

7-1-2011

Constructing the "At-Risk" Student in Education: A Sociopolitical Analysis from 1960-2009

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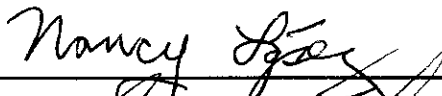
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**CONSTRUCTING THE “AT-RISK” STUDENT IN
EDUCATION: A SOCIOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS FROM 1960-
2009**

BY

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**BACHELOR OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-
LINCOLN**

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts
Sociology
The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine the changing conceptualization of what is called the “at-risk” or disadvantaged student from 1960-2009. Using components of theory on education as an institution, the construction of knowledge, and racial formation theory, I specifically argue that research reviews and federal policy serve as sites where these core concepts in educational discourse and policy continually go through a process of rearticulation and legitimation. I use one journal, the *Review of Educational Research*, to examine this relationship over 50 years, from 1960-2009. I use a quantitative content analysis of research abstracts to explore 1.) how the concept of the “at-risk student” is rearticulated between 1960-2009 and 2) how this is possibly legitimated through research discourse and changing educational policy over changing sociopolitical climates. I do this by tracing the trajectory of the change in conceptualization with changing policy and political regimes. Twenty-one individual level categories defining the “at-risk” students emerge and are tracked over time. I conclude by discussing how the relationship between research discourse on the “at-risk student” and federal policy directed toward the “at-risk” mutually influence each other using legitimating effects so that this concept remains a stable instrument to structure society. Implications for diversity are discussed.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Constructing the “At-Risk” Student in Education and Policy

As a sociology student studying education and social inequality, I have read considerable amounts of literature concerning the intersection of these two areas. I’ve learned that when trying to understand differing educational outcomes, researchers often try to examine what is called the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student. There is an attempt to pinpoint unique traits about this student or their life that leave them “disadvantaged” in the system of education or “at-risk” for school failure. In education, this has included the poor and/or minority students (for examples see Archer, 2010; Crosnoe 2009), students of color (see Ornstein and Levine, 1990), physically or mentally “handicapped” students (see Levitt and Cohen, 1975; Magriade, Hanson, Heaton, Kay, Newitt, Walker, 2010), women (see Haojie, Barnhart, Stein, Martorel, 2003; Ringrose 2007) and numerous others. Countless studies exist on the “at-risk” student (for some examples, see Condron 2009 Crosnoe 2009, Fine 1991, Mare & Maralani 2006, Stewart 1992, Valenzuela 1999, Willis 2009) and policies have been formulated in an attempt to address what have been identified as differing outcomes between those students classified as “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” and others.

As I read numerous articles and books that addressed inequitable outcomes between those labeled as “at-risk” and/or disadvantaged and the “other”, I noticed that different readings provoked different personal responses. More specifically, I was uneasy after realizing that a deficit framework still existed within some current literature concerning inequitable educational outcomes. Valencia (1991) defines a deficit framework as

...a person centered explanation of school failure among individuals *linked to group membership* (emphasis added)... (and) holds that schooling performance is rooted in students' alleged cognitive and motivational deficits, while institutional structures and inequitable schooling arrangements that exclude students from learning are held exculpatory.

The deficit thinking model in education holds that school failure can be attributed to internal characteristics of failing students, often attributed to some sort of group membership. These include such things as limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn, and immoral behavior resulting in lack of “educational success”. These internal characteristics, in a deficit thinking model, are believed to be transmitted through a variety of ways, historically using race, culture and family upbringing. The deficit transmitter changes alongside the scholarly environment of the time. While Valencia (1991) points out that most academics and researchers do not hold this model in high esteem, it has shaped the way educational research has been done and continues to be done in ways that the researcher often does not notice. Furthermore, there are real consequences for those who are labeled as “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” in education, especially when that label implies some sort of internal deficit on the part of the learner.

As I continued my reading on this topic I realized how different my own worldview as someone who has been labeled as a member of the group called “at-risk” or disadvantaged was from those studies that possessed a hidden dimension of a deficit framework. I had a continued sense of uneasiness or disagreement with this literature, especially on how the concept was being rationalized and treated. The realization of my

differing perspective led me to the current study where I question what it *really* means to be classified as “at-risk” or disadvantaged within education.

I entered this project with two basic assumptions. First, the concept of the “at-risk” and “disadvantaged” student has long been represented in educational research and has become a stable and legitimated concept in educational discourse, especially when dealing with inequality. At its most basic understanding, this concept appears to be simple and straight forward. The “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student is often a taken-for-granted concept that simply implies a student, whom by virtue of his or her group membership, is for one reason or another not receiving the full benefits of the educational system. However, the specific components that this concept actually entails change and shift over time. For instance, what it meant to be classified as the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student in the 1960s is not entirely the same as what it means to be within that classification in 2011, even though fundamentally the concept is the same in its outcomes for those within the classification.

Second, it appears that this shift in conceptualization occurs during changing sociopolitical climates. However, not much work has been done to understand how these changing sociopolitical conditions actually affect the changing conceptualization of the “at-risk” and “disadvantaged” student or how this concept has shifted in meaning over time. To fully unpack this issue requires a critical and in depth analysis of numerous aspects of changing sociopolitical climates and discourse. One must at the very least understand what exactly the concept entails throughout changing time periods, how and why the conceptualization changes through time, what factors influence this changing conceptualization, and how all of these questions are influenced by what is

happening in a much broader sociopolitical context. To achieve this requires a large project. Therefore, this project is only a point of departure or a starting point.

For purposes of this paper, I focus on one part: the changing research discourse used to discuss this concept over time. I answer the question of what the concept of the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student entails within academic research without merely reifying its taken-for-granted definition. Many studies that exist on the “at-risk” or disadvantaged student in education operationalize the concept in order to legitimate its presence in the study. My study is different in that it addresses the concept of the “at-risk” or disadvantaged student in education without focusing on just one component or one intersection within the concept and reifying its definition. Instead, it focuses on the construction of the general concept of the “at-risk” or disadvantaged student, allowing the specific components to emerge from empirical data.

I also propose a model that begins to explain how or why one gets placed within the classification merging components of theory on education as an institution and components of racial formation theory. I suggest that the construction of this classification, and its legitimacy, are maintained by a mutually influential relationship between two entities – research discourse on education of the “at-risk” student and educational policy addressing the “at-risk” student. I argue that this relationship is one reflecting legitimation theory, where education as an institution has legitimating effects on the construction and implementation of educational policy and where educational policy, perhaps, has legitimating effects on the production of educational research on the “at-risk” student. Simply, I propose a starting point to argue that educational policy on

the “at-risk” student and educational research directed toward the “at-risk” student work to legitimate each other.

I further argue that if this cycle of mutual legitimation is occurring, there must be a regulating mechanism that allows for the concept to remain a valid and legitimate component of educational discourse through changing sociopolitical climates. I argue that this regulating mechanism is a continuous, and necessary, rearticulation of the concept of the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student. This rearticulation occurs as a mutually influential interaction between research discourse and the creation and implementation of educational policy. A constant rearticulation is necessary as the concept of the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student would lose its legitimacy if it failed to encompass new members identified as emerging within changing sociopolitical climates. I discuss what this could mean as it relates to changing political regimes in the United States. Finally, I briefly discuss implications for research focusing on diversity and equity within the educational institution.

Chapter 2: A Sociopolitical and Theoretical Framing

Changing Sociopolitical Climates: The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Birth of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965

The 1960s were an especially active time period for numerous groups who systematically faced inequity in all areas of society. This time period was influential enough that scholars studying sociopolitical change have called it “The Great Transformation” (Omi and Winant 1994). It was during this time that significant social movements working towards equity for all people in all societal arenas were taking place. The passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 meant significant changes not only in policy and law, but also in rhetoric and discourse surrounding those groups who had faced systematic inequity within public and private settings. This included those who were identified as being members of racial and ethnic minority groups as well as women and it specifically addressed desegregation. It is important to note that at this time large scale federal recognition was given to the fact that certain social groups of people had systematically been discriminated against in a way that warranted national level reform.

The passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 led to numerous legislation regarding equal access and equity, the most important in the scope of this study stemming from Title IV. Title IV addressed equity in all organizations receiving federal monies, including the public education system. It is hardly coincidental that one year later, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 (P.L. 89-10; 79 Stat. 27) was passed. President Lyndon B. Johnson passed this landmark legislation that further prioritized addressing inequity in education, the stated purpose being to “improve educational opportunities for poor children”

(<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>), especially as it related to the goals of the Civil Rights Act passed one year prior.

While national level attention to societal inequality had become a priority during the time of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, addressing this systematic inequality within education was tricky, as public education is largely controlled at the state level as opposed to the national level. As such, the initial authorization of the ESEA (P.L. 89-10; 79 Stat. 27) was not meant to be seen as a general package of aid to all schools. Assistance was allocated to local education agencies (LEAs) with the highest proportions of poor students. Funds were distributed through the state educational agencies (SEAs) to avoid the perception that the federal government was intervening in the rights and obligations of states to provide public education. The original act was authorized for 5 years, through 1970. However, the federal government has re-authorized the act several times since it was first passed, resulting in multiple titles and numerous federally mandated educational programs, the most recent reauthorizations resulting in the Bush Administration's 2001 re-authorization called "No Child Left Behind" and the Obama Administration's 2010 re-authorization "Race to the Top" (P.L. 89-10; 79 Stat. 27).

Each of the original titles of the ESEA (P.L. 89-10; 79 Stat. 27) state broad areas where federal monies can be spent within an educational setting. Title I provides funding guidelines for educating "educationally disadvantaged" children. With more than 80% of the federal monies being appropriated to Title I programs, it is often seen as the "most important" title. Title I programs are aimed at reaching the needs of what are called the "educationally deprived" students and schools. Initially, this was interpreted as those children or schools who were predominantly poor or in low-income areas. It has also

included programs for migrant and bilingual education, Head Start programs, and Reading First programs. Title II provides federal monies for technology including library resources or things such as audio/visual material. It also addresses teacher and principal quality and mathematics and science partnerships. Title III is the first to explicitly address the “at-risk” student, as it provides funding for programs designed to meet the needs of the “at-risk” student. According to ESEA’s Title III, this student is “at-risk” in terms of “school failure”. Limited English Proficient (LEP) and Immigrant students are included within this definition. Title IV provides federal funding for college and university level educational research. The final title, Title V, provides funding for state departments of education. However, over the past 46 years, numerous amendments have been added and reauthorizations have been issued (P.L. 89-10; 79 Stat. 27). An up to date time line of the ESEA’s amendments and reauthorizations is attached in Appendix A: Pertinent Federal Legislation.

While the federal government did not intend to set any sort of national educational standards in the beginning, it has become clear especially since the 2001 authorization of “No Child Left Behind” that the federal government has been setting clear standards as to what constitutes “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” in any public education system since the original authorization of the ESEA. So, what exactly does the concept of the “at-risk” student entail and how has this conceptualization changed over time with the changing sociopolitical climate surrounding ESEA and its reauthorizations, and how is this possibly influenced by the previously discussed relationship between research discourse and education policy?

