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Interview with Pedro Noguera: How to Help Students and Schools in Poverty

Abstract

In this interview, Pedro Noguera, distinguished educator and sociologist, provides three major recommendations for school personnel and policymakers to assist students and schools in poverty: make student learning relevant, establish a positive school culture, and integrate students' academic needs with their social and physical needs.

Keywords

education, poverty, equity, achievement gap, opportunity gap

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Interview with Pedro Noguera: How to Help Students and Schools in Poverty

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A majority (51%) of our students across the nation's public schools are currently living in poverty (Southern Education Foundation, 2015), and a recent national teacher survey reported that 88% of the teachers said poverty was a barrier to student learning (Communities in Schools, 2015). Furthermore, over 67% of the public schools qualify for Federal Title I funding to support students in poverty to meet academic state standards (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

On May 14, 2015, Dan Rea, Associate Editor, *National Youth-At-Risk Journal*, interviewed Pedro Noguera, an internationally recognized speaker and writer on student poverty and educational equity. In this interview, Noguera offers practical research-based recommendations for schoolteachers, counselors, administrators, and policymakers to help students and schools in poverty. His recommendations for teachers and counselors make learning relevant for students with a personalized, problem-focused curriculum. His recommendations for school leaders empower staff and students with a positive school culture and a vision of excellence through equity. His recommendations for school reformers and policymakers go beyond the current narrow approach of teaching to the test and provide a broader, bolder approach integrating the academic with the social and physical needs of students.

BIOGRAPHY

Pedro Noguera is a Distinguished Professor of Education in the Graduate School of Education and Information Sciences at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). An urban sociologist and educator, his scholarship and research focus on the ways in which schools are influenced by social and economic conditions in the urban environment. He has served as an advisor and engaged in collaborative research with several large urban school districts throughout the United States. He



has authored 11 books and over 200 articles and appeared as a regular educational commentator on CNN, MSNBC, and National Public Radio. Before joining UCLA, he served as a tenured professor and holder of endowed chairs at New York University (2003–2015), Harvard University (2000–2003), and the University of California, Berkeley (1990–2000). From 2009–2012, he served in the role of Trustee for the State University of New York as an appointee of the Governor. In 2014, he was elected to the National Academy of Education. Recently, he received awards from the National Association of Secondary Principals, the Center for the Advanced Study of the Behavioral Sciences, and from the McSilver Institute for his research and advocacy to eliminate the educational inequities of student and school poverty.

What was your educational experience like growing up?

I was born in New York City and attended public schools in Brooklyn until my family moved to Long Island when I was in the third grade. I went to a very large public high school with over 5000 students in Long Island called Brentwood High School. Most students that I went to school with did not go to college, and I would say that was not exactly the kind of place that prepared you well for college. When I told my counselor that I was applying to Ivy League schools, he discouraged me from doing so, saying that kids from our schools do not go to elite schools. But my older brother had gone to Harvard, and because I thought I was as at least as smart as he was, I applied to several top schools and ended up choosing to enroll at Brown University.

What was the background of your parents and how did they influence you and your education?

Both of my parents are Caribbean immigrants. Neither graduated from high school, but both stressed the importance of education to us. That is undoubtedly the reason that all six of my siblings have graduated from college and have advanced degrees. My father was an avid reader, and he would often say to us “You can get a free education with a library card.” He practiced it and encouraged us to do the same.

So, despite their limited resources and limited education, my parents impressed upon me the importance of education and of doing well academically. However, when it came time to apply to college, that was not something they were familiar with. I was left largely on my own to figure out how to handle all of the paper work. Fortunately, I was able to do so.

So it sounds like that you came from a modest background, but your parents were able to

help you and your brothers to overcome poverty to a certain extent. What impact does poverty have on public schools today?

Poverty affects schools in numerous ways. The most obvious is that poor kids often have unmet social and psychological needs that affect their academic performance and well-being. Unstable or inadequate housing, poor health and nutrition, exposure to violence and trauma, are all conditions that impact learning. Our policymakers largely ignore these needs even as they pressure schools serving poor kids to improve. Not surprisingly, the schools that serve the greatest numbers of poor children tend to not do as well as schools that serve more affluent children.

