Children are often labeled as they age, grouped according to their abilities or lack thereof and compared to siblings or parents. What begins as childish name-calling, however, becomes more deeply ingrained within an individual as they age. Troubled youth, for example, are often classified as “at-risk.” This terminology implies that they are somehow on the verge of failing. But the question becomes, what are they seen as failing? Are they failing the idealistic American life or merely the traditional view of the educational process? This interminable question can be best viewed in light of articles such as Tom Barone’s “Ways of Being at Risk: The Case of Billy Charles Barnett,” Frank Conroy’s “Think About It,” and Harry Wolcott’s “Adequate Schools and Inadequate Education: The Life History of a Sneaky Kid.” The purpose of this essay is to discuss the label of “at-risk” to describe students who may be on the verge of ceasing their formal schooling to pursue other endeavors and to discuss their educational life histories. By the end of this discussion, it is the intent of the author that the reader concludes that too often society and schools are willing to label children and write them off. It is the hope of the author that educators instead explore other means of tapping into students’ needs and abilities in order to better educate them. This discussion is based on John Dewey’s concepts of continuity of experience and habit.

In *Experience and Education*, Dewey provides insight into the concept of experience. Dewey points out the principle of continuity of experience, the basis of which lies in the notion that an individual is exposed to values, ideas, and structures in their life that form an experiential continuum of continuity, or standardization within the ways they react to or perceive situations. The youth mentioned in articles written by Barone and Wolcott were functioning under the umbrella of continuity of experience. This is reminiscent of the story of a boy who carried an umbrella everywhere he went because a rain cloud followed him, never ceasing in its endeavor to drench him with rain. Billy Charles Barnett and Brad were also cyclically following patterns in
their lives which led to a continuous spiral out of the traditional education system. This is not to say that either youth took a downward spiral. It is merely stating the fact that the cycle was as continuous and unrelenting as the rain cloud. Take Billy Charles, for example.

Billy Charles’ experiences in school led him to resist the educational process. School made him feel cramped, as if he was trapped in a cage (Barone, 149). He only enjoyed two classes, a non-traditional social studies class and a remedial reading class where he was afforded some level of "special attention" (Barone, 149). Although he tolerated those classes, the boy “always resisted any encroachment of the school world on his freedom outside” (Barone, 149). Plainly stated, Billy Charles had poor experiences in the course of his schooling that left a bitter taste in his mouth. He saw school as an intrusion on his freedom to explore things he enjoyed, such as nature. The continuity of poor experiences left him with distaste for formal schooling.

Yet Billy Charles did not resist the notion of education; he merely had a strong aversion to formal education. By the same token, Wolcott’s Brad also had a continuity of poor experiences in school.

Brad, in like fashion, did not enjoy his time in the classroom. Beginning in kindergarten, he was pointed out as a troubled child, threatened with soap in his mouth after using objectionable language (Wolcott, 239). He always felt that he had inadequacies that left him lagging behind others in his classes; rather than making attempts to disprove the notion that he somehow could not catch up to his peers, he accepted himself for his strengths and weaknesses.

At that point, Wolcott states that, “schooling for him was over; he was out” (239). Brad had, in essence, given up on formal education after those experiences. His experiences led him to avoid formal schooling at any cost. He recalled “changes of schools, getting into trouble for his classroom behavior, or skipping school altogether” (Wolcott, 240). What Brad recalled was
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running from the educational system set in place to teach him. And other than acknowledging that he could have exerted more effort, "he expressed no regrets over school as an opportunity missed" (Wolcott, 241). But why did Brad detest formal education so much that he was unable or unwilling to see its value? Dewey might propose that his opinions were based on habit.

Dewey states the principle of continuity of experience "rests upon the fact of habit, when habit is interpreted biologically" (37). Brad was used to poor experiences in school, experiences that did not improve as he aged, attending a variety of different schools, including a rigidly enforced reform school. By habit he could not tolerate school. His attitudes were being formed from his first experience in kindergarten and continued through the rest of his formal schooling. Emotionally, Brad felt isolated from his peers, and felt as though he was being monitored or stared at by others. Emotionally, it appeared as though this did not bother him; internally, he sought friendship and acceptance. Brad said, "there must be a group that I would fit in somewhere in this town" (Wolcott, 243). He sought acceptance from the outside world, acceptance from those who he would not allow into his cabin or his little world. By habit, he was used to being alone, to acting alone, to surviving alone (save the minimal contact he had with those in town as he went in to purchase or steal supplies).

Students such as Brad and Billy Charles are too often labeled and judged before being given the opportunity to express their true abilities and passions when it comes to education. Had the educators in their lives viewed them as students needing more individualized attention, perhaps they would have been more apt to recognize the inherent capability within each of them, rather than seeing the external ennui and detest of school.

Both boys experienced a great deal of emotional stress outside the school that appeared to have played a large role in their avoidance of the educational system. What each of them knew of
leadership was what was shown to them in their homes. They were shown dictatorial means of education through punishment rather than encouragement and affection. The educators in their lives judged them due to their lack of proficiency in typical subject areas or because of their aberrant behavior in the classroom. What was left untouched was their ability in other areas.

Billy Charles had a great deal of knowledge regarding fly-fishing and trapping, basic survival skills. Brad also had a grasp on surviving in the wild while relying on the convenience of the nearby town. He was on the edge of town, the edge of "civilization," and the edge of recognizing that he was a capable and imaginative human being. Yet society and the school system gave up on them, calling them at-risk, believing that they would never be "educated," but Conroy suggests that education is a continual process.

Conroy touches on the cyclical nature of the concept of education. He utilizes examples in his own life to paint a portrait of education as an ongoing process. It is an entity that is not always immediately applicable or easily comprehended, but rather a means of absorbing information and storing it until the individual can make a connection that he or she can apply to a new situation. He explains as a light bulb that goes on when stored information catches up with life (Conroy, 69). Principles learned both inside and outside of the school setting can later impact an individual. And "education does not end until life ends, because you never know when you're going to understand something you hadn't understood before" (Conroy, 70).

Billy Charles and Brad had been assessed and their true abilities locked within themselves because the educational system as it stood was not what they needed to thrive. Dewey's concepts of continuity of experience and habit illustrate examples within both boys' lives that caused them to withdraw from formal education. And are they to be blamed for the "failure" of the system to retain their attention long enough to hand each boy a high school diploma?
diploma? No, the boys are not to blame, but neither is the system. To label them as "at-risk" of failing is to label them unjustly. True, they are at-risk of perhaps becoming hardened criminals or non-contributing members of society, but so are students who graduate from high school and college (as the Ted Bundy's of the world). Too much emphasis has been placed upon placing students in groups and labeling them as highly capable, mediocre, or at-risk. Why not give up the labeling and focus instead on the needs of the students? As Conrey stated, education is a continuous cycle. It does not end with a diploma, nor does it end with another fifty years of life. Education involves real-life application of principles gleaned from previous experiences. It is time for educators to cease attempts to label students and instead focus on the means by which students can be taught to use what they have learned in the past to more positively impact the future.