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## Controversial literacy: A conversation with Sonia Nieto

**SONIA NIETO** is Professor of Language, Literacy and Culture at the School of Education, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where she has been teaching for twenty years. She has written several books, including **Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education** (3rd edition, 2000), and the most recently published **The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities**. In 1998, she was named Multicultural Educator of the Year by the National Association of Multicultural Educators. Dr. Nieto's scholarly work focuses on multicultural education, the schooling of language minority and immigrant students, the education of Latinos in the US, and Puerto Ricans in children's literature.



In early January, 2000, I invited my teacher and friend, Sonia Nieto, to talk about what progress she sees-or does not see-in the state of multicultural children's literature. In particular, I was interested in her impression of the availability and quality of literature for and about Puerto Rican children. In my classes, I regularly use her decade-old but scholarly, comprehensive and sobering original research on this topic.<sup>1</sup> Although she has not yet conducted a formal update of her study of Puerto Ricans in children's literature, it is clear that Dr. Nieto has given considerable thought to the topic, and especially to the underlying sociopolitical as well as educational aspects of it.

In this conversation, Dr. Nieto says that no work of art, and no educational decision, is apolitical: all are embedded in their contexts; all have

points of view and reflect their times. Her main point in this conversation is that if teachers are to work for social justice, they must be prepared to understand and make conscious choices from an informed and social justice perspective on the political nature of all that they do. In school, and in the world, all readers need to see themselves and each other in the rich, full complexity of all of their lives.

I have recorded our conversation as follows. However, in an attempt to capture the full power of Dr. Nieto's own voice, I have intervened in the reporting of our conversation only to frame her recent major perspectives. In her original investigation, published in the early 1990s, certain recurrent themes caused Dr. Nieto to be at the same time both disappointed and hopeful:

- ◆ the continuing invisibility of Puerto Ricans

in the field of children's literature;

- ◆ the absence or neglect of the family and family life in some of the books, including a reluctance to include anything but the most superficial aspects of culture and a continued stereotyping of Puerto Ricans; and
- ◆ the emergence of children's literature illuminating the Puerto Rican experience.<sup>2</sup>

### RECENT TRENDS IN PUERTO RICAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

I've seen a number of children's books written about Puerto Ricans—some written by Puerto Ricans and some not—since the article that I wrote in 1991. In general, what I can say is that there still aren't enough books that are being published although there seems to be more attention to diversity in children's literature, now. Another trend that started in the 1980s is that more of the books are written by Latinos in general, Puerto Ricans specifically, and have to do with the kinds of issues that Puerto Rican kids are really facing in their lives.

I've also noticed, interestingly enough, that a larger number of books are about fantasy, legends and folklore. It's really interesting to me because when I first did this research in the 1970s, there was very little that was of this genre. Most of the literature was about the so-called "problem" of being Puerto Rican, that meant girls in gangs, boys in gangs, children not knowing English. Of course, on some level, children not knowing English is a problem, because children have to learn English. But in those books the issue is usually resolved when they learn English, and then they have no more problems. We know that that's not the case.

However, in the recent press that I've seen, some of those problems are not being addressed. There are still problems that kids have, but now we're sort of on the other extreme where we have a lot of folklore and legend and very little of the real life issues or the day to day lives of Puerto Rican youngsters. In general, I've seen these trends and I don't think that the range of perspectives is as it should be. I don't think that we have the range of genres that we should have with children's books. For example, now I think there are a lot more books for young children, whereas before there were more books for older children. What about the young adult now? Over all, I think that we need lots more fiction. We need more children's book authors and they need to have more access.

In terms of access to publishing, there's tension between having these huge conglomerates,

where the tendency is to homogenize, and on the other hand really having people who are interested (people who are working within those conglomerates) in a multicultural agenda. And they're interested in it because they know their society is changing and has changed and that they have to keep up and that this will sell books. And so there are sort of these competing tendencies.

