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Blankstein, A. M., & Noguera, P. (2015). *Excellence through equity: Five principles of courageous leadership to guide achievement for every student*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin Press.

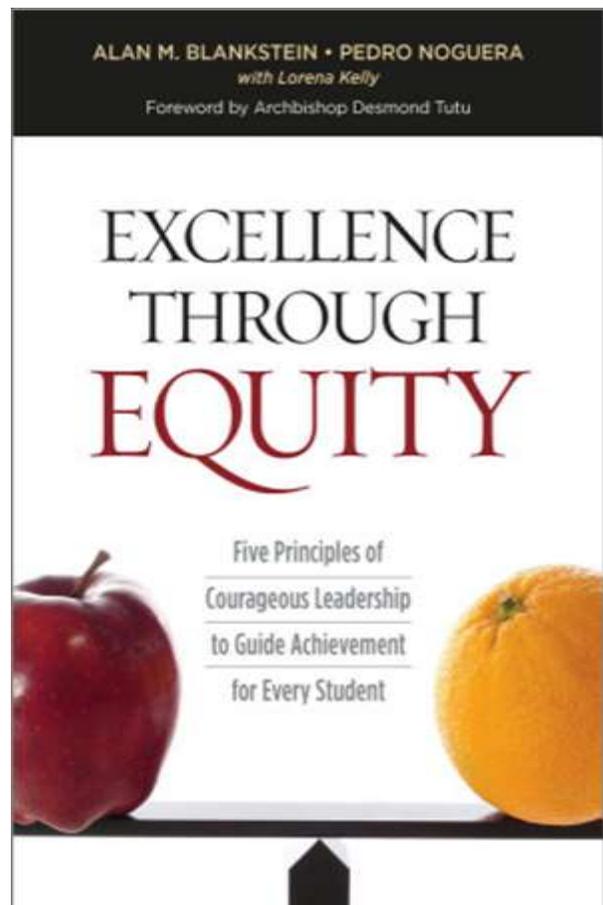
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“If my child is forced to collaborate with poor students, he or she will be pulled down academically” (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015, p. 9). This and other concerns are addressed in the book *Excellence Through Equity: Five Principles of Courageous Leadership to Guide Achievement for Every Student*. Authors Alan Blankstein and Pedro Noguera combine their wisdom and experience to provide a lens of courageous hope for all teachers, educational leaders, and policy makers. In addition to outlining a three-part paradigm of excellence through equity, the authors leverage the strength of practitioner success stories throughout the United States which provide the reader several concrete examples of courageous leadership illustrating excellence through equity. In this work, equity is defined as a commitment to ensure that every student receives what he or she needs to succeed.

The premise of the book is one of optimistic change based in educational theory that we have known for years (child development), understanding of current science (neuroscience), and recognizing the role of education to mitigate outside factors



(environmental influences). Changing our current actions takes courage. Thus, the remaining framework of the book is nested in the five principles of courageous leadership (courage to act, getting to your core, making organizational meaning, ensuring constancy and consistency of purpose, facing the facts and your fears, and building sustainable relationships).

The book begins with a typical sequence of events that occurs in many schools and districts across the nation: It is end of the school year and the state test results have just arrived. Teachers and administrators huddle around data visualizations of student performance. Students are categorized into levels of achievement such as Below Expectations, Barely Meets, Meets, and Exceeds Expectations. Data is disaggregated to identify differences in achievement, with special attention to specific populations such as students receiving Special Education services, students receiving English Language Learner (ELL) services, students who are economically disadvantaged, and differences in performance of students disaggregated by race. More often than not, the historical trends that have been established are, again, confirmed in this recent iteration of tests. The test scores likely fall into packages of data sorted by race, socioeconomic status, and zip code. Upon this realization, emotions kick in. Teachers and administrators feel discouraged that their best efforts resulted in little change to improve the achievement gap. Conversation about how to serve the needs of privileged and disadvantaged students both moves to resource allocation and the notion that when more is done for struggling students then less is done for advantaged students. A sense of haves and have-nots is present. Winners and losers. Paralysis starts to set in and the complexity continues.

Blankstein and Noguera offer hope with their new paradigm of thinking to meet the complex needs of students. Child development has been part of teacher preparation programs for years. However, our

expectation of adequate yearly progress has trumped our understanding of the variations in child developmental milestones. Instead of generalized expectations for all, Blankstein and Noguera champion personalized learning and other programming that is responsive to the developmental need of each student. Current neuroscience provides a message of hope. Our brains are able to change and grow throughout our lifetime. The experiences we have in school will and do have an impact in our brain capability. Relevant learning related to life experiences is more than just engaging, it is learning that taps into already-existing pathways in the brain. Teachers can cultivate talent and ability in their students by understanding how best to increase brain development. Environmental influences are often out school's scope of influence. Students' context may include food insecurity, housing instability, lack of safety, and other environmental factors that have a significant influence on children and learning. However, when educators and leaders acknowledge the impact of these environmental factors, schools can partner with community services that meet the needs of their unique student context.

