

## *City Schools and the American Dream: Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education*

by Pedro Noguera. Teachers College Press: New York, 2003.  
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Having reviewed more than 100 scholarly books for purposes of journal publication, this is the only review in which I am compelled to make this simple judgment: *This book should never have been published.* Which raises the question, Why do people in the academy publish books? I suspect for two major reasons. First, academicians write books as teaching contributions, a powerful collection of wisdom in the discipline organized in ways that advance teaching and learning in higher education. Second, scholars write books that break new ground and add new knowledge in the context of one or more disciplines. Done well, a few books achieve both these goals. This new publication by Pedro Noguera, a Harvard professor, does neither.

At best, *City Schools and the American Dream* represents, on one hand, a poorly told string of personal stories and experiences with innumerable anecdotes familiar to anyone working in struggling schools. On the other hand, this 157-page monograph reads like a self-righteous script preaching against the blindness of privilege and those Black scholars who locate the problem of minority (read "non-White") underachievement within Black culture. To be blunt, this is a nonscholarly book that lacks in any theoretical sophistication or empirical credibility, even though the pages are dotted with superficial references to a diverse mix of social science and education researchers from John Ogbu to Paulo Freire to Shelby Steele. The major source of "data" here is personal, drawing as it does on the experiences of the author as a public school teacher, member of a school board, college professor, parent, activist, and bureaucrat in Northern California concerned with troubled schools from Oakland to Berkeley.

Judged by its own goals, the book sets itself an ambitious task: "to show how urban schools are affected by the social environment in which they are located and to put forward a set of strategies to transform, improve, and fundamentally restructure them" (p. 8). Are these goals achieved? No.

The first reason for the underachievement of this book is that it trots out a series of truisms that have been the basis for education activism for more than 60 years in much of the world. Truisms such as the social context within which our education institutions are embedded sets outer limits on what schools can achieve. I found this repetition extremely frustrating because almost every major writer in education, radicals and liberals alike, and not a few conservatives, has made this point for decades. What is worse, when the author then moves into "solutions," he concludes limply—after a rather long description of an intervention (the Diversity Project) to close the academic achievement gap in Berkeley schools: "I readily admit that all our work may have been for nought; there is no guarantee that patterns that have been in place for years will be permanently altered" (p. 80).

The second reason why this book lacks any serious scholarly merit is because of its theoretical sloppiness in addressing what is perhaps the most perplexing question facing North Americans in their struggle to achieve equity in and through schooling. That question is, why do African American students underachieve in relation to other

minorities? The author speaks favorably about John Ogbu's explanation of "oppositional identities" among Black youth but blasts the "victimology" perspectives of scholars like Shelby Steele—whose crime is to co-locate responsibility within the Black community itself. As both a former resident in the United States of America and an African outsider observing these debates, I have been struck by the reluctance of activists and theorists to acknowledge two simple points. First, that the ways in which stories of anger, impotence, and oppression have been carried down intergenerationally among African Americans contribute largely to the sense of helplessness and defeat among this troubled group of citizens. Second, that the ways in which racism and capitalism affect the achievement of Black and poor children set permanent constraints on this most persistent American lie that schools can redeem society or, in populist rhetoric, "any-one can become President!" Noguera's solutions are neither novel nor useful for those of us who work with struggling schools—whether it be in South Africa's Soweto or in California's Oakland School District. Its evangelical tone, holding out hope for the damned, is crucial for activism but worthless for scholarship unless this book tackles the underlying causes of misery in schools and society by name: such as racism, imperialism, capitalism, and yes, the participation of people in our own demise. For example, we need to pose unpleasant questions about the educability of kids whose nervous tissue is shot through with crack cocaine; about the desirability of asking schools to compensate for the ravages of a destructive society and, in the process, to play the role of the juvenile prison system; and the possibility of taking the struggle for equity and justice out of the classroom and into the political realm. For when a self-proclaimed civilized democracy takes it upon itself to blast to ruins one of the world's oldest civilizations, how dare we ask the youth of that same democracy to live lives of compassion, fairness, and justice?