

# An Interview with Leonard Davidman

By Elizabeth Ann Galligan and Michael F. Shaughnessy

Leonard Davidman recently completed his thirtieth year as a professor in the California State University system. Along with his wife, Patricia, he is the author of two classic textbooks in multicultural education, *Teaching with a Multicultural Perspective* and *Lenses on Teaching: Developing Perspectives on Classroom Life*. Each of these texts is now in its third edition. He also served as associate editor of *Multicultural Education* from 1995 to 1999; at that time, the journal was the official publication of the National Association for Multicultural Education. He has won numerous awards for his teaching, writing, and service. In this interview, he discusses his work, his ideas, and the current state of multicultural education.

EAG & MFS: *Your typology of multicultural pedagogy is well known. How does it influence the way in which teachers approach their curriculum?*

LD: This question points to an important research question that Patricia and I have not undertaken. But as part of a pilot inquiry, Pat has surveyed recent graduates of our elementary education program [at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo] who were employed in our region. All these teachers had studied our model of multicultural education and the tools we promote, such as the typology, the demographic profile, and the eight planning/evaluation questions. All were in their third year of teaching at the time of the survey. About 25 percent of these teachers report that teaching with a multicultural perspective, teaching that seeks to accomplish specific goals of multicultural education, has become the way they teach. It is not an add-on. In contrast, about 75 percent report that they do not teach with a multicultural perspective and they believe that their work environment is not supportive of such teaching.

I hope that the teachers who are well versed in the components and details of the typology, as well as the other tools we have created, would:

- perceive their curriculum choices as a set of decisions that could help to achieve important educational goals, such as the maintenance and expansion of intergroup and intragroup harmony, personal freedom, and societal democracy; educational equity and social justice; cultural pluralism; and empowerment
- perceive that the mandatory curriculum they have inherited is a body of knowledge that has been socially con-

structed by a wide-ranging set of individuals and committees and therefore is a “text” worthy of critical analysis

*You have written: “Classroom teachers are the ultimate critical agents of change.” What should they be doing in their classrooms and communities to bring about change?*

I’ll first discuss what teachers can and should do in their classrooms. Then I’ll address the communities part of the question and think broadly in contemplating the work of teachers in their “communities.” The whole school, for example, can be considered one of the teacher’s silent communities.

In the postscript of *Teaching with a Multicultural Perspective* we wrote: “Much of this text...channels teachers’ multicultural thinking into the confines of their own classrooms. This individual classroom focus, which in part derives from our belief that classroom teachers are the ultimate and critical agents of change in the multicultural restructuring process, is both a virtue and a weakness.” James Banks observes that “to implement multicultural education successfully, we must think of the school as a social system in which all of its major variables are closely interrelated.” Thus, a classroom teacher should link his/her change agenda and curriculum to the change-oriented efforts of other teachers, administrators, community organizations, and others.

In their own classrooms, teachers can and should:

- make learning about change, change agency, and specific change agents (Ida B. Wells, Belva A. Lockwood, Dolores Huerta) a part of the official, ongoing curriculum
- model and teach their students about the change process by engaging them in a problem-solving discussion aimed at improving some aspect of the classroom or schoolwide community
- seek out and act on answers to change-oriented questions such as: What can I, the leader and authority figure in the classroom, do and say to establish the norm that it is wise, good, and necessary for students in this and other classes to learn how to question authority figures (within the academic discipline, the school hierarchy, local and national government, and so on)? What specific content (readings, videos, web sites, and so on) can I provide to underline the message that progress in all areas—intellectual, political, and economic—depends on individuals who know how to question the status quo and provide creative alter-

natives?

Regarding the second part of the question, what teachers can do in their communities, they can:

- join and become active in organizations like the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME); the local chapters of the National Education Association (NEA) or the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) [unions]; the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE); or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and then seek out the committees, special interest groups, or caucuses that address equity concerns
- become knowledgeable about current action research projects such as the Developing Networks of Responsibility to Educate America's Youth, which are attempting to train a diverse group of local advocates in various parts of the nation

*What should teacher education programs be doing to better prepare K-8 teachers for the increasing diversity they will encounter in their classrooms?*

I would begin with the idea that less can be more. Instead of focusing the pre-service candidate on multiple types of learners, choose to do in-depth, pervasive work on three to five categories of learners, and treat other types of diversity thoughtfully but with less depth and continuity. For example, at our institution, California Polytechnic Institute (Cal Poly), our current K-8 credential program places special emphasis on how to differentiate instruction for English language learners at various levels of English fluency and students who have Individual Educational Programs (IEPs) for various reasons or conditions. At Cal Poly and in every other teacher education program in California, pre-service candidates are supposed to have multiple, systemic opportunities to learn about and teach students who fall into one or both of these categories.

What is needed here is a “full court press.” One useful tool in this full court press is an instrument for pre-assessment of classroom diversity that my coauthor and spouse, Patricia T. Davidman, includes in our text, *Teaching with a Multicultural Perspective*. Using the Classroom Demographic Profile encourages ethnic and cultural disclosure and facilitates the teacher's discovery and understanding of the range and nature of the diversity within his/her classroom.

