



# THE NECESSITY *of* DIVERSITY

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

BY TRACY CROW

**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



**Sonia Nieto:** “Skills are important, but the attitudes teachers go in with are equally important.”

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 particu-

larly 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

TRACY CROW is the editor of *JSD*.

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 stu-

dents 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 that 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

#### Hear Nieto speak

Sonia Nieto is a keynote speaker at NSDC's 39th Annual Conference in Dallas. To hear her speech or take her message home, purchase a recording of her NSDC address (available in January). Visit [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org) for more details.

**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 *Críticas* 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 [www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~snieto/](http://www-unix.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-

**We have to help students understand that they have a role to play in turning injustice around.**

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 learning to teacher leadership, where teachers decide what they need to learn. At the same time, there are some 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-

**With teacher learning, we have to go from inservice to professional development to teacher learning to teacher leadership, where teachers decide what they need to learn.**

grams; at least you would encourage students to use their native languages to work in language-same groups, for example. Here students would be taught with multiple perspectives.

The highest level is affirmation, solidarity, and critique, which means respecting and embracing differences. At this level, teachers have an understanding that culture is dynamic, not static. Conflict is accepted as something normal. You don't simply substitute one myth for another for any particular group. Students are encouraged to think critically, to think differently, to not fall into any particular mold. This is not about political correctness, which is something that some people accuse multicultural education of — it's about different ways of looking at reality and trying to get to a fuller and more complicated truth.

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.

**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.

## JOY AND ANGER IN TEACHING

**JSD: In your books and as you talk, words like joy, passion, anger, enthusiasm, caring come up again and again. Such emotions and the role of the teacher as a caring person come out particularly in *Why We Teach* and in *What Keeps Teachers Going*.**

**Nieto:** *Why We Teach* was a wonderful book for me to put together. I love working with teachers, especially with teachers who are so committed and joyful and angry and enthusiastic and all of those things combined — they really reaffirm my hope in public education. To me, the teachers in *Why We Teach* represent the best of what teachers are. One important implication of what teachers wrote is that we need to create environments both in schools and in teacher preparation programs where joy is in evidence, where people look forward to going into schools and to teaching the students, to being with the children who have been put in their care. Joy is a really important component of what it means to teach.

**JSD: What about anger?**

**Nieto:** The book *What Keeps Teachers Going* came about as a result of a year-long project with a group of high school teachers in an inquiry group in the Boston Public Schools. We met once a month, and these were veteran teachers who taught a variety of subject areas, many with 25 years or more of experience. When I looked back at the transcripts of our conversations, at all my data, it became clear to me that anger was one of the things that keeps teachers going. I wasn't prepared for that. At first, I thought it was a negative thing and I didn't want to highlight it, but then the importance of that anger was just staring me in the face, so I included a chapter on anger and desperation.

There is a difference between the anger that these teachers felt and a blaming type of anger, the negative

chatter of the teachers' room. These teachers were angry at injustice, they were angry at racism, they were angry at bureaucracy. They were angry that decisions were often made for their students that they would not have made themselves. One of the teachers in the group, Junia Yearwood, said, "Anger is what fuels me. It keeps me going." She also said that once she gets in her room, she closes her door and she leaves that anger outside, because she cannot blame her students for everything else that's happening to them. Anger is part of the equation.

This righteous anger turns productive when people look for ways to address it. For example, one day Junia was talking about how it is teachers' responsibility to make sure that we make this a profession that is worthwhile, to read everything we can, to stay abreast of everything in the field. Years before, she had complained to her principal, "My colleagues just don't read," and he responded, "Stop complaining, Junia, and do something about it." So she put up a notice in the teachers room that she was starting a reading group. She was shocked when 25 people showed up for the first meeting. When she told this story a dozen years later, she said about half the group was still meeting.

That's one way to focus the anger in a positive way. Teaching has often been seen as a solitary profession where you close your door and that's it, whereas teaching really should be seen as a collaborative venture, even when you go into your classroom alone.

Whether you have inquiry groups or reading groups or any kind of professional development that really supports an active kind of learning with colleagues, collaborative work is the best way to turn anger into something productive. ■