

## **Risky Children Rethinking the Discourse of Delinquency and Risk**

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### **Introduction**

The word delinquency is a harsh, stigmatizing word. While the word has lost some frequency of use lately, underlying concepts of the word remain strongholds of educational conversations. The word serves as foundational rhetoric for more modern, yet equally stigmatizing language used to marginalize youth and families. Still, the word's origins, underlying meanings, or historical usage are useful in understanding the modern discourse of risk and they are rarely considered in professional circles. Delinquency is, in fact, a difficult word to trace from a historical perspective. The act of delinquency is not the typical subject. More often it is the individual involved, or the delinquent, that is the focus. Many words may be used to describe someone who is delinquent, with each word offering a slightly different spin or twist. Someone who is considered a delinquent may also be considered a troublemaker or a "problem."

When there is an attempt to be cordial, or even professional, the phrase "at-risk" is used. This phrase has taken a stronghold in the language used across multiple disciplines of education and particularly with youth marginalized by modern schooling initiatives intent to reform "failing" schools and "failing" teachers. Regardless of the exact phrasing, an underlying commonality in all of the modern usages of these terms and phrases exists. Almost always, the label of delinquent or one of its derivatives is reserved for youth who are typified as struggling in traditional public schools. The label is reserved for students who

place the school at risk of low progress based on standardized testing measures.

In modern American culture, it is quite common to hear a discussion of children who are at-risk of failing within the system. Some folks used to call those children delinquents. Hang around the field of education very long and you will hear plenty of discussion of “those kids.” “Those kids” are the kids who cause trouble, the kids who disrupt, and the kids who do not play by the rules. “Those kids” do not usually do very well on standardized tests, they do not typically do their homework, and they are not the kids you typically see in the back seat of suburban minivans laden with “Honor Student” bumper stickers. “Those kids” often exist on the fringes of the traditional public system, othered and segregated in many ways.

Developing a better understanding of the idea of students existing on the fringes of the system and typified through risk rhetoric requires a better understanding of the delinquency language that is used to discuss these students. This conversation is timely and necessary. In the current era of American schooling we find ourselves at a political crossroads for rethinking inclusion over division and understanding over fear. In order to further explore the historical concept of risk and delinquency as related to school children, delinquency will be defined in this paper and situated in a modern historical context. The history presented is just one history told through just one lens and should be received that way. The previous works highlighted are pieces that have been influential in my own construction of the idea of delinquency and are not to be considered as a comprehensive collection. The reality is, the history of “othering” is long and complex and should be pursued from multiple angles and by each individual engaged in this type of work. My own history as an educator includes teaching in public alternative schools with high school students who have now grown to be adults and friends. The history and subsequent request to reform risk discourse is presented in defense of them and is a reflection of my own journey of understanding that kids are not risky, but instead are full of potential and brilliance.

In many ways, the hope of this article is to extend the conversation enriched decades ago by Swadener and Lubeck (1995), as well as many others who have fought for equity discourse because of the recognition that words and language matter. As Sleeter (1995) stated, “the discourse over ‘children at risk’ can be understood as a struggle for power over how to define children, families, and communities who are poor, of color, and/or native speakers of languages other than English” (p. ix). The 2016 presidential election in the United States has served to, at the very least, reveal a country divided over issues of race, class, and gender. Perhaps

more than any other time in the twenty-first century, our populace is realizing that the ideas of a post-racial society are ridiculous notions. Instead, we realize that we have deep and difficult work that must be done and must be done quickly and reverently. Part of this work is rethinking our language and, in order to do that, consider some of the origins for the language we use.

### Who's Delinquent...And Why?

While defining delinquency is somewhat difficult, it is apparent that delinquency and the label of delinquent both carry negative connotations. While the word delinquent may be used playfully, rarely is this term used with endearment. To gain a better understanding of how the term is conceived today, just take a look at the dictionary. The term delinquency is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as, "The condition or quality of being a delinquent; failure in or neglect of duty; more generally, violation of duty or right; the condition of being guilty, guilt" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2015). This begs the question, what exactly is a delinquent? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a delinquent is, "One who fails in duty or obligation, a defaulter; more generally, one guilty of an offence against the law, an offender" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2015).