Practicing teachers who are highly skilled in the use of differentiated, individualized instruction should be identified and utilized. At Cal Poly, we bring such teachers on to the faculty as Teachers in Residence or as adjuncts in the field-based methods courses. We [plan to] make interviews with [those teachers] available online.

Teacher education programs should provide various opportunities to experience teaching English language learners as well as students with IEPs and to reflect on, write about, and share what they are learning. Teacher educators

need to model ways to manage diversity. This will allow future teachers to head into year one of their careers with a positive attitude toward diversity and differentiated instruction and a set of practical strategies to enrich the classroom curriculum and the community of learners.

The vast majority of K-8 teachers emphasize our commonalities as American citizens by teaching the mandated curriculum and engaging in strategies to foster a harmonious classroom. A much smaller group of teachers spends time actually developing in their students an awareness of and appreciation for the ways in which students are different from one another.

While there is much more to be said, I will close with two observations and recommendations:

First, prospective teachers need to understand that there is no device that will tell them exactly how to respond to the diversity they will encounter. They will need to see all the diversity in their midst, decide what to respond to and what to ignore partially or fully, and figure out what their response will be.

Second, prospective teachers should be taught the difference between socio-types and stereotypes (accurate and inaccurate generalizations) and the criteria used to determine which is which. They should be cautioned against assuming that one can mechanically apply knowledge of groups, socio-types, to individual students in their classes. The use of case studies, lectures, readings, and interviews can demonstrate how one collects knowledge about individuals from studying a group. Teachers should utilize both group and individual knowledge to respond to the individual diversity in a given classroom.

*How has 9/11 changed the way we view and teach multicultural relations?*

Well, I don't know that I have a strong feel for this question, but it did occur to me that it has made policy makers more aware of our lack of bilingual regional specialists—people who can help us understand the Middle East. So, that's one positive repercussion of a rather negative situation. Also, I think that in *Social Education* and *Multicultural Perspectives*—two magazines I get—there has been a greater emphasis on making public school students and teachers more aware of the Middle East and discrimination against Americans of Middle Eastern descent.

*You have observed that the polarization among socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and selected cultural groups has increased. What do you think has caused this, and how can teachers address this issue?*

In part, I would say that the increasing segregation of public schools in our country is part of the problem. Since we started collecting data on Latinos in the late 1960s, in every decade they have become more isolated in segregated, underfunded schools, schools that they might share with African Americans. The same is true of African-American students. So

there are fewer opportunities for white students to interact in a positive way with Black and Latino students.

There's not just the separation but also the different experience [each group has] in public schools. Our political parties play a role in isolating one group from another group. Quite often, someone will talk about doing something for low- or middle-income families as opposed to the wealthiest families, and out come the accusations of "class warfare." So I think certain policy makers and leaders in our nation bear some of the responsibility for the polarization.

When one asks what classroom teachers can do to reduce the polarization, that's where multicultural education and a multicultural curriculum come into play. You can't always bring people into face-to-face contact, but you can use the curriculum to build connections between groups that are not in contact with each other. You can make students knowledgeable about the struggles of African Americans through the centuries and the historical and current realities facing Latinos. You can use the curriculum to humanize all the individuals in those different groups to establish the commonality of their humanity.

*In your opinion, does a person who practices multicultural education possess a set of skills, or do they have an inner conviction as a result of some sort of personal transformation?*


I think it probably develops as a very gradual process. It's the acquisition of knowledge, which produces a set of

beliefs, which in turn leads to the development and use of specific skills.

When one speaks about the institutional change process, the transformation of the ethos or culture of an entire public school or school district, I think it's a combination of an inner desire to make things better, coupled with a set of skills. I think knowledge of the change process is part of the knowledge base that makes an effective leader or change agent.

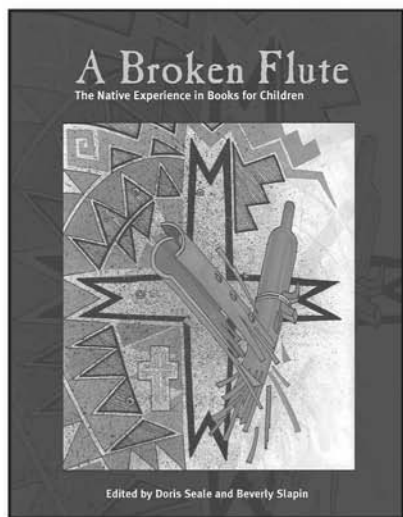
As I reflect on the postscript Pat and I wrote for the third edition of *Teaching with a Multicultural Perspective*, I regret that we didn't mention Michael Fullan and his book *Change Forces*. When we try to prepare principals in Educational Administration programs to be productive agents of change in the schools they will lead, we don't neglect the literature of organizational development and change. But students in multicultural education courses and programs need to read this literature as well.

To sum up, I think that a teacher can do good multicultural education work at the classroom level without a deeply transformed inner self. But at the school and school district level, I think the more complicated work of creating and sustaining school change does require the resolve that stems from a transformed inner self.

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