Gloria Ladson-Billings

THE DREAM-KEEPERS

Successful Teachers *of* African American Children

3RD EDITION

JOSSEY-BASS™
A Wiley Brand

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CONTENTS

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FOREWORD TO THE THIRD EDITION

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I am writing this foreword in the midst of the Novel Corona Virus—COVID-19—where cases are spiking in the upper Midwest and West. In many of the conversations I have been having about what impact this pandemic is having on schools in the US I am compelled to argue that COVID-19 is but one of the pandemics we are facing at this moment. I would argue that we are actually in the midst of four pandemics, COVID-19, which we know of, anti-Black racism, economic collapse, and climate catastrophe. All four of these pandemics are impacting our students, their families, and their communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic grabbed all of the headlines when the virus traveled from Wuhan, China, to Italy and other parts of Europe to the United States. As of this writing the US has had more cases of COVID-19 (9 million) than any country in the world with more than 228,000 deaths. This pandemic has caused many of us to work strictly from home, curtailed in-person schooling at both pre-collegiate and collegiate levels, slowed airline travel to a fraction of what we normally expect, and stopped millions of small businesses (restaurants, bars, barbers, beauticians, etc.) from operating in their typical fashion. This is something the nation has not seen in more than 100 years, since the 1918 flu pandemic. Many parents have been forced to serve as their children's teachers while concurrently trying to show up virtually for their own jobs. COVID-19 revealed the incredible disparities that exist between White, middle income students and Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and immigrant poor children. While we were all in the same storm, it became apparent that we were not all in the same boat. Some families rode out COVID-19 on a luxury liner while others were barely holding on to a raft.

On May 25, 2020, Minneapolis resident George Floyd was apprehended by a police officer and shortly after lay on the ground with a police officer's knee on his neck. Despite pleading with the officer that he could not breathe, Mr. Floyd was subjected to 8 minutes and 46 seconds of that officer's knee on his neck where he expired. In addition to the officer whose knee was on Mr. Floyd's neck there were three other officers on the scene who did nothing to aid him despite audible cries from an astonished public to help him. Mr. Floyd's murder sparked unrest and uprisings throughout the nation and around the world. People began to protest racism not only in cities and towns in the US but also in the UK, France, and Canada. Confronting anti-Black racism became a worldwide cause. It represented a second pandemic.

The third pandemic is the coming economic collapse. It is trailing COVID-19 because job loss and skyrocketing medical costs were directly related to the coronavirus pandemic. Families across the nation are trembling in anticipation of evictions and foreclosures. Parents are standing in food lines to supplement what they are able to put on the table. Families are unable to pay utility bills and car notes. About 800,000 women have left the workforce compared to 78,000 men. Many of these women were in the prime working ages of 35 to 44.

The fourth pandemic is climate catastrophe. Although there are those who deny climate change, those who experienced the horrendous West Coast wildfires or the spate of hurricanes that entered the Gulf Coast region (so many that the National Weather Service went through the traditional alphabet and started in on the Greek alphabet), know that the climate is definitely changing. There are more days with temperatures above 90 degrees, more days with stagnant air, longer mosquito seasons, more coastline erosion, and lower mountain snow packs across the country. Climate change is very real for most people.

This litany of pandemics may sound a lot like gloom and doom, but I actually have a bit of hope supplied by Indian novelist,

Arundhati Roy, who wrote an essay entitled, "The Pandemic Is a Portal" (see https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca). According to Roy, the pandemic gives us an opportunity to step into a new world leaving all of our old "carcasses, prejudices, avarice, old ideas" and other things behind. She argues we can carry "little luggage" and walk "lightly" into a new world ready to "fight for it." What a refreshing way to approach this full stop we have been asked to make as a result of the pandemic and reset our educational agenda.

What might a full stop and reset look like? I have argued that what our schools need as a result of the pandemic pause is a "hard reset." I draw the notion of a hard reset from mobile technologies. While cell phones are ubiquitous—we all have them—they are also prone to fail from time to time. We may turn them off and start them again to see if that fixes our problem. We may remove and then replace the SIM card. We may remove and replace the battery. Sometimes we go online and search for tech support groups. If none of those things work, we may reluctantly head to the mobile device store where a technician alerts us that we need to do a "hard reset." Those dreaded words mean that if we have not already backed up all of our information, we are going to get a mobile device returned to us minus our pictures and minus our contacts. It will look a lot like it looked when we first received it from the factory. We will need to start over. That is what I believe education through the portal, on the other side of the pandemic, should look like. We will need to reset so we can restart.

