealing with each question separately, the researcher feels it is more useful to combine the findings in this section as the questions and their responses were so interrelated.

Main Factors

The main factors identified by the interviewees were varied and tended to reflect the position of the respondent, thus, for example, the factors cited by the practising teachers were those that directly affected their students in their classrooms. Diane, for example, a teacher of Year 8 students, saw
the transition of students from Year 7 primary school to the more academic, subject-oriented situation of high school to be an important factor that may put a student 'at risk' in Year 8. Beth, a teacher of post compulsory ESL students in a secondary college, also considered the educational background of her students to be an important factor but in her case it was the "strangeness" of that background that could be a factor. As she put it: "there are even some who've had only religious education ... only ever read religious books, and that doesn't make for a good background if you want to do Year 12". A student's racial or ethnic background was cited as a risk factor because it could stereotype a student and, in Charles words, students could be "categorised ... on the flimsiest of grounds". On the other hand, respondents who were working in the Central Office of the Education Department tended to have a wider perspective. Emma, for example, felt that the educational background of the parents was a factor, "parents who have not gone beyond Year 10 level themselves [are] a risk factor".

Anne listed three main factors that in her opinion could put a student 'at risk'. The first was a language delay which could be caused by ill-health in childhood, a student's second language status, and/or coming from a poor home background. The second factor, in Anne's opinion was the general health of the student and whether they came to school hungry or dirty or not feeling well. Anne believed that these were primary needs and if they were unmet then the students "are not going to be able to concentrate on what it is they're trying to achieve at school". The third factor was the social-emotional well-being of the student and this may often include issues outside the school. Anne also added behavioural factors but felt that
often a student’s behaviour was related to factors occurring in any one of the other three areas.

Emma divided her response into two areas, those factors that affected an individual child, such as gender, temperament, intelligence and cognitive skills and those that were associated with the home or family environment. Here Emma listed parenting style which could include whether parents were coercive, what the educational background of the parents was and the presence of stress in the family through violence or poverty, which reduced the parent’s “psychological and social capital”.

Frank also cited family factors as being important such as, children living in dysfunctional families, the value a family attached to education and how the family viewed other authority structures, such as the Ministry of Justice, the police, and Family and Children’s’ Services. He also talked about single parent families, though he added that many such families functioned very well. However, there was evidence, for example, in the Child Health Survey (Zubrick et al: 1997), that there were issues associated with single-parent families that could place the children ‘at risk’. These issues included the area the family lived in, the level of income, the support structures or lack of them the family had, such as peer support and access to grandparents. He also felt, like Anne and Emma, that many of these factors were outside the “educational ambit” but they became issues for teachers and schools when they placed a child at ‘educational risk’.

Grace believed that in her context – post compulsory ESL teaching, the disparity in age between an ESL student and other students in the class was a factor as was gender when it was linked to the cultural background
of the student. There could be other cultural issues also, such as undue family pressure – either to study or to leave school and not be permitted to continue studying. This sort of issue affected both males and females and was another issue outside of school that was impacting on the educational outcomes of the students. Grace also cited the socio-economic background of the students as being an important factor.

Helen’s first response to this question about factors was to say it was an easy one! She continued by talking about a child’s cultural and social background and saying that she felt there was a lot of evidence that suggested that children from low socio-economic backgrounds were those most ‘at risk’ in the “schooling system”. Other factors mentioned by Helen were, language background, the educational background of the parents, and teacher expectations. She also felt that social factors were important, such as changes in family situations, which could include belonging to a single parent family or a transient family where the children moved from school to school. Helen felt that health factors were important but she did not go into detail except to say that a lack of extended family could seriously affect the health of children because families did not have the support structures or anyone else to go to.

Iris, who was a practising school psychologist in the group, felt there were three main areas in which children could be ‘at risk’ – personal, social-emotional and family. Personal factors could be a child’s personality characteristics and their cognitive ability; social-emotional factors included a child’s interpersonal skills and their mental development; and finally, she felt there were factors associated with the home and family
environment. Iris also mentioned that there were academic factors, but in her opinion these were related to the other factors.

A common thread in the responses was concern about students' socio-economic circumstances. All the respondents saw this as having potentially a profound effect on students' educational outcomes. Even Beth, who was the only respondent who saw past academic experience, or lack of it, as an important risk factor because her main concern was for her ESL students to gain entry to university, felt that the family situation could have an effect on the students' academic achievement. In her response she said: "for the vast majority, it's interrupted schooling, it's poor standards back home", and for some students living in a disruptive family situation then "it's very hard [for] the student in the family to study". This concern is borne out by the number of times this one factor is cited in the literature and by the number of compensatory programs that have been put in place over the years to address this issue, matters that have been discussed at length in Chapter 2.

The researcher found that when all the factors cited by the interviewees were analysed they could be classified into the same four areas as those cited by the respondents to the Stimulus Sheet namely: Personal, Family, Health and School. Table 5.5 lists the factors mentioned by the interviewees grouped under these headings. A comparison of the teachers' responses to the Stimulus Sheet (Tables 4.3 and 4.5) and those of the interviewees in Table 5.5 reveal that both groups identified similar factors, using similar language to do so.
### Table 5.5 Main Factors Causing Students to be 'At Risk as Identified by Interviewees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTORS</th>
<th>Personal</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stereotyping: race/ethnicity</td>
<td>Socio-economic background</td>
<td>Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)</td>
<td>Transition – primary to secondary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural/language background</td>
<td>Socio-emotional background</td>
<td>Language delay due to health factors</td>
<td>Language difficulties</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life experience</td>
<td>Lack of material resources: no books</td>
<td>Health - dirty/hungry/unwell</td>
<td>Limited academic background</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td>Emotional resources – lack of energy/time</td>
<td>Physical disabilities</td>
<td>Broken or disrupted schooling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender – male</td>
<td>Lack of knowledge – where to go for help</td>
<td>Health generally</td>
<td>Transiency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender linked to cultural background</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td></td>
<td>Previous education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language problems</td>
<td>Parenting style</td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperament</td>
<td>Parents' educational level</td>
<td></td>
<td>Situations within the school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive skills - intelligence</td>
<td>Stress – poverty/domestic violence/abuse</td>
<td></td>
<td>Time allowed for achievement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self esteem</td>
<td>Lack of support for family</td>
<td></td>
<td>Disparity of age (with others in class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>Single parent family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal skills</td>
<td>Dysfunctional family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>Lack of peer support for parents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental development</td>
<td>Lack of grandparents.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Area in which family lives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative attitude to agencies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family pressure/expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An interesting point is that although health factors were mentioned by respondents in both groups there was not the same degree of detail as factors in the other categories. For instance, Frank, in his response, cited the *Child Health Survey* but it was the socio-economic aspects of the survey.
that he was referring to rather than health *per se*. One of Anne’s main factors was language delay and she felt that sometimes there were health implications in this, she also felt that if a child was unwell then he or she could not concentrate on what was expected of them at school. Diane cited students with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) because they couldn’t focus on what they had to do in a school environment and Grace saw that having a physical disability could be at ‘educational risk’ if it held the child back. Helen also mentioned health factors as being important and linked them to the family situation but apart from this, did not go into detail. So health generally is seen as a major factor in putting children at ‘educational risk’ but respondents did not expand on this. This compares to the categorisation of factors as cited by Batten & Russel (1995) in Chapter 2, and listed in Table 2.1 on page 17, in which factors were categorised into Personal, Family and School. The only reference to a student’s health was the general factor of “illness” included in the Individual category.

Factors in the Education System

In Table 5.5 there are several factors listed that relate to the school environment so that the researcher felt that the next interview question in this section, which specifically asked about factors within the education system, might be superfluous. However, when asked the second question, all the respondents expanded on what they had already said, explaining that they believed there were definitely school based or system factors that could place students ‘at risk’ even if this effect was certainly not intentional.
For several of the interviewees, system factors such as the traditional structure of schools, time-tabling restrictions, the type of curriculum offered and the services and programs that were available to students were all seen as possible risk factors for students. At a classroom level, class sizes and lack of resources as well as the organization of classes and classrooms were seen as important factors. Anne felt that the expectations of teachers, parents and the system about what a child should achieve rather than “where they actually are” and the beliefs and value systems of teachers that might not benefit the different learning styles of children, were all significant factors. Beth believed that the type of advice given to students could lead to a situation where the student became at ‘educational risk’ because they couldn’t cope. Withdrawal programs and mainstreaming were both seen as possible areas of difficulty for students and teachers: withdrawal because students missed out on valuable information in their subject areas and mainstreaming because teachers did not get the level of support needed. Helen, who mentioned the latter factor, supported mainstreaming in theory but felt it had not been properly implemented and that teachers were having difficulty coping with the problems that were arising, as they did not have adequate support in the classroom.

Two respondents felt there were interagency issues for ‘at risk’ students; for example in remote areas there was often a lack of infrastructure so that, for example, there may be no speech pathologists available even though students with a language delay had been identified in that area. In another situation several agencies may be involved with an ‘at risk’ child leading to difficulties when there was a lack of communication between them.
Not having a sense of belonging in the school environment was a factor that both Iris and Emma believed could put a student at 'educational' risk. They also mentioned bullying and harassment which affected students' self esteem because they did not feel safe in the school environment. Iris also felt that students needed to have recognition for their achievements and that this related to student/teacher relationships which in turn affected whether a student felt valued and part of the school culture.

Table 5.6 summarises the factors within the education system that interviewees felt may put a student 'at risk'. Whilst there is some agreement between the respondents, the most notable thing about the responses in Table 5.6 is the variation between them, which may reflect their particular employment position or interest area. However, taken all together the nine interviewees generated a considerable list of factors which both classroom teachers and educators consider significant in producing an educational environment which can put a student 'at educational risk'.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Factors within the Education System that may put a student 'at risk'.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>• Teacher/parent/system expectations</td>
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<td>• Lack of resources</td>
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<td>• Teachers' beliefs and value systems</td>
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<td>• Interagency problems</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>• Lack of support for 'at risk' students</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Poor advice to students leading to poor choices</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>• Type of classroom</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Inappropriate curriculum</td>
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<td>• Time table constraints</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>• Lack of streaming</td>
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</table>
Students at Risk – Policy, Practices and Perceptions. Do they make a difference?

