
Am I a Keeper of the Dream? A Critical Reflection of *The Dreamkeepers*, 20

Years Later

By Cheron Hunter Davis

As a teacher for children in the primary grades and an educator of pre- and in-service teachers, I have become aware of the need for and importance of multicultural literature and curricula in American education. Children's literature, in particular, is a vehicle by which social injustices and discrimination might be explored in the classroom. And despite our insistence on declaring ourselves part of a post-racial society, the prevalence of discrimination and disenfranchisement of particular groups of people still weaves itself into the very fiber of American culture. According to Cochran-Smith, Davis, and Fries, 80-93% of students enrolled in collegiate education programs are White (2004). However, the population of students of color was 40% in 2002 and will continue to increase throughout the twenty-first century. At the same time, Whites represent 90% of public school teachers, another figure likely to increase (Howard, 2006). By 2035, children of color will constitute the statistical majority of the student population and will increase annually to an estimated 57% in 2050 (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004).

Racism continues to be a constant and volatile issue in American education. Literature has long been an escape from the realities of racism. Hazel Rochman (1993) explains, "A good book can help to break down these barriers. Books can help children to understand their own experiences, can validate their own culture, provide information about other cultures, encourage empathy and inspire imagination" (p.9). Books can also make a difference in dispelling prejudice and building a community; not with the role models and literal recipes or noble messages about the human family, but with enthralling

stories that make us imagine the lives of others. A good story lets you know people as individuals in all their particularity and conflict. And once you see someone as a person--flawed, complex, striving---you've reached beyond the stereotype. Acts of writing, telling, sharing, and transforming stories enrich and connect us and help us know each other (Temple et. al, 2002). Rochman (1993) explains, "multiculturalism means across cultures; multiculturalism doesn't mean only people of color" (p.9). The literature review and recommendations that follow explore possibilities of multicultural pedagogy in teacher education with a focus on African-American (AA) students and children's literature in elementary grades.

Review of Literature

There have been considerable changes in the availability and quality of literature written primarily for an audience AA children since Nancy Larrick wrote "The All-White World of Children's Books" in 1965. Regarded as groundbreaking at the time, Larrick's research exposed the lack of children's books written about and, even fewer, by minorities. Her work launched a publishing era that gave AA authors and illustrators access to the power of print and the opportunity to tell the stories of their heritages and cultures. The AA literature that has been published during this time may be used to help readers identify cultural heritages, understand social change, respect values of others, and expand their insights and imaginations. However, confronting sensitive issues like race and social class can be difficult, especially in the elementary classroom. Why? Multicultural educators have observed that research about race and literacy are often framed in the language of diversity, multicultural education, and culturally relevant education (Banks, 1994; Lee, 2007). White teachers are afforded the privilege of

engaging with multicultural education without ever having to acknowledge the ways that White people are the beneficiaries of inequality in society. Ladson-Billings (2003) pointed out that even when teachers use children's books that explicitly deal with matters of race and racism, they do not talk about race. Further, Hunter (2010) found that both Black and White pre-service teachers reported feeling uncomfortable discussing issues of race presented in AA children's literature with elementary students for whom they planned and implemented reading lessons.

Research shows that new teachers often abandon what they have learned during years of teacher preparation and revert to instructional practices they experienced themselves unless they are taught to be reflective, thoughtful, and critical. Kagan (1992) asserted that pre-service teachers carry beliefs about good teaching and students based on memories of their own schooling into their classrooms because these images are rarely challenged in teacher education programs. Many scholars stress the importance of education programs in which pre- and in-service teachers are taught Many scholars stress the importance of education programs in which pre- and in-service teachers are taught to analyze their own literacy histories (Bedard, Van Horn, & Garcia, 2011) and develop culturally sensitive lenses through which they can critically view the personal experiences, pedagogy, and ideology that ground their teaching and then reframe instruction based on the cultures and voices of their students (Lee, 1993; Spears-Bunton, 1990).

Teachers tend to use instructional practices that are consistent with their beliefs (Olson & Singer, 1994); therefore, teacher educators and pre- and in-service teachers must tackle rather than ignore their own personal beliefs and images as they confront

issues of race, racism, and privilege in AA literature. As Greene (1988) explained, literary texts chosen by informed teachers enable readers to “perceive their own illusions and stereotypes, even as they expose them to the multiple ways in which the world means to those inhabiting it” (p. 187). Ladson-Billings has carried forward Greene’s ideas in a body of work (1994, 1998, 2003, 2009) based on the premise that literature exposes readers to a wide range of thoughts and ideas and allows them to experience other lives vicariously to learn about human nature including their own. Her work suggests that intentional exposure, open discussion building critical discourse, and careful reflection about content and issues in AA children’s literature in teacher education courses can be catalysts for modifying the beliefs and images of pre- and in-service teachers and have a positive impact on the education of all the students they teach.

