

Book Review

*What Keeps Teachers Going?*

By Sonia Nieto

New York: Teachers College Press, 2003

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In *What Keeps Teachers Going?* Sonia Nieto presents three major questions which serve as the basis of the book: “What helps good public school teachers persevere, in spite of all the deprivations and challenges?” “What can we learn from these teachers about what makes for good teaching and learning in our public schools?” And “what can we say about forging a more hopeful future for public education, one that relies on respect for educators and students, instead of on mistrust and disregard?” (p. 7). These questions are critically examined throughout the chapters, each of which focuses on a specific aspect of teaching. The author uses analogy to describe various contexts in which teaching occurs: *teaching as evolution*, *teaching as autobiography*, *teaching as love*, *teaching as hope and possibility*, *teaching as anger and desperation*, *teaching as intellectual work*, *teaching as democratic practice*, and *teaching as shaping futures*. These major themes illustrate the idea that seeing teaching from a multidimensional perspective is critical to understanding why teachers continue to teach in spite of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

The author explores *teaching as evolution* through personal narrative to illustrate how teaching experiences are “part of the larger context in which education takes place” (p. 9). She states: “It is only through reflection on . . . [the evolution of teaching] that we can understand our motives, aspirations, and even success or failure as teachers” (pp. 9-10).

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Through a recounting of her early years of teaching, Nieto shares a few important lessons she has learned, commenting on the difficulty of teaching, the years of time it takes for one to become a good teacher, the intricate role of social justice in teaching, the realization that the level playing field in education that is assured by so many does not exist, and the inevitability of politics in education. Her belief in the positive impact of multicultural education is clearly evident, as is her acknowledgment of the sociopolitical basis of American education. Nieto takes the position that teachers play a vital role within the larger picture of schooling and education and expresses her belief that “teachers *can* and *do* exert a great deal of power and influence in the lives of their students” (p. 19).

Nieto presents the idea of *teaching as autobiography* and views the autobiographies that teachers bring to the classroom as broad spectrums of their experiences, ideas, beliefs, and values. She sees the importance of these life stories in helping teachers remember why they entered the teaching profession, think about how they see themselves within the school/classroom context, and consider their weaknesses and limitations. Through excerpts of teacher autobiographies, the author illustrates how personal reflection can influence beliefs and practices. This personal reflection, Nieto points out, is often tied to “racial and cultural identity . . . [and] political and sociocultural” contexts (p. 30).

The personal aspect of teaching is brought out in Nieto’s statement that teaching is “a vocation based on love” (p. 37). She points out, however, that *teaching as love* goes beyond sentiment in seeking to recognize and value students’ strengths, appreciating their unique abilities, and respecting their emotions and cultural identities. She raises the question of how one identifies an effective teacher, given the complex nature of the profession, and offers a number of beliefs and practices that reflect effective teaching, especially with students of various cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Regarding *teaching as hope and possibility*, Nieto presents a shared belief in the value of public education as one sustaining quality in those who continue in the teaching profession, despite the difficulties and frustrations. She emphasizes the importance of high teacher self-esteem, a positive relationship with colleagues, faith in future teachers, and a general confidence in the possibilities education has to impact the lives of students.

*Teaching as anger and desperation* are examined in the context of a bureaucratic system that is far removed from the needs of teachers and students and that offers little respect for the profession and for those who see teaching as an intricate part of their lives. Nieto states: “Although they recognize the need to move beyond it, for some teachers anger serves to remind them why their role in society is so crucial” (p. 65). The author challenges teachers to look beyond the anger, which is often

rooted in a desire to help students overcome the obstacles that lie before them in becoming successful and competent individuals. She expresses the powerful effect anger can have in achieving social and educational change, stating that it “is not always a negative emotion, especially if it is motivated by a deep caring for students, a hope for the future, and a vision of how it could be otherwise” (p. 74).

The need for *teaching as intellectual work*, which includes engagement in professional discourse, is examined in the context of daily classroom situations in which teachers find themselves. Nieto explains the rationale behind meaningful teacher learning: “If teachers are to improve what they do and gain more satisfaction from their work, building critical and long-standing relationships with their colleagues is essential” (p. 78). In addition to presenting teacher conversations as an essential aspect of professional growth and development, she makes the point that this type of intellectual work can also raise additional questions that may not always solve problems. She emphasizes the idea that writing can help teachers understand their practice and consider how to improve what they do in the classroom, so as to more readily meet the needs of students.

The social problems of poverty and racism are examined in relation to how they fit within the education system and affect teaching and learning. In her discussion of *teaching as democratic practice*, Nieto brings into focus the myth that education has an equalizing influence on students of all races and social classes and illustrates the truth that schools are vastly unequal in terms of funding and academic achievement. She presents the term *institutional racism*, which she sees as one hindrance to social and educational equality and says “is most clearly demonstrated through particular policies and practices that grant privilege to some people over others simply because of their race” (p. 95). She challenges the reader to see teaching as educational justice and as a way to promote democracy. She also sees effective teaching as the ability to strike a balance between providing students the love, care, and academic skills they need and the social injustices and roadblocks that keep them from succeeding.

Regarding *teaching as shaping futures*, Nieto discusses the teacher/student relationship and emphasizes the importance of this relationship in instilling a sense of hope and self-worth in students. She sites the difficulty of effective communication between teacher and student as lying in cultural, linguistic, and social class. The reader is reminded that the beliefs teachers have about students, as well as their words and actions directed toward students, can often have lifelong impacts.

Each theme in the book is illustrated through stories of experienced teachers who took part in a yearlong set of inquiry group sessions with the author that explored many of their thoughts, ideas, and beliefs about

teaching and about how they see themselves as parts of the education community. These stories provide evidence for the ideas that teaching has many dimensions, that personal reflection is a necessary component in seeing oneself as an agent of change within the school and school community, and that the basis of effective teaching lies in the ability of individuals to see teaching as a relationship and to use the power of this relationship to help improve and enrich the lives of students. The stories serve as lessons that Nieto and the teachers with whom she worked learned as a result of their inquiry.

The complexities of education are closely analyzed with the intention of presenting teaching as a multifaceted profession that has as its basis the personal relationships teachers have with each other and with students and in the foundations they establish within their own teaching communities. The book speaks to three main groups of people: teachers, teacher educators, and policy makers. Teachers are encouraged to examine their beliefs and practices, their relationships with students and colleagues, their position within the broad educational framework and within their school and local communities, and their willingness to grow professionally by learning from each other.

Nieto's call to rethink professional development speaks to the role teacher educators play in the training of future teachers and in the ongoing learning and growth of experienced teachers. We need to change "the conditions in which . . . [teachers] continue to learn throughout their careers, . . . which means a major shift in the culture of teacher preparation" (p. 124). Her suggestion of moving beyond the *what* and *how* of teaching to *why* supports the main thesis of the book, which is the value of continued teacher growth and development through intellectual discourse and ongoing personal reflection of practices. Teacher educators are challenged to consider the importance of understanding how students' lives and experiences are connected to their education at school and to convey this importance to those they teach.

Policy makers are encouraged to give teachers the time and support they need to adequately prepare for their daily instruction and for their professional growth and development, to structure school environments that encourage professional intellectual work and discourse that focus on improving learning for teachers and students, and to allow teacher input in the decision-making process. Nieto's idea that *time and support* are critical ingredients to teacher learning also relates to the overall conception of creating "a professional community" (p. 21) within the school.

*What Keeps Teachers Going?* provides an example of how stories based on personal experiences can be used to question long held assumptions about teaching and learning and to examine possibilities for educational change that will enrich the lives of both teachers and students.