

# Gloria Ladson-Billings

## Igniting Student Learning Through Teacher Engagement in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

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This article is the second in a series of narrative studies of leaders in the field of multicultural education researched and written by Cheryl Hunter and several of her graduate students at the University of North Dakota. The first in the series appeared in the Fall 2017 issue and other articles will appear in future issues of *Multicultural Education*. Hunter and her students demonstrate how incorporating the personal narratives of prominent multiculturalists and practitioners with their scholarship helps us understand the depth of the scholar's writing, the complexities of such scholarship, and the passion surrounding both their work and their lived experience. The project of narrative inquiry combines qualitative research methods, including interviews, with multicultural education, thus producing a series of biographies that offer a window into the history and development of multicultural education and its concepts. The first article in the series highlighted the work and life of Marybeth Gasman and this second installment features Gloria Ladson-Billings.

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### Introduction

For many years, the United States has espoused to the world its economic and social progressiveness. It has boasted that its freedoms are unilaterally available for its citizens. Furthermore, the U.S. preaches the gospel of globalization and the importance of competitiveness in the marketplace (Stiglitz, 2010, p. 195), which requires it to have at its core a stable, equitable, and a regenerative educational system that is sustainable, accessible to all children, and beneficial for future economic growth. However, looking more closely at U.S. educational policy, educational equity has vacillated between policies that have deeply divided the nation.

In the mid 20th century the U.S. eradicated the southern-inspired governing clause "separate but equal," established through *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 (Sunstein, 2004, p. 102). On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court decided through *Brown v. Board of Education* that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" (2004, p. 102).

It had been all too easy to navigate a wave of mass belief that segregation was beneficial to both Blacks and Whites, because "Negroes have not thoroughly assimilated" (Sunstein, 2004, p.102). Amidst this chaos, *Brown* "imposed a new normative polity" (Bell, 2004, p. 136) in America. This polity directed African Americans to buy into a new normative, that of working for pay with "implicit legal support" (Bell, 2004, p. 136). However, lacking prior education at the same level as Whites, African Americans were too often unable to compete, or to even take advantage of this new opportunity. This further pushed Whites to declare that Blacks were unmotivated and that they failed to take advantage of "their definitionally equal status" (Bell, 2004, p. 136).

Quite obviously, the social and political pendulum that may have begun to swing forward in addressing equality and prosperity for all, has also in many ways swung progressively backwards. This has inevitably left the nation in a global economic flux with an inability to deliver quality education for all its young (Stiglitz, 2010, p. 343). Many of the social arrangements that are in place seem to benefit and mirror the dominant powerbase, the White majority, yet others who are of Color, specifically African Americans, seem too often to have fallen back into the abyss of racial woe.

This article is the second in a series of narratives that explores the lives of leading multicultural educators and how their lived experiences have impacted the perspectives and theories of multicultural education. This article employs narrative inquiry as a methodological lens for understanding the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings.

### Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry offers a different form of research presentation when compared to more traditional research methodologies. In narrative inquiry, the personal story is used as the center of the study to create a more holistic and embodied story (Glesne, 2016). In other words, this form of qualitative research is characterized by the use of a person's biography that "...revolves around an interest in life experiences as narrated by those who live them" (Chase, 2011, p. 421).

Although all people tell stories of their lives in one form or another, the narrative researcher not only describes these lives, but she will also "...collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). As defined by Chase (2011), narrative as a research methodology has a distinct form

of discourse. Narrative research makes meaning through the shaping or ordering of experience. It is “a way of understanding one’s own or others’ actions, organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time” (p. 421). Thus, when a participant shares her story, the researcher uses analytical strategies to make meaning from the story (Riessman, 2005).

An important part of narrative inquiry is to examine and understand how the participant “...links experiences and circumstances together to make meaning, realizing also that circumstances do not determine how the story will be told or the meaning that is made of it” (Glesne, 2016, p. 185). Although the researcher hears the consciously-told stories of a person, the researcher also has to look for deeper stories and meanings that a participant might not be aware of (Bell, 2002; Creswell & Poth, 2018). At its simplest, the participant shares experiences from her own life and “...this information is then often retold or restoried by the researcher into a narrative chronology” (Creswell, 2014, p. 245).

This is also the starting point employed in the present study, and these conversations enabled Ladson-Billings to share her own stories and experiences with the researchers. This process involved analyzing “...the stories lived and told” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 68) and allowed the researchers to uncover meaning behind her experiences.

