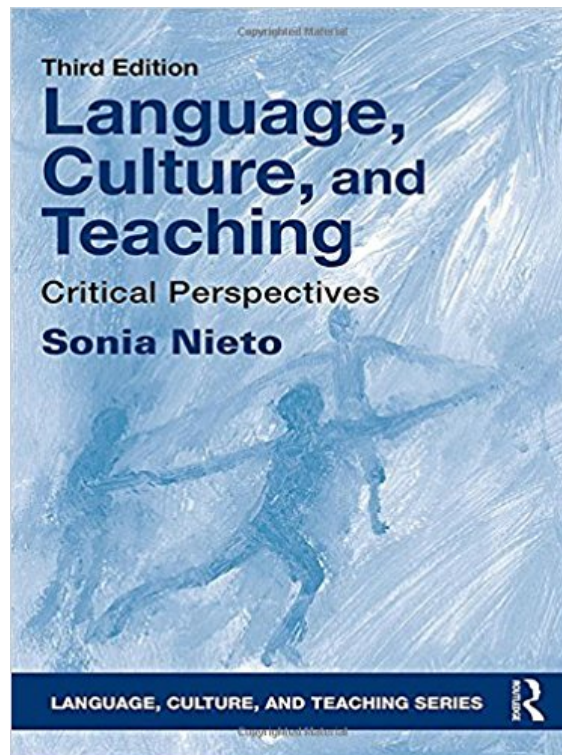


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*Review of Language, Culture, and Teaching – Critical Perspectives, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*  
By Sonia Nieto

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Sonia Nieto, multiculturalist and Professor Emerita of Language, Literacy, and Culture at the College of Education, University of Massachusetts Amherst USA, recently published this third edition of *Language, Culture, and Teaching*. The text is composed of five parts—an introduction and four sections of three chapters each—and accounts for both recent U.S. demographic and educational policy changes. It further considers the author’s most current thoughts on the teaching profession. The fifteen years since the first edition of this book have seen many historical events, from 9/11 to the 2008 and 2012 elections of the first African American president of the United States, and subsequently to the 2016 election of a man who feverishly challenged both the qualifications and birthplace of his predecessor.

In the Preface, Nieto cites current statistics that reflect major population shifts in the U.S. and its school systems, noting that by 2019, children of color will most likely constitute the majority of children in the U.S., and will disproportionately live in poverty (Children’s Defense Fund, 2014). These predictions call attention to the need for educational reform that includes more teachers who specialize and are well-trained in bilingual education, ESL, and multicultural and urban education. Pre-service teacher education must focus heavily on how to teach students who might differ in many ways from their teachers: racially, ethnically, linguistically, and in terms of socioeconomic status.

This book could serve as a beneficial and effective text in pre-service multicultural, bilingual, world language, and ESOL teacher education programs. As Nieto herself describes, the book is “[d]esigned for upper-undergraduate and graduate-level students and professional development courses” (p. i). Each chapter of the book is followed by several sections: Critical

Questions, Activities for Your Classroom, Community-Based Activities and Advocacy, and Supplementary Resources for Further Reflection and Study. These categories were created for continued exploration of chapter themes, and for students and their professors to have opportunities for reflection and action both as a class and as members of the larger community. Here, I will detail each the introduction and each of the twelve chapters.

### Introduction

“Language, Literacy, and Culture: Aha! Moments in Personal and Sociopolitical Understanding” was originally published in 2013 in the *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*. A second-generation immigrant of Puerto Rican descent—a *Nuyorican*, or *Diasporican*—Nieto provides her personal experience on language, identity, and culture as a backdrop to explain how she became aware of the challenges of public education, namely in her home city of Brooklyn, NY. She describes how her parents fled a uniquely impoverished, colonized Puerto Rico to New York City, where she spent much of her childhood living in tenement housing. There were no books, no bedtime stories, no cultural trips to museums, no ballet or gymnastics classes after school. Spanish was the only language spoken in the home, which was seen by her teachers as a detriment, and they pleaded with her parents to speak English. The English she spoke was heavily influenced by non-standard Black urban dialects and Puerto Rican English.

