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**Number: MOS01268**

**Symposium No 8**

**Meeting the needs of 'Students at Educational Risk': A Policy Process.**

***Abstract***

This paper analyses the Education Department of Western Australia's policy: 'Making the Difference: Students at Educational Risk' (SAER) as a process extending between macro and micro levels of the organisation between 1998 and present. The study aims to develop an understanding of how the production and practices of the policy reflect wider - and potentially competing - economic and social justice rationales, and to what extent it advocates and/or marginalises the needs of students 'at risk'. Policy is identified as an interactive process that is shaped and reconstructed by different 'contexts'. It is how individual agents interpret, resist, accommodate or conform within and between these different 'contexts' that helps provide a clearer understanding of how the SAER policy intent is executed in practice.

## **Introduction**

The literature and research into 'at-risk' is divided into two binary distinctions. The first distinction focuses on student identification and intervention strategies to reduce student under achievement at school. It examines the different interpretations and meanings applied to the term 'at risk' and the factors that create 'at risk' for the individual. It highlights the important fact that 'at riskness' is very individual due to the multiple factors and characteristics students experience and are exposed to. The second binary distinction is related to economic rationalism and is elaborated on further in this paper.

Defining the term 'at-risk' is open to a myriad of interpretations and meanings and has become a common phrase to describe a certain category of student who fail to fit into the dominant discourse and norms of educational institutions. Previously, students were identified and categorised as 'at risk' according to their disability, learning difficulties or for a variety of social factors including being part of a minority group. These groups of students were catered for under the umbrella of 'social justice', where policies and strategies were developed, and funding provided to cater for the needs of each 'at risk' category. Now the term 'at risk' has become a generic label that has been heavily criticized as classifying students 'at risk' regardless of the factors that create 'at risk'. 'At risk' is considered to be a more neutral term but "lumps a heterogeneous group of students into one category according to their shared inability to be excellent" (Gitlin, Margonis and Brunjes 1993:267). It is identified as being 'highly elastic' (Lubeck and Garrett 1990:327) as it is open to a possible multitude of interpretations and applications by educationalists, researchers and politicians.

'At riskness' can be identified both as an individual attribute (Frymier and Gansneder 1989) and refers to the psychological or emotional state of the child; and as being a social condition (Edelman 1989) influenced by a broader composite of factors and a generic concern with poor and minority children. Research in the area of students 'at risk' highlights that there is no 'typical' 'at risk'. Students 'at risk' rarely have a one-dimensional factor of risk, but are exposed to a combination of risk factors (Donmoyer and Kos 1993) or multi-dimensions that create an environment or atmosphere conducive to under-achievement. It is the composition of these risk factors that creates the 'individuality' of 'at risk'. Table one includes a list of the most common facts that create 'at risk'.

Historically an epidemiological model has been applied to student identification. In this model 'at risk' factors are related to demographic, biological, socio-economic or behavioural characteristics (Richardson, Casanova, Placier and Guilfoyle 1989) and attempts to define categories of 'at riskness' so that prevention or treatment strategies can then be adopted to assist students in overcoming their disadvantage at school. However, several tensions exist with this model of identifying 'at risk'. It deflects away from the problems of the school organisation and structures by not taking into account how educational institutions and the culture of schools fail to accommodate all students. It refers to entire groups of children as 'at risk' and implies children belonging to one or more of these groups are inherently 'at risk' (Montgomery and Rossi 1994; Sturman 1997) but fails to explain the variations in performance among students with the same background characteristics (Donmoyer and Kos 1993). Failure is frequently classified as defective children, which implies that schools are rational and school failure pathological (Skrtic 1991; Apple and Zenk 1996), and thus blames the victim for their shortcomings.

One contextual issue surrounding the epidemiological model and its impact on educational policies is that educational institutions continue to attempt to address the needs of students 'at risk' within the vacuum of the school environment. That is to say that schools, through restructuring and changing the process, procedures, pedagogy and strategies at the macro level of educational institutions, and the micro levels of schools and classrooms, can

address and cater for the 'at riskness' of its students. However, the school is but one component of the many tensions that result in students being at educational risk and research has found that only "about 12 to 18 per cent of the variances in student outcomes can be explained by classroom and school factors" (Creemers 1994:20).

