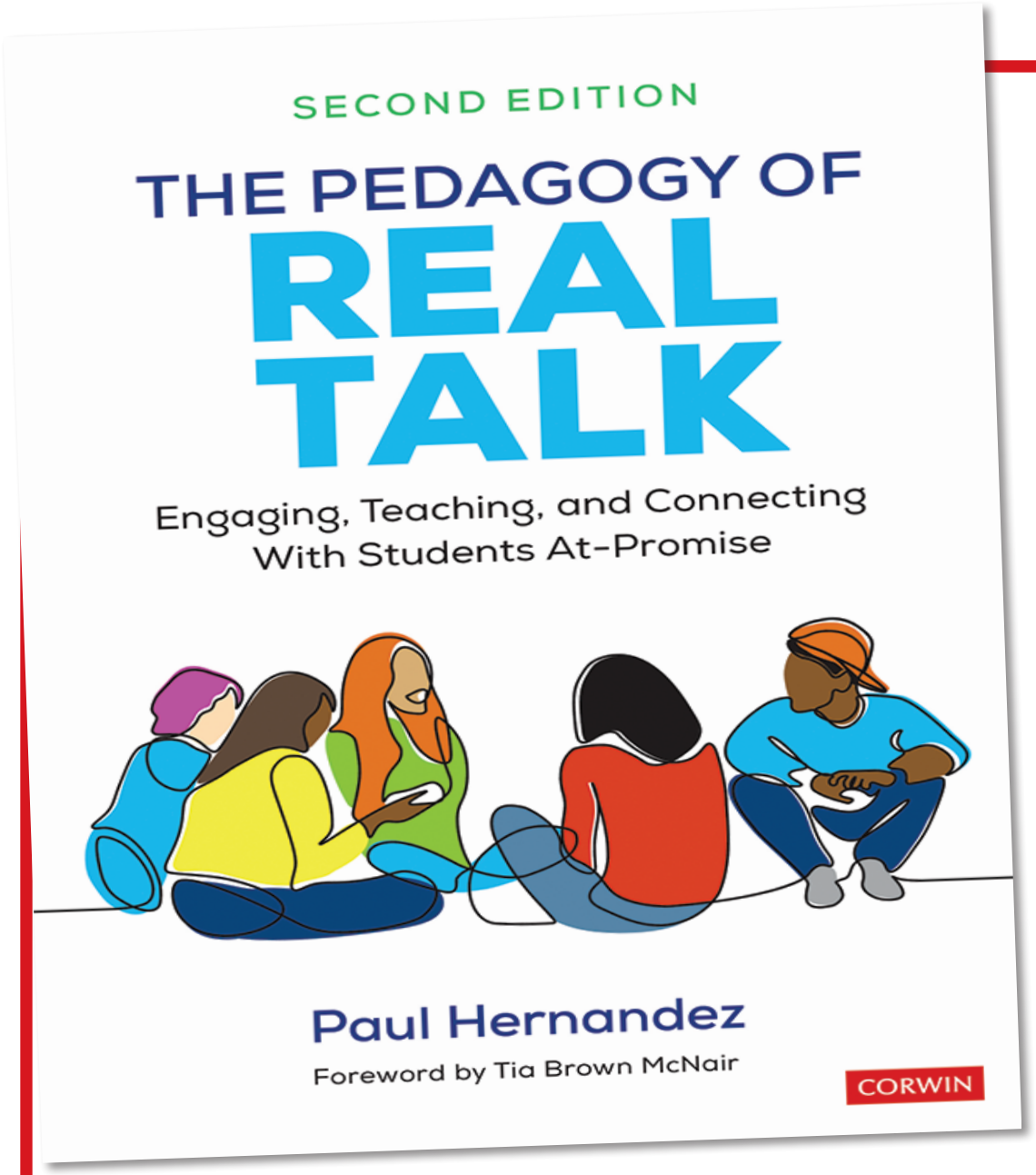

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CORWIN

1 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-promise 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-promise and, in turn, to increase passing rates for these students. I went from detesting school as a student at-promise to attaining my PhD. Today, my experience serves as a testament to the potential of students at-promise 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-promise find succeeding in school difficult, if not impossible.

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-promise, 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-promise 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-promise mistakenly believe that school is not for them and that educators do not care about them.

