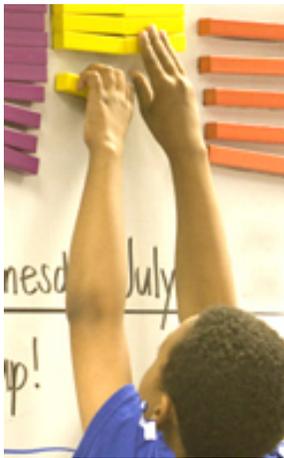




working papers



On Becoming Sociocultural  
Mediators

Sonia Nieto

University of Michigan

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## On Becoming Sociocultural Mediators

Sonia Nieto

**Dr. Sonia Nieto** has devoted her professional life to questions of diversity, equity, and social justice in education. With research focusing on multicultural education, teacher education, and the education of students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, she has written or edited eleven books and dozens of book chapters and journal articles, as well as a memoir, *Brooklyn Dreams: My Life in Public Education*. Her classic text, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* is now in its 7th edition (the 5th-7th editions were co-authored by her friend and colleague Patty Bode). The first edition (1992) was selected for the Museum of Education Readers' Guide as one of the 100 books that helped define the field of education in the 20th century. She has been profiled in Inside the Academy <http://insidetheacademy.asu.edu/sonia-nieto>.

Dr. Nieto has received numerous awards for her scholarly work, activism, and advocacy, including 8 honorary doctorates. Elected as a Laureate of Kappa Delta Pi (2011), and a Fellow of AERA (2011), in 2015 she was also elected a member of the National Academy of Education. She is currently working on a book about teaching with her daughter, Alicia López, also a teacher.

**Abstract:**

In this article, Sonia Nieto describes what it means for teachers to be sociocultural mediators. She begins by reviewing the term culture itself, challenging the ways it has been used over the years to position some students in negative ways, proposing instead a comprehensive definition that takes into account the many resources – sociocultural, familial, experiential, and others – that students bring to their education. The paper goes on to suggest what teachers need to know about their students and their students' communities to be effective with them, addressing the kinds of changes in attitudes, behaviors, and instructional strategies needed to promote robust learning. The strategies and information presented can also be useful for schools, teacher educators, and policymakers by helping to create more appropriate policies and practices that work for all students.

## ON BECOMING SOCIOCULTURAL MEDIATORS

*Paper written for the University of Michigan TeachingWorks Seminar Series, "Outrage Through Action: Disrupting Inequity Through Teacher Education," September 2017.*

*This paper focuses on the following TeachingWorks High-Leverage Practice: "Learning about students' cultural, religious, family, intellectual, and personal resources for use in pedagogy and instruction."*

What is culture and what does it have to do with learning? What cultural, social, linguistic, familial, and other resources do students bring to their learning? How can teachers learn about their students' cultural resources and how can they build on these resources in their curriculum and pedagogy?

In this paper, I address these questions by focusing on the slippery concept of culture, what it is and what it isn't, what it means for learning, and how teachers can become sociocultural mediators of their students. I first address why student differences matter in teaching and learning. Next, I suggest a definition of culture and discuss how it is implicated in learning and teaching. The paper goes on to explore how the concept of culture has been misconstrued and used inappropriately in educational conversations for generations. I then suggest what teachers need to know to become sociocultural mediators of their students. Specifically, based on my research and that of other scholars, I describe a number of changes in attitudes, behaviors, and practices that can help teachers become both more knowledgeable and more effective with their students of diverse backgrounds. At the same time, this information can be useful for schools, teacher educators, and policymakers by helping to create more appropriate policies and practices that work for all students.

## SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT: DIFFERENCES MATTER

It is now abundantly clear that differences – race, ethnicity, culture, gender, ability, and other social differences – matter in school achievement (Howard, 2014; Milner and Howard, 2015). Yet, schools tend to be almost uniformly reluctant to address race, social class, language, and other differences (see, for example, Delpit, 1995; Pollock, 2008). Instead, they tend to focus on the so-called "achievement gap" as if it had been created out of the blue. Given that students of color and students living in poverty have been the primary victims of school policies and practices based on deficit discourses, several years ago Willis Hawley and I asserted in an article on this topic, "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. ... but – ironically – solutions on the public agenda are invariably colorblind" (Hawley and Nieto, 2010, p.66 ). In fact, U.S. educational history has time and again demonstrated that education is neither color-blind, gender-blind, language-blind, ability-blind, nor class-blind.