Thus, narrative inquiry is a balancing act between listening to a story and at the same time understanding that the way the story is told is part of the narrative itself. When a person shares her story with the researcher, the researcher is given a “...window into people’s beliefs and experiences” (Bell, 2002, p. 209).

In this study, Ladson-Billings’ research is examined in the context of her own biography. Thus, this narrative inquiry might be viewed as a more holistic approach to understanding the life and work of Ladson-Billings, since the concern is “...with the relationships among the different parts of the transcripts or field notes, rather than fragmenting these and sorting the data into categories” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 112).

The final product is a combination of her life stories (experiences) with the attempt to make meaning of the stories she told. The use of narrative inquiry allows for a deeper understanding of the issues that Ladson-Billings has researched, illustrating how her personal story is connected to



*Gloria Ladson-Billings*

her research and work as a multicultural educator.

### **Ladson-Billings’ Dreamkeepers: Critical Race Theory and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Rising from the depths of poverty in a lineage of share cropping just three generations ago, and four generations away from slavery, and two generations away from legalized segregation (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 177), Gloria Ladson-Billings has experienced the effects of the cultural capital of African Americans being used by the dominant White society. Astutely aware of the epistemological curiosities situated in her own bicultural competence, Ladson-Billings has championed the production of scholarly work on building strategies in teaching African-American children and engagement in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.

A fervent advocate for equity in education for all African-American children, she dismisses as “bankrupt” the use of “race” as a layered concept within White American society (Ladson-Billings, 2007, speech). Accordingly, Ladson-Billings identifies race as a social, rather than a scientific construct, that is transformative within racialized power structures which have perniciously “dogged” (2007) African-American children at many different levels.

Born in west Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, while growing up Ladson-Billings faced many social and educational setbacks in both elementary and middle school. Born to a father who had a third-grade education and a mother with a high school diploma,

Ladson-Billings worked hard to have her intelligence acknowledged.

Often, she felt that educators did not see the potential in her or the value she could deliver to the greater society because she was a Black child and poor. As she articulated during an interview in March 2015, “In the middle school environment, it was clear to me that teachers didn’t think I was very smart. My classmates had a lot of resources that I didn’t have.”

Yet, Ladson-Billings persevered to attain great heights in education. She credits her tenacity and the focused direction in her life to her parents and grandparents who nurtured her social and educational capabilities:

My own parents grew up in what can only be described as legal segregation. My mother could not try on hats in department stores. My parents sat in the back of buses. There were certain towns in the country that they could not be in after the sun went down. It is amazing that they didn’t get frustrated. That they did not give up. Yet they believed that there could be a better future for their children. So, I don’t know that I need anybody outside of my house to inspire me because I lived with that. (Ladson-Billings interview, 2015)

Staying true to her passion in education, Ladson-Billings continued with her educational journey to Stanford, only to be segregated yet again due to her “race.” In fact, she recalled during her interview a very powerful incident that took place there:

I remember when I was in graduate school at Stanford. It was like being in junior high all over again. I was the young person who was different. I hadn’t gone to a private school before. I certainly hadn’t gone to an Ivy League school before. I’m not sure that my classmates thought I was anything special. I remember having an experience early in my graduate school career where I came to school and the halls of the building were so empty I was like, “Wow, it’s like one of those like weird California holidays that I don’t know anything about.” There weren’t many people around so I went into the office and I asked one of the secretaries. “Where is everybody?” She said, “Uh, well everybody’s gone to the AERA.” I said, “What is the AERA?” and she said, “You don’t know what an AERA is?” I said, “No” and she responded, “Well it’s your American Educational Research Association. It’s your primary professional organization.” I said, “Well, where is it? Where did they go?” She said, “Oh, it’s in San Francisco.” I said, “So you’re telling me they just went 35 miles up the road and nobody said anything to me about this?” (Ladson-Billings Interview, 2015)

This incident underscores Derrick Bell's reconceptualization of what is meant by desegregation in American polity discussed in his book, *Silent Covenants* (2004). Bell states that, "little attention is given to multiracial, multicultural, or multiclass issues" (Bell, 2004, p. 166), thus alienating the school experience of Black students. The closed-mindedness of these educational institutions make "inclusion as stigmatizing as exclusion" (2004, p. 166).