### **The individual**

*Psychosocial Factors Physical factors Behavioural Factors*

Self-esteem Health, illness, and Disruptive Behaviour

Motivation disability Passivity

Cognitive constructs Pregnancy/motherhood

Socially limited Young Offenders

Personality Drug use/substance abuse

Academic performance

### **The family**

*Family structure Family functioning Family socio- Separation from  
economic context family*

Fragmented and Disturbed parent/ Income Homelessness

Reconstituted child relationships Education Wards of state

Family structures Conflict

Family size Abuse

Modelling

Mobility

### **The school**

*School organisation Curriculum School climate*

Organisational policies Content Teacher/student relationships

And practices Decision-making Peer relationships

Discipline Teaching-learning strategies School counsellors/

School leaving and Assessment psychologists

Re-entry. Student participation
School/home relationships Staff professional
Development.
<b>Societal factors</b>
Poverty
Group differences
Gender
Ethnicity
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander
NESB
Socio-economic status
Geographical location

Table 1. Summary of risk factors (*Source: Batten and Russell 1995:51*)

The literature on 'at-risk' also highlights the urgency and importance of interagency collaboration. A call for more effective intersectoral links between agencies and improved boundary definition, less restrictive industrial practices and budget flexibility to allow cross-agency management is frequently voiced. However, in reality, many politicians involved in the creation of educational policy fail to link this important concept to other social service providers, leaving schools with very little power, or forms of persuasion, to affect how outside agencies operate, function or allocate their own scarce resources. Schools are already affected by the consequences of non-educational problems among students and their families, and often deal with such problems with few resources and little expertise.

The second binary distinction in the literature on 'at-risk' is related to an ideal position of economic rationalism. The ethos behind economic rationalism has become a model used to frame education and has placed 'school failure' and students 'at risk' as one of its central foci. The most prominent features of economic rationalism prevailing in educational policy globally have been, firstly, the shift in the rhetoric from 'individual risk' to 'nation at risk' (Timar & Kirp 1988). This shift has created tensions and contradictions between the discourses of economic rationalism and social justice, and how the latter is remolded and reformed within the dominant discourse. Secondly, its support of a human capital theory, where education is identified as a social investment to improve a nation's competitive edge in economic trading by producing a more flexible, educated and skilled population. It has influenced systemic and organisational practices through the restructuring of schools in an attempt to improve efficiency and accountability.

The finding of a United States Government inquiry into education in 1983 entitled *A Nation At Risk* illuminates the shift towards a nation 'at risk' and away from the individual. This inquiry found that there was a significant drop in the number of its youth completing school and this was correlated to schools not doing their job (Fullan & Stiegelbauer 1991). America needed an educated workforce to be competitive in the global economy. 'At risk' had become synonymous with a nation's economic growth and its ability to be competitive in international trading. Mediocre education performance was given as the reason for the possible lack of dominance in world markets. In 1989 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), also contented that the population needed to be more skilled, knowledgeable and flexible to meet the changes of economic growth and development of the economy. High youth unemployment and employability were again directly linked as affecting economic growth and correlated to the lack of accountability by schools to carry out their goals of providing suitable education. Schools were identified not only as part of the problem but also part of the solution (Guthrie & Krist 1988). Improving the quality of schooling was seen as the first priority towards improving the economy. Within this human capital perspective of education, the concepts of social equity and social justice were reframed and welfare issues played down. This created a reconstruction of the rhetoric of the notion of 'at risk' away from the needs of the individual and relocated it to economic inefficiency. However, "the ideology behind economic rationalism is not neutral or value free. It serves the interests of capital and the private sector rather than the interests of the citizens or the community and the function of education is to serve the economy" (Dudley & Vidovich 1995:45).

'At risk' and 'equal opportunities' have often been central to social justice issues. Previously, the notion of social justice was based on fairness, need and human development and used as a tool to ensure all students achieved equitable access and opportunities to develop their potential. Many policies and guidelines formulated during the 1970's aimed to ensure individuals and groups were not discriminated against and social justice was aligned to positive actions towards the redistribution of support and resources to disadvantaged groups in society. Since the late eighties social justice has been reconstructed and "The original meaning and values attached to 'social justice' have been altered, reconstructed, remodified, reframed and presented in a different perspective, where 'competing discourses' are stitched together" (Taylor 1997:30). The emphasis had now changed from that of the needs of the individual to one that applied to social groups, and was now further reframed in terms of addressing the needs of the 'majority' culture and the capital state. The realities of this shift in social justice was seen as being more aligned to 'legitimizing political decisions' (Ball 1998), through ensuring schools produce an effective educational workforce to improve the economy. Social justice now bares an entirely different set of values (Angus 1991; Sturman 1997) that focus on efficiency, excellence, quality and standards through rigid testing and accountability.

Corporate managerialism has become a key component of educational reform where the success of efficiency is based on producing more outcomes for the same cost or maintaining the same outcomes at a reduced price (Bates 1990; Haynes 1997), or as Yeatman (1987:341) stresses, it is "doing more with less" and "focusing on outcomes and results". Terminology such as stakeholders, outcomes, inputs and out-sourcing are used and supported by this new set of values, against an ethos of competition, profits, gains, and losses.

