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## INTERVIEW

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### **“This Addictive Thing Called Teaching”: An Interview With Sonia Nieto About *What Keeps Teachers Going?***

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Sonia Nieto represents critical educational scholarship as she challenges conventional notions of teachers' work and reexamines the nature of teaching in the United States. Nieto has contributed enormously to the growing fields of multicultural and bilingual education, critical multiculturalism, and curriculum studies. Since the beginning of her teaching career in an urban middle school in New York, Nieto has championed the need for social justice in schools for both students and teachers. In her latest book, *What Keeps Teachers Going?* Nieto investigates what sustains dedicated urban teachers in spite of everything. Many scholars who have followed Nieto's work over the years will think that this new research is a move away from her previous scholarship, but I believe it to be a logical step toward asking “profoundly multicultural questions” of critical issues in education (Nieto 2003b).

Nieto is professor of Language, Literacy, and Culture in the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. She has been a teacher for nearly thirty-five years at all levels, from elementary through graduate school. Nieto is the author of numerous books: *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* (2004), *Puerto Rican Students in U.S. Schools* (2000), and *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities* (1999). She has published numerous book chapters and articles in such journals as the *Harvard Educational Review*, *Multicultural Education*, *Journal of Teacher Education*, *Educational Leadership*, and *Theory into Practice*. Nieto has been honored with an Outstanding Teacher Award at the University of Massachusetts. In addition, she has received accolades for her research and activism with the 1995 Drylongso Award for Anti-Racist Activists (Community Change, Boston), the 1997 Multicultural Educator of the Year Award (National Association of Multicultural Education), and a Senior Fellowship in Urban Education from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (1998–2000). She has an honorary doctorate in humane letters from Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and was awarded a month-long residency at the Bellagio Center in Italy.

Although Nieto is known for her scholarly writings about multiculturalism and cultural diversity in the United States, both undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst know Sonia Nieto as a gifted teacher and inspiring mentor. It was both an honor and a privilege to sit down with Professor Nieto on two separate occasions to talk about her new work, which has implications for those of us who are interested in how historical, sociopolitical, and cultural forces impact teachers' work, and for those of us who truly seek local and national school reform. (By the way, if anyone admires the book's artistic front cover, Professor Nieto would have you know that this is her granddaughter's masterpiece.) Here are highlights from the interview.

**Sonia Nieto:** I wrote *What Keeps Teachers Going?* because it was what I call my "burning question." It is something that I have thought about since I became a teacher in 1966. I wondered how teachers stay in the classroom for many years in spite of all the problems that they face. Even though I had wanted to be a teacher, probably since birth, it was very hard work! And so, I have been curious about this question for a long time. Several years ago, I had the opportunity, privilege, and funding through an Annenberg Institute for School Reform fellowship to complete a research project. I decided that I wanted to take the resources that the Annenberg fellowship gave me to grapple with this question. I started a process through which I identified a number of teachers who would agree to meet with me on an ongoing basis. I actually got in touch with Ceronne Daly, who worked part time for the Annenberg Institute. Ceronne had just gone to the Boston Public Schools to become the director of high school restructuring. And so when I spoke to her I said, "Ceronne, I think I would like to work with teachers in Boston." (It took me two and a half hours to get there every time I went and I decided to go once a month for a year.) I wanted to go to Boston because it is the largest urban area in the state of Massachusetts. Also, it is an area that received a substantial grant through the Annenberg Institute when Ambassador Annenberg made this huge gift of approximately \$500 million for public education. Part of [those funds] went to Boston—a good chunk of it.

**Hilton Keon Kelly:** What motivated you to write this book about teachers' work and lives in urban school settings?

**Nieto:** I wanted to speak to teachers and to understand what it is that keeps them going in spite of all the obstacles and challenges. My original thought was to go to some of the schools, like a charter school, where they were really trying some [innovative] ideas, such as teacher-coaches working with teachers, and where teachers were really engaged in intellectual work. Ceronne suggested that it might be more helpful if I went to "regular schools because, after all, that is where the real challenges are." I thought that was a great recommendation and I am so glad that she made it. And I said

okay, let's do regular old schools. Because her contacts were in high schools, she and a couple of her colleagues thought about who might be good teachers for an inquiry group. I was looking for veteran teachers who were successful with students of diverse backgrounds. That was extremely important to me, because my field is multicultural education. While this might seem a departure from multicultural education, it really is not, because kids from African American and Latino backgrounds do populate most of our urban schools; yet many teachers do not know very much about the kids they are working with and are lost. Even if they struggle to teach them, they are sort of lost in terms of knowing anything about their backgrounds—as if you don't need to know that. That is also a criticism of teacher education and in-service education, but we will get to that later. So, this was very much in keeping with my interest in multicultural education. What is it that keeps teachers of linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse student populations going? Teachers who work in devastated school systems, in (sometimes) dilapidated buildings, and in difficult situations with poorly financed schools. All of the problems with the urban school—and yet, these teachers keep going in spite of everything! I wanted to know what it was that kept them going.

