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Making the American Dream a Reality for All Youth: Introduction to the First Issue of the National Youth-At-Risk Journal

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Abstract

This editorial provides an introduction to the first issue of the *National Youth-At-Risk Journal*. Information highlighted regarding the journal includes its mission, historical background and inspiration, and holistic aims and scope. Biased and realistic uses of the phrase "at risk" are also addressed. The editorial also introduces the journal editors and presents a preview of issue content.

Keywords

opportunity gap, educational equity, youth development, holistic well-being

Making the American Dream a Reality for All Youth:
Introduction to the First Issue of the *National Youth-At-Risk Journal*

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We welcome educators and all adults who serve children and adolescents to the first issue of the *National Youth-At-Risk (NYAR) Journal*. The journal is an open-access, peer-reviewed online journal that publishes educational articles on how to reduce harmful risk conditions and promote the well-being of all youth, especially vulnerable youth in schools, families, and communities. The journal is a publication of the National Youth-At-Risk (NYAR) Center in the College of Education at Georgia Southern University.

According to Harvard political science researchers (Putnam, 2015), the American dream of helping our children get ahead and be successful is in crisis, more so now than in the past, especially for those in poverty:

> Poor kids, through no fault of their own, are less prepared by their families, their schools, and their communities to develop their God-given talents as fully as rich kids. For economic productivity and growth, our country needs as much talent as it can find, and we certainly can't afford to waste it. The opportunity gap imposes on all of us both real costs and what economists term "opportunity costs." (p. 230)

Educators such as Noguera (2003) and Gorski (2013) have come to the same conclusion that the American dream of working hard to achieve a better life has been jeopardized by educational inequalities that contribute to an opportunity gap for students in poverty. Unfortunately, a majority (51%) of our public school students across the nation come from low-income families (Southern Education Foundation, 2015), and a recent national teacher survey reported that 88% of the teachers said poverty was a barrier to student learning (Communities in Schools, 2015). Reclaiming the promise of public education to provide a quality education for all students is a necessary prerequisite for restoring the American dream.

The mission of the *NYAR Journal* is to help practitioners—who serve youth placed at risk by poverty and other challenging conditions—to close the opportunity gap that prevents our youth from developing their talents and becoming successful adults. Educators and adults who serve youth in Title I schools and other challenging settings will find the *NYAR Journal* a highly informative and useful source of information for closing the opportunity gap and leveling the chances of success for our most vulnerable youth. Although the primary audience for the journal is in the United States, it is open to international readers and writers. The dream of improving one's life with a quality education is universally shared by youth around the world.

Historical Background and Inspiration
Historically, the *NYAR Journal* is an outgrowth of the National Youth-At-Risk (NYAR) Conference

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[1] Dr. Dan Rea, recently retired from the College of Education at Georgia Southern University. However, he remains active in his support of the NYAR conference and journal. Dr. Cordelia Zinskie continues to serve as a Professor of Educational Research in the College of Education at Georgia Southern University.

held annually in Savannah, Georgia. The NYAR Conference, now in its 27th year, is currently sponsored by the NYAR Center in the College of Education at Georgia Southern University. Building on the accumulated experience and holistic approach of the NYAR Conference, the founding editor and co-chair of the NYAR conference, Dan Rea, conceived the *NYAR Journal* as a publishing platform to disseminate up-to-date research-based information by presenters in and outside the conference to help adults serve youth placed at risk.

The journal is based on the same mission as the conference: "Helping adults serve youth." Furthermore, it employs the same holistic approach as the conference in providing inclusive professional learning for the whole village of adults who serve youth and offers a comprehensive framework of protective factors for understanding and meeting the multiple needs of youth at risk. Both the conference and the journal focus on fostering the well-being of the whole child and are not limited solely to improving academic achievement. The shared goal of the conference and journal is to empower youth to be successful both in school and life.

The call for submissions to the *NYAR Journal* is open to NYAR Conference presenters and any adult concerned about the well-being of youth placed at risk. The biannual journal seeks manuscripts that are theoretically sound and data driven with practical applications. Original research studies of promising programs and practices; first-hand descriptions of promising programs and practices in the field; case studies of "successful youth at risk"; action research studies on "how to improve the well-being of youth at risk"; syntheses of literature bridging the gaps between theory, research, and practice; and relevant book and report reviews are welcome.