Restructuring and reorganising of educational institutions have been strategies to make schools more efficient and improve the quality and standard of education while utilising the current level of resourcing. The nexus between the convergence of education and the economy and its focus on improving the quality and standard of education has created tensions and contradictions. Firstly, there is a tension between the current economic

discourse and the ideology of social justice. Social justice has become a struggle, polarised by the needs of the individual to obtain the appropriate resourcing to combat 'at risk', and that of the State, for economic efficiency at all bureaucratic levels. Secondly, school organisations face conflicting priorities and must reconcile new demands with existing institutional practices which are rooted in a particular socio-cultural tradition and power structure (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe 1995). Thirdly, there has been an 'unrelenting focus on learning outcomes' (Cladwell & Spinks 1998) that is underpinned by a view that education is measurable by scientific reasoning but fails to take into account social and individual variables. Individuals' development in reaching their social, emotional and cognitive milestones becomes inconsequential. Fourthly, a competitive element to education creates exclusion, as the principle of competition involves winners and losers. An economic model of education inhibits the promotion of personal, social and effective education as a means to promote social cohesion and individual well-being. However, economic rationalism is not concerned with individuals or how they are affected by societal influences. The predominant function of education is to serve the economy and as issues of social equity and social justice become framed with economic efficiency this will have future implications for education policy. Therefore, because of these tensions and contradictions it could be argued that it will be a challenge to schools to improve the support available to 'at risk' students simply by changing management and organisational structures, overseen by new accountability procedures while utilising already scarce resources. Internationally schools have the irredeemable task of addressing both discourses prevalent in policies and practices on 'at riskness', and as such are being pulled in two directions, to satisfy the demands of bureaucrats and address the needs of their students.

### ***Defining Policy***

One problem within the genre of policy research is "that frequently analysts fail to define conceptually what they mean by policy" (Ball 1994:15). It is a difficult and a controversial task to elucidate a simple definition as policy can mean many things. Hogwood and Gunn (1984:13-19) describe some of the traditional and different meanings of policy:

'Policy as a label for a field of activity', 'policy as a general expression of general purpose of desired state of affairs', 'policy as specific proposals', 'policy as decisions of government', 'policy as formal authorisation', 'policy as a programme', 'policy as output', 'policy as outcome', 'policy as a theory or model' and 'policy as process'.

The reoccurring theme exposed in contemporary definitions of policy is that policy is about '*intentions*' and '*actions*' that involve promoting certain '*values*' with the objective of '*creating change*' in social settings. However, there are those that would argue that that many definitions of policy are misleading as they give the impression that there is a general consensus about the values underpinning policy and that these are unchallenged, and thus fail to reflect "the political nature of policy as a compromise which is struggled over at all stages by competing interests" (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry 1997:24).

Ball (1994) defines policy and policy analysis as a complex business that involves more than just text, words and deed. The intent of policy, how it is interpreted and acted upon by different agents, what people do with policy as well as what agendas are being promoted or repressed all form part of defining and analysing policy. Ball (1994) and Taylor *et al* (1997) prefer to define policy as a 'process' that is dynamic and ongoing and this explains why policy is difficult to define.

Traditionally, the literature on policy analysis has centred on policy generation or policy implementation (Bowe, Ball & Gold 1992:6). However, applying separate distinctions to

policy analysis excludes the inter-relationship of social structure, power, culture and human agency that influence policy. For Ball (1994) Ranson (1996) and Taylor *et al* (1997) policy analysis involves examining the issues and processes of how policy is drafted prior to practice through to how the initiative of the policy, at a micro level is related and incorporated in the processes and values of the institution. Policy does not exist in isolation, but in context, there is a prior history, specific ideology and political agenda, a social and economic context (Grundy 1994; Taylor *et al* 1997), which are reflected in its discourse.

Ball, Bowe and Gold adopted a conceptual framework of policy analysis that identified policy as a process that involved a 'cycle'. In this model, policy is viewed as cross sectional with multi dimensions, all of which influence and effect policy objectives and policy outcomes. Policy is identified as an interactive process rather than an end product (Ball 1994), with a 'cycle' allowing a recontextualisation of policy and thus providing a clearer understanding of how the intent of policy is negotiated at different levels of a hierarchical system. From this standpoint, policy involves a trajectory.

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Figure 1. Context of Policy Making. *Source Bowe et al 1992:20.*

A policy trajectory consists of the **context of influence**, which involves the struggles by different agencies in the construction of policy and its discourse; the **context of policy text production**, where the policy is put into text and may contain inconsistencies and contradictions; and the **context(s) of practices**, how policy is interpreted and enacted, or not. Ball (1994) later advocated that the policy trajectory should also encompass two additional contexts. These included the **context of outcomes**, which is concerned with the issues of justice, equity and individual freedom; and the **context of political strategy**, which relates to the political and social activities that are supportive to the causes and struggles involved in equalities. Applying a policy trajectory model to policy analysis highlights the complexities, constraints and contested nature of the processes surrounding policy. It is for this reason that a five-context policy trajectory model to analysing policy (Bowe *et al* 1992; Ball 1994) forms the foundation of the theoretical framework used in this study. This model is invaluable in researching "the resistance, accommodation, subterfuge and conformity within and between arenas of practice and the plotting of clashes and mismatches between contending discourses at work in these arenas" (Bowe *et al* 1992:13) that may be identifiable in EDWA's SAER Policy.

