



Teacher education has not created a strong pipeline of diverse scholars who can challenge conventional thinking about what it means to teach diverse groups of students.

## Is Meeting the Diverse Needs of All Students Possible?

by Gloria Ladson-Billings



*I am sitting in a combined 2nd/3rd grade classroom observing a student teacher. I have specifically placed her in this classroom because she has had some struggles, and I am hoping the cooperating teacher—a former student of mine—might be able to help her.*

*I notice that the majority of the students are African-American boys. They are energetic and high-spirited. Seated at a table on the far left side of the classroom are three Latina girls who chatter incessantly in Spanish. At another table, all alone, sits a rather large (compared to the other children) European-American boy. He rarely interacts with the other students, keeps his head buried in a book, and shouts out answers (mostly correct) to every question the teacher poses. A talkative and sassy African-American girl sitting near the front of the room regularly makes it clear that her male counterparts do not intimidate her.*

*After a few minutes, more students stream in from another class. Two of them have physical disabilities, and another tall*

*African-American boy enters loudly and without regard for what the teacher is doing at that moment. One of the students is a twin, and he and his twin playfully run in and out of each other's classroom, fooling no one, and annoying the teachers.*

*In one of my post-observation conferences, I learn that the large European-American boy is a high-functioning student with Asperger's syndrome. The tall African-American boy has been shot, and his mother does not consent to his receiving any type of counseling or therapy.*

*This classroom is a beehive of activity, lots of it off-task and highly unpredictable. One of the few moments of peace and order comes once a week when an African-American man, a local pastor with an imposing stance, comes to mentor a group of the boys. His presence provides what the literature calls a "role model" or "father figure" for these boys. He is the only African-American male seen regularly at the school, and his combination of sternness and compassion seem to draw the boys to him.*

Reflecting on my observations from that particular day, I asked myself: Is it reasonable to expect novice teachers to be expert managers and pedagogues in settings like this one? Even the experienced teacher in that classroom was struggling with these students. How can we expect newly minted teachers to find success in such classrooms?

### The Nature of the Problem

I relate the preceding vignette as a way to help us think about the complexities of teaching in school environments that serve students from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. For many years, the notion of "diversity" was a code word for talking simply about race and ethnicity. To say one had

a diverse class was to say one was not teaching European-American students. Much of the literature, curriculum materials, and instructional practices was geared toward teaching particular groups of students—African Americans, Latinos, immigrant students, second language learners, or students with disabilities.

But the classroom I described and the many others like it make it abundantly clear that classrooms are complex organisms. The students bring with them richly textured biographies that go beyond their racial and ethnic categorizations, and their teachers bring their own sets of complexities. Somewhere in the nexus of this humanity, we are charged with producing literate, numerate, young

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citizens who are capable of learning more and faster than any generation that has preceded it. This is no small task.

To address the challenge of teaching all students well, we must start with the talent pool from which we are drawing individuals who will take on this task. As I sat in the 2nd/3rd grade classroom, I could not help but reflect on the group of student teachers I teach each Monday afternoon. They are bright, committed, and quite typical of the U.S. teaching force. Nearly all of them are European-American, lower-middle to middle income, English monolingual, suburbanites with a strong desire to teach in communities like the ones in which they grew up. They may see urban teaching as noble and socially important, but it is “too hard” for them. Unfortunately, far too many of them will find themselves taking these “hard” jobs out of economic necessity, and their lack of preparedness will show and be a disservice to yet another generation of poor and disenfranchised students, their families, and their communities. Even among the growing numbers of alternatively certified teachers who express a strong desire to teach in difficult-to-staff schools, we find poorly prepared teachers who regularly depart—at an alarmingly high rate—from urban schools and classrooms serving poor children of color.

Add to the challenge the current mandates of state and federal law regarding public education. The laws mandate that all children—regardless of the condition of their schools, the quality of their resources, and the preparation of their teachers—achieve at the same levels of proficiency on standardized tests of reading, writing, and mathematics. The consequences of this high-stakes demand were summed up poignantly by a colleague working on value-added assessment of teachers. One of the teachers in his study said something to the effect of, “we are now starting to resent the very children who need us most!” How do we begin to prepare teachers to teach all students in this environment? What solutions can we apply to the problems before us?

### No Easy Answers

The challenge of teaching *all* students well is not a new one. In the nation’s early history, educators simply did not attempt to teach them all. Only certain students were deemed worthy of attending school, and these were the only ones we taught. In later years, we used the deep segregation of the society to cordon off African-American and American-Indian children from the European-American students, and we hardly cared about what was taught in these separate and unequal schools.

After the landmark Supreme Court ruling of *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), there were attempts to desegregate the schools and do away with separate facilities. However, over time, powerful interests and court rulings found ways to chip away at *Brown* and, before we knew it,

the *de facto* conditions of segregation were recreated. Today, African-American and Latino school children find themselves more deeply segregated than before. Scholars like Gary Orfield and Erica Frankenberg (2007) argue that if we can break up that deeply entrenched segregation, we can improve the achievement level of all students.