Unfortunately, far too many people clammer for school to "get back to normal." The problem I have with "normal" is that "normal" was where the problems resided. Normal was having Black and Latinx students in the lowest reading groups and lowest tracks in mathematics, English, science, etc. Normal was having Black and Latinx students over-identified for special needs. Normal was having Black and Latinx students disproportionately suspended,

expelled, and sanctioned. Normal was Black and Latinx students excluded from Gifted and Talented Education, honors courses, and Advanced Placement classes. Getting back to "normal" is not the place we need to be.

As the chief proponent of "culturally relevant pedagogy" I have had the opportunity to look carefully at what shortcomings of culturally relevant pedagogy have been made evident over these past 30 years.[1] The primary shortcoming is that the pedagogy I observed failed to incorporate the notion of youth culture. While the teachers I observed did an excellent job leveraging students' home cultures—their first languages, customs, traditions, etc.—they did not factor in the impact of youth culture and its influence on US popular culture. I believe the primary reason for not including youth culture was an artifact of the teachers being teachers of elementary-aged students. Although elementary students consume youth culture through their use of language, adoption of fashion and style, and affection for popular music, they are not producers of youth culture. Had the study been done in secondary classrooms I am certain I would have seen more deliberate deployment of youth culture.

It is possible to see the effective use of urban youth culture in work by Emdin[2] and Rawls and Robinson[3] as well as in projects like "Science Genius" and #HipHopEd, which is a weekly Twitter® chat for teachers, students, scholars, artists, and community activists that discusses how youth culture impacts education. An excellent example of the merger of youth culture and student learning is Urban Word NYC, where Michael Cirelli serves hundreds of students from New York City Public Schools as well as incarcerated and homeless youth. Students who participate in Urban Word NYC programs write and perform spoken-word pieces. The US Youth National Poet Laureate program is run out of Urban Word NYC and in 2017 I had the opportunity to serve as a judge for the US Youth National Poet Laureate Program. Our judges panel selected a young woman from

Los Angeles, CA, whose biography indicated she had battled a speech impediment and some cognitive processing issues. That woman's name is Amanda Gorman—yes, the very same Amanda Gorman who became the youngest poet to deliver a poem at a Presidential Inauguration in 2021 and perhaps the only poet to deliver a poem at the SuperBowl!

So, in this edition of *Dreamkeepers*, I attempt to help teachers consider ways youth culture may be infused in classrooms to increase engagement, support student learning, develop cultural competence, and encourage critical consciousness. Thirty years may have passed, but I am convinced that our students still need *Dreamkeepers* to ensure their individual, family, community, and cultural dreams come true.

PREFACE

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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.

The power and persistence of the metaphor of the dream has defined the sojourn of African Americans in the United States. From the words of the Bible to the poetry of Langston Hughes to the oratory of Martin Luther King, Jr., African Americans' struggle against all odds has been spurred on by the pursuit of a dream.

Perceived as the most direct avenue to the realization of the dream, education and access to schooling have been cherished privileges among African Americans. Slaves were not allowed to learn to read or be educated, and this has underscored the possibility and power of education for liberation. The chronicle of the civil rights movement in the United States illustrates the centrality of education to the fight of African Americans for equal opportunity and full citizenship. Thus, Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas; the University of Mississippi; the University of Alabama; the Boston Public Schools; and Brownsville, New York, all symbolize the willingness of African Americans to sacrifice all for the sake of education.

But today African Americans find themselves in a downward spiral. African American students lag far behind their white counterparts on standard academic achievement measures. At the same time, the very society that experienced a civil rights revolution

finds itself locked in the grips of racism and discrimination. Almost forty years after a Supreme Court decision declaring separate but equal schools to be illegal, most African American students still attend schools that are in reality segregated and unequal.

However, *The Dreamkeepers* is not about the despair. Rather, it is about keeping the dream alive. The significance of this book can be found in the changing demographics of our nation's public schools. Children of color constitute an increasing proportion of our students. They represent 30 percent of our public school population. In the twenty largest school districts, they make up over 70 percent of total school enrollment. Conversely, the number of teachers of color, particularly African American, is dwindling. African American teachers make up less than 5 percent of the total public school teaching population. Further, many teachers—white and black alike—feel ill-prepared for or incapable of meeting the educational needs of African American students.

Based on a study of a group of excellent teachers, this book provides exemplars of effective teaching for African American students. Rather than a prescription or a recipe, this book offers the reader models for improving practice and developing grounded theory, through a look at the intellectually rigorous and challenging classrooms of these teachers in a low-income, predominantly African American school district.

