

MALAYSIAN SCHOOL COUNSELLOR'S PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES
TO IDENTIFYING AND ASSISTING AT-RISK STUDENTS THROUGH
COUNSELLING INTERVENTIONS

by

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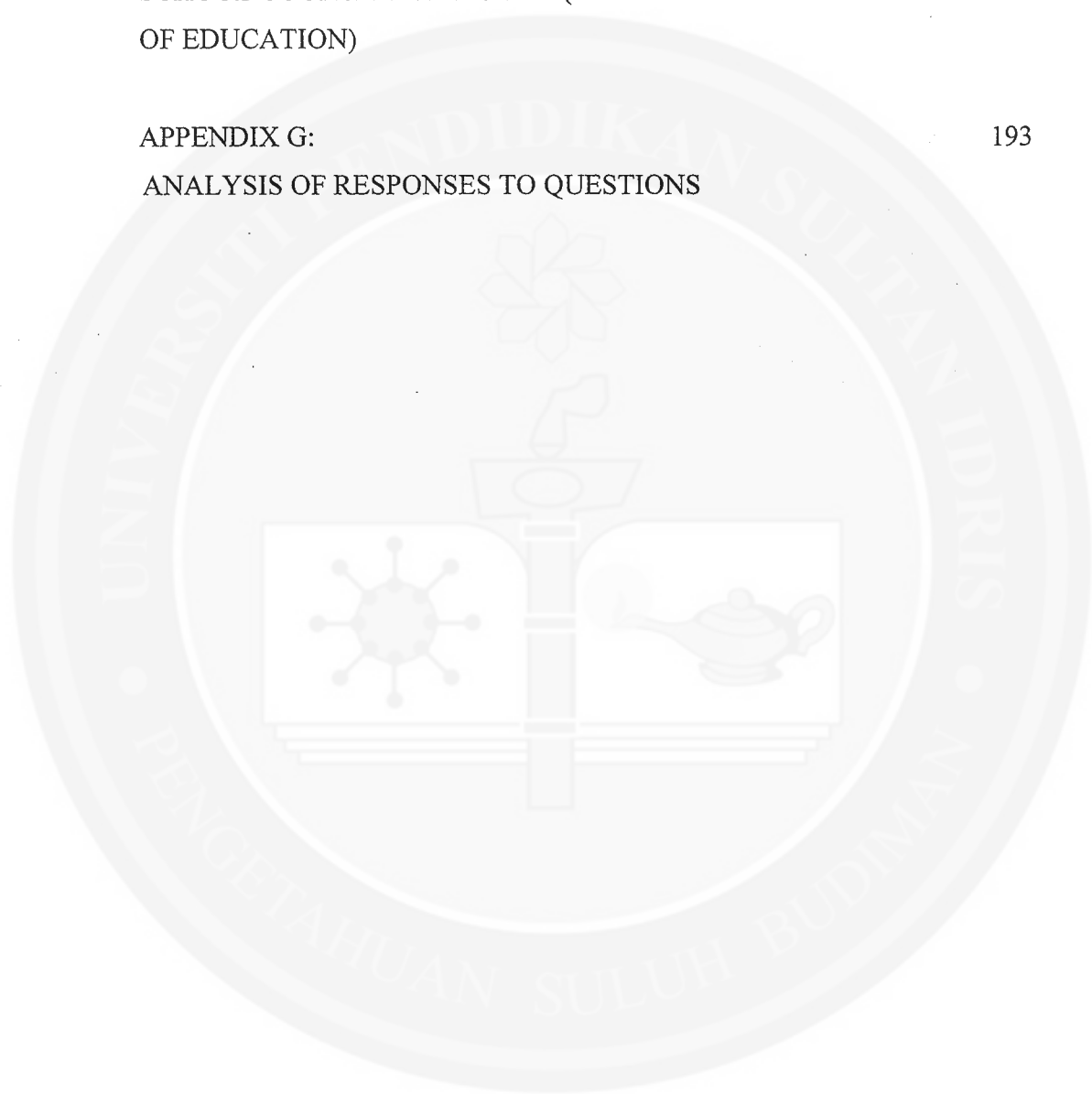
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Malaysian school counsellor's perspectives and approaches to identifying and assisting at-risk students through counselling interventions

