



## At-Risk Students: What Are the Factors and How to Help Them?

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### Abstract

*This article is aimed at analysing the factors affecting at-risk students and the strategies to help them. Based on previous literatures, the definition and characteristics of at-risk students are outlined. This article also links how the development of a child using Erikson's eight stages of human development and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of child development can affect students to be identified as at-risk. On the other hand, Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and Maslow's Hierarchy of needs are used as the strategies to help these at-risk students. This article is hoped to be able to aid teachers and other authorities to identify at-risk students and provide ways to assist and support them.*

Keyword: At-risk students, strategies, human development

### Introduction

All students should be given equal opportunity to learn. So, why do we still have at-risk students in schools or even colleges? So, who are at risk and why are they at risk? Despite having a few remedial programs and steps taken to overcome this, the problem is still a major issue in Malaysia or even the world. A student who is at risk means he or she has the potential to fail in studies or does not complete studies. There are a few aspects to identify at-risk students. They can be regarded as having these below characteristics (Jones, 2006, p.11), other than race and ethnicity:

1. Low socioeconomic status
2. Disabilities and identified as special educational needs students
3. Moves frequently
4. Poor reading skills
5. Grade retention one or more years
6. Multiple suspensions and expulsions
7. Single parent household
8. Home alone
9. Pregnancy
10. Drug use

11. Bored with school

These students sometimes are capable to achieve many important things in life, however due to few factors, they are at-risk to not finish schooling. Hence, it is highly possible they have bleak future and not be successful when they are adults. Hammond, Linton, Smink, and Drew (2007, quoted in Horton, 2015, p. 84) studied the factors that are affecting the students. They have identified the trends of the factors from various literatures and these factors can be classified into four domains which are individual, family, school, and community factors. When a student who is at risk is identified, there are many strategies being done to help him or her. The question is whether these strategies really effective and help them to cope? Throughout this paper, we will look and analyse in depth of these factors affecting at-risk students, strategies done to help them in relation to education and human development theories.

**Analysis on factors affecting at-risk students strategies to help at-risk students**

As mentioned in the introduction, the four domains of factors that expose students to be at risk are individual, family, school and community factors. Below is the table which shows significant risk factors for dropping out of high school (Horton, 2015, p. 84):

<p>Individual domain</p>	<p><b>Individual Background Characteristics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning disability or emotional disturbance</li> </ul> <p><b>Early Adult Responsibilities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High number of work hours</li> <li>• Parenthood</li> </ul> <p><b>Social Attitudes, Values, &amp; Behavior</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High-risk peer group</li> <li>• High-risk social behavior</li> <li>• Highly socially active outside of school</li> </ul> <p><b>School Performance</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low achievement</li> <li>• Retention/over-age for grade</li> </ul> <p><b>School Engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor attendance</li> <li>• Low educational expectations</li> <li>• Lack of effort</li> <li>• Low commitment to school</li> <li>• No extracurricular participation</li> </ul> <p><b>School Behavior</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Misbehavior</li> <li>• Early aggression</li> </ul>
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Family domain	<p><b>Family Background Characteristics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low socioeconomic status</li> <li>• High family mobility</li> <li>• Low education level of parents</li> <li>• Large number of siblings</li> <li>• Not living with both natural parents</li> <li>• Family disruption</li> </ul> <p><b>School Behavior</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Misbehavior</li> <li>• Early aggression</li> <li>• Low educational expectations</li> <li>• Sibling has dropped out</li> <li>• Low contact with school</li> <li>• Lack of conversations about school</li> </ul>
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This categorisation of factors makes it clear as to why students can fail and drop out of school. The situation is certainly alarming. First of all, individual domain can be associated with Erikson's eight stages of human development. Diagram 1 shows the stages:

