

Teachers' views of at-risk students in Vanuatu

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INTRODUCTION

In Vanuatu schools, many teachers do not recognise or acknowledge at-risk students in their classrooms. In this chapter, I examine Vanuatu teacher's beliefs and attitudes towards these students. The chapter is organised into five sections. First, I explain how at-risk learners have been discussed in the academic literature. Second, I introduce the case study which forms the basis of this analysis. Third, I describe design of the study and the sources of data. Fourth, I present my findings thematically. Fifth, I offer some suggestions for addressing the issues that arose in the course of the study.

DEFINING THE 'AT-RISK' STUDENT

Vanuatu classroom teachers often make comments such as, "there is a problem with the student that is causing him or her not to perform well in class," or, "the student doesn't ask questions in class." These views highlight a lack of understanding about 'at-risk' students. Commonly, Vanuatu teachers explain 'problem' students in terms of factors which they believe are external to the school. For example, teachers frequently believe that at-risk students perform poorly at school because of problems at home or with their families. Specifically, teachers often suggest that parents do not care enough about their children and this places them at-risk.

Schwartz (1991) notes that the concept of being 'at-risk' is difficult to define. He describes an at-risk student as one who has failed one or more school subjects. However, teachers attitudes about at-risk students are also important here because according to Good (1981) and Smith (1980) their beliefs about student performance in school can influence students' academic achievement. The word 'belief' is often used interchangeably with the term 'attitude' in this paper because our attitudes, ways of life, and our social and cultural practices are influenced by our belief systems (Bem, 2002).

Winfield (1986) has analysed teacher beliefs about at-risk students in inner-urban schools. In this research, forty American elementary schools in metropolitan areas were studied over a one year period. Using Patton's (1980) idea of cross-classification analysis, Winfield identified several ways in which the teachers commonly interacted with at-risk students. For instance, students are often made to sit at a distance from the teacher or on their own. As well, at-risk teachers often criticised students for their failures and gave little praise for what they had successfully accomplished. At-risk students also tend to be given less detailed and less accurate feedback by their teachers (Cooper, 1979). Furthermore, teachers interact with these students less frequently, and demand less work and effort from them (Good, 1982, 1981; Rist, 1970). These kinds of teaching practices can increase the difficulties that at-risk students face in their classrooms (Cooper, 1985).

The concepts of at-risk students described above highlight two important considerations in relation to the Vanuatu context. First, in my opinion, belief systems in educational settings should reflect the cultural values of ordinary Ni-Vanuatu. The word, *respect* is an important cultural value for many tribes, clans, villages, and islands throughout Vanuatu and it has a deep significance. For example, if I demonstrate respect for someone, I make every effort to understand him or her including making the effort to support that person in times of need. In

a Christian faith setting, we would express this as a demonstration of *love*. When we love others, we want to be there for them during their good times as well as their bad times.

The principles of respect and love are enshrined in the Vanuatu national constitution (Republic of Vanuatu, 1988). Hence, for Ni-Vanuatu, the value of respect should underpin their social and professional practices. In demonstrating understanding and love for others, strong relationships between people, tribes, clans, and communities can be fostered. In the Vanuatu schooling context, the idea of loving and understanding children can be demonstrated through caring actions in the classroom. If Vanuatu teachers show their regard for their students, then by implication, they will also want to understand and love them regardless of their academic status. In general, the values of love and understanding need to form the cornerstones of the beliefs of teachers in Vanuatu. These foundational principles, in turn, are likely to influence their actions and behaviour towards 'at-risk' students in their classrooms.

THE CASE STUDY

This chapter is based on a study I conducted in Vanuatu (Mwarakurmes, 2002). In this research project, I explored the beliefs and attitudes that Vanuatu secondary school teachers hold about at-risk students. Because this is a small-scale case study of a single school, the findings can not be generalised. However, it is the first study in Vanuatu about teacher's beliefs and attitudes towards at-risk students that has been undertaken and the findings highlight some key issues that need further attention. The study was conducted in a Vanuatu school which has an enrolment of over 500 students from Years 7 right through to Year 13. Ninety five percent of the students were Ni-Vanuatu. Their first language was Bislama but the language of instruction was English.