Holistic Aims and Scope

Focused on the well-being of the whole child, the *NYAR Journal* includes interdisciplinary articles on how to use the "5H" protective factors to understand and promote the positive development of youth placed at risk:

1. "Head" for intellectual achievement and talents: Closing achievement gaps and promoting learning for all youth.
2. "Heart" for social and emotional skills: Fostering social and emotional skills and the social climate for all youth.
3. "Hands" for safety and violence prevention: Preventing violence and ensuring safety for all youth.
4. "Health" for physical and mental health: Promoting the mental and physical health of all youth.
5. "Home" for family and community support: Developing and enhancing family and community support for all youth.

The journal provides practical information about the latest research-based educational programs and strategies to assist young people in overcoming risk conditions that may threaten their intellectual development, social/emotional needs, safety, health, and family/community support. Solely focusing on closing achievement gaps and raising student achievement—as many educational reform programs currently propose—is inadequate to meet the multiple needs of youth placed at risk (Noguera, 2011). Inadvertently, one-dimensional academic programs, centered on high-stakes testing and the pressure to perform, tend to undermine the motivation of the students they most need to serve (Ryan & Weinstein, 2009). To ensure their success, youth need relevant intellectual challenge, social/emotional support, safe schools and communities, healthy minds and bodies, and supportive families and communities. If these multiple needs are not met, they become

vulnerable to stress and are placed at risk. If they are met, they become resilient to stress and experience a holistic sense of well-being.

Based on the 5H protective factors, the journal provides a comprehensive and useful source of research-based information to meet the multiple needs of vulnerable youth and promote their holistic well-being.

In 2003, the 5H protective factors were inductively constructed by a thematic analysis of the common categories of conference presentations over a period of five years at the NYAR Conference in Savannah (Rea & Stallworth-Clark, 2003). Over 500 conference presentations by adults who served youth in a variety of settings including schools, families, and communities were analyzed for common categories. The 5Hs were found to be comprehensive categories representative of the diverse ways that adults helped youth placed at risk. They represented potential areas of *protection* when promoted and *risk* when neglected or hindered. Initially the five categories were labeled as follows: intellectual achievement and talents, social and emotional skills, safety and violence prevention, physical and mental health, and family and community support.

Later, they were renamed by Rea using the acronym of the 5Hs to help conference attendees to understand that the strands were not merely a collection of impersonal research topics but were humanly connected as an organized whole to protect and serve youth placed at risk. The 5Hs are a comprehensive framework of protective factors for under-standing and meeting the holistic needs of the whole child. Since their construction, the 5Hs have served as interdisciplinary strands for the NYAR Conference, and now serve as interdisciplinary themes for the *NYAR Journal*. Writers for the journal are encouraged to address any one or a combination of the 5H protective factors for youth at risk. The 5H protective factors of well-being are consistent with contemporary holistic approaches for promoting the positive development of youth (Cohen, 2006; Comer, 2005; Lerner & Benson, 2003) and fostering comprehensive educational reform beyond what schools can do alone (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2012; Noguera, 2011).

The journal aims to promote the well-being of the whole child by educating the "whole village" of stakeholders who serve youth at risk including schoolteachers, school leaders, school counselors and psychologists, school and community social workers, intervention and prevention community therapists, community health and human service providers, juvenile justice professionals, volunteer youth service providers, business and community mentors, and last, but not least, parents and youth caretakers. Schools and teachers alone cannot meet the multiple needs of youth placed at risk; a whole village of well-informed service providers must work together to meet these multiple needs. The journal supports the inclusive and organized professional learning of the whole village based on the 5H protective factors.

Biased and Realistic Uses of "At Risk"
Historically, the term "at risk" as it applies to youth appears to have been borrowed from the medical study of the causes and effects of diseases and the identification of risk factors that make humans susceptible to diseases. However, the highly promoted publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) brought this term to the widespread attention of educators and the public. According to this report, our nation was at risk in the competitive global marketplace because of the poor test scores of United States students compared with our

students from the past and international students at that time. Soon after, this term became commonly associated with any group of students, especially minorities, who evidenced poor performance on standardized tests. Moreover, at risk status was commonly reduced to an internalized trait of low performing students (O'Connor, Hill, & Robinson, 2009). The *NYAR Journal* does not subscribe to this early biased view, which often negatively portrayed youth at risk as low-performing minorities with inherent deficiencies and personal problems. The journal presents a more hopeful and realistic view of youth at risk, in which the problem of poor performance is not in the youth but in the problematic conditions that threaten their well-being. The goal is not to attack or condemn the students who need our help the most but to attack and resolve the problematic conditions of inequity that undermine their chances of success.

