

# TeachingWorks

UNIVERSITY of MICHIGAN SCHOOL of EDUCATION

2017-18 TeachingWorks Streaming Seminar Series

***Outrage to Action: Disrupting Inequity Through Teacher Education***

***On Becoming Sociocultural Mediators***

***Featuring:***

Sonia Nieto

Professor Emerita of Language, Literacy, and Culture  
School of Education, University of Massachusetts

**Thank you for your patience.**

**The session will begin at 4:10 p.m.**

**Email questions to [twseminar@umich.edu](mailto:twseminar@umich.edu)**

**#twseminar**

# On Becoming Sociocultural Mediators



Sonia Nieto

TeachingWorks Seminar Series  
*Outrage To Action: Disrupting Inequity Through Teacher Education*  
University of Michigan  
September 2017

## High-leverage practice:

“Learning about students’ cultural, religious, family, intellectual, and personal experiences and resources for use in instruction”

# Race & Ethnicity Matter

Education is *not* colorblind, genderblind, languageblind, abilityblind, or social classblind...

“...One would expect policies and practices related to students’ race and ethnicity to be high on the reform agenda. Of course, there is widespread discussion of the ‘minority achievement gap,’ but - ironically - solutions on the public agenda are invariably colorblind.”

Willis Hawley and Sonia Nieto, “Another Inconvenient Truth: Race and Ethnicity Matter.” *Educational Researcher* (2010)

Journal of Educational Research

November 2010 (Volume 113 | Number 3)  
Closing Opportunity Gaps | Pages 66-71

## Another Inconvenient Truth: Race and Ethnicity Matter

Willis D. Hawley and Sonia Nieto



Race and ethnicity affect how students respond to instruction and their opportunities to learn.

Given the shameful differences in the academic outcomes and graduation rates of students of color compared to many Asian and white students, one would expect policies and practices related to students' race and ethnicity to be high on the reform agenda. Of course, there is widespread discussion of the "minority achievement gap," but solutions on the public agenda are invariably color-blind. It is widely assumed that what works for white and Asian American students will work for students of color—if only we did it more often.

We need, however, to recognize an inconvenient truth—that when it comes to maximizing learning opportunities and outcomes for students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, race and ethnicity matter. Race and ethnicity influence teaching and learning in less important ways. They affect how students respond to instruction and curriculum, and they influence teachers' assumptions about how students learn and how much students are capable of learning.

Being more conscious of race and ethnicity is not discriminatory; it's realistic. Research on race- and ethnicity-related dispositions suggests that almost all of us, regardless of our skin color, are biased against, or at least relatively uncomfortable with, people whose race and ethnicity are different from our own (Greenwald, Pettigrew, Uhlman, & Banaji, 2007). Moreover, people of different races and ethnicities see the incidence of discrimination and the availability of educational and economic opportunity differently (McIntosh, 1988; Nieto & Steele, 2006; Swales, 1994).

### Clarifying Terms

We use the expression race- and ethnicity-responsive rather than more comfortable terms like diversity or cultural responsiveness to draw attention to the importance of addressing issues related to skin color in improving students' learning opportunities. Also, when we focus on race alone, we sometimes see only black and white, neglecting the wide range of ethnicities in our schools and society.

Effective implementation of race- and ethnicity-responsive approaches to school improvement that benefit all students requires that educators take three steps.