**Kelly:** Tell me about the teachers in your study.

**Nieto:** [The teachers in my study] are successful and love their jobs in spite of how frustrated they may get. I wanted to know what teaching is like for them, why they are there, and what everybody can learn from them. So it is not to say that all teachers need to be exactly like these exceptional teachers, but that everybody can learn from them—teachers, teacher-educators, administrators, and the general public. So, that is why I started this research. Ceronne was able to recommend a few people. Those people recommended other people, and so on. Actually, it was not until a couple of weeks ago that I discovered that five of the eight teachers had been Boston Teacher of the Year. (It is not mentioned in the book, because I did not know it at the time.) I did know that Junia Yearwood, one of the teachers in the group, was Boston Teacher of the Year last year. I sent them an article that I had written for them to check and make sure that everybody was in agreement with it. One of the teachers wrote back, “Sonia, I don't know if you realized it, but other teachers in the group have received the Boston Teacher of the Year award.” (Two teachers got the Golden Apple award, which was the original name of the Boston Teacher of the Year award.) I had no idea. I don't hold these people up as if everybody could be Boston Teacher of the Year because that is impossible. But, I think that everybody can learn from these teachers. At first, there were twelve or fourteen teachers in the group. By the second meeting, there were twelve or ten. By the time we finished, there were eight who had completed the year. Most of them had been teaching for about twenty-five or more years. One had just been teaching for ten years and one, Sonie, had been teaching for six years. Sonie was the “baby” of the group and was invited to the group because she

was a student of several of the other teachers. I must say she was one of the people who most benefited, although she was one of the people who was at first most reluctant to see the benefit of an inquiry group. Sonie was also frustrated with teaching as a fairly new teacher—frustrated with the system and ready to leave. By our last meeting, she said that it was the conversations in the group that kept her going. I just saw her a couple of months ago. She is still teaching three years later and I think she is in for the long haul.

**Kelly:** How did you use the resources that the Annenberg Institute provided?

**Nieto:** Along with a stipend, the fellowship came with money that I could use as I wished. I used that money for a small stipend for each of the teachers. We also applied for another grant. Ceronne is wonderful. She actually completed the application for an inquiry grant from the Boston Public Schools—and given the budget cuts, I don't know if they have this anymore. A group of teachers could apply for inquiry group grants and they could use that money. I think it was a thousand or fifteen hundred dollars. They could visit other schools, order materials, or use it as a stipend. What we did was just spread it among the eight teachers and each teacher got a small stipend. I used the Annenberg also for the snacks that we had—very important. I purchased books that we read together. At the end of the year, I wanted to make sure that I used every penny that was left. So one of the teachers had a great idea that we open up an account for each of the teachers at Barnes and Noble, two or three hundred dollars, which they could just spend whenever they wanted. But that was too complicated for the Boston Public Schools—we could not do it that way—we had to do it as a payment to the teachers. . . . Anyhow, that is how I was able to use the money. We read books and made sure that everybody had what they needed. Teachers didn't get very much out of this in terms of material things—they got two or three hundred dollars, a couple of books, and that was about it. But I think in other ways they got a great deal out of it and it certainly helped me a lot to answer this “burning question.”

**Kelly:** How often did the group get together throughout the year? How often did you observe the teachers in their school workplace?

**Nieto:** We met from May or June of 1999 to May of 2000—once a month. One time I went there just to observe and interview other teachers. Most of the time we met from three to five, but it was always five thirty or six by the time we finished. People were really engaged in the conversations. The teachers decided that they would each have a project that they could engage and that my role was to explore my question. It was interesting. Some of the teachers really wanted me to take more of a leadership role and I said that I was not there to tell them what to do. I told them, “I am here to talk with you because I want to learn from you.” By the third, fourth, or fifth meeting, we finally sort of settled down and got into a rhythm.