Bell further notes that to be immersed in an educational system that fails to recognize the history, culture, and needs of Black students is far worse than being totally excluded (2004, p. 166). In *Silent Covenants* Bell argues that America is a White country and Blacks particularly as a group are "not entitled to concerns, resources, or even empathy that would be extended to a similarly situated white" (2004, p. 195). He underpins this idea as the ideological basis of the foundation for the "two-sided coin of racial fortuity" (2004, p. 196).

Ironically, in 2005, Ladson-Billings was unanimously voted in as the President of the American Educational Research Association. However, had she abated resiliency while staying true to her path in life in the face of many obstacles, she might not have developed the critical acumen needed to excel in educational spheres because of structured racism in America.

### Teaching the Dreamkeepers

Ladson-Billings is one of the most noteworthy of American scholars in the area of teaching and learning and curriculum development for K-12 schools. Her contributions to education range from developing differentiated teaching methodologies to reflective practice that encourages student engagement through critical literacy. Critical literacy calls upon the learner to look beyond the literal meaning of text to determine what is present and what is missing, thus to analyze and evaluate the text's complete meaning and the author's intent.

Critical literacy, in fact, goes beyond critical thinking by focusing on issues related to fairness, equity, and social justice (Ontario language document, 2007). Ladson-Billings' cornerstone of belief is that all children are capable of learning given the right support:

I've always been a fundamental believer that kids are capable of learning. That hasn't changed one bit. Everything for me starts there, in that fundamental belief in the almost infinite ability that resides in

our students; to not lower their ceilings, to not believe that there is anything in their DNA that says they can't. That's a core belief for me. (Ladson-Billings Interview, 2015)

A critical learner herself, Ladson-Billings used her every interaction with people to inform and expand her knowledge base:

I think every single person that I have had a chance to interact with impacts me in some way and I may not know it at the moment but somewhere down the road I have this remembrance or another encounter and I think, "Oh that was that person I met in San Diego. Oh, that was that woman I met in Japan. Oh, I remember when I had this encounter with this person in Spain." So, I think of interactions with other people as opportunities for inspiration. (Ladson-Billings Interview, 2015)

However, inspiration alone does not seem to be enough for Black youth to succeed in education. Today's social climate appears to be a complicated one to navigate for many of these youths. Educational policy in America has become socioeconomically polarized. In fact, the American educational system is plagued with ever-expanding racial disparities that have negatively impacted minoritized groups, especially African-American children. Therefore, opportunities for inspiration and scholarship within Black communities are too often few and far between compared to the opportunities presented within White communities. Educational reforms that are enacted to "close the achievement gap," in fact, have further contributed to systematically disadvantaging Black students, thus demonstrably widening educational inequalities (Royle & Brown, 2014, p. 87).

In such a vastly challenging educational climate, it is no wonder that Ladson-Billings has passionately engaged in working towards bridging the gap through rethinking pedagogy. In her book, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (2009), she illustrates exemplary teaching ideologies and behaviors for teachers in all learning spaces. She eloquently examines "the art and craft of teaching."

Ladson-Billings' educational research has presented her with opportunities for observations of numerous teachers whom she describes as *dreamkeepers*. These are educators whose daily interactions and teaching styles have demonstrated culturally relevant pedagogy that encouraged and celebrated all children regardless of

class, ethnicity, gender, or religion. *Dreamkeepers* are teachers who are capable of teaching African-American students to high levels of proficiency.

### Values and Qualities of Dreamkeepers

Ladson-Billings posits that a high level of proficiency is a part of capacity building in a child. Meeting the child where he is at is a significant part in laying the groundwork needed in building proficiency. Moreover, she believes in the value of making connections between in-school lives and out-of-school experiences and in challenging kids to think and not merely react (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. xi-xii). "This is the ability to create knowledge in conjunction with the ability (and the need) to be critical of content" (2009, p. 100). She believes that effective teaching is teaching that helps students *choose* academic success and that it is *the way we teach* that profoundly affects the way that students perceive the content of the curriculum (2009, p. 14). This places the value and importance on teaching practice, not the curriculum.

Furthermore, Ladson-Billings points out that effective teachers develop an understanding of their students, their families, and their cultures. They are willing and able to see situations from varying perspectives other than their own. In this approach, they are better able to avoid making untrue assumptions. "Good teaching starts with building good relationships" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 136).