I have written this book with three voices: that of an African American scholar and researcher; that of an African American teacher; and that of an African American woman, parent, and community member. Thus the book offers a mixture of scholarship and story—of qualitative research and lived reality. I have relied heavily on "story" as a means of conveying the excellent pedagogical practice of the teachers studied. Increasingly, in fields such as law, education, ethnic studies, and feminist studies, story has gained credence as an appropriate methodology for transmitting the richness and complexity of cultural and social phenomena. Thus the audience for this book may be broad and varied.

The book is both reflective and empirical. At its center is the story of the pedagogical practice of eight exemplary teachers. However, my own experiences as an African American student who successfully negotiated public schooling provide a backdrop for my understanding of that practice. What was there in my schooling experiences that allowed me to persevere and prevail? I am not dismissing the fact that my schooling took place in a different and, perhaps, simpler time. Yet I retain vivid memories of ways in which schooling affected me both positively and negatively, and those memories help me see and understand current classroom practices.

Because of my decision to write in this way I break at least two scholarly conventions. First, I diminish the primacy of "objectivity" as I write both of my own life and memories as an African American student and of the lives and experiences of this group of effective teachers. Second, I write in a style that may be seen as methodologically "messy," as I discuss issues at both the classroom level and the school level. I do this because it is an opportunity to reinforce the fluidity and connection between the individual and the group in which teachers and students do their work.

I could have chosen to write this book in the dominant scholarly tradition—statement of the problem, review of the literature, methodology, data collection, analysis, and implications for further research. Indeed, this is what I was trained to do. But that tradition rejects my necessary subjectivity. Thus I chose to integrate my "scholarly" tools with my knowledge of my culture and my personal experiences.

Multicultural teacher educators will find this book a useful addition to the literature on curricular and instructional issues concerning African American students. Practicing teachers and student teachers will have an opportunity to create appropriate strategies and techniques for their own classrooms based on those shown in this book. Parents and community members will be able to use the book as a "talking point" to help outline the redesign of community schools that better meet the needs of their students.

However, again, the book is not a prescription. It does not contain lists of things to do to achieve effective teaching for African American students. As tempting as it was for me to do just that, my work on this book has convinced me that doing so would be professionally dishonest. I am committed to the belief that just as we expect children to extrapolate larger life lessons from the stories we tell them, we, as adults, can make our own sense of these teachers' stories about themselves and their teaching.

I have written this book not to offer a solution to problems in the education of African Americans but to offer an opportunity to make those problems central to the debate about education in general. In accordance with current public policy thinking, this book contends that the way a problem is defined frames the universe of reasonable public actions. Given our limited ability to address every problem that confronts the society, problem formulation takes on added proportions. Thus a specific problem, such as education, cannot stand alone; rather, it must be linked to broader issues like national defense, economic competitiveness, or crime. In this book, I attempt to reformulate what has been thought of as the problem of African American schooling into the promise of successful practice and the problem of our inability to consider how we might learn from that success.

This book discusses the notion of culturally relevant teaching and its inherent conceptions of the teacher and others; of classroom social interactions; of literacy and mathematics teaching; and of knowledge itself. Further, the book examines the implications of culturally relevant teaching for African American student education and teacher education.

Chapter One, in an attempt to rethink teaching and learning for African Americans, asks the question, "Is there a case for separate schools?" Far from suggesting a return to racial segregation, the chapter points to the growing disaffection of African Americans with the kind of education their children receive today in the public schools. Placed in a historical context, the question raises additional questions about teacher preparation.

Chapter Two discusses the growing educational and anthropological literature on ways in which school can be made more compatible with the students' cultural backgrounds. The chapter identifies a lack in the literature on the experiences of African American students specifically, and offers culturally relevant teaching as a way to address this gap. The chapter also compares assimilationist, or traditional, teaching practices with culturally relevant teaching practices.

Chapter Three discusses a critical aspect of culturally relevant teaching: the teachers' conceptions of themselves and others. Vignettes and interviews with this group of successful teachers of African American students illustrate how they see themselves and their students.

Chapter Four discusses a second critical aspect of culturally relevant teaching: the manner in which classroom social interactions are structured. Once again, vignettes and interview data illustrate the pertinent points.

Chapter Five discusses the third critical aspect of culturally relevant teaching: the teachers' conception of knowledge. The chapter provides examples of how this kind of teaching practice helps both teachers and students construct knowledge and move beyond the state- and district-required curricula to achieve academic and cultural excellence.