- Inappropriate curriculum
- Coercion from students or teachers
- Bullying and harassment
- Lack of connectedness to school
- Lack of infrastructure

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<th>E</th>
<th>Tradition structure of the school</th>
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<td>Time table constraints</td>
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<td>Lack of services and programs</td>
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<th>Withdrawal programs</th>
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<th>G</th>
<th>Lack of support for teachers</th>
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<td>Mainstreaming issues</td>
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<th>Teacher/student relationships</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Student not feeling wanted or belonging to the school</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lack of self esteem</td>
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<td>Need for recognition of achievement</td>
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Table 5.6 Summary of School & System Level Factors.

Factors occurring at particular times in a students’ life.

Finally in Section 2, five interviewees were asked if there were any risk factors that only occurred at particular times in a student’s life and whether some factors were always present for some students. All five responded in the affirmative to both parts of the question. Three important factors emerged from the responses, the notion of a critical period in a child’s learning and development, the notion of a sensitive period when a child is particularly vulnerable and the need for the early identification of the relevant risk factor.

For instance, Frank, who believed that early intervention was crucial, explained his response by pointing to some photographs of very young Aboriginal children he had on his wall as he said “that’s when I really need to be hitting them, at that age”. He did not mean physically hitting
them, of course! He continued by saying that there were “certain phases” in a child’s life which were important for learning, and if they were missed then it would need a lot of resources to try to address the missing skills, and he felt that by the time a student was 12 or 13 then it was “looking for chinks in the armour”.

Frank also saw these phases as developmental, a theme reiterated by Iris who saw developmental stages as “milestones” that if delayed could put a child “forever behind the eight ball …unless [they’re] identified”. Emma answered this question by using the “jargon in psychology”, namely that there were “critical periods” in a child’s life. One such critical period was in the first four to five years of a child’s life when they were acquiring language: she believed that if there was no adequate exposure at this time then the child was at risk of not acquiring language at all. According to Emma, there were also “sensitive” times when a particular factor may have negative or positive effects. To explain what she meant, Emma used the example of a child with a mother with depression, saying that if this situation occurred in the first five years of life it was more significant than if it occurred when a child was older and had other experiences and interests to counteract the effect.

Grace, the secondary/tertiary teacher in the sample, felt that puberty was another such sensitive time but she also felt that there were some factors which could have a serious effect and which could happen at any age, for example, the death of a parent. Other respondents emphasised this point and felt that there were various times in a student’s life when they could be ‘at risk’ because of circumstances such as family trauma.
The notion that there were critical times in a student’s life was also put forward by Helen who cited research into brain development, which suggested that there were “windows of opportunity for children to learn”. She felt that there was an optimal time for literacy development which meant, that if a child had not started to read or, at least, develop reading behaviours by the end of Year 1, then the problem was likely to be exacerbated as the child went through school.

Frank raised an interesting point, which was the need for children to develop, as he put it, “social well-being”. It was this that enabled children to be resilient to the factors that may always be present. This “resiliency” prevented them from becoming “victim[s]” and gave them the ability to problem-solve and overcome the risk factors in their lives.

SECTION 2 SUMMARY: FACTORS

In identifying major factors affecting a student’s ability to succeed in an educational environment, respondents produced a varied and comprehensive list. The factors could be loosely classified into four main categories – Personal, Family, Health and School (Table 5.5). These categories correspond to those identified in the responses to the Stimulus Sheet in Chapter 4. Personal factors included personality characteristics, cognitive ability, cultural and linguistic background as well as the gender and life experience of students. Family factors included the socio-economic and socio-emotional background of the family, family structure and parenting style. Health factors were less comprehensive than the other categories but were seen as important and that if a student was unwell, or had a specific health problem this was significant in affecting their well-being and ability to learn.
The school category included such factors as transition, academic background and language difficulties. However, when this category was explored further and respondents were asked specifically about factors within the education system that could put a student at ‘educational risk’, a much more comprehensive list was compiled (Table 5.6). This list included factors related to school administration – curriculum and timetabling, types of programs and services offered, the classroom environment, teacher/student/parent relationships and expectations and factors that could affect a student’s personal well-being and self-esteem, such as bullying and harassment and students not developing a sense of belonging to the school culture.

A number of respondents were asked to consider factors that could affect students at specific times in their lives. Three important concepts were identified, the notion of critical periods for learning and language, the notion of sensitive periods when students may be positively or negatively affected by factors in their environment, and the need for the early identification of relevant risk factors.

Finally, five respondents were asked about those factors that they believed could always be present and had the potential to put a child at ‘educational risk’. One respondent, whilst stating that there were some factors always present in a student’s life, didn’t detail them but said that he believed that students needed to develop “resiliency” or a “social wellbeing” in order to withstand the ever-present factors in their lives.

The other four respondents identified the following factors that, in their opinion, had the potential to put a student at ‘educational risk’ throughout their school career:
• Low socio-economic background
• Lack of language skills
• Lack of literacy

Related to these factors was the belief that early identification of 'at risk' students was critical.

The identification of 'at risk' students was the third major theme identified from the responses to the Stimulus Sheets. The next section of the interview schedule will explore the theme in more detail.

5.3 SECTION 3 – IDENTIFICATION

The EDWA publication, Framework for Successful Practice for Students at Educational Risk (1998a) lists key areas and descriptors of successful practice. Key Areas 1 and 2 (p.iii) concern the identification of students at educational risk and the development of appropriate programs to meet their needs. In the Successful Practice Explanation (p.1), research is quoted that estimates that 20% of students may be at educational risk. In this third section of the interviews, the researcher had these elements of the Student at Educational Risk policy in mind.

However, the researcher not only wished to find out about the identification process but, in view of the importance that respondents throughout this study had placed on the factors implemented in the 'at risk' status, also to determine what particular factors were being considered by teachers and schools in order to identify the students. In conclusion, the questions at the end of this section, which was also the end of the interview, were designed to establish whether, in the interviewees' opinion, any students had been disadvantaged by the new policy and
whether there was a common understanding of the term ‘students at educational risk’ amongst educators and teachers.

There were six questions in this section and as they were wide ranging in their scope, the responses will be considered separately. For questions one and five, the wording was adapted to suit the position of the interviewee, in these instances both versions are stated at the beginning of the analysis.

The questions for this section were:

1a) Identification is a big part of the Making the Difference strategy. In your school how are students at educational risk identified? Who initiates this?

1b) In your experience as an administrator, do you feel that schools have adequate methods of identifying students at educational risk?

2 Do you feel there are any commonly agreed factors or indicators which are used by teachers and/or schools to identify students?

3 Once a student is identified by a school as being at educational risk, what happens next? Do you feel this is satisfactory?

4 EDWA says that 20% of students are ‘at risk’. Do you agree with this figure?

5a) Do you feel there are any groups of students in schools now whose needs are less well-addressed because of the broadening of the definition?

5b) In your opinion, has the current thinking allowed for the needs of more or less students to be addressed?

6 Finally, when you discuss students at educational risk with other teachers/your colleagues, do you feel you all have a common understanding of the term?
Question One

Four out of the five teachers in the sample responded to the (a) form of this question by saying that it was teachers who identified students 'at risk' by their observations of the students in their classrooms.

Diane, the most inexperienced teacher did not have a very clear idea of what happened outside of her classroom but believed that students would be identified through standard testing processes, such as the TORCH test which is way of identifying students with reading difficulties. Her response was a little surprising to the researcher as she worked in Diane's school and was a member of the school's Students at Educational Risk committee. This committee had addressed the whole school on a number of occasions regarding the identification of students 'at educational risk'.

Charles, also a teacher at the researcher's school was not very aware of the whole school process but had a very clear idea of how a student 'at risk' would be identified in his own department, which was the ESL Intensive language Centre. In Charles' words, "I think most teachers are able to fairly quickly identify students who would appear to be at risk in some way." He went on to talk about the strong departmental structure and how the initial identification would lead to a general discussion with other teachers, which would lead to "planning a strategy to deal with the student". Another comment he made was that if he identified a student as being 'at risk' so would other teachers and so he felt the "network" as he termed it was "adequate in terms of identification".

Beth, in her response to this question, also felt that teachers were the people who identified 'at risk' students. In her secondary college, these would be Year 12 ESL students 'at risk' of failing the TEE. But the college
was also introducing in the following year (2000) a student profile sheet that would provide a lot more background information about the student. There were also to be three diagnostic tests – reading comprehension, writing and language practice. These tests would identify ‘strong’ students as well as those that would require a modified course. The introduction of the profile and the tests was an innovation for the college and as Beth commented, “that’ll be interesting to see if we can identify those at risk.”

Anne, an acting primary school principal, also considered teachers to be the first to identify ‘at risk’ students and felt that it was a “matter of the teacher sitting down with the child one on one and having the opportunity to work with the child”. However, in her school there were identification strategies in place to assist the teacher. These included, the *First Steps Developmental Continuum* and a *TAGS* checklist used to identify talented and gifted students. However, Anne did not feel that these procedures were precise enough and, in particular the *TAGS* checklist, did not accurately identify the underachievers. In Anne’s opinion these were students who, if they were not picked up could become behaviour problems later on in their school career. The *Literacy Net*, which is discussed in Chapter 2, was to be introduced in 2000 to screen students and Anne was optimistic about this as she felt it would provide a more accurate identification of students at educational risk.

Following identification of a student at educational risk in Anne’s school, a student profile book was developed and a range of diagnostic tools as well as standardised assessments would be used in order to inform the type of strategies that could be put in place to assist the child. Anne did
admit that much of the identification was looking at academic achievement and although the school had a pastoral care program and a behaviour management system these did not identify students ‘at risk’ so much as address a problem once it had arisen, “it’s not until there’s usually an outburst that something is done”. In spite of the fact that there were several strategies in place at Anne’s school she still felt that a lot more needed to be done at a system level. “So support is crucial but the identification is an issue, a system issue that needs to be addressed.”

