

# Cultural Difference and Educational Change in a Sociopolitical Context

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*Sonia Nieto's chapter points to the significant phenomenon of growing cultural diversity and the challenges it presents for educational change. Reviewing the evidence on ways of learning and what counts as learning in diverse cultures, and on the strong association between various levels of cultural diversity and poverty, Nieto argues that beyond the rhetoric, differences of race, culture, and language are rarely taken very seriously in educational reform efforts. Yet, she shows how taking cultural and linguistic diversity into account in educational reform initiatives, can make a real difference in student learning and achievement – and she outlines numerous, concrete and practical examples of how this can be and sometimes has been achieved.*

*In the second part of her chapter, Nieto spells out some educational change implications of her findings. She argues for better preservice teacher education that will prepare teachers effectively to work in contexts of diversity; for a more positive view of the strengths to be drawn from cultural difference; for whole-school policies that are sensitive to diversity issues; and for making social justice central rather than peripheral to an educational reform agenda that is currently too preoccupied with other interests and concerns.*

Change and reform have become the educational buzzwords of the late twentieth century in many countries throughout the world, especially in highly developed industrialized societies with large immigrant populations. What is meant by reform has differed according to the society in which reform initiatives take place and the effect on various populations within particular societies. Given the dramatic demographic changes taking place in many Western societies at the close of the twentieth century, as well as the history of unequal educational opportunities available to culturally dominated and marginalized students within those societies, it is imperative to pay special attention to the meaning of educational change in a sociopolitical context.

In this chapter, I will first briefly define what I mean by cultural difference, educational change, and a sociopolitical context. I will also review some of the relevant research and related literature on cultural differences and educational achievement. Specifically, the chapter will address how a positive perception of student diversity can result in successful learning outcomes. The discussion will center on three general areas: culture and its potential influence on student learning; adaptations of curriculum and pedagogy that can foster academic success; and the impact of school policies and practices on achievement. I will conclude the chapter with a number of implications for understanding difference in relation to educational reform.

A note about the scope of this chapter is in order. Although the stated purpose of this volume is to review and highlight educational reform within an international perspective, the term *international* is misleading. If indeed we are concerned with educational change on a global scale, we would be dealing with scores of countries. Yet the literature included in most “international” reviews is limited to a few countries, notably Western, technologically advanced societies where those in power are European or of European descent and English is the dominant language. (A conspicuous exception is Japan, which is also often included under the “international” rubric). Given that the majority of accessible literature has been produced by scholars in this handful of countries, it is also the research from which I will draw most of my examples. I want to emphasize, however, that I do not consider this an international focus, but rather one steeped in Western, European traditions of scholarship. Needless to say, much that is important and enlightening concerning educational change will be missing. Nevertheless, even within this very limited framework, there is much that can be learned because most of the countries generally included in the “international” literature (for example, the United States, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada) are also highly diverse, multicultural, and multilingual societies, if not in policy at least in reality.

## DEFINING KEY CONCEPTS

There are three key concepts that need further explanation in beginning a discussion of the impact of difference in the arena of educational reform. First, cultural difference and educational change will be defined as they are used in this chapter. Also included is a brief definition of sociopolitical context, since it is the lens through which I view and evaluate educational change efforts.

### *Cultural Difference*

Many discussions of cultural difference are based on limited conceptions of culture that take into account only ethnicity, race, and language. This is understandable given the history of the deplorable educational conditions in which students of non-majority cultures are educated, especially in Western societies. Thus, for example, bilingual, multicultural, intercultural, and anti-racist education in the United States, Britain, and the rest of Europe have focused on addressing inequities in educational outcomes for those whose ethnicity, race, and/or language are different from the “mainstream” culture (Banks & Lynch, 1986; Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukomaa, 1976; Santos Rego, 1994; Banks, 1995; Allan & Hill, 1995; Figueroa, 1995; Moodley, 1995; Hoff, 1995; Pérez-Domínguez, 1995). For the purpose of this chapter, I define *culture as the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created and shared by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors (which can include a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and/or religion), and how these are*