The Nieto family was lacking in what Bourdieu (1986) would call *cultural capital*, but throughout her life, she experienced a series of *Aha!* Moments that led to her eventual academic and teaching career. The first of these moments was as a young child in a run-down school in Brooklyn. She arrived speaking no

English and discovered quickly that reading revealed a new world that she would never have experienced otherwise. She also learned that speaking Spanish and being Puerto Rican were considered “handicap[s]” (p. 4). Speaking English only and assimilating to mainstream U.S. values were the way to get ahead. Eventually moving to another Brooklyn neighborhood of a higher socioeconomic status, Nieto and her siblings had access to quality education that better prepared her for her college education and beyond. This new zip code gave her much of the cultural and *social* capital she needed to progress academically. To attain it, she abandoned much of her urban dialect and learned standard English. However, being a Spanish-speaker was still seen as a deficit, and Nieto went so far as to hide the fact that she spoke it. These struggles of identity, and Nieto’s candid way of presenting them without apology or excuse, can prove very inspiring for pre-service teachers as they learn to recognize the struggles that their own students might be experiencing and how to help them navigate those waters.

Nieto went on to study to become a teacher and began her career in an impoverished Brooklyn neighborhood, later pursuing a doctorate in education. She says that education did not make all the difference. She had a supportive network, from her parents to others who opened doors of opportunity. Also, echoing the words of Brazilian educator Paolo Freire, Nieto understands that teachers must both teach and act, question the establishment, and work to make the classroom an equitable place for their students. This section poignantly introduces the overarching goal of this text: to see that teachers are “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” (p. 12).

### Part 1: Setting the Groundwork

Building on “the theme of the interconnectedness of learning” (p. 17), the first three chapters begin with a focus on the recent trend of accountability assessments in education, placing this development in the context of structural and systemic understandings of multicultural education. She also revisits three major movements that helped shape and define education in the latter part of the twentieth century: desegregation, multicultural education, and bilingual education.

Chapter 1 asks the question, “*What is the purpose of schools?*” Nieto argues that since the 1980s, the definition of education, of its ends and means, has gotten lost in the shuffle of corporate and political agendas, where testing and assessments have replaced those “nobler goals of education” (p. 19). She urges us to consider the interests we serve as teachers and question what, or whose, knowledge is the most valuable for our students to acquire. Asking these questions is vital to introducing content, and she argues for an ideal curriculum that includes literacy, sciences, arts, mathematics, technology and vocational studies, health and physical education, and at least one second language. Also, moving from overwhelmingly monocultural content, teachers must be trained to design lessons through a multicultural perspective. Quality education must address real and tangible issues that children across the U.S. face every day. Multicultural literacy must move away from the stereotypical “Holidays & Heroes” (Okazawa-Rey et al., 1998), and instead face ugly, historical truths head on, allowing students to think more critically about the

world in which they live and how it affects their own personal circumstances.

Chapter 2 is taken from the book *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* (2012). Here, Nieto presents seven characteristics included in her definition of multicultural education, “a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students” (p. 31), which rejects all forms of discrimination and affirms the diversity of students, teachers, and communities. Each of the seven characteristics is explained in detail throughout the chapter. Among them is the affirmation that multicultural education is antiracist, pervasive, and oriented to critical pedagogy. It is “more effective education for a changing world” (p. 48).

Nieto criticizes the usual sanitizing of revolutionary figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr., urging that we look deeper into his “dream” to reveal his vocal opposition to the Vietnam War and rampant capitalism. Citing a study from Donaldson (2001), she states that educators who benefit from racism, classism, and gender and class discrimination are often the ones most uncomfortable with discussing these topics. Multicultural education, she believes, must move away from the standard and embrace diversity in history and student populations. The critical questions raised at the close of the chapter challenge pre-service teacher educators and students to explore the various characteristics of multicultural education and consider the ways they can create curricula that promote social justice.

Chapter 3 is a sequel to a 2005 article that Nieto wrote for the *Harvard Educational Review*. She revisits desegregation, multicultural education, and bilingual education, noting that we have yet to fully achieve the original goals of these

movements. Instead, schools have become resegregated, with Latinx children being the most segregated population currently in U.S. schools. In addition, she believes, creativity and the pure joy of learning have been replaced with functionalism and staunch accountability practices. She recalls her early years as a young teacher, when she felt that public education could be the “great equalizer.” Recognizing that moving out of the “wrong zip code” helped her immensely in achieving her goals, Nieto sees that many young people continue to be failed by the public education system because of racial, ethnic, immigration, and other statuses that should be appreciated as contributive, not seen as detrimental. For ESoL teachers, and all educators who work with diverse groups of students, this chapter might inspire discussions about the political implications of English monolingualism as the standard in U.S. schools, and foster an appreciation for multilingualism and cultural diversity in the classroom.

## **Part II – Identity, Learning, and Belonging**

This section contains three chapters that affirm that students’ identity and feelings of belonging are tied to learning and teaching, with Chapter 4 focused on the meaning of culture and how it reflects and shapes our understandings and daily lives. Chapter 5 continues the conversation through Nieto’s research on young people’s responses to questions about culture, identity, and learning. The section concludes with Chapter 6, as Nieto recalls the experiences of faculty, staff, and students in one of the first Puerto Rican Studies programs in the U.S.

