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Policy Dialogue: Black Teachers of the Past, Present, and Future

Gloria Ladson-Billings and James D. Anderson

In the second half of the twentieth century, the ranks of Black teachers and school administrators declined precipitously. Today, less than 7 percent of American teachers are Black. This loss has had a number of consequences for schools and communities, but perhaps especially for Black students. As recent research has found, Black students benefit socially and academically from having a Black teacher, are less likely to be suspended or expelled, and are more likely to enroll in college.

For this inaugural policy dialogue, the HEQ editors asked Gloria Ladson-Billings and James D. Anderson to reflect on the past, present, and future of the Black teacher corps. Their wide-ranging exchange explores the various roles of educators, the legacy of segregation, the role of policy, and the Black experience. They close with a provocative list of research questions for emerging and established scholars to consider.

Keywords: African American education, Black teachers, education policy, racial uplift, desegregation

GLORIA LADSON-BILLINGS: I always worry about the way we've flattened something out. We'll use a term like *teachers* without recognizing that Black teachers had a particularly different experience historically—and perhaps a different mission—as they went into this work. It's the conflating of the notion of, say, a woman or a teacher without looking at the specificity of what it meant to be a *Black* teacher. And the role of a Black teacher in the Black community is so different than, say, a White teacher.

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Black teachers served a function of reading legal documents for people, helping people with evictions, helping them with medical issues, and negotiating for them. And community members saw teachers everywhere. They saw them in church. They saw them in the grocery stores. They were in the barbershops, in the beauty shops. There was an intimacy that no longer exists because one of the so-called "upsides" of desegregation is that now people with some means can move into "better" neighborhoods. But what happens is you leave these poor and working-class folks to fend for themselves, and they no longer see their teachers. Their Black teachers are driving in from the suburbs the same way their White teachers are.

JAMES D. ANDERSON: You're right, and another thing lost in this transition from the way things were is the respect that carried over in all of those spaces. It created a kind of community in which the educators themselves had enormous respect from their students and from their parents, and that carried over into the classroom. When you were told or asked to do something, you were asked by someone you had a tremendous respect for, that you had a great deal of understanding and knowledge about—because you saw them in your community, and you tried your best to live up to their expectations.

I have a sense that that's changing. If you don't live in the community, and you come in and leave, I don't know if that carries over in the same way.

GLORIA LADSON-BILLINGS: It also matters that we see so few Black teachers today. There's just a precipitous decline. When we lost that large number of Black teachers in the South post-*Brown*, it created a vacuum. Black children headed off to White schools, but Black teachers did not go with them.

I had an experience at Chapel Hill-Carrboro school district [in North Carolina]. They had a panel of Black adults, all maybe in their fifties, who were the first class who integrated Chapel Hill-Carrboro schools. And even at that age of about fifty, these stories were so painful. People were still choking back tears. They said, "They sent us up here by ourselves. Our teachers didn't come with us. Our principals didn't come with us. We had been state champions, in basketball, and in track, and all of those trophies stayed back in our old schools." I'll never forget, this one man said, "It's as if we had no history; like we just emerged here in Chapel Hill." I never thought about it in that way, but without that history, without that rooting, who are you?

JAMES D. ANDERSON: I had a similar experience in Charleston, South Carolina, talking with the first group of African American students

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who desegregated the schools in Charleston. There was one woman and her sister—their father at the time was the head of Charleston's NAACP—and at one point she talked about the school that she went to, the all-Black school, which had great teachers, and a great record of academic success for their students, and she wanted to point out that they were not going to the White school for better academic education, as some people like to think. Finally, someone asked, "Well, why did you go?" She said, "Because my father felt that it was a question of freedom and a question about equal rights—that the fact that we could be denied solely on the basis of the color of our skin was wrong and immoral. And so they encouraged us to go for those reasons; they never said go get a better education or go get new teachers." These people went on to talk about the pain that they suffered from not having the teachers that they had grown to know and to love—they paid a tremendous price.

Gloria Ladson-Billings: This deep commitment that I think Black teachers have had to the Black community writ large is something I think is understudied and not well understood. Historically, it hasn't just been about teaching your class in your school. For Black teachers, it has always been about the impact on our children and our community.

I've written about a woman who really influenced me greatly—my fifth-grade teacher. She was the most subversive teacher I'd ever had because she's the one who introduced me to W. E. B. Du Bois. When she told us about Du Bois—a Black man who got a PhD from Harvard—we looked at each other in disbelief. We just couldn't imagine it. She wasn't denigrating what you brought with you—your language, your customs, your personal stuff. Her goal was to extend and expand our world.

When I became a teacher, I ended up in South Philadelphia because the School District of Philadelphia was under a desegregation order, not just for students but for teachers. So I ended up in South Philadelphia, teaching middle school with White working-class kids and a smattering of Black kids who were bused in from West Philly. Sure enough, I got called the N-word so many times—by students and their parents.

One of the things that I remembered from my fifth-grade teacher was the importance of learning your community. In the midst of my first year, one of my student's parents passed away. In the class that I had him in, we collected a little money—I rounded it up to maybe $20, put the $20 in a card, and I decided to take the card to the house. And I didn't know the tradition of the Irish wake. The deceased is lying there, people are drinking whiskey, they're telling stories, they're laughing.

