
Introduction

When I was struggling in high school, administrators and teachers often spoke of me as a thing rather than as a person. They struggled to connect with me and my homeboys or to help us see a world beyond the Los Angeles ghettos. Rather than trying alternative methods to connect with students like us, teachers and administrators simply punished us and considered us a burden in the classroom. Eventually, I simply stopped going to school because education became my enemy rather than a source of empowerment to better my life. The feminization of deep poverty,¹ hunger, gangs, violence, and the social stigma of being different all contributed to my downward spiral within the education system. The manner in which I viewed the world and understood society, along with what I experienced on a day-to-day basis, was simply disregarded in the classroom. I was another student at risk destined to drop out of school.

These experiences instilled a passion within me to create an alternative pedagogy to empower teachers to become more successful in working with students at risk and, in turn, to increase passing rates for these students. I went from detesting school as a student at risk to attaining my PhD. Today my experience serves as a testament to the potential of students at risk and as a reminder for teachers not to give up on their most challenging students.

Although academic success is crucial to being successful in American society, getting a job, owning a home, and reaching the middle class, students at risk find succeeding in school difficult, if not impossible.

¹The feminization of deep poverty refers to the disproportionate percentage of households headed by single females living 50% below the poverty level.

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The negative experiences these students have in school and in their communities contribute to their poor performance, and their lack of academic success limits their opportunities for employment and educational growth. On a larger scale, their lack of success weakens the country overall. The nation needs more college-educated people to fill or to create much-needed jobs. Helping this population succeed is a major obstacle for teachers, a seemingly elusive goal—a goal that must be met!

However, in all the discussions centered on students at risk, relevant solutions are rarely offered to teachers. Instead, the focus is on the conditions that lead to failure: the students' environment and the disadvantages they experience that result in their failure in school. Although it is important to identify these foundational issues to help students succeed, simply identifying them without creating applicable solutions for educators to incorporate in their classrooms is an injustice to teachers and students everywhere. Some even believe students at risk do not want to learn, as reflected in one teacher's questions: "How do I teach students who do not seem to want to learn? How do I show them the importance of school when it seems like school just doesn't fit in with their lives?" Meanwhile, students at risk mistakenly believe that school is not for them and that educators do not care about them.

My answer to this dilemma is the Pedagogy of Real Talk. Teachers can come to class with great ideas, interesting statistics, fascinating movies, and the coolest stories, but if there is no connection with this population of students, these approaches will fall on deaf ears because the students will not be receptive. Through the Pedagogy of Real Talk, teachers and students connect with curriculum through real-life experiences, allowing teachers to establish meaningful connections with students. As a result, students at risk become receptive to learning from their teachers. The Pedagogy of Real Talk allows teachers to gain valuable insights into their students, something not usually possible with traditional approaches. As students become responsive to learning and as teachers gain insight into their students, the pedagogy then helps teachers create alternative lessons and assignments that connect students with the curriculum. The barriers between teachers and students at risk crumble as new and exciting environments conducive to learning emerge to increase passing rates for students at risk.

STUDENTS AT RISK

Almost any student may be categorized as at risk under the right circumstances. For the purposes of this book, I have chosen the definition provided by Stormont and Thomas:²

²As quoted in Melissa Stormont and Cathy Newman Thomas, *Simple Strategies for Teaching Children at Risk* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2014), 3; see also 5, Figure 1.1.

Students who are at-risk for failure [or dropping out of school] include students who have within [person] and/or within environmental circumstances that put them in vulnerable positions for having problems in school. These problems can be academic or social or both. Within person risk factors include [but are not limited to] ADHD, no or limited knowledge/skills or [social, emotional, and behavior problems]. [Some examples of] environmental risks include poverty-homelessness, limited support for learning, [gangs, drugs,] and negative interactions at school, home, or between school and home.

But it is important to keep in mind that being at risk of failure or dropping out does not mean students are bound to fail or drop out.

Common characteristics of students at risk include low self-confidence with schoolwork, avoidance of school, distrust of adults, and limited notions of their academic future. They often present behavioral problems in the classroom that disrupt the learning process for themselves and others. Many teachers describe these students as burdens in the classroom and feel hopeless in trying to teach them successfully.