Chapter 4 returns to the topic of culture, one that Nieto notes “can mean different things to different people in different contexts” (p. 65). For mainstream White Americans, culture is often seen as something possessed by others



who are different from themselves. As such, they might feel as though they do not have culture in the same way as do those from minoritized racial and cultural groups. Nieto defines culture as ever-changing, while including three main elements: a *what* (content, product), a *how* (process), and a *who* (agent). Educators are reminded to move away from the sentimental notion of culture, and instead recognize that culture is dynamic, multifaceted, contextual.

Even among what might be considered a homogenous group, there are many different identity affiliations present due to intersectionality with other traits: gender, SES, and so on. She provides the example of Puerto Ricans, who identify themselves in many ways depending on country of origin (island, mainland, etc.), language use (Spanish, English, etc.), and many other factors between and outside what some might consider to be “prerequisite[s] for Puerto Ricanness” (p. 67). Nieto goes on to explain how culture is dynamic, multifaceted, contextual, and embodies several other attributes, including the socioeconomic and political factors that contribute to the value and construction of culture. Bourdieu’s (1986) theories are revisited to shed light on the equal value of *economic*, *cultural*, and *social capital*.

She concludes the chapter by naming three issues that teachers should emphasize in their programs to challenge assimilationist perspectives and allow students to embrace their identities. These issues are skillfully developed in a way that require students to reflect critically on their own and their classmates’ cultural affiliations; that require teachers to consider their role as supportive, cultural mediators; and that require administrators to transform schools to “afford all students an equal chance to learn” (p. 87).

In Chapter 5, Nieto summarizes research in which middle schools and high school students of varying backgrounds were interviewed about their identity affiliations. The researcher sought to develop “an understanding of multicultural education as antiracist, comprehensive, pervasive, and rooted in social justice” (p. 98). The only commonality with all the participants was that they identified as successful students. The students were interviewed on many aspects of educational policy, including curriculum, pedagogy, tracking/ability grouping/grades and expectations of student achievement, racism and discrimination, and other topics. The interviews revealed that even the most hard-working, successful students might feel as though they do not deserve the success for which they strive, especially those students who do not come from privileged backgrounds. Educators, then, must develop environments in which students can feel confident to reach the highest of goals, despite “those traditional barriers” (p. 126). Just as one of the interviewees—a young Puerto Rican student named Marisol—can aspire to one day become president of the United States, so all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, language and cultural background, can be inspired to succeed.

Chapter 6 looks back to the early 1970s, when Nieto’s career shifted from public school teacher to instructor at Brooklyn College, as a member of a newly founded Puerto Rican Studies Department. During this time, she became a member of the BC 44, a group of faculty, staff, and students that challenged the hiring of a new department chair, one who was not recommended by the appointed Search Committee. In the hopes of preserving the original mission of the program, they protested the new hiring, taking over the offices of both the Registrar and the university’s president. Forty-four of the protesters were arrested, and

with fists raised, they exited the Registrar's Office.

Because of the protests, the department became renowned for its activism as well as its research and scholarship. Increasing diversity also gave way to a new name: The Department of Puerto Rican and Latino Studies. This is an inspiring true story of civil rights and the undying passion of a like-minded group of individuals whose main goal was to maintain the quality and authenticity of one of a handful of ethnic studies departments at the time. Nieto notes that it was a crucial time for social activism, and that "without this climate, advances in the education of marginalized Latino and African American students would not have taken place" (p. 150). One of the greatest results of this movement was in bringing the stories and experiences of marginalized people into core content in higher education programs. Discussing BC 44 in teacher preparation courses can introduce Nieto's tireless work for social justice in education, and encourage novice teachers to work with their students to address issues of injustice in their schools and communities.

### **Part III: Developing a Critical Stance**

In this section, Nieto discusses the roles of teachers in multicultural education, especially those with low levels of exposure to diverse classrooms. In Chapter 7, she calls for teachers to ask "profoundly multicultural questions" (p. 153), those that are based on access and equity, which in turn are more beneficial to student learning. Not asking them and not seeking their answers affect the success of historically marginalized students. Nieto warns teachers that multicultural education is more than sensitivity training and must be implemented in a way that is both culturally relevant and rigorous.

Culturally responsive pedagogy, highly advocated by many scholars of bilingual and multicultural education, is defined as a means by which students' backgrounds are beneficial to the learning process. Two factors that affect student learning are also introduced and explained: the sociopolitical context of education and school policies and practices. Further, Nieto poses four questions that multicultural educators address to provide an equitable learning experience for their students. The questions relate to broader issues of "equity, access, and fair play" (p. 160) that continue to plague many U.S. schools.

In Chapter 8 Nieto shows that school policies and practices must become more equitable to "move beyond tolerance" (p. 153). Nieto highlights forward-thinking teachers who are exemplars of sociocultural mediation, who demonstrate the true meaning of "tolerance." Nieto argues that the term, which is often used to describe respect and appreciation for cultures other than one's own, harbors hidden tones of "a grudging but somewhat distasteful acceptance" (p. 168). Nieto presents five fictitious school scenarios, varying from the monocultural model of education on one end of the spectrum, to the multicultural, equitable, utopic model of education on the other. While these scenarios draw from composites rather than presenting real cases, they provide examples to which pre-service teachers can compare their own experiences and inspire critical discussions of what multicultural education should, and should not be.

Chapter 9 is an engaging lesson in how teachers who do not specialize in bilingual or ESL education can learn from the practices of these teachers. Nieto details how teachers and teacher educators can learn from exemplary colleagues in bilingual and ESL education, most of whom are well-prepared to work with emergent

bilingual students. She affirms that forging academic and personal relationships with students can be challenging, but when teachers take interest in their students' lives, and the lives of their families and communities, it can change how the students value their own education. This chapter would be a welcome addition to professional development courses and workshops, as it encourages collaboration across disciplines and curricula.

#### **Part IV: Praxis, Hope, and the Future**

The concluding section of *Language, Culture, and Teaching* features three, brief chapters that give concrete suggestions for classroom practice. Chapter 10 focuses on teaching students of color, Chapter 11 focuses on the oft-absent perspective of teachers in discussions on education, and Chapter 12 returns to Nieto's beginnings as a hopeful, novice teacher, facing and overcoming numerous challenges, but returning to a state of "hope and the redeeming value of public education" (p. 195).

In Chapter 10, Nieto suggests that being "nice" is not sufficient to teaching students of color, and that teachers who create a culture of caring go much further in understanding and overcoming the challenges of working with student populations that do not share the same backgrounds as them. She also notes that biases extend beyond typical White, male, mainstream sensibilities, noting that minoritized groups can harbor biases toward each other, and within their own groups. In her many years of teaching, she has used several strategies to awaken dialogue and debate on "what it means to demonstrate care in the classroom" (p. 199). This chapter repeats some of the content of previous chapters, but this focus on students of color can begin healthy discussions on the irony of being simply a "nice" teacher.

Chapter 11 returns to the culture of caring in multicultural education and is ultimately a celebration of the work that multicultural teachers do. Nieto uses examples of teachers who epitomize three values of multicultural education: caring and love, courage, and creativity. These are career educators who not only teach, but are constant learners of their students, and are capable of reflecting critically on themselves, in an effort to become "multicultural people" (p. 203). In a time when high-stakes, data driven assessments have consumed public education, there still exist shining examples of teachers who challenge the system, some subtly, some with unabashed activism. In either case, these "unsung heroes" (p. 211) give renewed hope to public education.

The final chapter of the book, Chapter 12, takes the reader back to the beginning of Nieto's story, as she embarks on the first stage of her career as a naïve, hopeful, novice teacher in Brooklyn, a daughter of Puerto Rican immigrants. Her parents never stepped inside her schools during her formative years, except for the occasional open house only her mother would attend. She notes that although they did not meet the school's expectations of parental involvement, "[t]hey redefined what it meant for parents to be involved in their children's education" (p. 217). They could not help, but made certain that their children completed their homework and encouraged them to excel. These values, and a later understanding that teachers must bring their whole selves into the classroom—including their language, cultural, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds—have guided Nieto throughout her career. This hopeful volume may enable pre-service teachers and teacher educators to trace their own trajectories as multicultural educators, implementing Nieto's examples for comparison and self-reflection.

Because this book is mostly a collection of articles written at different times for various publications, there are many instances when information and events overlap. However, Nieto has skillfully updated this invaluable text, and it successfully serves its purpose. For pre-service teacher educators in the areas of bilingual, multicultural, TESoL, and world language education, this is an excellent choice of textbook, by itself or for additional readings beyond the required text.

The expanded critical questions, activities, and additional resources are relevant and timely, and give students and their professors many options for taking the learning experience outside of the classroom and into the community. The decades of experience that Nieto compiles in this book gives her argument credibility, and any teacher educator who believes strongly in multicultural, equitable education would appreciate its content.



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