If we want public education to work, we need to adopt a multicultural perspective

JSD: In *Affirming Diversity* (Allyn & Bacon, 2008), you write, “In spite of all its shortcomings, and although it has never lived up to its potential, public education remains a noble ideal because it is one of the few institutions that at least articulates the common good, if not always achieves it. Public education remains the last and best hope for many people for a better life.” Could you speak about that?

Nieto: The idea of the public good is steadily losing ground, and it is to our peril that it does so. We’ve become privatized in so many ways that people forget that we should strive to create what John Dewey called the “beloved community.” Public schools are one way to create that community. Given the ideals that we espouse as a nation, we have a responsibility to create schools that fulfill the promise of the public good. There are many schools that haven’t fulfilled that promise. That’s particularly true for schools attended by the poor, Native Americans, African-Americans, and Latinos.

We have dropout rates that are astronomical in some urban areas. We have schools that are decrepit with very poor infrastructures. We have schools where teachers are just not ready to teach the children who are in
front of them. Many of them thought that they were going to teach children like them, who went to schools that look like the schools they attended. That's not the case anymore. We need to have professional development for teachers and teacher preparation at colleges and universities that prepare teachers for the students they'll face every day and that prepare them with joy and enthusiasm, and not just with skills. Skills are important, but the attitudes teachers go in with are equally important.

**“ACHIEVEMENT” GAP**

**JSD:** Would you speak about the achievement gap, both the issue and the term itself?

**Nieto:** I don’t like the term “achievement gap” because it tends to put the onus on students alone, as if they caused the achievement gap in the first place. The term doesn’t acknowledge the conditions in which they’re learning. Instead I use the terms “resource gap” and “caring gap.” There is a resource gap in terms of the material conditions, and there is a caring gap in terms of the emotional resources available to students. Until we create smaller classes, better professional development, and provide more resources, things are not going to change. But a lot can happen when teachers and schools show care. When they show care for students, schools can make a huge difference even when the material conditions aren’t what they should be.

We need to work on those gaps first — then we can start talking about individual students not learning up to their potential.

**CARING GAP**

**JSD:** How can schools address the caring gap?

**Nieto:** I always go back to professional development. Teachers need to learn about the communities in which they’ll be teaching and who their students are. For example, I am Puerto Rican. I taught a course for years at the university called “Teaching About the Puerto Rican Experience.” There are 4 million Puerto Ricans in the U.S., and many people don’t know anything about them. We need to know why there are 4 million Puerto Ricans here and why they aren’t doing well, academically as well as in other ways. And I would say the same thing about Mexican-American, Haitian, and Native American students, among others.

Whoever you teach, you need to find out who the students are, why they’re there, and what you can do to help them be successful learners. When teachers do that, they start to understand who their students are and start to empathize, and with empathy comes caring.

One of my former students, Bill Dunn, was a teacher and is now an assistant principal. He had been teaching for almost 20 years in a school that had come to have a population of about 75% Puerto Rican students. He realized one day that he was beginning to understand what the kids were saying in Spanish. He decided it was time, in his words, to “come out of the closet” as a Spanish learner. He kept a journal, took classes in Spanish, listened to the radio, and read the newspaper in Spanish. He said he developed a true respect for his students because he was learning to be a second language speaker and he had never realized how difficult that was. He grew to respect the community as well as the culture, which he hadn’t known that much about. He teaches in a vocational school, and he made a cuatro, a Puerto Rican stringed instrument much like a guitar, in a woodworking class. The kids’ eyes just lit up, and several of them told him their grandfathers used to play one of those. Bill really came to understand what was important to the kids and to their communities. This was a wonderful teacher when he started the project, and he became an even more insightful teacher when he finished it.

Caring comes about through contact, through knowledge, and that’s why I always go back to collaborative professional development, where teachers grapple with these things, they puzzle them out together, so that they become honest. Too often we sidestep difficult issues because they’re so hard to talk about for many people. We’re afraid to talk about race, about privilege, about gender — these have to be central topics in professional development, especially given the tremendous diversity in our public schools now. All teachers need to have these conversations.

**ROLE OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION**

**JSD:** In *Affirming Diversity*, you and your co-author, Patty Bode, write about the role multicultural education can play in the complex sociopolitical context teachers are working in right now. How do you define multicultural education?

**Nieto:** First, multicultural education has to be antiracist. Racism and privilege are issues that are difficult for a lot of people to talk about, but we have to confront them if we’re serious about multicultural education. Otherwise we stay at the stage of what James Banks calls the “contributions stage” — this is what the Irish have contributed, this is what the African-Americans have contributed, this is what the Jews have contributed. That’s OK for a beginning, but then you have to look carefully at the
SONIA NIETO

Position: Sonia Nieto is professor emerita of language, literacy, and culture in the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Her work has focused on multicultural and bilingual education, curriculum reform, teacher education, Puerto Rican children’s literature, and the education of Latinos, immigrants, and other culturally and linguistically diverse student populations.

Education: Nieto has an Ed.D. from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, a master’s degree from New York University graduate program in Spain, and a bachelor of science degree in education from St. John’s University in New York City.

Professional history: Before joining the University of Massachusetts, Amherst faculty, Nieto taught junior high English and Spanish in Brooklyn and 4th grade in the Bronx at the first completely bilingual school in the Northeast.

Publications: Nieto has written several books, chapters, and articles, including Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education, the fifth edition of which she co-authored with Patty Bode (Allyn & Bacon, 2008), What Keeps Teachers Going (Teachers College Press, 2003), Language, Culture, and Teaching: Critical Perspectives for a New Century (Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), and The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities (Teachers College Press, 1999). Her edited works include Why We Teach (Teachers College Press, 2005) and Puerto Rican Students in U.S. Schools (Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000). Her newest book, Dear Paulo: Letters From Those Who Dare Teach (Paradigm Publishers), will be released in spring 2008.