The fifth teacher in the sample, Grace, answered the first question by describing two programs that were currently running at her school. The first identified students ‘at risk’ at the transition Year 7 to Year 8 level, through the feeder primary schools. Those identified were then given the opportunity to join the Mentor Program in the high school. (described in the Case Studies in Chapter 6). Grace was not entirely in favour of the program, feeling that it only addressed the needs of a very small number of students, that it was over-resourced and was only functioning because of that. She believed that the only successful programs in the public education system were those that, as she said, “can work on the smell of an oily rag”. The second program she cited assisted ESL students in upper secondary school who required extra support. She felt that this program was effective because it had evolved over time to address a specific need, but she conceded that it could only function in schools where there was a Commonwealth funding for ESL teachers, such as those with an Intensive Language Centre (ILC). Schools without such a centre would not be able to fund an Access & Bridging Program for mainstream ESL students.
Figure 5.2 illustrates the teachers' ideas about the identification of students 'at risk'. The identification process appears to be at two levels. At the first level, it is anecdotal through teacher observation and discussion with other teachers, but following this, a number of tools may be used to assess the student’s progress or confirm the teacher’s opinion.

**IDENTIFICATION PROCEDURES**

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<tr>
<th>FIRST LEVEL</th>
<th>SECOND LEVEL</th>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher Observation</td>
<td>Diagnostic Testing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of Student Profiles</td>
<td>First Steps DC</td>
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<td>First Steps DC</td>
<td>TAGS Checklist</td>
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<td>TAGS Checklist</td>
<td>Literacy Net</td>
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<td>Literacy Net</td>
<td>Diagnostic Tools</td>
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<td>Diagnostic Tools</td>
<td>Standardised Assessment</td>
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The three educators in the sample, who were working for the Education Department in Central Office, tended to address wider issues than the teachers in their responses, which was to be expected as they were not faced with the difficulties of identification of students at educational risk on a daily basis.

However, Frank also believed that it was primarily teachers who first identified students as being ‘at risk’. In his words they could tell “who’s doing what after two or three pieces of assessment.” He felt that the identification process in schools was at various stages of development with some schools, mainly primary, doing very well, whilst others were less effective. Some secondary schools, in Frank’s opinion identified on the basis of academic ability, screening, for example, for mathematics which
then determined the other subjects a student would take. The outcome of this process was that lower ability students were placed together, in Frank's words "into classes that can best be baby-sat". He did not feel that it was the school's intention to do this but that was how the process manifested itself. Primary schools on the other hand did much better at the identification process, in Frank's opinion, profiling students, developing a strategic plan, and identifying groups in the school population. This observation would have interested Anne, as her primary school had quite a comprehensive approach to identification, even if she was not completely satisfied with it. Frank voiced a word of caution about the complexity of some student profiles. He felt a student profile should be "simple" and not have too many parameters.

Emma was in agreement with Frank about the level of identification across schools. Some, she felt, were doing very well indeed whilst others were not so well advanced. The schools with very comprehensive identification processes were becoming "proactive" she felt and were beginning to identify the risk factors affecting a group rather than individual students so that something could be done across the whole school population.

Helen, whose area of expertise was early childhood education had a slightly different perspective than her two colleagues as she believed identification of 'at risk' students should begin in the very early years of schooling. She saw the pre-primary teacher as the person who would first identify children with problems with communication: these were children who were unable to communicate with the teacher or with other students. Early literacy problems, Helen believed were identified as this stage too as...
the teacher observed the early literacy behaviours of children. Formal assessment wouldn't begin until Year 1 but the form this took was a school-based decision and might include outside agencies such as a speech pathologist, or the school psychologist or assessment tools such as the Literacy Net. Profiling then became an important feature as the data was collected throughout the student's school career.

In summary, there is no single system of identification of 'at risk' students in schools. There is agreement however, that in most cases the identification process is initiated by the classroom teacher through observation and discussion. This may be followed up at a system level with a number of identification procedures or programs, but not all of these were seen to be effective. There is no standardisation about which identification procedures are used, as this is a school-based decision. It appears, from the comments of some of the teachers and the educators, that identification is being carried out more effectively in primary schools than in secondary schools.

In the previous section concerning factors, the importance of the early identification of factors that may put a student at risk was raised. Similarly, in this section of the interviews, the early identification of students 'at risk' was seen as important. One respondent believed that it should begin at the pre-primary level, whilst another felt that effective identification processes were those that identified the risk factors of a group of students as this allowed a school to become more proactive.
Question Two

After the detail with which respondents had answered previous questions regarding factors, the researcher was surprised by the brevity of the responses to this question about commonly agreed factors.

Seven interviewees were asked the question and six agreed that there were common factors and that these were related to academic performance, that is to literacy and numeracy. Amongst the teachers, Grace made the comment that it was academic performance that was the criterion and not whether a student could be doing better. She also added that in some cases it was unacceptable behaviour that brought an 'at risk' student to the attention of school staff. Frank, too, cited behaviour problems, but saw these as a result of literacy or numeracy difficulties.

Charles had a slightly different point of view. Although he did believe that there would be agreement between teachers once a student had been identified as 'at risk', he also felt that there was an "element of individuality that came into this", by which he meant that a teacher might identify a student 'at risk' that no-one else had noticed.

The educators in the sample went into more detail in their responses than the teachers. Emma listed the factors which she felt were commonly agreed although they were not, as she said "evidence based". These factors were: IQ, Aboriginality, ESL status, behaviour problems, poverty and single parent families, none of which in themselves placed a child 'at risk'. For example, in the case of an Aboriginal child, it may be the factors around him or her and what happens to them that are more important than their aboriginality. Frank was quite definite in his belief that the commonly agreed factors were literacy and numeracy, which was why
there was benchmarking and testing, and that difficulties in these areas affected all the others. Helen too cited literacy as the most common factor, as it affected children across the curriculum. She believed that this would be targeted in, as she described them, the "leafy green suburbs". However, according to Helen, there were many other factors that affect children and schools in other locations knew that targeting literacy was not going to solve all of the problems affecting the children's educational achievement.

In summary, according to the responses to this question, the most common factors used by teachers or schools to identify students at educational risk were literacy and numeracy – in other words the identification was related to academic performance whether at the primary or secondary level. At the pre literacy level, the ability to communicate effectively was an initial indicator, but by Year 1 early literacy behaviour was seen as an important indicator of future difficulties. Only the psychologist/educator who responded to this question cited factors other than academic in her reply. One respondent, however, felt there was an element of individuality about the identification of 'at risk' students and did not elaborate on any common factors. Table 5.7 lists the commonly agreed factors cited by the other respondents.
Students at Risk – Policy, Practices and Perceptions. Do they make a difference?

Commonly Agreed Factors that Identify ‘Students at Risk’

- Academic performance
- Literacy
- Numeracy
- Communication
- Behaviour
- IQ
- Aboriginality
- ESL status
- Poverty
- Family background.

Table 5.7 Commonly Agreed Factors that Identify ‘Students at Risk’ as Cited by the Interviewees.

Question Three

Question Three was asked in order to ascertain whether schools were developing strategies to address the needs of students at educational risk once they had been identified, as advocated in Key Area 2: Curriculum, in the Framework for Successful Practice for Students at Educational Risk (EDWA 1998a). There were a variety of responses.

Classroom teachers in the main were concerned primarily with strategies that directly affected their own students. In Diane’s experience at secondary level, for example, students who were struggling were moved into a more suitable class. She did not think that this was very satisfactory but there was no funding to do anything else. She would have liked a tutoring system or small class instruction for students who needed extra help. She was not aware of any other strategies at the whole school level for students at educational risk. In Beth’s senior college, where she was a post compulsory ESL teacher, students who were academically weak were counselled against TEE courses and advised to do modified or preparatory
courses instead. However, students could not be compelled to follow the advice, "we can advise but we can’t stop them" thus, some students set themselves up for failure.

Grace, who taught in an Intensive Language Centre (ILC) had quite a positive response to this question as she felt her department had a very collegiate and student centred approach to addressing the needs of ESL students who, in her words were all at "educational risk from the start". There were regular meetings of teachers where issues and concerns about students were discussed. Grace also felt that the flexibility of the curriculum in the ILC allowed for the needs of students at educational risk to be addressed through teachers being able to adapt content and delivery. When asked whether this was satisfactory, Grace answered by saying that no system is perfect. There were always some students who were more at risk than others and some were not identified, however she continued to say that in view of some of the factors that ESL students have to overcome, a lot of them do very well. She felt this was due to the sensitivity and flexibility of the system that was in place in the ILC where she worked.

Anne, the acting principal in the sample, had a more whole school perspective and had already described some of the strategies that were in place in her school in her answer to Question 1 above. One of these was student profiling. However, she did not feel that this was very satisfactory and felt that schools needed more support in this area – "in developing a realistic identification system across the school". Profiling, in Anne's opinion may not give schools the information they need, "profiling 500 students over a range of things may not necessarily give you useful data".
Frank in his response described a program that he was running in some secondary schools. These were “behaviour modelling support” programs, which were run by teachers in conjunction with youth workers. The aim is to address the “behaviour and learning issues” of the student. After a semester the student rejoins mainstream schooling. However, these programs were only provided in some secondary schools – the researcher in her experience of three Perth secondary schools since 1998 had no knowledge of them. Where learning difficulties were a problem there was assistance from the District Offices but Frank said he had to admit that the old-style individual teacher support from School Development Officers had been replaced by a consultative model which wasn’t as satisfactory. In Frank’s opinion support had to come from within the school and from the teachers themselves but he believed that primary schools were better at this than the more curriculum-driven secondary schools.