My answer to this dilemma is the PRT. 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 PRT, teachers and students connect with curriculum through real-life experiences, allowing teachers to establish meaningful connections with students. As a result, students at-promise become receptive to learning from their teachers. The PRT 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-promise crumble as new and exciting environments conducive to learning emerge to increase passing rates for students at-promise.

Students At-Promise

For several years, I have debated using the term "at risk" to describe students who struggle in school and appear headed toward dropping out. Though I used the term in an article I published in 2011, it didn't feel right then, and when I published my first edition of this book,

I began using "students at risk" as an alternative. I meant for this subtle change to convey that environmental risk factors impact students rather than insinuate students are the source of their vulnerable status. Still, the term "students at risk" is not a suitable replacement. Personally and professionally, I continue to struggle with how best to capture the complex needs, challenges, and, most importantly, our most vulnerable students' strengths. Thus, I have shifted to using the term "students at-promise" to reflect that, like all students, this population of students is full of potential for success (Dix et al., 2020; Osher & Kendziora, 2010; Sachar et al., 2019; Swadener, 2000). The term "students at-promise" is a strength-based label instead of a deficit-based one that stigmatizes students (Dix et al., 2020; C. Robinson, 2017; Samuels, 2020). Shifting from a deficit term to a strength-based term is not the solution for increasing student success among these students. Still, it may contribute positively to how teachers and administrators view them. Additionally, although I am using the term "at-promise," it does not eliminate or change the fact that this population is at risk for failure and dropping out of school for many reasons.

Almost any student may be at-promise under the right circumstances. For this book, I have chosen the definition provided by Stormont and Thomas (2014; see p. 5, Figure 1.1) to describe the risk factors for students at-promise:

> 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. (p. 3)

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-promise 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-promise 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-promise 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-promise 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-promise 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-promise 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. These were 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-promise are in that position for a variety of personal and environmental reasons.

As teachers, we must remember that students at-promise 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-promise. 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-promise 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-promise 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-promise 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 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), only 85.3 percent of all high school students graduate (NCES, 2019). For community college students, "even after having been in school for six years, fewer than 40% have graduated or transferred to a university," and in universities, 40 percent of all college freshmen never make it to commencement (Kirp, 2019, p. 4). High school dropouts' "median weekly earnings are $606, compared with $749 for high school graduates (no college), $874 for some college or an associate's degree, [and] $1,281 for workers with a bachelor's degree (and no additional degree)" (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). This income disparity remains constant for many high school and college 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-promise 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.

The Researcher

In developing the PRT, 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-promise 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-promise 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, whom 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-promise 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 equivalency diploma (GED) examination. Throughout this second edition, you will see examples from the work I did with the MSU HEP students. Additionally, I am providing examples of teachers I have worked with from around the country who have applied PRT in their classrooms. I have continued to refine and implement PRT and to train other teachers in implementing it successfully in their classrooms and schools.

The Pedagogy

A major component within PRT 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. In addition to Real Talk, alternative lessons are an

important component within PRT. Alternative lessons combine content standard(s) from the curriculum with students' terministic screens (Winterowd, 1985) or external societal issues connected with students' terministic screens. Defining these concepts helps familiarize you with them but does not highlight the complexity of applying them with students. Thus, to help you understand how to conduct and implement these concepts effectively, I will discuss what you must be willing to do with examples from myself and other teachers in Chapter 3.

These concepts alone have 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-promise. As the core of this pedagogy, Real Talk establishes connections between teachers and students, dismantling the barriers between students at-promise and teachers that inhibit the learning process. This approach is based on five main concepts: (1) relating to and connecting with students, (2) understanding students' personal perspectives, (3) creating an engaging, relevant, and inclusive curriculum for students (4) creating and maintaining a flexible framework in one's teaching strategies, and (5) 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 or virtual interactions with students on a consistent basis can teachers establish relatedness.

In preparing to work with the students at-promise, 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 multitasking).
- 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 PRT more fully. We will explore the theoretical foundations of the pedagogy, see how various aspects of the pedagogy were implemented, and learn how to implement PRT in any classroom with any subject matter.

If you have been looking for ways to reach your students at-promise, 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-promise. 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. PRT will give you the framework and strategies to succeed.

Note

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