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Language, Literacy, and Culture: Aha! Moments in Personal and Sociopolitical Understanding

Sonia Nieto, http://www.sonianieto.com/
Professor Emerita, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

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This article focuses on the intersections among language, literacy, and culture, and what these intersections have meant for me personally, and what they can mean for students who have been marginalized, neglected, or made invisible by traditional understandings of the role of education. Although not linked conceptually in the past, the more recent tendency to connect language, literacy, and culture gives us a richer picture of learning, especially for students whose identities are related to language, race, ethnicity, and immigrant status have traditionally had a low status in many societies.

One result of this reconceptualization is that more education programs are reflecting and promoting a sociocultural perspective in language and literacy. Such a perspective is firmly rooted in an anthropological and sociological understanding of culture, a view of learning as socially constructed, and an understanding of how students from diverse segments of society experience schooling, due to differential access to literacy specifically, and to education more broadly. The context I discuss in this article is grounded in my own experience as a Puerto Rican second-generation immigrant—also called *Nuyorican* or, more recently, *Diasporican*—in the United States, although the implications for teaching and learning go beyond my own limited experience.

I am aware that multiple and conflicting ideas exist about these theoretical perspectives, but some basic tenets of sociocultural theory can serve as a platform for this article. In what follows, I explore a number of these tenets, illustrating them with examples from my own experiences to

demonstrate why a sociocultural perspective is invaluable in uncovering some of the tensions and dilemmas of schooling and diversity.

Sociocultural Theory and Autobiography

The language of sociocultural theory includes terms such as *discourse* [*à la* James Gee (1990), with a small 'd' and a capital 'D'], *habitus* and *cultural capital* as defined by Bourdieu (1986; see also Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), *hegemony* as articulated by Gramsci (2012), *power* and *privilege* as discussed by Foucault (1980), *social practice* as defined by the New London Group (1996), as well as *identity, hybridity,* and even the very word *literacy* (Janks, 2007). Today, these terms have become commonplace, but if we were to do a review of the literature of some thirty years ago or so, we would probably be hard pressed to find them, at least as currently used. What does this mean? How have our awareness and internalization of these terms and everything they imply changed how we look at teaching and learning?

Let's look at some of the assumptions underlying literacy itself. It's generally accepted that certain family and home conditions promote literacy, including an abundant supply of books and other reading material, detailed conversations between adults and children about the books they read, and other such practices (Snow *et al.,* 1991). I have no doubt that this is true in many cases, and although I didn't have access to these things as a child, my husband and I made certain to provide them for our own children, as well as for our grandchildren. I hope we've made their lives easier and fuller as a result.

But what about the children for whom these conditions are not present? Should they be doomed to educational failure because their parents didn't live in the right neighborhood, weren't privileged enough to be formally educated, or didn't take their children to museums or attend plays? Should they be disqualified from learning because they didn't have books at home? Unfortunately, the answer to these questions is too often "Yes."

I begin with my own story, not because I believe that autobiography is the only way to learn about language, literacy, and culture. My story is not unique, and my purpose is not to single myself out as an "exception," in the way that Richard Rodríguez did, intentionally or not, in his painful autobiography *Hunger of Memory* (1982). Rodriguez's perspective about being a Spanish-speaking immigrant is, in fact, directly counter to mine: while he concluded that abandoning Spanish was the price he had to pay for success in the United States, my conclusion is that there is no need to erase part of one's identity in order to be successful. On the contrary, I believe that having more than one language has enriched me both personally and professionally. Being bilingual and biliterate is a legacy that I cherish every day. I use my story simply to underscore the fact that young people of all backgrounds can learn regardless of the language they come to school with, and that they need not be compelled, as Rodriguez felt he had to, to abandon their family and home language for the benefits of an education and a higher status in society.

I was like the millions of young people in classrooms and schools around the nation who arrive at school eager to learn, to make friends, and to fit in. Unfortunately, too many of these children, because they do not yet speak English, end up as the poster children for the so-called

"achievement gap" because the educational system does not understand the resources that they bring to their education. Because they come to school with a language – although it is not English – rather than "linguistically deprived" or "limited English proficient," these children are instead, in the words of Leslie Bartlett and Ofelia Garcia, "emergent bilinguals" (Bartlett & Garcia, 2011).