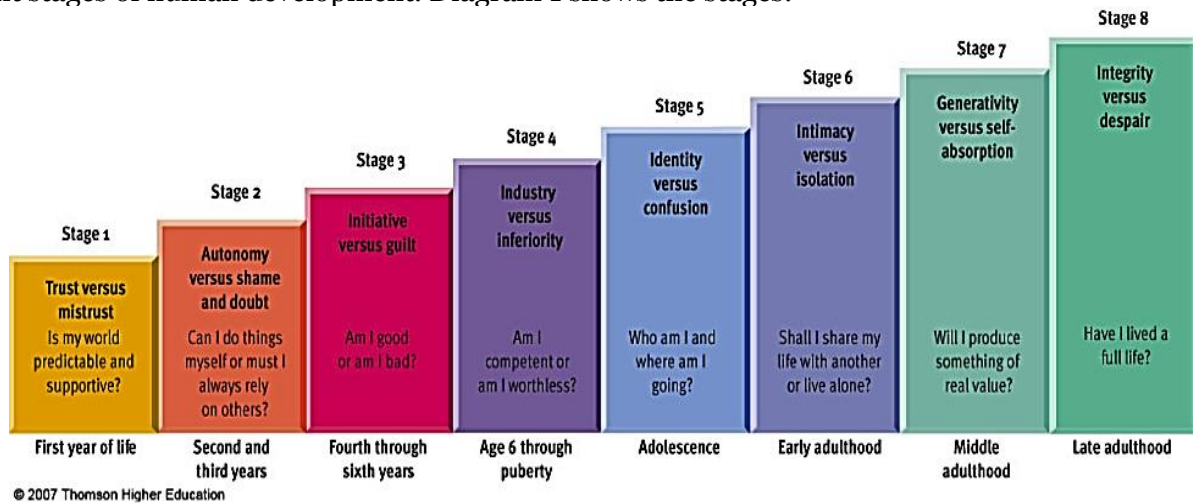
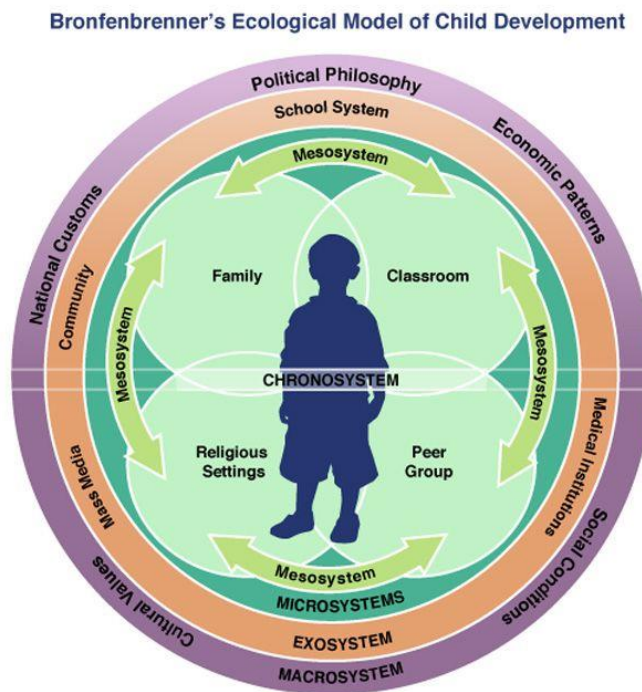


Diagram 1

These stages are very different and each with a task to accomplish and issues to overcome by a person. In diagram 1, stage 1 to stage 5 are the reflection of educational system starting from kindergarten, primary school, secondary school to college or university. These stages indicate how a person or student starts off his or her early education. For each stage, there is a task that a student has to achieve in order to move on to the next stage. At-risk students may fail at stage 2, 3, 4 and 5 due to their failure to pass through these stages. For an example, in stage 2, a student may feel that they are incapable of doing or understanding knowledge without a teacher's assistance. Eventually, he may feel that he is intellectually challenge when there is a constant pressure coming from oneself and the surrounding, thus decreasing his grades and this may make him feel demotivated to learn. As we can see, this is a series of action. It is a domino effect in which a bad action can harm multiple actions later. That is why it is important to think and prevent drop out or failures. Teenagers are the future leaders of the world. If a student cannot successfully finish

school, their future may not be as bright as the other students. Everyone has the same right to be educated. What is more alarming is the high school dropouts. These students are risking their future when they stop schooling at such young age like in primary and secondary school. As Burrus and Roberts (2012) said “high school dropouts are three times more likely to be unemployed than college graduates” (p. 1).

However, many studies have shown that socioeconomic status under family domain is an important factor of at-risk students. This is supported by Burrus and Roberts (2012), as one of “demographic indicators of at-risk students include coming from a low-income family (Allensworth, 2005; Roderick, 1994; Rumberger, 2004)” (p. 4). In addition to this, Horton (2015) claimed “high school students who are at risk come from all socioeconomic levels” (p. 84). Basically what hinder these students from getting proper education and putting them at-risk is closely linked to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of child development, Diagram 2.