Research Reviews and Policy as Sites of Knowledge Creation

Before I begin, it is necessary to discuss why empirical research reviews and policy are important sources of information in this type of analysis. According to Franklin (1999):

Reviews of research literature...are designed to enable researchers to delineate our current knowledge about a particular problem, issue, or field of inquiry as well as to situate their research in its proper historical and epistemological context...They acquaint both readers and researchers with the existing state of research in a field and point perhaps to the direction that the field might be heading (p 347).

Research reviews, in this way, present themselves as important instruments of knowledge creation. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that “the sociology of knowledge must concern itself with everything that passes for knowledge in society.” Franklin’s (1999) argument that research reviews enable researchers to “delineate our current knowledge about a particular problem” suggests that research reviews are one such piece of society that Berger and Luckmann (1966) are referring to. While Berger and Luckmann (1966) suggest a focus on “pre-theoretical” knowledge rather than one embedded in intellectual theory, the continual re-articulation of what it means to be “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” would situate this problem in a “pre-theoretical” arena, despite the fact that the discourse is embedded within intellectual writing.

The Shift from Subjective Meaning to Objective Reality

Berger and Luckmann (1966) present a model for how subjective meanings become objective realities. They argue that this transformation from subjective meaning

to objective reality is socially constructed using mechanisms such as institutionalization and legitimation. Finally, these socially constructed objective realities are internalized as subjective realities. It is at this point where sometimes a “taken for granted” symmetry occurs. See Table 1 for a table summarizing the three stages of the social construction of reality from Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) book (p. 61).

Table 1: Berger and Luckmann’s 3 Stages	
Stages of the Theory	Processes
Society is a human product	Typification, Objectivation
Society is an objective reality	Institutionalization, Legitimation, Reification
Man is a social Product	Internalization, Socialization

Throughout this process, Berger and Luckmann (1966) emphasize the way in which social structures and individual consciousness are not separate, but interlinked. Furthermore, Berger and Luckmann (1966) see this relationship between social structures and the individual as dialectic, to them meaning “a relationship between two phenomena which progresses and which leaves both changed.” Omi and Winant (1994) also refer to this dialectic relationship in their work on changing racial ideology. They argue that racial formation occurs through linkages between *structure* and *representation*, where “racial projects do the ideological ‘work’ of making these links,” defined as a means of linking social structure and representation of a sociohistorically constructed concept (in their case, race; in the case of this project, the “at-risk” student) (p 56). Similar to Omi and Winant’s (1994) work, I argue that the process through which this change occurs in

my research can be described as what they call rearticulation. In their discussion of changing racial ideology, they define rearticulation as:

...A practice of discursive reorganization or reinterpretation of ideological themes and interests already present in the subject's consciousness, such that these elements obtain new meanings or coherence. This practice is ordinarily the work of "intellectuals." (p 195)

While Berger and Luckmann's real question is how subjective meanings become objective realities throughout the entire three stage process, it is the second phase, the processes of institutionalization and legitimation that this rearticulation occurs (See Figure 1).

In the case of this study, subjective meanings of what is known as the "at-risk" or "disadvantaged" student have already passed through the first stage of "objectivation." These terms can be found in the literature as early as the 1930s. Language and signs surrounding the concept were developed and habitually used over the next 30 years until landmark educational policy was passed that worked to legitimate what had become stable and institutionalized in the literature as the "at-risk" or "disadvantaged" student.

As previously mentioned, I argue that there is a regulative mechanism mutually influencing both sides of the relationship between research discourse and education policy. This regulative mechanism is Omi and Winant's (1994) idea of 'rearticulation'. The constant rearticulation of the concept of the "at-risk" or "disadvantaged" student that occurs between research discourse and education policy are what regulate and facilitate change in the concept of the "at-risk" or "disadvantaged" student. This 'rearticulation' is what helps maintain the concepts objectivity and convinces the future generations that the

term is still legitimate. Without a continuous rearticulation of what it means to be within this classification through changing sociopolitical climates, the concept would potentially lose its legitimacy and power.

Research Reviews and Federal Policy as Sites of Power

Research reviews and educational policy often act as important instruments of power in society. As Franklin (2009) argues, “the answer lies in the language or discourse in which we frame these reviews” (p 348). Berger and Luckmann refer to this language as “symbolic utterances of all kinds, even non-verbal ones.” They argue that language plays a central role in the processes of institutionalization and legitimation, “enabling subjective actions to be named, conceptualized, and objectified, and also offering its own limits to personal meanings...” Foucault (1972) further identifies this as “discursive practices...always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period” (p. 117). What we end up with is a “system of categories, classifications, and ordering principles that structure our reasoning about educational issues (Franklin, 1999 p 347; Popkewitz, 1997). “And these systems, in turn, are the interpretive lenses through which we construct our understanding of the array of concepts we employ to talk about such educational matters” (Franklin, 1999 p 347-349). These strong, supporting social groups that regulate these processes are the educational system, the political arena, and the individuals within.

The system of education and the policy system are both highly institutionalized systems in the United States. According to Meyer (1977), the system of education has been so highly institutionalized that it is overwhelmingly seen as an authoritative producer of knowledge. And this knowledge, as Franklin (1999) points out, is a form of

power (p 349). Education, as an institution, both socializes and allocates individuals to specific roles within society (Meyer 1977). After an individual passes through the educational system, she or he receives some sort of credential that represents her or his successful socialization into the classification of an “educational elite” or what some call an “intellectual” in whatever field of inquiry or profession that she or he was training. Beyond this, Meyer (1977) argues that

Education has an effect on the distribution of political, economic, and social positions in society, authoritatively creating and defining new classifications of individuals. These classifications are new constructions in that they newly defined persons are expected to behave and to be treated by others in new ways.

New types of people and new competencies are created.

Important to note is that creation of both research discourse and educational policy are controlled by what the educational institution allocates as the educational elite or in Omi and Winant’s (1994) case, the “intellectual” – which they define as “...those whose role is to interpret the social world for given subjects...” (p. 195). The relationship between these two ends up being a reflection of this hegemonic control, where these groups of the “educational elite” or “intellectuals” control and interpret what is passed as knowledge of the social world that guides our understandings of educational concepts within two highly institutionalized and legitimate social spheres controlling education. These concepts dictate the acceptance of such classifications and how current and future “educational elite” or “intellectuals” understand the behaviors and expectations of the individuals placed within the classification by previous generations of the “educational elite” or “intellectuals” and the continued legitimation of the classifications.

Furthermore, Berger and Luckmann (1966) make the argument that legitimation further occurs because there are inevitable tendencies to strengthen existing social patterns in order to ensure that they are seen as “real” or “objective” by newcomers. This legitimation, to Berger and Luckmann (1966), is connected with the distribution of ideas, the control of ideas, and ultimately access to power. Antonio Gramsci [1929-1935] (1971) takes this thought a little bit deeper, referring to this as hegemonic control. Gramsci [1929-1935] (1971) argued that in order to be successful, it was necessary for those in control to elaborate and maintain popular systems of ideas and practices. This was done through multiple venues including education and ‘folk wisdom’—or the subjective realities that become the ‘common sense’. To Gramsci [1929-1935] (1971), this “common sense” understanding of subjective realities is what a society as a whole buys into, essentially buying into the hegemonic system that it is ruled by.

Research Discourse, Policy, and the Rearticulation of the "At-Risk" Student

There is not theoretical consensus on the nature of the relationship between academia and politics. For example, a conventional view of academia following enlightenment trends (generally speaking) holds that academia is completely independent from politics or political trends. Thus, political trends should be irrelevant within academia. Alternatively, there is the image that academia is completely controlled by the hegemonic ideology that legitimates the ruling class. And from a more historical basis, education and policy shape each other as a result of completely exogenous changes to either the polity or education (and hence are not related). I am proposing something a little different – that based on my discussion of Berger and Luckmann, Meyer, and Omi

and Winant there is possibly more of an interplay between academia and policy by means of a ‘rearticulation’.

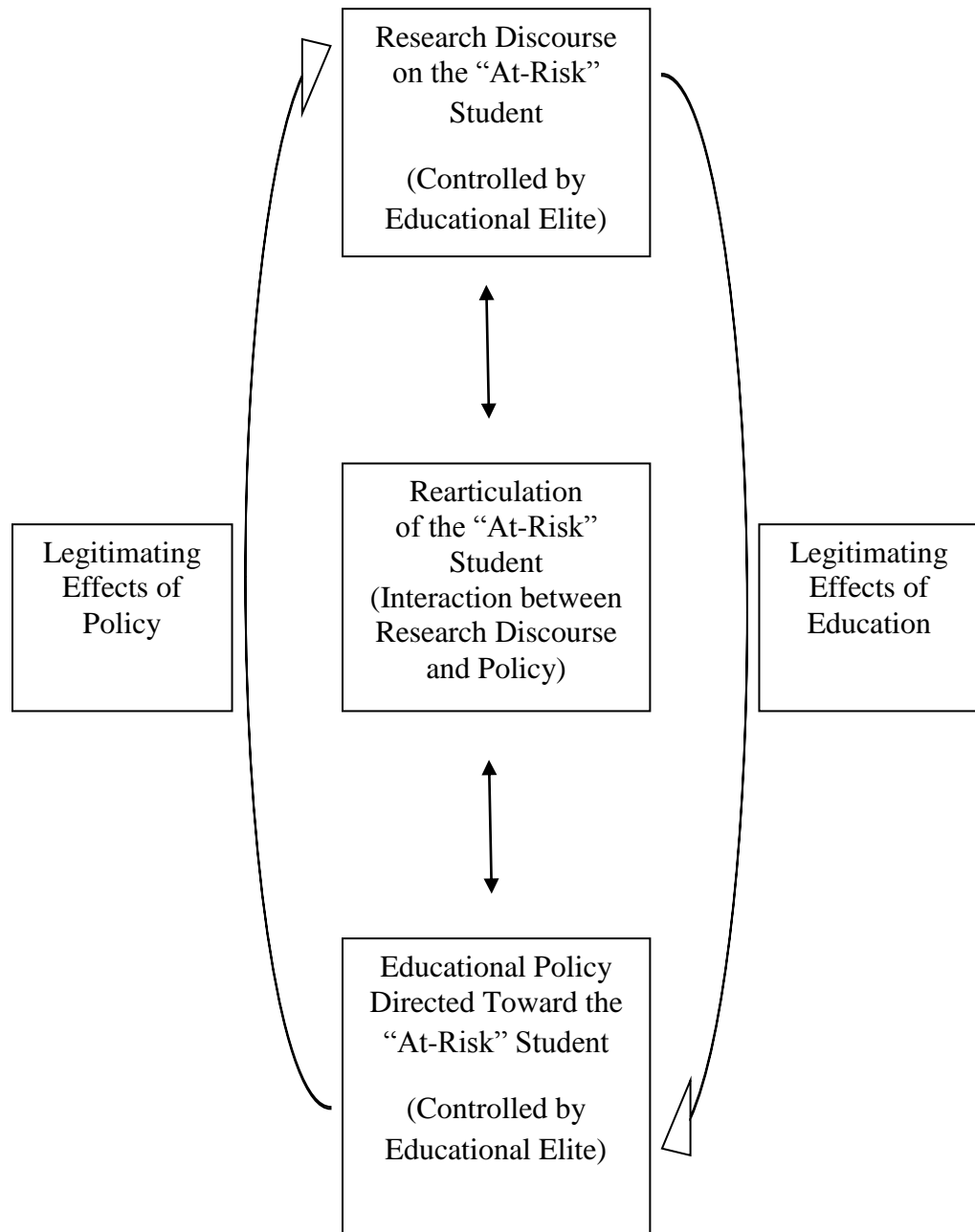
Figure 1: Research Discourse and Educational Policy as a Process of Legitimation and Rearticulation is a closed system representing a mutually influential relationship between educational research discourse and federal educational policy and the changing conceptualization of the “at-risk” student. Also represented in this model is the constant rearticulation that occurs within changing sociopolitical periods. As alluded to earlier, there is mutually influential legitimation occurring over time between these two entities (research discourse and educational policy). This figure suggests that research discourse on the “at-risk” student validates and legitimates what is reflected in educational policy directed toward the treatment of the “at-risk” student; and at the same time, educational policy directed toward the “at-risk” student legitimates what is being produced and accepted in academic communities publishing on what it means to be within the classification of what is called the “at-risk” student.