Aside from basic needs, poverty also affects the neighborhoods where children are growing up. Poverty is not simply about the lack of income. In many communities, concentrated poverty is accompanied by high levels of interpersonal violence and social toxins, like lead in the paint and in the air, that undermine the health and well-being of children. And all these conditions impact schools and children. We compound the problems confronting schools in poor communities by typically providing them with fewer resources. We are one of few wealthy nations that deliberately spend less to educate poor children than affluent children.

Specifically, how does poverty impact student achievement?

Poverty impacts student achievement in many different ways. It might be helpful to look at something as simple as homework to illustrate this point. Middle class kids often have parents who can help them, and generally, they have access to a computer. If children need more help, many middle class families will pay for a private tutor. Families utilize their personal resources to help their children succeed. Poor

kids often get none of these supports, and they can make a huge difference for a child. Not surprisingly, the kids that do not have such support tend not to do as well.

In the past, you have said that poverty is not a “learning disability.” What do you mean by that?

What I mean by that is we should not conclude that simply because a child is poor they won't be able to learn as much or that they can't be as smart or as intelligent. There is no evidence to support that. But there is a lot of evidence to show that when you ignore the social needs of kids in poverty, they do not do as well. Kids who move frequently because the family is looking for stable housing won't do as well as kids who have a stable home environment. So all these things are related to poverty and result often in poor children not performing as well.

How does poverty contribute to the achievement gap between white students and students of color?

Well, it is important to note that there are a lot of white families and children in poverty in America. In fact, there are more poor white kids than there are poor kids of color in this country. We tend to ignore white poverty in this country. White poverty tends to be more common in rural areas, and it also tends to be that poor white children are less likely to be concentrated in neighborhoods where poor children of color live because our society is so racially segregated. So we should keep in mind that it is not just students of color that we are talking about when we talk about poverty.

At the same time, poverty rates are higher among African Americans and Latinos, so race does interact with poverty to affect achievement and perpetuates what we now call the achievement gap. The disparities associated

with socioeconomic status impact the achievement gap because of the unmet needs of children, and also because we typically send poor children to schools with fewer resources. There is an allocation gap that our policymakers have done little to address. Wealthy children get a lot more money spent on them, which means their teachers get better salaries, their schools have better facilities, more resources and course electives than the schools of poor kids, and all of these differences in learning opportunities contribute to the achievement gap.

In what ways is the achievement gap both a manifestation of social inequalities and economic inequalities?

If you look at the data, and now we have got a lot of data since No Child Left Behind was enacted in 2001, what they show is that pretty consistently wherever poor children are concentrated, schools are more likely to underperform. But the data also show that even within schools that serve more diverse populations, you will find that the kids from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are doing less well than the kids from more affluent backgrounds. This is why the achievement gap is largely about inequities related to learning opportunities that may even be present within a school that appears to be high performing. If we are serious about closing the achievement gap, we have to address in-school factors like tracking and teaching assignments. Many schools assign the most qualified teachers to teach the high-achieving kids and the least prepared teachers to teach the neediest kids. Such practices perpetuate inequities in academic outcomes.

How is the achievement gap an opportunity gap, and what are some of the opportunity gaps?

The opportunity gap draws our attention to things that are really important. As I mentioned already, one of the most important is access to highly effective teachers. Teachers' salaries tend to correspond to the kind of school the child is attending. A teacher working in a more affluent suburb is typically paid more than teachers who work in inner city or in low-income rural areas. For that reason, it is frequently hard to retain the best teachers in low-income areas.

Aside from that, the opportunity to learn is influenced by the academic courses a student takes and has access to. For example, if you are in a school where you have access to lab science and electives that help you to prepare for college, as well as advanced placement courses, you are at a big advantage compared to students who don't have such opportunities. A recent study showed that Black and Latino kids are much less likely to be in schools where advanced placement courses are offered. And so all those things perpetuate inequities, and they are all related to the lack of opportunities to access and experience quality learning.

