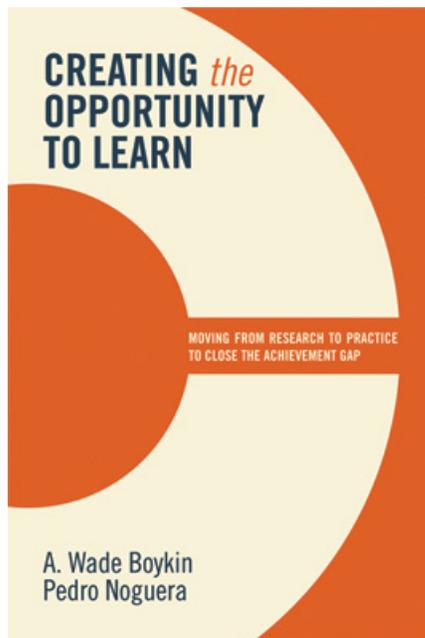


**BOOK REVIEW: What does it mean to "Create the Opportunity to Learn?"** By Dave Lehman, Connections Executive Editor, NSRF National Facilitator, and CFG Coach in Wisconsin, [davelehman@mac.com](mailto:davelehman@mac.com)



**Creating the Opportunity to Learn: Moving from Research to Practice to Close the Achievement Gap**

By A. Wade Boykin and Pedro Noguera, 2011, ASCD, Alexandria Virginia

Wade Boykin and Pedro Noguera need no introduction to many of you as they are well known and highly respected educators. Both are university professors. Boykin is the director of the graduate program in the department of psychology at Howard University, and Noguera, a professor of education at New York University. I approached the reading of this book imagining I was a high school biology teacher seeking some concrete ideas and specific suggestions of things I could do differently in the classroom. I am picturing achievement gaps in the success of my students based on race, gender, and economic class. I have to say – with few exceptions – I came up short, with hardly any specific things I might try to do differently in my classes on Monday. Yet there is value in their book, so let me explain.

*Creating the Opportunity to Learn* is organized into three sections. Part I: Understanding the Achievement Gap, Part II: Analyzing the Research, (with 100 pages, making it the lengthiest), and Part III: Applying What We Know. Each of the nine chapters ends with a useful summary. Part II offers a lengthy review of the literature on “three ‘achievement gaps’ that must be confronted simultaneously: the one between White students and their Black and Latino counterparts; the one between U.S. students and students in other parts of the world; and the one between what it took to be prepared for the 20th century and what will be required for adequate preparation in the 21st century.” This widening of the conventional use of “achievement gap” to include the latter two gaps is a useful re-mapping of the territory.

However, although there is an extensive review of research from the elementary school level, I was disappointed to find virtually no research drawn from the high school level. Either there is a lack of research at this level related to any of these three gaps, or it is a shortcoming of their analysis.

Part I is a useful overview for those not familiar with the achievement gap in this country, and worthwhile even for those of us already familiar with the problem, particularly their distinction between “involuntary” minorities (i.e. Native Americans, African Americans, Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans)



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Pedro Noguera

and “voluntary” immigrant minorities (especially Asian) who outperform the involuntary. The authors also mention the “culture of anti-intellectualism” particularly among some Black males who view being a high achieving student as being “White.”

Thus, with this awareness, I thought Boykin and Noguera might have at least mentioned the devastating impact of “stereotype threat” on the success of students of color. This concept, originally researched by Claude Steele and colleagues at Stanford, is about the assumption of intellectual inferiority particularly among Blacks in their first year in college as one major factor

in their lower graduation rate, “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype.” Here, too, I was surprised to see them reference Ruby Payne’s “culture of poverty” of which there is much to be criticized (see Paul Gorski’s critique in particular at his website [EdChange.org](http://EdChange.org)).

However, in Part III there was reinforcement for my strong belief in the importance of what happens on the ground, in the classroom, between teacher and students. There, the authors state, “A substantial body of research (see chapters 3-7) has shown that improving the quality of instruction is the most effective way to boost student achievement.” Yet in re-visiting Chapter 5 about “Asset Focused Factors: Interpersonal Relationship,” they seem to contradict themselves when they note, “there

is more evidence to support the benefits of TSRQ [Teacher Student Relationship Quotient] than there is to support any other factor reviewed in this book.” I agree with the importance of both quality instruction and “TSRQ” as key elements of eliminating, or at least reducing the “achievement gap,” yet, again, wearing my high school biology teacher hat, there is a lack of specifics about how to do these crucial things. What do I do to bring greater quality to my imaginary class of biology students? How in my biology class of 32 diverse students in each of 5 class periods do I get to know my students individually?