The mutually influential process of legitimation between these two entities is better understood after examining more broadly the legitimating effects of education on one hand, and the legitimating effects of policy on the other. While the presence of these legitimating effects remains constant throughout time periods, the inputs that regulate these legitimating effects change through time. To examine this, I will focus on two of the most influential: federal funding and political regimes.

Different political regimes have differing effects on what types of social policy will be supported within that particular regime. Changing political regimes may contribute to the regulation of changing ideology and in turn, conceptualization of social

issues. The dominant political regime legitimates the importance of particular social issues by either making the issues a main part of a political agenda and supporting the issues with federal funding or not placing much importance or funding into a particular issue. In this case, political regimes will mandate what is seen as legitimate and important with regards to educational reform and the “at-risk” student by either funding projects that they feel are legitimate or taking funding away from projects that don’t reflect what is seen within their political regime as legitimate. This will be reflected within the types of policies being passed within certain political regimes. So, now the question is whether or not this theoretical relationship between research discourse on the “at-risk” student, educational policy directed toward the “at-risk” student, and legitimating effects of education hold up with empirical data.

Figure 1: Research Discourse and Educational Policy as a Process of Legitimation and Rearticulation



Chapter 3: Methodology

To answer the question of whether or not the theoretical relationship between research discourse on the “at-risk” student, educational policy directed toward the “at-risk” student, and legitimating effects of education could be grounded empirically, I conducted a quantitative content analysis. This analysis was situated within a sociopolitical context relying on educational research to inform the data and changing political climates to inform interpretation. I examined research abstracts addressing inequitable educational outcomes as they relate to the broad concepts of the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student. I only focused on the broad concepts in order to not reify basic definitional understandings of the concept. Focusing on how the broad concepts were operationalized within the research allowed substantive definitional components to emerge through the data and allowed me to avoid reification. In this preliminary study, I only used one journal, the “Review of Educational Research” (RER). The RER publishes articles broadly related to educational research across a variety of disciplines regarding Pre-K – Postsecondary education. These disciplines include psychology, sociology, history, philosophy, political science, economics, computer science, statistics, anthropology, and biology as long as the articles are related to educational issues (<http://rer.sagepub.com/>). With such a multidisciplinary scope, this journal allowed me to efficiently analyze views in a multidisciplinary way in order to avoid what could be biased views within the discourse of a particular field.

I chose this journal for a variety of reasons outside of its broad multidisciplinary scope. First, it is the top ranked journal in education and educational research (1/139) with a Pearson’s 5-year impact factor of 5.726 and an overall impact factor of 3.326 in

the 2009 Journal Citation Report and an official journal of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) (<http://rer.sagepub.com/>). The AERA is an international professional organization with more than 25,000 members, including “educators, administrators, directors of research, persons working with testing or evaluation in federal, state and local agencies, counselors, evaluators, graduate students, and behavioral scientists” with the goal of “advancing educational research and its practical application” (<http://www.aera.net/>). Second, the RER has been in circulation since 1931, which allowed me to trace discourse through each time period in which I am interested (1960-2009). Third, the scope of the RER’s publications is adequately related to my research pursuits as this journal “publishes on critical, integrative reviews of research literature bearing on education, including conceptualizations, interpretations, and syntheses of literature and scholarly work in a field broadly relevant to education and educational research” (<http://rer.sagepub.com/>). Finally, I have electronic access to this journal for all of the years in which my analysis took place.

Data

I selected articles by conducting a search of the RER using JSTOR and the following parameters: 1960-2009. This allowed me to search 5 years prior to the initial authorization of ESEA of 1965 up until the current time period. Separate searches were conducted using specific keywords that came directly from the original authorization of ESEA 1965 and 338 articles using “at-risk student”, 287 articles using “disadvantaged student” and 326 articles using “high risk student” were identified. The three searches resulted in 951 citations, which were then entered into a master library using Endnote[®] software. Through Endnote[®], all repeat articles (those that came up from more than one

search) were eliminated. This resulted in a total of 523 articles. My analysis focused only on journal article abstracts, therefore anything extra was discarded (e.g. “Front Matter”, “Back Matter”, and book reviews). After eliminating this extra material, the total number of articles for review was 487. The articles were then sorted by the year they were published, starting with 1960 and ending with 2009.

Initially, I had planned to go through each article’s abstract for definitional statements of “at-risk”, “disadvantaged” and “high-risk”, tracking overt definitional conceptualizations. However, upon examining the titles and abstracts, less than 30 of these articles had such overt definitional statements. Therefore, I changed my method to analyze changes in the implied definitional statements within the abstract.

Conceptualization is the mental process whereby ambiguous and imprecise notions are made clear and more precise. A conceptual definition states the meaning of a concept. For my purposes, conceptualization refers to how journal article abstracts that discuss the broad concept of the “at-risk” student in turn define this concept and make it more clear. I examined the articles for explicit operationalization used to define the concept of “at-risk”, “disadvantaged”, and “high-risk” in the abstracts, as well as implied conceptualizations when reviewing the abstract. For example, in “Characteristics of Socially Disadvantaged Children”, Gordon (1965) mentions that behaviors and circumstances setting them apart from more privileged peers, home environment, family status, language, cognition, intelligence, perceptual styles, intellectual function, motivation, aspiration are all part of an explicit operationalization of “disadvantaged” students. On the other hand, the article “Societal Forces Influencing Curriculum Decisions” states broadly the social problem of those “at-risk” of dropping out, only

implying that social class, race, culture, and family are related to this problem. By analyzing conceptualization through time, I was able to create a trajectory of how the concept of the “at-risk”, the “disadvantaged” and/or the “high-risk” student has or has not changed during changing sociopolitical contexts.

Coding of Studies

Each study was coded across three dimensions. The first dimension was individual level characteristics that the study associated with “the learner” that somehow marked the individual as “at-risk”, “disadvantaged” or “high-risk” within the scope of the study. The second dimension coded for outcome variable, which consisted of the measurement of outcome that separated the students that were the focus of the study from all the “other” students. This dimension would include outcomes as broad as “achievement outcomes” to more specific outcomes like “IQ Tests.” The third dimension coded for was general topic of study, whether it was on “improving standards” or “reading comprehension” and even “technology in the classroom”. Just as conceptualizations of the terminology change over time, so do these topics of studies of the “at-risk”, “disadvantaged” or “high-risk” student. All three of these dimensions work together to represent a complete picture of what it means to be a classified as a member of this group of students within education literature and policy. This paper focuses only on the first domain, “individual level characteristics.” However, the complex relationship between all three domains will be explored more in depth in future projects.

Analysis Domain

“Individual Level Characteristics” refers to any characteristic of the student defined as having “unsatisfactory” educational outcomes within the study. These

characteristics must in some way be noted as contributing to the differing educational outcomes. This can include characteristics such as affective variables, race, socioeconomic status, family background, etc. My analysis revealed 21 emerging categories representing individual level characteristics, which can be found in Appendix B.

Each article abstract went through multiple cycles of coding. The first cycle consisted of open or “initial” coding, described by Saldaña (2009) as “breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences” (p 81). During the initial coding, I was careful not to prematurely collapse data into what I felt were emerging categories in order not to impose a bias upon the creation of a coding guide.

After initial coding was complete, I collapsed initial codes into a coding guide for use during second cycle coding, grouping seemingly related first cycle codes together in a way that made theoretical sense. If a category seemed to be emerging as important on its own, even if it could possibly be collapsed, I did not collapse it in order to allow it to emerge as a dominant category. For example, this happened with “Affective Variables” which contains multiple affective characteristics that appear throughout the abstracts and “Delinquent Behavior.” While “Delinquent Behavior” may be seen as part of “Affective Variables” or as having some overlap, I noticed this category seemed to have importance in standing on its own and not as a part of “Affective Variables” – therefore it was left as a category on its own.

Furthermore, I was careful not to let my own knowledge of the field dictate which codes were put within which category based on where current knowledge would suggest.

Instead, I allowed the language of the abstract to dictate where initial codes fit. For example, current knowledge suggests that “Hispanic” should be seen as “Ethnicity”. However, in the past the field and researchers viewed Hispanic as “Race”. Therefore, if an abstract talked about “Race” and implied “Black, White, Hispanic, Asian-American” as races, Hispanic was coded as “Race”. If, however, the article was referring to Hispanic as and “Ethnicity”, it was coded as “Ethnicity”. A series of analytical notes were kept throughout the entire coding process which assisted in the collapsing and creation of final coding categories. The final coding guide consisted of 21 categories and can be found in Appendix B: Coding Guide.

Analysis:

After the second cycle of coding was completed, I created a table that consisted of the frequency of articles per time period that contained each category. Time periods were divided into every 5 years. Once the frequencies of articles were calculated, I developed a second table containing the percentage of articles *per time period* that contained each category. These two tables are located in Appendix C: Data Tables. The calculations of percentages of articles containing each category within each period were then plotted on several line charts, showing how the prevalence of each category changed over time in relation to each other. These charts are discussed in the “Results” section. The charted changes in categories were then interpreted using changes in ESEA policy and changing political regimes in the U.S. to examine what the changing discourse could be telling us in terms of changing sociopolitical climates.