The so-called "achievement gap," rather than inherent in culture or class, is instead the result of a sociopolitical context that has for generations favored and privileged students of the majority culture, that is, White, middle-class, English speaking, and able students and those who live in the "right" zip code. The result of the uneven sociopolitical context is a deep structural inequality that is reflected and manifested not only in society generally but also in school policies and practices. Consequently, curriculum and pedagogical strategies that incorporate students' knowledge and experiences are frequently absent in the schools that our most marginalized students attend. Yet, as educational research has demonstrated, teaching practices that focus on what students already know and that honor and affirm their realities generally better equip students to become successful learners (see Bransford et al, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Nieto and Bode, 2018).

A good example of the persistence of the colorblind perspective is the ideology of meritocracy. Although widely extolled in schools and society, rather than motivating marginalized

students, the meritocracy myth has instead tended to marginalize them further. In a recent study, for instance, researchers found that students of marginalized backgrounds who believe the myth that anyone can “make it” without regard to race, ethnicity, or social class are more likely to engage in risky behaviors because of the apparent futility of even trying to succeed (Godfrey et al, 2017). This finding provides evidence that beliefs that justify “the system” can actually undermine the well-being as well as the learning of marginalized youths.

## UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

A goal of this paper is to suggest that when this happens, teachers can attend to the real issue at hand, that is, learning how to effectively teach students of culturally and socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds. When positive attitudes and behaviors concerning difference are in place, school, and teachers can then create conditions for robust learning.

Penning the influential 1972 book in which he coined the phrase “blaming the victim” to counter the widely used term “culturally deprived” to describe, students of color and those living in poverty, William Ryan hit the perfect note when he wrote:

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 of the schools to which we commit these children (Ryan, 1972, p. 61-62).

Nearly half a century later, his words still ring true for many of the schools that students of color and students living in poverty attend. The “cultural deprivation” metaphor is still ubiquitous today in, for example, the popularity of the ill-conceived framework on “understanding poverty” by Ruby Payne (2013). Payne’s work, used widely in school systems eager to find a rationale for the so-called “achievement gap,” has resulted in extending a destructive understanding of culture, in the process creating yet more apologists for the inferior education offered to children living in poverty.

Describing children of marginalized backgrounds as “culturally deprived” and “at risk,” among other demeaning terms, is nothing new; it has gone on for generations. Most of the time, this kind of deficit language has referred to students whose race, ethnicity, culture, and social class differ from the majority. Intelligence testing provides a glaring example: Lewis Terman, a psychologist at the turn of the twentieth century, after testing only two Mexican and Indigenous children, made the following stunning statement: “Their dullness seems to be racial, or at least inherent in the family stock from which they came” (Terman, 1916, p. 115). The solution? Terman suggested placing these children in separate classes because, according to him, while it was possible that they could become efficient workers, mastering abstractions was beyond their capabilities. As chronicled by Joel Spring, this kind of deficit thinking and the resulting policies and policies have been especially virulent towards communities of color and their children (Spring, 2016). Similar reasoning has been used to explain why Blacks, Hispanics, some Asians, and Indigenous people have failed to learn, but nearly every new immigrant and ethnic group in the United States, including European Americans such as the Irish, Italians, and Jews, has suffered a similar fate, at least until they acculturated to the dominant culture, losing most vestiges of their languages and cultures (Selden, 1999). Unfortunately, these damaging ideas do not remain at the theoretical level. Instead, they make their way in pernicious and dangerous ways into teachers’ and schools’ practices and policies.

Negative depictions of students from nonmainstream backgrounds have done little to improve learning; they have instead helped to set in stone how these students are viewed, labeled, classified, and taught. Given such deficit discourses, teachers have been given few positive strategies to address racial, ethnic, linguistic, and other differences in their classrooms, and even fewer ways to capitalize and build on student differences in support of their learning and growth. Challenging the negative discourses about difference prevalent in both school and society means recognizing – and acting on the recognition – that no race or language is inferior, no culture is a “culture of poverty,” and no community is insignificant. Rejecting deficit discourses and affirming diversity is the first step to treating students with equity and justice.

There is a great deal of misunderstanding in schools about culture. Incorporating culture in teaching is not about sprinkling what I've called "ethnic tidbits" in the curriculum; it is not about simply "celebrating diversity," commemorating a few outstanding men and women of nonmajority backgrounds, observing some "ethnic" holidays, or hosting "multicultural dinners." Instead, culture is both more complicated and more nuanced than these measures would suggest. I have defined it in this way:

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 religion" (slightly revised from Nieto, 1992).