*Diagram 2*

This model helps to understand how the world around a child or student helps or hinders development of the child. In diagram 2, we can clearly see there are five environmental systems that influence a child’s development. So, all the four domains of the factors contributing to at-risk students are present in this model and focuses on social context which people live. Five environmental systems are as follow: 1) microsystem, 2) mesosystem, 3) exosystem, 4) macrosystem and 5) chronosystem. The first system that highly influences the development of a child is microsystem which includes family, classroom, peer group and religious setting. That is why when a student with low socioeconomic background will cause the child to drop out of school. The reason might be because they have to work to support the family, stop schooling not to burden parents or take care of younger siblings while parents are working.

Therefore, how can we, as teachers or community help these students? This question will be answered in the next chapter.

## Analysis on strategies for helping at-risk students

After analysing the two major factors contributing to at-risk students, strategies need to be implemented to counter these problems. First of all, there is one strategy that is always used by the school authorities when dealing with severe misbehaved student, expel them from school. Does expelling students really work? Will this assure that they will not create the same problem outside of school? From my point of view, this looks like dismissing the problem instead of solving it. This is backed with a statement by Slavin and Madden (1989), “one of the most frequently used strategies to deal with at-risk students is also the least effective: flunking them” (p. 4). This evidently shows that expelling students might not even work. So, what should we do?

Snow (2003) has outlined and identified six general classroom strategies to assist at-risk students in a book entitled ‘Classroom Strategies for Helping At-Risk Students’. The strategies are described thoroughly and divided into chapters. The strategies as proposed by Snow are 1) whole-class instruction, 2) cognitively oriented instruction, 3) small groups, 4) tutoring, 5) peer tutoring and 6) computer-assisted instruction. The strategies are conducted for low-performing students and “are proven to be effective, or at least show promise as effective interventions for at-risk students” (Snow, 2003, p. 1). For the purpose of this paper, one strategy from Snow will be analysed in relation to human development theory which is small groups strategy. This strategy is separated into two groups, namely mixed-ability groupings and like-ability groupings. Snow further mentioned that this practice of mixed-ability grouping is “consistent with the established characteristics of effective cooperative learning: clearly defined tasks, encouraged interaction within the group, and differentiation of group roles” (p. 25). Sociocultural theory by Vygostky can be linked with this strategy. Below is the diagram of how the theory works.

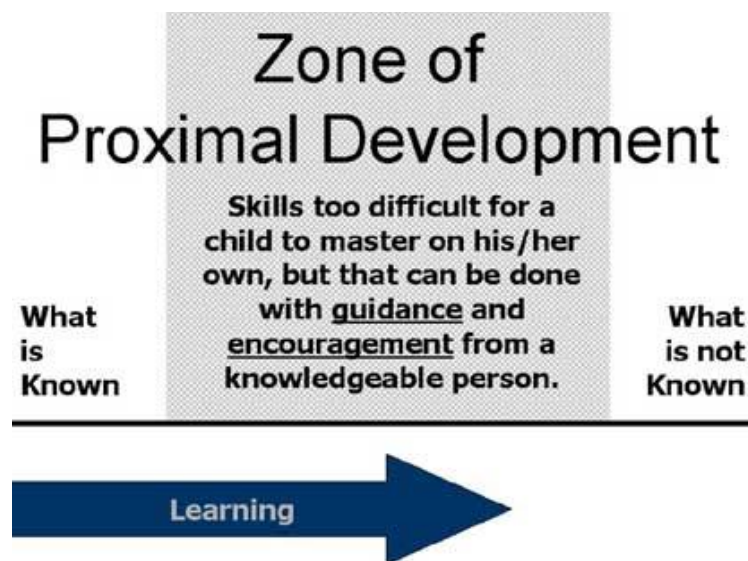


Diagram 3

Diagram 3 shows how actually mixed-ability grouping fosters learning for low-performing students. When a small group is given a task to be completed, the advanced students can help students who are low-level. They can help each other where they will all be working at the same level and support one another. According to Vygotsky, these advanced students can be considered

as More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). It “refers to anyone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the developing learner, with respect to a particular task, process, or concept” (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2016). Learning occurs when there is somewhat advanced student who can help and assist student who is at difficulties with the current ability to accomplish the task. This zone in learning is called Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as can be seen from diagram 3. Teachers and older adults are normally the MKOs but in this case would be peers. In relation to mixed ability grouping strategy, ZPD allows a low-performing student to accomplish a task with cooperative learning. When the task is difficult for the student, the MKOs scaffold the student collaboratively and give guidance to help perform the task and finally solve the problem independently. Thus, the learning occurs in this zone in which the student’s actual development (what is known, can do independently) is upgraded to a potential development (what is not known before has now become known with guidance).