Given the serious personal and societal consequences of adolescents dropping-out of school and behaving in self-destructive ways, it is very important to be able to identify students who are at risk of failure. Identifying and assisting at-risk students through counselling interventions will provide better understanding of issues resulting from academic failure at school. This study explored the perspectives and approaches of eight school counsellors with regard to identifying and assisting students considered to be academically and behaviorally at-risk. Their perspectives and approaches are crucial because they reflect the counsellors' understanding and competency to deal with at-risk students. This research project consisted of two studies. The aim of the first was to explore the school counsellors' perspectives and approaches for identifying at-risk students at secondary school. The second examined the intervention(s) used by counsellors to assist those students. Participants for study 1 consisted of eight school counsellors employed by secondary schools in Malaysia. Their schools had been identified as having the country's highest number of at-risk students. Study 2 comprised eight secondary-school student participants aged 16 to 17: formerly deemed students at-risk, they were asked about the interventions they had experienced. A qualitative case study research design with inductive analysis was used to analyze the resulting data. The method used to gather the data was an investigator-administered questionnaire which contained open-ended questions developed by researcher. For both studies, school counsellors were interviewed about their experiences, opinions, and attitudes to working with at-risk students. For study 2, questionnaires were provided to the students to obtain information about their perspectives and experiences of their school's counselling programs and interventions. The main findings of study 1 are: that hostile behaviour, negative attitudes, and poor academic achievement are key identifiers of students at-risk;

that family and peers factors are significant causes of at-risk behavior; that truancy is a form of risky behaviour; that multiple approaches are required for effective identification; that counselling skills and knowledge and a suitable personality are important attributes and competencies for counsellors who need to be able to identify at-risk students; and that counsellors' own weaknesses and limitations are barriers to counsellors identifying at-risk students. The general findings of study 2 are: the students' responses to counselling programs were positive if they participated voluntarily, if they attended with their peers, and if the intervention program was relevant to their immediate needs; the main elements of the counselling program entailed active participation; and counselling sessions and programs were the main interventions.

Overview

School counsellors, regardless of where they work, often deal with issues related to social problems faced by students at school. School counsellors in Malaysia, for instance, routinely encounter various social problems such as truancy, drug abuse, smoking, fighting, bullying, verbal and physical violence, vandalism and other destructive behavior that can impede students' academic success. Most of these negative behaviors are performed by students who are identified as at-risk of academic failure, a situation which can seriously affect their future lives and careers. Students are viewed as at-risk because of exposure to influences that may lead to failure in their learning; these include factors such as the failure of family institutions, community institutions, and school institutions. These factors, coupled with the physical and emotional changes that occur in adolescence, may give rise to hazardous behavior as described above. A study conducted by Hanafiah et al. (2002) showed that of out of 480 adolescents studying in secondary schools in the Gombak District of Selangor, Malaysia, 34.5 percent were engaged in risky behavior. A study by Morris et al. (1995) and a report from the Ministry of Health in Malaysia (1995) also showed that the risk-taking by adolescents is on the rise and that crimes committed by adolescents as a consequence of these risky behaviors are alarmingly high.

In the light of this situation it is argued here that school counsellors, in collaboration with teachers and parents, should play a more proactive role in detecting students who may engage in risky behavior that can have damaging long-term consequences. Early detection should be made by the counsellor in collaboration with schools, parents and the community. Early detection is important because it can help prevent risky or destructive behavior from escalating. However, it is necessary for counsellors to develop appropriate programs and effective interventions for these students. According to Bucci & Reitzammer (1993), preventing students from dropping out of

school has become a particularly important, multidisciplinary issue requiring the combined efforts of counsellors, psychologists, parents, and teachers. Two essential elements of this effort are the accurate identification of at-risk students and ongoing consultation among school personnel (Miller, 1988). In addition, researchers have repeatedly demonstrated the need for, and efficacy of, identifying potential dropouts prior to high school and the implementation of appropriate interventions when the first indicators appear (e.g., Ekstrom et al. 1986; Mann, 1987; Lloyd, 1978). Research by Wells et al. (1989) has found that early detection is vital to effective prevention and intervention. If problems are identified and addressed early then interventions can be more effective.

In this regard, it is essential that school counsellors in particular are armed with skills and knowledge that will help them monitor students deemed to be at-risk. Counsellors need to have appropriate perspectives and strategies for dealings with students. These perspectives include their attitudes, ideas, beliefs and perception. These are very important because they are a “reflective, socially defined interpretation of experience that serves as a basis for subsequent action”, as suggested by Clark and Peterson (1986, p. 287).