I spent approximately 35 hours at the school gathering data in the form of observations, interviews, and focus group discussions with five Years 7-8 teachers. Rather than confining myself to the staffroom, I spent time with the teachers in the dining room, on the soccer field, and around the school premises. This facilitated a more relaxed way of communicating with the participants about aspects of teaching and learning. We also discussed various aspects of school life. All of the participants were qualified teachers and each of them had more than five years of teaching experience. In order to protect their identities I have used pseudonyms throughout this chapter.

ACTION RESEARCH

In this study I took an action research approach. According to Carr and Kemmis (1986), action research can help the researcher and the participants to better understand a particular process or practice. Winters (1996) and Grundy (1995) also argue that action research can be seen as a cyclic form of self-reflective inquiry that can be used in professional settings for the purpose of developing in-depth understanding and improvement of practice (see also McNiff, Lomas and Whitehead 2003). At the time of the study, I saw myself as having a similar level of teaching experience as my participants. Action research allowed me to engage with the teachers in a way that did not make me appear to be more expert or senior in rank. Three types of data gathering methods were employed in my study. These are described in the following paragraphs.

In-depth interviews

Many qualitative researchers use in-depth interviews as a means of collecting data. According to MacDougall and Fudge (2001), open-ended interview questions can uncover information in ways that allow participants to express their views and ideas in their own words. In this study, I interviewed the participants on two occasions and both times I asked unstructured, open-ended questions relating to 'at-risk' students (Mwarakurmes, 2002). The first set of interviews was conducted at the start of the research. The reason for doing this was because I wanted to ascertain the participants' views about at-risk students before we progressed too far into the study. The second set of interviews took place towards the end of the six-week fieldwork period. The purpose of the second set of interviews was to find out if there had been any progress amongst the teachers in terms of developing better understandings of their roles and actions towards at-risk students. I recorded and transcribed all the interviews.

Focus group discussions

Focus group discussion methods can help people explore and clarify their views in ways that can expand on data that are collected in one-to-one interview settings (Kitzinger, 1995). According to Grundy (1995), focus group discussions provide opportunities for participants to reflect on their roles as teachers and as responsible people within their schools. This approach is also a good way of tapping into the different means of communication that people use in interacting with others, such as jokes, anecdotes, teasing, and arguing. In this study, the focus group discussions were 30 minutes in duration and they took place on a fortnightly basis over a six-week period. During the focus group sessions, the participants discussed what they had observed in the classroom and outside on the playing fields.

Reflective journals

In this study, each participant was issued with a journal booklet. Their task was to record their thoughts and observations and then reflect on these writings during the focus group sessions. Barth (2001) argues that writing about life experiences in the course of a study can help participants to reflect and analyse these experiences. Moon (1999) observes that reflective journals can also deepen participants' understandings of a particular issue and promote critical thinking about it. In this study, the participants were able to reflect on the questions asked during the first set of in-depth interviews and on the information they had recorded in their journals.

THE CYCLIC PROCESS

Using the concept of the cyclic process by Carr and Kemmis (1986), I carried out three focus group discussions with the participants. At each meeting, the participants and I ensured a number of conditions were met, as follows:

- (1) Participants were to observe and write down something about at-risk students;
- (2) Participants were to reflect on their observations;
- (3) Following their reflections, participants were to plan for their next steps to be taken;
- (4) Participants were to carry out their plans.

The above steps were repeated in a cyclic manner in each of the focus group sessions. In this way, participants were able to refine or redefine their understandings of 'at-risk' learners over the six-week field research period. This cyclic process became important as the case study

progressed because a great deal of refinement and redefinition of thinking took place amongst the participants and this allowed them to develop a deeper understanding of the issues relating to at-risk students.

DISCUSSION

The discussions presented here represent the participants' views about 'at-risk' students in their school. The discussions are presented in a thematic format as they emerged from the focus group discussions. Excerpts are provided to illustrate each of these themes in turn.

Theme 1: Teachers' initial beliefs

In this section, I explore the teachers' perceptions of the underlying causes and risk factors for at-risk students.

Kempes: There could be some problems at home, like family problems that might cause the students' non-performance in class.

Dalo: It could be that they [at-risk students] are getting negative labelling at home. For example, a parent may be calling their son or daughter, "you're good for nothing" or "you are very poor in English or mathematics."