Students at risk often have fragile home lives and may drop out or be forced out of the educational system because of various life circumstances. A majority of students at risk live in low-income households, meaning they have limited resources, social capital, and parental guidance. They often live in poor, dilapidated neighborhoods plagued with crime and violence. Reduced levels of supervision increase the likelihood of their involvement in negative activities that promote their disconnection from classes and loss of interest in school. They are discouraged learners who view success in school as a matter of luck rather than of their intellect and hard work. Conversely, these students may be pushed out because of age, lack of credit transfer between school districts and states, and differences in educational systems between countries.

We must also keep in mind that students within this population are at risk for a variety of reasons. They are not a homogeneous group just because they are all at risk of dropping out of school. Some students are at risk because they have substance abuse problems. Some are bullied. Others are homeless or abused at home. Some work over 40 hours a week in addition to attending school. In other words, a student at risk can be a student who is the son or daughter of a two-parent, upper-middle-class, professional household, or the son or daughter of a poverty-stricken single parent.

Consider these two former students of mine. One student came from a two-parent household. Although both of her parents had college educations and were employed, she was completely disengaged from school, feeling it was a waste of time because school was extremely boring. She failed and dropped out. The other student grew up very poor. He lived with his grandmother rather than with either of his parents. He found it

difficult to balance school with his responsibilities at home. To complicate things further, he became a teenage father and eventually dropped out of school. Two very different scenarios with the same unfortunate result: dropping out. Thus, despite their commonality of being at risk of dropping out of school, students at risk are in that position for a variety of personal and environmental reasons.

As teachers, we must remember that students at risk are people before they are students. Only by accepting this first can we expect to work with this population of students effectively. The life experiences these students have outside of school and the problems they face daily, which we often disregard as irrelevant to the classroom, permeate their success in the classroom. Lacking family members or loved ones with education or with real-life examples of people with degrees makes envisioning success in school difficult for students at risk. They struggle to see school as an arena for improving their lives. School is a long-term investment, but their economic needs are immediate and cannot wait until later to be resolved. Because of their economic needs, students at risk may view education as an obstacle or a waste of time. The issues of violence, gangs, drugs, and overall danger that surround or engulf students at risk also detract from students' undivided attention to schoolwork, both in and out of the classroom.

As working professionals, we know that major obstacles within our personal lives impact our performance and ability to succeed in our careers. Why then do we often expect students at risk to be different? Why do we believe their personal lives outside of school should not hinder their ability to succeed in school? Only when we begin to understand the issues our students face can we incorporate what we have learned into meaningful solutions in the classroom to empower our students through education.

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education,³ only 78% of all high school students graduate. Up to 1.2 million high school students drop out annually. Dropouts earn an average annual income of \$19,540 compared with the \$27,380 average annual income of high school graduates, a gap of \$7,840. This income disparity remains constant for many high school dropouts throughout their lifetimes and contributes to the ongoing cycle of poverty among the children of high school dropouts.

Increasing the success of students at risk by enabling them to graduate high school or college will have profound effects not only for the individual students but also for society in general. We will benefit from reductions in the poverty rate, the increased numbers of educated Americans, and the potential economic benefit based on increased numbers of capable, educated workers. To make any of this feasible, however, we must emphasize and teach educators applicable approaches to build meaningful teacher-student relationships within our educational system.

³Alliance for Excellent Education, *The High Cost of High School Dropouts: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011).

THE RESEARCHER

In developing the *Pedagogy of Real Talk*, I worked with dropouts who had been accepted into the Michigan State University High School Equivalency Program (MSU HEP). My background is relatively similar to that of many of the students in that program. I grew up within the feminization of deep poverty in this country. I lived engulfed in the street thug lifestyle and was involved with gangs as a youth. I was labeled a student at risk throughout school and dropped out of school multiple times. I continued my education at a community college, earning an associate's degree in liberal arts, and transferred to finish my bachelor's degree in sociology. I then went on to earn a master's degree and PhD in sociology.

I am not just an academic writing a book on an alternative pedagogy but a former student at risk who was supposed to be in prison, dead, or a part of any other statistic within our dropout epidemic. I spent the majority of my life as a young man detesting school, especially the teachers, who I felt were my enemies. I was so entrenched in my views of school that I categorized all teachers as bad, even before I ever encountered them. I did not allow them the opportunity to get to know me—or teach me—the material I was supposed to learn. I took pride in my rejection of school and in the teachers' inability to connect with me. Disturbing class was entertaining to me. More important, when I was forced to be in school, I simply did nothing. I accepted that I would fail because it was more important for me to resist the teacher and reject the teacher's attempts to teach me. Ultimately, I exercised my only form of power in the classroom as a student: resisting the teacher at the expense of my own success.