We decided that each person would report to the group what they were doing and what they were finding. We also read and we talked about the readings.

**Kelly:** What books did you choose to read?

**Nieto:** We read *I Won't Learn From You* by Herbert Kohl [1994]. We read *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare to Teach* by Paulo Freire [1998]. We read my book *The Light in Their Eyes*, which just had been published. Each teacher was given copies of all the books and we discussed all of them. Also, we wrote. Sometimes we wrote at our meetings. I would say, "let's take twenty minutes and write." I thought that it would be a nice way to sort of get some distance from the business of the day. Sometimes I asked them to write at home and bring it in. For example, I asked them to write a letter to a new teacher. I asked them to do that because Paulo Freire's book *Teachers as Cultural Workers* had a huge and positive impact on the entire group. It created a lot of food for thought. These are a series of ten letters that he wrote to teachers. I asked them, "What would you say to a new teacher?" It was wonderful that they wrote these letters—not everyone did. Some people were not interested in writing and that was fine. Some people were interested in talking and exploring, while other people, like Steve for example, loved to write. Steve still thanks me for it. He will send me e-mails: "thank you so much for the opportunity to write." Other people got different things out of it. In addition to writing a letter to a teacher, I asked them to write their teaching autobiographies. Some of them wrote when we met and some of them brought things they had already written to the group. They also wrote e-mails and I included some of them as part of the data.

**Kelly:** How were you able to provide such detail about group meetings?

**Nieto:** I had all of the meetings transcribed and that was something else that was paid for by the Annenberg grant. I hired a transcriber and she did a really nice job. Otherwise, I would have lost all of that. I could not have taken notes. I didn't take any notes, besides field notes afterwards and my reflections about the meetings. I had these very detailed transcriptions—she did a really great job. Reading those transcripts brought all of that back and so I used their words. For teachers who had not written, it was especially wonderful because I wanted everybody's voice to be represented in the book whether or not they had chosen to write. Although some of them never wrote, they had a great impact on the group and the book. Anyway, that is sort of the history of this project.

**Kelly:** Tell me more about how you were able to write this book in Italy.

**Nieto:** I was really fortunate to have applied for a study residence at the Bellagio Center in Italy and it was in the middle of the year that I was meeting with the teachers

when I found out that I received it. I received notification on Christmas Eve, actually. The Rockefeller Foundation in Bellagio, Italy, runs the Bellagio Center and they invite scholars and artists to go there for a month to work on whatever projects that they have applied to work on. They also invite your “significant other” or “life partner” to go with you. I mention this because it was so poignant to me that I was sitting in this splendor in Bellagio at this incredible villa in the Alps overlooking Lake Como that was just magnificent. I was so aware of the fact that I was in these surroundings writing about these teachers who had to work in sometimes very difficult situations and who were nevertheless inspired and inspiring. So, I took this very seriously and it was very humbling for me too. I had not written anything until I got there. I finished meeting with the teachers in May and in June we were in Bellagio. And so, I had a month of very focused work there. I reviewed with them at our last meeting in May what I felt were the themes that were coming up in our meetings, in their writings, and in everything else that we had done together. And I presented them as very preliminary themes. Everybody thought that I was on the right track and gave me sort of the go ahead. I told them that I would be going away to write, so if they had anything to send me do so before I left. Then I took everything that I had, all the transcription, the tapes, and all the things that they had written. Also, I took lots of books that I was reading—immersing myself in. I took all of this to Bellagio and sat in my study in the woods and thought really, really hard about our conversations and the messages the teachers were trying to convey. One of the teachers in the group, Karen Gelzinis, talked about a “secret.” What is the secret? Karen said that Sonie, who had been her student and was one of the youngest teachers in the group, came into teaching wanting “the secret.” What is it? What is the secret? At our last meeting—no it was when Karen sent me her final letter, which was like an eleven- or thirteen-page letter—Karen said, “here we wondered what was the secret and it was in front of us all the time. *It is this addictive thing called teaching*” [Emphasis mine]. There I was trying to find out what all these “secrets” were. That is how I came up with each of the chapters. Karen had provided the response to the question, what keeps teachers going?

**Kelly:** How important was the racial, ethnic, gender, and class composition of the teachers that you selected to be a part of this study?

