

EQUITY & DIVERSITY Q&A

What Should Culturally Relevant Teaching Look Like Today? Gloria Ladson-Billings Explains



By [Madeline Will](#) — April 20, 2022 ⌚ 8 min read



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Nearly three decades ago, researcher Gloria Ladson-Billings set out to understand what effective teaching of Black students looks like. Too often, she said, Black children were considered deficient and deviant—but in some classrooms, they were thriving. What were those teachers doing differently?

The need for Ladson-Billings' work still holds true today, as Black students continue to lag behind their white peers on standardized test scores and are disciplined at higher rates, particularly by white teachers. A body of research has affirmed Ladson-Billings' conclusions—that the practices of culturally relevant teaching can lead to students, and especially students of color, having more academic success, increased engagement in the content, better attendance, and a stronger perception of themselves as capable learners.

Even so, some of this work has come under the microscope, as conservative lawmakers across the country push to restrict how race is discussed in classrooms. The crusade against the academic concept of critical race theory—of which Ladson-Billings is a leading scholar—is underpinned by the fear that children are being taught to view themselves as oppressors or the oppressed. Some school programs or curricula that refer to culturally relevant teaching have been called into question by parents, policymakers, and other community members.

Education Week spoke to Ladson-Billings, who is a professor emerita of urban education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, about what culturally relevant teaching looks like in the classroom and her thoughts on the national debate about critical race theory and schools. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How do you define culturally relevant teaching in 2022? Is it different from how you originated this work?

I think it's still the same. There are three components. One, of course, is student learning—you have to have a focus on student learning, that's the reason people send their kids to school, that's our reason for being.



Gloria Ladson-Billings

— Courtesy of Bryce Richter/UW-Madison

The second is what I call cultural competence. By that, I mean the ability of students to draw

on their own backgrounds, languages, histories, customs, and experiences as they gain fluency and facility in at least one other culture. If you think in terms of Black and brown kids, that one other culture is usually going to be the mainstream culture, but we don't want their home language denigrated, we don't want their home customs denigrated. We often use those home customs and traditions as analogies or metaphors for understanding this new culture. Also, I want to be clear that when I say cultural competence, it doesn't leave white middle class kids off the hook. Even though schools are pretty much organized around their culture, they are going to have to be able to communicate with people in a lot of different places, in a lot of different circumstances.

The third piece is the piece that I call the most-ignored—critical consciousness. People think, “Oh, I don't want to get involved in that. I shouldn't have anything to do with politics.” Well, you shouldn't have anything to do with partisanship. But the truth of the matter is, we live in a political context. The critical consciousness is what I call the “so what” piece. We teach kids all kinds of things, and kids will say, “OK, so we learned this, so what? We're not going to have to use this, what is this any good for?” And we tend to give them very weak answers. We tell them things like, “Oh, you're going to need this one day.” Well, somewhere around 4th grade, they figure out, “I'm not ever going to need this.” So we've got to be able to show our students that what they are learning can have applications to the problems that they are confronting in their daily lives.

What I think has changed over time is when I did this research starting in the late 1980s, I was in elementary classrooms. What I was missing was the influence and the impact of youth culture. You can be talking about contributions of Black people—Rosa Parks, Sojourner Truth, whatever—but teenagers are making culture. They are making culture through music, through art, through fashion, through language. So I would say that in this iteration of my work, I've been looking very carefully at the role that youth culture plays in informing students and in shaping what I would call a culturally relevant approach to teaching.

You wrote in the '90s that people may ask, “Well, isn't what you described just good teaching?” And your response was, “Indeed, but why does so little of it seem to occur in classrooms with mostly Black students?” Do you think that's still the case, almost 30 years later?

I wish I could say no, but if there's anything that I think Black and brown children suffer from, it is under-teaching. So much of their school day is caught up in policing their bodies—"sit here, keep your mouth closed, put your hands there"—that very little of it is really pushing them intellectually. Even just the insistence that everything has to be geared toward a standardized test so bankrupts the educational experience. ... It's as if we believe we can punish our way to success.