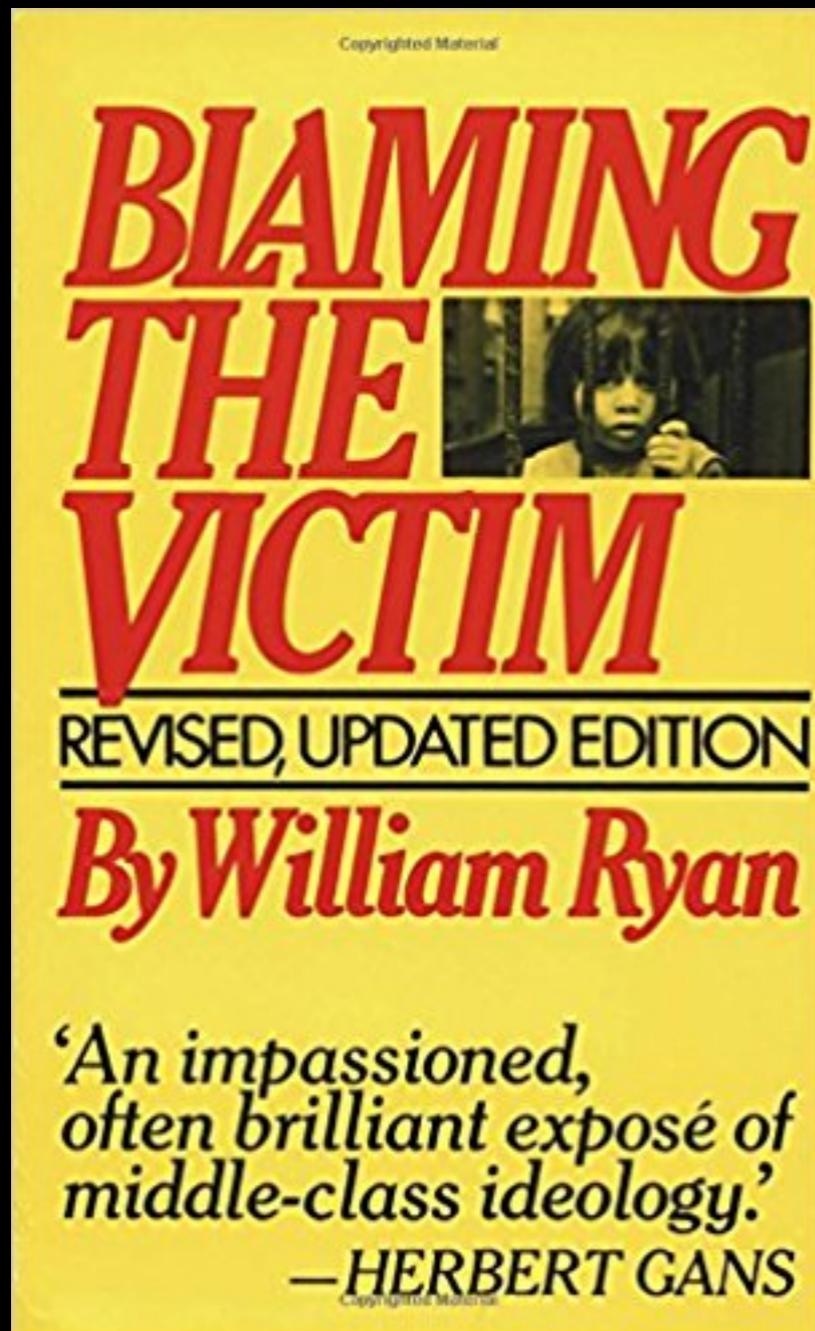
### Step 1: Understand how race affects teaching and learning.

Commitment to race- and ethnicity-conscious strategies for school improvement begins by understanding the influence of race and ethnicity on behavior and on attitudes about racial and ethnic differences.

There are three important lessons in this regard. First, differences among people to whom we assign racial and ethnic identities have no biological bases and are, instead, the product of socially constructed beliefs. When these beliefs disadvantage one group more than another, we can change them through social action. For example, one study found that teachers who became active in antiracist projects broadened their understanding and were able to use their new skills in creating affirming learning environments for all their students (Donaldson, 2007).

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## Blaming the Victim: A Long Legacy



*“We are dealing, it would seem, not so much with culturally deprived children as with culturally deprived schools. And the task to be accomplished is not to revise, amend, and repair deficient children, but to alter and transform the atmosphere and operations to which we commit these children.”*

William Ryan, *Blaming the victim* (1972)



***Begin by challenging  
deficit discourses***



No language is inferior,  
no culture is “a culture of poverty,”  
no child should be invisible,  
no community should be insignificant



# What is Culture?

- Culture is a *process*, not just a *product*.
- *Practices*, not rigid traits
- Culture is
  - dynamic
  - multi-faceted
  - created
  - socially constructed
  - learned

Gutierrez, K. D. & Rogoff, B. (2003).  
Cultural ways of learning: Individual traits  
or repertoires of practice.  
*Educational Researcher* 32 (5), 19-25.