Helen also believed that it was a school’s responsibility to develop strategies after a student was identified as ‘at educational risk’ in accordance with the Student at Educational Risk policy. However, Helen raised a concern regarding the involvement of other agencies. One example she gave was of 14 different agencies working with one child. These agencies did not know what the others were doing. Schools, she felt, needed to have a more coordinated approach and not just “experiment with all these different programs and see what happens”. She gave an example of a successful intervention program developed to help a Year 1 Aboriginal child who had been to three different schools. This plan involved the classroom teacher developing programs in which the child could succeed; the parents were pleased by this so made sure that the
child came to school and the child’s behaviour improved. In Helen’s opinion, because one problem area – the child’s poor performance, had been targeted, this affected the other areas and there was an “overall improvement in what was happening”.

Emma described a process that she believed would occur at the primary school level where there was, in her words “a fairly strong focus of culture, the culture of deficit”. There would be discussion amongst the staff, then involvement with a student services coordinator or deputy principal before possibly a parent-teacher interview. At some stage a school psychologist or social worker might be brought in and further assessment done. Some assessment data would already have been collected – “anecdotal observation, standardised assessment, curriculum based assessment” for example. Following this, “if they’re operating in a collaborative manner”, an individual education plan (IEP) would be developed.

Iris, a practising secondary school psychologist, was asked a slightly different question: Are schools developing effective programs? Iris felt that it was a slow process but she cited the Making the Difference policy in her response saying she felt it had “woken up people in the school community so we all have some responsibility”. The researcher then asked Iris to describe a Student at Educational Risk program which she had been involved in. This was the Mentor Program described in Chapter Six.

A number of strategies used to address the needs of students ‘at risk’ were described by the interviewees. Some of these were at the classroom level, some at the whole school level and some across schools. A summary of these strategies is shown in Table 5.8 below. It is interesting that the use of
student profiles was suggested both as a strategy to address the needs of students at educational risk and as an identification strategy (Figure 5.2).

The educators who were interviewed believed that primary schools had better strategies than secondary schools to support students at educational risk, however the primary school acting principal in the group was not satisfied with the process that was operating in her school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies to address the needs of Students at Educational Risk</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Moving students into another class</td>
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<td>• Counselling students</td>
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<td>• Withdrawing students for a period of time</td>
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<td>• Developing individual education plans</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Developing student profiles</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Specific programs eg the Mentor Program, Behaviour Modelling Support Programs.</td>
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Table 5.8 Strategies Used by Schools/Teachers following Identification of Students at Educational Risk.

In summary, there was a feeling amongst the respondents that although there were processes in place to address the needs of students 'at risk', they were not all successful. A number of specific programs were described that were considered successful but in some cases these were limited in their scope. In general, the development of strategies was seen as being the responsibility of the schools themselves although only one respondent quoted the Student at Educational Risk strategy Making the Difference. However, there was a perceived lack of coordination and the District support that had been available for schools was no longer there.
Question Four

The Rationale to the Policy and Guidelines for students at Educational Risk (EDWA 1998f) states that "at least 20% of our classroom population may not be developing the understandings, skills and confidence to achieve their individual potential". (p.5) Making the Difference is a Student at Educational Risk Strategy to initiative to address this. When the strategy first came out in 1998, the figure of 20% was seen as shocking to many in the community. The purpose of this question was to determine whether this view was commonly held view amongst the teachers and educators who were interviewed.

All the interviewees agreed with the estimate, three people even felt that it was a conservative figure. Emma and Iris believed the proportion would increase according to a school's location, for example if a school was in a low socio-economic area. Conversely it would decrease if a school was located in a high socio-economic area, Dalkeith as compared with Meekatharra, for example. Grace also thought the figure was conservative for a number of reasons, including socio-economic. Her comment was:

I think if you look at a class and you've got students who are gifted and at risk and at risk for educational factors and then at risk through that complicated loop of social or socio-economic or physical at riskness back to their education and that's a normal class, I think that's probably conservative.

Anne discussed the results at her own school where 13% of students the students were identified with some form of learning difficulty. However, this figure did not include those children who were underachieving in the absence of an identified difficulty and so she felt the figure of 20% of students being at educational risk was probably accurate. She did add the rider: 'at any one time' as students can be at greater or lesser risk as they
progress through school. “A child might not go so well in the early years of school and then, all of a sudden, for all sorts of reasons, kicks in and away they go”. The opposite too could occur in Anne’s opinion, when a student does well in the early years, but stops trying because they become bored and are not being challenged.

Frank considered that 20% was a “ballpark” figure and he also added the rider “at some stage in their lives” as there was a twelve-year time frame. He also felt that the figure of 20% of students at educational risk was supported by the findings in the *Child Health Survey*. (Zubrick et al 1997)

Charles agreed that 20% of students would be ‘at risk’ but he queried whether the figure was just looking at “educational risk”. His concern was that if the term was broadened there would be “a huge proportion of students at risk in some way”. An interesting comment, as the Education Department believes that their definition of a ‘student at educational risk’ has been broadened already with the addition of ‘educational’.

Summarising the responses to question four in this section of the interviews, it appears that far from feeling that 20% of students at educational risk was a high figure or being surprised by it, all the interviewees felt that it could be a conservative estimate. Some respondents felt that because of the time frame, that is, that many students are at school for twelve years or more and that there are many factors that can affect them during that period, students may come in or out of being ‘at educational risk’, during their school career.
Question Five

There were two versions of the question in order to make it more appropriate for the particular interviewee, as explained at the beginning of the chapter. In general, teachers were asked version (a) whilst educators were asked version (b). The purpose of the question in each case was to ascertain whether the implementation of the Students at Educational Risk Strategy *Making the Difference* had affected any particular groups of students. This was pertinent because by 1998 there were no longer any Commonwealth funded programs specifically targeting 'students at risk'.

Four of teachers in the sample responded to the question. Diane, the most inexperienced teacher said she felt that teachers were aware of students' needs. However, she also felt that until class sizes were reduced it was still difficult for teachers to properly address those needs.

Beth, however, felt that more students were at risk now than five to ten years ago. Her reason was that the standard of student being admitted to secondary colleges like hers had dropped in that time, which meant less able students were being put under pressure to achieve.

Grace believed that there were two groups who, in her words were "slipping through the net". These were the gifted and talented students who needed extending and those who had different needs that is, "need stimulation in different ways".

This response was echoed by Anne who was concerned by the emphasis the current system had on literacy – "as a system (we) prize literacy above all else". This, she felt had led to funding being targeted at literacy and benchmarking so that if a child was considered literate they were "okay". This point of view did not allow for the notion of multiple intelligences or
for the needs of gifted and talented students so that these groups were disadvantaged in the present system.

When the educators were interviewed the same themes became apparent: class size, funding and the needs of gifted and talented students were all mentioned. Helen, whilst not answering the question directly, considered that class size had an effect on whether an ‘at risk’ student had their needs addressed, because the problems associated with, for example children with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or those with behaviour problems “overflowing from the home situation” were difficult for teachers to cope with when there were twenty five to thirty children in a class. In addition, there was no longer the same level of communication between school and parents because of changing domestic situations and this had created difficulties for teachers.

In Frank’s opinion a new group was emerging – post compulsory ESL students and there were also, the gifted and talented students who had “always been there” but for whom “we’re never doing enough, and there’s never enough money”. However, in the main. Frank was optimistic when asked this question, believing that most groups were being catered for, but he did add: “within the resources that are available”. He commented that he was glad that Aboriginal Education had its own funding which meant that “we’re not stretching the elastic band even further”.

Emma responded to this question by saying that the broadening of the definition hadn’t disadvantaged any students but she did believe that there were some students who had always been at a disadvantage She
qualified the 'always' later on by saying: "I shouldn't say always, but for a long time". There were four groups of students she referred to:

- Those with low IQs but above 70, who would once have been in remedial programs or clinics but were now not able to access educational support and struggled in mainstream classrooms.

- Those students in remote or rural situations who, because of lack of infrastructure, could not access the facilities they needed. Their teachers were largely inexperienced and students were often bussed long distances which meant there was often a lack of parental collaboration or involvement in the child's schooling.

- Another group of disadvantaged students living in remote or rural areas were those with mental health problems who needed psychiatric help which was not available locally.

- Finally there were ESL students who were either, out of time, that is did not qualify any longer for support, or on visas that did not allow for support.

Iris, when asked this question, brought up the needs of the gifted and talented student and the issue of funding. She felt that if educators were not looking at the deficit model then the gifted and talented students were at risk but as a result of different factors. Resources however, were targeted at the deficit model, which Iris saw as "understandable" as this model related to the cited 20% but, in her opinion, it meant there wasn't a "global view" of what is meant by a "student at educational risk". It was her final comment in this section that the researcher felt was particularly telling: "even though the definition's been broadened it doesn't mean that we're catering for everyone".
In summary, a number of issues were raised in the responses to this question. Only one interviewee believed that students' needs were being better addressed now but there was still a qualification regarding funding. Other interviewees were less optimistic, believing that there were groups whose needs were not being adequately addressed. One particular group of students cited by four of the eight interviewees who responded to this question, was gifted and talented students. An interesting comment was made by one interviewee who regarded the present system as based on a deficit model which not only omitted the needs of gifted and talented students but influenced the direction of funding. A further large group of students were those living in remote and rural areas and a number of issues were raised in relation to the disadvantages experienced by those students. One group of students cited whose needs were less well addressed now because programs for them were no longer in place were students with low IQs but not low enough to access any support. A new group was also seen to be emerging – ESL students not able to access support for a number of reasons. It also appears that some groups are considered to be at 'educational risk' because of the issues that affect them more than the fact that they might be members of an identifiable group. For example, some students are 'at risk' not because of educational factors but because of lack of resources or issues associated with geographic location. In spite of the Students at Educational Risk policy and the Making the Difference strategy, from the responses of the interviews, it appears there are still considerable numbers of students whose needs are not being addressed and who remain 'at risk'. Tables 5.9 (a) and (b) lists the groups identified and the issues raised by the interviewees, in answer to this question.
Disadvantaged Groups

- Gifted and Talented students
- ESL students - out of time, post compulsory, visas
- Students in rural and remote areas
- Students with low IQs
- Students with ADD
- Students with behaviour problems

Table 5.9 (a) Disadvantaged Groups of Students Identified by the Interviewees.