Perhaps my mixed review of this book began with the title, *Creating the Opportunity to Learn*, for I believe this language of “opportunity” provides an easy out, and can become a cop-out. I have heard too many teachers say, “I provided those students [meaning the “achievement gap” students] with plenty of opportunities to learn, they just didn’t take advantage of them. It’s their responsibility, not my fault!” Boykin and Noguera seem to be aware of this, when early in their last chapter, “What Can We Do To Close the Gap?” (perhaps this should be “gaps” given their earlier analysis), they state;

*How do we encourage teaching that creates stimulating and inspiring classrooms, where students engage in problem solving and use their creativity and imagination to address interesting and important subjects, and where teachers push students to continue learning long after the exam is over.*

Toward the end of that chapter, emphasizing their concern about “equity,” they state,

*A commitment to equity will also force schools to adopt educational practices that allow them to take responsibility for student outcomes, evidence of mastery, and conditions that foster effective teaching and higher levels of learning.*

Note, they're finally speaking of a “commitment to outcomes,” not simply providing “opportunities” to learn!

It’s in this same chapter that the authors quote at length from the writing of John Taylor Gatto in what they mistakenly call his “most recent book,” *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum*

*of Compulsory Schooling* (published in 2002 and revised in 2005). His “most recent” (published in 2010) is *Weapons of Mass Instruction: A School-teacher’s Journey Through the Dark World of Compulsory Schooling*. Having known John for many years, being on more than one program with him, he is about as strong a critic of public education and advocate of home schooling as you can find. Notice the key phrase in each of the subtitles of his two books – “compulsory schooling.” Gatto’s is a conspiracy theory, hardly devoted to closing the achievement gap. So again Boykin and Noguera’s book disappoints my imaginary high school biology teacher who seeks specific ways to do better by his diverse students.

There are, however, other useful ideas for high school teachers and administrators. In Chapter 8, “Why Are Some Schools Making More Progress Than Others,” the authors mention a 9th grade study skills class that was created in one high school to help particularly those minority students among whom the failure rate was the highest. They also list other things being done by schools making progress on closing the achievement gap: a mentoring program for Black and Latino males, block scheduling, advisory groups, increasing minority students’ access to rigorous courses, improved mentoring and counseling for students at risk of failing, and instructional coaching for some teachers. And they begin this chapter noting four key professional development, gap-closing factors “such as quality teacher-student relationships, student improvement, cultural relevance, and critical thinking.” Similar to educators who get excited about PLCs and new goals ... and then realize how seldom workshop leaders provide details on just how to do these things. They, then end this chapter, and the book with these five “Paradigm-Changing Issues and Their Policy Implications:”

- 1) *Let evidence be our guide,*
- 2) *Pay attention to classroom transactions and dynamics,*
- 3) *Focus on assets,*
- 4) *Educate the whole child, and*
- 5) *Seek multiple pathways to success.*

I particularly like their emphasis in item three on the personal, social, experiential, cultural, and intellectual “assets;” the students’ strengths, interests, capabilities, passions and commitments, prior understandings, skills, and competencies they bring to the classroom. But again, how does my imaginary biology teacher learn the assets of all his myriad individual students?

In one of their footnotes that accompanies this chapter, the authors list 21 factors involved in exceptional schools that are successful, from the book by K. Chenoweth, *It’s Being Done: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools*. An interesting list, but again, I the high school biology teacher need more specifics on what to do with such items as “use school time wisely,” “like kids,” and “provide teachers with the opportunity to observe one another.” Enter NSRF and Critical Friends Groups peer observation protocols as an example of the missing specifics of how to go about doing this.

So do I recommend this book to you readers of *Connections*? Well, yes, particularly to elementary teachers who could find a definitive list of research studies on the topic of equity and the achievement gap. I’d mildly recommend it to other educators as well, although you will have to take general ideas and either research them further for specific “how-to’s,” or create your own strategies for how to follow through with your students in your context.

I’d be interested to know what others think upon reading this book. Please [email us](#) with your comments. — Dave Lehman