The theoretical framework for this study involved critical policy analysis (Ball 1994, 1997, Taylor 1997), which drew on both critical theory and Foucauldian concepts of power relationships. Critical theories typically seek to deconstruct social reality to demonstrate how organisations serve the dominant economic and political interests (Hoy and Miskel 1996) and uncover the subtleties of oppression so that it might become challenged and changed

(Carspecken 1996; Crotty 1998). It is concerned with justice and equity "where persons are never treated as a means to an end but treated as ends in their own right" (Prunty 1985:136). As a complement to this framework, Foucault's concepts of power, knowledge and surveillance as forms of social control provide insights into how policies are devised, received and acted upon within the micro levels of a bureaucratic hierarchy.

Central to the issue of social change is knowledge and power to create emancipation and foster social justice. For Foucault, the top down model of power is an outmoded view of power that reflects a pre modern style of power and control. Foucault suggests that power in modern societies has gone underground and is found at all levels in society (Symes and Preston 1997). Foucault stresses that his intentions are not to diminish the significance of state power but to point out the "risk of overlooking all the mechanisms and effects of power which don't pass directly via the state apparatus" (Foucault 1980:73). In this context power is seen as being productive and not solely repressive, circulating rather than possessed, existing in one's actions and often operating through intelligence and knowledge of self.

From a Foucauldian perspective the term 'discourse' is referenced in terms of a body of knowledge and its relationship to social control. Power is a critical component of Foucault's theory and discourses function in relation to power relations (McHoul and Grace 1993). In this context discourse transcends appraisal and interpretation of information as it involves critical examination of the tensions of social and power struggles and power/knowledge. Foucault (1980) argues that discourse produces power and power is everywhere and as such discourses are not merely about content, but embrace the author, its authority, the audience and its objectives (Ball 1994; Punch 1998). The texts of policies do not tell the audience what to do, but create circumstances and provide options or set outcomes or goals. Practitioners do not confront policy texts as naive readers, they come with histories, with experience, with values and purposes of their own, and they have vested interests in the meaning of the policy (Bowe *et al* 1992:22). Therefore the authors of a policy cannot control how other agents view the meaning of the text, as text has many readings and interpretations (Apple 1994; Ball 1994; Codd 1988). Therefore, control can never be totally secured, in part because of agency and there is never a guarantee that hegemonic knowledge is the outcome (Clegg 1989; Apple 1993).

Policy authors do make concerted efforts to control the meaning of text (Ball 1994) through the structure, processes and procedures prescribed in the policies, which Foucault refers to as 'techniques of power'. Power is seen as one that permeates controlling actions and desires through the micro practises of everyday lives (Symes and Preston 1997), such as the routines of schools. This relates to Foucault's (1977:217) concept of surveillance. Surveillance is an example of a technique of power to enforce control that is related to power/knowledge technologies. Procedures such as self-regulation are tools used by policy creators to ensure accountability and policy implementation. Self-surveillance, where processes of performance management occur at local sites (Lingard *et al* 1998), enable 'steering from a distance' (Kickert 1991) where the state maintains control and power through self-regulation. Examples of self-regulation range from the creation of timetables, attending professional development to facilitate the processes of change, undergoing performance management and performance appraisal by peers and managers to monitor the progress made in working towards achieving desired outcomes and goals.

To obtain an in-depth understanding of the processes, influences and power/knowledge struggles involved in the establishment and enactment of EDWA's SAER policy involved deconstructing each part of the policy to tease out how the policy is recontextualised from macro to micro levels and how the power of individuals within schools act upon the policy intent. The cycle model of policy analysis, relating to the SAER policy in Western Australia was studied in the broader context of globalisation and its relation to the ideology of

economical rationalism. This was essential in locating the research within a phenomenon that is not only being given international attention but is also having a dramatic affect on current educational policy processes.

### ***The background of the research***

In Western Australia systemic and organisational restructuring is currently taking place. The rhetoric of this restructuring has foregrounded decentralisation as giving schools greater powers and responsibilities in their operation and running (Osbourne & Gaebler 1992; Knight & Lingard 1997) to become more responsive to local community and cultural needs and thus improve educational services. However, there is a contradictory tension between the notion of this 'empowerment' of schools and the reality that policy initiatives are mandated by central office and balanced by tighter accountability processes (Osbourne & Gaebler 1992; Knight & Lingard 1997). Schools within the state of W.A. have to adhere to a range of policies and any one policy often interacts with, or even contradicts, other policies. Also many new policies have involved changes to processes, pedagogy and ways of operating and thinking about the ethos of teaching. In addition to state level policy in W.A. national policies interact with the SAER policy, such as National Literacy and Numeracy testing and Public Sector Standards.

