

## Book Review

---

*Crossing Over to Canaan: The Journey Of New Teachers in Diverse Classrooms*, by Gloria Ladson-Billings. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001. 192 pp. ISBN: 0787950017.

DOI: 10.1177/0013124505274557

*Crossing Over to Canaan* is a report on the Teach for Diversity (TFD) teacher education program. The program was designed by Gloria Ladson-Billings, the author of the book, and her colleagues to assist teacher education students in learning how to work effectively “in diverse learning environments” (p. 24). The introduction provides a rationale for TFD—that of a need for change in teacher education programs that will adequately prepare students to teach in urban schools. The metaphor *crossing over to Canaan* is used to describe “the passing of leadership from the old to the young” (p. xii). Ladson-Billings compares Moses in the Bible, who passed his position of leadership over to Joshua to lead the people of Israel into the promised land of Canaan, to a small group of “modern-day Joshuas” (p. xii) who have assumed the responsibility of teaching urban children.

The TFD program arose from concerns on the part of teacher educators during the 1980s that they were not showing teacher education students how to practically implement the theories of multicultural education, that students were not receiving comprehensive and coherent academic education and training, and that a discrepancy exists between theory and practical experience. Discussions among teacher educators at the University of Wisconsin–Madison grew into the 1-year TFD graduate certificate program, which focused on training teachers to work specifically in diverse urban classroom settings and on building community among teacher education students.

### THE NEED FOR CHANGE IN TEACHER EDUCATION

Ladson-Billings describes traditional teacher education programs, which consist predominately of White faculty members, as ones that have not made the necessary changes needed to adequately prepare students to teach the

diverse groups of children that exist within urban classroom settings. She states that teacher education programs need to focus on a more holistic approach to training teachers in how to work with diverse student populations in urban schools.

The book presents a number of reasons for resistance to change: a lack of understanding on the part of teacher educators of current school and classroom situations, simply because their training and experience was far different from what teachers experience today; a realization that change is difficult and would move teacher educators out of their comfort zone and more into schools and communities; and a belief that the status quo is sufficient for training today's future educators.

### TEACHER PREPARATION

The analogy of a cross-country trip is used to describe the teacher education process. The author explains that the road on which individuals travel toward a teaching career can be filled with tollbooths such as "competency tests, content examinations, . . . performance assessments" (p. 2), and long stretches of seemingly endless roadway. Likewise, she sees the side roads and scenery of the teacher education experience as meaningful adventures that adequately prepare future urban classroom teachers to meet the tasks and challenges they will face.

The first chapter focuses on the need for teacher education programs to adequately prepare students to work with diverse populations. Ladson-Billings describes diversity today as more interwoven into society than in the past and states that ideas about diversity "are broader and more complex" (p. 14) and involve immigrants from a variety of countries, with linguistic, ethnic, economic, and religious differences. She further states that mental and emotional problems interact with these various conditions to create unique situations in which students are usually labeled "at-risk."

According to Ladson-Billings, teaching well in the diverse classrooms of today requires a commitment to student success and to the development of positive student self-esteem, and a focus on the larger community. She sees the high teacher turnover in urban schools and the lack of professional support as hindrances and describes the feeling of failure, resignation, and hiring of new teachers as a cycle that continually repeats itself. She makes an important point that "inexperience . . . [does not equal] incompetence" (p. 18).

Ladson-Billings offers some criticisms of teacher education programs, including the political requirements of teacher education students that dis-

rupt the flow of courses and diminish the teaching profession by offering a disconnected curriculum. She provides a number of suggestions that she believes would ensure a high-quality teacher education program, including the establishment of certain points in time at which students would be judged as competent to continue or be terminated and of flexibility in practical experience scheduling.

### STUDENTS, CULTURE, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

A significant part of the book is chapter 2, in which the program participants for the report are introduced. The personal aspects of TFD are evident, as Ladson-Billings presents the group of "teacher-learners" (p. 34) in terms of race or ethnicity, family background, undergraduate minor, and prior work experiences. Use of the participants' own words to express their thoughts on education and teaching helps set the stage for further narratives in later chapters.