A simpler way to say it is that *culture is how we live in the world*. But culture is not simplistic: as I defined it more comprehensively in a subsequent book, culture is *dynamic, multifaceted, embedded in a social, economic, and political context, created and socially constructed, learned, and dialectical* (Nieto, 1999). Also, culture does not consist of rigid traits; it is instead about what Gutierrez and Rogoff have identified as "repertoires of practice" (Gutierrez and Rogoff, 2003). Nobody is completely defined or determined by her or his culture; at the same time, everyone is a cultural being and a cultural hybrid, that is, a member of various cultures. In addition, culture is not simply about race and ethnicity, but can include social class, language, gender, ability, and individual and other differences. Thus, a Mexican woman is not only Mexican, but also a woman, heterosexual or not, able-bodied or not, middle class or not. In addition, two people from the same culture and even from the same family can be – and frequently are – different in many ways. This makes getting to understand culture a tricky business, albeit one that is at the same time powerful in helping change how we think about pedagogy

When educators recognize that effective teaching begins with learning about their students in order to build a climate of care in their classrooms, "culture" becomes a creative endeavor rather than a fixed set of characteristics. In this way, teachers, students, and families can work hard at developing relationships of learning and responsibility in classrooms and schools.

### **Culture, power, and justice**

Missing in much of the discourse about culture are questions of power and justice. This includes asking who has power and how it's used. Paul Gorski, in an important article decrying how culture is often misused, cautions that educators need to distinguish between "cultural initiatives" and "equity initiatives." He critiques, for instance, what he calls the "cult of culture" because it impedes progress toward equity and justice by focusing on superficial – and often mistaken – notions of culture, an approach that he suggests is "based on an indefensible premise that we can achieve equity by ignoring inequity" (Gorski, 2016, p. 222).

Discussions of culture tend to focus on rigid and often erroneous understandings, for example, by displaying charts of so-called "cultural traits" that supposedly define particular cultures and suggesting that all people of particular cultures believe, feel, learn, and act in the same way. These charts tend to do more harm than good for any number of reasons, including that they inevitably lead to gross stereotypes and even racist messages, for example, that some children don't do well in school because learning is not "part of their culture," or that all children of a particular race or ethnicity learn in exactly the same way, and so forth. According to Gorski, "The implication of making culture the center of the conversation, comforting privilege rather than discomforting inequity, though, is that by doing so we mask racism, xenophobia, and other oppressions, undermining the goal of equity" (Gorski, 2016, p. 224).

Many years ago, Paulo Freire provided a graphic example of how power is used to define what is "correct" or "appropriate" in culture, especially as understood in schools. In speaking about language, Freire questioned the concept of "standard language" when he asked, "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'" (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 45). In making this assertion, Freire was not implying that standards were unnecessary. Instead,

he was questioning who has the power to create the standard, and why it's always people who already hold inordinate power.

Freire's statement is a good illustration of how all decisions about language (or other conventions) are arbitrary; that is, it shows that language is not inherently good or bad, but rather that it is created by human beings who attach meaning, power, and prestige – or lack of these – to certain ways of speaking. Language is a particularly dramatic example of how power is used. Why is it incorrect to use “ain't” or “mines,” as many children of color use (including me when I was a child)? Who has determined this? Why should all essays have five paragraphs, with each following a particular format? These kinds of decisions, intentionally or not, determine the status of a language by an elite.

A more recent example of how the language of some people is discredited by the majority can be found in “3 Ways to Speak English,” a powerful TED talk by Jamila Lyiscott who calls herself a “tri-tongued orator.” Speaking three varieties of English that she calls “home,” “school,” and “friends,” she switches effortlessly from one to the other, claiming with pride that she is “articulate,” a term sometimes used condescendingly by dominant group people as a backhanded compliment for people of color and immigrants who speak so-called “proper English.” ([https://www.ted.com/talks/jamila\\_lyiscott\\_3\\_ways\\_to\\_speak\\_english?language=en#t-76825](https://www.ted.com/talks/jamila_lyiscott_3_ways_to_speak_english?language=en#t-76825) [Lyiscott shares practical implications for teachers in a series of blogs: <http://www.heinemann.com/blog/liberation-literacies1/> as well as through her webpage, <http://jamilalyiscott.com/>].

The random nature of linguistic rules is evident in other aspects of culture as well. These include social mores, tastes, and traditions. For instance, why is keeping one's elbows on the table “bad” and why is it necessary to eat salad with the small fork rather than the big one? Why is only European music called “classical”? Don't all cultures have their own “classical music”? All of these questions, though seemingly trivial, say a great deal about who has the power to define “culture.”