The Dreamkeepers Revisited

Ladson-Billings’ *The Dreamkeepers* was first published in 1994 and has been republished in a second edition almost two decades later (2009). The purpose of this study was to identify qualities of teachers who were capable of teaching Black students at high levels of effectiveness. Among the eight teachers in the original study there were many differences in teaching styles, but Ladson-Billings found that all took advantage of what she called transformative teaching moments. These teachers were able to improve educational outcomes for Black students by using their own and students’ experiences in transformative teaching that provided culturally relevant instruction. Ladson-Billings found that these teachers’ practices were characterized by features such as cooperative learning, use of multicultural materials, and concern and care for both students and their cultures. She concluded that culturally relevant teaching practices include:

“the kind of teaching that is designed not merely to fit the school culture to the students’ culture but also to use students’ culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge. Thus culturally relevant teaching requires the recognition of African-American culture as an important strength upon which to construct the schooling experience” (1994, p. 314).

In the context of culturally relevant teaching, the construction of literary knowledge is especially important to Black students. Interviewing a Black child ten years of age, Sims (1983) asked why AA children’s literature appealed to her, to which she replied that “books about Black girls” (p. 23) were the ones she liked best. Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001) corroborated Sims’ findings and reported that AA readers enjoy reading books in which characters are similar to them and cultural experiences are familiar.

Children participating in interactive read alouds and reading independently or with guidance and instruction are constantly constructing meaning. According to Louise Rosenblatt (1994, 1995), all readers bring different personal and cultural experiences to the texts they read, assume different stances toward the text depending on purposes for reading, and understand the text through their own unique cultural and psychological filters. Building from Rosenblatt’s theories about readers, Bishop (1992) maintained that students who do not see their culture represented in the literature to which they are exposed are more likely to devalue their importance in society and in school.

Teachers must be able to use the students' cultural knowledge and experiences as foundations and supports for learning, and this can only be achieved by leveraging home knowledge with that of curriculum goals (Lee, 1993). AA children's literature provides a medium for engaging teachers and students in explorations of characters, events, actions, and consequences that are culturally relevant for Black students and an important part of the cultural heritage and body of knowledge that should be common to all students and teachers in elementary classrooms across the nation.

Then and Now

In *The Dreamkeepers*, Ladson-Billings (1994, 2009) identified commonalities among teachers that made them exceptionally effective in improving educational outcomes for Black students and derived tenets from her research that were worthy of consideration by teacher educators and reading teachers both then and now. These publications seem to have had little if any impact on the educative experiences and outcomes for Black students in American schools, however. In spite of the fact that Ladson-Billings provided guidelines for making teachers capable of reaching and teaching Black students very well almost 20 years ago, results from the National Assessments of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2011) from the 1970s until the most recent reveal a persistent, statistically significant achievement gap between White and Black students in reading and other areas.

Results from the NAEP provide nationally representative, continuing assessment data on American education results of subject-matter achievement across disciplines and populations. According to the latest results in reading for fourth graders (NAEP, 2011), the gap between White and Black students has diminished slightly since the 1970s, but

there still exists a significant 25-point score difference in reading between these ethnic groups. In addition, there was no change in average performance for either group or in the size of the reading achievement gap between White and Black students from 2009 to 2011.

Ladson-Billing's findings on exemplary teaching and its effect on academic performance of Black students that were published in 1994, again in 2009, and at other times in other sources (Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2003) have increased our collective knowledge about the importance of culturally relevant teaching, but the NAEP (2011) results suggest that the influence of Ladson-Billings' work so far has been insufficient to begin closing the achievement gap. Black students still lag behind their White counterparts in reading and other academic areas in spite of the promising results and potential effects of culturally relevant, culturally sensitive teaching.

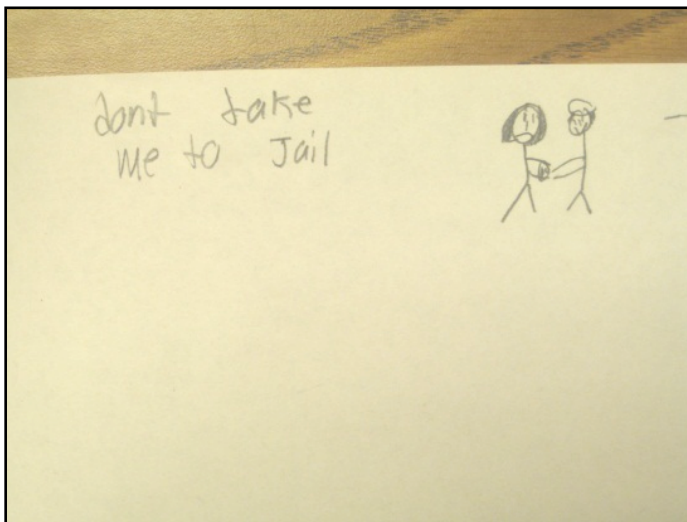
Classroom Experiences and Possibilities for Practices

