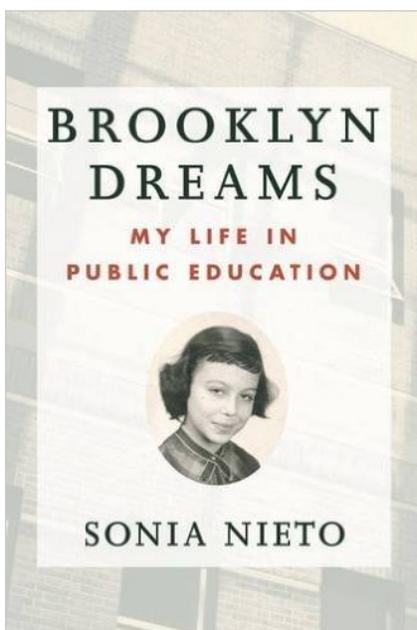


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Review of *Brooklyn Dreams: My Life in Public Education*

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Brooklyn Dreams: My Life in Public Education, by Sonia Nieto makes a major contribution on issues of economic inequality in education as well as the strengths and necessity of bilingual and multicultural education. Written as a memoir, it is a beautifully crafted history of her life from her early beginnings in a poor Puerto Rican neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, to her long career in education. Although formally retired, she continues to write, speak, travel, and mentor students. Fortunately, she has written *Brooklyn Dreams* to share her experiences with teachers, academics, and others interested in the strengths and challenges of immigrant children in large urban public schools.

Nieto says in her early chapters that she knew from an early age that she wanted to be an educated person, a teacher and a writer. She became all three and despite challenges in her life. This book is a very personal account of a life filled with the joys and trials of a large extended family with multiple challenges during a time when few Puerto Ricans made it to college. She discusses the reality of growing up in poverty poor neighborhoods in Brooklyn, and how the move to a middle class neighborhood in Brooklyn offered her the opportunity to attend a “good” junior high school and later Erasmus high school known as an excellent and academically demanding high school, thus preparing her for college and thereby setting her on a course to become a teacher. I focus in this review on her early life growing up in a Puerto Rican community, her family’s story, her life as a married academic with small children, her experience with bilingualism and the damage a monolingual education environment can do to one’s self- image, her family relationships, the mentorship in her early teaching and academic life, and how she handled the pressures of raising a family and leading a busy and ever-expanding professional career. Sonia Nieto is clear that hers is not a Horatio Alger story. She is not the exceptional individual escaping from a life of poverty to become a successful person, but about how the promise of educational opportunity is not realized for many in our society.

In her Harvard Educational Review article *Education in the Twentieth Century* (2005), she

documents the stories of other oppressed groups for access to education, but in this memoir she discusses how she lived through those struggles, and how the importance of love of family, desire to succeed, and the events that occurred in her life helped her to become the leading scholar that she is today. In becoming an educator, a writer, an academic, she also became an artist – she created a life that serves to give the world hope that education can become the goal it was intended – to help make public education fulfill the goal of offering everyone a quality education. In doing so she offers students and academics of all ages, a view into the life of someone who overcame the challenges of having a family, and navigating the difficulties of professional academic life, writing, speaking out, and teaching a generation of young teachers and scholars that a new world of education can and must be built.

Sonia grew up in Brooklyn, New York, the second child of parents who came from Puerto Rico with the first wave of Puerto Rican immigrants. Her father, Federico Cortés left school after fourth grade to work on a farm to support his mother and his many siblings. He came to the US in 1929 just before the US economic crash, and worked in a deli on the Lower East Side until he was able to open a small grocery store in his neighborhood. Her mother came to New York in 1934. Mami, as she was known in the family, had been raised by her grandparents from the time she was ten. Later in life Sonia learned that Mami was sent to live with her grandparents after her father died and her mother married her new husband, a dark-skinned man shunned by the rest of her mother’s family. Family life was not easy for Sonia’s mother; her grandfather had a child out of wedlock, Felícita, who was Mami’s mother, and was brought to live with her grandparents upon her mother’s marriage. Although she was an aunt to the daughter born to her grandfather and his wife, Mama Beta, she was treated as a stepsister. Sonia’s mother didn’t talk much about her early life, but it became clear to Sonia that her mother carried those hardships with her.