**Nieto:** Those things are very important to me, but that is not necessarily what I was looking for. I am glad, however, that we were able to get a diverse group of teachers. Now Ceronne, who is African American, knows that these issues are really important to me. But I know that she did not go out looking for “one of these and one of those.” Ceronne was out looking for people who were successful teachers, who loved the kids, who were admired by other teachers—not teachers who just stood there and accepted everything either. They are all movers and shakers, they make trouble sometimes, they stir the waters, they rock the boat—to use all the [popular] expressions. I think that the group that we got is pretty representative

of those teachers who keep going, at least in urban areas. It is a diverse group of people. We had Junia Yearwood, who identifies as a person of African ethnicity. She was raised in Barbados. Ambrizeth Lima is currently a doctoral student at Harvard but she is still teaching part-time. I believe she is working part time in the schools as a teacher-coach. (I am not sure.) We had Judith Baker, who is a white woman, and Steve Gordon, who is a white man. We had Claudia Bell, a white woman who is fluent in Spanish. Claudia learned Spanish as a young person and didn't even think about teaching until she worked in a hospital where she taught English as a Second Language to some of the workers. She became enthralled with this idea of teaching. She was a bilingual teacher. So even if people weren't of backgrounds other than white Anglo Saxon themselves, they often had other experiences that connected them [with their linguistically and culturally diverse students]. After our group finished in May, for example, Judith Baker went to South Africa to study the schools there. She then set up a relationship with some South African schools—sending materials to them and so on. So, these are teachers with political convictions as well. We had Sonie, who is Haitian, and we had Junia, who is African American. Karen Gelzinis is European American from South Boston. Karen had had experience within an all-black school, for example. As a teenager, she went to a predominantly Puerto Rican church and then lost a boyfriend because of that, and so on. All of these teachers had some kind of experience that connected them with community and that showed respect for the community and real evenness toward them.

**Kelly:** So, these teachers possessed certain “competencies” that enabled them to work well with their culturally and linguistically diverse student population?

**Nieto:** Absolutely. And that made them enthusiastic and excited about working with their kids. These teachers are really connected, unlike some teachers who elect to teach in urban areas. These teachers welcome the opportunity to teach their urban kids. One of my goals was to have prospective teachers and in-service teachers, along with the public at large, see the wonderful and positive things about teaching in urban schools—in spite of all the problems. There are rewards and there is enrichment in those teaching environments. This is what was reinforced for me.

**Kelly:** Why is the central question for your new book a “critical question” for those of us in educational studies and teacher education?

**Nieto:** For me it is a critical question because of several reasons. First, everybody is talking about how to relieve the teacher shortage. It is a fact that there will be a need for a lot of new teachers in the coming years. There is definitely a graying of the faculty and [more] teachers will be leaving the classroom—so that is one issue.

Second, there are so many teachers who don't know very much about the children they teach. We need to look at teacher education more critically. We need to look at in-service teacher education more critically. We also need to look at how we organize schools to promote learning about students, that is, how teachers learn about the students they teach. Third, which is another reason that I was brought to this research, there is a growing number of students of color in schools and the number of teachers of color is quite low. It is about 10%, maybe a little bit more. There are schools that are entirely (or 70–80%) African American and Latino. And yet, if you look at the faculties in those schools, teachers of color represent a tiny number. I think we need to do more to recruit a more diverse faculty.

**Kelly:** In the meantime, what should be expected of predominantly white faculties who teach in urban schools with predominantly students of color?

**Nieto:** Well, that is the next thing I was going to say, because we can't expect that it will be an overnight process. So, in the meantime, we can't expect teachers of color to be responsible for all the students of color—because we will never make it then. We need to make sure that all the children in our schools, no matter what their backgrounds, are the responsibility of all the teachers in our schools. So that means constant education [about students and subject matter], which is one of the issues that I talk about a lot in this book. In my previous books, as well, I argue that teachers need to keep learning all the time. This is a key responsibility of teachers. Junia Yearwood talked about this in the letter that she wrote, and so did Steve Gordon. Both talked about the fact that teachers need to keep learning; otherwise you can't serve your students well. Junia talked about the fact that she would never go to a dentist who wasn't keeping up with his or her profession. It is the same with teaching. Junia said we have to respect our students enough to keep learning. So, I think that is another reason that I researched the question—what keeps teachers going?

**Kelly:** It seems clear to me that you are not calling for more “methods” courses for teachers, but more courses that prepare teachers for the varied social and cultural contexts in which teachers work.