Chapter 4: Results

Construction of the “At-Risk” Student in terms of Individual Level Characteristics

Examining the coding guide you can see that over the past 50 years 21 categories of individual level characteristics can be accounted for. These categories range from physically identifiable markers to more subtle and covert characteristics. Physical or identifiable markers include characteristics such as race, gender, language minority status, delinquent behavior, disability (sometimes, for example, physical disabilities) and minority group status (sometimes, for example, based on race). More covert or hidden characteristics include affective variables such as motivation and effort, student self-concept, social class, cognition, ability to perform, family factors and home environment and psychological health.

Others may range anywhere on the spectrum between seemingly identifiable characteristics of the student and more hidden or implicit characteristics associated with the student. Some of these are culture and ethnicity, both of which can consist of variables such as race (identifiable) or socioeconomic status (not always identifiable by looking at a student). Also, some may argue that categories at one point or another such as socioeconomic status can be inferred from the appearance or actions of a child. The final grouping of categories is represented by general language of the at-risk. This grouping suggests that the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student is still being discussed in terms of school failure or underperformance (General Academic Factors) and in terms of both intellectual characteristics and non-intellectual influences (General Characteristics). General Terminology reveals emergent language used to discuss what is being rearticulated as the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student. General key findings suggest a

shift from more explicit definitions in the 1960s and 1970s to more implicit definitions over time into the 2000s. Furthermore, definitions in the early 1960s and 1970s often contained multiple categories (as represented in Appendix B: Coding Guide) while the increasingly implicit definitions in the 1980s-2000s often only focused on one or two of the categories.

How the concept of the “at-risk” or disadvantaged student has actually changed over time can be seen by examining Figures 2-7. These figures represent changing discourse on this concept over the 50 year time period from 1960-2009. Figure 2 represents the percentage of articles dealing with the “At-Risk” or disadvantaged student by selected intellectual and behavioral categories. You can see that “Ability,” “Affective Variables,” “Delinquent Behavior,” and “Cognition” all represented less than 10% of the articles dealing with the “at-risk” or disadvantaged student from 1960-1964. From 1965 to 1975, “Affective Variables” then peaks at representing over 50% of the articles, while “Delinquent Behavior” reaches its peak one time period later at roughly 25% of the articles. “Ability” peaks around the same time period representing around 15% of the articles while “Cognition” only increases slightly, still remaining under 10%. All four of the categories then decrease in the 1980-1985 time period with “Affective Variables” and “Delinquent Behavior” dropping to around 15%, and “Cognition” and “Ability” dropping below 10%. From 1985-1990 “Affective Variables” and “Ability” increase again representing roughly 25% and 20% of articles respectively while “Cognition” and “Delinquent Behavior” stay roughly unchanged. From 1990-2009, all of the categories then see a steady decrease in representation, with “Affective Variables” accounting for

most of the representation within this chart at that time with less than 10% of the articles in the time period.

Figure 3 represents percentage of articles dealing with selected demographic and background characteristics. Like Figure 2, most of the categories start out in 1960-1965 below 10% representation, with “Sex/Gender” not even represented. However, “Social Class/Status” starts as representing nearly 45% of articles dealing with the “at-risk” or disadvantaged student. While “Family Factors/Home Environment” and “Socioeconomic Status” steadily increase over the next 10 years in 1970-1974 to peak at 17% and 30% respectively, “Social Class” dramatically declines to roughly 15% in this same time period. Over the next 10 years to 1980-1984, all three categories steadily decrease with “Social Class/Status” representing around 13%, “Socioeconomic Status” and “Family Factors/Home Environment” each representing less than 5% of the total number of articles published in that time period. During this time “Sex/Gender” slightly increases, but still represents less than 5% of articles during the time period dealing with the “at-risk” or disadvantaged student. However, “Sex/Gender” peaks with “Family Factors/Home Environment” between 1985-1989, representing nearly 15% of articles being dealing with the “at-risk” or disadvantaged. All four of the categories remain fairly stable going into 2009, where “Social Class/Status” represents roughly 14% of articles, “Family Factors/Home Environment” steadily increasing to roughly 13%, “Sex/Gender” dramatically returning to under 5%, and “Socioeconomic Status” slightly increasing and leveling off at roughly 8% of articles addressing the “at-risk” or disadvantaged student.

Figure 2: Percentage of Articles Dealing with "At-Risk" by Intellectual and Behavioral Categories

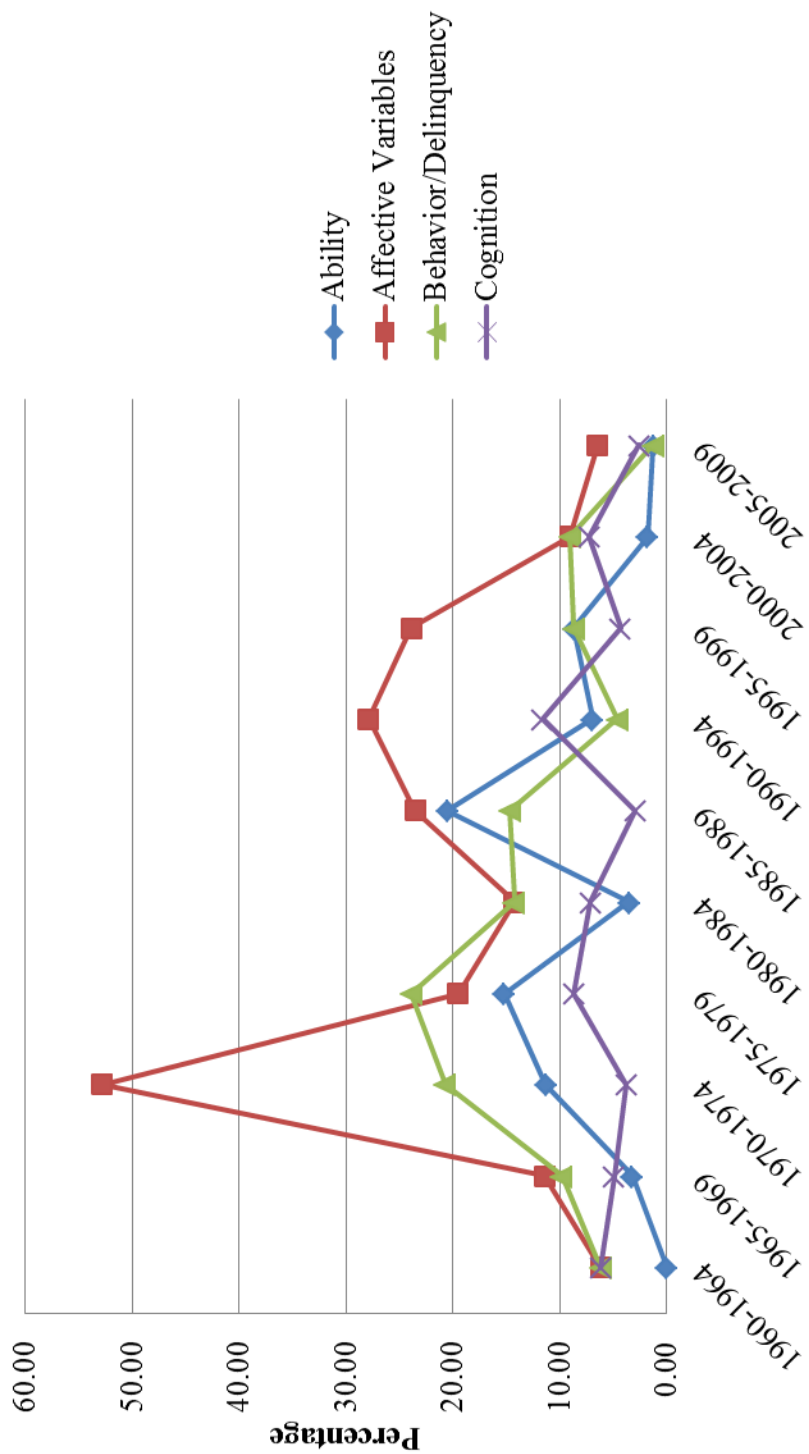


Figure 3: Percentage of Articles Dealing with "At-Risk" by Select Background Categories

