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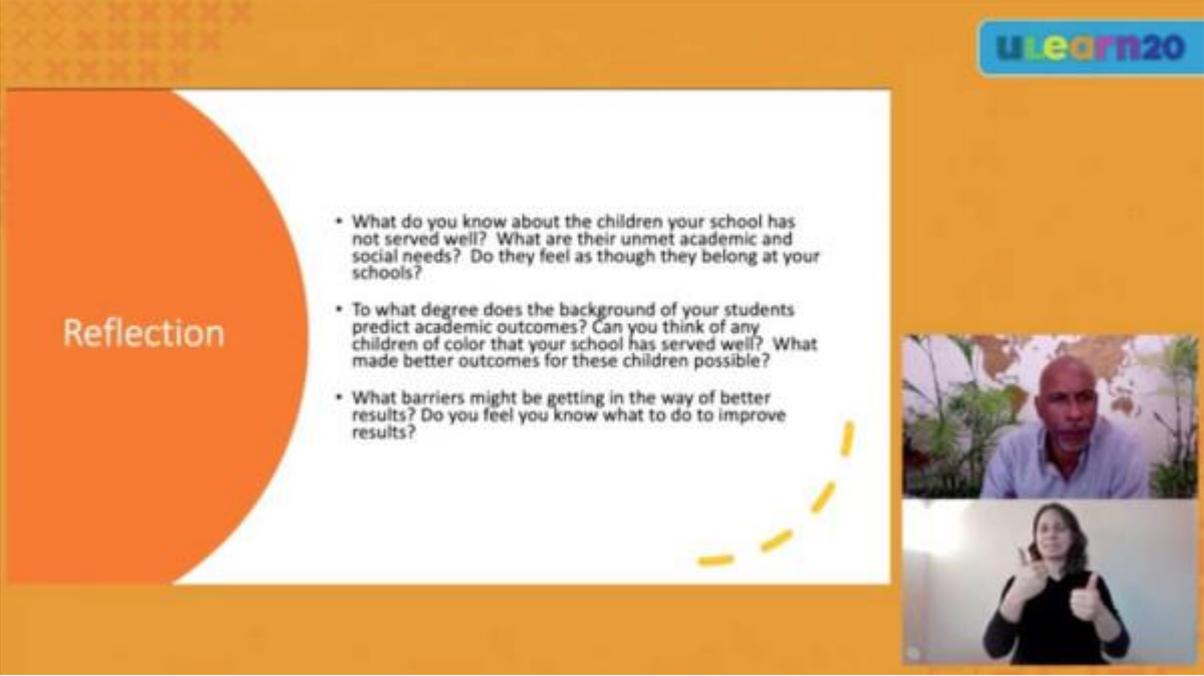
How are schools influenced?

With a background as a sociologist whose scholarship and research focuses on the ways in which schools are influenced by social and economic conditions as well as by demographic trends in local, regional and global contexts, Pedro Noguera was an inspired choice of keynote to open day two of the uLearn20 (virtual) conference. He didn't disappoint!



Beaming into us from his base in California, Pedro captured the essence of what had been emerging through the conference to that point with his opening challenge to the participants, asking, *"How can we make our schools and early learning settings more*

responsive to learners?” A simple question, but one for which there is no simple answer. Instead, it invites a deep engagement with a wide range of issues, and the exposure of many of the assumptions that underpin how we currently work in schools and as a system.



The image shows a presentation slide with an orange background. In the top right corner, there is a logo for 'uLearn20'. On the left side, there is a large orange circle containing the word 'Reflection'. To the right of the circle, there are three bullet points. In the bottom right corner, there is a video inset showing two people: a man in a light blue shirt and a woman in a black top, both giving thumbs up.

Reflection

- What do you know about the children your school has not served well? What are their unmet academic and social needs? Do they feel as though they belong at your schools?
- To what degree does the background of your students predict academic outcomes? Can you think of any children of color that your school has served well? What made better outcomes for these children possible?
- What barriers might be getting in the way of better results? Do you feel you know what to do to improve results?

In his presentation *Equity, Empowerment and Deeper Learning* Pedro traversed a number of the key issues facing educators today. His emphasis was always on what is best for learners, highlighting that we cannot disconnect education from the cultural context and influences on our learners. Excellence, according to Pedro, should be achieved through equity. We must start by affirming the language and identity of the individual learner, and address any interpersonal or institutional bias as it is exposed. We must learn to move past the barriers to equity that we face on an almost daily basis – complacency, racial bias and a punitive mindset – and seek to embrace new ways of working, being and relating to others.

Typical Barriers to Equity

- **COMPLACENCY – blaming parents and kids**
- Racial bias – lower expectations, weak/strained relationships
- Tendency to see teaching and learning as disconnected
- Punitive mindset in grading and providing feedback
- Unequal access to external support
- Ignoring the need to compensate for the effects of inequality outside of school



Historically, education has been used as a tool to assimilate learners into a common culture to prepare them for taking their place in the industrialised workplace. Our current model and approaches, according to Pedro, have been focused on control and compliance, and logistical and technical changes have dominated the conversations about how learning communities should operate. This was highlighted in the responses from schools, early learning services and systems to the recent COVID-19 lockdowns.

The slide features a title 'Five Essential Ingredients for School Improvement' and a subtitle 'Organizing Schools for Improvement, 2010 - Bryke, et.al.'. The five ingredients are: 1. A coherent instructional guidance system (red arrow), 2. Development of the professional capacity of staff (yellow arrow), 3. Strong parent-community-school ties (grey arrow), 4. A student-centered learning climate (blue arrow), and 5. Shared leadership to drive change (green arrow). The USC Rossier logo is at the bottom left, and the uLearn20 logo is at the top right. Two video thumbnails are on the right: the top one shows a man speaking, and the bottom one shows a woman signing.

Pedro's message was clear. To create the educational settings we need we must shift the paradigm. It won't happen simply by introducing new programmes or changing policies. We need to start at the very core of our beliefs about what is important and what matters for our learners and their futures. We'll know we're there when our attention is on developing talent in all of our learners, rather than trapped in deficit thinking that leads to remedial actions.

So what was the call to action I heard from Pedro? Simply this – we need to re-capture the 'delight' in seeing all of our learners succeed and flourish. This won't happen if we continue to focus only on trying to 'fix' problems. Instead, we must reorient our efforts to recognise and respond to the needs of each learner, acknowledging their culture, language and context in the programmes we design.

A final comment from Pedro sums it up well for me... *"Good teaching is like good cooking. They always come back wanting more!"* Imagine our educational settings and system where we could genuinely say that is the case?

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Derek has been involved with CORE since its inception in 2003. Derek, Nick Billowes and Vince Ham set up Ultralab South (now CORE), which was to embody their vision of an elearning research and development centre.