Issues

- Class size
- Standards
- Funding/resources
- Lack of parent/teacher communication
- Lack of infrastructure
- Multi-intelligences
- Lack of access to support

Table 5.9 (b) The Issues affecting ‘At Risk Students as Identified by the Interviewees.

Question Six

At the time of the interviews Students at Educational Risk had been Education Department policy for two years. The purpose of this final question therefore was to determine if the interviewees felt they had achieved a common understanding of the phrase ‘student at educational risk’. It was a closed question and in general answers were brief although some respondents did qualify or explain their comments. It was interesting that the classroom teachers in the sample strongly believed there was a common understanding, at least where emotional risks were concerned, whereas the acting principal and the educators were less emphatic in their replies. In fact the acting principal believed there might
be common understanding about educational issues but not emotional risks.

The responses of Anne, Emma and Helen were revealing as they all felt that understanding of the term was influenced by the employment position a person held in the education system or their personality. Anne believed also that if it were just literacy issues that were being considered there would be a higher level of understanding but that when other issues were considered, such as socio-emotional, there was some disagreement and further discussion was needed. Emma too had some reservations although she felt there was agreement amongst her present colleagues she did not feel there was the same agreement when she was talking to teachers, particularly in secondary school, where she felt they had a very narrow view of ‘at riskness’. This was an interesting point of view in light of the responses of the classroom teachers who all believed that they shared a common understanding. It was also interesting in the light of Helen’s response – she did not feel there was a common understanding amongst her colleagues, of whom Emma was one.

Frank believed that people were moving towards a common understanding and he saw a progression over the time that the ‘student at educational risk’ definition had been in use. He felt that educators now had a common language and were developing a “holistic approach to cater for students when we talk about students at educational risk”. In general, most respondents believed there was a common understanding although there were some reservations. Table 5.10 summarises the responses under the headings Yes or No, for whether there is or is not a
common understanding, where there is a proviso, the relevant comment is included.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>If discussing emotional issues ...</td>
<td>If limited to academic issues, may be different between subject areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td></td>
<td>No, too many factors, beliefs and values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Where I'm working now ...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>Moving towards ...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td></td>
<td>Varies with people’s jobs and personalities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.10 Common Understanding of the Phrase ‘Student at Educational Risk’.

SECTION 3 SUMMARY: IDENTIFICATION

In the *Making the Difference* documentation (EDWA 1998b) the identification of ‘students at educational risk’ is made a major responsibility of schools. No single system of identification is prescribed as each school is expected to develop their own to suit their students' needs. However, the majority of interviewees believed that the first step in the identification of students at ‘educational risk’ was teacher observation and discussion. Following this, a number of different strategies that
respondents had experience with were described. These strategies included such things as diagnostic testing and specific programs.

In general, it was academic achievement that was cited as being the most common factor used in the identification process. Other factors were mentioned but there was no overall agreement on these. Following identification, a range of strategies to address the need were described: some were at an individual level, for example the development of an individual learning/education program (ILP/IEP), whilst others such as the Mentor Program described in the next chapter, targeted groups of 'at risk' students. Interestingly, student profiling was seen both as a strategy to identify 'at riskness' and to address the issue. There were also some words of caution about the unnecessary complexity of profiling and the fact that it did not always give the information required. Profiling will be discussed further when the development of one school's profiling procedure is described in the case studies, in the following chapter.

All the respondents felt that EDWA's figure of 20% of students being 'at educational risk' was reasonable. Some respondents believed that the figure could be higher in particular circumstances. There were even some groups of students, in the opinion of the respondents, whose needs were either not being addressed or who were actually being disadvantaged by the current system. A number of issues which were seen to put some students at 'educational risk', were described which, in the opinion the respondents, would not be addressed by the Making the Difference strategy.

Finally, at the time of the interviews the belief that there was a common understanding of 'at riskness' among teachers and educators seemed to be restricted to particular groups of teachers or educators and appeared to
depend on the employment position of the respondent this, in spite of EDWA's best efforts with the Students at Educational Risk strategy, Making the Difference and all the attendant supporting documentation.

Each question in the interview demanded a personal, subjective response and, in analysing those responses, other questions have presented themselves. This is particularly true of the responses to the final question regarding a common understanding of 'at educational risk'. For example, what effect do personal values and beliefs have on that understanding? These are questions that are beyond the scope of the present research but they may have an effect on the implementation of Making the Difference, as the definition of 'at risk', which began this research, must necessarily be influenced by people's beliefs and values.

In the next chapter a number of case studies will be described. These case studies will flesh out, as it were, some of the issues that have been raised in the responses to both the Stimulus Sheet and in the interviews.
CHAPTER 6

CASE STUDIES

INTRODUCTION

In 1999 the researcher took up a position at a senior metropolitan high school as an ESL teacher. Whilst she was there SAER (Students at Educational Risk) became a priority in the School Development Plan. One response was the formation of a SAER committee of which the researcher became a member. The four case studies described in this chapter came out of that period, 1999-2000. They have been included in the study as they serve to describe actual instances of one school’s attempt to address the issues arising from the Students at Educational Risk policy and the experiences of one particular student deemed to be at ‘educational risk’.

6.1 CASE STUDY ONE – IDENTIFICATION (1)

Once the school had made SAER a priority it became necessary to develop some formal identification procedures. This case study describes how the school developed a student profiling system for the identification of students at ‘educational risk’.

The process began in January 1999 with the introduction of the SAER strategy, Making the Difference, to the staff at the school. In the discussion that followed it became apparent that teachers felt that one of the most important issues was the identification of students at educational risk. Consequently, the SAER committee was formed with the school psychologist as convenor. The researcher became a member of the sub-committee that had the responsibility for developing an identification procedure. There were several issues for planning for the group but for
the purpose of the present study the two that are of interest here were the
development of a SAER Identification Form and its implementation.

The first meeting of the Identification Sub-Committee was held in late
April 1999 with SAER Profile and Means to Identify 'at risk' Students as
the first two items on the agenda. The following are records of the results
of the discussion that took place and are taken from the minutes:

An appropriate SAER profile would be one where data regarding
'risk factors' is obtained from several sources in order to clarify the
remediation ... any profiling format should be aligned with the
broader profile document in the Making the Difference package.

Particular note was made about the need to recognise and respond
to the so-called 'underachieving student'.

also

Targeting students at risk is best done via the classroom teacher
providing subjective evaluation and then assisting in the broader
profiling process ...

There should also be a determination by staff of
A) Risk factors and
B) Performance factors,
against relevant criteria.

The Making the Difference 'package' mentioned in the first comment refers
to the Resource File (EDWA 1998b). This does not include any identification
profile as such but a key area deals with the need for schools to identify
students at educational risk. The points recorded in the minutes provided
the criteria for the process developed by this school and the following is a
description of the how the SAER Identification Form was developed by
the sub-committee and implemented by the school.
The Development and Implementation of a SAER Identification Form

The process began with a discussion about what student profiles or forms were already in use. It was discovered that there were a number of these, namely:

- a school Student Profile
- a Mentor/Student Profile form
- a Risk Factor proforma
- a referral form/package used to refer a student to the Student Services Team.

What became obvious to the Sub-Committee was the lack of coordination in the identification process in the school and the need to streamline the documentation that was already in place. The group began their discussions by focusing on the Student Profile Form.

The Student Profile was not intended for students at educational risk but for all students on entry to the high school. This form was very comprehensive; it was six pages long and had five sections. One section was in the form of a ‘pull-out’ that could be completed by the student. It required the student to rate themselves on items such as the type of intelligence they believed they had, and the type of learning mode they preferred, as well as their future goals. The intention was that students would complete this section every year from 7 – 12. The final page listed the thirteen Overarching Learning Outcomes (OLOs) outlined in the Curriculum Framework (Curriculum Council 1998) so that students' progress could be monitored across the eight learning areas, from Years 8 – 12. The researcher is reminded of the comments of two interviewees, one who warned against the complexity of student profiles and the other who
felt that profiling over a too large a range of different items did not necessarily provide useful data.

The sub-committee members felt that a specific SAER Identification Form should be designed so that it could be used as a tool for collaborative planning between the teacher and support staff. Consequently, it should be kept as simple as possible and be easy to complete, so that it was user-friendly and not time-consuming. Several examples of identification forms were studied and finally an example from another high school was used as a model.

The form was deliberately kept to one A4 sheet with areas of concern itemised with indicators for the teacher to tick as appropriate. The other side of the paper outlined the process to be followed once the form was completed. This follow-up process was seen to be vital as the group recognised that a teacher with a concern about a student needed to feel confident that it would addressed and that he or she would get feedback as quickly as possible. It was also felt that there had to be consultation between the teacher and the support groups so that strategies could be devised collaboratively to address the student's needs. It was also felt that any process had to include parental involvement. It was the hope of the Sub-Committee that by including the implementation process on the form, teachers would be aware of the procedures that would be put in place once the form was completed. This would help to address the lack of coordination and understanding about the processes involved in identifying students at educational risk that had been noted.

There were several drafts of the Identification Form, which took into account comments and suggestions made by different members of staff.
who had been asked to review it. Finally, by December 1999, the planning process was completed and the school had a SAER Identification Form. (see Appendix 3) The next task was to implement the form, evaluate it and develop strategies to address the needs of students at educational risk.

It had taken 12 months to develop the SAER Identification Form but taking into account the number of stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, and other school personnel), the time constraints on the committee members (all were full-time teachers/educators) and the importance of the procedure itself, this did not appear excessive to those involved. However, it was assumed that the implementation of the form would not take as long and the SAER Committee met in March 2000 with high expectations. By that time, the form had been presented to the Heads of Department (HODs) and the Teachers in Charge (TICs). This had been at the insistence of the Principal of the school as she felt that they needed to be fully involved with the identification process. By August 2000, the SAER Identification Form had finally been presented to staff. A flow-chart (see Appendix 4) was presented at the same time that outlined the stages in the identification process.