Given my background and early life experiences, it seems improbable that I would be an academic discussing literacy and learning. Conventional educational research would assume that my home and family situation could not have prepared me adequately for academic success. My parents came to the United States as immigrants from Puerto Rico, fleeing the unique poverty of colonialism, and they quietly took their place in the lower paid and lower status of society. I spent my first ten years in a fifth-floor tenement apartment, and the next 3 years in another equally depressing neighborhood in Brooklyn, both of which were entry points for immigrants from around the world, including my parents, Federico Cortés and Esther Mercado. My mother did not graduate from high school, and my father never made it past fourth grade.

In my family, we never had bedtime stories, much less books, but while my father never really mastered English, he read *The Daily News* (in English) religiously every day. At home, we didn't have a permanent place to study, nor did we have a desk "with sufficient light and adequate ventilation," as our teachers suggested. We didn't have many toys, and I never got the piano lessons that I so desperately wanted from the age of five. We never went to summer camp, and we didn't have gymnastics, ballet, or tennis lessons. We never learned how to ride a bike, nor did we take part in any kind of sports. As a family, we didn't go to museums or other places that would give us the *cultural capital* described by Bourdieu (1986), thought to be a requisite to succeed in school. We spoke only Spanish at home, even though teachers pleaded with my parents to stop doing so. And when we learned English, my sister and I spoke a nonstandard, urban Black and Puerto Rican English.

In a word, because of our social class, ethnicity, native language, and discourse practices, we were the epitome of what are described in the United States as "children at risk," "disadvantaged," and "culturally deprived." Nevertheless, I was fortunate that I had a family who stressed the virtues of education, even if they themselves had not had the privilege of an education—or more likely, because of that fact. But they kept right on speaking Spanish, they still didn't buy books for our home, and they never read us bedtime stories. Yet my parents valued education and literacy: they told us funny stories about greenhorn Puerto Ricans *(jíbaros)* just arriving from the island, as well as the riddles and tongue-twisters they had learned as children back on the island.

My father worked in a delicatessen on Delancey Street in lower Manhattan for 20 years and when it closed, he bought a *bodega,* a small Caribbean grocery store in Brooklyn, with his savings. Although he could barely write, he could add a column of numbers in his head with dizzying speed. My mother worked in the *bodega* as well, and she too had many talents, such as the embroidery and handwork that she had learned on the island. Also, raising my brother, who has autism, took all the patience and skill she had as a parent. These skills, however, were never called on by my teachers; our family was simply thought of as culturally deprived and disadvantaged, another segment of the urban poor with no discernible competencies.

Schooling and the First *Aha! Moments*

I attended a run-down ghetto school in Brooklyn just a few blocks from my apartment. My schoolmates were African Americans, as well as immigrants from Puerto Rico, other places in the Caribbean, and Italy and Russia, among other European countries. One day in particular resonates in terms of language learning. I arrived at school as a fluent Spanish speaker but speaking no English. I guess I hadn't learned how to tie a bow yet. I wrote about this incident (Nieto, 2011) in a book titled *Words Were All We Had: Becoming Biliterate Against the Odds,* edited by Maria de la Luz Reyes. This book chronicles the many obstacles for those of us who entered school knowing Spanish but who did not yet speak English. I had just started school and there I was, a six-year old in a first-grade classroom in New York trying to tie my hat. I didn't have the words to let my teacher know that I needed help. I remember feeling mute. I stood there, gesturing and making sounds that made no sense to her, attempting to ask her to tie my hat. I felt helpless.

This scene is as vivid to me today as if it was yesterday. I suppose my memory says something about the tremendous vulnerability I felt at not being able to make myself understood, the sheer panic of not knowing English. Although I spoke Spanish, it was not the officially sanctioned language of school. By the end of that year, besides learning enough English to get along, as well as the rudiments of reading, I learned other valuable lessons, and this was my first *AHA! Moment*: I learned that reading would open up the world to me, that learning was exciting, and that education was the best hope for a better life. In other words, I learned that literacy was important for personal enlightenment, academic learning, and improved life options. But unfortunately, I learned other less sanguine lessons as well: I learned that it was a handicap to be Puerto Rican; I learned that English was the language of value and "culture." I learned that although Spanish was the language of family and love and nurturing, it was also a language of low status. I learned that school was where you learned things that were worthwhile and important, and that home was where you learned things that you never talked about in school. Most of all, I learned that to get ahead, you must speak, read, and write *only* English. The result was a tremendous wall between home and school. It was only after I became a teacher myself that I began to question why this should be so.