Nor should concerns about culture center on “sensitivity.” I remember speaking at a multicultural education conference over two decades ago when somebody asked me how educators could develop more “cultural sensitivity.” My reaction was instantaneous, perhaps because I was tired of hearing the term “cultural sensitivity” being used as if being “sensitive” to one another could erase the disastrous results of educational inequality, not to mention the many decades, and sometimes centuries, of racism and other oppressive acts in our nation. I responded, “Rather than cultural sensitivity, we need to be thinking about arrogance reduction,” something about which I later wrote more extensively (Nieto, 1995). My response underlines my reluctance to think of culture as a rigid set of values that fail to take into account the sociopolitical context in which culture exists. As I said at that conference many years ago, it is not so important whether teachers are “sensitive” to their students. In fact, if not accompanied by genuine respect and knowledge, that expression seems to me to be singularly condescending because one can be both sensitive and racist at the same time. What matters is whether they learn about their students, respect them and their communities, and demonstrate this respect in their curriculum and pedagogy.

This leads to the issue of sociocultural mediation.

## **BECOMING SOCIOCULTURAL MEDIATORS**

The first time I came across the mention of sociocultural mediation was more than a quarter century ago when I read a book chapter by Esteban Díaz, Luis Moll, and Hugh Mehan (Díaz, Moll, and Mehan, 1986). In it, the authors described how their work was guided by Leo Vygotsky's sociocultural, sociohistorical theoretical framework (1978). It was a persuasive essay that described how one of a teacher's primary responsibilities is to become a sociocultural mediator of their students. The more similar a teacher and her students are in terms of culture and experiences, the easier this is, but when teachers work with young people who are different from them in many ways, the task becomes more complicated, though no less necessary.

More recently, Esteban Díaz was joined by his colleague Barbara Flores in extending the framework introduced in the 1986 piece to further explore how sociocultural theory can aid teachers in working with students of nonmainstream backgrounds (Díaz and Flores, 2003). As

they explain, teachers as sociocultural mediators co-construct teaching and learning experiences with their students. However, given how unproductive schooling has been historically for marginalized students, they also argue that the failure of remedial efforts to correct this situation lies in the deficit perspectives on which most pedagogical efforts are based. That is, rather than use students' linguistic, cultural, and experiential resources, schools often dismiss these resources as unsuitable for learning. When this happens, Díaz and Flores suggest that failure itself is co-constructed through the social interactions that teachers help create in their classroom lessons and other activities. They go on to write, "Failure or success in 'lessons' is seen as a function of teachers' pedagogical knowledge, expectations, beliefs, and attitudes about language, culture, teaching-learning, and most recently, 'mandated' ways of teaching statewide curricula" (Díaz and Flores, 2003, p. 29).

Díaz and Flores conclude that the cycle of failure for nonmajority students starts with the low expectations that are prevalent in society, leading to low levels of instruction, commonly thought of as "compensatory education," and resulting in poor academic achievement. They suggest instead teaching to the potential of students rather than what might seem to be their actual development. Doing so does not mean diluting the curriculum but instead enriching it by working in what Vygotsky called the "zone of proximal development," or ZPD which he defined as the "distance between the actual developmental level of the learner as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 86).

In practical terms, what does it mean to become a sociocultural mediator? For me, it means, first, that teachers must begin by examining their own knowledge, perceptions, and biases concerning their students, and then adjusting their pedagogical practices to reflect a more equitable approach. Absent this critical reflection, old stereotypes and misconceptions about students of marginalized backgrounds remain stubbornly in place. Second, it means learning about, honoring, and affirming the sociocultural knowledge, skills, talents, and experiences that students already possess. And, third, it means that schools must be restructured so that this can happen. Getting from here to there is not, however, as linear a process as this would imply. Moving from reflection to action has been an intractable problem for generations, especially because teachers have had little apprenticeship in their teacher preparation to practice what they have learned in theory and research. One way to address this issue is to actually practice becoming a sociocultural mediator, both in their teacher education and in their schools when they become teachers.

In what follows, I explore how becoming a sociocultural mediator involves changes in not only attitudes, but also in behaviors and pedagogical practices. I begin with the work that teachers need to do to learn about themselves. Equally important is learning about students and their communities, and I suggest several examples of how teachers and other educators can do this work successfully.

### **Learn About Yourself**

An uncritical teacher is an ineffective teacher. This is always the case, but when a teacher has rarely reflected on her or himself, and less on students whose backgrounds differ from their own, it's even truer.

Reflecting on ourselves can be difficult. Most of us rarely have the time or even the inclination to spend time thinking about who we are, what we believe in and value, and how our beliefs and values play into our everyday lives. Yet reflecting on these things is an essential duty of teachers because educators' stock in trade is the lives of other human beings. When those human beings are very different from us, the task becomes even more consequential. All educators, but especially educators of dominant backgrounds, need to think critically about the implications of their lives and identities for the work they do. Dominant group teachers often think of themselves as the norm and others as "different," generally meaning inferior. Unlearning this belief is the first step. That takes opening up to the possibility that one's attitudes and values can be detrimental to one's students.