Besides being deprived of the love and support at home, the participants believed that 'at-risk' students can be characterised as being withdrawn in class and lacking interest in learning.

Suzu: Yes, I think that's what we are saying. There is one in my class. I see that he is not performing to my expectations. But he is okay to me. But there are some problems that cause him or her to not perform up to the standard that I expect. For example, in the classroom the student (AS) is restless. He sits there and after a while he begins talking to another student.

Asua: I am seeing an at-risk student as the one that shows a lack of interest in the lesson. He just sits down without saying a thing. He doesn't ask questions as to show he is interested.

Bola: The same thing applies to this particular student in my class. In class he participates actively in whatever we require of him. But when it comes down to giving formal tests, he performs very low. While other students ask questions and participate, this particular at-risk student is totally withdrawn.

Suzu repeatedly complained that "sometimes these students are very quiet in the class," but noted that when it came to outdoor activities like sports and agriculture, "they become active." He believed that 'at-risk' students were disinterested and withdrawn in the classroom because they had not found a way of balancing their enjoyment of practical outdoor learning activities with more academic pursuits. Asua remarked that "their self-consciousness of age or size may cause them to withdraw", and, their "interest is on something outside the classrooms."

On the other hand, Bola argued that these students are "careless in their work" and "speak very poorly." Bola went further, saying that "the difficulty of the subjects sometimes puts them off." Dalo spoke about students' personal characteristics. For instance, Dalo stated: "John and Mark are very aggressive and hostile in class" and; "Kalisto has the same behaviour like his parents" or "Cathy is a liar."

The views expressed in the early stages of the fieldwork process indicate considerable reluctance on the part of the teachers to think about factors within the schooling environment that might have contributed to their students' negative behaviour. To draw out the group's views on this point, I asked the question: Within the classroom environment, do you think teachers have a part in encouraging students' withdrawal from learning? Asua responded as follows:

Asua: This whole thing seems to come back to us teachers. I think we need to treat them (AS) like our own kids. We want them to learn. How can we find ways of making them feel that we are interested in their learning? We need to show we are interested in their learning by bringing them closer to us. Like a dad whose son departs from him, yet, he finds ways to bring his son close to him.

Another participant remarked that "Many of us teachers just ignore these students." The participant continued to reflect on teacher inaction and how it might place at-risk students in a place where "they will find it difficult to express themselves."

These discussions challenged my personal beliefs about my own students, especially those who were part of the group of students that were being discussed. In order to tap further into the above views, I posed another question: Why is it that this group of students have so long been stereotyped in this way? This question got everyone thinking and soon the group began to realise that it was not so much an issue of students' negative attitudes towards their study *per se*, but that the issue hinged on what we believed to be the reality about this group of students. The following excerpts demonstrate this point.

Suzu: In this school we normally have a cut-off mark. Students who frequently fail a subject or an exam may be regarded as at-risk students. Since I started teaching, I've often heard about it. But we do not have a clear policy on what we should do.

One of the reasons for these beliefs could be that schools have policies that predefine the academic status of this group of students. If Ni-Vanuatu children don't make it over the cut-off mark, the school will label the students as at-risk. Although none of the other participants mentioned the cut-off mark, I knew from experience in teaching at the same school that the cut-off mark in all school subjects is fifty percent. Another reason was that teachers were under a lot of pressure to teach the syllabus and felt they could not put extra classroom time into supporting this particular group of students. For example, Dalo commented in his journal, as follows:

Sometimes I feel like I'm wasting the time of smart students who've finished first, when helping slow students (AS). Sometimes giving them extra work is bringing more burdens to me as a teacher or sometimes I don't have enough time to mark their work. I like to keep on my own work

What do I do when students are not interested in the subject I teach? Even though I made it clear the importance of this subject they are still not interested. Some even work very well but during exams they don't do well. Are they pretending to be working?