I get calls, a lot of them, from people saying "Please let us know about children's book authors who are writing about Latinos." And I can't give them very much because I don't know of any or very few. So I think that there has to be a way to recruit and nurture these young artists to write these stories. Some of that's happening but I don't think enough of it is. I would say that it's a trickle; it's not what it should be but it is maybe a more sizable trickle.

Something else I've noticed as a trend is that more attention is being paid to multicultural kinds of stories. That is, that there are situations in which a culturally diverse community grapples with an issue or a problem. I think that's very good, on the one hand, because that's the nature of our society: it is culturally pluralistic. Unfortunately, most neighborhoods are not as pluralistic as we would like them to be, though I think that some neighborhoods certainly are.

There's one story about a community garden.<sup>3</sup> It looks to be like a New York City Lower East Side type of a neighborhood where something like that could conceivably happen ... where there is a culturally diverse community. They set up this garden and everybody grows something different. They get to know each other and they take care of the garden together. It's very nice; it's got problem-solving; it's got sharing and it's about each person maintaining his or her own but at the same time contributing to a greater good. And those are all good messages, I think, so I see it as a positive trend. Unfortunately it doesn't mirror most of our neighborhoods.

### STEREOTYPING IS INEVITABLE IF THERE ARE TOO FEW REPRESENTATIONS OF A CULTURE

When we have so few representations of a culture, and especially when those representations are presented without authentic context, all we are left with, inevitably, are stereotypes. The more stories we have, the more we are able to get at the full complexity that accurately represents cultures, and individuals within those cultures.

For example, the recent **West Side Story** controversy<sup>4</sup> in Amherst, where I live, is a very complicated issue. I think that this whole controversy has more to do with the climate of the high school than with **West Side Story**. What's reported in the media is that it's a First Amendment issue, a censorship issue. At a general level, I suppose that that's true. But at a high school level, these types of decisions are made all the time: about what is appropriate, what is not appropriate, how it might be difficult for some students and so on. So I think it has to do with the sense of some students at the high school feeling (or being made to feel) that they're not part of the community, and then, finally, when they are represented in some way in the community, it's in a negative way.

Now that doesn't mean that it should have to be canceled. I happen to think that it should have been done. Use it as a teaching tool. If we are educators, we need to look at things in an educational way and think of how we can use literature to help students become critical, to become creative thinkers. However, that doesn't mean that I necessarily think the decision's wrong to not do it. I think that the school people made the best decision they could, given the circumstances-that it had been blown out of all proportion. But I wouldn't want kids of any background to immediately say, "It's racist so we can't do it."

#### CHILDREN NEED PLENTY OF IN-SCHOOL GUIDED PRACTICE OF CRITICAL READING

It was interesting because the week after this whole thing started, I was watching an episode of a show on TV in which all the bad guys were Latinos, all of them. And I think they were Puerto Ricans, in fact. And I sat there thinking, "Who is there to deconstruct this for the young people?" I'll bet the kids in town were sitting there watching this now - is anybody there helping them? Yet this is something we take in all the time. So, if we can't talk about it in school then they really can't learn anything.

I would want students and adults to know that no work of art including children's literature is apolitical. Every work of art including every children's book has a point of view. No work of art is neutral or innocent. They all are embedded in their context, their historical context and sociopolitical context, and they reflect the times in which they were written, who wrote them, what their objective was. If we can teach children that

then I think that we will have come a very long way. Children or young adults won't necessarily rule out reading literature because of the point of view that it has-because if we do that, we end up white-washing history, as most textbooks do.

A perfect example for me is **Huckleberry Finn**. Should it be banned? I think censorship happens every single day in schools, but we call it "selections," we call it "choice." Teachers make up their minds every single day about what to use with students based on their own thinking, based on their political ideology, on their orientation to what education is all about. I think that we do our students a disservice by censoring too much and not having them read a wide range of things. So I would say the same thing about **Huckleberry Finn**. I think students should have the opportunity to read that book.