Particularly in those districts serving our most-vulnerable kids, all we keep hearing about is, "We gotta get the reading scores up. We gotta get the math scores up." With that particular mandate, it's very difficult to do more-innovative, more-creative—not just teaching, but assessments. Why does the assessment have to only be a test? Why couldn't it be a performance? Why couldn't it be an exhibit? That's exactly what happens to kids in private schools—they get all kinds of opportunities to display their knowledge and skills.

I've seen critics saying that culturally relevant teaching is a rebrand or a part of critical race theory. What do you make of that?

Well, I have to laugh at that. I really do. Critical race theory doesn't have anything to do with K-12 curriculum. At all. It's interesting because Christopher Rufo from the Manhattan Institute said in his own words that we're just going to make the whole brand toxic. Guess what else they said is critical race theory? Social-emotional learning. It's everything. If I don't like it, it's critical race theory. It's probably feminism. It's probably special education. It's probably bilingual education. It's whatever I don't like.

I just think it's very sad that people are not reading deep enough to see that they are being misled, and that this is misinformation that is being fed to them.

You're one of the first scholars to apply critical race theory to education policy research. Was your work with culturally relevant pedagogy informed by critical race theory tenets?

No. I started that work earlier. Culturally relevant pedagogy, I wrote that proposal in '88, it got funded by the Spencer Foundation in '89. I didn't start reading critical race theory until

‘91 when I got to Wisconsin, and I didn’t publish anything until ‘95.

Yet some of the legislation that’s been introduced could limit culturally relevant teaching in schools. How do you respond to that?

The attack on anything that allows more participation and moves us toward equity is going full force. I don’t know that there’s anything that will persuade someone who is convinced that somehow they’re not getting a fair shake. That giving someone else an opportunity diminishes them. I mean, that’s the mindset. If you do this with these kids, then you’re not giving my kids [the same opportunity], or you’re indoctrinating my kids. Those sentiments really reflect the larger public debate, and what’s starting to happen is, no matter what the issue is, we have people who decided they’re going to take the opposite side. ... It’s hard to have an actual deliberative debate if people don’t even know what they’re talking about.

So where does that leave schools that are trying to do this work?

I think that schools that are segregated for the most part—and unfortunately 60 percent of Black and brown kids do attend segregated schools—will be fine because nobody cares what we teach them. We [as a society] really don’t. We spend little time in their classrooms. The only thing we care about with these kids is that they’re not out in the streets hurting somebody. That’s our image of those kids.

The place that becomes difficult is the place where I think the work is most needed, and that is in segregated white schools. Schools in the suburbs, schools serving the wealthiest kids. Unfortunately, what happens is we avoid these topics. We avoid these issues, and then [the students] go to college, and they’re confronted with people from all over and experience people who’ve had different experiences. And then they’re angry because, why didn’t I know this? Why didn’t anybody tell me this?

I think a perfect example of the conflation of the notion of critical race theory and “anything I don’t like” is [the 1619 Project](#). That woman [author Nikole Hannah-Jones] has nothing to do with critical race theory whatsoever. And in fact, nobody was [saying it was] until someone decided we’re just going to put this in here with all the stuff we don’t like.

I did a talk for Stanford about this debate about 1619 versus the 1776 [Report, released by a commission appointed by then-President Donald Trump that emphasizes “patriotic education”]. And I said if I were still teaching the adolescents U.S. history, they’d have to read both documents. I don’t have a problem reading a document that disagrees with my perspective. But we’ve got to be able to look at, what does the evidence say? What is it that is so objectionable about one versus the other? That’s how you develop this critical consciousness. The idea is not to have students come up believing what you believe, but it is to have them in a place where they can defend what they believe.

Culturally relevant teaching is probably one of the biggest [drivers] of parent involvement and parent engagement. While the debate is about, “you’re not letting parents have their say,” culturally relevant pedagogy has always encouraged parents and community members to participate in schools and classrooms. If that’s something people feel like they’ve been walled off from, culturally relevant pedagogy is not what’s done it for them. I’ve always said that parents should be in classrooms and engaged in what’s happening and raising questions and participating and sharing.



Madeline Will

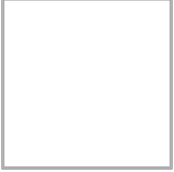
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