The minutes of the August 2000 meeting of the SAER Committee state that, “we have succeeded in our identification brief from the beginning of the SAER Committee”. It was agreed that there needed to be an evaluation of the identification process. In October, the minutes noted that there had been increased use of the Identification Forms by teachers. However, it was disappointing to the committee members that there was not enough time available to evaluate the SAER Identification Form nor develop any
specific strategies relating to it as the school was to be closed down at the end of the year.

6.2 CASE STUDY TWO – IDENTIFICATION (2)

The development of the SAER Identification Form was a formal response to the *Students at Educational Risk* policy. The following case study describes a less formalised identification process that took place in the school at the same time.

The procedure took place in the Intensive Language Centre (ILC) which was a post-compulsory centre catering for ESL students over the age of 16 years. Many of the students were refugees who had little or very disrupted schooling. In Chapter Two, ESL was seen as one factor that put students 'at risk' and one interviewee also considered post-compulsory ESL students to be a “new” group of ‘at risk’ students in WA schools. However, being an ESL student does not, and should not be considered as an ‘at risk’ state in itself: many ESL students achieve very well at school and with the right support do not become students at educational risk. However, there are some ESL students, who for a variety of reasons, are more ‘at risk’ than others and it was the identification of these students that this case study describes.

**Identification of ‘at risk’ ESL Students**

This is an anecdotal description of a procedure that took place at the beginning of December 2000 in the post compulsory ILC centre. The ESL teachers, of whom the researcher was one, were meeting to discuss the progress of the students. Two events were of importance: firstly, the students under consideration were about to complete their first semester in the beginners’ program and move into their second semester, starting at
the beginning of the following school year. In their second semester the students undertake a transition program to prepare them to enter mainstream subjects in Year 11 and 12. The second event was the imminent closure of the school, which meant that all the ILC students were to be moved to another school. Although the ILC would be re-established, it was recognised that the move was likely to unsettle some students.

In the second half of the ILC program there were two pathways – a pre-TEE, and a Vocational pathway. Students were placed in these programs on the basis of their progress, their examination results and past educational background. In order to make the placements, the teachers and the Deputy Principal of the ILC had lists of students' names -- there were about fifty, the students' class records and end of semester examination results. However, following this procedure, the teachers reviewed the lists again but this time with the intention of identifying the students they considered to be 'at risk'. The identification was done entirely on the teachers' observations and experience of the student. Without exception all the teachers involved considered the same students to be in need of extra support or help. As the Deputy Principal remarked, all the students were 'at risk' in some way but these students were very clearly at 'educational risk' because of literacy or numeracy difficulties or, in some cases, poor speaking and listening skills which affected their interaction with their peers or participation in class activities.

Following their identification, there was a further discussion about the best ways to assist the students during their last six months in the ILC. In some cases if the student was eligible, they could have extra time in the
ILC, but this could only occur if students had a very limited or disrupted educational background. Other students would have to move on and it was these students who were at greatest risk of not completing their ILC program to a standard that would allow them to move into a mainstream program and achieve success there.

This identification procedure was very informal and the numbers of students under consideration was small – eight in all. However the teachers did identify the group who needed more support, quickly and efficiently. The procedure relates well to the responses of interviewees in Chapter 5, with regard to how students at educational risk are identified. In Figure 5.1, for example the first level in the identification process was seen to be “teacher observation and discussion”. The most common factors used to identify ‘students at educational risk’ cited by the interviewees, were literacy and numeracy, and at a pre-literacy level, the ability to communicate effectively. These same factors became the basis for the identification procedure of the ESL students.

Following the identification of the students, the strategy put into place in order to provide the extra support required was to organise a separate class for them in which the curriculum delivery was varied and resources were chosen in order to give the students more time and more practice in the areas of most need. Although this was not a specific SAER program it did address two key areas of Successful Practice for Students at Educational Risk (EDWA 1998a) namely: Curriculum Delivery (p. 4) and the Learning Environment (p. 10).
6.3 CASE STUDY 3.—THE MENTOR PROGRAM

An aspect of the Student at Educational Risk policy is that of specific program development and schools not only have the responsibility of identifying students at 'educational risk', they also have the responsibility of developing programs for them.

This case study describes such a program which was developed for students at educational risk in the school at large by the school psychologist. It followed her experience with a similar program at another school. The psychologist described the program to the researcher during the interview process.

**Staff/Student Mentor Program**

The program began in a small way at the beginning of 1998 by targeting Year 8 students; by 2000 students across Years 8, 9 and 10 were included. It is a staff/student program that provides one on one support for 'at risk' students. It requires teacher involvement which in turn involves the school, until a whole school culture develops that takes responsibility for the students' well being.

Initially, primary school reports are used and the results of reading ability tests to identify students at the beginning of Year 8. Following this, students are identified by the use of proformas, which ask subject teachers to identify those students they consider to be 'at risk'. The students are then approached and invited to be in the program: there is no coercion and students may agree to become involved or not. This is an important feature as students must be willing to identify the goals that they want to
focus on and must be able to experience success

Teachers volunteer to become mentors for students and over a three week cycle spend approximately 5 – 10 minutes a day with the student deciding on the week’s goal, discussing any problems and, at the end of the week, evaluating the progress the student has made towards achieving their goal. This daily contact is important. At the end of the cycle, students can opt to extend the time. They may also choose to be a part of the program or not and can come into or leave the program as the need arises.

The funding for the program initially came from a District Office grant. This was followed by a submission through the School Development Plan to the School Council, which was successful, so the school in effect funded the program. Finally, in 1999 the school psychologist was successful in winning a Making the Difference Resource Grant to develop a file outlining the program. This file won a Best Practice Award in 2000.

In spite of the program’s apparent success – according to the psychologist approximately 20% of Year 8 students were identified, there were criticisms of the program from other areas within the school. It was felt that for the numbers of students involved (approximately eight in a school population of 80) it was heavily resourced in terms of funding and teacher time. There were several students, especially in Year 9, who were considered to be particularly ‘at risk’ but who were not involved in the program as they had declined to participate and yet there was no alternative program available to address their needs. There were no
school-based and funded programs for mainstream students in the post compulsory years, that is Years 11 and 12.

A final negative factor, although not the responsibility of the people involved in the program, was again the imminent closure of the school. The program was not available in the schools that students were to attend in 2001. This was particularly sad for those students who had been involved and had benefited from the program. It will remain to be seen whether the psychologist who did so much to develop and implement the program is able to introduce it into other schools in the future.

6.4 CASE STUDY FOUR – ALI: A ‘STUDENT AT EDUCATIONAL RISK’

The case studies above have involved the procedures that were used by the school to identify students ‘at risk’ and one of the SAER programs that was developed and used by the school. This final case study looks at the SAER issue in a more personal way as it describes the experiences of the researcher with one Year 11 student at the school.

In February 1999 the researcher met Ali (not his real name), on his admission to Year 11. He was 17 years old and his reputation had preceded him, as he had spent some time in the post-compulsory ILC in the previous year. He had also spent some time in a Junior ILC at another school. Ali was a Kurdish refugee who came from a very disturbed background. He had a diagnosed psychological problem but would not accept any treatment or counselling. None of the teaching staff were ever made aware of the exact nature of the problem.

The case study begins with an edited version of the minutes of a meeting of Ali’s teachers following his reinstatement after a week’s suspension.
(Names have been changed in order to ensure confidentiality.) In the minutes, school (F) is the school where all the case studies occurred.

Ali - a Student at Risk

Minutes of a Special Meeting of Teachers of Ali on 28th July 1999

The meeting was called by Mr Stevens to discuss the allocation of teacher aide time for Ali and the management of his behaviour after his return to school.

Ms Evans began the proceedings by giving some background information about Ali.

- At the end of 1998, on the completion of the ILC program at (E) and (F) (names of metropolitan high schools), Ali went to Northlake Campus ‘Flying Start’ program.
- He returned to (F) after 2 days, as Northlake did not consider they could cater for his needs.
- On his return he went into a Year 11 Vocational Education Program.
- Ms Evans learned that Central Office had classified Ali as 0.3 Educational Support and in Term 2, Week 9 a 0.3 aide was appointed.
- This arrangement did not work out, as Ali did not respond well to the aide.
- He left school at the end of Term 2 and through Mr Crossley (the psychologist at (E)), a placement was organised for him at Melville Ed. Support Centre for Semester 2.
- This was found to be unsuitable as the Centre only caters for Yrs 8 – 10.
- Ali was then referred to Fremantle Ed. Support at TAFE, but this was full for 1999, possible place in 2000.
- Ali, with his family, returned to (F) insisting that he be readmitted
Mr Stevens said that the school had an obligation to accept him and Ali had been readmitted. Ms Lee (the school psychologist) introduced the idea of a mentor for Ali and suggested a trial two week program similar to that used in the Year 8 Mentor Program, and that a case manager needed to be appointed to liaise with all parties. This is not to be considered as a disciplinary measure but an effort to change Ali’s behaviour/responses to situations. Ms Lee reminded people not to rely on the mentor program if a disciplinary problem occurred and to follow normal BM (Behaviour Management) procedures with reports to be sent to the Deputy Principal or Administration.

Following this meeting teachers were asked to give their concerns to a specially convened group. Concerns that were submitted included the procedures to follow when/if Ali refused to accept direction, interfered with other students, refused the assistance of the aide or reacted loudly and violently with the teacher or other students. However, it must be noted that Ali’s behaviour was not reprehensible all the time. The following were comments given to the meeting by the researcher:

Ali is a very needy student who creates his own negative energy whirlpool however, he can also be charming and pleasant. His classmates are very supportive, though they do get frustrated with his behaviour. For me, the bottom line is, I like Ali but I know I cannot address the needs of other students in my class if he continues his disruptive behaviour.

28/07/99
The effect of Ali’s behaviour on other students and the extra teacher-time demanded by him had been a complaint made by both teachers and other students. Putting Ali on a Mentor Program was seen as one way to address his behaviour and also by having two adults in all of his classes, it was hoped he would not be as demanding. It was however, a very resource intensive solution.