The varied examples provided in the book offer a range of settings, ages, and outcomes. The authors suggest that through persistence and courageous leadership, similar successes can be replicated in other settings. Through the following examples, the reader is likely able to identify enhancements to their current actions in order to better champion equity for all.

**Example 1.** Ability grouping and tracking can become a closed door for some students. When a student is placed in an ability track, students can internalize this judgement as definition of present and future potential. Furthermore, the simplicity and performance-level descriptors of ability groups can become a substitute for deeper, professional conversations about students and student performance. Staff and community of Rockville Centre School District in New York

worked hard to deconstruct routines of tracking. The results have been notable including increased challenge in all classes, eliminating the racial gap of students earning their Regents diploma, and establishing systems of support available for all students.

**Example 2.** Learning is a social process. Cultivating student voice emphasizes collaborative dialogue and ownership of learning. Oak Hill School of Alabama provides program examples of students crafting and articulating their future-selves. When students are engaged within the school context by their heart and intellectually challenged, a commitment to personal learning accelerates individual and collective accomplishment. Especially for students under constant stereotype threat, a sense of belonging leads to higher academic engagement and performance.

**Example 3.** Through the NCLB years, we have trained our minds to narrowly define educational success through test scores. Even with hyper vigilance, achievement gaps on standardized tests still persist. The Consortium, a coalition of public schools in New York, highlight examples of an alternative way to build students' skills and assess progress in achieving them. High expectations and student voice are emphasized in The Consortium's use of performance-based assessment and inquiry pedagogy. Performance-based assessments are typically more robust than the typical multiple-choice standardized state test. Inquiry pedagogy allows all students to participate in their

learning and decreases their reliance on teacher-directed conversations.

Blankstein and Noguera challenge the reader to consider the impasse between the pursuit of excellence and equity. The complexity of educational excellence extends beyond academic standards and accountability. For any reader, the pursuit of excellence is engrained in our educator-minded heart already. This new paradigm helps focus our mindset on equity and solutions instead of zero-sum winners and losers.

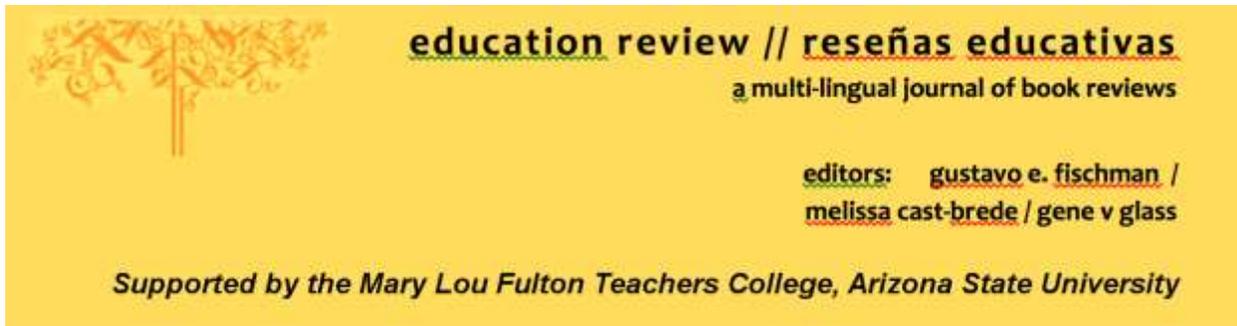
When there is mutual accountability and a shared commitment to the common goal of meeting the needs of all students among all stakeholders, school can begin to realize the goal of excellence through equity. (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015, p. 21)

To be summarized in more simple terms: do our best for each student. The momentum of personalized success for each student builds a wave of system success. Achievement gap reports and adequate yearly progress requirements have sparked awareness of inequities. However, resulting actions have not made significant impact on this gap. *Excellence Through Equity: Five Principles of Courageous Leadership to Guide Achievement for Every Student* is a hopeful invitation and reminder that when we frame our action-oriented thinking in the three pillars of excellence through equity, we are able to move from the mundane and predictable results of our work to extraordinary excellence for all.

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## About the Reviewer

**Tami Williams** is an Assistant Professor in the Educational Leadership Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. She advocates for personalized learning and culturally proficient leadership. Williams served as a district administrator, building administrator, and classroom teacher for 17 years before entering higher education.



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