



The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children

Gloria Ladson-Billings

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The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children Gloria Ladson-Billings Education, like electricity, needs a conduit, a teacher, through which to transmit its power-- i.e., the discovery and continuity of information, knowledge, wisdom, experience, and culture. Through the stories and experiences of eight successful teacher-transmitters, The Dreamkeepers keeps hope alive for educating young African Americans.

--ReverAnd Jesse L. Jackson, president and founder, National Rainbow Coalition

In this beautifully written book Ladson-Billings illustrates the inspiring influence of a select group of teachers who keep the dreams alive for African American students.

?Henry M. Levin, David Jacks professor of Higher Education, Stanford University

Ladson-Billings' portraits, interwoven with personal reflections, challenge readers to envision intellectually rigorous and culturally relevant classrooms that have the power to improve the lives of not just African American students but all children.

The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children Details

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Salamah says

I needed this for school. Very insightful and will hopefully help with my research.

Hannah says

Mostly just shocked that it's taken me seven years in education-as-social-justice to read this cover to cover (id read many chapters and excerpts before). We're reading it as part of onboarding our 2016 teachers and it's SO good. Not sure how "possible" it would've felt as a brand new teacher, so that's why I'm reading Crossing Over Into Canaan next - also about culturally relevant teaching, but with a focus on new teachers. Definitely glad I read and recommend for all education peeps!

Kahliah says

Great read. For many it affirms what you're doing is right, for others it challenges how you practice teaching, you ask questions you will get answers, you will change some things and you'll understand your students better. Truly this book is written for all and all students can benefit from the knowledge gained from it.

Holly says

Especially poignant for teachers but a thoughtful for anybody who wants to understand more about cultural literacy in a charged climate. Well-written and full of humanity.

Craig Werner says

I'll begin by saying that Gloria Ladson-Billings is a colleague whose work has had a major and constructive impact on the field of urban and multicultural education. Her notion of culturally relevant pedagogy works better than any other approach I've encountered in approaching the real life needs of diverse classrooms. Although the title emphasizes the relevance to African American children, culturally relevant pedagogy can be extended to all different sorts of classroom situations. Without minimizing the importance of the specifics, I'd venture that on some level what she's writing about is simply good teaching. The "Dreamkeepers" referred to in her title are eight teachers, five black, three white, who were recognized as highly successful by both parents and administrators in the northern California district where Ladson-Billings conducted her research. The book is a mix of critical reflection, autobiographical narrative concerning Ladson-Billings' own experience as a student in the Philadelphia system, and vignettes taken from the classrooms she observed. It's a nice mix, one that recognizes the multiple levels of awareness needed for educational success. Any teacher will learn from the book and one of the great things is that there's absolutely no shared

set of techniques that unites the teachers. What does unite them is a deeply held belief that all of their students can succeed and a respect for the communities in which they teach and the culture of their students.

The limitations of the book for contemporary readers and teachers are all tied to the fact that it was based on research carried out in the late 1980s. Times have changed in the American school system. Ladson-Billings' Dreamkeepers make a point of dismissing the authority of simplistic standardized tests, but they were working in schools where the impact of testing, charter schools, and the other poorly conceived initiatives connected with Bush's No Child Left Behind and Obama's Race to the Top (pretty much two peas in an unappetizing pod) had had their impact. The afterward of the revised edition of the Dreamkeepers provides brief thumbnails of teachers who have carried on the vision of the original cohort, but they're very brief and there simply wasn't space to grapple with some of the complications (which Ladson-Billings has done in other writings). Even in the original studies, I frequently wanted more detail. One instance concerned her description of a culturally relevant approach to teaching algebra. I have no doubt it worked and Ladson-Billings did a good job describing the teacher's attitudes. But there's not much about exactly how she moved away from the standard approaches to problem solving.

Experienced teachers will certainly benefit from reading the book, but the most important audience for The Dreamkeepers is young teachers who will be teaching in diverse classrooms but haven't received training in the specifics of what that means.

Laura Mansfield says

This should be a required read for all teachers.

Kathleen Daley says

I really liked this book and many of the classroom suggestions the author discussed. However, I felt most of the ideas are applicable to all students, rather than any one particular race.

Ellen says

I was already excited to become a teacher, but after reading this book I'm inspired to work even harder to become a great teacher.

Audrey says

Gloria Ladson-Billings spent two years observing highly effective teachers in an underprivileged, predominantly african-american district. She asked parents and administrators to list teachers they considered highly effective, then chose the names that appeared on both lists. She uses anecdotes from those observations, interwoven with her own memories, to distill several hallmarks of culturally relevant teaching. In brief, they come down to this: 1) Treat your students with respect. 2) Remember that your students are talented, valuable people who bring a unique and valuable perspective into the classroom. 3) Have high

expectations for your students. 4) Make sure your literature and history lessons include and respect the african-american experience. 5) Teach your students to think critically about current events and even question the perspective of the textbooks used in your school. 6) You'll almost certainly need to do some of your own curriculum creation, as most textbooks won't meet the criteria stated above. 7) If the district's guidelines don't meet your students' needs, quietly ignore them.