What are some of your recommendations for turning around high-poverty, failing schools?

My primary recommendation starts on the premise that the schools cannot do it alone. We have to find ways to provide additional support to schools, especially those serving our most disadvantaged children. There are number of school districts that have developed community schools where health-based clinics and after-school programs and parent education programs are available to address the needs of poor children. In addition, we must make sure that we are not giving poor children an inferior education. Poor kids need the same kinds of learning opportunities that affluent kids need. They need a rich learning environment stimulated by great literature

and by interesting learning experiences rather than having watered-down curriculum that emphasizes low-level skills and contributes to boredom and alienation. So, if we are serious about turning around low-performing schools, then we have to be willing to provide poor kids with a high quality education. If we are unclear about what a high-quality education looks like, then we need to visit some private schools or public schools in some affluent suburban communities, and you will see what it looks like. This is what we should be doing in poor neighborhoods also.

What part does the culture of the school play, and how can we turn low-performing schools around by changing the school culture? Is that important?

Yes, school culture always plays an important part, and by culture I am referring to beliefs, attitudes, values, the norms that are operative within a school, the relationships between the teachers and students and between the school staff and the parents. All of these factors affect the culture of a school and the learning environment. In a school with a dysfunctional culture, where there is tension, where there is conflict, where teachers do not collaborate, where teachers are isolated, where there is a lot of disruption and defiance among students or clashes between parents and school personnel, it is unlikely that children will perform well. We have to focus on creating a positive learning environment that is conducive to teaching and learning; culture always matters. The challenge is that cultures cannot be imposed on schools. Cultures develop organically within a school, and so it is the responsibility of the educators to work together to build a positive culture where kids will be engaged, and parents will do their part in supporting the learning of their students.

High poverty seems to be related to violence also. What are some of your recommendations for making high-poverty schools safer?

It often is the case that the neighborhoods with high levels of poverty also have higher incidents of interpersonal violence, and sometimes that also creeps into the schools. So there might be bullying or gangs or fights amongst children and conflicts with teachers. The main thing you have to work on in such places is the culture. Again, the relationships that I spoke about a moment ago cannot be created by focusing on security alone. This is not to say that the security is unimportant, you must make sure that there are no weapons in schools and that children are in a safe and orderly learning environment. But safety and order ultimately are a byproduct of a positive learning environment and positive culture and not simply of security. I see schools that are investing in metal detectors and security guards but not investing in counselors and social workers, people who have skills in building strong relationships with kids.

For example, we have known for many years that the kids who are involved in extracurricular activities like sports, music, and theater will do better academically and will be less likely to get into trouble than kids who are not involved. So if we are really serious about ensuring safety, then we have got to make sure that those kinds of opportunities are available to kids, because they keep kids engaged, they keep kids happy and coming to school, and they create a safe environment that is more conducive to good teaching and learning.

What can we learn from high-performing, high-poverty schools that are closing the achievement gap? What are some of the success stories and the implications of what they are doing?

I just published a book about this with my colleague Alan Blankstein. In the book, we look at schools with diverse populations that are doing well academically. The book is called, *Excellence Through Equity*, and we examine what it takes to create schools and districts where excellence and equity are reconciled, where all kinds of children are served well. What you invariably find in such schools is a strong positive culture that is conducive to learning, but you also find collaborative relations with teachers. Teachers are engaged in ongoing work to develop their skills, so that their skills match the needs of their students. There is a better and healthier partnership with parents and much deeper parental engagement. Almost always these schools are characterized by visionary leaders who are able to inspire and unite their staff around a common vision, and that vision helps to hold everyone accountable to the ideals that the school espouses. I get to visit schools like these throughout the country. The good news is that even in many poor communities such schools exist, and the existence of those schools reminds us that when we get it right, with respect to those conditions, we can serve all kinds of children and that should be a reason for optimism.

You mentioned some qualities that distinguish successful leaders of high-performing, high-poverty schools. What are some qualities that characterize ineffective leaders in high-poverty failing schools?

