

MITZI LEWISON

From her first days as a teacher of immigrant schoolchildren in East Los Angeles to her current career as international scholar, best-selling author, and professor of literacy, culture, and language education at Indiana University, Mitzi Lewison has made a difference in the lives of learners. She has advocated for teachers and children as an elementary and middle school teacher and assistant principal, a children's television content director, a literacy researcher, a teacher inquiry group leader, a curriculum designer, and a university teacher educator. Across all these endeavors, she has approached teaching as a learner, critically engaging problematic aspects of reading and writing as issues of equity and social justice.

Since joining the IU faculty in 1996, Mitzi has embarked on a scholarly journey that expanded to stretch around the world. She started with small study groups of teachers, taking an inquiry approach to teaching that would typify all her work: patient yet active inquiry that takes the time to first listen and learn before taking action.

The longevity and sustained success of subsequent international teaching projects were built upon Mitzi's flexibility, compassion, and capacity to understand and deliver what people need in order to succeed. She was the linchpin in a U.S. State Department outreach effort to rebuild teacher education programs in Afghanistan. Most recently, she served as project director at the heart of an initiative that spans two decades and four partnerships, including the Afghanistan Higher Education Project and the Indiana University–Kabul Education University Project. This work enabled about 100 Afghan educators to complete graduate-level English language education programs and included the establishment of a master's degree in TESOL. Through years of daily, early morning check-in teleconferences, interspersed with extended onsite visits, Mitzi worked closely with Afghan education officials and teacher educators to build their nation's capacity to deliver language and literacy teacher education at the university level. The result was a uniquely effective English curriculum reform project that has impacted 18 Afghan universities. During 20 onsite visits to Kabul, Mitzi personally developed and delivered professional



development workshops to demonstrate culturally responsive teaching that met the needs of Afghan teacher educators. Mitzi's leadership and service exemplify the informed and compassionate assistance that universities could offer to teacher educators in developing countries devastated by conflict.

Other collaborations include curriculum development with African Studies at IU to create a video series, *Windows into the World of Africa*, as part of an outreach mission to produce curriculum materials for teachers. And Mitzi has just launched a new pilot project for international underserved college students in conjunction with IU's satellite campus in New Delhi, India, which kicks off in June 2020.

Mitzi's warmth, knowledge, and commitment to equity infuse her courses, whether children's literature and literacy methods classes for undergraduates or seminars for doctoral students. She received five awards for outstanding teaching, including the Burton Gorman Teaching Award, the highest honor for teaching awarded by the IU School of Education. Beyond the classroom, Mitzi established strong university partnerships with schools that provide a collaboration model that continues today. Mitzi served as elementary literacy program area chair during a time when IU had one of the largest teacher education programs in the nation. Under her leadership, the program was nationally recognized by the Commission on Excellence in Elementary

Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction. Through this 2003 study commissioned by the International Reading Association, the leading literacy professional organization in the field, IU's literacy program was named one of eight exemplary reading teacher preparation programs. The areas that served as criteria for this prestigious national award also describe the scope of Mitzi's teaching and teacher education leadership: excellence in vision, resources and mission, personalized teaching, apprenticeship, autonomy, and community.

Finally, Mitzi's most significant legacy is in the field of critical literacy. She conceptualized one of the field's top models, a way of reading that questions the commonplace and breaks down commonsensical notions that create barriers and marginalize groups of people. Mitzi's books illustrate how readers who discuss a text from multiple perspectives can begin to see taken-for-granted inequalities in everyday situations. Her books are must-have resources on critical literacy for elementary and middle school teachers and teacher educators. In the book *Teaching Children's Literature: It's Critical!* and in their best-selling book *Creating Critical Classrooms: K-8 Reading and Writing with an Edge*, Mitzi and colleagues Chris Leland and Jerry Harste provide a roadmap for developing avid readers who question a text and translate their understanding into action for social justice. A resounding theme across Mitzi's publications is an emphatic emphasis on teacher empowerment tempered by a self-critical lens that can reveal sociopolitical aspects of everyday classroom teaching practices. Mitzi's work enlightens teachers as professionals while respecting them as decision makers and inquirers with the power and ability to study their own practice. Her work with teacher study groups and teacher inquiry has earned recognition from the International Literacy Association, among others.

Mitzi will have many new adventures in retirement, and we wish her all the best in this exciting next chapter. We also send along heartfelt thanks for all that she's accomplished, as will so many others in the schools, universities, and international communities that she has served.

Karen Wohlwend