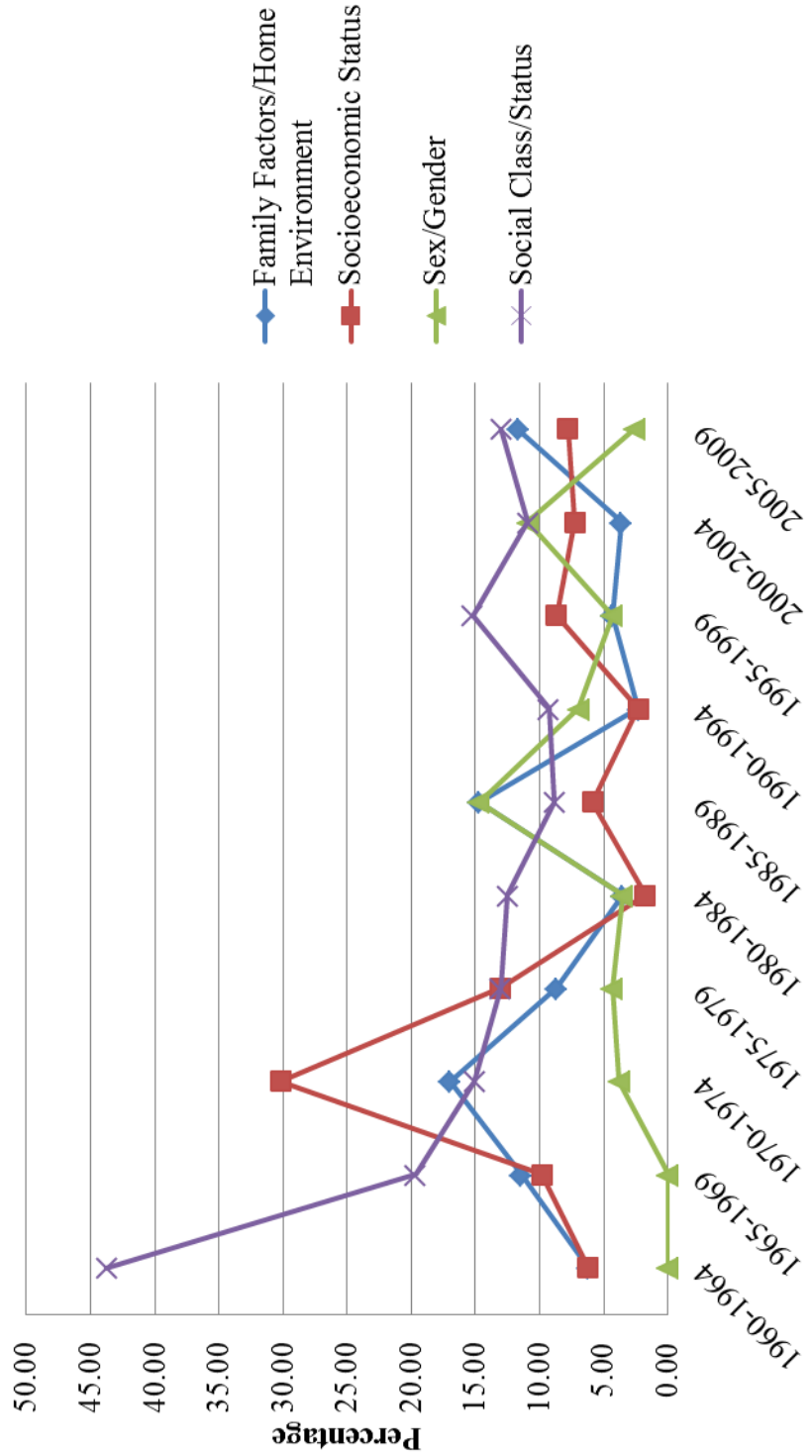


Figure 4 represents the percentage of articles addressing the “at-risk” or disadvantaged student by select minority group categories. None of the three categories (“Regional,” “Immigrant/Refugee” and “Minority Language”) surpass 10% of the entire number of articles being published during the entire 50 year time span, and overall represent more chaotic results. “Regional” and “Language Minority” categories peak in the 1970-1975 time period (beginning of bilingual education programs, Appendix A) at roughly 9% and 7% respectively with a second jump in 1985-1989 where both represent roughly 6% of articles being published. Both then drastically drop from 1990-1995 and then increase going into 2009. These categories represent more noise in the data and should be looked at in one of two ways. One, it may be helpful to collapse these into a bigger category or two, these may not be as central to the concepts of the “at-risk” or disadvantaged student as appeared to be while coding data.

Again, Figure 5 represents the percentage of articles dealing with the “at-risk” student by certain mental health categories. What is interesting is the same *general* pattern in all three categories across the entire 50 year span. All three of the categories (“Disability/Special Education,” “Psychological/Mental Health” and “Self-Concept/Self-Esteem”) all represent less than 10% of articles on the “at-risk” or disadvantaged student from 1960-1964. “Disability” and “Psychological/Mental Health” then dramatically increase to 20% and 12%, respectively, the following time period from 1965-1969. They both then decrease from 1970-1975, each representing less than 10% of articles on the “at-risk” student. All three categories then steadily increase in the 1980s with “Disability” and “Psychological/Mental Health” changing direction in 1985 where they represented roughly 13% and 8% of articles on the “at-risk” student, respectively.

Figure 4: Percentage of Articles Dealing with "At-Risk" by Select Minority Group Categories

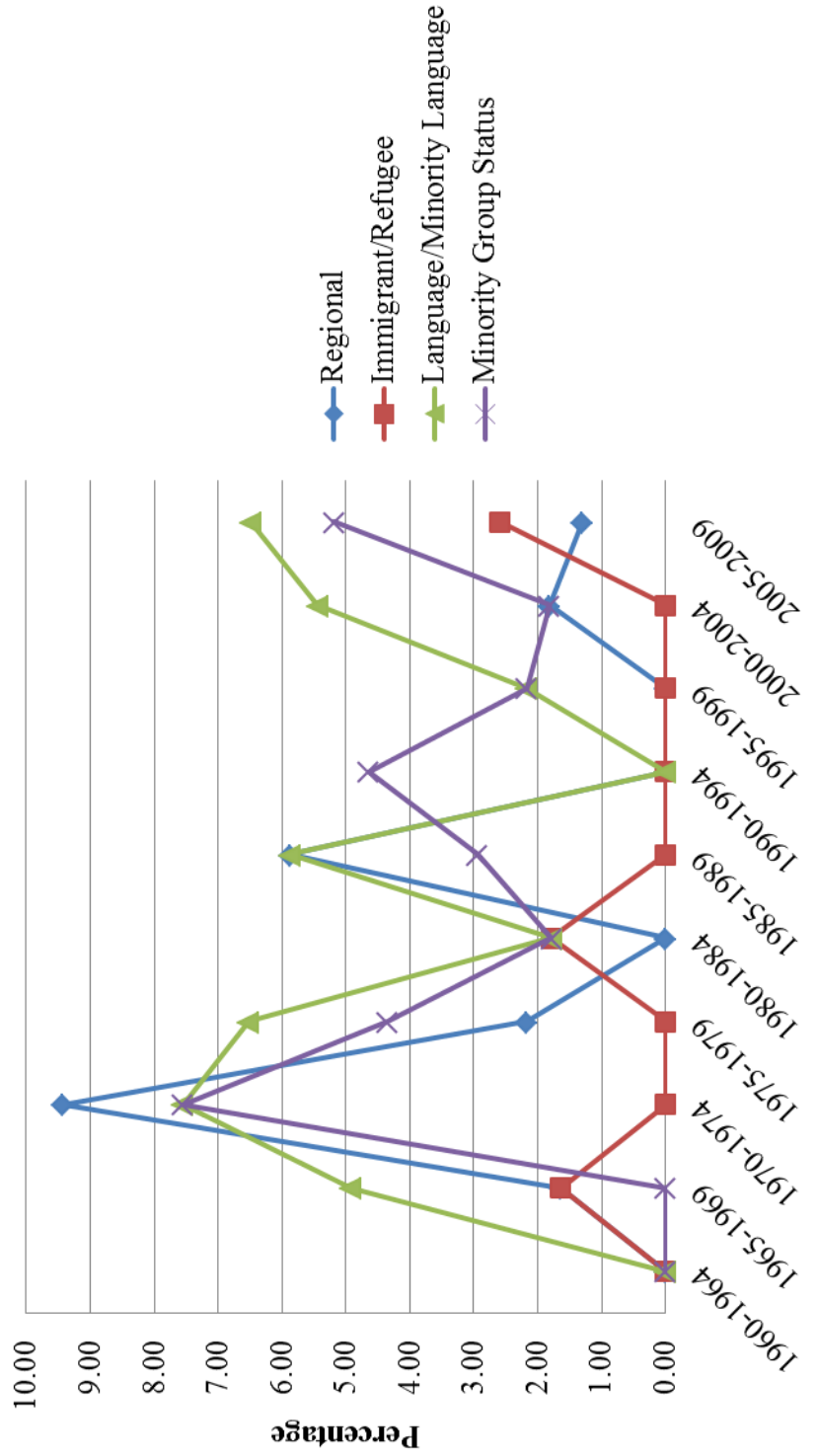
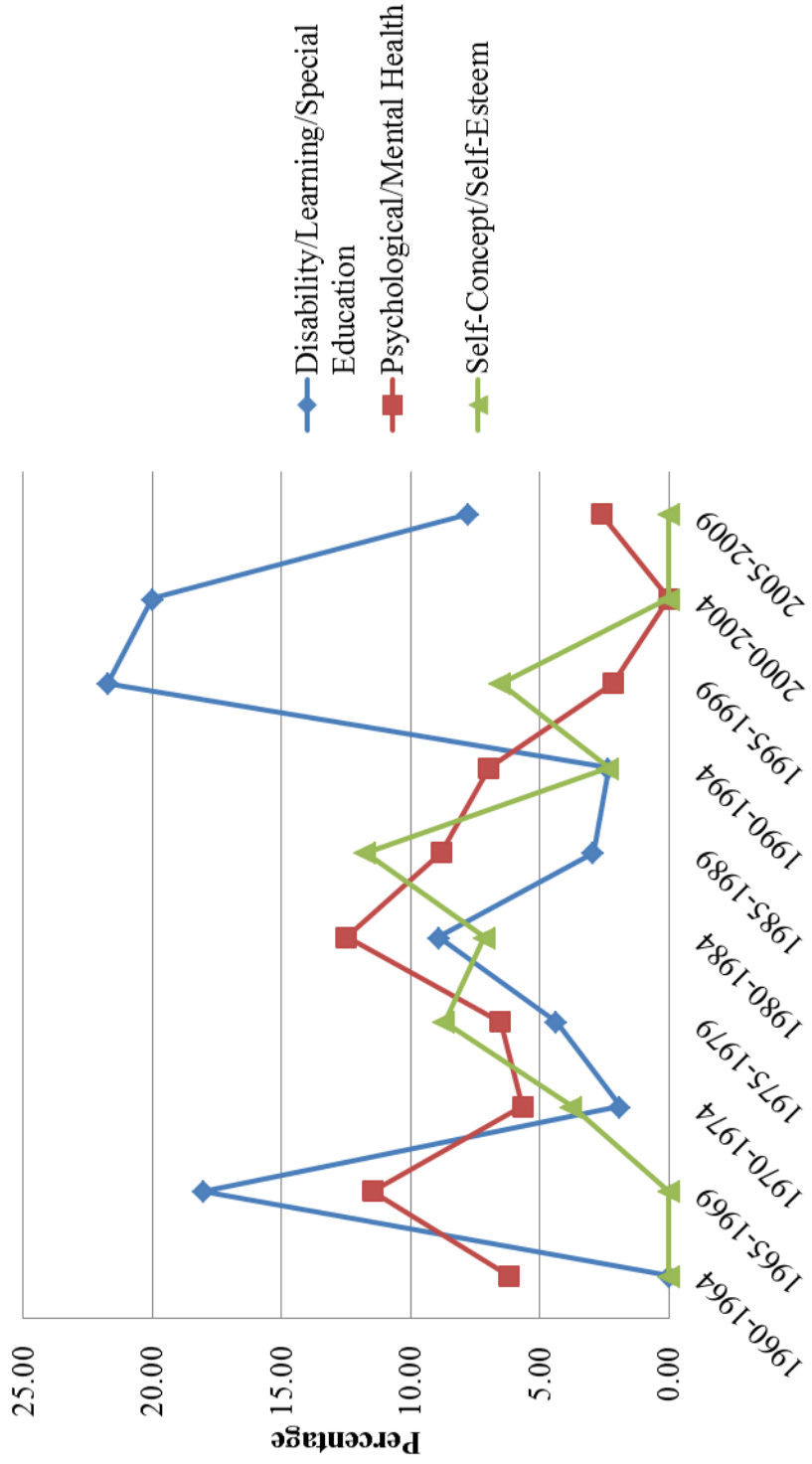


Figure 5: Percentage of Articles Dealing with "At-Risk" by Select Mental Health Categories



“Self-Concept/Self-Esteem” changes direction one time period later from 1985-1989, where it represents roughly 13% of articles. While “Psychological/Mental Health” and “Self-Concept/Self-Esteem” both steadily decline into 2009, representing less than 5% of articles on the “at-risk” student, “Disability/Special Education” dramatically peaks in 1990-1995, increasing from less than 5% in the previous time period to roughly 22%, and then dramatically decreasing to less than 10% going into 2009.