The phrase, "youth at risk," as used in the *NYAR Journal* signifies the urgency and seriousness of educational and societal "risks" faced by youth today. We cannot prepare youth for or protect them from risks if we deny, ignore, or "sugar coat" the risks. They are real and must be named and confronted in ways that reduce the threats and promote the well-being of youth (Freire, 2000). The problematic conditions that place our youth at risk must be identified and accepted as problems before they can be solved and transformed. Moreover, as stated previously, the problem is not in the youth but in the problematic conditions that place them at risk. A realistic problem-solving approach avoids blaming students, teachers, or parents and asks what can we do together to solve the problems that jeopardize the well-being of our most vulnerable students.

Furthermore, it is important to note that youth at risk are not limited to minorities, inner-city youth, or youth from poverty backgrounds. From the perspective of the journal, all youth—including children and adolescents from every strata of society—can be placed at risk at some time in their development and to varying degrees. Even so called "gifted students" may be placed at risk by bullying, drug usage, premature sexual involvement, negative peer pressure, excessive pressure to perform for grades, and lack of academic challenge or relevant topics of interest. If not protected and guided, these risks can result in bodily harm and emotional insecurity, drug addiction, early pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases, undesirable and impulsive behaviors, performance anxiety, suicide, apathy, underperformance, and dropout (Carper, 2002; Hansen & Toso, 2007).

"At-Risk Youth" versus "Youth Placed At Risk"
The *NYAR Journal* follows the guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA) (2010) for the use of the term "at risk." The APA recommends that writers maintain the integrity and worth of all people as human beings and avoid language that labels or implies a person as a whole is at risk (e.g., "at-risk youth"). To preserve the individuality of the person, APA recommends the use of people-first language (e.g., "youth at risk," "youth placed at risk," "youth in high-risk settings," and "youth experiencing multiple risks").

The phrase "youth at risk" is preferred over "at risk youth" because it emphasizes the primary human identity of the person over the secondary influence of the risk. Youth are not risks, but they may experience risks. Their human identity is not defined by risk conditions or risk behaviors. Whereas "at-risk youth" implies the "risks" are internalized personal deficiencies or deficits in youth themselves, "youth at risk" implies the "risks" are externalized in the unhealthy environmental

conditions, which threaten youth's well-being. Rather than attempting to fix the deficits of the "at-risk youth," the focus shifts when using "youth at risk" to fixing the unhealthy environmental conditions that place youth at risk and creating a more healthy fit between youth and their environment. The purpose of the journal is to provide adults who serve youth with useful information to diminish and counter the harmful effects of risk conditions that threaten and interfere with youth's well-being.

Unpacking the Implied Meanings and Underlying Causes of "Youth At Risk"

The phrase "youth at risk" is often used in a general intuitive sense but it is not always clear what youth are placed at risk *by* or *for*. We can unpack the implied meaning of the phrase by making the possible "causes" and likely "consequences" of the unspecified "risk" structurally explicit in the following statements (Moore, 2006): "Youth are placed at risk *by* a problematic condition *for* a poor or harmful outcome" or similarly "If youth are exposed to a problematic condition, then they may experience a poor or harmful outcome." When writing or reading about youth at risk, it is important to identify clearly the "problematic conditions" and the "poor outcomes" and to understand their relationship.

Being "at risk" does not imply certainty. The relationship between the problematic conditions and the poor outcomes is not an absolute causal relationship. It indicates chance or probability. Risk conditions raise the chances of poor outcomes. In other words, the likelihood or chances of suffering poor outcomes depends on the severity of and susceptibility to the risk conditions. Furthermore, protective factors such as the 5Hs may diminish or counter the risk conditions and raise the chances of positive outcomes.

Often poor outcomes in schools are narrowly focused on low student achievement. However, using the 5Hs, we can identify five interrelated categories of poor or harmful outcomes: the neglect and hindrance of youth's intellectual development, social/emotional needs, safety, health, and family/community support. Hence, educators in schools and communities should not pay attention solely to youth's lack of intellectual achievement but be holistically concerned with poor outcomes in all 5H areas.