In the third chapter, Ladson-Billings discusses the responsibilities schools have of meeting the physical and emotional needs of students, as well as academic needs. She mentions academic differences between students with low and high socioeconomic status, offers some hypotheses as to why some students do not achieve, and sees part of teachers' jobs as helping "students *choose* academic achievement in the face of powerful and competing alternatives" (p. 60). She also offers some worthwhile definitions of achievement, including clear academic goals, classroom time spent on teaching and learning, and teacher assessment of student knowledge and progress.

The theme of chapter 4 is cultural competence, which the author defines as "the ability of students to grow in understanding and respect of their own cultures" (p. 78). She contrasts cultural competence with the distance created between themselves and their own culture when students of color successfully integrate themselves into the traditional American education system. She also points out that White teachers have little understanding of the cultures of many of the students they teach and of what it is like to exist in a school culture that is different from one's own.

Ladson-Billings sees the additive multicultural curriculum that teacher education students receive as less than adequate in training teachers to work with diverse groups of students. The TFD program focused on helping students understand how culture affects their actions and beliefs. She outlines a number of cultural competence indicators, which consist of an understanding of "the role of culture in education" (p. 98), a willingness to assume

responsibility for learning about and understanding the cultures of students and to become connected to the communities in which they teach, and the inclusion of students' cultures within the curriculum.

Chapter 5 focuses on creating school communities that involve themselves in social justice projects. One goal of TFD was to help teacher education students see the role of community service as an essential part of their education and practical training. Students were required to participate in some type of community service during their first summer in the program. They continued with this idea during the school year but were also allowed to create their own projects that were beneficial and meaningful to them. Students were also required to complete a master's paper or project related to their experiences.

A number of "indicators of sociopolitical consciousness" (p. 120) are outlined in the chapter. These include knowledge of the sociopolitical context in which one lives and teaches, a vested interest in the school community, the ability to make the curriculum relevant to the lives of students, and the realization that student learning is connected to the lives of teachers.

### **REVIEWING THE PAST AND ENVISIONING THE FUTURE**

Interspersed throughout the book are personal narratives of the TFD students' experiences, along with their reflections on these experiences. The author's own accounts of her early teaching experiences create interesting parallels between the creator of the program and the students with whom she worked. The struggles, frustrations, and successes of teachers are given a universal perspective. Ladson-Billings clearly presents and reinforces the idea that reflection is an important and essential part of learning.

Included in chapter 6 is a summary of what Ladson-Billings and her colleagues learned as a result of implementing the program. These concepts centered on the connection between teacher and community, the importance of mentoring and participation in intellectual work and discourse, and on the creative aspects and approaches to teacher education. The author also discusses the limitations that existed within the program: the difficulties of dealing with the complexities of schools and teaching and of translating social issues theory into practice. Her reflections on the program include beliefs that TFD was too intense and did not allow students to adequately reflect on their experiences, that the program lacked formal training in research methodology, and that it did not include cooperating teachers in planning and

course design as originally intended. Overall, however, she sees the program as a positive way to create a new generation of exceptional teachers who are highly qualified to serve children from diverse backgrounds.

### SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS

Ladson-Billings integrates a review of related literature and her ideas on change in teacher education, teacher preparation, and the social and cultural aspects of education with personal experiences of teacher education students. This brings meaning to the basic concepts presented in the book and provides an example of the complexity of applying educational theory to practice. The realities of classroom life are confronted by the TFD students and the author, which illustrates the universality of teaching and learning. The book also presents the idea of teacher as learner, as evidenced by personal dialogue and reflection.

*Crossing Over to Canaan* serves teachers and future teachers by emphasizing the importance of professional reflection on students' behaviors and experiences in the classroom and how these behaviors and experiences relate to teacher beliefs, attitudes, and practices. The book also serves teacher educators by questioning a number of long-held beliefs about teacher education programs, by presenting the idea that cultural differences do exist in teaching and learning settings, and by offering a number of suggestions on how to adequately prepare future teachers. It seeks to provide those at the university level with an opportunity to critically examine teacher education in the context of an increasingly diverse society; to creatively consider alternative approaches; and to examine a program model that offers a different perspective on multicultural education, the relationship of theory to practice, and the place of personal reflection and discourse in the overall education picture.

Christine M. Kerfoot  
*University of the Pacific*