Sonia’s parents married when her father was 40 and her mother 32, rather late in life for Puerto Rican

families. There were three children, Lydia, Sonia, and Freddy. Sonia, one year young than Lydia, differed greatly in personality from her sister. Lydia was artistic, while Sonia was the organized and persistent one. Lydia was sloppy, while Sonia was neat. Growing up they slept in the same room, and these differences resulted in tensions. However, despite their contrasting personalities, they were and still are close. Their brother Freddy, had cognitive and behavioral issues, and when the family enrolled him in school, the administration said that they he couldn't attend public school. As there were no arrangements at that time for special needs students, Freddy remained in the apartment all day, a difficult challenge for the family. Even later, when the family placed him in a care facility they found when they moved to Massachusetts, Sonia was the family member responsible for him.

Sonia started elementary school with little knowledge of English. She also started a year later than was normal at the time, because her family needed her at to help care for Freddy.. She navigated the language barrier when she entered elementary school in first grade because Spanish had been her first language. She says that she knew immediately upon entering school that she was going to have to learn English very quickly. She took on the task of learning English and by second grade was an accomplished reader. Teachers, however, frowned on speaking Spanish in school and when she spoke Spanish to a classmate, her teacher told her that only English was spoken at school and that it was rude to speak Spanish during the school day. What she took away with her from that experience was that English was a serious language that would get you ahead, but Spanish was a private language spoken at home with family members. However, at the same time that she was told she couldn't speak Spanish in school, she was often asked to translate when an administrator had to communicate with a Spanish speaking parent. Through her school years she was acutely aware of the irony that while immigrant children who spoke another language at home were advised and even restricted from speaking their home language at school, monolinguals were encouraged to learn a second language, one that they would never master.

Cultural differences between the school's expectations, and her family's caused other

problems. Her parents came from a rural area of Puerto Rico and were uncomfortable interacting with school personnel and rituals. As is true in many Spanish-speaking countries, the family role in raising children differs from the expectations of the US educational system. The role of parents from many countries believe it is the role of parents to raise their children to behave well, respect their teachers, but not to teach them yourself because that is the role of professional teachers. Another cultural difference is on the role of parents in the schools. Normally parents don't go to schools, which is considered interfering with the the professional responsibilities of teachers and administrators. Parents in Mexico for example, where my son went to first grade, asked parents to pay for uniforms and support the school financially, but not to have a dialogue with the school about instruction, or administration. Puerto Rico differs from Mexico in that the school system is based on the US system, yet for people brought up in a rural setting, going to school to argue with a teacher, or to influence what is taught is not done.

Sonia was a good student and when a third grade teacher asked the class (who were mainly immigrants) who wanted to go to college, only Sonia raised her hand. Her teacher quickly responded "Well, we always need people to clean toilets" (Nieto, 2015 p. 46). The teacher was a good teacher whom Sonia liked, but she suggests that even good teachers could convey their hidden biases, which then get communicated to students. This experience stayed with Sonia, and made her all too aware that teachers should never make assumptions about the children in their classrooms. She later incorporated what she learned from this experience into her own teaching and writing.

New York's public school system was segregated not by law, but by the racial and ethnic geography of neighborhoods, and the school that you went to ultimately decided whether you would have a good education or not; and whether you would be prepared for college or not. This reality conflicted with what we typically expect of public education. Our public education system is based on the belief that schools would be the great equalizer – the means of making the US the meritocracy it was supposed to be. However, this was not the situation for most of New York's families, especially if you lived in a poor neighborhood, and went to

local public schools. In the case of the Sonia's family, the school that Lydia and Sonia attended, PS 55, was located in a poor, immigrant neighborhood of Brooklyn. This becomes an important driving theme in her quest for equity in education: the failure of schools to offer equal educational opportunities to all students. The family's ability to move to an academically challenging school when she was in junior high school, opened the doors to the expectation and preparation that would allow her to enter college to do well as an undergraduate student.