As a teacher of children and a teacher educator, I have carried the findings published by Ladson-Billings (1994, 2009) in *The Dreamkeepers* into public school and university classrooms. I have facilitated many read-aloud sessions and guided reading lessons with racially mixed groups in which I invited students to comment on characters with whom they identified in conversational and written responses to texts such as *Rosa*, a picture book written by Nikki Giovanni and illustrated by Bryan Collier (2005). The book's narration, dialogue, and cut-paper images present unique perspectives and an exciting way for children to learn about Rosa Parks' courageous act of defiance that sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott in Alabama. While conducting this read aloud and follow-up activities with a group of second graders, I discovered that all of the students

understood the inequalities and injustices suffered by the characters in the story. These children recognized what many seasoned educators and pre-service teachers prefer to ignore, i.e., that education in the South continues to perpetuate the White privilege. Confronting inequity and challenging the status quo is often difficult for teachers and teacher educators, but these youngsters were unafraid to explore the historical events and social issues depicted in the book and apply them to their here and now.

The rest of this article presents three of the tenets derived by Ladson-Billings (1994, 2009) from the work she reported in *The Dreamkeepers*. The first two tenets are followed by student activities and work samples that show my attempts to incorporate AA literature into literacy instruction that parallels tenets for culturally sensitive instruction and to teach cultural and historical content as well as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and visual literacy. The third tenet is followed by thoughts and insights about my role as an educator who is also a political being and an agent of change.

1. Teachers and students participate in a broad conception of literacy that incorporates both literature (text and illustrations) and oratory.



In addition to collaborative discussion about the text, students were also led in interactive drawing and oration or dialogue activities related to the text. This theatrical presentation, made in small groups of four to five students, is a learning and assessment technique that caters to those students who struggle with reading and writing. Students are expected to construct knowledge of characters' possible dialogue based on the text. For example, the teacher might ask the students to pretend they are the characters in the book and to come up with a drawing and dialogue for each. The drawing above shows the words recorded by one student as the dialogue. "Don't take me to jail" pleaded the character as an officer led her away. In activities such as these, children are able to engage and construct meaning from the literature using several different modes of literary learning that involve reading, writing, listening, speaking, and visualization to produce their own drawings and oration.

2. Teachers and students engage in a collective struggle against the status quo.

As the students and I participated in a literary discussion, many questions arose about the fairness of laws that allowed persons of color using public transportation to be subjected to taking seats in the back of the bus or standing to give White passengers places to sit. After these conversations, I engaged students in an activity called an open-mind portrait, which is designed to help students think more deeply about a character and relive the story from the character's point of view. I asked students to reflect on how Rosa Parks may have felt as a Black woman during this period, and their portraits showed that they were able to connect with Rosa's emotions and feelings. In the blue text bubble next to the portrait above, students responded that Rosa was thinking "That segregation is

wrong” and demonstrated their vicarious engagement in Rosa’s struggle against the status quo.



3. Teachers are cognizant of themselves as political beings.

As an educator of future teachers working with elementary students, I am constantly re-evaluating my perceptions of literary materials. The cultural politics of literacy are prevalent, although hidden, and impact the young minds we are entrusted with shaping. Additionally, pre-service teachers need opportunities to engage in conversations about race and culture during their undergraduate studies so that they might be aware of the possible educational, philosophical, and cultural deposits they are capable of making in the minds and lives of young learners. My task, as both a researcher and teacher educator, is to prepare my students, who are largely White female future teachers, for the diversity and multiculturalism they will confront upon entering the profession. It is the responsibility of teacher educators to help these eager, unassuming, and inexperienced future professionals understand and unpack the knapsacks of privilege they carry. If they are equipped with knowledge of the prevalent role that race and culture play

within the context of literary experiences aimed at educating children, future teachers will be able to carry out instruction in classrooms where diversity is celebrated, issues of inequality are confronted, and all students are effectively educated in ways that are culturally sensitive and relevant.

Reflection and Conclusion

As I reflected on Ladson-Billings's *The Dreamkeepers* (1994, 2009), I was struck by the crucial role that my work as a teacher educator and my students' work in classrooms can play in the education of generations of school children. As history continues to shape itself, its record and portrayal in print, on television, and in the memories of those who lived it are no less distorted today than they will be 50 years from now. Rosa Parks' portrayal as a tired seamstress rather than a lifelong community activist is a distortion that will be maintained across generations unless we prepare teachers who are able to think critically and teach their students to do the same. Literacy is a dynamic collection of interactive processes that are constantly redefined and renegotiated based on socio-cultural influences. We are not simply preparing students to be *readers*. Rather, we are preparing reflective, evaluative, critical thinkers who construct knowledge by reading literature representing many cultures and presented in countless innovative informational media that change continuously. While the challenge is daunting, it is not impossible. Our futures depend on our commitment to the preparation of culturally competent educators who are able to boldly face the challenges of creating multicultural classrooms and curricula that reflect and respect the lives and experiences of the students they teach.

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