In middle school, I specifically remember a teacher who told me one day that whenever I showed up to her class, I ruined her day. I was a talkative young man in her class, I admit—but I did not deserve such a spiteful comment, especially from a teacher. It was at that moment that I decided to resist every single thing she would attempt with me to make her feel the disrespect she made me feel. I never brought paper or pencil to her class whenever I attended. I was constantly disruptive, pushing her beyond her limits. She reached her breaking point one day and simply gave me a paper and told me to draw on it. I told her I didn't have something to write with. She responded, "I do not care! Even if you have to write with your blood, you will find something to write with!" I smiled at her and said okay. As she began teaching the class, I cut my finger with my key and wrote my name on the paper in blood. I raised my hand and asked her to come over. "Is this okay?" I asked. I remember how she gasped, eyes nearly exploding. Her face turned a pasty pale complexion, and her body shook as she told me to get out of her class. I remember how good I felt because my sole purpose in that class was to resist her and to

make things impossible for her. My extreme actions were a direct result of her comment. I felt most empowered when I resisted and tortured her, even though it was to my detriment. Such problems, which have existed in classrooms for decades, persist in classes today.

Because I have lived through this and been surrounded by countless others who did as well, creating something to help empower teachers in teaching their most challenging students has become my life's passion. I have always felt strongly that the most powerful person in the classroom is the teacher, and that if teachers are taught effective approaches to apply in their classrooms, they can transform the lives of their students in a positive manner. Fusing my academic knowledge as an educator with my own personal insights as the student no teacher could reach, I have created an authentic approach that will resonate with both teachers and students at risk in the classroom.

When I was offered the opportunity to work with students in MSU HEP, I was determined to create and implement an alternative teaching pedagogy to help those students pass their General Educational Development (GED) examination. I have continued to refine and implement that pedagogy and to train other teachers in implementing it successfully in their classrooms and schools.

MSU HEP

The HEP program at Michigan State University is designed to assist migrant and seasonal farm workers who have not completed high school in obtaining their GEDs.⁴ HEP has two main objectives: (1) increasing the percentage of HEP participants who receive their GED diplomas and (2) increasing the percentage of HEP GED recipients placed in postsecondary education programs, upgraded employment, or the military. To be eligible for HEP, students or a member of their immediate families must meet the following requirements:

- Have worked a minimum of 75 days in agriculturally related employment (migrant or seasonal farm work) in the previous 24-month period
- Participate in a Migrant Education Program (Title I, Part C)
- Be eligible for services under the Workforce Investment Act, Section 167 Program;
- Be at least 17 years of age
- Have not received a secondary school diploma

⁴The following discussion is based my doctoral dissertation, *Alternative Pedagogy: Empowering Teachers Through Real Talk* (Doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University, 2010), available from ProQuest.

Because admission to the program is based on occupation, no one is excluded based on race or ethnicity. However, the migrant community is a very specific cultural and ethnic demographic, the most common race/ethnicity/culture being Mexican or Mexican American. Therefore, the majority of HEP students are also Mexican or Mexican American.

In addition, students who are able to graduate with their high school class (under the age of 16) and students who have received high school diplomas are not eligible for HEP. Most of the participants have either dropped out of school (high school, middle school, and sometimes even elementary school), have been “pushed out” of the system because they lack credits or their credits are nontransferable, or have immigrated to the United States and need an equivalency or certificate of education from the United States. Some have dropped out of school to support their families through migrant or other work. Others have dropped out due to gang involvement, lack of motivation, or discipline or behavior problems. Still others lack any feeling of connection with schools because of conflicts with teachers or administrators, language barriers, or struggles outside of school that affect their ability to focus or complete work. All of these scenarios equate to a student body with diverse backgrounds.

As migrant workers or as children of migrant families, many of these students face unique barriers in school. On average, these students move with their families at least once a year for work; some move as many as eight times a year. Each move brings the frustrations and challenges of withdrawing from one school and enrolling in another, often in a different state with different standards and expectations.