This theme is stressed in the memoir. Nieto says,

That attending JHS 246 was my first dawning recognition that where you lived and went to school could dramatically affect the quality of your education. I would return to this observation many times over the years as a teacher and, later, as an academic and researcher. At the time, it didn't fully occur to me that I had been in a substandard school; rather, I thought I had attended schools with children who were not as smart or motivated as my new classmates. Today I recognize that my former classmates didn't have anything like the same opportunities that the students in JHS 246 enjoyed and that some of these opportunities had become available to me when I transferred there. A student's chances are often dictated by where the child lives and goes to school, not simply by the child's attitude, aptitude, or merit. This connection between students' environment and their success is real, despite the stronghold of the meritocracy myth in our culture. One thing is certain: if my family had not moved to East Flatbush, I am certain I would not be where I am today (Nieto, 2015 pp. 69-70).

Her introduction to teaching occurred while she was at St. John's University. She took all the necessary education courses, and in her final semester did her student teaching. Her first teaching experience was with a woman she describes as bitter and disagreeable who told her about a dream she had that she told students to stand and told each row to drop dead, and they

did. This went on for the six rows of students. Fortunately, the second experience in schools was completely different. This teacher, Mrs. Adler, was energetic, focused, and warm. In her planning for classes, her interactions with the students, and the infectious excitement she had for learning she showed how much she thought of her students, how much she loved her job, and that she expected the best of them. Even when sick, she would come to class, and one day with laryngitis she communicated by writing on the board. Sonia says that it was Mrs. Adler who became an inspiration and a model of good teaching for her.

In the 1960s, she finished college and returned from a summer trip to Spain, when she started her teaching career in Ocean-Hill Brownsville where she would experience bitter fights over the next few years. The schools in poor neighborhoods were underfunded and forgotten, and the community leaders demanded community control, and more resources for the schools, and a more culturally relevant curriculum. The teacher unions were fighting the community leaders, and the results of those struggles were that Black and minorities became disaffected from the union, teachers left the city or gave up teaching, and the schools became more segregated. Having already experienced the differences in elementary and junior high schools in poor neighborhoods and the contrast with her experience when the family moved to a middle-class area and she entered Erasmus High School, her first experience as a teacher taught her the reality of the rigid tracking of New York schools.

But her experience wasn't all negative. She was able to observe two very different but excellent teachers. One was Mr. Scott, an African American teacher who had no discipline problems in his classes. Student sat straight up and all were engaged and enthusiastic. She observed a quite different style in Mr. Seidman, a social studies teacher, who organized his class into Socratic discussions on American history. In contrast to Mr. Scott's class, Mr. Seidman's class was organized a lot less formally, and students were in chairs or on desks talking without raising their hands clearly, engrossed in the topic, thus leading her to realize that the teachers could have equally effective styles as long as they respected and believed that their

students could learn. These two teachers also gave her hope that she would someday become a good teacher.

Although 1960 was a difficult year, it was made more bearable because Sonia's friend from St John's who was assigned to the same school, and together they read, ate lunch and commiserated with each other over the challenges they faced. They avoided the teacher's lounge because of the negativity exhibited among teachers who saw their students only as obstacles, not as good children needing love, attention and respect in the classroom. She writes of several experiences in her first year of teaching that made a permanent impression on her. One occurred during a discussion in class on what foods children would be eating for their Thanksgiving holiday dinner. Children responded first with the expected dinners: turkey, gravy, and mashed potatoes. But when she told them about her plans for Thanksgiving: that they would be having rice, beans and pernil (slow roasted pork), the other children were in disbelief, not realizing that she was Puerto Rican. They then described what they would really be eating for their Thanksgiving meal: arroz con gandules, tostones and African Americans with collard greens and okra. She describes this as one of her most successful lessons of that first year.

She said another memorable event occurred after a monumental spitball and paper airplane fight that took the whole class period and left the classroom littered with paper. One of the participants came up to her and said "Miss Cortés, would you like me to clean up the floor." When she became emotional, the boy said "Oh, don't cry, Miss Cortés. They don't mean it." (Niето, 2015, p. 139). Although her first year teaching was difficult, she took away three lessons from that year: that it's important to love the children, but it's also necessary to understand and respect them, and that there can be different ways to teach well.