Chapter Six focuses on three of the teachers in the study and their teaching of elementary literacy and mathematics programs. The focus on literacy contrasts two different instructional approaches and materials that yield similar results: a classroom of literate students. The chapter discusses the ways in which the teachers' use of culturally relevant teaching transcends the material and instructional strategy. The focus on mathematics contrasts the practice of a culturally relevant teacher with that of a novice who works in an upper-middle-class white school.

Chapter Seven attempts to peek into the future. It examines the prospects for improving the academic performance and the school experiences of African American students. It looks

at current practice in teacher education, established school and community programs that have a focus on African American learners, and some experimental programs.

Two appendixes at the close of the book address methodological and contextual issues. They are included to help colleagues think about ways to both replicate and improve upon my research. Indeed, this entire effort represents not a conclusion but a starting point from which the educational needs of African American students can begin to be addressed.

Acknowledgments

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In the final analysis, however, I assume full responsibility for the contents of this book. The ideas and opinions expressed and the mistakes made are mine alone.

Madison, Wisconsin Gloria Ladson-Billings

THE AUTHOR

Gloria Ladson-Billings is the Kellner Family Professor of Urban Education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and Faculty Affiliate in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She is the 2005–2006 president of the American Educational Research Association. Ladson-Billings' research examines the pedagogical practices of teachers who are successful with African American students. She also investigates Critical Race Theory applications to education.

Ladson-Billings is the author of the critically acclaimed books, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, *Crossing over to Canaan: The Journey of New Teachers in Diverse Classrooms*, and *Beyond the Big House: African American Educators on Teacher Education*, and more than 50 journal articles and book chapters. She is the former editor of the *American Educational Research Journal* and a member of several editorial boards. Her work has won numerous scholarly awards, including the H. I. Romnes Faculty Fellowship, the Spencer Post-doctoral Fellowship, and the Palmer O. Johnson outstanding research award. In 2002 she was awarded an honorary doctorate from Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden. During the 2003–2004 academic year she was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, California. In fall 2004 she received the George and Louise Spindler Award from the Council on Anthropology and Education for significant and ongoing contributions to the field of educational anthropology. In spring 2005 she was elected to the National Academy of Education and the National Society for the Study of Education. She is a 2008 recipient

of the state of Wisconsin's Martin Luther King Jr. Heritage Award and the Teachers College, Columbia University, 2008 Distinguished Service Medal. During the 2008–2009 year she was named the Helen LeBaron Hilton Distinguished Chair of the Iowa State University College of Human Sciences.

INTRODUCTION

About 30 years ago I walked into some elementary classrooms to observe some amazing teachers engage in rigorous, authentic teaching with students that much of the education research literature regarded as unlikely to experience academic success. What I witnessed was not only academic success. I saw students who affirmed themselves individually, socially, and culturally. I also saw students who engaged in real-life problem-solving that had implications for them as members of their school community as well as their wider community. Ultimately, I described these teachers as "Dreamkeepers" and the work they did as "culturally relevant pedagogy." Both terms have gained some traction in the education research literature. Indeed, "culturally relevant pedagogy" produces some five and a half million hits on a Google® search.

Since the publication of *Dreamkeepers* I have talked to thousands of teachers, teacher educators, students, administrators, and community members throughout the nation and around the world—England, Scotland, Sweden, Brazil, South Africa, Japan, China, Spain, and other countries. Everywhere I have traveled I have learned of students who have been marginalized because of race, ethnicity, language, religion, and/or immigrant status. And, each of these groups of students have struggled to be successful in what might be considered the public schools. Educators and policymakers have wondered how they could adapt the work of the teachers they studied to their specific contexts. Early on I began see that the work of the teachers I studied was not merely descriptive, it was generative.

Since that initial study I have had the opportunity to learn of scores of classrooms where teachers have, despite various systemic inequities, challenged students to rigorous and engaging curriculum in all kinds of subject areas—history/social studies, English, mathematics, and science. I have witnessed teachers go out of their way to help students feel valued and appreciated. I have seen teachers help students with social-emotional and mental wellness issues that led to academic improvement and deeper commitment. I have seen teachers do what I call the "Rumpelstiltskin" pedagogy—spin straw into gold where they had little resources and minimal support but were still able to deliver first rate classroom experiences for their students. I will explain some of these experiences in detail in this volume's afterword but in this introduction I would like to focus on two important innovations that should impact today's "Dreamkeepers"—technology and youth culture (aka hip-hop).

Technology Take Over

For today's students electronic technology is a part of their everyday way of life. I call today's students, "New Century Students." For the most part, their teachers were born in the 20th century, they were born in the 21st century. I have had an opportunity to make some observations about New Century Students and these observations have implications for how they operate in the classroom:

1. New Century Students believe in multi-tasking, even though cognitive scientists tell us that multi-tasking is not efficient.[1] Our students believe they can listen to music on their Spotify playlist, check their social media pages, text a friend, browse websites, and write a paper. However, the research indicates that only about 2 percent of the population are good at

attending to more than one thing. Students who multi-task perform less well than those who attend to one task. However, this does not stop our students from trying to multi-task.

2. New Century Students see themselves more as "consumers" than students. Thus, they tend to "shop" for schools, classes, and teachers. This consumerist attitude is not their fault. We have cultivated the notion of "choice" when it comes to school and students have taken advantage of it. They may live in a district where there is "open enrollment" and choose to go to any school in the district. They may choose a charter school over their neighborhood school. They may live in a district or state that promotes private school vouchers or they may opt out of brick-and-mortar schooling altogether and choose to do "homeschool" or online schooling. All of these choices means that students grow accustomed to "shopping" for their education and like consumers of other goods and services, they expect a certain degree of customer satisfaction. To maintain enrollment, some schools may acquiesce to student and parent demands that may determine course offerings and final grades.
3. New Century Students do not receive their news about the world the ways their parents did via newspapers and nightly television news broadcasts. They receive their news and information via push notices from their favorite Internet sites, blogs and programs like "The Daily Show." Thus, teachers who may want to incorporate current events in their classrooms must be prepared to hear a variety of perspectives on an item and multiple perspectives on what was the news story of the day. It may not be the political news out of Washington. It can be entertainment news (e.g., Beyoncé dropped an album and video last night), sports news (e.g., Kevin Durant was traded to the Nets) or tech news (e.g., Apple is introducing a new iPhone). These varied perspectives on what constitutes news makes for interesting

classroom conversations and the need for teachers to demonstrate some pedagogical flexibility.

4. Although heavily invested in "social justice" New Century Students are less sanguine about "social welfare" (particularly if they have to bear the costs). It is not unusual to see New Century students engage in social protests like "Black Lives Matter" in response to police brutality or "#MeToo" in response to violence, harassment, and discrimination directed toward women, LGBTQIA people, and gender nonconforming people. However, these same students may balk at the notion that they should pay Social Security taxes or be required to subscribe to a health-care plan because they see it as paying for "old people."
5. In the world of New Century students, email is an "old technology," and they would prefer to communicate via instant messaging and tweets. While email may be the stock and trade of schools and workplaces, it is a dinosaur among New Century students. Teachers who do not understand the way to reach their students is through text messaging or their Instagram® pages are likely to regularly miscommunicate with them.
6. For New Century students, "library" research can best be done on their desktop, which means they rarely leaf through an entire journal. Where previous generations of students trekked to the library and pulled periodicals off the shelf, New Century students find what they want by doing online searches. They rarely see an article in the context of a whole journal where they may be tempted to read beyond the assignment.
7. New Century students believe it is important to "stay connected," thus their phones are always at hand and classes that prohibit cell phone use interrupt their connections. Teachers who want to be successful with New Century students often find ways to integrate cell phone use into their classrooms

(e.g., establishing live Twitter® feeds and allowing students to search for information using their mobile phones).

8. New Century students have very different conceptions of copyright, intellectual property, and plagiarism rules. This tendency among New Century students is often difficult for 20th-century teachers. They do not realize that their students live in the world of "sampling" and "mashups" where selecting pieces of material is not only appropriate, it is expected. Hip-hop artist Ice Cube samples from the Isley Brothers to make, "It Was a Good Day," and Lauren Hill samples from Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons on "You're Just too Good to Be True." Teachers at both the high school and collegiate level have to explicitly teach students rules of plagiarism and intellectual property.

Despite these tendencies among New Century students, there are some exciting opportunities for using technology in teaching and learning. For example, the use of live Twitter® feeds referenced above can be a way to get students who are shy or reserved to participate more fully in the classroom. Instead of seeing mobile devices as distractions, culturally relevant teachers encourage students to use their devices to find information and become more engaged. Several of the teachers I have observed since the initial Dreamkeepers study taught me the importance of allowing students to create a class playlist. In these classes, teachers set the criteria and encourage students to select songs for the playlist. The criteria may demand, no songs with racist, sexist, misogynistic, or homophobic lyrics. The teachers begin each class session with a song or two from the class playlist as students arrive. They indicate that students arrive on time (just in case their song is the one that plays that day) and settle more quickly. Sometimes the song selected becomes a place to begin a conversation or represent a connection to what the class is studying. Teachers working with New Century students believe that