As the discourse of delinquency and risk moves throughout time and culture, it is clear that it exists in order to categorize. As the definition suggests, not being delinquent seems to mean a successful fulfillment of a duty or obligation. When writing about individuals with disabilities in the newly formed republic of the United States, Nielsen (2012) wrote,

In the decades following the American Revolution, the new nation sought to define and distinguish between good citizens and bad citizens. Democracy was a grand and potentially dangerous experiment that presumed its citizens could and would make reasoned political decisions. How could the new republic survive unless the bodies and minds of its citizens were capable, particularly its voting citizens? (pp. 49-50)

Nielsen's work is focused on the history, and gross marginalization, of individuals with disabilities, but it is clear that by today's standards, we now considered delinquency to be a form of disability, both through formal categories of special education such as children with emotional/behavioral disorders as well as through the practice of a general school culture that is not welcoming to those who exhibit behaviors outside of the status quo norm, which is usually reflective of stereotypical middle class, white values. As Nielsen raises the point of the idea of a "capable" citizenry, she brilliantly introduces the idea that this conversation is about what's good for "us," and not "them."

This concept demonstrates the functional definition of delinquency. Delinquency describes the behaviors of a certain subset of the population that, through abnormal behavior, places something at risk for the rest of “us.” But as Polakow (1995) stated, “And who is at risk? Them? Us? All? Who belongs in the gray zone between normality and abnormality, health and pathology? Or put a little differently, upon whose contested terrain does the at-risk child walk?” (p. 263).

One society’s delinquent may not be delinquent in another’s, but it seems clear that the language exists in order to intentionally “other” someone outside of the status quo. Also, it seems that the idea of a delinquent fluctuates with time and place as visions of place and space move and shift. In order to better explain this idea, and provide some continuity to the term delinquency and the delinquent, a succinct and selective historical approach to the term will be presented.

### **A Succinct History of Delinquency**

Depending on what version of human history an individual ascribes to, delinquency may have been around since the beginning of humanity, which would entail that so has the delinquent. Certainly, human beings have continually engaged in mischief. Of equal certainty is the fact that human beings have sought to place punishment on those who act mischievously in an attempt to cut down on the number of people engaging in delinquent acts. From the *Ten Commandments* to *Hammurabi’s Code*, this history is long and complex. To further complicate the term, surely everyone has at some point in their lives committed an act of which they are not proud. Some may even define such an act as delinquency. Would that make everyone a delinquent? Hardly. As Binder (1987) stated, “Cultures have differed and continue to differ widely in levels of tolerance for various types of idiosyncratic behavior... and in the formal structures and procedures for social reaction to unacceptable behavior” (p. 1). With this in mind, delinquency must always be considered within cultural context and as a function of time and place, which implies certain inherent limitations in narrowing the topic. Nevertheless, considering some historical perspective on the idea of delinquency is necessary in order to outline the sociological frameworks from which the concept is explained today.

While the history of the term delinquency is complex, it is apparent that in the eighteenth century not only was delinquency related to the actions of juveniles, but it also was strongly correlated with urban environments (Horn, 2010). As Horn (2010) explained, in the early 1700s, juvenile delinquency was not something that captured the focus of the populace (p. 10). Horn attributed this to the fact that about three-quarters

of the population lived in rural environments, away from the stereotypical delinquents (p. 10). This introduces a new idea of how delinquency has developed. Horn's statement suggests that delinquency discourse is at least in part a product of urbanization. In other words, the coining of the phrase was an attempt to label a societal problem that began to occur as people lived in closer proximity. This does not necessarily suggest that delinquent acts emerged alongside urbanization. Surely, the overall idea of delinquency existed long before. This does, however, suggest that as larger groups of people had their daily lives disrupted, or perhaps even felt threatened, the need to label troubling behaviors with a universal term developed. It was not delinquency itself that emerged during urbanization, but rather a discourse of delinquency. Most often this discourse was used to describe urban, male youth.