**Nieto:** In my previous book, *The Light in Their Eyes*, I wrote about the fact that we don't need so many methods courses. One thing that I agree with about [current] educational reform is that teachers need more content in the subject area that they teach. Although methods are necessary, I think there is an overemphasis on methods. Instead of [more] methods, we need to focus on developing the type of person who will work most effectively with students, particularly students who have been poorly served. We need to encourage teachers to look deeply into themselves and their own biases and values, because what they bring into the classroom



impacts the students they teach. That is a constant process! Teachers need to learn about themselves in order to be sensitive to students they teach.

**Kelly:** So, you might say that, historically, teacher education programs have done a good job preparing teachers for a particular type of classroom and a particular type of child, but when some teachers have entered the real world of diverse classrooms with “other people’s children” they have labeled it dysfunctional.

**Nieto:** I think that is true and I think social class has a lot to do with it too. One way that I have said it is that many schools of education are still preparing teachers as they were teaching students fifty years ago. (Not that our schools were ever populated by only white kids—I was in school fifty years ago and most of my classmates were not white.) I think that for too long we have not been attending to the needs of large segments of the [student] population. Now it is getting to the point where it is more crucial than ever, because the numbers are so high. There is such an attack on public schools with all the talk of privatization and so on that I worry about the future of public education—that is another reason that I wrote this book.

**Kelly:** I notice that the book is dedicated, “to all those teachers that keep going in spite of everything.” What assumptions did you make about those teachers before your research and what were your findings?

**Nieto:** I think that some of the assumptions that I had were clarified by the work that I did with the teachers. One is that teachers who keep going love what they are doing and love the students they teach—that certainly was clear. I assumed that teachers were intuitively curious and that was reinforced. I assumed that teachers were hopeful and maybe that is because I have always felt that you can’t be a good teacher unless you are a hopeful person. Not a “Pollyanna,” but a hopeful person—and those things were clarified. I was surprised at the anger that teachers felt. I don’t tend to be an angry person and so I think that surprised me. Usually when you think of angry teachers, you think of teachers who are sort of, as one of the teachers said, “bitching and moaning” all day, ineffective, angry at the kids, angry at the community, disrespectful, and on and on. That is not the [kind of] anger that these teachers had at all. The teachers in my study were angry at the disrespect they were shown by the system. They were angry at the conditions in which they had to teach and children had to learn. They were angry at racism and inequality. They were angry with the bureaucracy. They were angry, as Karen Gelzinis stated, at the mouse droppings that she had to clean up every morning from the computers that didn’t work. These were some of the things that they were angry about. In all the time that I spent with them, they never talked about anger at kids. They could be exasperated and frustrated with them. They could not understand why they behaved in a particular way or did a particular thing, but they were never angry with

the kids. Junia said that when she walks into a classroom, she leaves that all outside because her room has to be a sanctuary. She cannot bring in that anger and show it to the kids, because then she will be ineffective. This was real learning for me. I came to understand that anger is the other side of hope. Anger can be a very positive thing. As several of the teachers remarked, “anger is what fuels you.” In addition, I was surprised at the level of intellectual work that teachers wanted to do. All of them go to professional conferences, they attend professional meetings, and some are part of the National Writing Project (which has been a very powerful organization for many teachers around the country). Several of them had taken part in inquiry groups before. Junia had started a reading group in her school. They have been mentoring teachers and they have been coaches. All of them are working intellectually—they read educational books and articles, even though they may not be in graduate school. These things are important and that was reinforced for me.

**Kelly:** How would you compare the sociopolitical and cultural contexts in which you taught in New York to the current situation of the urban teachers that you interviewed?

**Nieto:** In 1966, when I started teaching in an urban public school (a junior high school in Brooklyn, New York), I thought conditions were pretty tough then. It was in Ocean Hill–Brownsville. I often talk about how I used to cry every day when I went home, because it was so frustrating. (Those kids were coming from more or less the same kind of background as mine. They were the poor and working-class immigrants.) I saw that the challenges were even greater for the kids that I was teaching than they had been for me and that there was less support in 1967 in the urban public schools. There were more challenges to families. For example, there were so many children from families in which their parents were unemployed or living on disability. Judith Baker, one of the teachers, talked about the challenges as “social work explanations that teachers get into that lead nowhere.” I loved that because it is true. It is not to say that those challenges or conditions don’t exist, but we can’t do very much about them. And that is another message that I wanted to get in there. I think the challenges are much greater today than they were when I started to teach and certainly much greater than when I was a child in school. I think our society has changed a great deal. Most families have two parents working and the kids go home to empty houses. Also, there are so many families that have only one parent. All of these are challenges that have a great impact on families, on students, and on student learning. Given that, I think we need to look for ways for schools to pick up the slack. Many are becoming community centers and so on. And unless we redistribute the wealth, I don’t think our society is going to change very much.