When I was 13 years old, we moved from our tenement apartment to a small two-family house in a more middle-class community in Brooklyn. In that neighborhood, I was able to attend an excellent junior high and high school. I didn't particularly like either, especially the high school. It was too big and impersonal, and as one of only three Puerto Ricans (my sister was another one) in a student body of 5,600 students, I felt invisible. In retrospect, however, I realize that it was there that my sister and I got the quality education that we needed to prepare us for college, a dream beyond the wildest imagination of my parents. Before then, we had attended a junior high school with few expectations for our academic success. Given the high dropout rate of Puerto Ricans at the time (and still now), we would have been lucky to even have graduated from high school.

This led to another *AHA! Moment*: My new address made a profound difference in the education that I was able to get, that is, my zip code guaranteed that I would receive an excellent education.

In addition, because of the high school that I attended, I learned Standard English, eventually dropping the "ain't" and the "mines." For a number of years, I also tried to hide the fact that I spoke Spanish.

Teaching and More *Aha! Moments*

Although I didn't have many social relationships in high school, I was a good student, and I received a couple of scholarships. Accepted into a local college. I worked throughout college and commuted daily by subway. At St. John's University, I followed my dream to become a teacher, something I had thought about since I had been a child. In 1966, with a degree in elementary education, a student teaching experience in a mostly White middle-class neighborhood, and teaching certification from the New York City Public Schools, I began my teaching career in an intermediate school in an impoverished community in Brooklyn. Even though I had thought I would be the perfect teacher who would inspire my students and impress my colleagues, it became clear to me right away that I was facing greater challenges than I had expected.

The school was a sad place, with angry and disenchanted students, and tired and burned out teachers, some of whom were racist and dismissive of the students. Many administrators seemed to have given up, and some were just waiting for the day when they could retire. The students, all of whom were African American and Puerto Rican, lived in poverty, with few opportunities either in school or in the community. Classes were overcrowded and chaotic, and there was a palpable sense of despair in the school. There was also the problem of labeling: not only were my students labeled as "culturally deprived," lazy, or incapable of learning, but because I taught the so-called "non-English (NE) students," I too was labeled as the "NE" Teacher, even though I was perfectly fluent in English.

In spite of the fact that I loved my students and that many of them were capable and smart, I became discouraged. Although I believe that I became a pretty good teacher in the two years I was there, learning some useful strategies, developing more self-confidence, and forming close connections with my students, I realized even then that it was not enough. But it was there that I had my next *AHA! Moment*. I saw firsthand that societal structural inequality, brutal poverty, unrelenting racism, and other limiting realities, as well as the unjust policies and practices in schools, had more to do with my students' learning than what I did in the classroom. Given this situation, I began to wonder how much I could accomplish as a classroom teacher.

Two years later, an exciting opportunity presented itself: a call went out for bilingual teachers to staff a new, experimental elementary school in the Bronx. P.S. 25, the Bilingual School, was to become the first public school in the Northeast, and only the second in the nation, to use students' native languages in instruction, while at the same time teaching them English. In spite of the fact that at the time there were already over 1,000,000 Puerto Ricans in New York City, in the two years that I had been in the system (and as a former student in that system), of the 55,000 public school teachers in the city, I had never met another teacher who was either Latina or fluent in Spanish. They must have been hiding somewhere, because at P.S. 25, the principal was able to find and recruit about thirty of us as bilingual teachers, about half of whom were Hispanic, and the others were Whites and African Americans who were fluent in Spanish.

As a child, my teachers made it clear to me that speaking Spanish was a problem, and this idea was reinforced in my teacher preparation program. As a preservice teacher, I had been warned to keep my "cultural baggage" outside my classroom door. I had been taught that culture was peripheral to teaching and learning, and that it had nothing to do with intelligence or merit. My ideas began to change as soon as I started teaching at P.S. 25. I began to believe that language, culture, race, and ethnicity, both instructors' and students', are inextricably tied to teaching, whether we admit it or not. At the Bilingual School, language and culture were cherished and affirmed, and they had equal status with English and mainstream American culture. Whereas my previous school had been a sad place, P.S. 25 was an affirming place, one where we could all—students, staff, and families—feel proud of speaking Spanish, something I had never before experienced, except in the company of my family. It was a place where nobody made excuses about being Puerto Rican or Cuban or Dominican, and where teachers used students' histories and realities as important sources for the curriculum. At the same time, I learned that when teachers bring their entire selves into the classroom, including their identities, they are being both true to themselves and honest with their students.