The discussions above highlight a number of educational issues. First, the parents are accorded much of the blame for not caring enough about their children, thereby placing them 'at-risk' in the classroom. However, while it is true that parents are responsible for the well-being of their children, schools also play an important role in children's development and this should not be overlooked. Second, the teachers themselves demonstrated a lack of love and care for their students and this may have played a role in student disengagement from learning because students are much more likely to participate in class when they feel they are

respected and cared for by their teachers. Thirdly, there is a pedagogical issue. This relates to the point that the participants made about at-risk students being withdrawn and lacking interest in their learning. Learning in the classroom depends on the way teachers plan and execute lessons. How engaging these lessons are is the issue here. If teachers are to involve students in the learning process, they must prepare their lessons in ways that will promote this aim for all students. Fourthly, there is the issue of teaching the curriculum. If teachers follow the curriculum rigidly, they are more likely to ignore anything that may slow them down, including putting time into supporting at-risk students. In Vanuatu, if we want to embrace learning for all students, less emphasis needs to be placed on passing examinations and greater focus needs to be given to student engagement and learning. If teachers take these ideas into account in their professional practice, they may be more likely to succeed in involving at-risk students in the learning process.

Theme 2: Teacher-Student relationships inside the classrooms

To order to elicit information from the participants' about what they had observed in their classrooms I posed the question: How do teachers interact with at-risk students by way of questioning, responding, talking, eye contact, and other activities that encourage engagement in learning? The pattern of engagement between teachers and at-risk students that emerged was striking. I begin by sharing my own observation:

Amton: I felt sorry for Moses (not his real name). He was sitting at the back of the room in this social studies lesson. At first it took me a while to figure him out as an at-risk student. Mrs Tangap's (not her real name) voice was very loud and she spoke against the black board with her back towards the class most of the time as she was explaining things to the class. Mrs Tangap was well groomed and was very smart. She seemed to like the girls sitting at the front row as she'd asked them a lot of questions. Mrs Tangap hardly asked the at-risk student at the back. I counted and Moses was asked only once and even the response was not satisfactory. Nevertheless, Mrs Tangap continued on.

Dalo described what he observed:

Dalo: I noticed that the classroom was very quiet. The students were quiet most of the time. The teacher spent 90% of the time writing on the blackboard. The remaining time was spent on asking questions to those up-front (notably the brighter ones). The one being watched by me (the AS) was sitting in the middle of the class. There was not interaction between the teacher and this student.

The excerpts above suggest that there was less engagement and fewer positive interactions between teachers and at-risk students. There was also little interaction that supported and encouraged this group of students to participate in class. The apparent passivity of these students was also observed by Asua:

Asua: Sitting at the back of the class I noticed that students were all quiet. It soon dawned on me that my presence kept them quiet. The teacher did not arrive until 10 minutes after the scheduled time. The first thing I noticed was that the classroom environment was different. The boys were on one side and all the girls were together on the side of the classroom. Obviously there was no way boys can interact (discuss) with the girls or vice versa. I took note of where my at-risk student was sitting. He was sitting beside a very talkative student. Mrs Bols (not her real name) has a very clear deep voice. Her handwriting on the board was very neat and tidy. I noticed that the teacher calls on the at-risk student a number of times to answer her questions. But I noticed also that the at-risk student was a shy student and would not answer her most of the

time. I overheard Mrs Bols said, 'you should be listening to me instead of dreaming...' I was certain that this at-risk student was not too comfortable with Mrs Bols words. Nevertheless, he just smiled.

All these remarks led me to infer that there is a communication gap between this group of students and teachers. Suzu agreed, saying:

Suzu: So the teacher directed a question to him and he looked lost. And the rest of the students laughed at him. When he realised he was being laughed at, he remained silent and acted as if he was listening. I noticed that he concentrated for only a few minutes and then he started talking again. Then I noticed that this time the teacher just ignored him. At this point, I don't know what we can do to alleviate this difficulty

The excerpts and discussions above raise a number of pedagogical issues. First, it was clear that teachers did not initiate classroom interactions with students equitably because they addressed most of their questions to students who were likely to give the right answer. Students who had been labelled as 'at-risk' were often ignored or given negative feedback by their teachers. Second, there is the issue of learning styles. Ni-Vanuatu children come from different family backgrounds and not all students learn well in an environment where the teacher is in control most of the time. Teachers need to learn about the various preferred learning styles of their students. If they have a working knowledge of these learning styles they will be better placed to support student learning, including at-risk student learning.

Theme 3: Teacher-student relationships outside the classroom

To gauge the participants' thoughts about teacher's relationships with 'at-risk' students outside the classroom, I asked the question: How then do teachers relate to at-risk student outside the classrooms? It is assumed here that if teachers interact with at-risk students inside the classroom, then they will be more likely to do the same outside the class. To this question, Dalo responded:

Dalo: I don't have consistent scheduled times for my at-risk student outside my normal classroom hours. I only meet them after class if I feel that the topic I am teaching is difficult for them.