**Kelly:** I agree.

**Nieto:** A great majority of families care about their kids and want to do what is best, but they do not have the tools. So, I think we need to think about how teachers can do the best that they can with the kids that they have. Peter Negroni, who was the school superintendent in Springfield, Massachusetts, used to talk about how teachers might sometimes think that families are keeping the “best kids” at home and sending them the worst kids! “You know,” he would conclude, “they are sending us the best they have and let’s do the best that we can for them.” I think that was a great message. Because it reinforces to me that there are teachers who do a wonderful job with the same kids as schools and school districts that are not doing a very good job. So, what is the difference? I think the difference is leadership in the school and the expectations of teachers, along with the talent and enthusiasm of teachers.

**Kelly:** Looking back at the findings in your study, what accounts for good teaching and learning in the public urban school?

**Nieto:** Well each of the chapters in this book is a response to that question but I think I would like to go beyond the themes, *which are autobiography, love for the students and the subject matter, hope and possibility, anger and desperation, intellectual work, and the ability to shape futures*. Those are the reasons that keep teachers going, but I think even more important are the implications. What can other teachers learn? What can all of us learn from them? I think that the implications are that we need to rethink teacher education.

**Kelly:** What does that mean really?

**Nieto:** I think we should instill in prospective and in-service teachers that teaching involves constant learning and to have them look at teaching as collaborative work rather than independent isolated work. In our program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, we try to always have teachers working together and then it becomes a habit. When they go into the schools, we encourage them to seek others to help them figure things out. It also means that teachers should learn to look at the benefits of diversity and what students bring to school as the starting point, rather than thinking that they need to obliterate students’ identities. All of these are implications for teacher education. The intellectual work that I have mentioned happens before and after the degree is received. It is not as if you get your degree and you are done. You get your degree and then you can begin. This is how I think we should think about it.

**Kelly:** So, would you say that we must prepare teachers for crisis?

**Nieto:** I don’t want to use the word “crisis” because it has such a negative connotation, but you might say, “prepare them for the expected and the unexpected.” But I

think really what the problem has been in teacher education is that they didn't prepare students for the expected. They prepared you for the perfect world of teaching. What we need to expect in teaching is a less-than-perfect world. It is not perfect in the schools. There are many problems. We need to prepare teachers to face those problems and to learn how to do that. We need to prepare teachers to work with the community and parents—we don't do that. There are so few courses that deal with any of that. A series of implications has to do with teacher education and another closely related to in-service education. That is, once a teacher is in a school, how do we provide ongoing education? I think we really need to think about how schools need to be restructured to provide time for teachers to work together. In addition to space for teachers to work together, schools should provide the opportunity for them to go out and do things. (Of course, that takes money.) The last part that I talk about in the book is new national priorities for teaching. Rather than focusing on high stakes tests, we need to think about high finance. Why should we put money into schools? (If people didn't think that money was the answer then we wouldn't have private schools.) A lot of money is spent in educating children [in private schools] and that is what all kids deserve. So, instead all of those things that I see as punitive or dismissive to public education, such as high stakes tests and vouchers, we need to think about how we support teachers—especially those who keep on going and who are doing a great job. How can we support them and have them become mentors for others? How can we develop leaders among the teachers, as well as among principals and assistant principals, to promote the kind of community, love, and respect in schools that kids need to be successful?

**Kelly:** How does this book serve as a counternarrative to the prevailing wisdom and knowledge about teachers and teachers' work?