Recognitions: Nieto’s achievements have been recognized with AERA’s 2006 Distinguished Career Award from the Committee on Scholars of Color in Education, and the Senior Scholar Award for Research on the Social Context of Education, the 2005 Outstanding Educator Award from the National Council of Teachers of English, the 2003 Criticas Journal Hall of Fame Spanish-Language Community Advocate of the Year Award, and three honorary doctorates, as well as numerous other recognitions. Nieto has served on many local, regional, national, and international commissions and panels, and she serves as trustee or advisor on numerous advisory boards, including Facing History and Ourselves, Educators for Social Responsibility, the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, and the Center for Applied Linguistics.

To learn more about Sonia Nieto, visit her web page at wwwunix.oit.umass.edu/~snieto/.

structural inequalities in our society and our schools — that’s really where the gap comes from.

• Multicultural education is also basic education, as basic as reading, writing, arithmetic, and now computer literacy, which wasn’t on that list 20 years ago. Multicultural education has to be added to the list in the same way. We live in a diverse society in a diverse world; we need to know how to get along with one another.

• Multicultural education must also be for all students, and not seen as a palliative for black students or for Latino students. Everyone has been miseducated if we just have a monocultural education. The world is not monocultural, the U.S. is not monocultural. If we really want to prepare students for the world as it is, we need to include all students through a multicultural perspective.

• Multicultural education should be pervasive. As soon as you walk into a school or a classroom, you should know that the school has a multicultural perspective. Not only in the materials you see around and the bulletin boards and the books, but also in the pedagogy, the teachers’ relationships to students, the languages that are being spoken, and the curriculum that is being used.

• Multicultural education is about social justice. Schools are in a key position to reach all students and all families. This is a good place to start talking about what’s right and what’s wrong, what’s fair and unfair. We have to help students understand that they have a role to play in turning injustice around.

• Multicultural education includes process, which means it’s not just about the materials. Curriculum is important, but relationships with students are even more important.

• Finally, multicultural education includes critical pedagogy. I learned this from Paulo Freire, who said that education is always political. He reminds us to ask “for whom am I educating, and against whom am I educating?” We need to understand that we can never be neutral. That doesn’t mean that teachers should go into a classroom and spout political rhetoric, just that they need to understand that there are many ways of looking at the world. Teachers have to encourage their students to learn about and grapple with the complexity of multiple perspectives because reality is always messier than what is presented in the standard curriculum.

Students need to learn by talking to different people and reading differ-
ent sources. In the book *Black Ants and Buddhists*, by Mary Cowhey (Stenhouse, 2006), Cowhey shows how she does this with 1st and 2nd graders. In her classroom, students learn to ask, “Where’s the evidence?” Critical pedagogy is the opposite of what Freire called “banking education,” where you deposit knowledge in students’ heads. Instead, when a critical pedagogy is used, students learn to think critically.

**LEARNING IN A MULTICULTURAL SCHOOL**

**JSD**: What does student learning look like in a multicultural school?

**Nieto**: Student learning would look very different than it looks now in many schools, especially given the rigid accountability strictures we’re living with. Most high-stakes tests are multiple choice, and there’s only one right answer. For some things, of course, there is only one right answer. But a lot of things are more complicated than that. In a multicultural context, students learn to be critical thinkers, they would learn to be creative, to talk back to the text, to resist being depositories of information.

They are joyful about learning.

**JSD**: And what are implications for teacher learning?

**Nieto**: The implications are the same! Teachers should be thrilled with learning, and some certainly are. With teacher learning, we have to go from inservice to professional development to teacher leadership, where teachers decide what they need to learn. At the same time, there are things that some teachers are reluctant to focus on. Administrators and teachers need to insist on creating spaces for those difficult conversations as well. Discussing power and privilege, race, class, language differences, gender, sexual orientation, and so on, are crucial topics in which teachers and other educators need to engage if they are to understand their students and the conditions in which their students live.

**MULTICULTURAL SPECTRUM**

**JSD**: Beyond the definition of multicultural education, in your work you describe different levels of multicultural education, starting with monocultural education. Could you describe what those levels look like?

**Nieto**: Monocultural education doesn’t need much description. This would be an English-only environment, where there is only one view of history, and where all the great masters are European. It’s what is typically known as the “master narrative.”

Beyond that is tolerance. A lot of people think that when you reach a level of tolerance you’ve really reached the top. You’ll see, for example, mission statements that include the term tolerance. But tolerance may mean that we simply put up with differences.

Acceptance is the next level. If we accept differences, at least we acknowledge them. At this level, you would see an environment that acknowledges different languages; there might be a bilingual program, but more likely an ESL program. At the acceptance level, you might have celebrations of holidays or multicultural fairs.

The next level is respect. You would support students’ native languages. You might have bilingual pro-

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Most of all, multicultural education means equity and access. Ultimately, multicultural education has to be not about just accepting differences but making sure that all kids have access to high levels of learning and that all families are welcomed into schools.

I don't see specific schools that perfectly exemplify any of these levels. Every school has moments of all these things in it. I have seen teachers who try to have a multicultural perspective in their teaching in even the most seemingly monocultural schools, and I have seen schools that claim to be multicultural but have very little acceptance or respect in their practice. The level of affirmation, solidarity, and critique is an ideal to strive for. Just because you might think a school is at the tolerance level or the monocultural level doesn't mean there aren't moments of affirmation.