Other than that, with the advancement of technology nowadays, there are many opportunities for youths today to succeed not only in academic but also non-academic aspects like technical and skill area. The scopes of jobs nowadays are wider and offers plenty of opportunities for teenagers. Thus, another strategy that has shown good implementation in Malaysia to help at-risk students is the existence of various educational institutions like polytechnic and technical and vocational colleges. For at-risk students who just finish *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) but achieve low grades are given choices to go to *Institut Latihan Perindustrian*, community colleges, *Institut Kemahiran Belia Negara* and *Giatmara* colleges. These training colleges are specialised in giving technical and vocational education training (TVET) to at-risk students. Although they are not good academically, they have future in areas with skills. Moreover, currently there is a growing demand for more TVET graduates. Hence, these at-risk students can be transformed to be not at risk with TVET. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs which is a motivational theory can be related to this strategy or approach.

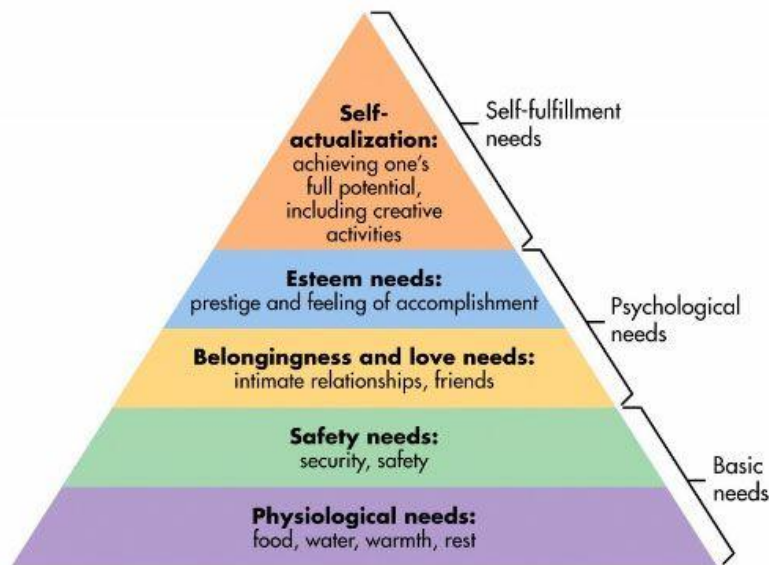


Diagram 4

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs indicates that fulfilling students’ needs can boost their motivation to achieve more in education. Thus, brightening their future and the nation’s future. “Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.” As quoted from an American lecturer, Ralph Waldo Emerson. From diagram 4, it can be proven that when the students feel that they are in a safe

learning environment (*safety needs*) to study with their friends who have the same interest like them and teachers who are trained for teaching TVET subjects (*belongingness and love needs*), this motivates them to develop self-esteem (*esteem needs*) and finally leads them to achieve good results in their respective area or subject (*self-actualisation*). Whatever it is, basic needs have to be satisfied before students can achieve their full potential. The basic needs are what provided by all the mentioned institutions above. According to Littlejohn (2001), “enthusiasm in learning can be affected by the relationship between motivation and ability that it is either functioning as an upward spiral or downward spiral” (p. 6). Ultimately, this is the job of the teacher and institution to be able to fulfil the students’ needs for them to be motivated intrinsically and extrinsically in learning. Hence, bringing up the motivation level of the students and not bringing it down. The benefit is the students can still continue studying and not dropping out of school despite not being in mainstream educational institutions (secondary school and university).

## Conclusion

As a conclusion, as stated earlier in the introduction, everyone has the same right to get education. After analysing a few factors and a few strategies in depth, it can be concluded that nobody should be excluded from studying. At-risk students need sustained support from everyone around them for them not to be failures and school dropouts. All walks of life need to play their roles accordingly including the government, community, family, school, and teachers to help them in learning. With positive psychological condition, the achievement of at-risk students can be raised and they can be less involved in behavioural or other problems. The future of the nation lies on the future of the youths today. Do not restrict the students’ movement when actually they can achieve more in life. Their journey is still long and the students’ development is fragile.

They need to have a balanced emotional quotient (EQ) to motivate themselves. As claimed by Elias et. al. (2007), “with a higher EQ they will be more motivated to achieve excellence, have higher self-esteem and self-efficacy” (p. 55). To end this paper, let us reflect and ponder upon a few questions. Does what we do now is sufficient to help at-risk students? Do we really understand them and help them after various strategies have been proposed? Should we help them with just enough help or go all out to help them lowering the risk? These questions will remain unanswered unless all of us do something quickly.

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