



## SPEAKER SPOTLIGHT

Gloria Ladson-Billings

# WE NEED TO DO A BETTER JOB TALKING ABOUT RACE

*The Learning Professional* recently spoke with Gloria Ladson-Billings, a keynote speaker for Learning Forward's 2021 Virtual Annual Conference. She previewed themes she'll be sharing with us in December about culturally relevant teaching in a COVID and post-COVID world.

Ladson-Billings is the former Kellner Family Distinguished 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.

The recipient of many awards for her work on culturally relevant pedagogy and success for marginalized students, she was elected to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences in 2018. She is a past president of the American Educational Research Association and the author of the critically acclaimed books *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* and *Crossing Over to Canaan: The Journey of New Teachers in Diverse Classrooms*.

### What do you tell educators about why it is important to talk about race?

I start by asking, "What do you believe education is meant to do?" Usually, people will say it should help us all improve and make us better. I push them to talk about what that means. Eventually, someone will say it means that superficial differences don't make a difference in student success.

So then I ask, "What if I told you I could predict your success by your ZIP code?" Eventually, they get where I'm going with this. We are allowing these superficial differences to make a difference. If that's not what we want, we have to address it.

I also point out that, as people who are participating in a deliberative democracy, talking about things is the way we get the work done. The Constitution came about as a result of talking about democracy, not just wishing for it. It took hard conversations, deliberating over every single world. This is our mechanism. We need to talk.

The discussion about race is not new. So why are we so exercised about it now? Because our children have brought this to our doorsteps. They've asked us questions: "Why was that man killed in the street?" "Why are people marching?" "Why do we have to say Black lives matter — do they matter?"

That discussion didn't come from schools. It couldn't have, because school wasn't in session. It came from the environment our kids are living in, what Carlos Cortes called the societal curriculum. He said that if we don't teach it, the world in which they exist will teach it to them.

That's why our children raised the questions. And they started telling us, "This isn't right, this isn't fair." While kids may not understand all the fine points of justice, they do understand the notion of fairness. And although the conversation didn't come from schools, the immediate response among educators was that we have to do a better job of talking about this.



**The Constitution came about as a result of talking about democracy, not just wishing for it. It took hard conversations, deliberating over every single world. This is our mechanism. We need to talk.**

**What advice do you have for education leaders who are navigating heated conversations about race?**

I've told my students for 40 years: You have to know the community in which you are working. When educators do this work skillfully, they say to their community, "This is a change we want to make, and we need your input."

You have to build the relationship before you can go anywhere with anti-racism. And you have to set the parameters, to say, "Here are the things I hope to take up, and the things I hope you will have a conversation about, too."

But it's also important to understand that many of the people we see protesting at school board meetings right now aren't parents in those districts. They're activists and operatives. We need to really know who are the parents in our communities.

It's also important to remember that we should start with what's important to students. We can't just come in with our agenda because the things that we care about might not be the things that students care about.

Here's an example of how to make the conversation about race meaningful to students and families, from a teacher I worked with in North Carolina. He asked students to go home and find out who in their families had benefitted from the GI bill. When they came back and discussed it, they noticed that all the white kids and none of the Black kids had stories about how their families had benefitted.

So he said, "Now let's go back and look at what the GI bill says." That was a powerful way to teach about discrimination. He didn't start with a lecture. He started with the students and the community.

**To engage in culturally relevant teaching, you recommend that educators do all three pillars of your framework: focus on students' academic success, develop their cultural competence, and increase their critical consciousness. How**



**2021 VIRTUAL ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

Learning Forward's 2021 Virtual Annual Conference is Dec. 5-7. To register or get more information, call 800-727-7288 or visit [conference.learningforward.org](https://conference.learningforward.org).

**can educators weave those pieces together?**

Teachers need to understand the big picture about the work they're doing, not just how to get through the work on Monday. Here's an example of that, from a 4th-grade teacher. At the beginning of the year, she took pictures of every one of her students standing in the exact same place and made a bulletin board with the 25 pictures next to each other.

She had the kids move closer to the board from the back of the room and asked them every five steps, "What do you see?" From far away, they said that everybody looked the same. As they got closer, they saw more and more differences. Her point was that that's how humanity is — from the long view, we're very much the same, but the closer you get and the better you see us, you can see our differences.

Then the teacher said, "All year, we'll be grappling with these ideas of what it means to be the same and different." Those are big-picture concepts that are important for academic learning. Students will use that concept in chemistry when they talk about how bases and acids are similar and different and in biology when they compare mammals and amphibians.

And she brought in culture and the concept of cultural differences while she did it, so she built cultural competence. Later, she built on that to ask students what's different about living in different

places — for example, about Madison versus Milwaukee — to help students see that where you live shapes who you are and how you are in the world.

To introduce the critical consciousness piece, a teacher today could say, "What's different on the Gulf Coast than where we live? What's different now because of Hurricane Ida?" From there, she can ask, "What do you want to do about it? How can we help?" That's a critical consciousness question.

**That example shows how important it is to engage deeply and thoughtfully to do this kind of teaching. How can we help educators build those habits?**

I always ask teachers to do self-archaeology to learn about themselves and who they are in this work. Don't worry that you don't speak Spanish or Farsi. What *do* you speak, and why do you speak it? How long has it been spoken in your family? Doing that digging is important for teachers to decenter themselves and learn that the way they see the world is not the only one way to see it.

When I ask my college students "What is your culture?," they often say, "We don't really have a culture. We're just normal." It's hard for them to really look at themselves and understand that not everyone does things the same way. To do that digging is the heaviest lift that most teachers will have.

Also, teachers should always be asking themselves, "Why am I doing this, and why am I doing it this way?" That should become a driving question as an educator. We have to be much more mindful of the decisions we're making because they have consequences for students.

**That's more important than ever now, isn't it?**

This pandemic provides us with some opportunities, and I don't want us to squander them. It's the first time we've been asked to come to a full stop. We should not just go back to normal. Let's go to new. ■