

BOOK REVIEW

The Trouble With Black Boys...And Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education

Noguera, Pedro A. (2008). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
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As a new school year gets underway, many educators return to classrooms and administrative settings with renewed determination for dealing with the ongoing, complex, and elusive problems addressed in the book being reviewed. These problems revolve around the disheartening achievement gap between affluent White students and low-income Black and Latino students-particularly males of color. Sadly, the standardized tests scores continue to suggest that our minority males are the lowest achievers. Furthermore, resource rooms and detention centers continue to be disproportionately represented by our male minority students (Schott Foundation, 2004). Strategies for understanding and remedying the unresolved situation come and go, yet the problems continue throughout public education in the United States today (Kohn, 1999; Kozol, 2005).

As educators, we ask ourselves questions concerning education's role and responsibilities in affecting positive social change for low achieving students as they navigate society's school systems and the real world beyond: Do we as educators perpetuate or even cause the achievement gaps? Can we possibly be held accountable for all of society's woes? What are key areas of change needed? What is an appropriate role for us as agents of change?

The Trouble With Black Boys...And Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education tackles these and many related questions in a remarkably ordered, well-reasoned, research-based, and compassionate construction of personal accounts and studies that support the author's contention that, essentially, "... our society-its schools, churches, private businesses and corporations, and local government-must do more to address the ways in which Black boys and men are set up for failure" (Noguera, 2008, p.xxv). The author weaves his collective research findings with his own personal experiences as a Black student, K-12 classroom teacher, and a self-described "urban sociologist" (consulting, doing research, serving as a professor at Steinhardt School of Education at New York University most recently, in addition to the Harvard Graduate School of Education from 2000-2003, and at the University of

California, Berkley, from 1990-2000), culminating in a comprehensive, multifaceted view of the situation. The critical, central role of education in the discussions throughout the book does not diminish Noguera's (2008) attention to the influences exerted by family and society beyond school that also contribute significantly to the negative trends and, importantly, young Black males' self-concept and cultural identification (p.41). Rather, the author argues that family and social impacts from outside school walls are magnified within the microcosm of society that students experience in school.

To the reader's relief, this book is not just another discouraging picture of the tangled problems we find ourselves in. Noguera (2008) examines successful schools whose students are high achievers representing all races, cultures, and genders. He interviews students as well as teachers and administrators to identify applicable principles for replicating the positive characteristics in struggling schools. The short lists and essays summing up favorable practices and traits of these successful schools can strike the reader as simplistic, idealistic, and obvious upon first consideration, but the exciting outcomes found as a result of the high achieving schools' practices put one's skepticism to rest.

Some examples of the "simple" solutions offered can be found in the recommendations from some successful, formerly at-risk minority male students. They suggest that teachers "...should be organized and well prepared for the classes they teach" and they "should have a strong command of the material and a passion for the subjects they teach so that they can get the students to be excited about learning it" (pp. 62-63). The students emphasized that their teachers also show respect and expect it, they listen carefully to their students, and they adjust their teaching to the students' needs and interests (pp. 62-63). The lists and examples go on to illustrate practices that all caring, responsive teachers would like to think they include every day in their teaching practice...but how many actually do, on a consistent basis? Noguera (2008) reminds us throughout his real life examples that the reality we prefer needs to be recreated each day, each hour, and with each student we interact with.

That said, consciously exerting equitable portions of positive energy and conveying sincerely high expectations to both the enthusiastic, respectful learners as well as the confrontational, uncooperative students is a challenge that the author acknowledges can be exhausting and fraught with dead ends for teachers. And how does all the responsibility for a society

gone awry fall in the laps of already overworked teachers? In response, Noguera (2008) emphasizes that the responsibility is certainly not to be the exclusive burden of teachers, and in fact school leaders are more often driving the decisions and policies that get in the way of effective teaching and high achieving students (Chapter 6). Still, teachers spend the most time with students, and can exert more influence on a regular basis (p.103). He points out that public schools are still modeled after fear-based paradigms in which there is a power struggle between students and authority figures derived from centuries-old asylum constructs (p.89). Emphasis on teacher-student dialogue rather than management of classes emerges once the "fear barrier" is removed (p.128). Shifting paradigms from a power-based, fear oriented approach can liberate teachers to get back to the high quality, student centered teaching they prefer. Optimum teaching is interrupted when students act out from fear and resentment, and teachers conduct classes in an atmosphere of fear and self-protective micromanagement. To this end, Noguera (2008) describes a high performing school where local retired grandmothers serve as hall "security" personnel to support the school climate of trust and nurturing among the staff and students (p.109).

As readers go through each chapter of this book, they may find themselves marveling, as this reviewer did, at the many "in-depth look at the obvious" case studies it provides. Despite the "obviousness" of the proposals, somehow they add up to form a convincing, compelling argument for Noguera's (2008) optimistic, simple solutions to pervasive, troubling challenges faced by educators in today's society. The essays, examples, and research summaries contained in his book are designed to unapologetically show how simple respect and mutual caring between troubled young minority students and adults can help bridge the gaps in achievement caused by impoverished, abusive, and deprived home lives. Additionally, community involvement and responsibility in partnership with schools are also key in the author's equation for a less institutional, more humanistic construct for teaching our students. Breaking the negative "patterns of interaction" (p.227) and replacing them with new options for self-concepts within young people can stop cycles of negative choices from perpetuating the violence, poor health, and poverty that all contribute to failure in school and society (p.19).

The impressive evidence presented within Noguera's (2008) own research, along with plentiful supporting studies representing decades of research in the topics of concern,

converge to persuade the reader that there is more hope than despair when it comes to finding solutions for our too-numerous failures among Black and other minority males. This is recommended reading for educators' beginning-of-the-year inspiration.

References

Kohn, A. (1999). *The Schools Our Children Deserve*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Kozol, J. (2005). *The Shame of the Nation*. New York: Random House.

Schott Foundation. (2004). *Public Education and Black Male Students*. Cambridge, MA: Schott Foundation.