The SAER policy statement and accompanying documentation titled *Making the Difference: Students at Educational Risk*, which mandated through EDWA's Strategic Plan for Government Schools (1996), was released to all government schools in W.A. in 1998. The aim of the policy is to coordinate and improve the provision and delivery of programs for SAER. Between 1998 and 2005 schools are to establish a criterion for identifying SAER and create structures, processes and performance indicators to monitor progress. The way the EDWA SAER policy uses 'at risk' relates to how students achieve the 'values' and 'outcomes' specified in the Curriculum Framework documentation. EDWA describes SAER as, "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 1998:3). The policy stresses that schools, through adopting good practice techniques, more effective utilisation of current resourcing and better accountability can dramatically minimise or alleviate the causes of 'at risk'.

### ***Methods***

A qualitative approach to research was selected for this study in-order to approach the inherent complexity of social interaction in natural settings. To capture the diversity and exemplify the change processes (Carter and O'Neil 1995) involved in the policy process a case study approach to research was adopted to highlight the complexity of different contexts and points of view of individual educational sites (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). The principle sources of data collection to answer the research questions were documents, interviews and field notes. A multiple approach to data collection allowed for triangulation with the intention of preventing bias or distortion of facts and to affirm and consolidate data through cross-referencing, enhancing the validity and worthiness of the research.

### ***Research sample***

The research sample included participants at different levels of EDWA's hierarchical system. This included four key Senior Officers from Central Office who were directly involved in the formation of EDWA's SAER Policy. Case studies of four primary schools (two in metropolitan and two in country locations) formed part of the research sample. Both metropolitan and country schools were included because the identification of SAER and the subsequent processes and resources to address students' needs may have been effected by local

contextual factors. Schools were selected based on the criterion that they had already begun, in 2000, to develop a policy and some strategies for enacting the SAER policy and guidelines. The Principal, SAER Co-ordinator and two teachers in each school, chosen by the high ratio of SAER in their classroom, were interviewed.

This paper is a research in progress and the following section analyses the findings from one of the case study schools.

### **Profile of the Case Study school.**

The school is located in the metropolitan area of Perth. It is situated in a low socio economic area and has a low H Index rating and therefore a high disadvantage ranking. Originally the school's Administration Team consisted of a Principal and two Deputy Principals. When one deputy retired the school negotiated with EDWA to forgoing appointing a new deputy and accept the difference in salary between a teacher and deputy to establish a new Leadership Model within the school. Students 'at risk' were identified as a priority area in the School Development Plan. A class teacher who showed an interest in the area was appointed SAER Curriculum Leader in 2000. This new Leadership Model provided the Curriculum Leader with sufficient time to set up and establish the schools SAER identification and support process. Initially half a day a week in the first year was allocated to the Curriculum Leader to work with staff and complete the administrative tasks. Teachers were given relief time to complete profiling activities and this information was put into the school computer with each student having an 'at risk' profile which monitored the progress and support the child received.

### **Data Collection**

Due to the uniqueness of the school the Principal, Deputy Principal, SAER Co-ordinator and two teachers were selected as part of the research sample. Each participant was interviewed at the school using semi-structured interviews. Ball's five contexts of the policy process were used as a guide in grouping questions for interview. Forty-five minutes was allocated for each interview, which were tape recorded with permission from the participants to ensure that all the information was preserved for analysis. Notes were also taken during the interview process to capture information that was not recordable, such as body language. All respondents were asked the same questions for all areas of context, except for the context of practise. The following codes were selected for each interviewee: Principal: PR, Deputy Principal: DP, SAER Curriculum Leader: CL, Teacher one: T1, Teacher two: T2.

### **Preliminary Findings.**

As a general observation the Administrative Team felt quite relaxed and open to the questions and often responded at length. In general teachers provided shorter responses with T1 being very relaxed where as T2 was very nervous and more guarded in responding to questions.

### **Context of Influence.**

When the respondents were asked about what factors influenced the creation of the SAER policy the PR identified two main reasons, one related to the legal aspects and requirements so that children with special educational need are catered for and secondly as a guide for the placing of resourcing. The Deputy Principal (DP) stated more political factors that there was pressure from lobby groups and academics who were making judgement calls about what they believe should be happening in school without a really understanding of what is actually happening in schools. The Curriculum Leader (CL) and (T1) identified the need for

accountability as an influence. The CL stressed that it was the desire to have accountability and the testing for benchmark results and expectation of standard for schools and that EDWA could be proving to take steps to make sure all standards are similar. The CL stated that the reason for mandating the policy was "so that it was not negotiable by teachers and schools, they tend to interpret things to suit their needs and mandating something makes it a non negotiable issue, and what happens with many new trends when its just a trend there are teachers who would just duck their heads and hope they miss it, by mandating it you are ensuring that it does not happen." Where as T1 responded that the policy was for EDWA to cover themselves so that "when kids are not being picked up they can say that they have this policy in place and its up to the schools to make sure that it is followed ... I don't think that the funding was really put into it, but the policy is there so it takes responsibility away form them on to the teachers". In addition low literacy levels also influenced it including Dr Kemp's concern about children leaving school not being able to read and the fact that they slip through the school too easily and not being picked up. Teacher two (T2) only responded that it was in relation to making an overall uniformed policy to get everyone involved.