Figure 6 represents the percentage of articles dealing with the “at-risk” student by select minority background categories. While “Ethnicity,” “Minority Group Status” and “Race” all represent less than 10% of the articles dealing with the “at-risk” student in 1960-1964, “Culture” is at its all-time high representing over 30% of the articles in that time period. “Ethnicity,” “Minority Group Status” and “Race” all then steadily increase to peak in the 1970-1974 time period at 11%, 8%, and 23%, respectively while “Culture” dramatically decreases to nearly 18% in that same time period. All four of the categories steadily decrease through 1989, all representing less than 10% of articles dealing with the “at-risk”. While “Ethnicity” and “Minority Group Status” all remain fairly stable until 2000, “Race” dramatically increases to roughly 11% during the 1990-1995 time frame and culture dramatically increases from the 2000-2004 time frame to roughly 13% of articles while “Race” continues to dramatically increase into 2009, representing nearly 20% of articles dealing with the “at-risk” student.

Figure 7 represents the percentage of articles dealing with the “at-risk” student by more general terminology. All three of the categories (“General Academic,” “General Characteristics” and “General Terminology”) start out in the 1960-1964 time frame representing less than 10% of the articles dealing with the “at-risk” student. From 1965-

Figure 6: Percentage of Articles Dealing with "At-Risk" by Select Minority Background Categories

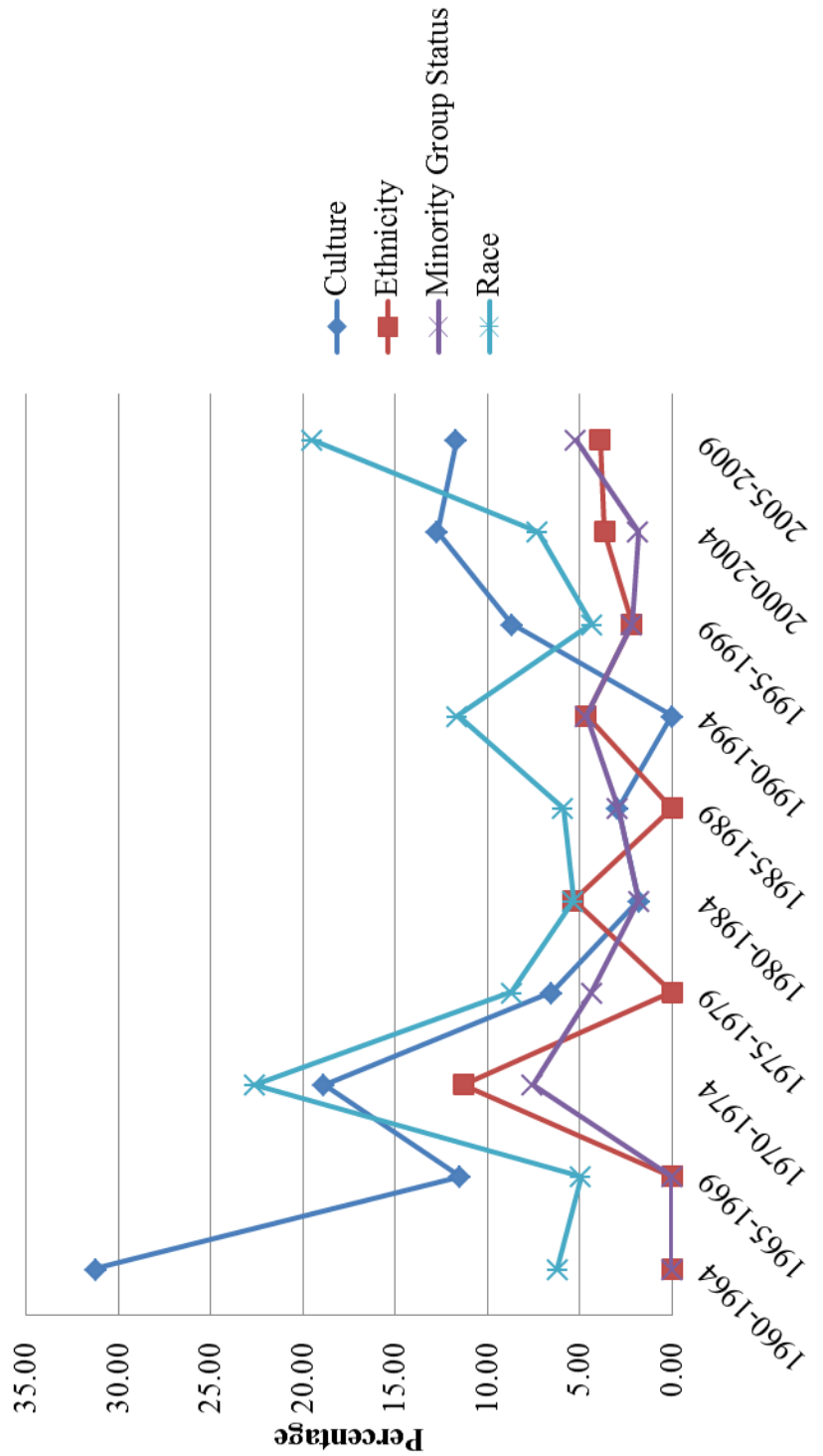
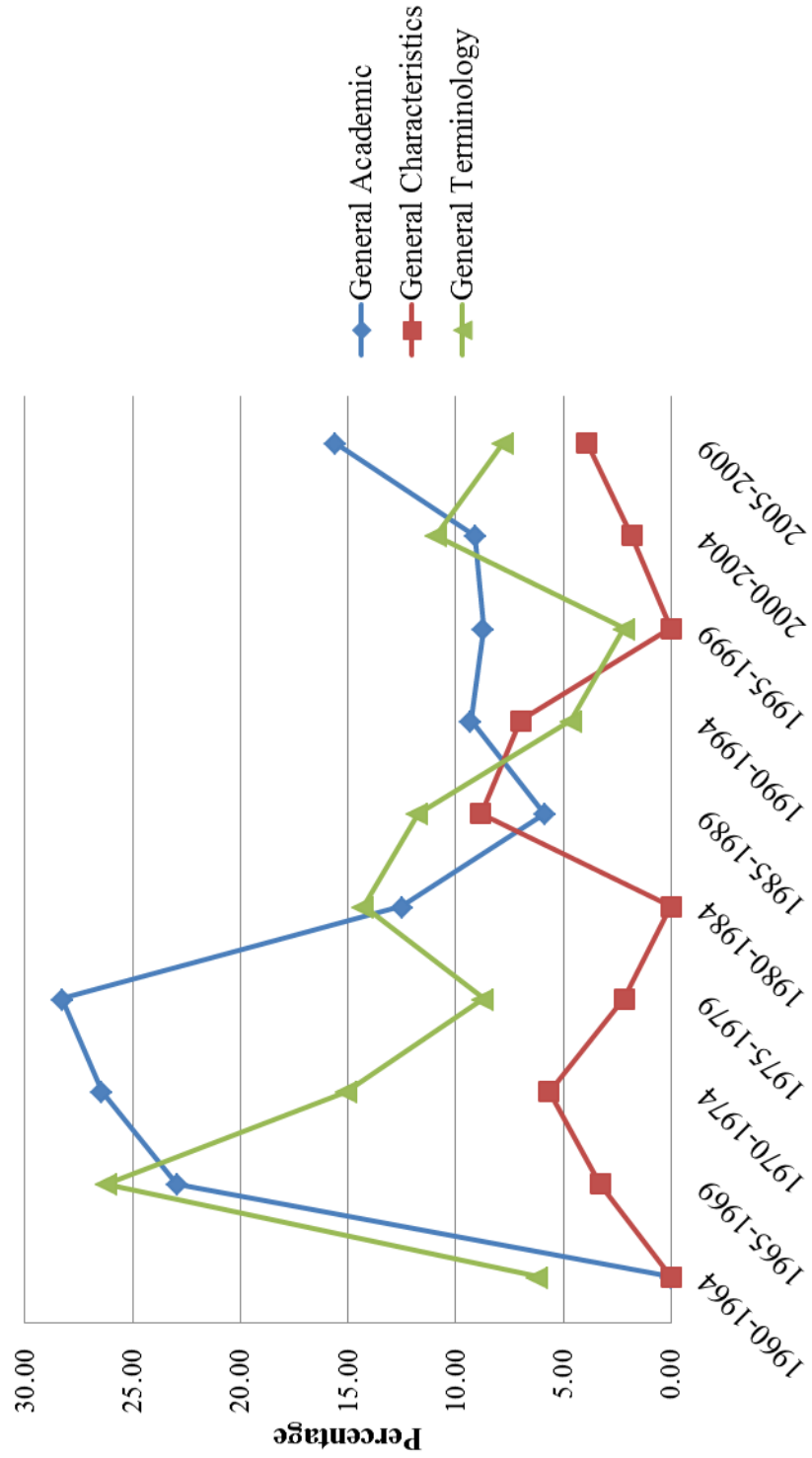


Figure 7: Percentage of Articles Dealing with "At-Risk" by General Discourse Categories



1969, “General Terminology” and “General Academic” categories dramatically increase to 26% and 23%, respectively, of articles dealing with the “at-risk” student. “General Academic” continues to rise roughly 28% during the 1980-1984 time frame while “General Terminology” dramatically decreases to under 10%. From 1980-1990, “General Academic” dramatically decreases to roughly 6% while “General Terminology” slightly increases to almost 15% in 1980-1984 and “General Characteristics” peaks at almost 10% in 1985-1989. “General Terminology” and “General Characteristics” then steadily decrease into 1995-1999 to below 5% while “General Academic” remains fairly stable at just below 10%. Both “General Terminology” and “General Characteristics” remain below 10% going into 2009 while “General Academic” increases once again to over 15% in the same time period.

While each category has its own unique path, one of the most notable general patterns throughout each of the Figures (2-7) is a significant spike in percentage of articles containing selected categories in the time period from 1965 to 1975 and 1980 in some cases. Beginning around the 1975-1980 time periods, there is a significant drop in the percentage of articles containing select categories across a majority of the categories. This drop in frequency lasts through the 1980s and even the 1990s. Many of the categories then see an increase starting and continuing through the 2000s. The following section will address how changing political regimes may help explain these changing patterns of representation of categories and this general pattern of ebbing and flowing of research on the “at-risk student.”

Chapter 5: Discussion

A broad look at political changes occurring during these peaks and drops may help explain why the some general patterns of ebbing and flowing may be occurring. The major shift starts to occur in the mid-1960s, right around the time of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. As discussed earlier, Omi and Winant (1994) describe this shift in political discourse as the “Great Transformation.” This time period was characterized by a new liberal political regime taking over the highly conservative time period of the 1940s and 1950s. It was during this politically liberal time that considerable changes were occurring in political discourse on equity and social justice and highly influential social movements were taking place within communities facing significant oppression and discrimination. This period from the 1960’s through the mid-to-late 1970’s is traditionally seen as a politically liberal period. There was a consistent effort to integrate those individuals that had traditionally been outside the educational system. The way that the educational elite or intellectuals chose to do this was by recognizing them within the broad concept of the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student.