There are so many of them. Some of them are obvious—leaders who are reactive rather than proactive. They spend their time responding to what comes at them, whether it is a fight on the playground or a Xerox machine that is not working. What happens in that kind of work mode is that you can think you are being responsive but never address the most important issues in the school, and the most

important issues in the school are always what is happening in the classroom. And so in contrast to highly effective leaders, ineffective leaders are rarely in the classrooms, they are not coaching teachers; they are not giving useful feedback to teachers. It is important that the children see the principal and know that there is an adult who is responsible, who is looking out for the school and who is assuring their safety. Strong leaders are able to do that as well. So it is really about balancing the work and striking the right balance between what is often called the “adaptive work” and the “technical work” in running the school. Good leaders are able to establish clear priorities and make sure that their energy is invested in the areas that lead to sustained growth in school such as building professional capacity in the staff, working on the school culture, and engaging parents. Those are the things that ultimately lead to sustained success.

Teachers want to know what works. What are some teaching strategies that you might recommend to teachers working in high-poverty schools?

The most important thing is to focus on keeping students academically engaged so that they are invested as learners. Generally, this requires teachers to utilize strategies that are more interactive and more hands on. Most students learn better by doing than by sitting and listening passively. Teachers who employ strategies that challenge students to think and use their problem-solving abilities will be more successful in creating a learning environment that pushes kids to excel. We must challenge kids and give them the opportunity to see how what they learn in school can be applied in the real world. Cultural relevance is a really important part of this so it is imperative that we utilize multicultural books and learning

materials that will engage kids and motivate them to apply themselves.

How can teachers incorporate popular culture such as hip-hop and music and so on into the curriculum to motivate students and to make it more relevant to them?

Not all teachers are familiar with the popular culture, the music, the songs, the videogames, and the television shows that kids are familiar with. If you are, then you can in fact use these things as a way to build connections with kids and build connections between the curriculum and your students. For example, I had a former student who used to use hip-hop as a way to introduce literature to kids. Before introducing them to Hamlet, he would have kids read a poem by Tupac Shakur that the rapper wrote about his mother, because he knew that this would help them to relate to Hamlet who was also going through a lot of issues and concerns with his mother. For teachers who are not as familiar with popular culture or who do not share the same background with the kids, I would say what they have got to do is to work to try and learn about their students and find out what are their interests are, what do they care about. This is important for building connections with kids. The key is building relationships. When we can do this, it makes learning more accessible to students, and students become really willing to participate and be invested as learners.

You have talked about learning communities in some of your writings. How can teachers create a sense of learning community within their classroom and the school setting?

The main way to do it is by giving kids the tools so that they can work together and can learn from each other. You know, great classrooms are places where kids are not just listening to

the teacher, but they are also learning from each other, learning with each other, and problem solving together. For that to happen, teachers actually have to teach kids how to work together, and teach them that working together does not mean copying someone else's work, but it really means each person is taking responsibility for their contribution. When that happens, the teacher can become the facilitator of learning or as a colleague of mine puts it as "the activator of the learning." That is where the kids are taking much more responsibility for learning, and the teacher can now differentiate support for the different learners in the classroom. Some kids need more time and attention than others. If you are able to create an environment where kids are working together, it is easier for teachers to address the individual needs of children.

Related to that, how can project-based learning and service learning make learning more relevant to our students?

If you watch a child learn something outside of school, whether it be learning to cook, learning to fix a car, or even learning a new video game, children typically learn by doing. They do not learn by sitting and listening. They learn through trial and error, which means that we have to create a safe environment in school where making mistakes are acceptable as a part of learning. And ultimately, they learn through mastery. They learn by mastering things, and that is really important because kids need to express a sense of confidence of what they are doing and they need a strong foundation. Otherwise as the work becomes more advanced and more complex, they won't be able to do it because they do not have the foundation. So I would say that what we really need to do is to encourage teachers to teach the way our students learn, rather than expecting the kids to learn the way they teach. And when teachers are looking for evidence of

learning in their students, they will teach differently, because they will constantly modify their methods based on what they see working for the children and utilize strategies that keep them engaged.

How important is it that teachers incorporate different aspects of technology into the classroom teaching and learning?