Being at the Bilingual School brought another *Aha! Moment*: it was there that I came to realize that the role of parent involvement in the education of their children is significant. When I was a child, my parents had stayed away from our schools, no doubt because of their own limited schooling and the fact that neither felt comfortable in a place where Spanish was not spoken (even though my mother was quite fluent in English). Culturally, school felt like an alien and unwelcome place to them. In contrast, at PS 25, parents were involved in ways that would have astounded my own parents: not only did the students' parents join the PTA and volunteer in the classroom, but also they took part in hiring new teachers and in setting the overall climate of inclusion and advocacy in the school. As a teacher, I was expected to engage in family outreach, and I learned to do so with enthusiasm. I visited my students' homes, where I was always treated like an honored guest. I communicated with families through phone calls and letters as well (this was way before email), and I invited family members to my classroom and to their children's exhibits and performances. These activities made a difference both in students' attitudes and in families' acceptance and respect.

Doctoral Studies and Teacher Education: A Deepening Consciousness

After four years at the Bilingual School, first as a fourth grade teacher and later as a Curriculum Specialist, I secured a position as an instructor in the Puerto Rican Studies Department at Brooklyn College in a co-sponsored teacher education program. I was thrilled to be working in higher education, something that my station in and my cultural identity would not have predicted. There, I taught courses in the sociology of education, in the Puerto Rican child, and in methods of teaching in bilingual classrooms. It was there, in fact, that I decided that this was to be my lifelong profession.

At Brooklyn College, I learned about the importance of agency and the possibility that it could lead to social change. It was a heady time for ethnic studies, and political education was part of our daily experience. We had protests and take-overs every week, and it was during those that I learned to speak to large audiences, both at the Faculty Senate and also at the large demonstrations in the Quad. Although the administration wanted our department—which was

seen as unruly and not quite ready to take care of its own affairs—we demanded self-determination as a department. After a five-day occupation of the Registrar's Office, I was arrested as one of the "BC 44." As a result of being steeped in the politics of the 1960s and '70s, I had another *Aha! Moment*: in the words of Frederick Douglass, the iconic 19th century freed slave and abolitionist, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will" (Douglass, 1857).

Given my decision to pursue teacher education as a profession, I applied to and was accepted as a doctoral student at the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts, an institution that was also undergoing profound changes in curriculum and pedagogy. My doctoral studies were transformative. Not only did I take courses with professors from the School of Education who were doing groundbreaking work in multicultural education and social justice, but I was also able to take courses outside the School of Education that had a profound effect on me. For example, I took a class with Sam Bowles and Herb Gintis, just as their groundbreaking book *Teaching in Capitalist America* (1976) was being published. In their class, I learned that our society's structural inequality made it almost impossible for students of color and all students living in poverty to get a fair shake in education, something that I had seen firsthand but that was never spoken about in "polite" circles. Their research demonstrated that without a shadow of a doubt, privilege begets privilege, and conventional myth to the contrary, climbing up the ladder of success is no easy matter in an unequal society. Their research showed, also, that it is a father's income that makes the most difference in whether a child will get a good education and future opportunities. The idea of meritocracy and fair play, I learned, were largely myths.

The research, as well as the theories, of other scholars such as Martin Carnoy, Michael Apple, Joel Spring, Maxine Greene, James Banks, and others, not only disabused me of the pie-in-the-sky myths about education being the great equalizer, but they also affirmed the significance of culture, language, and race in teaching and learning. Years later, Gloria Anzaldúa was one of the first Latina theorists I encountered, and it was riveting for me to read her words about the power of language and culture. She helped me understand why, as a Spanish-speaker in a rigidly English-dominant society, and in spite of my many years of education and professional merits, I still felt like an outsider. She wrote: "So, if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I *am* my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 59).