Ali was reinstated into all his classes with either a teacher-aide or a resource teacher present. He met with his mentor on a daily basis to discuss his weekly goal. These were simple goals such as “Not interrupting the teacher in class.” or “Always bringing my file to class.” Ali responded well to this procedure as he enjoyed the extra attention and the special status. However, there was no improvement in the standard of Ali’s work. The mentoring continued beyond the two weeks suggested in the Minutes but there were no further meetings with his teachers to discuss Ali’s progress.

However before the end of the year there was a further disturbing incident. Ali became attracted to a fellow student in his Art class. He talked quite openly about his feelings and several teachers tried to counsel him about the best way to behave, however the girl did not welcome his attentions and tried to stop them but Ali would not accept this. He began to watch her, found out where she lived and followed her home. He then found out her phone number and began ringing her at home. Finally, the girl’s father intervened and came to school to complain. Ali was very upset, he could not understand the reaction as, in his words, he loved her and therefore would not harm her. Eventually, the situation calmed down,
the father did not lay any charges as he had threatened and Ali stopped following the girl.

Ali completed Year 11 but did not pass any of his subjects. The administration believed that he would not return to school for Year 12 and no further steps were taken to place Ali anywhere else. However, he returned to school at the beginning of 2000 and the principal felt obliged to accept him.

Ali found the pressure of Year 12 very difficult and his behaviour began to deteriorate almost immediately. He no longer had aide time and was not on the Mentor Program. He received his first warning in February and his mother (Ali’s father was dead) was asked to attend the school. Meetings with the family were always difficult as the mother spoke little English and appeared to be dominated by Ali’s elder brother, who always accompanied her. In spite of a translator being provided who explained the school’s concerns, the family found it difficult to believe that anything was amiss and refused to accept any help or advice in the way of counselling for Ali.

Finally, Ali was involved in an out-of-school incident but which involved a female Year 8 student from the school. It was a serious incident in which Ali physically attacked the girl for what he perceived to be an insult. This time the police were called and because of the gravity of the situation, it was felt that Ali could no longer remain at the school. A family conference was again called and Ali was ordered to stay off school grounds until the arrangements could be made. It took two weeks before the family came in and there was obviously some reluctance to do so. The family conference, when it did occur, was very difficult, the brother and mother were abusive
and hostile, they did not accept that Ali had any responsibility in the altercation with the girl and seemed to believe that he was within his rights to attack her because she had been rude to him. The school had no recourse this time but to remove Ali from the roll.

This is a tragic story about a student in great need. He was identified as being 'at risk' almost from the time he started in the Junior ILC. However, no programs, including the Mentor Program, could really assist such a disturbed young man and without support or even acceptance from his family that he needed help, there was nothing the school or teachers could do. Not all of Ali's teachers, including the researcher, believed that Ali was an Educational Support student, that is a student with an IQ below 70, which made any placement in such centres inappropriate. In the end, the school administration did not know what to do, his teachers developed their own strategies to contain his behaviour because they knew there was nowhere else for him to go, but it was not enough, and in that respect the education system failed him. The researcher met Ali once after he had left the school; he had no job and no prospect of getting one.

SUMMARY
The first three case studies describe above are real examples that illustrate some of the themes that have recurred throughout the study. The first two address how 'at risk' students may be identified, the first by describing the development of a student profile and the second how that identification can occur through the process of teacher observation and discussion. The third case study describes a school-based and funded program specifically designed for students 'at risk'. The final case study however, is a little different in that it describes the experiences of a particular 'at risk' student
and his teachers. It is included in order to demonstrate some of the challenges that schools are faced with in coming to terms with the needs of 'students at educational risk'.

In the following chapter the areas of the 'at risk' debate, first identified in the literature review, will be revisited and related to the findings discussed in Chapters 5 & 6. Finally, the propositions that have arisen as the study progressed will be presented with recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER SEVEN
PROPOSITIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers and other educators defined and used the term ‘at risk’ as applied to students. Thus, initially, the focus was confined to teacher’s perceptions of the term ‘at risk’ as applied to students. The context of the study was the introduction by the Education Department of Western Australia of its Students at Educational Risk strategy, *Making the Difference*, in which an official definition of a ‘student at educational risk’ was introduced.

Much valuable data was collected throughout the study, however there were some limitations. For example the initial data collection, the *Stimulus Sheet*, was restricted to teachers’ understandings of the term ‘at risk’. During the second stage of the data collection the interviewees were presented with a much wider range of questions, but the number of participants was small. The four case studies in Chapter 6, whilst providing depth to the study, were restricted to procedures and experiences at only one secondary school. However during the process of coding the data, a number of conceptual categories emerged and further coding revealed relationships between these categories. These relationships have relevance for all teachers and educators thus, in the next part of this chapter, they are presented in the form of propositions. Finally, at the end of the chapter a number of recommendations for further research are suggested.
PROPOSITIONS

1. Teachers' definitions of 'at risk' students are not congruent with the Education Department's definition of a student at educational risk as stated in the Making the Difference documents.

This proposition arose from the realisation by the researcher of the breadth and depth inherent in the definitions of 'at-riskness' that teachers and other educators in the study were providing. For example, teachers' definitions of 'at risk' students utilised a variety of factors in order to provide clarity and make the meaning more precise. These factors could be classified into, personal, family, health and school categories. A notable finding was that the factors used by teachers in primary and secondary schools tended to focus on different aspects of the student's life. For example, in early primary school the emphasis is on educational-academic factors, however by secondary school the emphasis has changed to social-behavioural issues. In high school in particular, the health of a student becomes an issue, especially their mental health. In the Child Health Survey (1997) poor mental health is cited as a risk factor in the poor academic performance of students. However, health issues are not cited at all in the Making the Difference documentation regarding students at educational risk.

From the interview responses it became apparent that there was some disagreement between teachers and other educators about whether the addition of 'educational' by the Educational Department to the term 'at risk' had broadened or narrowed the definition. The intention of the Education Department was to broaden it and they included the achievement of the thirteen Overarching Learning Outcomes (OLOs) from the Curriculum Framework as the criteria for deciding whether a student
was at educational risk or not. Although the OLOs include a number in the affective domain, there are teachers who believe that the word 'educational' itself narrows the perception to include only academic/educational outcomes. Furthermore, classroom teachers in the study had a different perception of what the term 'educational' actually signifies when compared, for example, with the beliefs of the school psychologist.

By 2000 the whole phrase was already being superseded in everyday use by its acronym, S-A-E-R. It is possible therefore that in future, teachers will be unaware that the 'E' stands for "Educational" or of its original importance to the intention of broadening the definition of 'at risk' students in *Making the Difference*.

2. **Without adequate resources or expertise, schools will not be able to develop appropriate programs for all their students at risk.**

With the introduction of *Making the Difference* schools now have the responsibility for developing programs for students at educational risk. This may lead to particular students being disadvantaged.

If the figure of 20% of students in schools being 'at educational risk' at any one time is translated into classroom terms, then a classroom teacher may have five or more 'at risk' students who require some form of intervention at any one time. Identification of the students who are at risk is most often initiated by teacher observation and discussion, as the case studies demonstrate. This is the first level in the identification process and is generally completed quickly and effectively. However, the next part of the
process; that of implementing an appropriate intervention program, may be complex and time-consuming. In the meantime, if the risk is being manifest as behaviour problems, then often the only recourses for the teacher are punitive measures such as detention or time-out in a contract room which may or may not be an effective or appropriate measure for that particular at risk student.

It is important therefore that the most appropriate program be put in place for the student as quickly as possible. If the intervention takes the form of an individual education program (IEP) then it requires time and effort on the part of the teacher and other members of staff to organise. The teacher must also have the necessary knowledge and expertise to properly conduct the program as well as having adequate support and resources allocated in order to implement it. Schools may lack the necessary expertise, resources or time to adequately cater for the student on an individual basis and IEPs are not effective for every student at risk.

Part of the *Students at Educational Risk* policy is program development but the responsibility for doing so is the schools'. Currently, there is no central coordination of or accountability for the type and range of programs being offered in Western Australian schools. It is therefore critical that there is some central accountability to ensure that there are appropriate and effective programs being developed for the 'at risk' students in government schools and that adequate support and resources and, above all time, are provided for teachers to implement them.
3. The emphasis on individual outcomes in *Making the Difference* may disadvantage defined groups of 'at risk' students.

With the introduction of outcomes-focussed education, it is believed that the needs of individual 'at risk' students can be addressed through the implementation of Individual Education Plans. However, by concentrating on the needs of individual students, the needs of groups of students may be ignored. In the study, participants identified groups of students who they believed were particularly 'at risk'. These included students in remote and rural areas, ESL students, those with low IQs and gifted and talented students.

In the past the use of the epidemiological model of 'at riskness' resulted in groups such as these being identified and singled out, and subsequently programs were developed for them and funding allocated. However, with the shift to individual outcomes, a more interactive model now underpins current thinking and a raft of factors is considered by schools and teachers in order to identify an individual student at risk. In many cases this is preferable to the earlier approach, but there is a down side as some issues can only be effectively addressed at a group level.

Karmel introduced the notion of group outcomes in 1985 when he stated that educational outcomes should be the same for defined groups as any other group. He did not feel that the best way to allocate funds was on an individual basis and he cited American compensatory programs as evidence of individual funding that had not achieved the desired results. Interestingly he also believed that by putting the emphasis on the individual student the 'blame' was put on the student instead of on the
system. This view is in direct contrast to EDWA’s which supports the notion of individual outcomes and ‘educational’ risk, because they believe that this removes the ‘blame’ from the student and places it with the system.

At the present time, by identifying individual students ‘at risk’ through the use of teacher observation, profiling or the use of identification forms, whatever is put in place to address the issue must of necessity be reactive. The notion of a deficit is inherent in the identification process, for example, the majority of participants in this study believed that a student ‘at risk’ was failing or not achieving in some way. However, if a group of students is defined as being potentially at risk, then programs can be developed which are proactive and address the issue before it impinges on the students’ progress.