With respect to the factors that influenced the creation of the school's own policy on SAER there was a unified response that related to the immediate needs of the students within the school. The responses took into account the low socio economic status of many students, the resulting problems of ESL, weak literacy and numeracy skills, the lack of exposure of children to different types of environmental experiences, factors at home and in the early years, the parents own education, the child's learning environment at home, the behavioural problems at the school that needed to be addressed in a formal way, health and well being.

### ***Context of text production***

When the teachers were asked about the characteristic of the policy both responded that they had not seen EDWA's SAER policy. T2 said the she was too busy, not interested in looking at it as she had other things to sort out. T1 was not at the school when the policy was initially being developed but hoped that EDWA's policy was user friendly as she did not have time to pour over lots of words. Both the PR and T1 mentioned the policy text was related to issues of accountability with T1 responding that she thought the policy was to enable people to go and say "this is where a child is not picked up" therefore it was about "accountability rather than for the sake of the child". The PR also stated that it was more to do with accountability and legal requirement ...insuring there is a public statement about what schools are doing about 'at risk' that would stand up in a legal sense and that it was written in a more legal way. The DP stated that they had problem with policy. It was too big in general, a long-winded document for academics, difficult to read your way through, written at the wrong level and needed to be broken down into smaller documents. In addition it was not the right document to bring into school and the policy was disconnected from school and their understanding how a school functions and was set out in that particular style for EDWA to clarify their understanding of why we are doing this. Staff needed a readers digest version. The DP acknowledged that they had not read all the documents (as did the Principal and CL) but would have if it were easier to read. The DP even stated "the title made it sound something different from what was already happening in someway". The CL had only read the parts of policy given to them by the principal but was making the school focus on the *Making The Different* aspects. The CL believed the policy reflected the values of social justice and an obligation to cater for SAER, where previously only token value had been placed upon this, and therefore EDWA was legally and morally obliged to do something.

The school does not have a written SAER policy but both the Principal and DP stated the document is written in School Development Plan type wordage and all staff had an input into its creation. The school policy was a whole school decision, it formed part of teachers'

performance management and everyone was expected to implement. However, T2 did not feel they had a say in how the policy was created and set up within the school anyway.

### ***Context of practice***

Both teachers believed that they did not need a policy to help them meet the needs of SAER. T1 responded, "Policy or no policy SAER need to be taken care of so I don't need a policy to do that, as a teacher I don't need a person to say that you have to do this for SAER ... its what my job is". Both teachers stated that the introduction and implementation of the policy had created more work. More paper work, more accountability: assessing child (literacy net) writing IEP, writing programs, parent interviews, reassessing and this had to be balanced against other policies/initiatives being implemented at the same time, including a new computing trial, focus on English, portfolios, behaviour management of students so more accountable for kids who are in trouble and even more paper work, performance management and the Curriculum Framework.

The Administrative Team were aware that the teachers felt that it had been imposed and that it would over ride everything previously done and therefore wanted proof that it would solve the problem. It was also seen as 'more to do' especially after massive changes to teaching pedagogy and policy initiatives which created overload. The new acronym made teachers feel that it was something different from what they have been doing. The DP responded that most teachers were comfortable with what they had been doing that has been successful and felt insulted to be told that what you are doing is wrong. The Administration Team helped teachers adapt to the policy by bringing it down to action level by looking at what teachers were doing that fitted the demands of the policy and how it could be fine tuned to accommodate the policy and that the extra time to accommodate people showed they were valued. Staff were not urged nor did they read the policy in full form. The Administration Team indicated there was huge resistance by a small number of the teachers to change their pedagogy and these teachers were just doing the bare minimum but were still following a process. T2 admitted that they did not make changes to pedagogy as they were: "always quite aware of it anyway". Both teachers indicated that there was no time for programming and preparation of lesson materials and they would prefer to spend more time with the child and class preparation.