#### TEACHERS MUST UNDERSTAND THE FULL COMPLEXITY OF A BOOK'S CONTEXT

But at the same time that I say that, I think that teachers need to be prepared to teach it because if they are not, then it may end up hurting some students. I still recall a student I had several years ago, a doctoral student, who was the only African American child in his class when that book was read. He said that he still remembers, and still feels the sting: every time the word "nigger" was mentioned, all the children turned around and looked at him. Unless the teacher knows how to prepare the book so that students can read it, understand the context in which it was written, be able to share that with the students and have students engage in conversation about that, then I don't think the book should be taught unless those conditions are in place. Now is that censorship? I don't think so; I think it's good teaching.

And so, for example, with **West Side Story**, one of the first questions I thought about was: "How many of the students had read **West Side Story**?" and I don't think very many did. And yet 160 students signed a petition that it shouldn't be done. I understand why they were signing it-they felt very alienated. They felt that their culture was never included, and finally when it is, look at how it is included-in a very, some might say "racist" way-I would say a "stereotypical" way. It's a way in which there are very few images of Puerto Ricans presented in that play.

Does that mean that those things didn't exist? No, of course we know that gangs existed. Now,

did I know people who were in gangs? I didn't. I grew up poor, in difficult economic circumstances, but that wasn't my life. It doesn't mean that everybody's life was the same. But because **West Side Story** is the only representation that most people know of Puerto Ricans, that's the image that they have. I would want all kids to be able to read it and to respect it and learn from it and think about it critically.

### TOO FEW IMAGES

Our newspapers had been full of letters every week for months about this. Some people just dismissed it as "ridiculous" and "people are over-sensitive." Some people are just the other extreme, saying that we should never do anything and if we do we should be out there picketing. A lot of letters struck me and I learned from them.

The one that was the most poignant for me was one written by a Puerto Rican woman who graduated from Amherst High School and who had just graduated from Mount Holyoke College. She said that when she went to high school she only heard Puerto Rico mentioned twice in the curriculum. One was in an economics class, to say that the island of Puerto Rico was the biggest consumer of Cheeze Whiz. That was the only thing she learned about Puerto Rico. And the second time that she saw Puerto Rico mentioned was when the school put on a cabaret performance of songs from different plays, including "America" from **West Side Story**.

Now for me, I happen to think that's a great song and that you could use that. It's very subtle and it shows the real contradictions of these wonderful ideals that we have. But all she heard was kids with funny accents singing disparagingly about Puerto Rico, that's all she heard. And I can understand why that's what she heard. She said, "I refuse to have anything like that done again."

### WHO CAN WRITE

#### CULTURALLY AUTHENTIC LITERATURE?

I think that people who are not from the culture can write respectfully and thoughtfully and knowledgeably about a particular group of people, because if we can't get to that place, we can never become good teachers. The problem is that sometimes people think that they have the right to write about a group of people because they spent the weekend somewhere or because they know a few words in Spanish. Believe me, I saw that over and over again when I did my first review in 1983. I

reviewed so many children's books that had misspelled words in Spanish, that used words that didn't exist, that used the Spanish language as a prop, that were so incorrect and disrespectful that it just makes me angry.

But does that mean that non-Puerto Ricans can't write about this? No, I don't think so. One of the books that I liked then (1991) was written by a non-Puerto Rican. It was actually history, by Milton Meltzer. He's very good. He's been very respectful of different people and different backgrounds for many years, because he writes from a social justice perspective, which is a very different point of view, and he writes from an informed perspective.

Now the good thing is that he does not speak for us. And he can't speak for us, but neither can any one Puerto Rican speak for everybody else. And so the important thing is, and this is why I really believe in multicultural education, to have as many examples of children's literature as possible, because then you have many different perspectives. Readers will get to see that there is not just one point of view in the Puerto Rican community, in the African American community, in the Jewish community. In any community there are many different points of view. And so when I say "We have stories to tell," I mean that we have many stories to tell—each of us. Your story will never be like my story, but that doesn't mean that they are not each legitimate and important stories. I think that the more publishing opens up, the more those stories will be told so that people won't say that, well, **West Side Story** for example, is the Puerto Rican experience.

In fact, I teach a (graduate) course, *Teaching About the Puerto Rican Experience*. I remember years ago saying to students, "We should call it *Teaching About Puerto Rican Experiences*, because there are many Puerto Rican experiences." The more I think about it the more I think that we need to just open up and have a lot of different kinds of representation.

### WE NEED A VARIETY OF DIFFERENT IMAGES

I think that's one of the things I said in this article:<sup>5</sup> I've never asked that all stories be or reflect one point of view, or that they have all positive images, because we're not all positive. But (and this is why people get upset when they see negative images) if there's only one story and it has negative images, then those are the images that people carry around. So we need to have lots of different images and see

them as part of the human spirit.

These issues are all so complicated, however, because, for example, a lot of the Puerto Rican folktales are European in origin. So they talk about princes and princesses and kings and queens. So are they authentic? They're authentic only in the sense that this is what's been told in Puerto Rico and this is what's been carried down through the ages. Are they all positive images? No, I wouldn't say that. Are they more egalitarian images? Not necessarily. Are they less sexist? Not necessarily. Does that mean we shouldn't use them? I don't think so. I think there's always a way to use things.

We can't have only one way of assessing the authenticity of Puerto Rican culture in children's books. It's very different for everybody and the more stories we have, the more that complexity can be demonstrated. There are such complex issues at work. Let me give you an example. The Juan Bobo stories you probably have heard. Juan Bobo was very popular in Puerto Rico. He is sort of this simpleton who is very smart in some ways but he does really dumb things sometimes. [Like Langston Hughes' character in the **Simple Stories**, Jesse B. Simple.] I think every culture has one. [Yiddish culture has it, too—*shlemeil* stories.] Every culture has one, sort of making fun of ourselves. Now, Juan Bobo stories are authentic when they talk about Puerto Rican culture. But they also have the mother at the end of a lot of stories beating Juan Bobo because he's misbehaved. So some people really criticize the stories because of that. I understand that. So some people have tried to redo Juan Bobo stories, make them more PC and bring them up to date.

Another criticism has been that the Juan Bobo stories always show Juan Bobo as this *jibaro*, which is the country bumpkin or hillbilly who's always more European in origin than Taino or African. So there's been a new collection of Juan Bobo stories in which Juan Bobo is much more dark-skinned. A lot of people saw that as a positive thing. But one reviewer said, "Of course they had to make Juan Bobo black." She saw it as a very negative thing.

Every issue is very complicated. You need to know the historical context and you need to know the social context. It doesn't mean that you can't teach these things. It just means that you need to be skilled in how you teach them. And you need to go about doing it in a way that respects that context. When my daughter was in junior high school, about fifteen years ago, I looked to see what her new multicultural text book had about Puerto

Ricans. They had a poem by a very well-known Puerto Rican poet, originally written in Spanish. They had the English translation to it. It was about the *jibaro*, the country person who is often portrayed as not formally educated but quite wise. It's a poem that is very sophisticated. I knew the poem.

But after I reread it I thought, "How would most teachers in the United States know how to teach this?" You have to know the history of Puerto Rico, what the *jibaro's* sense is about the status of Puerto Rico, how the *jibaro* is wise in understanding the social and political context. I can't imagine most teachers being able to teach that, or most fifteen and sixteen-year olds being able to understand it. You'd have to really prepare the students well. Which means, of course, that you'd have to be prepared, yourself. And I'm not saying it can't be taught, because if it can't be taught, we'd go back to just monocultural literature. But I don't think that most teachers in my daughter's school were prepared to teach that.

#### HOW WE TEACH IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN WHAT WE TEACH: CRITICAL QUESTIONS TO ASK

I would want my students to take away from my classes a way of thinking about diversity, a way of thinking critically about teaching and learning. Not the facts that "This is what Puerto Ricans are like" or "This is what African Americans are like"-- "Here's a list of traits" or "Here's a list of books," even, that are most appropriate. I would want them to be able to look at the list of books and say, "This one might work and this one might not," "What are the questions that I should ask about this?" "Who's writing this and why are they writing it?" "How can I involve parents in the selection of books?" "How can I look at people in the community as resources?" and "How can I look at my students as resources?"

So I hope that they go away with questions and strategies rather than with the answers because the answers change every day. I don't think that we change everything in just one course, obviously, or even with ten courses, but I do think that we can, if we teach in a critical way, encourage teachers to become critical teachers and to ask the right kinds of questions. So as new books come out, they themselves would be able to decide. They won't have to say, "Is this on the list?" Now, they might not be able to decide, because I can't decide what's an appropriate book for everybody. I can't decide what's an appropriate book for every Puerto Rican, but

let's say I'm looking at a book that is a Native American book. I might have real questions about it, but what I should be able to do is know where to go for information, for support, for resources and for insights that I might not have.

#### THE NEED TO BE COLLABORATIVE WITH THE COMMUNITY

Take for example, the teacher who tried to teach from the children's book **Nappy Hair**,<sup>6</sup> and was fired for it as a result of community pressure. She's the kind of person who probably came out of a multicultural course inspired to do the right thing. Sure, she probably shouldn't have copied the pages out of context. She could have brought people from the community in; she could have done other things. But she was trying to do what she thought was right and use a book which she saw in a positive way.

It's a book that I really like, by the way. I read the article [in **Newsweek**] and went out and bought the book for my granddaughter because she has nappy hair and I wanted to read it to her. I understand why there's a problem because it's a very rhythmic kind of book and the teacher in question could have been saying it in a way that some of the parents thought was stereotypical and so on. But it's because of the rhythm of the book, which was written by an African American woman. What the author said was that there are racial issues in our communities that we haven't grappled with.

It just scares me to think that so many topics are off limits because if they're off limits, how can we ever grow? If we can't inspire teachers to take chances and do things like that, then there's no hope for us. So that's why I was very empathetic with the teacher. I'm not saying she was right in everything she did but if we get upset with everything that has to do with difference because these topics are off limits, then there is even less hope. But if we teach our students to be collaborative with people in the community, with the students, with the parents and with other community members, then maybe things like this are less likely to happen. But that is something that needs to be taught in most courses-it shouldn't necessarily be in multicultural courses only. It should be in all courses because it's not just about working with culturally and linguistically diverse parents; it's about working with all parents.

I think that if we approached parents as partners and the community as partners, then these things are less likely to happen. But in a sense things like this will happen; they're happening all the time.

We can't let it get to the point that people are silent and no longer willing to take risks. I wonder if this woman is willing to do multicultural stuff anymore. She got a job in a school, apparently, and from what I've heard she was still doing multicultural literature but other people who are not as strong might not.

Teachers are afraid that they're going to be criticized. They have every right to feel afraid because they look at news items like about **Nappy Hair** or **West Side Story**, and then they're even more afraid. They are walking on eggshells. We can't make it so impossible to talk about these issues that we have to walk on eggshells, because then we'll never address the issues. On the other hand, sometimes what happens is that when people take these multicultural courses they think that they know the answer. They know the right way and they are sort of missionaries on a quest and they then isolate themselves from all their colleagues whom they see as helplessly naïve or ignorant rather than say, "How can I work with my colleagues so that I can learn from them and they can learn from me?" You know, and be a little more humble about it.

