

## Professional Book Review

Noguera, P., & Wing, J. Y. (Eds.) (2006). *Unfinished business: Closing the racial achievement gap in our schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 336 pp., ISBN: 0787972754 (hc). \$24.95

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*Unfinished Business: Closing the Racial Achievement Gap in Our Schools*, edited by Pedro Noguera and Jean Yonemura Wing (2006), is an attempt to provide a transformative multicultural pedagogy and praxis to individuals interested in resolving the problem of racial inequity in public schools. The text describes the process and outcomes of an ambitious, research-based project conducted in California's Berkeley High School to examine the racially-based achievement gap within that school.

The Diversity Project, a 4-year longitudinal study, was initiated in 1996 to determine and address reasons for the ethnic and racial segregation and achievement gap that had persisted at Berkeley High, even though the school and the Berkeley community were presumably among the most liberal in the country, espousing a philosophy of educational justice and social equality. The project was inspired by the television documentary, *School Colors*, which threw a national and unflattering spotlight on the problem of racial polarization in the otherwise highly-rated high school. Many at the school and within the Berkeley community, particularly upper-income Whites, were shocked and in denial about the racial segregation and disparities uncovered by the documentary. Some tried to explain the school's glaring "racial" problem as a matter mostly related to class or socioeconomic differences.

One of the first goals of the project was to get everyone to acknowledge the reality of a serious problem at the school. In order to gain support for the study and to challenge teachers and administration to change the status quo, researchers solicited individuals from the UC Berkeley faculty, the high school, and the community to participate in the study by helping design, collect, and analyze data. Teacher workshops were organized to initiate continuous discussion about issues and best practices. A principal objective of these workshops was to help teachers develop methods of action research (such as shadowing students) and reflective inquiry to ascertain why and how their own methods of instruction might be contributing to inequitable educational circumstances for some of their students.

Among the major premises of the project is that the predominantly White, academically successful students of Berkeley tended to possess social and cultural "capital," aside from economic resources, which enabled them to take greater advantage of the educational system. Meanwhile, the longstanding administrative policies and organizational structures—the accepted status quo—

militated against low-achieving minorities benefiting from the same structures. Underperforming minorities tended to be mainly Black and Hispanic and clearly possessed a sense of alienation from the school, as did most of their parents. On the other hand, Asian students represented a wider variation in terms of privilege, yet tended to do well in terms of achievement with nearly 90% eligible for admission to California's state university systems upon graduation.

The book includes an introduction, six chapters, and conclusion, each prepared by different researchers involved in the project. Chapters in the books are divided into a number of subsections that describe research topics, participants' experiences, programs, and committees involved at various phases of the project's development. Earlier chapters provide an explanation of how the Diversity Project was organized and include data on the Class of 2000 as background and evidence of existing race-based inequities at the school.

Spaced throughout the book are engaging reflections and testimonies of many teachers, students, parents, staff, researchers, and other individuals who shared in efforts to make the Diversity Project viable and effective. The reader thus learns of the impact of school policies, procedures, and classroom practices, or lack thereof, on academic choices and social relations in the school, including student-teacher and parent-teacher-staff interactions. These reflections highlight how individuals were either empowered or rendered powerless in these varied relations. The personal experiences also said much about some of the consequences one could expect in the future with an American educational system bound by requirements of No Child Left Behind and reliance on "deficit" paradigms that invariably normalize failure.

The research process revealed some striking, if not unexpected, differences with regard to students' access to information and resources. This no doubt was partially the reason why, for many minority students, 9<sup>th</sup> grade was often "the beginning of a slide into second class citizenship." Many White students had the resources to be able to resort to, such as tutors and private coaches, if needed, both before and after their arrival at Berkeley High. On the other hand, Black, Hispanic, and English language learners had trouble accessing, through teachers and counselors, pertinent information about how to study for statewide tests and what types of classes to take in order to gain entrance to and to succeed in Advanced Placement courses or in future college studies.

The research also uncovered that students of color were most likely to be tracked into low-level classes, listening to lectures they perceived as being "dull" and "boring," and were made to do repetitive work in class without the creative input customarily found in higher level courses. The project participants concluded that the freshman year at Berkeley High, a school of over 3,000 students, was a promising turning point for many White children, while a high percentage of minority children learned to see themselves as non-achievers.

A racial and ethnic chasm also developed with respect to extracurricular activities and school sports. Because of peer influence, Asian, Black, White, and Hispanic students tended to become associated with different sports and clubs, many of which were inclusive of just one socio-ethnic grouping. The clubs and their participants “tended to reinforce patterns of racial segregation” (p. 81), and apparently few coaches had gone out of their way to try and make their organizations more diverse.

The project ended after four years. Governmental fiscal cuts, administrative and faculty turnover, and resistant parents, fearful of what changes would mean for their own children, were instrumental in ending programs and procedures that had shown promise of being able to transform circumstances and reform what were found to be ineffective and destructive policies and organizational infrastructure at the school. The project was not successful in meeting the ultimate goal of empowering Berkeley High to help break the cycle of underperforming minority students. Racial dynamics at the school and its ever-widening achievement gap, for the most part, remain similar to what they were before the project began.

However, the project was successful in meeting another goal: “to generate findings from the research to guide and influence changes at the school” (p. 20). In the conclusion of the book, one of the editors provides readers with numerous recommendations for change. Among the changes advocated is the development of smaller learning communities, “school-within-school programs,” which could help eliminate disparities in achievement, minimize isolation, feelings of alienation, and violence and help lead to greater accountability. Ideally, this would require students of differing academic levels and differing special needs (including ESL students) to work together in creative and ethnically diverse classroom settings. The text also promotes the use of real world applications in classroom instruction that would engage students’ minds and boost their enthusiasm for learning. Finally, the authors offer many recommendations about connecting with student groups, reaching out to parents and parent groups, and enhancing student learning through socially-transformative pedagogy.

Much of the research done for the Diversity Project was qualitative, but comprehensive in scope, and the book can be commended for the great variety of recommendations it offers. Although chapter placement in some areas is seemingly random, the chapters themselves are filled with meaningful testimonies of participants and informative and coherent assessments with implications for future educational propositions and policies. The text will be of use to educational researchers and anyone truly interested in the obstacles to and potentials of social reform in U.S. public schools.