HEP is also designed to capitalize on the college environment to help students achieve the HEP goals. These students live in a dormitory on campus for the duration of the 12-week program. The HEP offices are located in the same dormitory. The HEP staff that directly works with students consists of an associate director, recruiter, secretary, four instructors, and two residential mentors.

HEP participants engage in a rigorous preparation process to pass the GED exam. The four instructors provide in-depth instruction in the five GED subject areas (math, reading, writing, science, and social studies). To accommodate their comfort and confidence levels, HEP students may take their classes in either Spanish or English. In addition, students participate in a career-development course in which they prepare for career, college, or post-HEP pursuits. Twice weekly, students attend official practice test sessions that simulate actual GED testing.

Unfortunately, although the established passing rate goal for HEP was documented as 75%, the program had historically fallen short of achieving this goal prior to my joining HEP. Despite the HEP staff’s commitment to student success, students had not been effectively prepared to pass the GED. To target this shortfall, MSU included many student services within the program structure to assist students with the transitional and academic issues

that often become barriers to student success. However, those services had not been sufficient to increase the percentages of students passing the exam. I developed the Pedagogy of Real Talk to address that insufficiency.

THE PEDAGOGY

A major component within the Pedagogy of Real Talk is the concept of Real Talk, an instructor-led discussion surrounding a series of broad, engaging universal themes designed to motivate student-oriented outcomes and to establish connections, understanding, trust, empathy, and caring for one another. This concept alone has utility; as the foundation of this approach, however, it is the combination with other components that makes it distinct and successful. This unique and more encompassing foundation is a combination of the theories of Paulo Freire, Margo Mastropieri and Thomas Scruggs, and Joan Meyer, along with my work with students at risk. As the core of this pedagogy, Real Talk establishes connections between teachers and students, dismantling the barriers between students at risk and teachers that inhibit the learning process. This approach is based on four main concepts: (1) relating to and connecting with students, (2) understanding students' personal perspectives, (3) creating and maintaining a flexible framework in one's teaching strategies, and (4) upholding one's willingness and eagerness to work with students. However, the ability to relate to students is a skill that is not easily taught. Only through actual face-to-face interactions with students on a consistent basis can teachers establish relatedness.

In preparing to work with the students at risk, establishing an environment of open communication from the first day is critical. In such an environment, teachers gain unique insight into students. Being an active listener allows teachers to relate better to students and to create an engaging, exciting, worthwhile classroom environment. By *active listening*, I refer to an explicit effort not only to hear the words of students but also to listen to the entire message they are trying to convey. Incorporating active listening with students can be achieved by implementing a few simple steps:

- Look at them directly; they must have your undivided attention (no multi-tasking).
- Pay attention to their body language.
- Use your body language to show them you are listening (e.g., nodding your head occasionally, smiling when appropriate, offering small comments like "uh huh" or "yes" to encourage them to continue speaking).
- Do not interrupt them as they are trying to make their point. Foster genuine communication with students, allowing them to teach you about their perspectives, realities, worldviews, and experiences.

With this information, I developed lectures, lessons, and assignments focused on their experiences. The HEP students were extremely receptive to my pedagogy because the material covered in class was directly related to their lives. However, this alone did not guarantee they would pass the GED.

I continued to refine my approach by ensuring that all class activities were inclusive and integrated the core concepts of the curriculum. The students became more engaged in class and receptive to learning. Because they needed to develop a deeper understanding of the concepts related to the GED exam, I focused on integrating those concepts into Real Talk. Providing a consistent classroom structure throughout the semester was also crucial to the students' success.

In the following chapter, I explain the Pedagogy of Real Talk more fully. We will explore the theoretical foundations of the pedagogy, learn more about the case study conducted to validate the success of this alternative methodology and the students involved in that study, see how various aspects of the pedagogy were implemented, and learn how to implement the Pedagogy of Real Talk in any classroom with any subject matter.

If you have been looking for ways to reach your students at risk, help them succeed, and find tools with which to sharpen your teaching continually, read on. The approach can be used by first-year teachers, 30-year veterans, and anyone in between. Teachers of all backgrounds, racial groups, gender, sexuality, and social classes can use this approach with any population of students at risk. The focus of this pedagogy is not the teacher or the teacher's background; it is the connections established with the students, regardless of background. It is about maximizing connections through universal emotions that are not necessarily focused specifically on life experiences alone. The Pedagogy of Real Talk will give you the framework and strategies to succeed.