#### TEACHING LITERACY IN STUDENTS' OWN LANGUAGE AND IN STANDARD ENGLISH

The reality is that most students who have English as a second language are not in bilingual programs. They're not in bilingual classes. They're lucky they're in ESL classes. That's just the way that it happens to be so even though I support bilingual education, I have to be realistic and say that most of the students who could benefit from it are not in bilingual classrooms. They are in classrooms taught, more and more, by monolingual, English-speaking teachers. Those teachers have a responsibility to teach those students. I have written about what all teachers need to know to teach language minority students.<sup>7</sup> Of course, there are some easy things, like all teachers should know the languages of the students. But that's not going to happen in the near future, although I think it's a good idea for as many teachers as possible to learn another language, even if it's not the language of the students in their classrooms. I say that simply for the experience of being a second language learner and what that's like and how difficult it is. But of course if they learn one of the languages that students in their classrooms speak, that's even better.

But things like collaborating with bilingual teachers and bringing the students together on joint

projects—that's a very good thing to do. They can learn to read to one another, they can learn one another's words, they can do projects like cooking and planting and lots of physical things that they can learn from. They can play games together; they can do science experiments together. I think that the teachers, all teachers, need to know different bodies of knowledge. Like how do students acquire a second language? What is the process? Even if you learn just a few words in a student's language, using those words so that students feel comfortable and if you learn another language you can also recognize why students make particular kinds of mistakes.

You can also avoid certain pedagogical mistakes if you know another language. For example, teachers will use English words they think will be easier for their students. They might say the word 'hard' instead of the word 'difficult' because 'difficult' sounds more difficult. But if they were working with Spanish-speaking students, it would be a better thing to use the word 'difficult,' which has a cognate in English. Now if they knew Spanish or French or Italian, they would know that that's the case and that would help them. So knowing a second language always helps you figure out, if it's a related language, what some of the problems that the kids are going through are.

Another thing that teachers can do is have students get together in like-language groups, so that all the kids who speak Vietnamese can work on a project, even if they report it in English and the teacher doesn't speak Vietnamese. But at least they're allowed to use their own language. I also think it's important for all teachers to not only ask the parents not to speak English at home to the kids but, in fact, to also ask them to "keep speaking" their native language. More and more research is saying that the children who are most successful are the children in families where the native language has been maintained and literacy is encouraged in that language.

So I think teachers have a lot to learn about this. Even if students are allowed to use one or two

words in explaining something and if they can't explain it in English, have a peer translate it and using that as a basis for a lesson. I think there are many things that teachers can do who don't speak the language of the kids they teach. There are many things they can do to encourage students to maintain that language and to feel proud of that language and to affirm that language. They can send books home in that language, for example, even if they themselves don't speak or read in that language. Teachers can speak to the librarian about ordering books in the native languages of the kids, making those books available to them, sending them home, having parents or other family members come in and read those stories in the native language to the class. There are many things that teachers can do to encourage literacy in lots of different languages.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>First published in **Teaching Multicultural Literature in Grades K-8** (Violet Harris, Ed., 1992), Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers), then condensed and reprinted in **Rethinking Schools** (Winter, 1993, 8:2), Milwaukee, pp. 3, and 20-23.

<sup>2</sup>*We have stories to tell* in **Rethinking Schools**, 1993, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>Erika Tamar, **The Garden of Happiness** (1996). Illustrated by Barbara Lambase. NY: Harcourt Brace & Co.

<sup>4</sup>In November, 1999, the Amherst High School (Amherst, MA) theater department's decision to put on the 1950's musical, **West Side Story**, was challenged by a petition signed by some 160 students, on the grounds that the musical stereotyped and degraded Puerto Ricans. In response, the high school cancelled plans to do that musical. The public controversy reached as far as the front page of the entertainment section of **The New York Times** by December 24, 1999.

<sup>5</sup>*We have stories to tell* in **Rethinking Schools**, 1993, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup>Written by Carolivia Herron, illustrated by Joe Cepeda, 1997. (Knopf)

<sup>7</sup>Sonia Nieto, *Bringing bilingual education out of the basement and other imperatives for teacher education*. In **Lifting Every Voice: Pedagogy and Politics of Bilingual Education**. Edited by Zeynep Beykont, 2000. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Publishing Group, pp. 187-2807.