Nieto, S. (2010). *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating  
Multicultural Learning Communities* (New York;  
Teachers College Press.

# Understand Culture

## What it's *not*

- *Ethnic tidbits in the curriculum*
- *“Celebrating diversity”*
- *A “holidays and heroes” approach*
- *“Multicultural dinners”*
- *A definitive and rigid set of values, discourses, and practices*

## A working definition:

**“Culture consists of the ever-changing values, traditions, discourses, practices, social and political relationships, and worldview shared by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, race, ethnicity, social class, social identity, and/or religion.”** (Nieto, slightly revised from *Affirming Diversity*, 1992)

## What it *is*

- *Values, traditions, discourses, practices*
- *Social and political relationships*
- *Worldview*
- *Shared history, geographic location, race, ethnicity, social class, social identity, religion*

***Culture is how we live in the world***

# Missing in some discussions of culture:

## *Power*

- Who has it?
- How is it used?
- Who determines the curriculum?
- Who defines the pedagogy?
- Who sets the testing policy?
- What about disciplinary policies?
- What is the nature of outreach to parents and families?

## *Justice*

- How does the school respond to racism and other injustices?
- What about teachers?
- How do school policies and practices privilege some students over others?
- Who is disciplined and why?
- Who's reflected in the curriculum? Who's missing? Why?

Nieto, S. & Bode, P. (2018). *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*. New York: Pearson

# Culture and Language Matter in Student Learning



“I *am* my culture.”

*Paulo Freire*

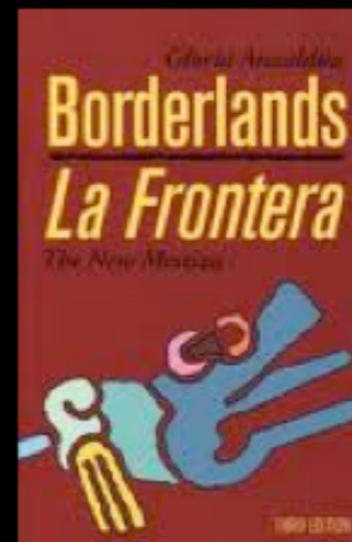
“Who named the language of the elite as the correct, as the standard? *They* did, of course. But why not call it ‘Upper-Class Dominating English’ instead of ‘Standard English’?”

Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, 1987

“So, if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language...

*I am my language.*”

*Gloría Anzaldúa*





***High Leverage Practice:  
Learning about students' cultural, religious, family,  
intellectual, and personal experiences and resources  
for use in instruction and pedagogy***

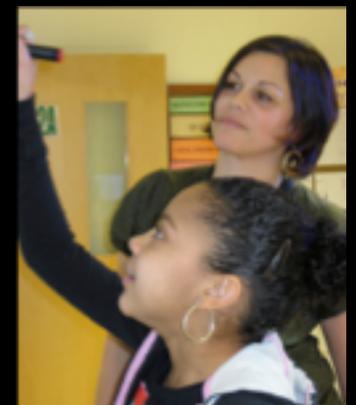
**“Teachers must actively learn about their *particular* students in order to design instruction that will meet their needs”**



**“This includes being deliberate about trying to understand the cultural norms for communicating and collaborating that prevail in particular communities...”**



**“It also means keeping track of what is happening in students' personal lives so as to be able to respond appropriately when an out-of-school experience affects what is happening in school.”**



**There are no “generic students”**

**“Teachers must *actively* learn about their *particular* students in order to design instruction that will meet their needs”**

***How?***

# Learn Sociocultural, Sociohistorical Theory

- Principally guided by Vygotsky's sociocultural, sociohistorical theoretical framework (1978)
- “We hold that the basis for failure is due to defective organization of lessons and activities based on teachers' unexamined attitudes and beliefs about the perceived ‘deficiencies’ of minority and poor students and their families” (Díaz and Flores, 2003).
- “Therefore, it follows that we, as teachers, critically examine, reflect, interrogate, and transform our social interactions across multiple settings.”
- “Our challenge, then, becomes to organize the teaching-learning process to the potential and not the perceived developmental level of our children.”