Hegemonic language policies are not limited to feeling pride or shame about one's language. Hegemony goes much deeper than personal idiosyncrasies: it can keep people in positions of subservience and powerlessness, or elevate them to unearned positions of privilege and power. During my graduate studies and later, as a young professor, I was privileged to serve on a committee that hosted Paulo Freire for month-long visits for several years. I immersed myself in his theories, and they helped me discover another *Aha! Moment:* that *education is always political,* that is, that whatever pedagogy or practice we use inevitably says something about our ideology. In the words of Freire, "All educational practice implies a theoretical stance on the educator's part….It could not be otherwise" (Freire, 1985, p. 43). In other words, even those decisions that might seem innocent and natural betray what we believe, as well as our values and biases. These decisions include the books and curricula we select, the relationships that we have with students, our perspectives about their communities and identities, how we set up our

classroom, the choices of which languages to use, or how to teach reading—all these decisions and more, whether large and small, are political decisions.

Given my experience as a teacher and later, a teacher educator, these theories were powerful and made a great deal of sense to me. Even though I was one of the so-called "success stories" that people like to point to, I knew that I was in a tiny minority among my Puerto Rican peers. I was luckier than most, and although I wish that I could say that education made all the difference, I cannot. I had the benefit of parents and others who loved me, opportunities that made a difference, and the good fortune to go to good schools as an adolescent. I have never given up on education, but I have learned that it has serious limitations.

In spite of the limits of public schooling, I continue to believe that what teachers do, although partial, is also significant. I have learned also that literacy is not just about teaching the mechanics of reading or imparting information to students; rather it is always either advocacy for or against the students whom we teach. Again, the words of Paulo Freire describe this point powerfully: "We are political militants," he wrote, "because we are teachers" (Freire, 1998, p. 58).

Lessons from *Aha! Moments:* Preparing Teachers with Critique and Hope

I conclude this article with a few of the lessons I've learned from my *Aha! Moments*. Beyond my personal experience, I recognize that as educators we have to live with the contradictions of our work, while at the same time we need to prepare teachers with both critique and hope. A friend of mine has a sweatshirt that says, "Old age is not for sissies," and in the same way, I say that teaching is not for sissies. Instead, teaching is for those with courage and a critical mind, and that's why *critique* is important. We also need *hope* because without it, we can become disenchanted, disillusioned, and burned out. Without both critique and hope, teachers are too often swallowed up by a system that is inequitable and hegemonic, that replicates power and privilege, and that rewards students according to their identities and postal codes.

In what follows, I use the words of some of the teachers and students with whom I've had the privilege to work to illustrate these lessons.

Relationships Are at the Heart of Teaching

When I was a Visiting Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2012, I asked a group of students in an education class to tell me about teachers who had made a difference in their lives. The class was very diverse, and I found it intriguing that students of all ethnic backgrounds had more or less the same message: One after another, they talked about teachers who were patient, understanding, supportive, and who believed in them. Yet they rarely mentioned what the teachers taught, or even how they taught it. While content and pedagogy are important, these young people reaffirmed what we already know, that is, that relationships must be the bedrock of any learning. When asked about memorable teachers, most people, like the students I asked in South Africa, will most likely remember the attitudes, dispositions, and behaviors of teachers who made a difference, rather than the subject matter they taught. That's because teachers who are successful with students inevitably become *sociocultural*

mediators, that is, they learn about their students, they help them to negotiate academic spaces, and they affirm students' identities while helping them to explore the world beyond their limited realities (Diaz *et al,* 1992).

Sociocultural mediation is important because literacy is not just about learning to decode; rather, it is a social practice that cannot be separated from the sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts in which it takes place. An example comes from Mary Ginley. When she was a graduate student in my program, she wrote in a journal that she kept for my class about what sociocultural mediation means in practice. She challenged the notion that being "nice" was enough:

> Every child needs to feel welcome, to feel comfortable. School is a foreign land to most kids (where else in the world would you spend time circling answers and filling in the blanks?), but the more distant a child's culture and language are from the culture and language of the school, the more at risk that child is. A warm friendly, helpful teacher is nice, but it isn't enough. We have plenty of warm friendly teachers who tell the kids nicely to forget their Spanish and ask mommy and daddy to speak to them in English at home; who give them easier tasks so they won't feel badly when the work becomes difficult; who never learn about what life is like at home or what they eat or what music they like or what stories they have been told or what their history is. Instead, we smile and give them a hug and tell them to eat our food and listen to our stories and dance to our music. We teach them to read with our words and wonder why it's so hard for them. We ask them to sit quietly and we'll tell them what's important and what they must know to "get ready for the next grade." And we never ask them who they are and where they want to go (Ginley, 2010, p. 114).