The counsellor's perspectives with regard to at-risk students will influence the accuracy of the identification process and the effectiveness of the prevention and intervention activities. Counsellors who possess appropriate attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions regarding students will generally be more alert to the symptoms of unsafe behavior and more responsive to their needs. This is consistent with a report by the Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC Digest Series, 1986) for at-risk students which indicated that the detection of vulnerable students and the development of suitable programs to help them is an integral part of educational reform.

As indicated by the literature cited above, at the international level research on at-risk students has been extensive and one of the most significant findings is that early identification and prompt intervention are crucial. In fact, most researchers have

shown that the early identification of at-risk students and the development of programs to assist their further growth and development were among the most important components in educational planning. However, as noted in the literature review (below), there has been little empirically-based information on school counsellors' perspectives with regard to the identification of students deemed to be at-risk. In fact, there have been no studies of this kind in Malaysia. However, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and approaches are important because they strongly influence counsellors' understandings and competencies in dealing with students. Thus, this study extends previous researches into the identification of at-risk students, and it is expected that the findings of this enquiry will increase our knowledge and understanding in this important area and so enhance the expertise of counsellor practitioners.

Statement of the problems

There is a significant body of literature related to early identification of at-risk students. However, there is little in the literature (and none in Malaysia) that addresses the perspectives and approaches of school counsellors regarding the identification of vulnerable students in their schools. In this study, counsellors' perspectives of at-risk students are important because they can affect their advisory practices, and these, in turn, can affect the overall outcomes of the counselling process. School counsellors' perspectives and approaches (including their experience, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, knowledge, and professional behavior) are crucial because these personal characteristics determine how well they work with students. In other words, counsellors' personal views and experiences influence the ways in which they work and the strategies they apply. However, few school counsellors are competent to identify those students who may be in danger of academic failure. Thus, they may not be alert to the symptoms (warning signs) of at-risk students and may not be able to identify problems early and accurately. Thus, this study is undertaken with the aim of providing important information regarding the perspectives and approaches used by school counsellors in the identification of at-risk students.

Purpose

This research project comprised two studies. The purpose of the first study was to explore the school counsellors' perspectives and approaches in identifying at-risk students at secondary school; and the second study was to identify the interventions used by counsellors to assist those students. Their perspectives which were examined here included the attitudes, beliefs, feelings, knowledge of counselling, and professional behavior in regard to the identification of at-risk students, while their approaches were the strategies, methods, practices and ways of identifying and assisting their students.

Participants consisted of school counselors (Study 1 and 2) and secondary students (Study 2 only) selected from various zones in Malaysia. An analysis of the interviews conducted with the sample of school counsellors yielded data regarding how they interpreted their roles and responsibilities. Additionally, questionnaires completed by a sample of vulnerable students in Study 2 provided valuable information regarding the treatment programs which they experienced with the counselling unit at their schools. A collective case-study research design with a qualitative method of evaluation was used for the second study. The results from both studies provided useful information regarding the connection the counsellors' perspectives in dealing with at-risk students, way(s) of identifying vulnerable students and, counselling interventions for at-risk students.

Research questions

According to Maxwell (1996), research questions formulate what the researcher wants to understand while the interview questions seek information and data from participants in order to acquire that understanding. This exploration of school counsellors' perspectives and approaches in identifying and assisting at-risk students was guided by the following overarching questions:

Study 1: School counsellors' perspectives and approaches in identifying at-risks students

- i) What are the perspectives held by school counsellors with regard to identifying at-risk students?
- ii) What approaches are used by school counsellors to identify at-risk students?

Study 2: School counsellors' perspectives and approaches in assisting at-risks students through counselling interventions

- iii) What are the perspectives held by school counsellors with regard to assisting at-risk students through counselling interventions / programs?
- iv) What approaches are used by school counsellors to assist at-risk students through counselling interventions / programs?

At-risk student's perspectives toward counsellors and counselling interventions

- v) What are the perspectives held by at-risk students with regard to the counselling interventions / programs in which they had participated?