Technology can be helpful but it is no panacea; it is not as though technology can replace a teacher. You can have iPads and smart whiteboards but, whatever you have, if you don't know to use them effectively, then they are little more than a gimmick and distraction. However, if the teacher is highly skilled in how to use technology, it can also support individualized learning, it can support differentiation, and it can result in students becoming much more invested as learners. So technology is the tool, and it is one we should be open to, but we should not see it as a panacea.

In your writings, you have talked about the importance of classroom relationships and building relationships and also adult role models. How important is it to have adult role models, mentors, and tutors?

Very important! It is very important because kids need to have adult role models they can identify with. They particularly need to see people from their backgrounds that are in professional roles, so they have something to aspire to. Very often people who share similar backgrounds, particularly race and culture and socioeconomic status, can have a certain amount of moral authority in the eyes of children that is really important for maintaining a positive learning environment. At the same time I would say, it is really important that there are adults who demonstrate a strong sense of caring to kids, who are very professional in

their approach, and they take their work very seriously. And let the kids know that because they care, they take their work so seriously and demand that the children do too. So all of those things are really important for all kids, but especially for poor students.

In one of your articles, you talked about how we have over-emphasized personal “grit” but neglected “agency.” What do you mean by that?

We have come to conceive of personal grit as an individual property—a kind of perseverance and commitment to work hard and not give up—which is certainly important and necessary for achievement, but agency is a different concept. Agency applies to not only what an individual does but also what communities do. Agencies can be collective. Kids need to know help-seeking behavior such as knowing when they need a mentor, knowing to get advice from someone when you are in a jam or need help when something is difficult—that is agency. All the grit in the world without help from others may not be sufficient. So I tried to draw attention to the fact that we need agency in schools, collective agency especially, because when teachers are organized and work together to meet the needs of schools, when parents are organized to support their schools, schools perform at a better level. Collective agency like this can make a big difference in schools.

How do we empower teachers and students to develop this personal agency and also collective agency? If we are going to change things, this sounds very important.

We need to provide activities that enable them to experience agency. For example, I work with an organization called Y-PLAN (Youth-Plan, Learn, Act, Now), and in its basic curriculum, kids work with teachers to identify a problem

in their neighborhood. It could be a problem related to transportation, water, crime, or anything that matters to their neighborhood and families. Then students study it and they study it to understand the nature of the problem. They may also engage public officials to understand why that problem is not being addressed by the city or the county where they live. Then they work on developing a plan on how to respond to the problem. What that does is give the kids the ability to realize that the problems of the neighborhood do not just appear naturally; they appear because of something that human beings have done. But they are also learning how to understand and address those problems and how to apply their knowledge and skills to come up with alternative strategies for solving the problems. And all that helps to develop a sense of personal and collective agency in kids and moves them away from passively accepting conditions that are difficult and undesirable and to rather see these conditions as challenges that can be and must be tackled and grappled with.

It sounds like that agency is related to service learning and project-based learning. How can we use service learning and project based-learning to build agency in our students?

I think both of those can help produce agency, but we need a problem-focused curriculum. By that I mean if we are going to do service learning, let's identify the areas where services are needed and then work with kids to develop a strategy to respond to that. For example, if we know there are seniors in our community who are isolated and living on their own and are not able to do things, we could organize young people or young people can organize themselves to run errands for older senior citizens in our community, to do shopping, or to help them with matters around their house. In that way, service learning is not

simply about a service, it is about solving a problem and applying our personal and collective energies to solve a problem in the service of others. I think that contributes to the agency that I was speaking to earlier. And we can do the same thing with the project-based learning, so the projects are meaningful and related to something that is very concrete in the environment of the school. I was visiting a school recently where students in the Bronx were visiting the Bronx River, and they were trying to understand why there were certain pollutants in the river, where they came from, and they were also looking at the animal life in the river, and all that helped them to apply what they were learning, but also they started to understand why certain problems in their community existed.

In a problem-focused curriculum, do the problems come from the students or from teachers? Where do the problems come from?