This issue of *who they are* and *where they want to go* is a deeply political question because it acknowledges that literacy and teaching are about *whose story is told*. Asking these questions is what sociocultural mediation is about, because it is only when teachers become sociocultural mediators that they can forge strong relationships with their students

Teach Students to Question and to be Curious

While it's important to teach students the skills and competencies they need to negotiate the world successfully, teachers also need to teach students to be critical. It is necessary, in other words, to teach them to not only read the word, but as Paulo Freire said, to "read the world." This means teaching students to probe, to be curious, and to question. What does this look like in practice? A good example comes from Ron Morris, an African American student we interviewed over 20 years ago for a case study. Ron talked about the first class in which he had ever been interested, a class on Black history in 8th grade. Until that time, he had never learned anything about African American history in school, surely a terrible indictment of education in a nation with more than 40 million African Americans.

Except for that class, Ron had been known as a troublemaker, a child who was alienated both in and out of school. He had never connected to school, until school connected to him. This is what he said about that class:

> It was basically about Black people, but it showed you all people instead of just Black people. It showed us Latinos. It showed us Caucasians. It showed us the Jews and everything how we all played a part [in] what society in any country is like today. I'd sit [in that class] and just be like, I was just so relaxed. I just felt like the *realest person on earth* (Nieto, 1996,p. 270).

What will it take until every young person feels like "the realest person on earth"? For one, it will take creating learning opportunities that are relevant to students' lives and respectful of their identities, while also teaching them to question everything, including their own assumptions, values, and even identities.

Understand that Teaching is Advocacy for Social and Political Change

Unless teachers understand that teaching is advocacy for social and political change, inequities will continue to exist. This necessitates asking what I have called "profoundly multicultural questions" (Nieto, 2003), that is, questions that at first blush may not seem to be "multicultural" at all but that, in the end, are about ensuring that all students have access to a high quality and equal education. It means asking questions, such as "Who's taking calculus?", the kind of course that is often a gatekeeper to college access; or "Where is the bilingual [or ESL or special education] program? Is it in the basement?", a placement that says something about its relative status in the school; or "What are our children worth?" That is, why is more money spent on educating some children—generally the most privileged—while the most underserved continue to languish in schools that are under-resourced?" (see Nieto, 2003 for a more in-depth treatment of this issue).

An example comes from Hyung Nam, a high school social studies teacher in Portland, OR, who I interviewed for my recent book *Finding Joy in Teaching Students of Diverse Backgrounds: Culturally Responsive and Socially Just Practices in U.S. Schools* (Nieto, 2013, forthcoming). Teaching for 11 years, Hyung became involved with teachers from the organization Rethinking Schools (RS) almost from the beginning. He said he was amazed when he found them, because he had never before met a group of activist teachers. Indicating that he probably would have given up as a teacher if he hadn't found the group, Hyung said, "I feel inspired and really empowered and honored to be in a role where I could help students to question the world and expand their horizons and to see the possibility that they can be agents in the world to change the world to be a better place" (Nieto, forthcoming). In fact, Hyung took the advocacy function of education very seriously, saying, "I see part of my job is to agitate. You know, if we think about the kind of society, the dominant mainstream society that we have, that's kind of why I'm a teacher is to agitate and make people think and question things."

Conclusion

It would be easy to throw up our hands and say that education is too full of contradictions, that it preaches what it cannot deliver, that it's a utopian dream. Yes, all these things may be true. Yet, it is a teacher's responsibility to remain hopeful in spite of all these things. As Paulo Freire reminds us, "The educator's biggest problem is not to discuss whether education can or cannot

accomplish, but to discuss *where* it can, *how* it can, *with whom* it can, *when* it can; it is to recognize the limits his or her practice imposes" (Freire, 2007, p. 64). The limits are real, but so is the power of hope. Living through the contradictions, although not easy, is an essential obligation of both teachers and teacher educators.

My *Aha! moments* have helped me understand not just my own reality, but also the realities and lives of others. This is why I believe that it's our responsibility as educators, and particularly as teacher educators, to engage teachers in serious introspection and reflection, the kind of reflection that demands an honest and rigorous understanding of their own position in the world, and of what it has to do with the profession they've chosen. When they do these things, they will be better prepared to connect in authentic and caring ways with their students, because they will understand that sociocultural and sociopolitical understandings of the world are not just personal *Aha! moments*, but rather moments of transcendence and transformation.

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