These questions involved an exploration of the thoughts, ideas, and attitudes of school counselors as well as at-risk students. The questions were explored by means of case-study research methodologies which used interviews to elicit views and opinion from participants. (Cresswell, 1988). This type of inquiry about perceptions, attitudes, and views of school counsellors was conducted through semi-structured discussions, the interview schedule being described in detail in the methodology section.

Significance of study

The purpose of this study was to explore the school counsellors' perspectives and approaches in identifying and assisting at-risk students through counselling interventions at secondary schools. Their perspectives and approaches are crucial to the counselling process because they influence the effectiveness of identification and thus help minimize both academic failure and subsequent negative behaviour.

Moreover, the perspectives and approaches held by school counsellors determine their level of understanding and competency in dealing with students.

Educational researchers have closely examined teachers' belief systems in order to discover ways of heightening teacher effectiveness. This is consistent with research by Pajares (1992) who studied teachers' belief systems, finding that they offer crucial insights into the motives inherent in their teaching practices. Since teachers' beliefs may affect their practices, then their practices may, in turn, affect student outcomes. Similarly, counsellors' personal qualities and beliefs are powerful determinants of the therapeutic encounters that they have with clients (Corey, 1997).

The need to investigate this issue is reinforced because to date there have been no qualitative studies of Malaysian school counsellors' perspectives and approaches. Furthermore, in the Malaysian context, the study of at-risk students is in accordance with the National Philosophy of Education that stresses both Education for All and the maximization of the human potential. Malaysia believes in the philosophy of "The Caring Society" and so any sector of the population deemed at-risk needs particular attention (National Report of Malaysia, Ministry of Education, 2004)). Moreover, Malaysia is a country that has experienced great change: it is growing rapidly, and economic, cultural, and social changes have affected all parts of the community, yet young people are expected to cope with those developments. According to Dr. Gomez, a Developmental and Counselling Psychologist at HELP University College, Malaysia, about 28 percent of Malaysian children are suffering from mental health problems. He also added that, *"...depression, stress, violence and suicide are all on the rise amongst young people in Malaysia. It is a really worrying trend and we want to try and address that problem right now"* (Lubon, 2006).

Furthermore, with regard to the current scenario in schools, counsellors are expected to understand the complexity of students' problems, to intervene in a timely and professional manner, and to assist with such problems with appropriate counselling programs (Campbell, 2004). With increasingly complex problems facing youths today,

research is needed to explore counsellors' perspectives and approaches in regard to the identification of students who are at-risk of academic failure and of engaging in negative behavior.

Despite the fact that early identification is important for prevention, reports in the literature generally consider that understanding vulnerable students is the first step towards preventing many other problems such as academic failure, anti-social behavior, and emotional problems (Knesting & Waldron, 2006). At-risk students are associated with high rates of school dropout, academic failure (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989) and engagement in negative behavior (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000). Thus, identification of such students is important and deserves more attention and research - particularly in Malaysia. Early identification is crucial for the implementation of suitable intervention and this can only be achieved by counsellors who are competent in this area. Unless timely and accurate identification occurs, these students are in danger of educational failure and of personal and social problems that can follow (Campbell, 2003).

Like teachers, parents, and other school personnel, counsellors are responsible for overseeing student performance and personal well-being. The information gained from this enquiry could help to shape training and supervision programs, to maximize client services, and strengthen counsellors' professional performance. School counsellors' perspectives are relevant for both educational and social reasons, studies having shown that school counsellors are well placed to predict and identify accurately students who are at-risk of dropping out (Wells, et al., 1999).

Finally, this study can be considered as an extension of previous studies and is the first of its kind in Malaysia. A set of common characteristics compiled from this project can serve as a blueprint for identification, prevention, and intervention of at-risk students. The inputs provided by school counsellors may also be useful for highlighting the barriers, indicators, and predictors associated with vulnerable students. Moreover, the information gathered will assist counsellors to identify and design specific models of counselling that might help address the needs of this target

population. Therefore, this study will increase our knowledge and understanding in recognizing students who may become at-risk.

Definition of terms

The important terms associated with this qualitative study are explained below. They are included for reader clarification, meaning and understanding. These terms are specific to the Malaysian school counselling setting and are defined as follows:

At-risk student: The term ‘at-risk’ refers to a set of causal/ behavioral dynamics (refer to Appendix E) that place an individual in danger of a negative future event (Kamps, et al. 1999; Keys, et al. 1998; Tudor, 2007). In this study an at-risk student is one identified by a school counsellor as having low academic achievement as well as behavioral problems at school based on the personal record obtained from the school counselling unit.