Different children have different needs and addressing those different needs is the best way to deal with them equitably. The same is true in the classroom—if teachers pretend not to see students' racial and ethnic differences, they really do not see the students at all and are limited in their ability to meet their educational needs. (2009, p. 136)

When Ladson-Billings was asked during the interview what teachers in successful classrooms look like, her response, unremarkably, was the following:

... they (teachers) focused on the kids' abilities not their disabilities. They had a very strong belief in the capability of children. They were invested in the community. For them the classroom was just one place where learning took place. These were teachers who viewed the world as their classroom. The classroom itself was just a place. Their teaching went beyond the four walls of a room or the two covers of a book.



These teachers are, in fact, the *dreamkeepers*. In her book, *Dreamkeepers* (2009), they are those who embrace all children as capable learners. They empower children through collective responsibility and establish a community of learners within their classrooms. Moreover, *dreamkeepers* view their learners as producers of knowledge, not mere receivers or consumers of it.

In her book, Ladson-Billings points out the three central constructs in how *dreamkeepers* teach: a strong focus on student learning, developing cultural competence, and cultivating a sociopolitical awareness in students (Ladson-Billings, 2009, pp. x-xi).

### Hurdles in Achieving Student Excellence

Unfortunately, these successful classrooms or these types of teachers are not the norm in many Black communities. In the current-day educational systems in the U.S., both segregated and integrated settings have endemically high proportions of low-achievement and high drop-out rates among Black students. This is due to lack of resources, poorly trained teachers (Bell, 2004, p. 166), and the American educational system's refusal to recognize African Americans as a distinct cultural group (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 10).

Moreover, today's legal governance (Center for Public Education, 2006) has imposed restrictions on the ways in which educators can interact with students. These restrictions include limited discussions on topics such as race, religion, prejudice, and inequality that affect many African-American youths daily (2006). As Ladson-Billings asserts, these topics do not figure naturally into the "White" psyche, and therefore there is discomfort associated with such discussions (Ladson-Billings, 2007).

In 2006, at the annual AERA conference in San Francisco, Ladson-Billings challenged educators to reconceptualize the "achievement gap" (which she sees as a direct result of educational inequality between the White and Black children) as a national debt and how it is important to pay-down this debt rather than to "catch-up" (Ladson-Billings, 2007). She vehemently believes that rules and restrictions can be reimagined, in order to impact student learning and engagement positively:

I think that any rule that we make can be unmade. The rules did not come off of two stone tablets. My daughter went to school here in Madison (a middle-class community) and her teachers took them to all kinds of places. She had teachers who

would contact her over the summer and say, "I'm going to take all the kids to DQ. I'll be by to pick you up at two." (Ladson-Billings Interview, 2015)

She continues by pointing out that as teachers we will make a commitment to the kids we want to make a commitment to. We do all kinds of things for kids we care about:

I have a former student who is a teacher in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He has created a global education course for kids who wouldn't usually have the opportunity to take such a course. He brings to them individuals such as Nobel Prize winners, incredible people. And he has them interacting with his kids. Not only that, but he takes his students to amazing places. His kids have sat down at the home of Warren Buffett's son. Here is Warren Buffett, one of the richest people in the world, and these kids who normally people would have just passed by, have had this opportunity. (Ladson-Billings Interview, 2015)

Ladson-Billings further elaborates that teachers who believe in their kids and are committed to them are not dissuaded by people saying, "Well these kids can't or these kids and their parents don't work" or whatever the latest excuse is. To see teachers who work hard to prove that's not so, *that*, to Ladson-Billings, is exciting.

### Racial Segregation Seen Through Critical Race Theory

In addition to her work in teacher pedagogy, Ladson-Billings has also devoted much of her professional career to investigating how Critical Race Theory (CRT) applies to education. CRT begins with the notion that racism is normal in American society. It argues that Whites have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation. This was the case in the *Brown* decision where "Interest-Convergence" became a factor.

As Bell suggests in *Silent Covenant*, Blacks' interests in racial equality will be accommodated "only when that interest converges with the interests of Whites in policy-making positions" (2004, p. 69). However, even if such convergence takes place, it would soon be abrogated should that interest threaten the superior status of Whites, especially those in the middle and upper classes (p. 69).

In her article written with William F. Tate entitled, "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education" (1995), Ladson-Billings discusses the disparities in education today and suggests that these "inequalities

are a logical and predictable result of a racialized society in which discussions of race and racism continue to be muted and marginalized" (p. 47). Ladson-Billings and Tate propose that race "continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States" (p. 48).