As the term emerged, the way in which society handled those considered delinquent becomes an important focus. In the early 1700s, youth were not generally the recipients of harsh legal punishment, something that is regularly practiced in the modern United States. As Horn (2010) explained, "there is scarcely anyone of common humanity who would not shudder at taking away the life of a child under 16 or 17" (p. 10). Delinquents were typically punished informally. However, as urbanization increased throughout the 1700s, so did the manner in which society chose to handle delinquents.

By the 1780s and 1790s, concern over delinquency was growing (Horn, 2010, p. 18). It was at this point that the history of delinquency becomes more complex as attempts began to be made to correct the problem. Delinquent youth began to be imprisoned and institutionalized. A reform effort had emerged. By 1847, there was even a Juvenile Offenders Act targeted at punishing delinquent youth (Horn, 2010, p. 98). This act is monumental in the discussion of delinquency as governmental influence and economic interest were now prominent in the discussion of who was delinquent. A quick look at today's juvenile justice system would support this fact. The concept that society feels the need to invest human and economic capital in combating what the society determines is delinquent is of paramount importance to understanding the theoretical interpretation of delinquency.

The most notable attempt to curb delinquency should come at no surprise to modern educators: schooling. In the nineteenth century, school as a reformatory tactic had become much more prevalent in much of Europe. In fact, England passed an Industrial Schools Act in 1857 that essentially gave courts the power to sentence children to punishment by schooling (Horn, 2010, p. 117). The words of a leading "reformer" of the era, Mary Carpenter, set the tone quite nicely for what was to come in

this era of schooling as a way to essentially train and condition a class of people. As Horn (2010) stated, “Reformatory schools were designed to cater for youngsters whom Mary Carpenter had labeled members of the ‘dangerous’ classes” (p. 116). To whom or what were these children “dangerous?” Were they endangering the status quo? Were they endangering the way of life of those experiencing privilege? It seems clear that Carpenter’s discussion of the “dangerous” class mirrors the modern discourse of risk and, as Polakow (1995) stated, “the construction of an at-risk language serves to maintain stratification and the segregation of ‘difference’ among children in our schools, forming part of an all encompassing web of privilege and power *at risk* of unraveling...” (pp. 263-264, emphasis in original).

Carpenter’s language, however, brings schooling directly into the conversation of risk discourse and forces an analysis of the purpose of schooling in regards to behavior that does not conform with the standards of the predominant, powerful class of people. By labeling children as dangerous, it becomes much easier to sway public opinion in the direction of containment and reprogramming. It makes forcing children into a schooling environment that asks them to abandon their cultures, often abandon their families, and change into a more palatable form of themselves that complies with the status quo seem like altruistic work. While it may seem absurd today to consider a group of people as a “dangerous class,” is it possible that the rhetoric of risk is perpetuating this very misguided and misinformed way of thinking about children and the purpose of schools? As we continue as a profession to engage in victim-blaming language such as “failing schools” and “at-risk children,” are we merely using a repackaged, twenty-first century version of an outdated and othering language?

Certainly, history is riddled with cases of delinquent youth. What is important to understand is that, as urbanization increased and governments began to enact laws focused on delinquency, interest in the idea also increased. Much more can be learned about how the term has intellectually developed by taking a look at how people were writing about the term. From at least one perspective, some of the most influential works perpetuating modern delinquency discourse seem to have emerged around World War II and continue to progress today. Discussing a few of these seminal pieces in light of cultural context will provide a more enlightened view into the development of the way delinquency is discussed.

### **Modern Interpretations of Delinquency**

It is tempting to break down the discourse of delinquency by dis-

secting legal accounts and specific cases of delinquent youth. However, it seems that delinquency and the inherent subjectivity associated with the term are difficult to understand through selective legal exemplars. It seems that the most appropriate way to understand the term in a modern sense is to view how the term has been used in relatively recent years. Due to the nature of delinquency, it is apparent that much of the understanding and use of the term developed from its usage by sociologists. Platt (1977) said that early writers focused on social problems “stressed as causes of delinquency the disorganized features of slum life and the grinding impact of urban industrialism on migrant and immigrant cultures” (p. 4). On the other hand, Platt indicated that other writers focused on particular factors such as the “modern conditions of family life and the lack of sustained primary relationships, the lure of the peer group in subcultures characterized by female-centered households, the increased professionalism of the police, and a growing acceptance of middle-class definitions of normality” (p. 5). Still others, according to Platt, have focused on “how social structures exert pressure on youth to engage in nonconforming behavior” (p. 5).

It is evident from Platt’s (1977) classification of theorists that there is no uniform discussion of delinquency, but rather several different discussions utilizing similar, but not exact, discourses. Two influential modern writers in the field of delinquency were Shaw and McKay (1942). Shaw and McKay took a criminological approach to understanding juvenile delinquency. For Shaw and McKay, delinquency is discussed as a societal problem. In their text, *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas*, published during World War II amidst a time of heightened and governmentally encouraged patriotism for a capitalistic American society, Shaw and McKay warned,

The importance of this problem cannot be measured in terms of its cost in dollars and cents, the property losses it entails, and the loss of the contribution which might be made by the thousands of these youthful offenders if their energies and talents were turned to useful enterprises. (p. vii)

The language utilized echoes the language of the Juvenile Offenders Act instituted nearly a hundred years prior. The language indicates that delinquency is a problem that threatens youth, but more importantly, it is a problem that threatens the very nature of societal well-being.

Nevertheless, Shaw and McKay (1942) indicated that certain societal factors correlated highly with juvenile delinquency. Among these factors with high correlations to juvenile delinquency in Shaw and McKay’s list, “population change, bad housing, poverty, foreign born and Negroes,

tuberculosis, adult crime, and mental disorders” (p. xi). While Shaw and McKay did not necessarily consider the intersection of those factors or the inherent social justice issues and the manifestations of systematic oppression, they did make a bold claim that is pivotal in understanding the development of delinquency discourse. Shaw and McKay claimed that all of the above factors do have something in common: “The common element is societal disorganization or the lack of organized community effort to deal with these conditions” (p. xi). Shaw and McKay claimed that a solution for combating juvenile delinquency is “a program of neighborhood organization” (p. xiii). In other words, despite what is now dated language, Shaw and McKay did indicate that delinquency may not be an individual problem, but more an issue a society must face collectively. However, this language also indicates that it is the community that is at a deficit and does not necessarily mention the larger societal inequities at play.

Ironically, a lack of organization was presented by Shaw and McKay (1942) as a potential cause of delinquency, while another pivotal writer on delinquency, Cohen (1955), proposed that a different kind of organization was actually driving the issue. Cohen focused on gang culture, specifically in adolescent males. Cohen outlined a number of different delinquency theories, including the possibility that delinquency is a societal problem and a learned behavior. Cohen explained the possibility that children, “learn to become delinquents by becoming members of groups in which delinquent conduct is already established and ‘the thing to do’” (p. 11). In this view, “some delinquents are bright, some are slow; some are seriously frustrated, some are not; some have grave mental conflicts and some do not” (p. 13). Of course, Cohen presents psychogenic theories, as well (p. 17). In these theories, children may have some personality traits that predispose them for delinquency. What is innovative about Cohen’s contribution to delinquency discourse is his push for statistical data and social theory to fit together. In his attempt to mesh theory and statistical delinquency facts, Cohen described what he called a delinquent subculture by stating that it was “non-utilitarian, malicious, and negativistic” (p. 25). These adjectives further position delinquents as threats to society and paint them yet again as “the other.”

Another interesting piece of Cohen’s (1955) work was his description of the gender distribution of juvenile delinquency. It seems that the focus of most works related to delinquency revolved around males. Cohen even stated, “delinquency in general is mostly male delinquency” (p. 44). Yes, Cohen was writing in the 1950s, but he did support his claim with statistics on arrest data that overwhelmingly tell the same story. While Cohen attributed most female delinquency to sexually related issues, demonstrating yet another way women were and are marginalized on the



basis of sexuality, he did recognize that delinquency was not a trait found solely on the Y-chromosome. Still, Cohen's follow up statement is almost humorous from a modern perspective as he explained that, "orneriness' and 'hell-raising' in general are primary practices of the male" (p. 45).

This evolution of delinquency discourse and delinquency data collection continued throughout more modern works with a delinquency focus. Just 14 years after Cohen's (1955) *Delinquent Boys*, Hirschi (1969) explained the three fundamental perspectives of the day: motivational theories, control theories, and cultural deviance theories. Hirschi explained,

According to strain or motivational theories, legitimate desires that conformity cannot satisfy force a person into deviance. According to control or bond theories, a person is free to commit delinquent acts because his ties to the conventional order have somehow been broken. According to cultural deviance theories, the deviant conforms to a set of standards not accepted by a larger more powerful society. (p. 3)

Hirschi also further defined delinquency as, "acts, the detection of which is thought to result in punishment of the person committing them by agents of the larger society" (p. 47).

It is interesting to note the permanence of certain themes in delinquency discourse. Hirschi (1969) still focused on societal influences and factors in delinquency. Hirschi is not unique in continuing to discuss delinquency in terms of race, class, and gender. However, Hirschi discussed the relationship between social class and delinquency in a more quantitative manner, noting that, "While the prisons bulge with the socioeconomic dregs of society, careful quantitative research shows again and again that the relation between socioeconomic status and the commission of the delinquent acts is small, or nonexistent" (p. 66). This is representative of a continual broadening in the delinquency discourse and a challenge to the stereotypical understanding of delinquency. What was once discussed as an urban problem perpetuated by immigrants, minorities, and individuals in lower socio-economic classes was now an issue that could pertain to anyone, given the right situation. Of course, division still remained among those writing about delinquency, but now there were at least those willing to offer an alternative to certain theoretical perspectives.

Still, Hirschi's (1969) claim that there is little to no relationship between acts of delinquency and socioeconomic seem, at least at first, not to make any sense. They do not seem to mesh with what we understand as reality. Hirschi went on to explain that

...it is true that the lower class boy is more likely to be picked up by the police, more likely to be sent to juvenile court, more likely to be

convicted, and more likely to be institutionalized if convicted, when he has committed the same crime as a middle class boy. (p. 68)

Since it seems as if data are suggesting that no one social class is more likely to commit a crime than another, why doesn't our prison population reflect the demographics of our general population? As Hirschi (1969) pointed out, we are not talking about crimes, we are talking about punishment. Michelle Alexander (2012), in her brilliant work *The New Jim Crow*, makes the distinction quite clear as she discusses the War on Drugs as a war on the African American community. Alexander stated,

It may be surprising to some that drug crime was declining, not rising, when a drug war was declared. From a historical perspective, however, the lack of correlation between crime and punishment is nothing new. Sociologists have frequently observed that governments use punishment primarily as a tool of social control, and thus the extent or severity of punishment is often unrelated to actual crime patterns. (p. 7)

While theories and statistical evidence have continued to develop throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, thus continually changing the discourse of delinquency, it is evident that there is no one approach to understanding delinquency, but there are some depressing themes running throughout all approaches. It seems that when we discuss the idea of a delinquent who exists outside of some socially constructed normality, who threatens the powerful and the status quo, we then see systematic, often government enforced ways, of punishing and controlling subsets of our population. Incarceration and reformatory schooling are just two of the major attempts to control certain subsets of our population. The cited examples only serve as guides intent upon representing selective fruits of a complex intellectual labor. Sociological and psychological theories of delinquency still remain intact today and breaking down those theories is not the function of this paper. Instead of exhausting efforts determining "what" a delinquent is or even "why" a delinquent exists, the remaining intention of this paper is to frame delinquency discourse as an urgent issue of social justice. The modern conversation of delinquency in schools, masked under the conversation of risk, is a threat to democratic ideals in that risk rhetoric is a weapon used to oppress subcategories of the broader population.