School counsellor: This refers to those teachers who are full-time appointments by the State Education Department in Malaysia to counsel students; they are exempted from any teaching activities. Usually counsellors possess either a degree in Guidance and Counselling, a Post-Graduate Diploma in Psychology, or equivalent qualifications. These counsellors have been trained specifically in guidance and counseling and will carry out their duties as determined by the Ministry of Education. (Refer to appendix 1 for major duties of school counsellor)

Secondary schools: Public secondary schools in Peninsular Malaysia. Secondary students range in age from 13 to 17 years (Ministry of Education, Malaysia).

Perspectives: According to Clark and Peterson (1986), counsellor perspectives are interpreted as a “*reflective, socially defined interpretation of experience that serves as a basis for subsequent action*”, (p. 287). In this study, the counsellor perspectives will include the attitudes, ideas, beliefs and perceptions in dealing with at-risk students.

Assumptions

The researcher assumed that the research questions presented during the interview would delve into the counsellors' perspectives regarding the identification of, and assistance to, vulnerable students at their schools (Study 1) and also, the students' experiences of counselling programs (Study 2). It was also assumed that their responses truthfully reflected the feelings and experiences of the respondents in relation to the research questions. It is possible that there may have been a social desirability bias in the interaction between respondents and researcher.

Limitations

The following limitations may be noted in this study:

1. This study did not aim for generalization; rather it sought an in-depth, detailed analysis of reported experience.
2. This study did not attempt to observe any of the counselling programs designed for at-risk students held by school counsellors at their schools.
3. This study did not intend to make broad assumptions regarding the effectiveness of counselling interventions provided for at-risk students.
4. Since the student participants were selected by their respective counsellors, there could be bias in the student responses. This will be discussed further in discussion section of chapter 6.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In the Malaysian context, the study of at-risk students is in accordance with the National Philosophy of Education that stresses 'Education for All' and the maximization of human potential. Malaysia believes in the philosophy of 'The Caring Society' (www.moe.gov.edu.my) and thus this project has been conducted in order to address the needs of a vulnerable section of the population. Specifically, the objective of this study is to explore Malaysian school counsellors' perspectives and approaches to the identification of at-risk students and the methods employed to assist students through counselling intervention. This is important because each counsellor has his/her personal attitudes and beliefs and each uses particular strategies which can influence the identification of insecure students and which determine the type of intervention used for students at risk of both academic failure and negative behavior. In the light of this objective the literature review is divided into four main sections. The first focuses on the counsellors' perspectives in terms of their attitudes and beliefs, this being followed by a review of the concept of students being 'at-risk'. The next section focuses on the identification of at-risk students in schools from the perspectives of counsellors. Lastly, school counsellors' perspectives and approaches to assisting vulnerable students through interventions are discussed.

Counsellors' Perspectives (beliefs and attitudes)

With regard to counsellors' beliefs and attitudes, this researcher supports the ideas proposed by Pajares (1992) who asserts that teachers' beliefs systems are important in shaping their teaching methods. He argues that studying teachers' beliefs can offer crucial insight into the motives inherent in their teaching practices. Teachers' beliefs may affect their practices, and then their practices may, in turn, affect student outcomes. Thus, by exploring teachers' beliefs it is possible to discover ways to

enhance teacher effectiveness. Within this context, each school counsellor's perspectives and approaches - their experience, knowledge, perceptions, beliefs and attitudes - are crucial because these determine their ways of identifying students who may be in need of intervention and support. This, in turn, will determine the strategies that the counsellors apply.

The relationship between a counsellor's own personal beliefs and his or her attitudes to at-risk students is important because of the impact it may have on the counsellor-client relationship. As Corey (1997) has concluded, a counsellor's personal qualities are the most powerful determinant of the therapeutic encounter that he/she will have with clients. The quality of the counselling relationship, sometimes called the *therapeutic relationship* or *working alliance*, is generally considered to be the most important factor contributing to client growth and well-being in the context of professional counselling (Goldstein, 1962; Gladding, 1996; Walborn, 1996). Similarly, Walborn (1996) states that almost all schools of therapy affirm the importance of the therapeutic relationship in the helping professions. "The successful outcome of any counselling effort depends on a working alliance between counsellor and client" (Gladding, 1996, p. 142).

