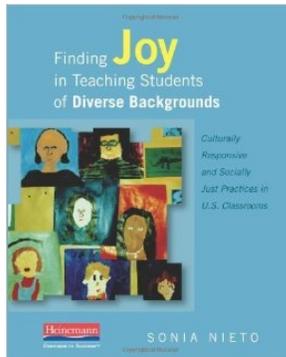


Professional Book Review

Nieto, S. (2013). *Finding Joy in Teaching Students of Diverse Backgrounds: Culturally Responsive and Socially Just Practices in U.S. Classrooms*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. 179 pp., ISBN: 9780325027159. \$24.57.

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René Descartes, French philosopher and scientist, pronounced, “I think, therefore I am.” For the instructors whom Dr. Sonia Nieto showcases in *Finding Joy in Teaching Students of Diverse Backgrounds: Culturally Responsive and Socially Just Practices in U.S. Classrooms*, “I teach, therefore I am!” is their resounding proclamation. The book is a tremendous tribute to teachers everywhere who instruct students of different backgrounds. This insightful exposé of elementary and secondary instructor interviews provides an authentic and powerful gaze into

the sometimes fulfilling highs and disheartening lows of classroom instruction. The interviews are especially important because these voices and perspectives “are largely missing from current conversations and debates on public education” (p. XV). The successes of these teachers are especially significant given the context of the frequently demanding and harsh sociopolitical climate of today. Through the distinctive voices and experiences of the teachers and Nieto’s expert exchange and experience, we learn how teachers across the spectrum of experience can and do survive. More importantly, we learn how they manage to thrive and find joy while teaching students of diverse backgrounds using culturally responsive and social justice pedagogies. Through the engaging personal stories, we learn that success is sometimes a simple matter of the sheer strength of character, will, skill, resistance, commitment, and love for students and the greater cause of public education.

The manuscript is divided into three parts with 11 chapters in all. Part I explores the current landscape of public education. Part II highlights the profiles of teachers who are thriving. Part III looks at the lessons learned and issues a *call to action* for teachers not only to enact culturally responsive values in the classroom, but also to personally and publicly live the values of social justice. Together, the three divisions drive home the central message of how teachers who work with diverse students can find joy and thrive while growing professionally and developing vital knowledge, aptitudes, and behaviors characteristic of culturally responsive pedagogy.¹ For Nieto, culturally responsive pedagogy “is not a specific set of strategies to use with students of a particular background but rather a mindset that respects and honors students’ cultures, experiences, and histories and finds ways to include them in the curriculum” (p. 53).

Nieto adeptly assembles the chapters in themes that connect to highlight the overarching theme: the mindset, dispositions, and behaviors of thriving teachers. Chapters 1 and 2 of Part I discuss the current context of public education. Chapter 1 focuses on the destructive influence of the sociopolitical context with the passage of federal policies like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RttT). Nieto claims that these policies have brought about the marketization of public schools and dramatically changed how education is viewed, funded, and assessed. They have spurred an overreliance on standardized achievement testing that has been particularly devastating for the burgeoning minority demographic in poor, under-resourced schools; students themselves are now viewed largely through a deficit lens. Teachers of failing students/schools are often penalized and also viewed through a deficit lens, rather than seeing the issue as a reason to provide more meaningful teacher education and professional development, smaller classes, better pay, and more resources for poor schools.

Chapter 2 and subsequent chapters focus on how teachers have managed to thrive and positively impact their students and school communities despite the challenging influences of the context. In Chapter 2 the focus is on professional development and teacher preparation. This section looks at what it means to teach with a social justice perspective given the vast diversity in classrooms. Nieto notes that learning to teach such diverse students is about more than just methods and strategies. It requires developing a multicultural and social justice perspective. This gets at teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and relationship with their students, as well as their knowledge about their students' families and backgrounds. This also requires the qualities of openness, flexibility, humility, and a willingness to learn. In addition, an awareness of the sociopolitical context of education and society is crucial as it involves issues of inequality, poverty, racism, and other biases. Professional development then becomes a matter of focus on student learning and teacher learning and satisfaction.

Nieto links Chapters 3 through 8 in Part II by the following themes in each of the concluding segments:

- Teaching is an act of love.
- Teaching is an ethical endeavor.
- Teachers thrive when they keep learning.
- Teaching is honoring students' identities and believing in their futures.
- Teaching is challenging the status quo.
- Teaching is advocacy. (p. 125)

Chapter 9 expands on the themes in Chapters 3 through 8. Chapter 10 lays out the dispositions needed by teachers to be effective with all students and provides examples of how these values are applied in the classroom. Nieto stipulates that "the values that the teachers in this book reflect are neither templates nor recipes for success. Rather, they are dispositions—inherent qualities of mind and character—that guide a person's behavior and actions" (p. 138). This aligns with the Chapter 4 discussions concerning the need for educators to pursue teaching

from an ethical mindset that respects students and their communities and learns about their cultural and family practices and values, then infuses these practices and values in the curriculum. Chapter 11 deals with the question of how teachers thrive and ends with four recommendations for how to thrive derived from the teachers' stories and from Nieto's many years as a teacher and teacher educator

Finding Joy in Teaching Students of Diverse Backgrounds: Culturally Responsive and Socially Just Practices in U.S. Classrooms is an instructive and inspiring must-read for teachers, administrators, policy makers, parents, and (I dare say) students alike! The book closes with the telling assertion, "The teachers featured in this book work hard to live their values, not just articulate them" (p. 144). Indeed, Frederickson (2005) affirms this statement with the declaration, "It is time to walk the social equity talk" (p. 38)!

Notes

1. Culturally responsive pedagogy had its beginnings in the discourse on culturally relevant teaching articulated by Gloria Ladson-Billings. In *The Dreamkeepers* (2009), the author asserts that culturally relevant teaching uses student culture in an attempt to maintain and transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture where one's history, culture, or background is distorted or absent from the curriculum or textbooks. Similarly, Gay's (2010) text *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* suggests that the most effective teaching is inclusive of such factors as prior experiences, community settings, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic identities of teachers and students. This is a basic fact often ignored when teaching some minorities—especially if they are poor—as most teaching is delivered from a Eurocentric framework.

References

- Frederickson, G. (2005). The state of social equity in American public administration. *National Civic Review*, 94(4), 31-38.
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- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.