Some specific problematic conditions (risk factors) afflicting youth include, but are not limited to, poverty, racism, substance abuse, school violence, gangs, bullying, negative peer pressure, negative school climate, lack of relevant curriculum, passive instructional strategies, disregard for individual learning differences, ineffective and unfair discipline policies, low or biased teacher expectations, unqualified teachers, inadequate counseling, teen pregnancy, sexual assault and harassment, unhealthy eating practices, abusive and neglectful parents, lack of community resources, and community violence. From this list, it is apparent that the problematic conditions afflicting youth are numerous and interrelated and without protective factors may lead to poor or harmful outcomes.

Although poverty is one of several problematic conditions placing students at risk, its negative effects on educational outcomes appear to be widespread and profound (Berliner, 2006). A recent national teacher survey revealed that 91% of the teachers spend their own money on classroom supplies; 54% used their own money to help feed students; 49% helped a student get new clothing or footwear; and 29% arranged for a student to receive medical attention (Communities in Schools, 2015). Furthermore, over 67% of our nation's public schools are eligible for Federal Title I funding to support

students in poverty to meet academic state standards (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

Educators such as Gorski (2013) and Noguera (2003) proposed that educational inequity underlies many of the problematic conditions—including poverty—that place youth at risk for poor academic outcomes. For example, Gorski described some educational inequities that place students in poverty at risk:

> Poor students are assigned disproportionately to the most inadequately funded schools …with the largest class sizes…and lowest paid teachers…They are more likely than their wealthier peers to be bullied…and more likely to attend school in poorly maintained buildings…They are denied access to… dedicated school nurses…well-stocked libraries…, and engaging pedagogies. (p. 1)

While educational inequity contributes to several problematic conditions that place students at risk, educational equity on the other hand contributes to their academic excellence (Blankstein, Noguera, & Kelly, 2015; Gorski, 2013). According to Noguera (2009), educators can and must be "guardians of equity" by practicing it in their classrooms and schools. If educators are to fulfill the promise of public education, they need to guarantee educational equity for all students, especially the most vulnerable. Educational equity does not mean educating every student the same way. It means providing the individual protection and support needed to ensure the educational success of all students. In other words, it implies giving students the personal assistance and supplies they need to be successful. The *NYAR Journal* endorses educational equity as a means of closing the opportunity gap and safeguarding the success of youth placed at risk.

EDITOR INTRODUCTIONS

The following individuals served as editors of this inaugural issue of the *NYAR Journal*:

Cordelia Zinskie, Editor, serves as a Professor of Educational Research at Georgia Southern University. She served as chair of the Department of Curriculum, Foundations, and Reading from 2006 until 2013. She teaches graduate courses in research methods (quantitative and qualitative), statistics, and proposal writing, and her most recent research efforts have focused on online teaching and learning (e-learning). She has significant experience mentoring graduate student research at the Ed.S. and Ed.D. levels and has served as an evaluator on a number of funded grants.

Dan Rea, Associate Editor, is currently a Professor of Educational Psychology at Georgia Southern University in the Department of Curriculum, Foundations, and Reading. He has worked as a secondary mathematics teacher in inner-city and alternative Title I schools and as an assistant and associate professor of educational psychology respectively at Doane College, Nebraska and University of Wisconsin at Whitewater. Since 1994, he has served as a co-chair of the National Youth-At-Risk Conference and published numerous articles and edited books on fostering the well-being of youth placed at risk, motivating student underachievers, and building learning communities in schools. Presently, he is a Co-Director of the National Youth-At-Risk Center, which administers the NYAR Conferences and the *NYAR Journal*.

James C. Jupp, Associate Editor, works as an Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Pedagogy at Georgia Southern University. He worked in rural and inner-city Title I settings for 18 years before accepting a position working with teachers, administrators, and researchers at the university level. A public

schoolteacher in diverse Title I schools, his primary line of research focuses on committed White teachers' understandings of race, class, language and difference pedagogy. Drawing on his experiences as a teacher, he is the author of the award-winning book, *Becoming Teachers of Inner-City Students* (2013), which contributes to an understanding of the preparation of White teachers for work in urban schools.