Counsellor-education stresses the importance of counsellor behavior (both verbal and nonverbal) as evidenced by such techniques as mirroring, active listening, responding, expressing positive regard, using silence, and empathic statements. The fact that a counsellor is listening, feels positive regard, or empathizes with a client is meaningless in a therapeutic relationship unless the client is aware of these thoughts and feelings (Long, 1996). It would seem reasonable to state that counsellor behavior is necessary for the establishment of trust or collaboration, and it is an indispensable component of the therapeutic alliance. Therefore, understanding why a counsellor acts as he or she does must be considered important.

Most personality theorists suggest a positive correlation between human beliefs and actions, contending that a person's beliefs are a primary cause of his or her behavior.

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Albert Ellis, founder of the theory of Rational-Emotive Therapy (RET) (Ellis & Grieger, 1977), later to become REBT with the addition of 'Behavior' to the title, states: *"We largely (though not exclusively) control our own destinies, and particularly our emotional destinies. And we do so by our basic values or beliefs – by the way that we interpret or look at the events that occur in our lives and by the actions we choose to take about these occurrences,"* (p. 5). Viktor Frankl (1965), founder of Logotherapy, asserts that personal values and beliefs are of ultimate importance because it is in these that a person finds the meanings necessary for life, and it is for these that he or she will live or die. Although many studies show that beliefs are a major determinant of behavior, it should be acknowledged that beliefs and attitudes do not necessarily translate into action. An alternative view, that behavior shapes beliefs, is found in behaviorist theory (Skinner, 1938). Assuming a causal relationship, regardless of direction between beliefs and behavior, it would be reasonable to expect that knowledge of a person's beliefs might provide valuable insights into his or her behavior. In this regard, the relationship between a counsellor's personal beliefs and his or her attitudes to vulnerable students is important because of the impact it may have on counsellor behavior in the client-counsellor relationship.

The concept of 'at-risk'

What is an 'at-risk' student?

To date there is no agreed definition of what constitutes an 'at-risk' student. This is because the term 'at-risk' is used to describe various types of issues such as educational and social problems. Furthermore, previous studies have shown that there are many definitions of what is meant by 'at-risk' students. According to Slavin and Madden (1989), the most common definition state that they are students who are unlikely to graduate at the highest level in school and / or drop out of school (p. 4). Other criteria describe such students as those who fail in one or more grades, have been placed under special education, or speak in a language other than English. Similar to this is a definition by Margarita (1986), who defines an at-risk student as one who is danger of low academic achievement, not experiencing success in school,

low self-esteem, has a minimal identification with the school and thus are potential dropouts. In addition, these students also have disciplinary and truancy problems, credit problems, exhibit impulsive behavior, and have problematic peer relationships (<http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-928/risk.htm>). Comer (1987), has similar views, defining the at-risk student as one who underachieves in school and consequently will underachieve as an adult. Apart from difficulties in their studies, at-risk students are also identified in terms of poverty, drug abuse, sexual activity, race, and ethnicity.

According to Rohaty (2005: International Conference for at-risk children in Malaysia), this term describes students who have learning difficulties, lower intelligence, fewer advantages, or different personality and learning profiles as compared to the normal population. Others would suggest that the definition of 'at-risk' needs to be broadened and that we cannot only look at 'at-risk' students as being those who are in danger of getting 'bad grades' and of dropping out; it should include a variety of factors that put students in situations of risk, the students' personal characteristics, and the circumstances or places that are considered to be harmful for students. Therefore, apart from focusing on school dropouts, many previous studies have been undertaken to describe the experiences of children and adolescents suffering from various problems in life that prevent them from developing into healthy and productive adults. The range of problems and issues faced by the at-risk adolescents comprise learning difficulties, poverty, social relationships, and family and school contexts (Brambring, Losel, & Skowronek, 1989; Dryfoos, 1990; Haggerty, Sherrod, Garmezy, & Rutter, 1994; Luthar et al., 1997; McWhirter et al., 1998). Another important aspect related to the definition of at-risk is that the risk status should be viewed as steps along a continuum, not as a unitary category. According to McWhirter et al. (1998), the risk status should be seen as a series of steps along a continuum that ranges from low to high risk.

A description by Micheal Tudor (2007) in his book *Practical Classroom Strategies*, gives a much better description. He states that: