

# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	4
Hot Topic 1: At Risk and Underachieving Students .....	5-14
Hot Topic 2: The Brain and Learning .....	15-22
Hot Topic 3: Conflict .....	24-35
Hot Topic 4: Cultural Diversity .....	36-45
Hot Topic 5: Educating Gifted Students .....	46-55
Hot Topic 6: Excellence and Equity .....	56-65
Hot Topic 7: Gender and Learning .....	66-73
Hot Topic 8: Leadership Skills in a Time of Change .....	74-79
Hot Topic 9: The Middle Years of Schooling .....	80-88
Hot Topic 10: Technology .....	89-101
Bibliography .....	102-103

# Introduction

For the past five years, a number of “Hot Topics” have been of great concern to educators and parents. These are topics I hear discussed both formally and informally at educational conferences and workshops, in parent groups, and in casual conversations.

Many of these topics apply not only to education but also to our society as a whole. We are living through a time of immense change. People are puzzled and concerned by all of these changes and the problems that inevitably accompany them. Many are looking for ways to do more than just cope. They are looking for ways to face change creatively, productively and proactively.

This book is a guide to understanding current “Hot Topics” and dealing with them constructively and positively. It is a book not only for teachers and parents but also for members of the community and the society at large who touch and are touched by the next generation. Because the mission of schools is to work with the youngest members of society, it is fair to say that the problems of society all land first at the schoolhouse door. Schools do not exist in a vacuum. They are products of and intimately connected with the society and communities from whence they come. Therefore it is important that all members of the community understand the “Hot Topics” which are facing our schools.

You will find this book especially helpful if you are a:

- Teacher
- School administrator
- Counsellor
- Parent
- Consultant
- Mentor who works with students
- Member of a community organisation or agency involved with children
- Legislator or other government official
- Business person with an interest in children and schools
- Interested member of the community

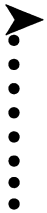
Each chapter has one or more *Reflection Pages*. Use these pages for your own personal reflection, but also to structure discussion on and reflection about the “Hot Topics” with your professional colleagues, personal friends or in other groups.

The chapters on Conflict and Cultural Diversity each contain an Individualised Student Lesson Plan. For more information on how to use these, see *Tools for Teaching and Learning in the Integrated Classroom* by Carolyn Coil, Hawker Brownlow Education, publisher.

It is my hope that this book will be helpful to a wide range of groups and individuals as we look expectantly toward the challenges of the 21st century!

# Hot Topic 1

## At-Risk and Underachieving Students



Leo is having lots of problems at home. His parents went through a divorce two years ago and his dad often fails to make the child support payment. It seems to Leo that his mother is always unhappy. She has a job, but it isn't enough to make ends meet. Leo finds school really difficult. His teachers say, "Oh, Leo! Yes, I know him! He's a behaviour problem." Leo knows he should study, but he really doesn't feel like it in school or when he gets home from school either. He used to think he was smart enough to go to university someday, but he just doesn't care about that anymore.

I first met Leo more than five years ago. At that time I was doing research on underachievement and was interviewing hundreds of kids who had been identified to me in one way or the other as underachievers. Leo has become somewhat of a prototype for me -- a student who exemplifies many of the problems we associate with underachievement and at-risk students.

At first meeting, Leo was a strange combination of a child who was both depressed and defiant, defeated and angry, discouraged and daring. In our first interview, Leo would not look me in the face. He hung his head and shrugged his shoulders instead of answering my questions about his life and his schoolwork. Later, when his answers showed his anger and defiance, I realised that Leo was acting out his frustrations in the only way he knew how, and toward the only environment in which he felt he had any control. School meant some form of stability for Leo, someplace where he knew the boundaries and rules and found it safe to rebel against them. Every other part of his environment was so insecure there was no way to rebel or try to control it. So the school and his teachers received the consequences of the life he lived outside of the school day.

Leo is much like thousands of other children who are at-risk of school failure, of not succeeding in school, and of leaving school before they have adequate education and skills to meet the demands and challenges of the 21st century. Many such students are at risk not only of failing in school but also for their personal safety and survival. The problems that these children bring to school with them are often upsetting and overwhelming.