All respondents said that they had enough support within the school and talked about the change in the allocation of human and physical support from that of equal support per class to directing it where needed. Staff applied for support from the Support Committee where teachers have to put in a submission and then justify and demonstrate how this would help the child. The PR summed the effect of the new Leadership Model on changes to practice:

"The leadership system enabled us really nicely to give the SAER coordinator sufficient time. CL would have averaged half a day a week in that first year to set things up working with staff and doing the administration ... if we were still at the level of resourcing that we had in 1999 a lot of the things that the CL was able to do the CL would not have been able to do ... and there is no doubt that we would have been able to use CL time to the degree to set up the computer aspect, the tracking, the support for the SAER coordinator that we were able to do...there is no doubt about that at all ... overall we can only do our best and we are happy with what they are doing in literacy"

### ***Context of outcomes***

One outcome of the finding was that both the PR and T2 were frustrated by the poor communication between interagency collaboration and their inability to do anything about it,

resulting in slow progress in trying to cater for students 'at risk'. T2 felt that the policy may be in place to help children but in some instances nothing is being done as the school was waiting for other agencies to respond to their requests and that parents need to take more responsibility. The PR described the frustration of only being able to request outside agencies to be involved, provide support or supply information. The Principal recounted a story about a student with severe behavioural problems and that the school, under the current level of support and resources had done their best, but when the student leaves school there is a big worry that it may reflect badly on the school. The PR said, "It has been extremely difficult to get all the agencies talking to each other and the school and parent are caught in the middle".

All respondents indicated that needs of all children were not being met but what they had achieved in the circumstances was the best they could. All indicated that some students needed 1:1 support every day to make them progress but that it was not achievable but they tried to narrow the gap the best they could. Behavioural management was a concern amongst all interviewed with the DP claiming that if they could address the amount of time a teacher spent in addressing behavioural problems in the classroom we could improve outcomes as currently we are spending up to 60 % of our time on teaching and 40% on behavioural management.

Both teachers felt that they should be shown more trust and that the amount of paper work was a real issue in actually addressing 'at risk' as T1, quotes "most of the time after school is mainly for the Curriculum Framework trying to line it up for the accountability for my PD and not spent on programming for students' individual needs". The different attributes that students brought to school was identified by all respondents as having a great impact on the child's learning which was not always taken into account and that these type of issues need to be addressed more fully. All highlighted social justice as the intention of the policy but believed it was difficult to achieve. T1 summed this up by saying the policy "is more a tool for other aspects of EDWA. They're just wanting to protect themselves and it's very black and white and that they forget that there is lots of grey with children. It's more to show that they are addressing their own needs. I am not convinced that EDWA put the resourcing behind their words".

The Administration Team all indicated that there was now a better process for tracking each child at risk and the level of support provided. The school policy was becoming embedded in the culture and structure of school procedures. The Administration Team cited the school policy as always evolving e.g. need to work on tags, health and well-being but was currently at a mountainous level.

### ***Context of political strategies***

The PR highlighted the need for someone in School Services with the power to bring agencies together as the schools can only request cooperation and cannot make things happen. There was complete agreement that the policy was not going to meet the needs of all students and that family background, children experiences and the trauma that students have to deal with all impinged on a child's educational achievement. These factors not only influenced what the school was able to achieve but also the need for greater attention to help schools address 'at-risk'. The DP felt that the community did not value education as previously and the sphere of influence of the school has diminished but society thinks it has increased.

The PR was frustration and embarrassment that as a teacher they did not have a lot of skills to be able to assist kids with any needs outside the norm and that as a system we don't support staff to really get over that. They felt embarrassed that they cannot do more. The PR

believed that the culture and structure of schools also prevent addressing student need by stating that

"I do not think that schools structurally are set up to be able to drive a policy as affectively as it should be ...on top of everything else we have to do ... I think there needs to be more support for flexibility of structure ... this school has been very lucky... this inhibits affective implementation of such policies" (i.e. teacher only having 2 days of year as SAER Coordinator under previous structure).

### ***Discussion of findings/Conclusion.***

The tentative findings of this data supported global research into 'at risk' in that there are multiple factors that create risk, of which many are factors created outside of the school environment. Students are still being identified using the epidemiological model where 'at risk' is due to the defective child (Skritic 1991; Apple and Zenk 1996) and not because of the culture and structure of schools. A student's personal attributes, home and social environment and school characteristics all strongly interact and impact on performance, and therefore should not be studied in isolation (Montgomery and Rossi 1994). The dilemma with prevention and treatment policies and programs lies with the underlying approach and philosophy to address under achievement. If they are focused on individual characteristics then the solution of 'at risk' will be seen as early intervention and related to the cultural deprivation theory of 'at risk'. If they are based on individual and environmental characteristics the solution will be seen as creating more and different educational environments matched to individual needs and away from the middle class school culture deprivation perspective (Natriello, McDill, Pallas 1990). Angus (1993:343) describes this focus on the school environment as

advocating an isolational, a political approach to education in which it is assumed that educational problems can be fixed by technical means and inequalities managed within the walls of the schools provided that teachers and pupils follow 'correct' effective school procedures.

