

- 1. Title: To Graduate Or Not To Graduate: Rethinking What Education Can Do For Students At Risk**
- 2. Author: Jeong-Hee Kim**
- 3. Affiliation: Dep. of Curriculum and Instruction, Arizona State University**
- 4. Address: 4228 N. Tabor St. Mesa, AZ 85215**
- 5. E-mail: kjhee@cox.net**

Abstract

According to National Alternative High school youth risk behavior survey conducted in 1998, alternative high schools in the United States serve approximately 280,000 students nationwide who are at high risk for failing or dropping out of regular high school or who have been expelled from regular high school because of illegal activity or behavioral problems (Grunbaum J.A. et.al, 1998).

At the same time, some school districts face difficulties relocating an alternative high school because of strong voices of some parents who are against the idea of having such a school in their neighborhood. One of the voices says, "It's hard enough keeping our children in the good end without exposing them to this. The students sent to alternative high school do deserve another chance, but not at the expense of our children" (East Valley Tribune, June 2002). What does this message tell us?

If we fail to educate these 280,000 students (probably more now if not less), what is going to happen to their future? If these students lose hope, fail, or drop out, and end up in jail or at the lowest paying jobs in the country (Aronson, 2001), what is going to happen to the future of our society in the long run? What are the roles of the alternative high school to make these students succeed in their lives? If it is not just school's responsibility to make them successful, what are the ways to share the responsibility among the community, schools, teachers, and educational researchers ?

Keeping these lingering questions in mind, in my study, I attempt to share with the reader the complexity and ambiguity of students' experiences and their narratives, who attend an alternative high school. In so doing, I attempt to pull out threads of their ways of being educated, ways of exiting the situation of being "at risk", and, thus, ways of becoming successful in their lives. The purpose of my research is, thus, to remind us that education is not just for talented youths but also for "at risk" youths. We know this simple fact, but the reality is that our public education is geared to benefit the former rather than the latter.

My study is done in narrative construction. I begin my study with a perspective of *fluid inquiry*, a way of thinking in which an inquiry is not clearly governed by theories, methodological tactics, and strategies (Schwab, 1960, cited by Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Fluid inquiry is an effective way of approaching the complexity and ambiguity of the life of "at risk" students. Bateson (1994) says, "Ambiguity is the warp of life, not something to be eliminated" (Cited in Clandinin & Connelly, p.9, 2000). For narrative inquirers, thus, ambiguity, difficulty, complexity, and uncertainties are associated with the doing of the inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

My research text consists of poetry and narratives in a fictionalized format. It is based on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion, *polyphony* in which author's authority is rejected, but each character in the narrative is given the authority to speak for him/herself. I selected to

use polyphonic style because I would rather have my research be dialogic than monologic. In monologic research, only one language that has authority is used, and the language is under the researcher's control. Participants of the study are treated as objects rather than as subjects. In polyphonic approach, however, narrative is not subordinated to the hegemony of a single, unified point of view (Gardiner, 1992, cited by Tanaka, 1997). Each different voice is honored, thus, multiple meanings are emerged out of the text.

Using the polyphonic concept, I reconstructed three characters (pseudonyms): teacher (Kathy), student (Hilda), and security guard of the school (Scot). These characters were created based on interview transcripts and observations. I do not want any of the voices privileged over the others. They are reconstructed (fictionalized) using real or imagined facts and facticities. According to Denzin (1989, cited by Sparkes, 1996), facts refer to events that are believed to have occurred, and facticities describe how those facts were lived and experienced by the informants. For my study, I gathered data (facts) and utilized the data to describe how those facts were lived and experienced by the informants (facticities). These facticities are represented in the narrative form and poetry.

My study has some contributions to offer to the field of education. First of all, by using fictional literary narrative format, it contributes to developing new ways of thinking in educational research, namely, narrative inquiry. Barone and Eisner (1997) contend: "The implications of exploring and exploiting new forms of representation for the conduct and display of educational research are profound" (p. 92). Moreover, the narrative story format, according to Barone (1995), contributes to creating epiphanic moments in its readers, providing them with vicarious experiences.

In addition, my research sheds light on students who are labeled as "at risk", but who wish to be given a second chance of success. Many students in alternative program have lost their hope of success because of the underlying assumption that they would fail the society because they had failed regular high schools. By having an "at risk" student of an alternative high school at the center of the scene, my study attempts to understand what it means to be educated to the "at risk" students and what are the ways of empowering them. It also offers the reader an opportunity to reconceptualize shared responsibility for these students among teachers, administrators, communities, and educational researchers.

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