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The Importance of 'White Students Having Black Teachers': Gloria Ladson-Billings on Education

By [Larry Ferlazzo](#) on [February 20, 2018 11:30 AM](#)

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Editor's Note: This is the second post in a series called "A Look Back." In it, I'll be highlighting a particularly insightful response an educator has provided in a past column.

This first post in this series was: '[Stop Hiding Behind the Factory Model of Teaching](#)': [Rick Wormeli on Differentiation](#).

Today's "A Look Back" shares Gloria Ladson-Billings' response to the question:

What impact can having more teachers of color have on our schools & what needs to be done to make it happen?

The full original column, which also included responses from Travis J. Bristol and Terrenda Corisa White, was headlined [The Teachers of Color "Disappearance Crisis"](#). You can also listen to a 10-minute conversation with Professor Ladson-Billings at [my BAM! Radio Show](#).

You might also be interested in a collection of previous posts on [Race & Gender Challenges](#).

Gloria Ladson-Billings retired from the University of Wisconsin-Madison last month. She is the newly elected president of the National Academy of Education and a senior fellow at the Learning Policy Institute:

"What if We Had More Black Teachers?"

Almost every conversation about the remedy for Black-White academic achievement disparities includes a recommendation for recruiting and retaining more Black teachers. For those who do not know, the number of Black teachers has been on a steady decline for the past half century. Today Black teachers comprise less than 7 percent of the U.S. public school teaching force.

If you look at the inverse relationship between the number of Black school students and the number of Black teachers, increasing the number of Black teachers seems a logical and necessary strategy. Unfortunately, there is no empirical evidence to support it. Indeed, if having Black teachers spelled academic success for Black children, Detroit, Washington, and Atlanta would be the highest performing school districts for Black students and we know that is not the case. The solution to achievement disparities is multi-faceted and complex—the skin color of the teacher alone is not the answer. However, increasing the number of Black teachers may address some other issues.

One study did suggest that although there were no significant differences in the test scores of students with Black versus White teachers, Black teachers were more likely to persist with Black students. That persistence could signal just the boost some students may need to continue on toward grade completion and/or graduation. But the "Black teacher effect" may be something other than a quantifiable indicator.

I cannot imagine my own schooling without the Black teachers who nurtured me in my de facto segregated elementary school. Their prodding and insistence that I was capable prepared me for the hostile desegregated environment I encountered in junior high school and later the cut-throat, dog-eat-dog milieu of my highly competitive high school. I cannot imagine my career in the academy had I chosen one of the predominately White colleges/universities into which I was admitted. Instead, I went to a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) where my mostly Black professors not only exposed me to an expansive liberal arts education but also taught me some of the nuances associated with operating successfully in the White work world. Incidentally, I share some of those lessons with my own college students—especially first generation college students who may not have the social capital to facily negotiate middle class workspaces.

I do know the experience of walking into schools (especially elementary and middle schools) where Black students ask me with

eagerness, "Are you a teacher here?" And, I recognize the disappointment that falls over those same faces when I shake my head, "no." Their longing for a teacher that "looks like them" is palpable.

- Gloria Ladson-Billings in Education Week
Teacher

I do know the experience of walking into schools (especially elementary and middle schools) where Black students ask me with eagerness, "Are you a teacher here?" And, I recognize the disappointment that falls over those same faces when I shake my head, "no." Their longing for a teacher that "looks like them" is palpable. The current statistics indicate that class after class of children—Black, Native American, Latino, and Asian—go through entire school careers without ever having a teacher of their same race or ethnicity.

But, I want to suggest that there is something that may be even more important than Black students having Black teachers and that is White students having Black teachers! It is important for White students to encounter Black people who are knowledgeable and hold some level of authority over them. Black students ALREADY know that Black people have a wide range of capabilities. They see them in their homes, their neighborhoods, and their churches. They are the Sunday School teachers, their Scout Leaders, their coaches, and family members. But what opportunities do White students have to see and experience Black competence?

In my many years as a university professor I have had so many White students who revealed that I was the first African American teacher they had ever had at any level. And, many confessed to being somewhat surprised that I was also the "best" (that's debatable) teacher they ever had. They seemed amazed that I had both a wide and deep knowledge of a variety of subject areas and knew how to encourage and draw more out of them than they thought possible. My hope is that their experience with me makes them walk into classrooms filled with Black children and say, "there could be doctors, lawyers, engineers, professors, inventors, and teachers in here," rather than assume that their black skins limited their intellectual possibilities.

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- Gladys Ladson-Billings in Education Week Teacher

In 1935 W. E. B. DuBois published an article in the Journal of Negro Education titled, "Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?" Of course at the time of his writing all Black students in the South were attending separate schools. There was some integration in northern schools but since the schools reflected the neighborhoods it was not usual for schools to be largely Black or largely White. What was different was we did not have sprawling suburbs so some schools that sat on the boundary between Black and White neighborhoods served both communities. My high school was such a place that was almost equally split between African American and Jewish students.

By the late 1980s more and more Black communities were isolated and had limited resources. At this time, there was a cry for Afrocentric schools —i.e. turning segregated schools into schools with an expressed purpose of educating Black students from a "Black" perspective. Many felt this was only possible if all, or certainly most, of the teachers were Black. Interesting, DuBois' conclusion was the "Negro" needed neither segregated nor integrated schools. They needed "good" schools. So, in a shameless appropriation of DuBois I would argue that Black children do not need Black teachers or White teachers—they need "good" teachers!

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