Teachers can learn about themselves by reflecting on the experiences they've had and the privileges they've earned, either at birth or along the way. Teachers and other educators rarely have the time and space to think about these things. Keeping a journal is a good way to begin to reflect on these things. Joining a reading group can help open teachers up to different perspectives about teaching and life. Joining an inquiry group to address a particularly tricky problem in their classroom or school can help teachers not only think about their own experiences but also to hear and reflect on the experiences of others who might have different ideas about the same questions. Starting a reading group focused on coming-of-age stories of young people of different backgrounds can give teachers insight into the lives and experiences of young people, including their own students.

Educators can also do a deep dive into their own families. Doing a family history can be a good way to learn about one's heritage, but doing what Christine Sleeter calls a "critical family history" can be even more powerful because it can reveal hidden aspects of oppression and privilege, many times in the same family (Sleeter, 2008). Drawing on critical theory, critical race theory, and feminist theory, Sleeter describes how she went about doing her own critical family history, in the process discovering things she might not have even imagined about her family. In doing so, she explains,

I explored how this process can work as an entrée into historical memory about race, ethnicity, and identity—revealing the ways in which power and privilege have been constructed, the prices people have paid for that, and the ways in which ordinary people have challenged inequities (Sleeter, 2008, p. 115).

Doing her own critical family history, Sleeter pored through archival records and other historical documents to learn more about her family's immigration stories and history in the United States. Through this process, she discovered that historical amnesia had played a part in her European immigrant ancestors' lives who, despite the discrimination they had faced, were later able to create a narrative that neglected to take into account how their very skin color had allowed them access to privileges unavailable to African Americans, Mexican Americans, Asians, and Indigenous people. Tradition and law have managed to erase the part played by racism and exploitation in the collective memory of many European Americans. That is why so many find it hard to define themselves as cultural beings, claiming instead that they "do not have a culture." They do, of course, have culture as everybody has, but they also have power, something they may be oblivious about. This is where the "critical" in critical family history comes in.

Sleeter's interest in critical family history led her to write a novel, *White Bread* (2015), in which she follows the political awakening of a young White teacher who fits the profile of a person who is ignorant of her own family's past. Like many others, this teacher was unaware of the fact that her ancestors had probably benefited from their privilege as White immigrants. Through the protagonist's research, as well as her interactions with a fellow teacher and her largely Mexican American students, she learned not only about her own family's history, but also about how viewing one's family history with a critical lens can teach us a great deal about U.S. history and current reality. Rather than the "level playing field" we have been taught to believe in, engaging in critical family history can demonstrate that the system is often rigged so that those with privilege in race, language, social class, and other differences benefit. Sleeter's book has been used as an important tool to use with preservice and practicing teachers to make just this point.

### **Learn About Students and Their Communities**

All good education requires beginning where students are, and then opening their minds to other worlds. That is, becoming a sociocultural mediator means that educators not only introduce students to other perspectives and experiences, but also that they encourage students to carry who they are along with them. When teachers embody this mindset, rather than discarding their identities, students can instead claim them. Take the issue of language: while it is essential that all students in the United States learn to communicate in English, this does not mean – as has been the typical expectation – that they abandon their home language in order to succeed. Doing so often results in going from being monolingual in their home language to

becoming monolingual in English, an unnecessary and needlessly destructive loss individually for students, and a dire linguistic loss for the nation. The same is true of discouraging students from accessing their sociocultural knowledge and experiences. When those are left outside the schoolhouse door, the message is clear, whether intentional or not: Your language, culture, and experiences do not belong here.

Although I highlight only a few of these practices, I encourage teachers and other educators to think creatively about how they can learn about their students and their students' communities in respectful ways that engender confidence and trust. For instance, one of the most useful ways to learn about students' backgrounds is to explore their history. I used to teach a course called "Teaching About the Puerto Rican Experience" for preservice and practicing teachers. Rather than focus on, for instance, the fact that some Puerto Rican students prefer rice and beans to hamburgers (while true, the opposite may also be true for others), I taught my students some Puerto Rican history, both on the island and in the United States. Without this knowledge, my students would have no idea why more than half of all Puerto Ricans live in the United States rather than on the island they love so dearly. Without this knowledge, they wouldn't understand the role played by U.S. colonialism when Puerto Rico was taken over by the United States from Spain in 1898, and also today, when it still has a complicated and contradictory political status of both "territory" and "Commonwealth" and little power over key decisions in the lives of its people. Without this knowledge, it would be hard to understand why Puerto Ricans have a "back and forth" migration pattern different from most other immigrants. Without this knowledge, teachers would be hard pressed to understand the stubborn tenacity with which many Puerto Ricans hold onto their language and cultural practices. So, rather than focus only on why Puerto Ricans might celebrate their daughters' quinceañeras, or why the system of *compadrazgo* (godparent relationships) is decidedly different among Puerto Ricans than others – interesting and informative topics, no doubt, but usually not central to understanding why Puerto Rican students haven't succeeded in U.S. schools. Even more importantly, attention needs to be paid to the sociohistorical and sociopolitical context of the group in question.