Díaz, E. and Flores, B. (2003). Teaching to the potential: Teacher as sociocultural, sociohistorical mediator. In de la Luz, M. and Halcón, J. (Eds.) (2001). *The best for our children*. New York: Teachers College Press.

# For Teachers to Become *Sociocultural Mediators...*

...their responsibility is  
to meet students where  
they are and take them  
someplace else...



*...and have them carry who  
they are along with them.*

# What Does it Mean to Become a Sociocultural Mediator?

- Understand culture
- Use “high-leverage practices but question the idea of “best practices”
- Learn about yourself
- Learn about your students
- Learn about the community
- Create affirming curriculum and pedagogy

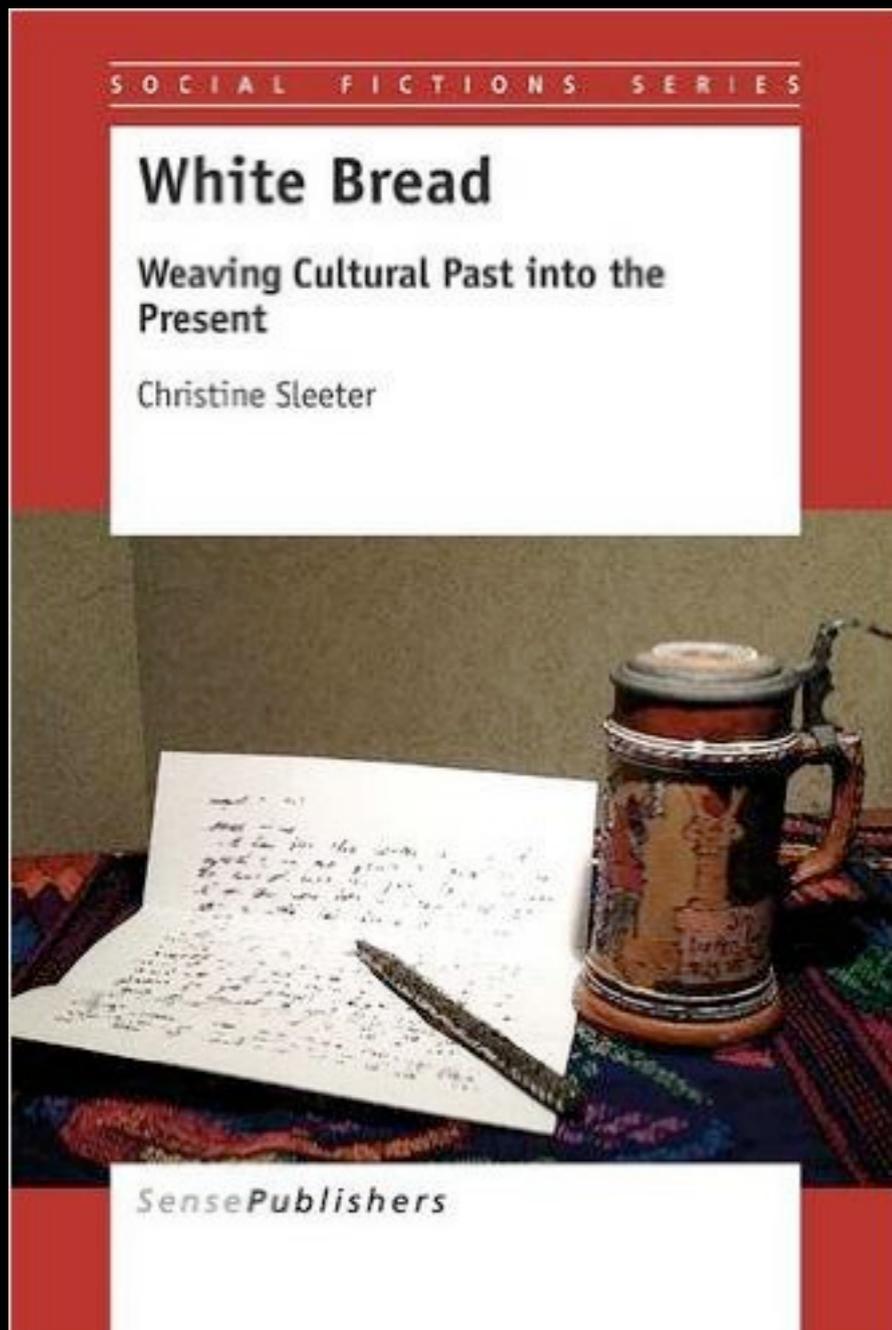


# Some Basic Concrete Examples

- Learn to say students' names correctly
- Label room with languages spoken by students
- Have books and other materials that reflect the backgrounds of students in the room, and of people in the world
- Learn as much as you can about your students
- Engage in authentic family outreach
- Learn about, and become engaged, in the community
- Learn another language

# Learn About Yourself

- Reflect on your values, perspectives, and biases
  - keep a journal
  - join or create a reading/writing/inquiry group
- Explore your heritage
  - Interview family members
  - Read about your people's history
- Explore your privilege
  - read Christine Sleeter's *White Bread: Weaving Cultural Past into the Present* (2015)
  - do your own "critical family history"



In the novel *White Bread*, readers accompany Jessica on a journey into her family's past, into herself, and into the bicultural community she teaches but does not understand. Jessica, a fictional White fifth-grade teacher, is prompted to explore her family history by the unexpected discovery of a hundred-year-old letter. Simultaneously, she begins to grapple with culture and racism, principally through discussions with a Mexican American teacher.

# Learn About Your Students

There are no “generic students”

Students of similar backgrounds  
are not all the same

Create pedagogy to find out about  
your students

Develop curricula to build on their  
interests, skills, talents, and needs

# **Pedagogical Strategies to Learn About Students**

- **A letter at the beginning of the semester**
- **Journaling**
- **Individual conferences, interviews with students**
- **Attend student performances, recitals, games, and other events**
- **Writing prompts**
- **Developing relationships with parents, family members: home visits, coffee hour, welcome volunteers in the classroom**