While on one hand, this is seen as a way to assimilate immigrants, racial minorities and others newly being classified as “at-risk” by granting fuller citizenship and individualism, another approach may see this as also maintaining a system of class divisions where these members who were recently granted more *citizenship* and *individualism* have also been placed as a separate class, often seen as “lower” than the “status quo” or the *non-“at-risk”* student. Furthermore, if the goal of the ESEA of 1965 was to incorporate more members in order to grant fuller citizenship, one would expect

that differences in educational outcomes between those labeled as “at-risk” or disadvantaged and the “other” would decrease. However, this did not happen.

My research also suggests considerable changes in educational discourse on the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student during this period. The 10 years immediately following the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the ESEA of 1965 showed sharp increases in literature focusing on affective variables, behavior, ability, socioeconomic status, family background, region, language, minority group status, disability, psychological health, culture, race, and ethnicity. This isn’t surprising, as you can see in Appendix A: Pertinent Federal Legislation the extensive focus the ESEA puts on all of these categories between 1965 and 1975-1980.

While much emphasis was placed on correcting social inequality in throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the late 1970s and 1980s brought with it the shift from a liberal political regime to the conservative and neoconservative politics represented by Ronald Reagan. It was during this time that much of the emphasis was taken away from the equality for certain populations to a more national approach, viewing the system of education as creating a “Nation at Risk” of educational failure. As Omi and Winant (1994) point out, this era brought with it notions that the disadvantage brought on by *previous* discrimination and racism was all of a sudden “fixed.” More importantly, Omi and Winant (1994) point out that discrimination was being rearticulated as damage done to the *individual* and not to the group during this same time period.

Among the largely held beliefs in this era was that the United States had entered a “post-racial” era, and past grievances had been alleviated. Popular in this time was the belief that the United States was now “color blind”, where the color of one’s skin was not

an important factor determining life chances (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Brown, Michael K; Carnoy, Martin; Currie, Elliott; Duster, Troy; Oppenheimer, David B.; Shultz, Marjorie M. and Wellman, David. 2003). There was large social support to end policies such as busing and integration which were largely established to promote equity for what was seen as “previously marginalized” groups. There was a belief that there no longer needed to be a focus on affirmative action and some neoconservatives even suggested that a phenomenon known as *reverse discrimination*, where it was now white males who they believed were being discriminated against within society. Now, more attention was being paid to student performance and standards, which can help explain the slight increase in research addressing affective variables, ability, language, and more general characteristics of those “at-risk” for failure, and also the significant drop in research addressing the categories that peaked in the liberal political era of the 1960s and 1970s.

While neoconservative politics still hold a place in the present time period, the 1990s brought with it a newly democratic leadership and a rise in neoliberalism. The continued emphasis on neoconservative issues concerning “the nation” and a neoliberal focus on “the market” meant a continued focus away from individual level inequality within education, which helps explain why many of the categories are still not being represented within the data. The educational institution was urged to become “depoliticized” (Apple 2006). As Apple (2006) argues, “the very process of depoliticization makes it very difficult for the need of those with less economic, political, and cultural power to be accurately heard and acted on in ways that deal with the true depth of the problem” (p 37). Instead of focusing on individual outcomes and needs, the focus is translated in terms of “market talk and privately driven policies” (Apple 2006,

Fraser 1989). According to Apple (2006), under neoliberalism issues such as segregation, sexual harassment, etc. are rearticulated as being “private” matters and there is an emphasis to keep these matters in the private sector, e.g. dismantling social services and stopping these issues from spilling into political sectors. This helps to understand further the continued drop in emphasis on individual level categories and a focus on general “outcomes” or “intellectual” categories of the “at-risk”. The ESEA in the 1990s largely focused on education for handicapped or disabled children, which is clearly represented in the large increase in percentage of articles being published addressing disabilities and handicaps.

The early 2000 passage of “No Child Left Behind” and the effects of the national standards movement brought rise again to many of the individual level characteristics of the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student. However, the late 2000s brought criticism of President Bush’s reauthorization of the ESEA, and educating the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student was starting be re-thought in educational discourse (Ravitch, 2010). Forty years after the original national level focus on educating this classification of student began, a rise in issues of diversity, which encompassed a large number of individuals including all those aforementioned in this study was taking place. There was a new emphasis on what is called “multiculturalism,” an umbrella term designed to encapsulate all ‘cultures’ of students. Just what it means to be “multicultural” or to represent “diversity” is as muddy as the concept of the “at-risk” student today. However, this rise of “multiculturalism” also legitimates research on all categories that might be included within it or within the realm of “diversity,” which helps explain why many of the categories that saw a consistent and long lived drop through the 1980s, 1990s, and

early 2000s are starting to significantly rise again into the late 2000s. I suspect that if this analysis was done again 10-15 years from now, one would notice a considerable and consistent rise in this representation, where studies on the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student largely discussed “diversity” and “multiculturalism”.

What might this say about the interaction between research discourse on the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student and policy aimed at addressing these individuals? The Civil Rights Movement in the mid-1960s demanded equality in education for all students and were anchored in group rights, where those who were not benefitting from an equitable institution were -- politically and federally -- identified and defined. While the concept of the “at-risk” student had already been institutionalized in research discourse and as a socially constructed reality, ESEA of 1965 legitimated this concept when it defined this population of students who were not equally benefitting from the educational institution as the “At-Risk” and “Disadvantaged”. The concept finally gained political legitimacy. After this nationally recognized legitimation, there has been a continuous cycle of mutual legitimation and rearticulation, influenced by particular political and social contexts.

During the political regime of the 1960s, this concept became highly legitimated and how it was defined in policy is clearly reflected by the high spike in research on the “at-risk” being produced throughout multiple categories. However, while the concept of the “at-risk” retains traditional definitional components, the conceptualization of core definitional statements changes or are rearticulated, within changing political climates. Why there is a constant rearticulation of the concept throughout changing political contexts is better understood when looking at it using legitimation theory. This

relationship can be more simply understood by bringing back Figure 1: Research Discourse and Educational Policy as a Process of Legitimation and Rearticulation (p 17).

Again, this model represents the mutually influential relationship between research discourse and educational policy on the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged”. The key finding of this project, as suggested by the changing percentages of articles containing selected categories of the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student, is that the definition of this concept is rearticulated throughout changing sociopolitical climates by either adding or subtracting categories of characteristics based on what is being legitimated through implemented policy. The policies being passed throughout each time period reflect the categories of research on the “at-risk” being reified within the time period. This is most clearly reflected by implementation of Minority Language Programs in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the focus on the “Exceptional Child” in the late 1970s, which turned into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990 and 1991. As the federal government, controlled by the political party in power, pumps funding into projects reflecting their political interests surrounding educational reform, academic discourse representing these interests is funded and proliferates. The research that is not legitimating (or being legitimated by) federal funding drops off the radar. Furthermore, as academic discourse identifies more categories of individuals who fit the already legitimated concept of the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student, educational policy adopts these newly classified groups into existing policy in order for the concept and the policy to remain legitimate and stable through changing sociopolitical climates.

Future Directions

As previously mentioned, this thesis is focused on only one dimension of a bigger project. It merely tries to understand one piece of a much more complex picture of what it means to be classified as an “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student within the system of education. My next step in this project will add the two remaining dimensions I coded for, but did not address, in this thesis. By discussing the results of “Outcome Measures” and “Topic of Study”, I will be able to triangulate the evolution of this concept through policy and discourse.

Furthermore, focusing solely on the relationship between policy and discourse simplifies this evolution into two domains. While this paper argues that the relationship between these two domains is of utmost importance in this topic, there is clearly more to the evolution of this concept that presented here. For example, while the main focus of this paper regarding Omi and Winant’s (1994) work was broadly their theory on ‘rearticulation’, it is clear that there are a lot of similarities between their theory of racial formation and my theory of the “construction of the ‘at-risk’ student”. More specifically, this construction seems to be representative of what Omi and Winant (1994) define to as a “racial project”, or at least a tangential application of the term. Omi and Winant (1994) refer to a racial project as a means of linking structure and representation of a sociohistorically constructed concept (in their case, race). This thesis does this, and while race is implicated, I don’t think it can be said that this is solely an application of Omi and Winant’s (1994) theory of racial formation.

However, as I mentioned, there are enough similarities between the construction of the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student and Omi and Winant’s (1994) theory of racial

formation to warrant further investigation as to whether the concept of the “at-risk” or disadvantaged student is working as a neo-code word, used to uphold hegemony in a post-Civil Rights era. There also seems to be evidence suggesting that the concept of the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student may have been rearticulated during the 1980s and 1990s as a “neoconservative” code word, used to discuss issues of race or inequality without saying so. These topics will soon be explored in future projects.

Furthermore, as alluded to earlier, the construction of the “at-risk” and “disadvantaged” student began well before 1960, the first year in my analysis. In future work, I will attempt to unpack the much deeper sociohistorical and political roots of the concept and evolution of the “at-risk” student from the 1930s through the 1950s, trying to specify a more complete genealogy of the term.

Conclusion

The concept of the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student has historically been, and will likely remain, a central concept in educational discourse and policy. Its roots and legitimacy are deep within the social institutions that dictate our society. It has become a part of what society recognizes as a social reality, especially when it comes to structuring the institution of education and in terms of understanding inequitable outcomes. Omi and Winant (1994) argue about the construction of “race” that it is imperative at this point that we work to “deproblematize” the concept (55). This is also imperative in the case of the “at-risk” student. Just like “race”, the concept of the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student continues to play an essential role in how we structure our social world. This thesis formulates theory on how this concept maintains legitimacy through changing

sociopolitical climates in order to secure its continuous space in educational discourse and policy.

In this thesis, I have addressed what it means to be within the classification of the “at-risk” or “disadvantaged” student. I contribute theoretically a model implementing theoretical aspects of education as an institution and racial formation theory that has potential to address how one becomes part of this classification and how this classification is rearticulated through changing sociopolitical climates in order to maintain its legitimacy. Furthermore, I have introduced an empirically sophisticated technique that is a little different from the norm. This method allowed me to unpack the question of what it means to be classified as “at-risk” without reifying traditional components of a taken for granted conceptualization. I was able to accomplish this by using an inductive, bottom up approach as compared to the tradition deductive, top-down approach.

As mentioned earlier, this is the starting place that addresses a small part of a much bigger project. This piece has the potential to inform literature on education as an institution, literature addressing continuing inequity within education, and what this means for the future of diversity within education. It also challenges researchers studying education and inequitable outcomes to think about and question their own preconceived ideas and the dominant epistemologies that dictate what it means to be a part of the group that academia and politics have labeled the “at-risk” or disadvantaged students.

