

World-famous scholar, Professor Christine Sleeter: “I’m glad Azerbaijan is having a better multicultural experience”



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 the 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.

Khayala Mammadova and Andrzej Klimczuk: What is the meaning and your perception of multicultural education?

Christine E. Sleeter: To me, multicultural education is a process of transforming schools based on the dialog in which groups that have been marginalized on the basis of their identities (culture, language, gender, religion, etc.) can rework what doesn’t work for them, or what has kept them marginalized. Ultimate I believe schooling should work for everyone, but it is usually those with most power who can define school processes, content, etc. Multicultural education broadened who gets to decide those things. As such, it does not look the same in every school or in every country. What it looks like depends on who is there and the histories of relationships among groups.

K.M. and A.K.: What do you think is the significance of multicultural education?

C.E.S.: I think multicultural education has the potential to support democracy and equity in a diverse society. Research finds that students, including those from dominant groups, develop more accepting attitudes or understandings through multicultural education, and that students from marginalized groups

become more academically engaged with a multicultural education. By making dialogue and collective change central to it, young people can learn to become engaged in democratic social change.

K.M. and A.K.: What are the nature of students and the learning process, and how should learning experiences and relationships be organized?

C.E.S.: I think the first place to start is by engaging the students in helping to decide what matters to them, what works for them. I do not think we can simply pick some learning processes and expect that those are what work best for any given group of students. Students know best how they learn and what interests them. My own teaching has involved a lot of dialogue with students. I always come to the classroom with ideas of where we are going and how we are getting there, but I also involve the students along the way.

K.M. and A.K.: Could you tell us about the transforms of multicultural educators' practice—like the sorts of things they should be doing in classrooms?

C.E.S.: When I work with teachers, I have them select a main idea or concept from the curriculum they will be teaching. Then they work with that idea or concept through several lenses. 1) Research the idea as it is reflected in the intellectual knowledge of at least one historically marginalized group. 2) Find out what the students know already, and want to know, about that idea. 3) Think about their expectations for student learning, and how they will challenge the students intellectually and support them while they learn to do difficult academic work. 4) Consider how they will assess student learning while they are teaching, so they can figure out what students are learning and where students are struggling. 5) Figure out how the students might become actively engaged in learning.

Again, some of this will involve talking with the students about the teaching/learning process.

K.M. and A.K.: What are the perceptions of teacher candidates regarding multicultural education?

C.E.S.: Often, they feel they cannot do it because they have a curriculum they are supposed to teach, or it is too difficult, or they do not have the content knowledge from another group's perspective, or it is something extra. That is why when I work with teachers, we start with their curriculum, central concepts in their curriculum, and then go from there.

K.M. and A.K.: Please tell us about multicultural education, and how did you get involved? Please describe your commitment to multicultural education (racially, culturally, and socioeconomically).

C.E.S.: In brief – I trained to teach in inner city schools, on an urban education program during the early 1970s. Since I had not grown up in an urban area, the students were quite different from those I knew. This was when multicultural education was just getting started in the United States. There were no courses on it, although some ideas related to it were beginning to take shape. While I was continuing to teach in urban schools through much of the 1970s when schools were being desegregated, I encountered some early multicultural education practices. One was a group of teachers from different racial/ethnic backgrounds who had obtained some grant money to write multicultural curriculum and did workshops for teachers. These kinds of experiences helped me understand my own students better, and spoke to the kinds of life and learning experiences I was having. That is how I got involved.

K.M. and A.K.: What are your views about reflections of multicultural education on social life?

C.E.S.: I'm not entirely sure what you mean by "social life." If you are referring to social relationships in a school – multicultural education helps. My experience has been that young people are curious about people who differ from themselves, and about social issues they hear about in the media, such as (in the United States) Black Lives Matter. Usually, teachers do not talk about such things, partly because they

feel they do not know how and are afraid that the kids may get into arguments the teacher will not know how to mediate. However, it is possible for a teacher to learn to facilitate difficult conversations about controversial issues (children and youth can often handle controversial issues better than teachers can). Moreover, as the students and teacher become better at discussing controversial issues involving differences and what is fair/unfair around them, the students can develop better social relationships with each other.

K.M. and A.K.: What do you consider to be one of your greatest achievements? Why?

C.E.S.: At the moment, what is getting used the most in the United States is my review of the academic and social impact on students of ethnic studies. Ethnic studies relate to multicultural education. Several years ago, the teachers' union asked me to review the research because they wanted to know whether to support ethnic studies programs or not. I did so and found that almost all of the research reported positive impacts on students, some of it academic impact, others of it social impacts. That review is being used quite a bit to get schools boards in schools' districts throughout California, as well as in other places like Portland Oregon, and Albuquerque New Mexico, to adopt ethnic studies. I think the fact that the report is helping to change policy and practices perhaps makes it one of my greatest achievements.

K.M. and A.K.: Describe your ideal academic work environment (i.e. in what type of academic environment would you like to work?).

C.E.S.: I'm not sure retired from my university a few years ago because I could not continue to keep up with all the work that was demanded while also keeping up with the writing I enjoy doing. I came to California State University Monterey Bay because the students were very diverse and from working class backgrounds. I enjoy working with students who are not from the elite social sector. However, the universities that serve them tend to have heavy workloads for faculty, and eventually, the workload got to me. Ideally, there would have been financial support at the university level for slightly less teaching and thesis advising, and more support for faculty decision-making.

K.M. and A.K.: What motivates you to do your best?

C.E.S.: I like to be able to use my own creativity and ideas. If I enjoy the work and believe in the value of what I'm going, that motivates me.

K.M. and A.K.: As everybody knows, multiculturalism has failed in a number of countries around the world, the Azerbaijan Republic has declared it as a state policy. This policy is successfully implemented in our country, and the achievements in this field are also recognized on the global level. In addition, some states intend to learn and use the Azerbaijani experience in multiculturalism. Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev declared 2016 a "Year of multiculturalism" in Azerbaijan to maintain, further develop and popularize the traditions of multiculturalism. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev has declared 2017 the Year of Islamic Solidarity in the country. Islamic solidarity is a natural extension of the multicultural environment in Azerbaijan. Do you have further views and suggestions about this issue?

C.E.S.: Actually, I take issue with the statement that "multiculturalism has failed." What that usually means is that culturally diverse people were admitted into a country, or school, or whatever, and then expected to just blend in. Not a whole lot was done to allow the country, or the school, to become different than it was, different in a way that reflects and supports the diverse people who are now there. So, when "newcomers" experience marginalization and react to being marginalized, members of the dominant society become upset and believe it is a failure. Just having diverse people in the same country does not actually make it a multicultural society. I'm glad Azerbaijan is having a better multicultural experience.

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The International Multiculturalism Network is initiative of 2016 the Year of Multiculturalism in Azerbaijan that will contribute to strengthening of peace and stability by connecting researchers and practitioners with an interest in multiculturalism (<http://multiculturalnetwork2016.blogspot.com>).

Interviewers: Dr. Khayala Mammadova, Head of the International Multicultural Network and Andrzej Klimczuk, IMN Country Representative in Poland