After a short break to visit Spain and her future husband, Angel Niето, she returned to New York with more confidence in her teaching but also a growing awareness of the political realities of a movement to bring community control of schools to the mainly African American and Puerto Rican communities of New York. Conditions in the poor community of Ocean Hill -Brownsville were

difficult, with few students graduating with academic diplomas, and an extremely low number of African American or Puerto Rican administrators. Community activists demanded community control, and the teacher's union, the United Federation of Teachers, or UFT opposed it. The administration of the NYC schools bowing to the pressure of the community activists created several decontrolled school districts, and her school district was one of them. The UFT considered this a union busting strategy and initiated a strike on the first day of school in September of 1967.

This activism was new to Sonia, and although she later was to understand the needs of the Puerto Rican as well as the African American in administering and defining a culturally appropriate curriculum for students, she was confused and emotionally drained by the conditions for her first year of teaching and about the political movements she didn't yet understand. As a result she felt exhausted and unable to continue teaching. She asked for and received a leave of absence. While she looked for another job, she took a position as an adult ESL teacher, and although she wasn't teaching children, this experience confirmed in her mind that she was a teacher regardless of the age of her students.

During the spring of 1968 while the country was in political upheaval following the assassination of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and the upheaval of the 1968 Democratic Party convention in Chicago, community control demands in New York resulted in new schools, administered by African American and Puerto Rican educators and run by locally controlled school boards. Sonia's next teaching job came in one of those "pioneering" schools, PS 25, a newly created bilingual school in the Bronx. The principal Hernán LaFontaine, a Puerto Rican who grew up in New York hired Sonia despite her lack of knowledge or belief in the benefits of bilingual education. It was only after she taught as a bilingual teacher that she realized the difference in the immigration patterns of immigrants of color with former immigrants, and that these new immigrants wanted to keep their language and culture rather than totally assimilate, as was the goal of previous waves of immigrants.

While she was at St. John's she had been taught and believed that culture was an impediment to

learning. Here she learned that “leaving your cultural baggage at the door,” was impossible, and that teaching with someone’s culture in mind, was a wonderful teaching and learning opportunity. She quotes Paulo Freire (1970) who said that “I am my culture” and that leaving his culture behind was like shedding his skin (Nieto, 2015, p.160). He also suggested that culture wasn’t destiny, but it did influence who you are, what you value, and what you do.

The time at the bilingual school in the Bronx, taught her that in order to teach bilingually you needed a new curriculum, so the teachers in the school created the curriculum and recreated it every day as they prepared their classes. She also became aware of what other children not in the community-controlled school were missing. Learning about all cultures, their own and others was what education should be doing for all children and this later became the seeds of her multicultural approach. She also initiated a program of independent reading. Children read what was interesting to them, and this gave her the opportunity of learning their goals hobbies, interests, and habits

In April of 1969 Sonia learned that she was pregnant, and although extremely pleased she realized that this would mean some alterations in her marriage. It was at this time that her husband Angel took over the main responsibilities of caring for their daughter and the house. He became the main caretaker for the rest of her professional life

Sonia benefitted through her early careers from many mentors. Hernán LaFontiane was one of her first mentors at PS 25, introducing her to bilingual education and supporting her during her early years of teaching. He also invited her to citywide forums and conferences on bilingual education, and she assisted him in organizing the first national bilingual conference held in 1969 at Columbia University. Another early mentor from this period was her colleague Herminio Vargas, who had just gotten a position at Brooklyn College teaching in the Puerto Rican Studies program and that she should apply for a second position that was open. She didn’t believe that this was a real possibility, but Herminio urged her to apply for the open position in bilingual education. She, Angel and

Alicia drove to Brooklyn College for what she thought would be an hour interview. At the end of three hours she walked out as an instructor in Puerto Rican Studies. Fortunately as she said she had married a patient man who waited for all that time watching Alicia, a two and a half year old.

The early 70s were a politically turbulent time and although she lived through the political struggles of the late 60s, the struggles of the 70s still seemed intense. The political activities resulted from the unacceptability of ethnic studies by the more conservative elements of academia. In addition the new approach challenged the Euro-centrism of the educational establishment. Not only were Shakespeare, Faulkner and Hemingway to be taught but also such authors as Morrison, Neruda, and deBurgos, and no longer was history to be taught as the conquests and achievements of Europeans and Americans, but also the study of unfettered imperialism, colonialism, and exploitation.