Olufunke Adefope, Associate Editor, is an Assistant Professor at Georgia Southern University in the Department of Teaching and Learning. She taught mathematics to 7th and 8th grade students in a high-needs school district in Brooklyn, New York. She also taught mathematics to out of school youth at a non-profit organization in New York City. Her research interests include investigating strategies that can be used to best support African-American males' mathematical learning experiences.

PREVIEW OF ISSUE CONTENT
We invited several of our editorial board members and long-time supporters of the National Youth-At-Risk Conference to contribute submissions to the inaugural issue; all of these individuals are well-respected educators with a commitment to meeting the needs of youth placed at risk.

Dan Rea's interview with Pedro Noguera focuses on how to help students and schools in poverty. Noguera provides three major recommendations for both school personnel and policymakers to assist this population: make learning relevant, establish a positive school culture, and integrate students' academic needs with their social and physical needs.

The article by Emily Gibson and Robert Barr, "Building a Culture of Hope for Youth At Risk: Supporting Learners with Optimism, Place, Pride, and Purpose," focuses on how attention to students' social-emotional needs is needed before learning can take place. Drawing on the authors' well-researched four "seeds of hope" from their book, *Building a Culture of Hope* (2013), this article discusses a practical plan for integrating a culture of hope into schools and classrooms.

Rajni Shankar-Brown contributes an essay, "Urbanization and Persistent Educational Inequalities: The Need for Collective Action Towards Equity and Social Justice," that addresses both historical and current conditions that have created barriers to success for children attending public schools in urban areas. Shankar-Brown summarizes the influence of political, social, economic, and cultural factors on education of urban youth. Her essay ends with a call to other educators regarding the need for increased emphasis on addressing educational inequalities in urban settings.

In the next article, Rosemary Barnett, Caroline Payne-Purvis, and Gerald Culen present their empirical research, "Perceptions of Community and Risk Behavior Exposure for Youth in At Risk Environments." They examine survey data gathered from children participating in an after-school program designed to enhance community engagement of youth placed at risk. Their results show that youth with a more positive perception of their community were less likely to be exposed to risk behaviors in the community. This research supports the use of targeted programs to assist students in looking beyond their current environment to the future.

Robert Lake reviews Paul Gorski's book, *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty* (2013); he describes the main idea of each chapter and notes how Gorski's work resonates with him both professionally and personally. Lake emphasizes Gorski's guiding principles for understanding and creating equitable learning environments for students in poverty as well as research-based teaching strategies addressed

in the book that have proven effective with students of poverty.

We conclude the inaugural issue with our *Art Corner*, a feature that highlights artistic efforts of individuals who share our passion for meeting the needs of youth placed at risk. George E. Miller II, a child advocacy artist, displays his artwork in this issue. His colorful illustrations are vibrant, multicultural, and uplifting. He uses his artistic gift to draw attention to educational concerns such as literacy, dropout prevention, mental health, child abuse prevention, and homelessness. His artwork recognizes and inspires adults that serve our children and foster their well-being. Miller has previously exhibited his artwork at the NYAR Conference in Savannah.

Although there is not one common theme for this issue, there are multiple, interrelated themes that widely address at-risk issues. Some of the interrelated themes are the effects of poverty on youth, the need for hope and a supportive school culture, the importance of positive perceptions of the community, the call for educational equity and social justice, and the usefulness of a broad view of youth's needs and their holistic development. These themes cover more than the identification and analysis of risk outcomes; they provide a deep understanding of the underlying problematic conditions and a broad but practical approach to helping adults serve youth at risk.

CONCLUSION

According to Spencer, Fegley, and Dupree (2006), "Vulnerability is part of the human condition that can be thought of as a balance between risk factors and protective factors" (p. 67). If risk factors (problematic conditions) predominate over protective factors, youth become vulnerable to stress and are placed at risk for poor outcomes in school and life. On the other hand, if protective factors predominate over risk factors, youth become

resilient to stress and experience a holistic sense of well-being. The mission of the *NYAR Journal* is to educate and enable concerned adults to tip the balance in favor of our youth. We can fulfill this mission by eliminating educational inequities and closing the opportunity gap that prevents our most vulnerable youth from attaining a quality education and achieving a better life. Through our service to youth, we set in motion small but critical changes that can grow and make life-changing differences for those who need them the most. We hope you find the *NYAR Journal* an informative and useful resource to foster youth's well-being and make the American dream a reality for all youth.

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