Problems come through dialogue between teachers and students. When they are together, they decide that this is the issue we should be working on and this is the problem that deserves our attention. But it is often better that it is not imposed by the teacher, we are going to do this, because you want a sense of ownership and buy in from the kids. So dialogue in identifying the problems is more effective that way.

Related to the problem-focused curriculum, what about teachable moments like what recently happened with the riots in Baltimore, Maryland, or the earthquakes in Nepal? How can teachers take advantage of these teachable moments?

I think that this is a good question! I think these are opportunities for students to kind of look beyond the mere reporting of news that may occur in the media and to ask “why”; why

did so many people riot in Baltimore, why was there so much unrest, and what beyond the police killing of Freddie Gray contributed to that? Once they start asking those questions, they realize that Baltimore has had a chronic problem of unemployment for many years and that the communities hardest hit by the rioting were communities with very high unemployment and basic services lacking. Similarly, if we look at Nepal, students would ask why did so many people die, and they would discover that there was a lack of attention to the quality of housing people lived in, and the government had not done its job in creating earthquake-proof dwellings or in funding that work, and therefore they would start to see the connection between poverty and the death brought on by the catastrophe. So teachers and students need to ask “why” questions that go deeper than what the media has reported to help students understand what is occurring in a more complex way.

In the past, you have been critical of the “narrow approach” to curriculum that primarily focuses on testing and teaching to the test. What might be some benefits of a full-service community school, which has a much “broader approach” to working with students in poverty?

I think the main benefit is that schools need help. They need other resources and expertise that typically are not available. So a full-service school brings after-school programs, a health clinic with health workers, social workers and that again makes it easier for the schools to respond to the needs of children. So community schools, I think, can be particularly resourceful in addressing critical challenges related to poverty.

Related to the full-service community school, you have endorsed a more holistic approach to

working with students in poverty. It is called “A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education.” What is this broader approach and why is it important?

Essentially, it is trying to get our policymakers to recognize that we need to take a more systemic approach to addressing the needs of students in high-poverty areas where academic failure is so pervasive. And so we want to have a policy-level call for universal preschools, greater access to after-school and summer programs, more attention to the social needs of kids, and health needs. So, we have been promoting this idea, and there are a few cities where it has been embraced already. Tulsa, Oklahoma is probably the best example where every school is a full-service school, and so if you could do that in Tulsa, you could do that in more communities around the country. New York City has recently embraced full-service community schools as an anchor for their reform strategy. So I think that the interest in this idea is growing.

Why isn't it enough just to focus on teaching and testing? Do you think this broader approach is essential?

It is essential for all the reasons I said already. You can't separate the academic needs of a child from the social and psychological and the physical needs. You need a more integrated approach, and that is basically what community schools do, and that's why we have been advocating this broader, bolder approach.

What is your latest book or project that you are working on?

The book we just released and mentioned earlier is the book, *Excellence Through Equity*, where we identified schools that are showing us that it is possible to educate all kinds of kids in schools and districts across the country. The

chapters are written by educators who have been leading the work in describing how it is going on. The new project I am taking on is a book that analyzes the current state of race and education in American today 60 years after the Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, to integrate schools and to take stock of where our schools are now with respect to the question of racial inequality and racial justice. In this new book, I examine a lot of evidence that schools are becoming more segregated at a time when our society is becoming more diverse, which is something that we all should be concerned about.

What do you mean by equity? What does that mean in your new book?

In the book, we focus primarily on educational equity. Educational equity really is about giving students all the tools and support they need to be successful—recognizing that none of the kids are the same. Some kids have greater needs than others, and so we need to be thoughtful in the way we allocate resources and support children.

CONCLUSION

During a time when the number of school-age children living in poverty is on the rise (Addy, Engelhardt, & Skinner, 2013), the educational approach to helping these students has narrowed with counter-productive results. In contrast, Noguera offers schoolteachers, counselors, administrators, and policymakers a broader, bolder approach that fosters excellence through equity and holistically supports the academic, social, and physical needs of students in poverty. For more information about how to help students and schools in poverty, educators will find many practical research-based recommendations by Noguera in the following bibliography:

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