

WHY WE TEACH:

A conversation with Sonia Nieto

What motivates some teachers to keep going even in the face of daunting professional challenges? Sonia Nieto shares lessons from her long career in teaching, teacher education, and research.

By **Rafael Heller**



A member of the National Academy of Education, **SONIA NIETO** is professor emerita of language, literacy, and culture, College of Education, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Her teaching has spanned early elementary through doctoral education, and her research has focused on multicultural education, teacher education, literacy, and the education of students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, with a special emphasis on Latinx students. She began her teaching career in 1966 in an intermediate school in Brooklyn, later moving to P.S. 25 in the Bronx, the first fully bilingual school in the Northeast. Her university career started in the Puerto Rican Studies Department at Brooklyn College. She and her family moved to Massachusetts in 1975, where she completed her doctoral studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, returning a year later to begin her long academic career there. She taught and mentored preservice and practicing teachers and doctoral students at UMass from 1980 until 2006.

Nieto is the author of dozens of journal articles and book chapters and has written or edited 13 books, including a memoir, *Brooklyn Dreams: My Life in Public Education* (Harvard Education Press, 2015), a coauthored book with her daughter Alicia López, *Teaching, a Life's Work: A Mother-Daughter Dialogue* (Teachers College Press, 2019), and *Finding Joy in Teaching Students of Diverse Backgrounds: Culturally Responsive and Socially Just Practices in U.S. Classrooms* (Heinemann, 2013). She is the founding editor of the Language, Culture, and Teaching series (Routledge Publishers) and editor of the Visions of Practice series (Teachers College Press). The first edition (1992) of her classic text, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, was selected for the Museum of Education Readers' Guide as "one of the 100 books that helped define the field of education in the 20th century." Nieto has received dozens of awards for her scholarly work, teaching, activism, and advocacy, including nine honorary doctorates and, most recently, the 2019 Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award from the Literacy Research Association.

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RAFAEL HELLER is the editor-in-chief of *Kappan* magazine.

PHI DELTA KAPPAN: Throughout your distinguished career as a teacher and scholar, you've been a powerful advocate for equity and justice in public schooling, focusing especially on the topics of multicultural education, bilingual instruction, curriculum design, teacher development, and literacy. But your many books and articles can also be read as a single, ongoing meditation on the joys of teaching, as told through conversations with other educators (including, in your most recent book, your daughter Alicia). You've never been a Pollyanna, though. Rather than sugarcoating the work of teaching, you've always written about what keeps teachers going in spite of the personal and professional challenges they face. To start, tell us a bit about your own struggle — especially in your early years as a teacher — to figure out whether the joys of teaching could outweigh the frustrations.

SONIA NIETO: When I started teaching in the late 1960s, in Brooklyn, I had the typical first-year experience, where somebody hands you a curriculum and some books and says, "OK, you'll be teaching English, reading, ESL, Spanish, and — surprise — French, because we don't have anybody else to teach those things." It was a baptism by fire, for sure.

I'm Puerto Rican, and I grew up in Brooklyn with kids who were a lot like the Puerto Rican and African American kids I was teaching. But it was a rough, under-resourced school, and I hadn't really been prepared for the assignment. In college, I had learned how to design units and write lesson plans. But all of our teacher education books had pictures of White kids and White teachers on the cover, and they described a very different reality from the one that I was experiencing. My program hadn't taught me much about the history of public education, the sociopolitical contexts of urban schooling, the challenges facing students from low-income and immigrant backgrounds... So it was a difficult start to my career.

I did a little better in the second semester. And,

Suddenly they were listening and participating, and I found myself thinking, "Wow, I can actually teach! This is great. I love this."

to be honest, I think what made the biggest difference was the time an assistant principal visited one of my classes. It was a rowdy group of kids, but while this administrator was sitting in the back row, they were on their best behavior. Suddenly they were listening and participating, and I found myself thinking, "Wow, I can actually teach! This is great. I love this." And then, after observing the class, the assistant principal sent me a note, commenting on the lesson. All these years later, I remember this one line where he said, "You're on your way to becoming a master teacher." Well, that was ridiculous, because I wasn't. I had been teaching for about a month

and a half. But he saw something in me, and when you're a novice teacher, that sort of encouragement can be incredibly powerful. It gave me a spark of hope. It was my first real affirmation that I might be good at my work and that this might be a job I can do well in and improve at and enjoy.

That's when things really started to blow up politically, though. I happened to start my teaching career right in the middle of a historic moment, when we had this fierce struggle in New York between, on one side, community members who wanted more local control over the schools and, on the other side, the teachers union, which was worried that local control would weaken collective bargaining. And the conflict was about not just bargaining power but also racial politics — at that point, the union membership was mostly White and Jewish, while local control was supported by a lot of teachers of color. Like I said, it was baptism by fire. I didn't want to be in the middle of all this, so at the end of the school year, I decided to leave.

KAPPAN: How did you wind up back in the classroom?

NIETO: A few months later, I got a call from the newly assigned, inaugural principal of P.S. 25, New York City's first bilingual school, which was about to open. I was one of very few teachers in

the system who were fluent in Spanish, so the principal asked me to come in for an interview. At the time, I didn't know anything about bilingual education, but I got the job. That fall, there was a big teachers' strike, but P.S. 25 was one of five schools in the city that stayed open. We had lots of young, gung-ho teachers, many of us teachers of color. Everyone was fluent in Spanish and English, and we had this strong sense of mission. Plus, the principal was a great mentor to me — he even asked if he could put his own son in my class, which was a real vote of confidence. That was the first time in my life that I saw a group of teachers who had a consistently joyful attitude about their work, and it rubbed off on the students, too. That's what really pulled me back into teaching. I had the great fortune to be part of that school.

KAPPAN: In an interview that we published in March, Susan Moore Johnson talked about her research into the factors that enable new teachers to thrive. Most important, she argues, are the professional relationships and support systems available in their schools. Was that true for you?

NIETO: Absolutely, especially at P.S. 25. And what got me through my first year was the fact that my best friend was miraculously assigned to the same school that I was, and we would have lunch together every day and commiserate. Looking back, though, I think the relationships I had with students were just as important. There were some really poignant moments in the classroom that lifted me and kept me going. One day, for example, some kids in one of my 6th-grade classes were having a spitball fight, and a student was hanging out the window. It was real pandemonium. At the end of the class, there were spitballs all over the floor, and I was feeling emotionally destroyed. But then this little boy — one of the kids who was involved in the spitball fight — came over and asked if he could help me clean up the mess. All of a sudden, I saw the empathy that he had, this caring that . . . well, I get choked up just thinking about it now, 50 years later. You know, when students are disrupting your class, it's easy to feel like they're ganging up on you. Then this boy came over to help, showing such *humanity*, and it hit me that each of these kids



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

was an individual, somebody I could build a relationship with. So that was another big moment for me, realizing that I didn't have to feel alone, like it was me against the world. For me, one of the great joys of teaching is to recognize that every student is somebody I can get to know and appreciate.

KAPPAN: So far, we've talked about the challenges that face teachers at the very beginning of their career, when the Hollywood fantasies about teaching meet the messy realities of life in the classroom. But it's one thing to find your feet as a new teacher, and it's something else entirely to figure out what will keep you motivated and engaged over the long term. From your many conversations with veteran educators, what have you learned about the things that sustain teachers throughout their careers? How have they found enough joy in teaching to keep going in spite of misguided policies, low salaries, top-down leadership, and so on?

NIETO: Actually, I just published an article in *Teachers College Record*, titled "Beginning is the hardest," on this very point. For most teachers, the first few years really are a distinct phase, full of frustration and anger and a lot of learning. Again, this is when it is absolutely critical to connect with colleagues, try to build good relationships with students, collect enough positive

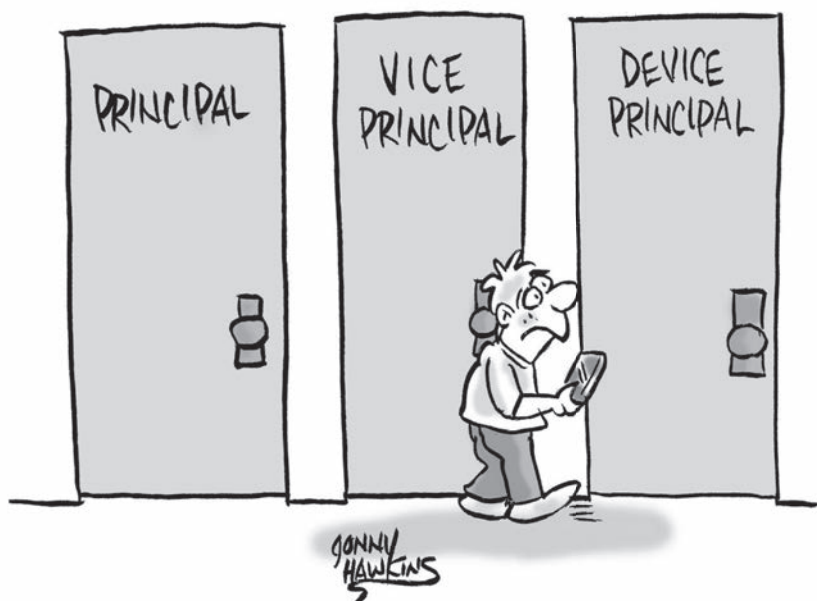
moments to keep you going, begin to develop a sense of skill and mastery, and figure out whether this is a job you can be good at. Also, I often tell new teachers that one of the most important lessons I learned as a beginning teacher is to make sure you don't give up without a fight. If you see teaching as work that will be satisfying to you in the long run, then it's worth it to push through the initial hardships.

But after the first few years, you really do have to recalibrate and come to a more mature understanding of who you are and what drives you. That's why it's so valuable, I think, for teachers to talk and write about their purposes for teaching. If you know what you love about the work, and if you can articulate that clearly, then when things are difficult, you can remind yourself why you do it.

KAPPAN: In your books, you've included dozens of examples of this sort of autobiographical writing by veteran teachers. It's pretty remarkable to see just how varied are the ways in which they find purpose and joy in teaching — one describes how she loves being able to reinvent herself every school year; another writes about how intellectually stimulating the work is; another writes about the joy of orchestrating a great classroom discussion; another about love of his subject area; another about the opportunities teaching gives you to be creative, and on and on. But which of these do you hear most often? What are the most common explanations teachers give as to what they love about teaching and what keeps them going in the profession?

NIETO: As you point out, teachers find all sorts of reasons to keep going. Everybody has their own motivations. But yes, there are some common themes. I've already mentioned one that I hear quite often: The satisfaction of doing work that you're good at. In my career as a teacher educator, that's one that I always impressed upon aspiring teachers. At the beginning of your career, you need to ask yourself whether you're learning and getting better at the work. If you're improving, and you can see yourself becoming a master teacher one day, then stick with it, because it's a wonderful thing to find a career that gives you a sense of mastery and success. That will help sustain you in the long run.

Many teachers also talk about the joy and *relief* of finding the right professional identity, coming



to realize that being a teacher is who they're meant to be. My daughter is a good example. She's a wonderful teacher (and, if I can brag a little, she was recently named as a semifinalist for the Massachusetts Teacher of the Year, for the second time), but she never planned to go into the profession. After college, she resisted it and resisted it until one day she finally recognized that it was the right fit for her. That was 26 years ago, and she's still in the classroom. Then there's, Jennifer Welborn, another teacher here in Amherst, who has written about her own struggles (including a piece in my book *Why We Teach*). She became a teacher, then quit, then went back to teaching, then quit again. Clearly, she was struggling to figure out what she wanted to do, so she went to a counselor to help her pick a profession that would be a great match for her. She did a long interview and filled out these surveys and personality tests, and so on, and finally the counselor said, "You know, I think the best profession for you is teaching." She couldn't believe it. She said she actually cried right there in the office. But she finally accepted that this was what made her tick, and she went back to the classroom and became one of the most beloved teachers in our school district. She's been teaching middle school science for over 20 years now. I'm fortunate that my own grandkids were her students.

A lot of the teachers I've featured in my books are full of righteous anger, too. That's partly because of selection bias — I've always been drawn to teachers who have a strong sense of social justice, so those are the teachers I tend to meet with and write about, people who come to teaching with a real drive to change the world. I don't know that I'd call it joy, exactly, but that kind of anger is powerfully motivating, and it does sustain a lot of teachers throughout their careers. I remember one time, many years ago, when I was working with a group of aspiring teachers in the Boston public schools — I wrote about this in *What Keeps Teachers Going?* (2003). A teacher who came to one of our meetings told the story of how she overheard a couple of the student teachers complaining about how hard they were working

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and how they didn't have a life anymore. She was a cooperating teacher and had been working in the system for 28 years. She was a hardened veteran, passionately committed to her work but very angry — in fact, I found out later that one of her students had just been murdered and she was in mourning. But when she heard the student teachers complain about "not having a life" anymore, she leaned over and said, "You know something, this is a life. You come in, you grow, you learn, it's never the same, it's always different. You heal, you help, you love. What's wrong with that? Is that a life or is that a life?"

I've always liked that line: "Is that a life or is that a life?" And I recognize that it was spoken by somebody who was motivated to teach because she was deeply angry about what was happening to many of the kids

she worked with. But the flip side of that anger is love. It's really based on love, and it keeps a lot of us going.

KAPPAN: In your books, you often use the word "love" when discussing the relational side of teaching, especially the pleasure of seeing our students succeed and thrive. And for our schools to be truly equitable, you argue, teachers must have the capacity to feel this sort of emotional attachment to all of their students, not just those who look like them, or share their religion, or follow directions in class, or are easy to teach. "Love" is a pretty squishy term, though. You're always careful to qualify it, explaining to readers that what you have in mind isn't "maudlin" or "sentimental" but something more like "admiration for students and appreciation for the strengths they bring with them." But still, is love the right word?

NIETO: You know, language is never precise enough. You could talk about "empathy" or "perspective taking," but those words aren't right, either. The point is that many teachers describe a powerful emotional connection to the students they teach. They get attached in a deeply personal way, so that they really *feel* for their students, experience their dreams with them, and are joyful when they do well. For me, love is a good word for it. For instance, it's the only way I can describe

somebody like Roger Wallace, whose story I've told in one of my books, *Finding Joy in Teaching* (2013). I met Roger 45 years ago when I began studying for my doctorate. He was a master's degree student in the same program, and he had just started teaching at a local school. He told me he had planned to become a lawyer, but after a semester-long internship in an after-school program, he felt that he had a moral responsibility to go into teaching. He was one of four children raised by a single mom in an African American community here in Massachusetts, and he had grown up with a strong sense of his cultural history and belonging. But his mission wasn't only about teaching African American kids (although most of the African American parents made sure their kids got into his class). He has an extraordinary ability to make sure that every student feels valued and loved. Honestly, I've never met a more committed and enthusiastic teacher.

I remember one summer, maybe 15 years ago, I saw him in town. It was August, so I asked, "Are you ready to go back to school?" And he said, "I've been ready for a month!" He's retired now, but he's teaching at a community college and he's doing lots of tutoring and he's just unstoppable. I don't know what to call that but love. He really demonstrates it. And it's not about wanting to be loved by his students in return (which he is) but about this sense of responsibility and affection for *every* student. One time when I interviewed him, he said something about this, and it has become one of my favorite quotes. If you want to be successful teaching kids from all backgrounds, he said, then you have to "put your stuff away." Put away your own neediness and biases and everything that gets in the way of building relationships with students and appreciating who they are.

KAPPAN: But is that teachable, the capacity to feel genuine affection for every student and take a sort of vicarious pleasure in their success? And even if it is, isn't that an awfully high bar to set for educators?

NIETO: When I was a teacher educator, I thought about that all the time, and I often brought it up for discussion. Here's a personal anecdote that I always found helpful to tell prospective and practicing teachers: One evening, I went home

and told my husband — who was also a teacher — that in my class we had just been discussing love, and I asked him, "So, do *you* think teachers need to love their students?" He said, "Of course! How could you teach without loving your students?" And then he added, "That doesn't mean you have to love them *all at the same time*." I think that's important to keep in mind. It's not all-or-nothing, and we're not all going to be Roger Wallace.

Personally, I don't think love (or empathy, or whatever you choose to call it) can be taught. But I suspect that most people have at least some innate capacity for it, and I think it's important to model it for them, to help them bring it out. That's what I always tried to do in my teaching, anyway. If the topic was cooperative learning, for instance, then that's what I tried to practice in my classroom. And I tried not just to talk about empathy and love in teaching, but actually to be forgiving of students whose ideas I didn't share and to understand where they were coming from. In my many years of teaching, I'm sure there were a few students who felt that I didn't empathize with them. But I tried to model a certain kind of warmth — to be what Lisa Delpit called a "warm demander" — and I'm hopeful that many of my students went on to create the same kinds of relationships in their own classrooms.

KAPPAN: In other words, you put your stuff away.

NIETO: I certainly tried to put my own stuff away, put myself in my students' shoes, and — if they said something I disagreed with — to understand where they were coming from. Of course, that doesn't mean I never got angry. I often taught about politically contentious topics in education, having to do with race, language, equity... and I encouraged my students to have honest discussions and debates about these things, so some days were hard and intense. But like my husband said, being a loving teacher doesn't mean loving everybody all the time or loving everything they say in class. And, you know, that's also true about having a satisfying career in teaching. It doesn't have to be all joy, all the time. You'll have some really bad days and mean-spirited colleagues and terrible administrators and awful policies and on and on. But maybe you can find enough joy to keep you going for a bit longer, in spite of everything. 