

SCIENTIFIC INTERVIEW:

INTERVIEW OF CHRISTINE SLEETER ON MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES



Our guest is Christine E. Sleeter, Professor Emerita in the College of Professional Studies at California State University Monterey Bay. She has been a visiting professor or lecturer at several universities, including University of Maine, University of Colorado Boulder, Victoria University of Wellington and Auckland University in New Zealand, San Francisco State University, University of Washington Seattle, and Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia in Madrid, Spain. Dr. Sleeter has published over 140 articles in edited books and journals such as *Educational Researcher*, *Multicultural Education Review*, *Urban Education*, and *Teaching and Teacher Education*. Her most recent non-fiction book is *Un-Standardizing Curriculum: Multicultural Teaching in the Standards-Based Classroom* (2nd ed. with J. Flores Carmona, Teachers College Press, 2016). Her first novel *White Bread* was published in 2015 by SensePublishers. Her work has been translated into Spanish, Korean, French, and Portuguese. Recent awards for her work include the American Educational Research Association Social Justice in Education Award, the Chapman University Paulo Freire Education Project Social Justice Award, the American Educational Research Association Division K Legacy Award, the Charles DeGarmo Lecturer Award from the Society of Professors of Education, and the Doctor of Humane Letters from Lewis and Clark College.

1. Give us your background on teaching and mentoring experiences with students from diverse cultural backgrounds?

Goodness, I have done a lot. Here are the main experiences: 1) I student taught students in a high school that had no racial or ethnic majority in Seattle in about 1972 then taught high school students in a learning disabilities program in Seattle for several years. These experiences were what got me interested in multicultural education. 2) At California State University Monterey Bay, between 1995 and 2003, I taught classes from Freshman level through Master's level in which there was no racial or ethnic majority. The students in the classes were very diverse. The largest racial/ethnic groups were Mexican American and white, but there were also students who were African American, Asian American, American Indian, and international students from several different countries. 3) After I retired from CSU Monterey Bay, I have mentored graduate students who are culturally diverse, mainly African American or Latino women. I have also occasionally guest taught a graduate course as a visiting professor to graduate students who are culturally diverse, and in one case (in New Zealand), most were Maori or Pacific Islander.

2. Has diversity played a role in shaping your teaching and advising styles? If so, how?

Yes, very much. The main thing is that I have learned to get to know the students starting with the first day of class, and seek students' input into curriculum and teaching styles. I specifically ask them for their input, which I find enormously helpful. Once students are aware that I value their input, sometimes they make suggestions spontaneously.

3. How will you contribute to the institution's effort to enhancing diversity in a meaningful way?

I have retired from my university, so at present, I don't contribute to enhancing diversity. However, one thing I have always done is work to hire a diverse faculty, and if I am in charge of a committee, I deliberately appoint culturally diverse people to the committee. Generally when I'm in charge of a committee, there is no racial or ethnic majority in the membership.

4. Describe your experience or explain how you have been educated to understand the history of African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Native Americans and other historically marginalized communities in the USA.

When I first started student teaching, I knew virtually nothing about the history or culture of anyone in the USA who wasn't white. Since my students were mostly students of color, I realized from the beginning that I needed to learn. So, I began reading books by African American, Mexican American, and Native American authors. I never stopped doing this reading, and over time my knowledge expanded a lot. I also sought out experiences that would help me learn. For example, while teaching in Seattle, I took a university on Education of the Black Child. At one of the universities where I was a faculty member, I helped start an Ethnic Studies program and then audited the first African American history course that was offered.

5. What is your definition of diversity? How do you challenge stereotypes and promote sensitivity and inclusion?

I am actually more interested in relations of power than in diversity by itself. With regard to race and racism, for example, for me a central question is why white people continue to hold power, how white people maintain power, and how power might be shared across groups. When it comes to question of inclusion, then, while diversity is certainly important, I ask how dominant groups have made their own ways of thinking and doing things have the most status and power, what and who is marginalized in the process, and what it would mean to break down that dominance. I find Critical Race Theory a useful theoretical tool for critiquing limited forms that inclusion often takes.

