African American Males: An Endangered Species in the 21st Century?

A review of

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

by Pedro A. Noguera


Reviewed by

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The Trouble With Black Boys: And Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education provides the reader with the current status of African American boys as they attempt to achieve their full academic potential within the U.S. public school system. Gibbs (1988) proclaimed, in a classic volume, that African American males, as a group, were an endangered species as a result of the institutionalized racism that persists in our society. Noguera, in this volume, argues that unfortunately we haven't made substantial progress along these lines since 1988. He incorporates into this discussion the plight of Latino males and their families, who are coping with acculturative stressors.
Noguera has divided his volume into the following three parts: (a) experiences of male students of color in urban schools and the negative impact of these experiences on their subsequent academic potential, (b) the continual search for equity and excellence among male students of color within the public school establishment, and (c) how public schools need to transform, on the basis of a best practices model, if we are ever to have equity and excellence for male students of color within the public education establishment. The theme that runs throughout this volume is that all marginalized and stigmatized male students of color, independent of the barriers and hurdles, will thrive in learning environments that provide them with sufficient resources and nurturance (e.g., Foster, 1997).

There exists a longstanding literature that focuses on the plight of African American males here in the United States written by scholars of color that has remained almost invisible within the mainstream behavioral sciences/education literature (Carbado, 1999; Davis, 1999; Gibbs, 1988; Hilliard, 1998; King, 2005; Kunjufu, 2001, 2002; Merrick, 2001; Connor & White, 2006; Oliver, 1994; Poulson-Bryant, 2005; Staples, 1982; Thomas-El & Murphey, 2003; Watts & Jagers, 1997; West, 2001; White & Cones, 1999; Wilson, 1991). These scholars have consistently associated the status of African American males within our society, independent of socioeconomic status, with our failing public school system (e.g., Foluke, 2001; Hale, 1986; Harry & Klingner, 2006; King, 2005; Kunjufu, 2001, 2002; Thomas-El & Murphey, 2003). Noguera provides for the reader a road map to where we are right now and where we need to go and includes the plight of Latino urban youth into this landscape.

By exposing readers to his varied array of experiences within public school districts, Noguera helps us become well acquainted with the challenges facing us. These challenges/barriers include crime, unemployment or underemployment, bureaucratic obstacles, curricula changes that necessitate the incorporation of effective approaches of instruction for English-language learners, state and federal funding, teacher training, and the pressing need for reforms and supports. These challenges include, most importantly, a shift in the expectancies and expectations of teachers, parents, school administrators, and support personnel concerning the academic performance and achievement potential of male students of color. These challenges/barriers will force all of us to confront our biases, stereotypes, beliefs, and attitudes involving the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, language, immigration status, and acculturative stressors. The question becomes how these intersections directly affect the expression of dysfunctional behavior by school personnel within the context of schools (e.g., Sue et al., 2007; Tucker & Herman, 2002; Valdes, 1996).

Noguera provides readers with a window, based on a best practices model, of strategies that have the potential of reconceptualizing our notions of how to deliver culturally sensitive public education services in the 21st century. There is an emerging literature that focuses on how educators can become effective catalysts for change within urban school districts. This literature focuses on how educators can reconceptualize their
roles as leaders and problem solvers within a school context (e.g., Frattura & Capper, 2007; Krovetz & Arriaza, 2006; Murrell, 2002; Simmons, 2006). Similarly, other scholars of color have focused their attention on how to intervene, utilizing the African American extended family, to bring African American males and their families to the table as collaborators with teachers and other school personnel to provide culturally responsive classrooms (e.g., Boyd-Franklin & Bry, 2000; Coles, Coles, Coles, & Coles, 1997; Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997; Watts & Jagers, 1997).

One theme that seems to run through these scholarly volumes and Noguera's experiences in the schools is the notion of the adoption of African-centered consciousness-raising intervention/prevention programs among African American male youth. When such a model incorporates the African American extended family and the broader school/community, independent of their socioeconomic status, it typically results in elevations in self-esteem and self-concept among African American males that are critical to subsequent changes in academic achievement.

I highly recommend this volume to the lay public, parents, legislators, teachers, and professionals-in-training in the following areas: sociology, ethnic studies, men's studies, human development and family studies, educational psychology, cultural anthropology, marital and family therapy, school counseling, school social work, and school nursing. This volume should stimulate lively discussions, thought, and reflection among anyone passionate over the current state of our public school system. Any individual who is interested in being a part of the solution instead of maintaining the status quo when it comes to our public school system will benefit from reading this timely and thought-provoking volume.

References