Schools cannot make up for the glaring social inadequacies of home and neighbourhood, yet we are challenged to educate children who are neglected, tired, hungry, and abused. We must motivate and teach children who may have no permanent home and who seldom have the kind of interaction with supportive adults so necessary for academic and personal development. To succeed in school, these at-risk students need special attention.

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***"The problems of society all land first at the schoolhouse door."***

—Carolyn Coil

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# Traits of At-Risk and Underachieving Students

Almost all children enter school full of high expectations and enthusiasm. By the end of year 1 or year 2, however, many have already discovered that they are not going to succeed in school and begin to see school as punishing and demeaning. How does this happen? What occurs within the first year or two of school that sets up some children for a life of school failure? What are some of the traits of at-risk and underachieving adolescents? These questions have multiple and complex answers. There is no one cause of underachievement and school failure. Most at-risk students have a number of the traits listed below:

- **Socially immature**

Often the students most at-risk for school failure are those who seem very immature when compared to their same age peers. They cannot sit quietly and listen to the teacher, their small muscle skills may be poorly developed, and they are just generally less mature than the other children.

- **Behaviour problems**

Poor behaviour in school seems a defining characteristic of many students who do not succeed in school. Sometimes this behaviour is quite humorous (except to the teacher) and other times it reflects hostility and violence. Students who spend their time in school misbehaving not only disrupt other children, they also disrupt their own learning. It is almost impossible to be involved in learning when one is spending much of his or her time in class engaging in unproductive and negative behaviours!

- **Unmotivated to do schoolwork**

When I began my work on underachievers several years ago, my main premise was that I needed to find a way to motivate these students. To the contrary, I found that many underachievers are quite motivated, but they are not motivated to do *schoolwork*. At-risk and underachieving students do not usually sit quietly and do nothing. They do engage in a variety of activities that disturb or entertain their classmates, upset the teacher, and sabotage their own learning.

- **Low self esteem**

Self esteem can be defined as one's *perceptions* of what others think about oneself. It is the result of information that comes from the outside to the inside. When students feel they lack the love and approval of parents, other family members, teachers, other significant adults and their peers their self esteem is very low. Many at-risk students grow up feeling unloved and rejected, and as a result have extremely low self esteem.

- **Lack of self confidence**

Self confidence is the opposite side of the coin to self esteem. It comes from the inside to the outside. Self confidence occurs when a child realises he or

she can control the *outcomes* of his or her life and that personal actions and decisions make a difference in what happens in one's life. At-risk students feel out of control in terms of the events of their lives and usually have very little self confidence.

- **Lack of academic skills necessary to complete assigned tasks**

Many at-risk students begin school with minimal academic skills and poor language proficiency. As the years of schooling increase, most of these students fall further and further behind their classmates. It becomes impossible ever to catch up and learn the needed academic skills. Many of these students simply give up. This can happen as early as grade 2 or 3.

- **No organisational skills**

A descriptor I often hear about underachievers is "disorganised". Students who do poorly in school often are very disorganised. They have a hard time keeping track of everything -- their belongings, assignments, timetable, books, papers, pencils, pens, etc. School success assumes a certain amount of organisation on the part of the student. Without these skills even a highly intelligent child is liable to do poorly in school.

- **Influenced by peers who are poor role models**

The old saying, "*Birds of a feather flock together*" is certainly true of students who are not succeeding in school. These students seem to find one another and learn from one another, albeit in negative ways. Students are influenced by their peers, and it is disastrous when one at-risk student influences another in a negative way.

- **Fear of failure**

Failure is a spiral that continually goes downward. After the first few experiences with failure in school, most at-risk students become very fearful of more failure. Often this fear is covered up by an attitude that says, "I could care less", but the cause of such an attitude is usually fear of continued failure with no way to save face.

- **Boredom with schoolwork**

The mantra of many school-age children seems to be "School is boring!" Ironically, they are often quite right. Many low achievers spend their days in school being taught with a boring skills-based curriculum and endless skill-and-drill worksheets. At-risk students need exciting, hands-on classroom activities and an integrated thematic approach to learning.

- **Rebellion against authority**

At-risk adolescents, particularly males, seem prone to rebellious attitudes and activities. From their point of view, the 'system' has not served them well and this translates into rebellion against the authority figures at hand, usually parents, school authorities and the police.