Both early intervention and intervention at critical stages in a student’s life were identified by the participants as being crucial in the ‘at risk’ debate. It would seem therefore, that as well as identifying individual ‘at risk’ students, measures must be put in place that identify groups of students before they become ‘at risk’.

4. It is the responsibility of all stakeholders to make a difference in the life of an ‘at risk’ student.

This proposition arises from the interactive model of ‘at riskness’ which acknowledges that a student may be affected by factors arising from different but related areas of their lives. That teachers recognise these areas is evident from the number and type of factors they identified as affecting an ‘at risk’ student and which are listed in Tables 4.3, 4.4 and 5.5.
However, a considerable number of these factors lie beyond the area of expertise of the classroom teacher or even of schools or Districts. For example, political intervention is required in order to address the inequalities created by poverty or rural isolation. If teachers themselves are not to feel isolated or overwhelmed by the enormity of the 'at risk' debate then all the outside agencies must be involved in addressing the needs of a student 'at risk'.

Making the Difference acknowledges the need for parental, community and inter-agency involvement in successful practice for students at educational risk. However acknowledgment isn't enough, there must also be collaboration between all parties. In order to do this a more formal structure needs to be put in place that can coordinate the activities of all the agencies and ensure accountability, so that schools, teachers and agencies can more effectively work together to address the needs of at risk students.

RECOMMENDATIONS
This study has raised a number of issues. The Student at Educational Risk strategy Making the Difference was first put forward as a major strategy in the 1998 Plan for Government School Education. The implementation period was originally to be until 2002 but this has now been extended to 2005. The extension became necessary when the extent of the change for schools was realised. But with such a long period of time before the strategy is fully operational it is critical that aspects of the policy are researched and evaluated before 2005 if whole cohorts of present and future 'at risk' students are not to be disadvantaged by a system that is intended to
benefit them. With this concern in mind, a number of recommendations is proposed for future research projects.

**Recommendation 1**
That research be conducted into the programs being developed by schools for students at educational risk, including the level of funding and resources provided, and the numbers of students involved.

**Recommendation 2**
In view of the importance of individual outcomes and the development of Individual Learning Programs to address the needs of students at educational risk, research into their effectiveness is recommended.

**Recommendation 3**
The change to Commonwealth funding has meant that funding is no longer allocated to targeted groups of 'at risk' students. It would be valuable to know how these students are being catered for in schools and whether appropriate programs have been developed for them.

**CONCLUSION**
The study began simply with a desire on the part of the researcher to learn how teachers perceived the term 'at risk'. The categories which emerged from the data went far beyond that and demonstrated the depth of concern educators and, in particular practising teachers, have for the students who are not achieving socially, emotionally or academically and who are 'at risk' in the school system.

In Chapter Two the interrelationship between programs, policies and the identification and definition of 'at risk' students was described and
illustrated in Figure 2.1 (p 11). *Making the Difference*, which is a policy for Students at Educational Risk, is therefore an integral part of the relationship and cannot help but 'make a difference' to how 'at risk' students are identified and on the programs that are developed for them. The other part of the relationship noted in Figure 2.1, that of 'models' is also having an impact as a more interactive model of 'at riskness' informs educational policy. The dilemma at present is whether that difference is going to be positive or negative; whether it will be to the benefit of students 'at risk' or disadvantage them even further.

Historically, students at risk have been defined as those students who do not complete their schooling satisfactorily and *Making the Difference*, with its emphasis on not achieving Overarching Learning Outcomes; confirms this viewpoint today. One of the major factors for students not achieving satisfactorily at school identified in the literature and in the data in this study, was socio-economic disadvantage. In 1994, in the *Administrative Guidelines for Commonwealth Programs for Schools* (DEET), the following comment was made: "Ever since Karmel it has been argued that in dealing with socio-economic disadvantage schools are dealing not with deficient individuals but with a complicated ecology which requires school and community action to tackle." (p.9) In the seven years since this was written this "complicated ecology" has become even more complex. This study would indicate that teachers and educators are well aware of the challenges that face students, both inside and outside school, but there must also be strong support and accountability at a system level to make a real and positive difference to the outcomes for educationally 'at risk' students.
Dear Staff Member
I am currently conducting research into what the term “at risk” means to people working in the field of education. Is the term so general that, as Jean Aitchison believes, it is difficult to define or specify an ‘associated image’?

In an attempt to determine whether, as educators, we hold different images of what ‘at risk’ means when applied to students, I would be grateful for your input by answering the following two questions, namely:

1. How do you define the term ‘at risk’?

2. How would you use the term in a sentence of your own?

Please place your completed sheet in the box provided.

Thank you for your participation,

Norma E. Smith
20 September 1998
APPENDIX 2
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

DEFINITION CATEGORY
1. As a teacher/educator how would you define the phrase a ‘student at risk’?

2. When “Making the Difference” came out in 1998 the word ‘educational’ was added to the phrase, “at risk” i.e. ‘students at educational risk’. Did the addition change your perception or understanding in any way?

3. The intention of adding ‘educational’ to the phrase was to remove possible negative connotations. Do you believe that students are less stigmatised or labelled since ‘educational’ was added to the term?

4. In general, do people use the full phrase or still say ‘student at risk’?

5 In your opinion has the current thinking allowed for the needs of more or less student to be addressed?

FACTORS CATEGORY
1. In the literature many factors for ‘at riskness’ are cited. In your experience what are the main factors that put students at educational risk?

2. Are there factors within the education system itself that may put at student at risk?

3 Do you believe there are some factors that may only occur at particular stages of a student’s life? Conversely, are there factors that are always present for some students and that put that student at educational risk throughout their school career?

IDENTIFICATION CATEGORY
1a) Identification is a big part of the ‘Making the Difference” strategy. In your school how are students at educational risk identified? Who initiates this?

b) In your experience as an administrator, do you feel that schools have adequate methods of identifying students at educational risk?
2 Do you feel there are any commonly agreed factors or indicators which are used by teachers and/or schools to identify students?

3 Once a student is identified by a school as being at educational risk, what happens next? Do you feel this is satisfactory?

4 EDWA says that 20% of students are ‘at risk’ at some time. Would you agree with this figure?

5a) Do you feel that there are any groups of students in schools now whose needs are less well addressed because of the broadening of the definition?

b) In your opinion has the current thinking allowed for the needs of more or less students to be addressed?

6 Finally, when you discuss students at education risk with your colleagues, do you feel you all have a common understanding of the term?
### APPENDIX THREE

### STUDENT AT EDUCATIONAL RISK (SAER) - IDENTIFICATION FORM

**Private and Confidential**

**‘Making the Difference’**: Identification of Students at Educational Risk

---

**SAER Identification Form (2000)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification: Areas of Concern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student: ________________________ Year: _____ Gender: ______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Reporting: __________________ Date: ____________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This form is designed as a tool to develop a collaborative approach in assisting teachers to identify issues affecting a student’s progress.

Please tick the specific area(s) of concern.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AREA OF CONCERN</th>
<th>Performance in Learning Areas</th>
<th>Area of Concern</th>
<th>Tick</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Declining/changing grades</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Interaction with peers</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underachieving</td>
<td>Interaction with teachers</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor application in class work</td>
<td>Isolate</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework issues</td>
<td>Transition issues</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Victim of Bullying</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Issues</td>
<td>Bullies others</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Australian English Proficiency</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Listening skills</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Mood swings</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reading skills</td>
<td>Manipulative</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Writing skills</td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Speaking skills</td>
<td>Anxiety/stress</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeracy skills</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational skills</td>
<td>Victim of Trauma</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work presentation</td>
<td>Refugee status</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor skills/coordination</td>
<td>Personal/family</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disrupted schooling</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Behavioural</td>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>Attention seeking</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lateness</td>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unexplained class absence</td>
<td>Lacking concentration</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent/patterns of absences</td>
<td>Defiant (refuses to follow instructions)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Disruptive</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>Extreme changes in behaviour</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Suspected” substance abuse</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>○</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Acknowledgement: This form has been adapted with generous permission from School’s Framework for Identifying Students at Educational Risk. (1999).
STAGE 2: CONSULTATION WITH HOD/TIC

OUTCOMES OF PROBLEM SOLVING PROCESS

1. What was the result of parent consultation?

2. What strategies have been tried by the classroom teacher? - What results?

STAGE 3: UNRESOLVED CYCLE

1. Referral to Student Services personnel to organise a case conference via:
2. A reference to discuss concerns with parents, and/or student.

CASE CONFERENCE OUTCOMES

MONITORING WITH CASE MANAGER AND CLASSROOM TEACHER

CASE MANAGER: ___________________________ DATE: ___________________________

Copies to: Year Co-ordinator/Deputy Principal/School Psych/Other

Date: June 20, 2000
APPENDIX FOUR
SAER IMPLEMENTATION FLOW CHART

SAER IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

STAGE 1 =
CLASSROOM TEACHER: SAER IDENTIFICATION FORM

STUDENT'S IDENTIFIED ISSUE(S)

STAGE 2:
Consultation with HOD/TIC in Problem-Solving Process

Strategies for action:
Examples -
- Parent contact
- Curriculum modification

Allow one/two weeks to monitor effectiveness of strategies

STAGE 3
ISSUE RESOLVED
(eg IEP)

SAER COMMITTEE

STAGE 3
UNRESOLVED CYCLE
- This process will require ongoing involvement from HODs and TICs.
- Referral to Student Services and appoint a case manager responsible for liaison and communication

Ongoing coordination, monitoring and evaluation by case manager with student, Hod/TIC &/or student services personnel

Suggested actions may include:
a) further parent contact
b) expand on IEP
c) school based programs (mentor, literacy, work experience)

CASE CONFERENCE
Discussion/Problem solving

a. Case conference may be arranged by case manager. Involve all student's teachers, HODs/TICs and relevant student services personnel.
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