



education review/reseñas educativas

editor: gene v glass

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a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

February 25, 2010

Arizona State University

ISSN 1094-5296

Noguera, Pedro A. & Wing, Jean Yonemura. (Eds.) (2006).
Unfinished Business: Closing the Racial Achievement Gap in Our Schools.
San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

Pp. 336

ISBN 978-0-7879-7275-2

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February 25, 2010

Educational sociologists/researchers tend to agree that social class matters in our everyday lives. However, beliefs about how class matters ought to be treated in the educational milieu are difficult at best, contentious at worst. *Unfinished Business: Closing The Racial Achievement Gap In Our Schools* (henceforth *Unfinished Business*) is a pioneering book insofar as its two co-editors, Noguera and Wing, as well as their diverse collaborators investigate the interplay of race and achievement by employing a case-study framework.

The case is Berkeley High School, a large public school (over 3,000 students) in Berkeley, California and “the

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Citation: Hartlep, Nicholas. (2010 February 25). Review of *Unfinished Business* by Pedro A. Noguera & Jean Yonemura Wing. *Education Review*, 13. Retrieved [Date] from <http://edrev.asu.edu/reviews/rev889.pdf>

most integrated high school in America” according to the *New York Times*. The units of analyses are (a) high school students’ educational negotiation practices and (b) decision-making processes. The study was an “instrumental” case study because it attempted to understand *general phenomena* in regard to the case, Berkeley High School (Stake, 1995).

The case and units of analyses in this longitudinal case study are very appropriate for this line of research. Berkeley’s diverse student population clearly illustrates and personifies the “achievement gap” phenomenon, which is flourishing in our nation’s schools. *Unfinished Business* elucidates the hidden inequities of schools—where cultural attitudes, academic tracking, curricular access, and after-school activities serve as sorting apparatuses that propel students on trajectories of either success or failure.

This review critiques *Unfinished Business* and analyzes the arguments made through creating nexuses with extant educational and sociological research and literature. While the analyses and critiques herein are qualitative-laden, the critiques made are constructed to be meaningful and meant to extend the racial achievement gap discourse in staff lounges—in our nation’s preK-12 schools and faculty lounges—in colleges and universities; let us begin.

Unfinished Business is unique to the education field because of its unorthodox style; it states explicitly that the research conducted and contained in the book’s chapters did not accomplish what it endeavored to do initially—that is, to make Berkeley High School a place where racial disparities in academic achievement could be reduced through school change. Nevertheless, the research was illuminating and provides a jump-off point that enables future research to continue this inquiry and mission. Some of the illuminating elements unearthed were the following:

1. *Organizational Dysfunction and Lack of Leadership*—referring to the continuous changes and alterations to Berkeley’s school leadership (e.g. from 1996-2002, five different principals or co-principals served as leaders).
2. *Conflict versus Collaboration in the School Reform Process*—referring to the juxtaposition of researchers



Pedro A. Noguera

(presumably experts) and community members (families, teachers, staff, etc).

The highly cited expression, “It takes a village to raise a child,” holds water. Noguera, Wing, and colleagues’ truth-claim that the lines of research need to become blurred is accurate and is meritorious. The overall argument made in *Unfinished Business* is that there are many different, nuanced subtleties that all contribute to the vexing problem of racial achievement gap. There is no singular, catch-all, silver bullet that will cure our nation’s schools.

Nevertheless, extending the research on how Organizational Dysfunction and Lack of Leadership impacts learning is worth its weight in gold. Similarly, many schools in addition to Berkeley’s have fluctuating and ever-changing school leadership. While the recruitment and retention of quality school leaders is vital, it is something that if continually changed and altered can have harmful repercussions, which may manifest themselves in the racial imbalance of school achievement.

Further, schools must eliminate hostility towards conflict and move more towards collaborating in the school reform process. For this to occur, researchers and academics must become insiders through actively listening to its informants and participants. Researchers will be well-served if they listen more before proclaiming their superiority as it relates to academic degrees and distinction.

These two facets—organizational dysfunction and lack of leadership as well as conflict versus collaboration in the school reform process—are the essences Noguera, Wing, and colleagues discovered. It is these essences that are so powerful and productive for future research on the racial achievement gap.

Notwithstanding their great discoveries and nuanced perceptions of how the achievement gap manifested itself in Berkeley, Noguera, Wing, and colleagues’ research at times fails to deliver in the adequacy of their explanations and assertions. At times the coeditors and contributors speak to

inequalities and injustice; however, they never assert critical arguments. Noguera, Wing, and colleagues (2006) actually “[...] take issue with...pessimism related to possibilities for school change or the likelihood that education can be used to counter inequality” (p. 283). There is an inordinate amount of research that speaks to the sources of educational inequality (see Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1981; Anyon, 1997; Rothstein, 2004). Rothstein (2004) declares, “The influence of social class characteristics is probably so powerful that schools cannot overcome it, no matter how well trained are their teachers and no matter how well designed are their instructional programs and climates” (p. 6). *Unfinished Business* is powerful and replete with arguments and evidence. Nevertheless, it is the author’s perspective that the book would be augmented, for the better, if more critical arguments were made.

Unfinished Business is a must-read book for all who work for the betterment of children’s lives. It is cogently written, which makes for an enjoyable and easy read. This in itself is a magical feat, since there are so many different contributors (students, teachers, researchers) to the book. Coeditors Noguera and Wing should be acknowledged for editing a piece of research that many will come to cite and refer to, especially since the racial achievement gap has gained currency as a topic for research.

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