- **Schedule activities, events with families**

# Learn About the Community

Learn about their history

Learn about their experiences

Learn about their talents and skills  
AKA “funds of knowledge”

Learn about what they want for  
their children

# **Implications for Teacher Education: *Mindset, Curriculum, Pedagogy***

## **First:**

**Learn what you want your preservice  
and practicing teachers to learn  
(about themselves, their students,  
and students' communities)**

# *Why?*

**“...to ensure the they are equipped not only to enact equitable practice but also to disrupt patterns of inequity in their classrooms”**



**Simona Goldin**

**TeachingWorks  
University of Michigan**

# Learn About Your Students

- Most teacher educators - like most teachers - are White, middle-class, monolingual English speakers
- Many have had few experiences and have limited expertise in issues of equity and diversity, regardless of their own backgrounds
- *Start where your students are*
  - Try not to be judgmental about deficit-laden comments and attitudes
  - *But* confront negative, stereotypical, racist, and other oppressive comments and attitudes
  - *Don't* shield students from discomfort
- Bottom line, as in all educational endeavors: Begin with respect for students

# Teach Them *What* They Need to Know

- **The sociopolitical context of education (for ex., the history of public education and the education of diverse groups in U.S. society)**
- **Sociocultural theory**
- **Language development**
- **Resources to learn about histories and experiences not covered in your programs (courses outside Education, relevant bibliographies, books, and other resources the University has to offer)**

# *How?*

- **Keep a journal**
- **Develop a reading list of significant books in the field and commit to reading one a week, or whatever you can fit into your schedule**
- **Join a reading or inquiry group, or begin one**
- **Interview family members**
- **Do a critical family history of your own family**
- **Seek out experiences at your university's teaching and learning center, and beyond, about issues of diversity, justice, and equity**
- **Apply for grants, Fulbrights, and other learning experiences about these issues**

# The Tip of the Iceberg



**What else?**



*Teaching preservice and practicing teachers is not a task to be taken lightly because it is about preparing the next generation of teachers, those who will have an impact on the future of young people in our society.*





*In the end, being an educator means believing in the power of education to expand minds and open hearts to different ideas and perspectives*