Therefore, one of the greatest challenges to schools is how to establish working relationships between the multi-dimensional factors, school and educational outcomes. Attempting to meet the needs of the students within the vacuum of the school environment, through policies advocating restructuring and changing pedagogy while utilising current levels of resources, creates embarrassment and frustration and still fails to meet the needs of the 'at-risk'. In addition there is grave concern about the creators of policy not understanding or being in touch of what is happening at the school level and the nature, structure and organisations of schools. This relates to both the production and format of policies on 'at risk' and the expectation that schools will be able accommodate an influx of policies, that greatly changes practice and pedagogy procedures, and still assimilate and adapt to these changes while getting on with the business of teaching. The need for greater flexibility in the structures of schools, as highlighted by the Principal in the case study school, is an important concept to be considered when addressing the needs of 'at risk' students. However, policies relating to education still expect schools to be homogenous and uniformed and the child to 'fit into the system' regardless of clashes in culture. Moreover, education policies are still often written by administrators who adopt a view that all students can be catered for within the same generalised service (Rizvi & Lingard 1996).

A further aspect, which is highly documented in addressing 'at risk', and which was evident in the data collected was the lack of procedures and systems for improving interagency communication and cooperation. The American literature on 'at risk' continually highlights the urgency and importance of the need for multi-agency cooperation, as does the Institution for Child Health Research (ICHR) in Australia. The lack of structure in place to improve cross agency links impedes the chances of schools to address the needs of those 'at risk'. The prevailing system of human service delivery, in which education, health, and social services are separate entities, is a large unwieldy bureaucracy in which services are fragmented, overlapping, and often inaccessible to those who need it most (Guthrie & Guthrie 1991; Morrill 1992). Schools are already affected by the consequences of non-educational problems among students and their families, and often deal with such problems with few resources and little expertise. Even when policies advocate in the text the importance of interagency collaboration there is no structure in place to support this and no scaffolding on which to build such a system. The end product of frustration and embarrassment for schools is amplified; as they feel isolated in addressing 'at risk' and powerless to change interagency practices.

Accountability and efficiency are two concepts, which form part of an economic rationale and have become embedded in educational policies. At all levels of the policy cycle, and in all contexts, the ethos of education is heavily underpinned by performance, quality and accountability to provide better outcomes with the same level of resourcing. However, the consequences of a high concentration on accountability have found schools swamped with policies and the amount of time and paper work that it involves, which in fact detracts from the purpose of teaching. Policies are often written by bureaucrats who do not understand how schools function and there is now an atmosphere where at the micro level of policy individuals believe they are seen as untrustworthy. Teachers believe they are meeting student needs as best they can, taking into account all the social factors and current levels of support. The tentative findings of the data collected supported this when teachers felt that they should be shown more trust and that most of their time was spent lining up what they are doing for accountability and not spent on programming for student needs. The research data tentatively supported Foucault's concept of power struggles within the different contexts of the policy cycle. For example, the fact that some teachers were resistant to enacting the policy through doing the bare minimum and not changing pedagogies but still following a process highlights power struggles. This demonstrates how the power of agency, even when self-regulation processes are in place, affects policy enactment. In an attempt to ensure that teachers comply with the policy the Administrative Team in the case study school attempted to assert control by incorporating it into the context of policy production by making performance management a key component of the School Development Plan. Additionally extra time and assistance was provided to achieve the desired changes, yet the Administration Team still could not control the way teachers interrupt and chose to side step and resist policy.

Furthermore, the discourses of economic rationalism and social justice are conflicting rather than complementing. Policies relating to 'at risk' present a tension between the two priorities of being both student centred (yet failing to take into account the individuality of 'at risk') and attempting to meet the demands to provide students with flexible skills and knowledge to meet the needs of the economy. The concept of social justice, located and represented in educational policies and practice, is reconstructed to 'fit into' the dominant discourse. The tentative findings of the data revealed that although the intent of the policy was related to issues of social justices, with the ethos of the policy being to serve the children, as a document the SAER policy did not served the concerns and issues related to social justice very well. The structure and complexity of policy documents, combined with its lack of attention to broader social issues and the structure and culture of schools, was seen as a cumbersome tool to help address the needs of SAER. Research into policies on 'at risk'

have found that the two discourses of social justice and economic rationalism sit uncomfortably side by side and that educational policy is a very complex and messy issue.

The value of conducting research at the school level is an important process to inform research into policy analysis. The complexity of policy is a messy tool to bring about change at the local school sites. The "resistance, accommodation, subterfuge and conformity within and between arenas of practice and the plotting of clashes and mismatches between contending discourses at work" (Bowe *et al*/1992:13) in the arena of educational institutions reflect this messiness. Policies are in fact dynamic processes that are negotiated at different levels and in different contexts, as identified in Ball (1992) policy cycle and therefore, the need for continual research into policy at the micro levels of schools is critical to obtain an in-depth understanding of the way policies reflect and constrain educational practices and students performance.

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