

BOOK REVIEW

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

by Pedro Noguera, Jossey-Bass, 2008, 352 pp.

Review by Jeremy Cutler, University of Pennsylvania

In *The Trouble With Black Boys... and Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education*, Pedro Noguera takes a thoughtful yet critical look at the myriad of social, cultural, and political factors that have resulted in the troubling achievement levels for poor and minority students. Noguera critiques the currently pervasive habit of blaming schools, teachers, parents, and especially kids for the educational failures of inner-city public schools instead of acknowledging the larger social and economic inequalities at work in our society that undermine our ability to educate all children. Using many case studies and vignettes, Noguera shows how instead of recognizing the fact that poor children come to school with very different needs, policy-makers have become accustomed to condemning and humiliating urban schools and the poor and minority students who attend them. And in the instances where schools *are* experiencing success in educating poor and minority kids, Noguera argues that remarkably less energy has been focused on studying and replicating those particular schools and techniques. In *The Trouble With Black Boys*, Noguera sets out to correct that: to highlight and build upon reforms that can work in urban schools; and to create ideas that can serve to support and engage the historically vulnerable and marginalized students – poor children, African American males, and recent immigrants.

Noguera's essays are grouped, by chapters, into three main sections. The first section, "The Student Experience," explores the ways in which cultural and structural factors, both in and outside of schools, have a profound effect on school performance. Noguera points out how critical it is to understand

both the way in which racial identity is formed in schools, as well as how this identity directly influences academic performance for minority students. These studies are often missing from discussions which address the risks faced by young minority students.

The second section, "The Search for Equity," is largely concerned with the way that the 'traditional' goals of public schools—sorting students, socializing them, and maintaining order and control over them—have inadvertently helped in creating environments that are more susceptible to marginalization, disengagement, and violence among students. Disciplinary measures based on control and exclusion create disadvantages for certain children more than others; few educators have been willing to look at the ways that schools structures have served to reproduce this inequality. Alternatively, in instances when schools have put energy into seeking out and/or replicating successful models, or shown a willingness to study the effects of their own practices, the possibility for progress and more equitable conditions has increased radically.

Finally, the last section, "The Schools We Need," serves to highlight some steps that have proven effective in mitigating the ways that concentrated poverty, racial isolation, and other political factors have traditionally been impediments to school improvement. Some of the suggestions include empowering and involving both parents and community organizations by investing in social capital, and creating a culture that questions the failure of urban schools, rather than expecting and accepting it.

While Noguera's book reflects on the general role of race in schools and

society, two of the chapters are devoted specifically to issues of immigration. In Chapter 3, "And What Will Become of Children Like Miguel Fernandez?" Noguera conveys his concern for Latino students in schools today. He cites that they have the highest dropout rates and lowest college attendance rates (Garcia, 2001) and are overrepresented in categories such as enrollment in special education and high suspensions from schools, while being underrepresented in positive categories such as honors courses or gifted and talented programs (Meier & Stewart, 1991). Noguera looks at some of the reasons why Latino immigrants have had little success in using education as a means to social mobility and fulfilling the 'American dream. He chronicles the way in which first-generation hopeful immigrants quickly turn into second and third generation Latinos who have become angry and frustrated. These conflicting perspectives raise some interesting questions. For example, Noguera asks, how can the energy and drive of recent immigrants be harnessed in ways that are productive and positive, but at the same time empower them to refuse "a permanent place on the lower rungs of American society" (p. 59)?

Chapter 5, "Latino Youth: Immigration, Education, and the Future," attempts to understand how Latino youth adjust to their life in the United States, as well as how they navigate the specific challenge of growing up in a society that is both politically and socially hostile to their presence. Noguera addresses some of the challenges that take place inside of or in relation to schools, and he suggests some interventions that schools can make to become more supportive and responsive. Noguera presents an interesting comparison be-

tween Latino immigrants of today and European immigrants of earlier generations. Noguera recounts that while the earlier European immigrants encountered hardships and discrimination, their assimilation eventually brought social mobility and racial equality. Further, the author explores some trends which indicate that acculturation and assimilation is actually working against the success of Latino immigrants, and is resulting in the lowering of academic achievement (Suarez-Orosco & Suarez-Orosco, 2001). On the other hand, Noguera illustrates that if schools were to focus more on implementing culturally-relevant curricula and pedagogy for these students, Latino immigrants might be more prepared to navigate the hardships.

The Trouble With Black Boys is a collection of essays; therefore some ideas reappear occasionally and some of the chapters flow into each other more fluidly than others. Taken as a whole, however, Noguera's work is a both forceful and hopeful critique of urban education. The author writes in a style that is exceptionally clear and engaging, which may partly be due to the way that Noguera seamlessly combines his theoretical framework with examples from his practice as a high school teacher, school board president, university professor, and consultant to urban schools. Another factor that makes *The Trouble With Black Boys* such a compelling read is that Noguera proposes specific solutions for addressing these seemingly intractable problems, and usually provides personal data or anecdotes that support the validity of his ideas. For that reason, the book serves as an excellent guide not only for policy makers and academic reformers, but also for teachers, parents, and administrators looking for immediate and practical solutions to the daily struggles in their schools and with their own practice. Although Noguera concedes that a complete effort to improve urban public schools would "address the educational issues in concert with other issues, such as poverty, joblessness, and the lack of public services" (p. 230), Noguera's specific suggestions in this collection serve as a solid and courageous base upon which to pursue eq-

uity for students of all races and socioeconomic levels.

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Penn GSE Perspectives On Urban Education
www.urbanedjournal.org
Published by the University of Pennsylvania
Graduate School of Education
3700 Walnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104
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