6. In your experience, what are the challenges faced by members of historically underrepresented groups in the workplace? What strategies have you used to address these challenges, and how successful were those strategies?

Probably the main challenge is white people (and often other people of color) perceiving members of historically underrepresented groups as not quite competence, not quite able to do the job well. That happens a LOT, and it results in members of historically underrepresented groups often not being hired, or being hired but micro-managed, or being questioned all the time, or not being invited to the "upper echelons" of the work place, etc. Being white myself, the main thing I try to do is to call white people on it when they are questioning the competence of someone, and/or to treat people as fully competent. (Also being white, I don't

always see it when it's happening, sometimes a person of color has to draw to my attention what is happening.)

7.It is expected that multicultural education would effect education system as a result of its nature. What do you think of its reflections on education?

If you are asking what I would expect to see happen as a result of multicultural education – I would expect to see children and youth flourishing intellectually in school because what is offered to them in the classroom connects with where they are “coming from,” challenges them intellectually, and is taught by someone who forms relationships with them and teaches them well. I would also expect to see children and youth critically question the world around them, and begin to take action to make things fairer in their school and community.

8.In your experience, what are the key factors that contribute to the success of students from diverse backgrounds?

The teacher is certainly a huge factor. What matters here is how firmly the teacher believes in students' ability to learn, how committed the teacher is to doing the work to support student learning, and how well the teacher becomes acquainted with and draws on the learning resources that every student brings to the classroom from life outside of school.

9.Describe how you function and communicate effectively and respectfully within the context of varying beliefs, behaviors, and backgrounds.

I listen a lot. I tend to listen more than I talk anyway, but by listening to people and trying to hear what they are saying, trying to take them seriously, I can usually figure out how to communicate with them.

10.What do you see as the most challenging aspects of an increasingly diverse academic community?

The fear of dominant groups (white, in the case of the US, particularly white males) of being displaced and not being in charge. A lot of white people have the perception that the system is fair as it is, and all people from historically underrepresented groups need to do is wait their turn. Such people do not see the processes they engage in to keep things as they are – or they do not see these processes as biased. So, when you try to change something, like admission criteria

for students, or curriculum, or criteria for hiring new faculty, or criteria for promoting people, there is push-back.

What is also difficult is that historically underrepresented groups learn to distrust each other. So, for example, on my campus there has been conflict between Mexican American and African American faculty, staff and students around limited resources, and who gets what. Everyone has learned the racial/ethnic stereotypes, and everyone has learned distrust. It is possible to work through these things, but that takes open conversation and a willingness of people to engage with issues that are uncomfortable.

11.How does the ethnic studies movement reflect back on multicultural education in the present time ?

If multicultural education had resulted in the kinds of changes intended when it began in the early 1970s (or late 1960s), there wouldn't be a push now for ethnic studies. But multicultural education between watered down over time. When I talk about this, I talk about 4 factors that led to that watering down: 1) pitching multicultural education to a white teaching force; white teachers generally are very uncomfortable considering race and racism, but may be willing to consider cultural celebration and individual differences; 2) an orchestrated attack on multiculturalism by conservative think tanks during the 1990s, that was rather effective; 3) neoliberal reforms which turned a lot of attention away from multicultural education and toward raising student test scores; neoliberalism has also reframed multiculturalism from challenging racism to celebrating diversity; and 4) limits in the extent to which textbooks became multicultural – representation from diverse groups was added but without changing the overall narrative of the curriculum. So, urban youth today are pretty skeptical of multicultural education and see ethnic studies as a way forward.

12.How would you work with people under your supervision to foster a climate receptive to diversity in the department, the curriculum, staff meetings, printed materials, initiatives, etc?

The most effective thing we can do is what we model. Rather than telling people what we should do, how we should think, how we should treat others, I try to model how I think we should work together and treat each other. Over time, many people (students as well as faculty colleagues) have told me that's the most powerful way of learning.

13.Thank you for the opportunity to interview.

Thank you.