### **Challenging the Term**

While delinquency discourse and education are not directly correlated, much of the way delinquents, at least when it comes to youth, are discussed today is within a scholastic context. Challenging risk discourse requires

professional adults in privileged positions of power to be open to the flexibility of an idea. To consider that delinquent behavior may not originate from an individual, but rather from an individual's incompatibility with a troubled system requires progressive thinking. Certainly the education system as well as the juvenile justice system is filled with caring, well-intended, intelligent professionals. There are too many instances of success found within those systems to argue otherwise. However, it is healthy to look at those systems that are so tightly connected to the idea of delinquency and ask powerful questions regarding their ability to help or hinder those adolescents labeled at-risk or delinquent.

Platt (1977) described juvenile detention centers in Illinois in the early 1900s by stating, "The bleakness and impersonality of the institutions were matched by the uncompromising professionalism of juvenile court officials. 'Troublemakers' were characterized as ungrateful and malicious, requiring swift measures of retaliation" (p. 151). An institution of this type creates an "us" versus "them" mentality. This characterizes aggressive rhetoric that is all too often used in the discussion of delinquency as an idea. Stone (2011) may further this concept with her words on modern youth culture. Stone stated, "The significant point about youth and their culture, probably cultures, is that they defy control, that which contemporary society and its adults need" (p. 288). Stone continued, "In a present day U.S., a strong and invasive justice system operates within which is a sub-system to deal with, to punish, youth" (p. 289). As these writers have implied, it seems that if a society, through organized governmental systems wages war against those considered "juvenilely delinquent," then "delinquents" will continue to forcefully strike back in self-defense rendering the efforts of these governmental systems to curb the delinquency problem counter-productive.

Given this seemingly never-ending and vicious cycle, perhaps it is advantageous to then reconsider what actually is "at-risk." Almost always, the term implies that either an individual or group of students is at-risk for failing to succeed within the system. What if, however, it is not the kids that are risky at all? Instead, perhaps it is time to reinvigorate a conversation that asks how the system generates risk. While that may seem like an idea accompanied by little substantial evidence, consider the idea of risk in scholastic environments that are much less formulaic, much less standardized, and much more mirroring of the human imagination and the learning process. Consider systems of education that would posit that it is not children at all who are at risk. Rather, the rest of us are at risk of missing out on the genius right in front of us due to our conditioned way of thinking about children, learning, and schooling.

### **Who's Really At Risk?**

The late John Holt (1989) posited that modern teaching operates on the premise of at least three overused metaphors. The first metaphor, according to Holt, is that education is an “assembly line in a bottling plant or canning factory” (p. 148). The idea is that educators need to fill students with some knowledge and then push them on down the line. The second metaphor sees “students in a school as laboratory rats in a cage, being trained to do some kind of trick” (Holt, 1989, p. 149). The idea here is that modern schooling operates on the foundations of reinforcement theory. Students are essentially bribed to perform some task deemed valuable by the adults in power. Finally, Holt suggests a third metaphor: the “school as a mental hospital, a treatment institution” (p. 150). It is in this third metaphor, which Holt suggested was the most dangerous (p. 150), that we find our foundation for the modern discourse of risk.

Holt's (1989) metaphor of schools as mental hospitals is essentially a newer way to discuss the reform movements of the nineteenth century. It is a way to restate Mary Carpenter's concerns regarding the “dangerous class” (Horn, 2010, p. 116). Under this metaphor, the school is positioned to receive all credit when students learn, and it is free of all blame when students do not. As Holt described, this model puts the blame on students for not learning (p. 151). Perhaps they are not interested, perhaps they are lazy, or perhaps their home life is just unfit. This model assumes that children have no interest in learning and that it is up to schools to convince them to engage in intellectual activity. When the kids do not, something must be wrong with them. They must be “at-risk.”

This mentality has potentially placed the institution of public schooling in the United States “at-risk.” It is this mentality that has allowed conversations about “failing schools,” “failing teachers,” and “failing kids.” We now find ourselves in an era of education that presents teachers as necessary task masters commissioned with producing test scores. Nevermind the fact that the American Statistical Association (2014) has already warned of the statistical inadequacy of the Values Added Measures by which these teachers are compared. Essentially, we have created a system full of disincentives for teachers to work with our youth most threatened by risk discourse and the policies it permits. Make no mistake, teachers still support these students like they always have, but they do so now at the risk of poor evaluations. The risk, it seems, is all theirs.