Although this may not be true for all teachers, the five participants indicated that they did not have the time to follow up students outside school hours. Another made this comment:

In my case, what I usually do is I'd speak to them as a group out on the soccer field. We would joke and laugh and then when opportunity comes for me to talk privately with my at-risk students I would talk to them. But I realised that I could not get a lot out of them. Sometimes they are not really free to express their views. They'll tell me anything but things related to the classroom activities. So I find it difficult. We do talk around but I feel there is still a gap between us.

Although only two participants shared their thoughts on this issue, other participants recognised and agreed with their observations. Most referred to the lack of time as the reason they did not engage with their at-risk students outside the classroom. These excerpts also show that when teachers approach them outside of class, Ni-Vanuatu children will often talk about anything except classroom-related matters. The participant's comments suggest that 'at-risk' students see the classroom environment as being quite alien to them. It could be the case then, that what goes on inside the classroom does not link in meaningful ways with children's everyday lives outside the classroom.

FINAL COMMENTS

As stated earlier, this small-scale case study involved five participants so these findings may not necessarily represent the attitudes all teachers in Vanuatu. However, I believe it is worthwhile to highlight aspects of the findings which may have implications for future research.

Firstly, some Vanuatu teachers perpetuate the idea that the welfare of students depends entirely on their parents thus placing the blame solely on families for a lack of love and care for their children. When teachers place blame on parents, they deny the importance of their own roles and responsibilities as educators of 'at-risk' children. In fact, students spend seven to eight hours a day at school so teachers are clearly an important influence in their lives. Secondly, teachers themselves rarely demonstrate love and care for their students including those who they believe to be 'at-risk'. Thirdly, teachers lack pedagogical knowledge about how they can actively engage students in the learning process. This includes the ability to initiate equitable classroom interactions through asking questions, the ability to diagnose learning difficulties, and the ability to develop effective student learning support systems. Fourthly, a great deal of importance is placed on passing examinations. The teachers were under pressure to follow the curriculum and this came at the expense of attention to active student learning. Generally, these teachers were not relating well to 'at-risk' students on several levels.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WAYS FORWARD

Issues relating to at-risk students in Vanuatu classrooms that were identified in this case study, do exist. However, they have not been explored or brought to the forefront of debate in the Vanuatu educational context. Having carried out this study, I hope that Vanuatu scholars will do further research on this issue because it could be incorporated into a systematic programme of educational improvement in Vanuatu. In light of this, I outline some thoughts as suggestions for future attention.

The values of love and respect: I often hear these values preached in churches across the Vanuatu. I also hear these values highlighted in village meetings when chiefs emphasise the importance of respect. Love and respect are therefore seen as important values in Vanuatu and they could also be put into practice in Vanuatu classrooms. If they were to be put in place, the outcomes of at-risk students could be dramatically improved.

Beliefs about learning: Our beliefs affect what we do and how we behave towards others including students in our schools. However it may be necessary to rethink some of these beliefs if they are not helping our students to learn and if they are based on false assumptions. We may also need to reconceptualise how the cultural values of Ni-Vanuatu children can be incorporated more fully into schooling. If Ni-Vanuatu educators base their beliefs on values of love and respect, then our teaching practices should also reflect these values. The above findings indicate that this is not currently happening in all schooling environments.

Pedagogy: Generally, Ni-Vanuatu children are energetic and active. In the villages, they are usually the first people to get up in the morning to play outside their houses. In contrast, when Ni-Vanuatu children enter the classroom their behaviour changes and they become quiet and reserved. If Ni-Vanuatu children are passive in class, then their classroom experiences may not be matching their life experiences outside the classroom. Given this, it is necessary to reconceptualise the pedagogical practices and beliefs of Ni-Vanuatu teachers including rethinking the way in which they plan, implement, and deliver their lessons.

Culturally responsive approaches: As a way forward, I suggest that we need to consider a system that caters for all students in the Vanuatu classrooms including those we believe to be 'at-risk'. This system should enable schools and teachers to take into account the preferred learning styles of Ni-Vanuatu children.

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