In the face of the society’s deep resistance to school desegregation, we have attempted to remedy the problems that students in segregated settings face by recruiting and preparing more teachers of color. And, while that is a worthy goal (indeed, we should have more teachers of color), there is nothing in the scholarly literature to suggest that racial compatibility necessarily ensures school achievement. If that were the case, then most African-American families would rush to enroll their children in Detroit or Washington, DC schools. Many of the alternative certification routes to teaching do an excellent job of recruiting young people of color into the teaching force. But does their preparation help them survive and thrive in these urban classrooms? The data suggest just the opposite: young teachers of color leave the profession at a higher rate than their European-American counterparts.

But let us suppose that we could do a better job of recruiting young people of color into teaching. What will they find when they enroll in their local teacher-education programs? The fig leaf covering teacher education is the fact that most teacher-educators are old, European-American, and too far removed from PreK–12 teaching to be of much help when it comes to preparing novice teachers for diverse classrooms. Teacher education’s “dirty little secret” is that it has not done a very good job of policing itself when it comes to issues of diversity. The sad truth of the academy is that scholars of color are expected to enter it to focus solely on topics of diversity. Thus, teacher education has not created a strong pipeline of diverse scholars who can challenge conventional thinking about what it means to teach diverse groups of students.

In most teacher education programs, students encounter a scholar of color teaching the “multicultural” or “diversity” course, and sometimes teaching an English as a Second Language (ESL) or bilingual education course. Rarely do they see these scholars as helping them make sense of teaching and learning. Additionally, the very coursework that comprises teacher education fails to take up notions of culture and learning in robust and substantive ways. Instead of a “diversity” course, our prospective teachers could benefit from an authentic course on culture—from an anthropological perspective—and how culture impacts learning. Few teacher education programs offer such a course and, when they do, they rarely offer it as a program requirement.

So if the teaching force is not diverse, the teacher educators are not diverse, and the coursework does not adequately



prepare students to teach a diverse set of students, what can we do? There are ways to address these challenges that provide us a sliver of hope.

### It's Not All Bad News

Two weeks before I sat in that 2nd/3rd grade classroom where both the veteran and novice teachers were struggling to meet all of the students' needs, I observed a high school classroom in New York. I walked about 22 young men, mostly Black (i.e., African-American, Afro-Caribbean, and African) and Latino. They were well-spoken, polite, and disciplined—without being regimented. They were a cohort of young sophomores who had an opportunity to work together to improve their academic profiles and plan for their post high school futures.

Every young man knew his score on the New York State Regents Exam, and every one of them was passing. This was a huge turnaround from their freshman year, and they were proud of the brotherly bond they had forged with one another. One key to their success was the fact that the principal had successfully recruited a group of Black and Latino male teachers to serve as their core course teachers (i.e., for mathematics, science, social studies, and English), and these teachers worked with them regularly to provide additional counseling and tutoring. The students challenged one another to do better.

At one point during our meeting, one student, known as “The Honcho,” organized the young men, called them to attention, and barked out a command for a “line speak.” Immediately, the young men began reciting in unison inspirational poems about taking responsibility for themselves and others, taking charge of their futures, and making good decisions. Their style reminded me of the Black Greek Letter Organizations (i.e., fraternities and sororities) where working together in a spirit of brotherhood is the paramount value.

When I asked what was difficult about high school, one young man hesitated, smiled, and said, “Actually, nothing about high school is that hard. If you just do your homework and study, you’ve conquered more than half the battle.” His classmates nodded in agreement. “Just doing homework will get you a long way,” remarked another boy. What had these youngsters learned that seems so difficult to convey to so many others? How had they learned it? What do we need to do to ensure that more of our students see school as “not that hard”? How can teacher educators help prospective teachers see all students as capable of mastering all that school has to offer? The time I spent with them made me hopeful that success for all of our students is possible—and necessary. ■

### References

- Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. 1954. 347 U.S. 483. Washington, DC: U.S. Supreme Court.  
Orfield, G., and E. Frankenberg. 2007. *Lessons in integration: Realizing the promise of racial diversity in America's public schools*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

## Gloria Ladson-Billings



- Kellner Family Chair in Urban Education and Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison
- Former President of the American Educational Research Association (AERA)
- Awarded H.I. Romnes Faculty Fellowship, the National Academy

of Education/Spencer Postdoctoral Fellowship, and the Palmer O. Johnson outstanding research award

- Former fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University
- Invited to Laureate Chapter in 2009

### What are your areas of expertise and interest?

Culturally relevant pedagogy as a means of enfranchising diverse students in schools; educational anthropology; cultural studies; and critical race theory applications to education.

### How do you recharge yourself professionally?

Because of the extensive travel built into my work life, I enjoy being able to stay home. While there, I am a bit of a film buff, so I love catching up on film (particularly foreign films). In my spare time, I try to practice the piano (am not very good), and I also enjoy physical things like yoga, zumba, and weight training.

**How do you balance your professional and personal life?** I actually think the notion of “balance” is a dangerous way to think about this because balance implies a 50-50 relationship that is nearly impossible to achieve. So rather than balance, I focus on “integration.” How can I integrate my work life into my personal life, and how can I integrate my personal life into my professional life? This quest for integration has made life really exciting.

### Recent Work

Ladson-Billings, G. 2009. *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*, 2nd ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