### **The Time is Now**

The conversation of risk, the social justice issues that are inherent within that discourse, and the implications this discussion has for our

society must be had now and must be had around the world, but particularly here in the United States. It would be irresponsible to raise such a conversation about the dangers of risk discourse without offering suggestions for combatting this discourse in the public space.

Perhaps a simple change we can make as a profession is to stop using victim-blaming language. Over 20 years ago, Swadener and Lubeck (1995) asked us to continue discussing children and families “at-promise” instead of “at-risk.” That sounds like a reasonable start. Along those same lines, perhaps we could also work to stop calling our teachers, our schools, and thus our children, failures. The words we use matter.

Learning from the work and words of those engaged in the work of children stereotyped as “at-risk” is also critically important. Much of this work takes place in the often ignored world of public alternative schools. Perhaps more than any other place, these public schools serve students who have been marginalized in the public system and labeled as “risky.” Conley (2002) posited that these schools exist simply to serve a system’s “outcasts” (p. 9). The teachers in those settings, however, tell a different story. We know that caring teachers make a difference for students who have often received a message that no one cares, such as many students served in public alternative schools (Epstein, 1992; Lagana-Riordan, 2011, May & Copeland, 1998; Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, Tonelson et al., 2006). The work of Kim and Taylor (2008) demonstrated that students in these settings often feel “left out” (pp. 213-215).

Still, we know from research such as that of Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, and Tonelson (2006) that students in these settings begin to find success when they are shown that they are cared for by teachers and administrators. Other researchers have followed up and suggested that teachers in these settings really do care a great deal and that, in fact, this is a motivating work factor. When reporting the results of a study focused on alternative school teachers, nurses, and administrators, Jordan, Jordan, and Hawley (2017) stated, “Teachers, nurses, and administrators alike expressed a hopeful investment in the futures of their students and they saw their roles as professionals to not only have and express hope, but to turn that hope into action (p. 6). It seems that a logical step in the fight against risk discourse is to show students labeled “at-risk” that you care, and “risky” is not how you define them.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it seems that delinquency as an idea has existed possibly as long as human beings have existed, but an increase in the attention the idea receives seems to have emerged alongside urbanization. As the

actions of others tended to have greater impacts on the lives of others, societies sought to find ways to alter these actions. It also seems that the main focus of delinquency discourse still revolves around adolescent males. As delinquency developed as an idea, so did the ways in which people have tried to explain it. Sociological, psychological, and biological approaches have all been utilized, with some people choosing to combine approaches. It is clear, however, that delinquency carries with it a negative connotation as well as unnecessary and statistically unsupported stereotypes. There are, however, silver linings in an otherwise dark cloud. Writers and researchers such as Alexander (2012), Swadener and Lubeck (1995), Jordan, Jordan, and Hawley (2017), and Stone (2011) have offered alternative perspectives to the ways in which individuals considered delinquent and the systems in which they are educated and treated are approached. Hopefully, this trend will gain momentum and continue.

Nearly one-fifth of the way through the 21st century, it is time to once again reconsider the discourse of risk. No longer should educators proceed with allowing conversations that place a negative connotation on the state of children within a manufactured system. Children are not risky. On the contrary, it is educators entrenched in perpetuating risk discourse that are in fact “at-risk.” We are at-risk of overlooking the brilliance of a child. We are at risk of educating a generation of children that self-label as defective based on an incomplete and inappropriate representation of success. We are at risk of perpetuating a system that blames teachers. Instead of asking children to conform, why don’t we instead reform to be more inclusive, more child-centered, more democratic, and more scientifically sound? Why don’t we continue, with whatever means we have, to scream out against societal inequities and systematic oppression? Instead of asking teachers why they are “failing,” why don’t we instead empower them to support all of our students, not punish them for doing so? If we cannot do these things, the risk is on us.

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