

## Changing Minds in Changing Times

*Language, Culture, and Teaching: Critical Perspectives for a New Century* (Volume in the Language, Culture, and Teaching Series). Sonia Nieto. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001, 328pp.

### **Kira Baker**

*University of Pennsylvania*

Sonia Nieto's newest book, *Language, culture, and teaching: Critical perspectives for a new century*, is a welcome resource during a time when conversations about education seem to center on high stakes testing rather than good pedagogy, and when dialog across race, ethnicity or nationality is veiled under the shroud of 'either-or' politics. In this book, Nieto creates a framework for understanding the meaning and necessity of true multicultural pedagogy in today's world. Her writing aims to awaken readers to the multiple perspectives and experiences of students and teachers in schools, which are often hidden or degraded by well-worn institutional practices and/or racism. The book, a collection of journal articles and book chapters, is structured as a 'text book' for pre-service teachers, however, this powerful volume speaks to those in teacher education and should also be on the reading lists of policy-makers, administrators, and politicians.

Politics, power, democracy - all are a part of education, according to Nieto. Her socio-cultural theory of multicultural education emerges from a focus on people lives. She highlights the tenets of this focus as: agency, or active learning through mutual discovery; experience; hybridity/identity, which highlights the complexity of the individual; context; and community, defined as democracy and power. Nieto's definition of multicultural education is therefore based on relationships, critical questioning, perspectives, and reform. Nieto argues that multicultural education must be viewed as basic, because the alternative to it would be 'monocultural education,' which offers only one viewpoint and reinforces hegemonic structures. She stresses that all multicultural education is antiracist education because it invites multiple perspectives, and engages participants in active reform towards democracy and social justice.

The text was fueled with a sense of urgency to remind readers that the context of culture and power in schools has a direct impact upon the life of every child. Nieto's message was urgent not only because of the ways that this context is usually masked or ignored, but also because of the increasing shift towards 'managerial' policy in schooling that shuts down avenues of critical dialog or meaningful reform. This 'managerial' trend is often based upon an economic imperative, she maintains, and not a pedagogical one. Nieto is successful in sharing examples of her message through voices of students, and through research studies and theoretical writing. She makes clear the connections between culture and cognition, and argues that when a student's culture or background is ignored or deemed not 'culturally relevant' the curriculum ultimately represents a type of 'symbolic violence' to that student. This powerful image reminds us of the dangers of

considering one viewpoint, history, or language as the most relevant perspective; should we give in, we would operate on the lowest level of expectations, and deny students access to ‘transformative pedagogy.’

Nieto’s sense of urgency was also clear by her tone in addressing readers. She drew us in through real stories, conversations of students, and even an example of her own experience teaching. Issues of racism and linguisticism (ideologies and structures that deny power to those on the basis of language) ran through each story, which demonstrated their hidden potency and danger in schooling. Nieto outlines why new teachers should learn about multiculturalism, and details examples of theoretically sound multicultural pedagogy. Finally, she urges her audience, pre-service teachers and teacher education professionals, to fight for multicultural education and practices through an ongoing social-justice reform process.

I am writing this review from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where the school board was dissolved and re-assigned by the Governor and Mayor, who have now begun a ‘reform model’ including six private companies and several non-profits in running schools in the district. The new school board, (the “School Reform Commission”) has four businessmen and one non-profit leader. As I read Nieto’s book, I thought to myself, has anybody who is making decisions for these schools ever read a book such as this? With the current spotlight on reform in the U.S., Nieto’s advocacy for ‘social-justice reform,’ speaks loud and clear, not only to teachers, but to policy makers and administrators as well. Therefore, I would suggest two additional things for Nieto’s book: one, a message to the policy-makers, and two, for everyone to mail a copy of this book to their local mayor, school board, or principal, and ask them to answer all of the ‘critical questions’ that are assigned at the end of each chapter in the book. Perhaps then, reform in schools will better reflect the multiple voices and perspectives within them.

*Kira Baker is a doctoral student in the Teaching, Learning and Curriculum program of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Her interests include teacher networks and professional support for pre-service and beginning teachers.*