The example of Puerto Rico is just one instance of how knowing the history of the students in our classrooms is essential knowledge for teachers, whether we're talking about Indigenous and Hispanic groups who were here before Europeans arrived, people of African descent who were forcibly enslaved, European immigrants and, later, Asian and other immigrants from around the world who arrived in the late 19th and 20th centuries, and others who to continue arrive today. All of these groups have histories that are more complicated than the simple story of immigration that's generally told.

For students to learn successfully, teachers have to work at developing respectful and nurturing relationships with them. So, besides learning something of the history of the students in their classrooms, teachers also need to explore who their particular students are, not in a superficial fashion about supposed cultural traits of ethnic or social groups. They can do this by focusing on the individuals in their own classrooms because while people are members of a specific cultural group, they are also individuals with particular likes, dislikes, strengths, limitations, dreams, and hopes. Another way to say this is for teachers to learn to "read" their students, as counseled by Paulo Freire (1998). Mary Cowhey took this idea to heart in "Reading the Class," a persuasive essay she wrote for a book I edited several years ago that includes essays from some of my former students on how they had been influenced by Freire's writings and philosophy (Nieto, 2008). Mary explained, "You write about reading the class. I guess I jump the gun. Part of how I address my fear about the first day of school is to face it, as you suggest" (Cowhey, 2008, p. 13). She goes on to describe her practice of visiting every family of the children she will be teaching the week before school begins. She explains,

I can't wait for the first day of school, and so I go out and read the students in their neighborhoods, their homes, with their families. That way I know where my students are coming from, literally. I know who their people are. I know the names their families call them. I know what they are proud of and what worries them. I begin to trust these families. My students and their families begin to trust me (Cowhey, 1998, p. 13).

Besides home visits, teachers can also explore the families' "funds of knowledge," a research approach shaped by Norma Gonzalez, Luis Moll, and their colleagues, most of whom were practicing teachers (Gonzalez and Moll, 2005). The approach consists of teachers becoming ethnographers of their students by interviewing families in this way learning about the particular skills and talents they have. It can include industrial, professional, domestic, and sociocultural skills, and it gives teachers another tool for bringing families' realities into the curriculum and pedagogy. This is important to do especially with families who are often viewed as having few or no skills and talents. Needless to say, doing these interviews takes a good deal of preparation, respect, and knowledge on the part of teachers.

Another research-based approach for teachers to find out more about their students is to interview the students themselves. This can be done individually or as a project where several teachers work together to craft case studies of particular students about whom they want to know more (see Nieto and Bode, 2018, for examples). Again, teachers need to use discretion in doing case studies to avoid violating privacy issues and steering clear of harmful generalizations.

Other ways of learning about students and their communities include having students interview family members, with particular attention to language, culture, race, and immigration. For instance, students can do a language survey of their family languages. Often, these surveys reveal that most families, regardless of racial background, have multiple languages in their past of which they may not even be aware; the same is true of immigration stories that have been hidden, sometimes for generations. Another approach is for teachers to write a letter to their students on the first day of school, a practice that my daughter has done with her students for most of her 23 years of teaching. In turn, she asks them to write her a letter about themselves. As she has found, not only is this a valuable way to learn about her students, but telling students about herself, her family members, the languages she speaks and why they're important to her, why she became a teacher and what she loves about it: all of these allow students to feel free to share their own experiences as well.