Appendix A: Pertinent Federal Legislation

1954: Brown V. Board of Education

Focus: African-American Population

Integration

1964: Civil Rights Act of 1964

Focus: Race, Color, Sex, National Origin

Federal Assistance and Federal Funding withheld from school districts
that failed to adopt reasonable and acceptable plans for integration

1965: Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965

Focus: Children from Low-Income Families

Greatest Need

1966 – Title III: Adult Education Act

Focus: Literacy for Adults; Adult Learners

1967 – Title IV: General Education Provisions Act

1968: Multicultural and Bilingual Education Act

Focus: New Immigrants, Minority Populations

Bilingual Education

Students with a Language other than English as their first language

Language Minorities

Hispanic and Native American Students

1970: Emergency Assistance Act

Focus: Creation of Magnet Schools

1972: Title IX

Focus: Gender, Access, Science, Math, Engineering, Technology, Vocational Courses

1974: Education of the Exceptional Child

Focus: Children with disabilities

1975 – Education for All Handicapped Children Act (origin of today’s IDEA)

Focus: Children with Disabilities

1981 – ESEA Re-Authorized as “Educational Consolidation and Improvement Act”

Focus: Authorizes funds to help school districts meet the special educational needs of educationally deprived children in low income areas, and to provide compensatory education services for children with disabilities.

1983: Nation at Risk

Focus: Impact of Education on Economics of the Country

Curriculum, PERFORMANCE of students, time in school, relationship between K-12 and colleges, citizen involvement

1988 – ESEA Re-Authorized as “Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School

Focus: Improvement Amendments of 1988”. Title I funds could be used for school-wide programs in schools where 75% of students were at or below the poverty level.

1989: Goals 2000

Focus: Pre-school education; High school graduation rate; competency in English, Math, Science, History, Geography; Drug and Violence free; Environment conducive to learning; partnerships and parental involvement; teacher

professionalization; every adult will be literate and possess knowledge to compete
in the world economy

1990 – Education for the Handicapped Amendments of 1990

Focus: Children with Handicaps

1991 – Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1991

Focus: Children with Disabilities

1994 – ESEA Re-Authorized as Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994

Focus: Charter Schools and Choice, equal educational opportunity; integration

Covers Title I, Safe and Drug-Free Schools, bilingual education, impact aid,
education technology; reauthorized the National Center for Education Statistics,
amended General Education Provisions Act [GEPA]

1997: IDEA Act

Focus: Re-Authorization of Education of the Exceptional Child

1998 – Reading Excellence Act and legislation for class size reduction initiatives

Focus: Reading achievement improvement by reduction in class size

2002: Supreme Court Decision of 2002 on Vouchers

Focus: Vouchers, School choice, Privatization of Public Education

2002: No Child Left Behind

Focus: Accountability, Qualified teachers, Student and School Testing, Standards

2010 – ESEA Re-Authorization as “Race to the Top”

Focus: student outcomes, student achievement, achievement gaps, high school
graduation rates, and ensuring student preparation for success in college and
careers; and implementing plans in four core education reform areas

Appendix B: Coding Guide

Affective Variables:

Affect
Aspiration
Attitude
Creativity
Determination
Efficacy
Effort
Emotions
Expectancies/Prospects
Goals
Incentive
Initiative
Interests
Morality
Motivation
Oppositional Identity
Personality
Values

Race:

People of Color
African American
Black

Negro
American Indian
Indigenous
Native American
Eskimo
Asian American
Mexican American
Hispanic
Chicano
Latino
Non-White
Racial Identity

Culture:

Culture: General
Cultural Variables
Culturally Deprived
Culturally Diverse
Culture: Sociocultural Variables
Culturally Impoverished
Culture: Status
Culture: Language
Culture: Genetically Mediated
Culture: Capital

Culture: Multicultural

Acculturation

Culture: Citizenship

Culture: Poverty

Ethnicity:

Ethnicity

Ethnicity: Culture and Race

Ethnically Diverse

Ethnicity: Hispanic

Ethnic Minority

Ethnicity: Vietnamese

Ethnicity: Cambodian

Ethnicity: Hmong

Ethnicity: Southeast Asian

Ethnicity: Lao

Sex/Gender:

Sex

Gender

Male

Female

Sexuality

Gender Transgressor

Socioeconomic Status:

Socioeconomic Status

Economic Factors

Poverty

Poor

Impoverished

Social Class/Social Status:

Social Skills/Competence

Acceptance

Social Variables

Social Class

Social Development

Socially Disadvantaged

Social Circumstances

Socially Disturbed

Social Status

Social Capital

Interpersonal Relationships

Language/Minority Language:

Language Minority

Minority Language

English as a Second Language

English Language Learners

Second Language Learners	Family Status
Black English	Parental Characteristics
Linguistics	Parental Status
Self-Concept/Self-Esteem:	Parental Child Rearing Practices
Self-Concept	Parental Behavior
Self-Esteem	Parental Involvement
Delinquent Behavior:	Lifestyle
Delinquency	Limited Opportunity
Delinquent Behavior	Heredity/Biochemical
Deviance	Refugee/Immigrant:
Withdrawal	Migrant
Attendance/Participation	Immigrant
Cognition:	Refugee
Cognition	Regional:
Cognitive Ability	Urban/Inner City
Cognitive Variables	Center City
Cognitive Functioning	Rural
Ability:	Mountain Folk
Ability	Southern Negro
Academic Ability	Psychological/Mental Health:
Family Factors/Home Environment:	Mental Health
Family Background	Psychological Factors
Home Environment	Self-Control

Self-Management

Health

Abused

Disability/Special Education:

Speech Deficit/Handicap

Learning Disability

Slow Learner

Exceptional Child

Handicapped

Neurologically Impaired

Mentally Retarded

Special Education

Mental Factors

Slower Students

Students with Disabilities

Developmentally Disabled

Reading Disability

Math Disability

Hearing Disability

Attention Deficit Disorder

(ADD)

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity

Disorder (ADHD)

At-Risk for Disability

Minority Group Status:

Minority Group

Minority Children

General Characteristics:

Special Characteristics

Learner Characteristics

Special Problems

Individual Characteristics

Student Factors

Attributes

Non-Intellectual Influences

General Academic Factors:

Intelligence

Pre-Academic Intelligence

Teacher Expectation

Intellectual Function

IQ

Perceptual Style

Potential to Learn/Achieve

Achievement Level (Low-

Achieving)

Achievement Status (Low-

Expectation)

Educational Problems

Risking Failure

Persistence

Retarded in Learning

Developmental Level

Low-Skills

Experience

Perception

Diverse Students

At-Risk Student

Students who Struggle

Leftover Child

High-Risk

General Terminology:

Drop-Out

Potential Drop-Out

Push-Out

Disadvantaged Children/Student

Ineffective Child

Vulnerable Children

Students with Special Problems

Deprived Student

Potential Failure

Different Children

Special Populations

Retained Children

Appendix C: Data Tables

Table 2: Frequency of Categories Per Time Period												
Category	1960-1964	1965-1969	1970-1974	1975-1979	1980-1984	1985-1989	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2009	SUM	
Ability		2	6	7	2	7	3	4	1	1	33	
Affective Variables	1	7	28	9	8	8	12	11	5	5	94	
Delinquent Behavior	1	6	11	11	8	5	2	4	5	1	54	
Cognition	1	3	2	4	4	1	5	2	4	2	28	
Culture	5	7	10	3	1	1		4	7	9	47	
Disability/Special Education		11	1	2	5	1	1	10	11	6	48	
Ethnicity			6		3		2	1	2	3	17	
Family Factors/Home												
Environment	1	7	9	4	2	5	1	2	2	9	42	
General Academic		14	14	13	7	2	4	4	5	12	75	
General Characteristics		2	3	1		3	3		1	3	16	
General Terminology	1	16	8	4	8	4	2	1	6	6	56	
Immigrant/Refugee		1			1					2	4	
Language/Minority Language		3	4	3	1	2		1	3	5	22	
Minority Group Status			4	2	1	1	2	1	1	4	16	
Psychological/Mental Health	1	7	3	3	7	3	3	1		2	30	
Race	1	3	12	4	3	2	5	2	4	15	51	
Regional		1	5	1		2			1	1	11	
Self-Concept/Self-Esteem			2	4	4	4	1	3			18	
SES	1	6	16	6	1	2	1	4	4	6	47	
Sex/Gender			2	2	2	5	3	2	6	2	24	
Social Class/Status	7	12	8	6	7	3	4	7	6	10	70	
SUM	20	108	154	89	75	61	54	64	74	104	803	

Category	1960-1964	1965-1969	1970-1974	1975-1979	1980-1984	1985-1989	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2009
Ability	0.00	3.28	11.32	15.22	3.57	20.59	6.98	8.7	1.82	1.3
Affective Variables	6.20	11.48	52.83	19.57	14.29	23.53	27.91	23.91	9.09	6.46
Delinquent Behavior	6.20	9.84	20.75	23.91	14.29	14.71	4.65	8.7	9.09	1.3
Cognition	6.20	4.92	3.77	8.7	7.14	2.94	11.63	4.35	7.27	2.6
Culture	31.25	11.48	18.87	6.52	1.79	2.94	0	8.7	12.73	11.69
Disability/Special Education	0.00	18.03	1.89	4.35	8.93	2.94	2.33	21.74	20	7.79
Ethnicity	0.00	0	11.32	0	5.36	0	4.65	2.17	3.64	3.9
Family Factors/Home										
Environment	6.20	11.48	16.98	8.7	3.57	14.71	2.33	4.35	3.64	11.69
General Academic	0.00	22.95	26.42	28.26	12.5	5.88	9.3	8.7	9.09	15.58
General Characteristics	0.00	3.28	5.67	2.17	0	8.82	6.98	0	1.82	3.9
General Terminology	6.20	26.23	15.09	8.7	14.29	11.76	4.65	2.17	10.91	7.79
Immigrant/Refugee	0.00	1.64	0	0	1.79	0	0	0	0	2.6
Language/Minority Language	0.00	4.92	7.55	6.52	1.79	5.88	0	2.17	5.45	6.49
Minority Group Status	0.00	0	7.55	4.35	1.79	2.94	4.65	2.17	1.82	5.19
Psychological/Mental Health	6.20	11.48	5.66	6.52	12.5	8.82	6.98	2.17	0	2.6
Race	6.20	4.92	22.64	8.7	5.36	5.88	11.63	4.35	7.27	19.48
Regional	0.00	1.64	9.43	2.17	0	5.88	0	0	1.82	1.3
Self-Concept/Self-Esteem	0.00	0	3.77	8.7	7.14	11.76	2.33	6.52	0	0
SES	6.20	9.84	30.19	13.04	1.79	5.88	2.33	8.7	7.27	7.79
Sex/Gender	0.00	0	3.77	4.35	3.57	14.71	6.98	4.35	10.91	2.6
Social Class/Status	43.75	19.67	15.09	13.04	12.5	8.82	9.3	15.22	10.91	12.99

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