This is the reason Ladson-Billings believes strongly that all students are capable and that they can choose success. She also firmly believes that every interaction in the classroom is an opportunity for students to be inspired.

Ladson-Billings and Tate also state that class and gender-based explanations for the difference in school experience and performance are not powerful enough alone to mitigate the negative experiences of African-American children. Furthermore, they attest that these myopic explanations "do not account for the extraordinarily high rates of school dropout, suspension, expulsion, and failure among African-American and Latino males" (p. 51).

In fact, Ladson-Billings and Tate offer a comparison between urban Black schools and suburban White schools that shows obvious differences in many areas. For example, there were striking differences in courses, electives, and intellectual property (i.e., science labs, computers, certified and prepared teachers, etc.). They discuss mandated educational standards and how schools that serve poor students of color lack access to resources, and therefore, are unable to adequately meet these educational standards.

Without the resources and opportunities afforded to suburban White students; "how can we ever expect these urban students to fill in the achievement gap?" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 55). They argue that, "the cause of their (African-American students') poverty in conjunction with the condition of their schools and schooling is institutionalized structural racism" (p. 55). "Instead of providing more and better educational opportunities, school desegregation has meant increased White flight along with a loss of African-American teaching and administrative positions" (p. 56).

Ladson-Billings and Tate state that, "a model desegregation program becomes defined as one that ensures that whites are happy (and do not leave the system altogether) regardless of whether African-American and other students of color achieve or remain" (1995, p. 56). They also point out that "without the authentic voice of people of color (which has been silenced) we cannot say or know anything useful about education in their communities" (p. 58).

In an ideal world, Ladson-Billings states that “all of our students would leave school multiculturally competent to be able to deal with the global world in which they will find themselves.” But she worries, “how can we develop culturally competent students if our teachers are culturally incompetent?” (Ladson-Billings Interview, 2015).

According to Ladson-Billings, successful pedagogy begins with student-centered teaching where students are treated as competent individuals whose individual experiences and skills are valued. Successful teachers know that instruction drives best practice and, therefore, instructional scaffolding is seen as an important aspect of this practice, because it helps extend student thinking abilities. Moreover, to be an effective teacher, successful teachers need to have an in-depth understanding of their students and subject matter. Sadly, in an unequal educational system, it has become a Sisyphean task to teach these pedagogies to teachers of African-American children, because these concepts do not prefigure into the dominant culture of the White gatekeepers.

By examining education through the lens of CRT, Ladson-Billings also points out various flaws in the curriculum, instruction, assessment, funding, and desegregation of school systems. In her article “Just What is Critical Race Theory?” she uses CRT to explain “the sustained inequity that people of color experience” in education (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 18). She points out that the school curriculum is “a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script” which “silences multiple voices and perspectives” (p. 18). She further iterates that these accounts and perspectives have been “muted or erased” because they “challenge dominant culture authority and power” (p. 18).

Ladson-Billings also points out that for the critical race theorist, assessment (specifically intelligence testing) “has been a movement to legitimize African-American student deficiency under the guise of “scientific rationalism” (1998, p. 19). She cites these principles based on Alienikoff’s book *A Case for Race-Consciousness* and Gould’s book *The Mismeasure of Man*. Ladson-Billings further ascertains that “perhaps no area of schooling underscores inequity and racism better than school funding” and that “CRT argues that inequality in school funding is a function of institutional and structural racism” (p. 20).

When examining White self-interest regarding school funding policies, she stresses that, “almost every state funds its

schools based on property taxes. Therefore, those areas with greater property values typically have better funded schools” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 20). Hence she poses the question: “Who lives in these more prosperous areas? Whites.”

One of her more powerful statements regarding the issue of funding is a dichotomized question Ladson-Billings continues to pose:

Whether-or-not school spending is a determining factor in school achievement, no one can mount an ethical case for allowing poor children to languish in unheated, overcrowded schools with bathrooms that spew raw sewage while middle-income White students attend school in spacious, technology rich, inviting buildings. If money doesn’t matter, then why spend it on the rich? (1998, p. 21)

Over recent years, scholars have taken up CRT to analyze and critique educational research and practice. Ladson-Billings and her colleague William Tate helped to open the door to this analytical approach of education with their much-discussed article “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education” in 1995 and now many years later she feels that only limited progress has been made with regards to educational equity.