I am often distressed at how little some teachers know about the communities in which they work. Too often, they have never really learned about what the community has to offer. And though it might sound like a small thing, I've suggested that simply taking a walk around the neighborhood can be a far more meaningful professional development activity than having teachers sit through yet another mandated PD in which they have little interest or have had little input. Some teachers make the decision to move to the community in which they teach so that they can better understand and relate to their students and although this is a positive step, it's not necessary. They can simply frequent some of the community centers, places of worship, and businesses in order to get a feel for what the community is like. They can also attend their students' games, plays, recitals, and other events, something greatly appreciated not only by students but also by their families. And, finally, they can learn about their students by simply making themselves available to listen.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION**

Everything I've written up to this point has focused specifically on teachers: what they need to learn and what they can do to access high-leverage practices related to culture in their curriculum and instruction. At the same time, most of the preceding suggestions relate equally well to teacher educators. The reality is that most teacher educators, like most classroom teachers, are White, English-speaking, and middle-class. So, in what follows, I want to extend the discussion to how we as teacher educators can work with our candidates, in the words of Simona Goldin of TeachingWorks, "to ensure that they are equipped not only to enact equitable practice but also to disrupt patterns of inequity in their classrooms" (2017).

Though they may be experts in particular content areas such as literacy, social studies, and others, many teacher educators have neither personal experience nor professional expertise concerning cultural diversity. This is particularly true if they are from the majority culture, but it's also true of all teacher educators regardless of background because none of us knows everything that we should about cultural diversity, equity, or sociopolitical considerations, not to mention the individual familial and intersectional cultures that students bring to U.S. classrooms. For example, though I am Puerto Rican and know a lot about the Puerto Rican experience in the United States,

this knowledge alone does not necessarily equip me to know about students of backgrounds other than mine. Nor does it guarantee that I will have the needed knowledge or expertise to teach even Puerto Rican students whose realities – race, social class, and place of upbringing – do not match my own. Learning about students is thus a formidable and complicated task for all of us.

With limited knowledge of our own students, teacher educators, like teachers, must learn what they want their preservice and practicing teachers to learn both about themselves and their students, and also about specific practices that can prepare their preservice and practicing teachers for the diverse classrooms they are certain to encounter in their work.

Let's begin with learning about themselves. If teacher educators are to be successful in preparing their students to work with young people of diverse backgrounds, they must engage in the kind of exploration in which I've suggested teachers need to engage. In too many cases, faculty members believe that once they complete their doctoral studies, they need little in terms of continuing professional development except in keeping up with their content area. This is far from the truth, as more universities are realizing, because the student populations at institutions of higher education are becoming more diverse than ever. Fortunately, many universities have created teaching and learning centers that provide faculty with seminars, fellowships, and other resources for extending their professional learning to effectively teach the ever-changing student body. Taking advantage of these opportunities is crucial if teacher educators are to learn about the identities and experiences of their students, in this case, preservice and practicing teachers.

At the same time, there are numerous activities beyond those offered in teaching and learning centers in which teacher educators can explore their own identities and extend their sociocultural knowledge. Undertaking some of the same activities I described earlier – keeping a journal, joining reading and inquiry groups, interviewing their own family members, doing a critical family history of their own families – are just as relevant for teacher educators and others who provide professional development for preservice and practicing teachers as they are for teachers.

Learning about their students is also important for teacher educators. Just as there are no generic K-12 students, there are no generic preservice or practicing teachers. Each comes with his or her own culture, language, experiences, perspectives, and talents, as well as limitations and biases. Teacher educators, like teachers, thus need to start where their students are. Some of these students might be very knowledgeable about diversity of all kinds, and some may know little to nothing about it; most will probably fall somewhere in between. Some will have learned enough U.S. history, as well as educational history, to know about longstanding inequities in the U.S. educational system, while others may know little about these things and fervently believe that all there is to success is working hard and having “grit.” Having taught preservice and practicing teachers for many years, I was delighted when I had students who arrived with a vast knowledge of diversity, had traveled extensively, had other eye-opening and mind-expanding experiences, or were bilingual or multilingual. These resources gave them significant insights in understanding difference. At the same time, I was sometimes appalled by some of the attitudes and beliefs expressed by others, attitudes and beliefs I knew would be terribly harmful to their future students. The deficit-laden statements I heard were sometimes painful to hear. Understanding where these ideas and biases are coming from is important for teacher educators to understand, though certainly not to condone. Rather than condemn preservice and practicing teachers for these attitudes, my job was to offer them research, data, readings, and curriculum to help them broaden their perceptions and perhaps rethink some of their ideas.

Being an educator means believing in the power of education to expand minds and open hearts to different perspectives, and that is what I believe all teacher educators need to believe as well. The bottom line, as in everything in education, is to begin with respect for one's students, trying to understand their perspectives and values, even if they differ greatly from our own. At the same time, teacher educators also need to refuse to allow racist and other oppressive statements in class. As teacher educators, we have to keep in mind that 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. That being the case, it is our job to make sure to confront the negative ideas and biases that some preservice and practicing teachers bring to class because it is likely that, if not confronted directly, these same attitudes will make their way to their classrooms.