**Nieto:** I think a lot of what is being said about teachers is very mean-spirited and based on the assumptions that teachers know little and do little in the educational enterprise. In fact, teachers are talked about in much the same way that urban children are talked about, especially children of color: the deficit model. Now I am not saying that all teachers are the best that they can be, nor do I think that all teachers care about children. I know that is not the case. But punishing all teachers in a broad stroke is the wrong policy and does not build upon the tremendous commitment that many teachers do have. I think we need to construct a counternarrative because the narrative right now is that we are going to be very punitive towards teachers, such as "they don't know very much," "they need to learn a lot more," "they can't pass tests," and "they can't teach." Some of these assumptions are wrong. Passing a test is going to make you a better teacher? Jumping through some of the hoops for certification is going to make you more effective in the classroom? I am not saying that some of these things aren't necessary. I think that teachers do need to have a body of knowledge. I think that it has been proven that teachers

make a very large difference in the lives of children, especially their academic success or failure. We need to make sure that teachers have developed a lot of different skills and attitudes that will help them work with students successfully. But a teacher test is not going to do it, and assigning blame to teachers for problems in education is not going to do it, either. Also, a high stakes test for kids is not going to do it. So, that is the narrative that we have right now. This narrative is very powerful and I think we need to create a counternarrative to it.

**Kelly:** I definitely agree that there is the perception that urban classroom teachers are not our best teachers and that they do not care about the “unruly” children they teach.

**Nieto:** Right. Although that may be true of some teachers, it is not true of others. We need the good work that excellent teachers are doing because this is the hardest job in the world. It is really difficult and when teachers are good, we need to say: These are really good, caring, confident, and hardworking teachers. What can we learn from them to improve schooling for all kids? So, that is really the counternarrative. Looking at the teachers I interviewed, they are an amazing group of people who are committed to maintaining teaching as an intellectual endeavor. That is something that you never hear about in the conventional discourse. These teachers talk about how important it is for them to keep current and to keep thinking about some of the problems and issues that they face, and to keep reading and learning with one another. We need to change the view that we have of teachers.

**Kelly:** On page 127, you write, “Teaching as intellectual work means looking collaboratively and critically at student work and talking together about what works and what doesn’t work; it means developing curriculum with other teachers and having the opportunity to discuss thought-provoking books and ideas.” Could you say more about this dimension of teachers’ work and what school systems must do?

**Nieto:** The way the school systems are traditionally organized, there is very little time for the kind of work that I am advocating. The school systems are organized to prevent collaborative work because each teacher is in her own classroom with little time to meet with one another. Some of this is changing now. Look at the middle school model, for example: you see that teachers can plan together and can really create curriculum together and coordinate the curriculum that they are doing. Those are wonderful models, but it doesn’t necessarily happen in schools and when there is professional development it often means bringing in a scholar to do a presentation that teachers have neither asked for nor are they particularly interested in. And again, this is not to say that we can’t all benefit from hearing new things, but I think teachers need to have the opportunity to get together and do the kind of reflection that isn’t ordinarily permitted. Karen, one of the teachers in the

group, said teaching is so much easier without the reflection because there is always so much to do. “The bag is never empty” is how she phrased it, “there is always so much to do.” But she also said without the reflection, you also don’t have the richness and you also can’t improve.

**Kelly:** One of the most powerful ideas that you write about came from Steven Gordon’s writings on “mindful teaching.” Gordon writes about the individual turmoil that continues to accompany his lesson planning and preparation after decades of teaching. As a novice teacher, I longed for the day when teaching would be an automatic process and I no longer had to put so much time and effort into lesson plans and curriculum. But as Gordon suggests, teaching never becomes automatic for effective teachers. Your research suggests that when teachers do “mindful teaching” they are doing the thing that will keep them going. Could you say more?

**Nieto:** Steve is a wonderful teacher and he has been teaching for about thirty-two years. When he read this piece that he had written for our group, it was breath taking for me to see that a veteran teacher of so many years, plus the knowledge of an excellent teacher who won the Boston Teacher of the Year Award and who is loved by his colleagues and students, goes through this turmoil. It is both inspiring and daunting because for young people entering teaching this might not be the thing to show them actually, because they might think it is always like this. Steve is a particularly sensitive person, so I think that he might have a heightened sense of this turmoil. But I think that all good teachers are grappling with some of these issues all the time. And that is both the agony and the ecstasy of teaching. In fact when he finished reading that piece, we were so stunned. We talked about how, as a veteran of so many years, he still struggled with what to do on Monday morning—not as a pragmatic question but as an intellectual question. When we talked about teachers’ fear of making mistakes, Steve said “oh I make mistakes all the time. I just made one today and it makes me think how I should change.” That kind of reflection is necessary and empowering. This was his question all along. I told you that every teacher had a question that they explored. Steve’s question was: Can teaching be rational? He was thinking about “mindful teaching.” How do teachers practice mindful teaching? It is an important question to ask. It is central to his work.