It is then no wonder that her concerns remain still deeply rooted in teaching pedagogies and CRT as it affects the educational system. When asked during the interview which current issues were driving her thoughts she stated,

... probably the continued disparity of educational experiences for kids. The fact that we can pretty accurately predict how kids will do in school just by knowing their zip codes. There is an increased rate of expulsion and suspension.

She also mentions the school to prison pipeline in the following way:

All of those things really worry me. There continues to be very unjust practices happening in our schools. I don’t think it’s sustainable. I don’t think we can afford to have 2.3 million people in prison. I don’t think we can remain a democracy with 2.3 million people in prison. Just to give you an idea of how huge that number is, just 40 years ago, we only had roughly 700 thousand people in prison.

### Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

In what ways can the educational system safeguard Black students from moving from schools to the prison pipeline? Ladson-Billings believes that “a culturally relevant approach to teaching

helps students understand that there can be and should be learning connected to everyday problems of living in a society that is deeply divided along racial, ethnic, linguistic, economic, environmental, social, political, and cultural lines. And students should be learning that education can and should help alleviate those problems and divisions.”

When examining the issue of instruction, she suggests that “current instructional strategies presume that African-American students are deficient,” therefore, instructional approaches “typically involve some aspect of remediation” and ultimately, “the students, not the techniques, are found to be lacking” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 19). She calls this the “you poor dear syndrome” (Speech, 2007). She further elaborates by saying, “much of what happens in our classrooms has little to do with what students learn.”

In culturally relevant teaching, Ladson-Billings believes that students are empowered, intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically “by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 20).

With a culturally relevant approach, the teacher creates a net, which is designed to catch all the students. The goal is learning for all students. Moreover, she believes that knowledge must be recreated, recycled, and shared by both students and teachers and viewed critically. In culturally relevant pedagogy, teachers help students develop necessary skills, and sees excellence as a complex standard, where student diversity is valued (2009, p. 89).

Towards the end of the interview, Ladson-Billings was asked for any final thoughts or for any closing remarks and her reply was the following:

I just want to harp on the fact that we really are teaching the most talented group of young people the world has ever seen. They are technologically savvy. They are smart. They are sharp. They are globally connected. And yet I think we keep thinking that they are not capable of doing things. I believe that they are a group of kids who are more capable than any group of kids we’ve ever witnessed.

Ladson-Billings also believes that a lot of people entering teaching are naive about what the job entails, and consequently, they get easily discouraged because it isn’t what they think it is going to be. As she candidly states,

... they don’t realize how much harder the job is. And it isn’t just about being in

your room with kids. It's about working in communities. It's about working with families and it's about having a real vision for what it means to impact a generation of young people.

### Conclusion

Gloria Ladson-Billings' contributions to American education through a multicultural lens is unparalleled. Her adamant stance that African-American students are capable, smart, and that they must be given equal opportunities to excel in schools seems to be gaining some momentum in educational settings. However, if the pendulum of racial and educational equality is to swing forward for permanent gains that would equalize the racial divide between Blacks and Whites, there still need to be many fundamental shifts within social and political structures that impact educational policymaking.

As Bell argues in *Silent Covenants*, "Blacks must challenge the assumptions of White dominance, and the presumptions of Black incompetence and inferiority, by refusing to accept White dominance in our schools, places of work, communities..." (Bell, 2004, p. 200).

Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy is informed through Afrocentric feminist epistemology (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 189) which rearticulates prevailing definitions and structures within Black communities (Collins, 1993, p. 554). Afrocentric models stress interpersonal connections, caring and personal accountability as the backbone of community building (1993, p. 554) which are also the necessary components to becoming successful *dreamkeepers*.

For African-American students to succeed, schools need to be truly integrated so that the curriculum and the teachers are reflective of African-American culture and values. A classroom where students come face to face with others who are different from themselves is the place for real integration (2009, p. 7).

These dynamic ideas converge when students choose academic success as their

destiny. Each action taken by teachers who place students "on a path to their destiny belongs to those who would be *dreamkeepers*" (2009, p. 177). Coming from the depths of poverty and having experienced first hand racism and divided educational pathways, Ladson-Billings is committed to seeing equitable educational policies that benefit all children. She is indeed the greatest of all *dreamkeepers*.

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