It also became clear to Sonia that if she were to become an academic, she would have to have a doctorate, and she began looking for graduate schools. Angel who had been taking courses for his enjoyment decided upon Sonia’s suggestion to enter a program that would give him credit for life experiences. It turned out that he needed only a few courses to receive his BA degree in 1975. She applied and was accepted for a new Ford Foundation grant that was created to support the doctoral studies of Puerto Ricans as well as African Americans, Mexican Americans and Asian Americans. She finally decided to apply to Harvard and UMass Amherst. A few days after she applied to UMass, she received an invitation to come up to Amherst to visit the program, and meet with the director of the curriculum program and the faculty. Both she and Angel loved the idea of moving to a place as “bucolic” as western Massachusetts. Once she met the faculty and saw the setting, she decided not to apply to Harvard and moved to Amherst in 1975 to begin her long career at UMass, first as a doctoral student and then as faculty. Along the way, she met many who shared her interest in multicultural education, diversity, and equity including Bob Suzuki, Bob Sinclar Sylvia Viera and Luis Fuentes.

Paulo Freire's work had deeply influenced her as she pursued her doctoral program. The friendship between them continued for decades. Freire began his career as a literacy teacher, which led to his being jailed and then exiled from Brazil. One of his teachings which stayed with her is that it isn't enough for someone to read the word, they also had to read the world, meaning that people needed to understand the world in which they lived in order to become agents of change. It was this agency that became so important to Nieto's life philosophy, and the reason for her optimism even in the face of the difficult conditions people face. But in order for education to be liberating, it has to move away from the "banking school" of education, and to be envisioned as individuals working with others to change the conditions that oppress them. Over the years Freire spent many Januaries in Amherst, during which and his and Sonia's relationship continued to grow (Nieto, 2015, p. 197).

She was also influenced by two professors, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, now well-known in the field of educational economics, who came to U Mass. Their seminal book, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) had not yet been published but was being used in graduate education courses at UMass. The book was used not only in education and economics, but in sociology and anthropology. Its main tenet was that a child's education was based on their economic and political power contradicting the beliefs in meritocracy and that education functioned at the great equalizer.

Although accepting the role of class and power in educational attainment, Sonia did not accept the fatalistic view that others took from their approach. Instead of cynicism, she accepted Freire's view that teachers were agents of change and believed with him in the power of people to change their destinies – and provided a "powerful antidote to the pessimism and cynicism" so common among people generally and academics in particular (Nieto, 2015).

Sonia retired in 2006 after 30 years at UMass, 24 of them as a member of the faculty. How did a woman from a working class immigrant family, become one of the most highly esteemed academics in the field. Her extended family provided the emotional support that enabled her to thrive in spite of the demands it placed on her. Her husband Angel Nieto made it possible for her to work full time as he took over the role of the caring for the house and the children. Also her continuation at UMass as a faculty member after she finished her doctorate gave her the stability to take care of the extended family while she continued to teach.

This is a must read book for anyone interested in multicultural, bilingual and equitable education. Undergraduates in anthology, sociology, women and ethnic studies would benefit from this book as would pre-service Language and Culture courses. The book introduces you to the people who birthed and developed the field of multicultural and bilingual education, . And it is a wonderfully enjoyable read: the descriptions her first entering school not speaking English, to the cultural misunderstandings and arrogance of the majority of her teachers, but also the teachers that nurtured her and believed in her. She nurtures a closeness with the reader by introducing us to her family, to their tremendous love and support they gave each other as well as their struggles economically and with the specific challenges of a cognitively and behaviorally challenged child. Although for over a century, our nation has advanced the ideal that a high-quality and excellent public education is the birth right of all children, our schools cannot fulfill this ambitious and noble purpose unless all of us—teachers, parents, policymakers, and the general public—commit ourselves to sustaining a commitment to public education. Throughout the book you know you are hearing from a leader, an artist who composed a life for herself as she urges us not to become cynical but to create the opportunities needed for all children to succeed.

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