**Kelly:** Are there any models for encouraging and implementing “mindful teaching” in the school workplace? In other occupations?

**Nieto:** That is a good question and I don’t know how to answer it. I am sure that there are. I don’t know what they are. I know that in the automobile industry, when they started including more collaboration and problem solving, workers became more productive and that was a model that was imported from Japan. It doesn’t necessarily mean that they have more power, but at least workers felt more productive and re-

spected for their point of view. They would sit down and figure things out. And I think the same is true in medicine where a group of doctors sit down and try to figure out a patient's medical problem. There are probably many other examples. Education is a particularly knotty problem because teachers spend the bulk of their time in front of the students, and that is not a problem in itself, but they don't have time for reflection about the big things. The more that they can talk, think, and write about critical issues in education, the more thoughtful they can be as teachers.

**Kelly:** In your final thoughts you suggest that in order to expand the opportunities for students in urban schools, we should focus our attention on high standards, high expectations, and high finance. I can imagine every group interested in school reform along the political spectrum, from the most liberal to the most conservative, espousing such ideals. What exactly do you mean by high standards, high expectations, and high finance?

**Nieto:** Let me disagree with you that everybody along the political spectrum would say these things because I don't think that the radical right now would espouse the need for high finance. (Only high finance for the schools where their kids go, which are often private schools.) There is no problem with high finance, but when it comes to public and urban schools, often the charge is "look we are just throwing money at the schools and nothing has happened." Of course, I do believe that everybody would say that we need high standards and high expectations all along the political spectrum, but they need to define what they mean by that obviously. By standards, I don't mean standardization. I don't mean a one-size-fits-all kind of approach and I also don't mean high stakes tests. If kids take a test from grades three to twelve will that bring them up to par? Why should a test bring them up? What is the test doing, really? In Massachusetts, we are seeing that it is increasing the drop-out rate of the most vulnerable students. So, what I mean by standards is access and opportunity. I have just written something for *Educational Leadership* [2003a] about the kinds of "profoundly multicultural questions" that I think we need to ask. Questions that most people would not assume are multicultural at all. Even if they make a change in the curriculum by adding a few holidays and heroes, you have to ask questions about access and equity, such as "Who is taking calculus?" "Who is teaching the children?" "Are all teachers equally capable and prepared to teach the children that they teach?" "Do teachers know enough about the subject matter?" and "What are our children worth?" To me, these are all "profoundly multicultural questions." It has to do with what we spend on education, particularly for the most vulnerable children. So, that is what I mean by high standards and high expectations. Also, I mean a high level of access and opportunity. Even teachers who think they have high expectations for their students will sometimes say things such as "well I really believe they can do it, but at the same time they don't have fathers; they come to school and have to learn how to hold a

pencil,” and so on. I would grant you that those are real challenges when we compare that to children in suburban middle-class families that have all these skills and have had all these opportunities. High expectations means that teachers have to acknowledge that students might come with certain challenges, but even with those challenges, they are capable.

**Kelly:** I agree.

**Nieto:** In fact, I just talked with somebody the other day who said, “I have to say, I am not really sure that all kids can learn.” And I really appreciated that he said this because I understand the fact that he opened up a conversation by saying it. A lot of people believe it but don’t say it. I responded, “Would you feel that way about your kids?” He said, “Well, when I go home my kids have a teacher for a parent and they have all these opportunities.” I asked, “Does that mean that other children who don’t have these opportunities don’t deserve them?” This is what we really have to get at. In the face of evidence to the contrary, we still should say, “I know that she is smart” or “I know that he is smart.” There are some schools that are two blocks from one another in which the kids in one school are doing so much better than the kids in the other school. The kids are from the same community and are facing some of the same challenges and situations. Why are some schools doing so much better than others? There is a climate and a culture in that school that expects students to do their best and knows that they can. There is a shared understanding in successful schools that these kids can do well and they deserve the best.

**Kelly:** Are there any last thoughts about what keeps teachers going?

**Nieto:** I am hoping that teachers will read the book and take away some lessons that I think are important for our nation right now. I am very grateful to the teachers who were able to offer me insight into what keeps teachers going. I have gone around the country speaking to groups who are interested in what keeps teachers going in spite of everything. I wanted to create a book for nonacademics as well as for scholars. The issues that are raised in this book are not only important to classroom teachers but are crucial for everyone concerned about the future of public education in the United States.

**Kelly:** Thank you.

**Nieto:** You’re welcome.



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