Again, using some of the same practices and strategies I suggested for teachers to use in order to learn about their students could work equally well for teacher educators. Of course, teacher educators cannot do home visits, and taking a walk around the neighborhood of the university would probably not be very helpful. But teacher educators can ask students to engage in other activities in which they describe their sociocultural realities and experiences. For example, I used writing a great deal in my classes, not only for research papers but also for other assignments. In some of my courses I asked students to keep a journal so they could jot down their thoughts after class about some of the topics we had discussed. Since the courses I taught concerned diversity, racism, privilege inequality, and other subjects that might be new and uncomfortable for them, their journals were private, to be shared only with me. Confronting issues of inequity for the first time, ideas that might shake their belief that “everyone has an equal chance,” that there is a “level playing field for everyone,” that meritocracy – not privilege or race or social class – is the only thing that counts in our society: all of these are challenging for those who have never thought about these things before. This doesn’t mean that I shielded my students from their discomfort; in fact, I made it clear at the beginning of every semester that it wasn’t my job to make them comfortable. On the other hand, I took my role to create a safe learning environment very seriously.

I would also give my students assignments based on class discussions, readings, and other activities. I collected the journals twice a semester and I commented extensively in them. It was a way to have a conversation with each student and also a valuable way to get to know them and figure out where their ideas were coming from. At the same time, it gave the students a sense of anonymity in case they were reluctant to appear uninformed or “dumb” in class.

Teacher educators also need to make sure that they introduce preservice and practicing teachers to practices that can help them become sociocultural mediators of their K-12 students. Learning about students’ language development, whether in a first, second, or multiple languages, as well as strategies to support their English language development, is important for all teachers. Also learning sociocultural theory and putting it into practice through the kinds of ethnographic field work with teachers as defined by Gonzalez and Moll (2005) is an excellent way of starting off early with preservice teachers so that they learn how to work with the families of their culturally diverse student populations. Thinking critically about our syllabi – what to include, what to emphasize, the bibliographies we use, the scholars whose work we trust, the texts we assign: these are all crucial considerations to keep in mind when planning the courses that will help preservice and practicing teachers be prepared for the complex classrooms in which they will work.

On the first day of class, I often assigned “The Act of Study,” a brief but powerful 3-page piece by Paulo Freire (Freire, 1985). In it, Freire encourages students – all of us who study and learn – to become critical readers by rejecting mechanical and rote practices that leave little room for imagination in learning. Instead, he asked students to “assume the role of subject of the act” because “It’s impossible to study seriously if the reader faces a text as though magnetized by the author’s words, mesmerized by a magical force...” (p. 2). “The act of study, in sum,” he writes, “is an attitude toward the world” (p. 3). This was the kind of attitude that I wanted my own students to have about everything they read, everything they discussed, everything they saw in their schools and beyond. This “attitude toward the world” should be evident in everything that teachers learn and do. At the end of this inspiring piece, Freire writes, “To study is not to consume ideas, but to create and re-create them” (Freire, 1985, p. 4). That’s what I believe the best teacher education is about.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

My own trajectory as a teacher and teacher educator over more than 50 years has taught me that having a mindset and engaging in practices that honor students’ identities and sociocultural realities, and that recognizing the sociopolitical context of education, can make a great difference in the quality of education that our K-12 students receive, particularly students of marginalized backgrounds. Practice-based teacher education, based on robust research and coupled with theoretical understandings, seem to me to be the most powerful way to prepare the next generation of teachers.

Given the tremendous demographic and sociopolitical changes that have taken place in our society in the past several decades – changes that, if anything, will only intensify in the years ahead – it is imperative that teachers and teacher educators address these changes through their curriculum and instruction. Because our classrooms, schools, universities, and our society in general are becoming more diverse than ever before, educators must learn to address differences by becoming sociocultural mediators. In this essay, besides the *why* of becoming sociocultural mediators, I've also provided examples from research and practice that I hope teachers and teacher educators will find helpful.

Although I've focused on the crucial role of teachers and teacher educators in becoming sociocultural mediators, they are not solely responsible for what goes on in classrooms and schools. If we are to make meaningful changes in U.S. schools, many others need to be involved as well, including administrators, policymakers, and the general public. This requires dramatic changes in curriculum, pedagogy, and other educational policies and practices (topics about which I have written in more detail in Nieto, 2010; Nieto, 2013; and Nieto and Bode, 2018). Until these changes are made, our schools will continue to be spaces where some students are welcomed and others are marginalized, a situation that bodes poorly not only for young people but also for our democracy as a whole.

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