Personally, I have mixed feelings about these results, because, to me, they are glaringly obvious. As far as I'm concerned, Ladson-Billings's conclusion amounts to "Be a good teacher, and you will be effective with african-american students." On the other hand, sometimes pointing out the obvious IS groundbreaking scholarship. One thing I really like about the book is that Ladson-Billings doesn't pretend like there's only one way to be an effective teacher of african-american students. I think this grew out of her methodology. The teachers she observed often didn't have much in common in terms of pedagogical theory. She even includes a chapter in which she juxtaposes a whole language reading classroom with a phonics-based classroom. What she found was that both approaches are effective, provided that they are administered by a teacher who subscribes to the principles outlined earlier. To me, this was obvious, but it is also a completely original conclusion. I have never seen anything like it in anything else I've ever read. And, for that reason, it is important that this book exists.

The best thing about this book, for me, was that it was a way for me to observe these teachers through Ladson-Billings's eyes. There are a lot of interesting ideas hidden within the discourse on pedagogy. I think my favorite was the teacher who sent a student to another room on an errand, sat down at the student's desk, and then began exclaiming over all of the nifty things she "discovered" inside. The student, of course, along with the rest of the class, immediately began to protest that the items inside belonged to the student. They saw it as a joke in keeping with the teacher's theatrical sense of humor, until she went back to the front of the room and had them read their textbook's perspective on the "Age of Discovery." Episodes like this made the reading absolutely worthwhile. My only real regret is that this book's research is about 25 years old. I'd like to see an updated version, using teachers in the field right now. I'd also like to see a lot more research that uses this methodology. It's disappointingly rare for researchers to study effective teaching simply by finding out who is effective and then watching them with an open mind.

Joe Totterdell says

"No challenge has been more daunting than that of improving the academic achievement of African American students. Burdened with a history that includes the denial of education, separate and unequal education, and relegation to unsafe, substandard inner-city schools, the quest for quality education remains an elusive dream for the African American community. However, it does remain a dream—perhaps the most powerful for the people of African descent in this nation."

Gloria Ladson-Billings is currently the Assistant Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which is home to a very prestigious teacher preparation program, and she is also a good friend of a professor of mine at San Francisco State University. While originally published in the 1990s, *The Dream-Keepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* still holds true today. A mixture of anecdotal testimony, vignettes from Ladson-Billings's own life, and findings from the study around which the book revolves, the arguments within *The Dream-Keepers* advocate educational reform that will rectify a public schooling system that has long failed to properly serve African American children, who have been historically marginalized in the United States in a number of ways. Ladson-Billings goes into some detail in describing the forces behind the de facto segregation of public schools and school districts in the United

States, which is certainly evident in various public schools throughout the San Francisco Unified School District, and while the focus of her book is on African American children, Ladson-Billings's viewpoints on teaching and education can very much be applied to students from all ethnic groups and backgrounds, as she cogently argues for the use of beneficial, culturally relevant pedagogies and practices inside the classroom and makes known the detrimental effects of assimilationist teaching practices on students in the classroom.

Like many educational reformists today, Ladson-Billings's point, very broadly speaking, is that teachers need to know their students better and take their cultures into greater consideration when designing lessons and conducting classes, and in doing so, teachers will be challenging a status quo that involves apathy toward the cultural backgrounds of students and almost mindless adherence to the demands of distant administrators and impersonal school district standards and mandates; the benefits of culturally relevant pedagogies that enable students to more easily identify with, relate to, and understand the material being taught are manifold but are not limited to more involving classes, more interested, high-achieving, and successful students, and most importantly, more being learned—this all sounds pretty reasonable to me, but what do you think?

Marva says

This is an excellent book for anyone who wants to understand what it means to be a teacher. There is so much more to education that teachers commit to; they must become allies and saviors, disciplinarians and nurturers, and do so while understanding that each child—no matter their race, gender, or family background—is different and deserves a chance to excel.

Micah says

A wonderful exploration and analysis of what is needed to be a successful teacher of African American students. This text explores several case-studies but adds a meaningful organization of themes that helps the aspiring and practicing teacher recognize what areas of competency and understanding are needed. Strength-based, truthful, and inspirational; I wish I had found this earlier in my teaching career.

Mandi says

All about that culturally relevant teaching! Read this for a class, and it was really informative, with a heavy focus on story-telling. Enjoyed it.

Olivia says

One of the better books I've had to read for class - it's a little dated at this point (I would love to see an updated study in a similar vein as this), but worth the read. Some of Ladson-Billings's tenets for successful teachers of African American children seem obviously, but they are worth saying, and so well-put. And her research argues her case nicely.

Katherine says

an easy yet powerful read. good for teachers, non -teachers, anyone remotely interested in social justice. from the beginning she works from the understanding that race is important. maybe we should all be "equal", but we're not, and pretending everything is balanced is a disservice to children, especially african american children. very good. there's hope.