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And something just told me—and it might have been that sort of influence of these very professional Black teachers I had—to just stay. I stayed the entire time for the wake. And the fact that I stayed ran through that community like wildfire and totally changed my relationship with them because I honored their tradition.

I think deep understanding of communities is the piece of what Black teachers are bringing, and that is often missing in the analysis of what Black teachers do.

JAMES D. ANDERSON: I don't often tell the story of how I went to college. But I was a senior, and even as valedictorian, I didn't have any plans to go to college. None whatsoever. And I was actually in line getting ready to give the valedictorian's address, and Mr. Hughes, who was my homeroom teacher in twelfth grade, came up to me and said, "Can I see you in my classroom?" And I was scared to death because when I went to school, when they pulled you out of line they didn't pull you out of line to give you a present.

In his classroom he said, "Look, I want you to know that before you give your address, they're going to announce that you have a scholarship to go to Stillman College. And I didn't want you to get overjoyed and forget your speech." That's the moment I knew I was going to college. He went to Stillman College and talked the dean into giving me a scholarship, and it was actually handwritten. But again, those are the kinds of things that those Black teachers would do for you. Some people might call it nurturing, but it's how they saw their jobs. Look, I've taught you math, or another subject, and now the next step is for me to do whatever I can to make sure you have an opportunity. This is how you address the opportunity gap.

When schools were desegregated after *Brown*, and thousands of Black teachers were fired, no one walked into the vacuum to fill those roles. As a result, generations of kids suffered because they didn't have someone who would go the extra mile to provide an opportunity—it was not part of the job description.

GLORIA LADSON-BILLINGS: One thing I want to make sure we get into is the fact that because segregation was so virulent, Black teachers who wanted advanced education couldn't get it in the South. They'd gone to HBCUs [historically black colleges and universities] to get a teaching certificate, but at that time few HBCUs offered advanced degrees. And even though they were teaching in the state—they were state residents, they were paying state taxes—they could not go to the state university to get a master's degree. So they end up going north. They went to places like Teachers College, Penn, Illinois, Wisconsin, to get, at least on the face of it, better educations than

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their White counterparts. But even these better credentials didn't give them access to teaching in better-resourced schools.

James D. Anderson: I recall a study in the state of Virginia at the time of the *Brown* decision, when they were thinking about whether they would dismiss African American teachers; they discovered that African American teachers had credentials that were more advanced. They had earned them from better institutions because of the Jim Crow policy forcing them out of state.

I think there's a narrative out there which assumes that African American teachers were not as well prepared, but that narrative does not realize the actual consequences of Jim Crow that forced them beyond the BA to go and get master's degrees in the best institutions in America, and then to return to the South with those credentials and with that substantive knowledge.

Gloria Ladson-Billings: Since then, there's been a tremendous amount of deskilling among Black teachers. And simultaneously they faced new barriers to entry.

James D. Anderson: I was certified in Chicago and did my teaching practice at Marshall High School. While I was in Chicago, in contrast to what I was accustomed to growing up in Alabama and in the rest of the South, where our teachers were the sole teachers, almost all of the Black teachers in Chicago were referred to as "FTBs." I found out FTB meant "substitute on a full-time basis." They were not in the tenure system, which meant that the union contracts, the raises, none of that applied to them. And it was only when they threatened to form a separate Black union in 1969 or 1970 that they started to bring Black educators into the union. So you had two teaching forces in the schools in Chicago: Black teachers on a substitute on a full-time basis and White teachers.

At that time, when you were certified to teach in Illinois, Chicago had its own separate certification. And to get certified in Chicago, you had to go through a test that included a language test. A lot of African American teachers were denied their credentials based upon what officials said was their "Southern dialect." They had to go before the board so they could hear you speak, and then in the end they leaned over and asked, "And what party do you belong to?"

Gloria Ladson-Billings: I think it was in Alabama, where they started implementing basic proficiency testing, and a huge number of Black teachers were suddenly deemed to be incompetent. They could no longer hold on to their licenses. Since then, we've gone on to Praxis

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and edTPA, and fewer and fewer Black teacher candidates are successful.

In the places that produced the largest number of Black teachers, the HBCUs, we're seeing teacher education programs shut down. HBCUs are struggling to stay afloat fiscally and are putting so many more of their resources toward higher-paying fields. They're opening engineering schools or computer science programs, because the private sector will pour money into those.

If you just look at the demographics, the prospects that we will increase the Black teaching force are not good.

JAMES D. ANDERSON: I think this is where colleges of education can take some bold steps. The issue we're talking about now, it's almost a liability—the wholesale dismissal of African American teachers from the teaching profession.

The remedy should be the wholesale admission of African American teacher education applicants. By wholesale, I don't mean you just open the door. I mean, you have programs like the one that Wisconsin has just started, which will provide tuition, room, board, and the support services to get students through.

GLORIA LADSON-BILLINGS: But we need better strategies for recruitment. Some years ago there was a young African American girl who earned a perfect score on the SAT. Everybody was after her: Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, the University of Chicago. She ended up going to Florida A&M. When the papers interviewed her, they asked, "Why would you choose Florida A&M?" And she said, "Because the president of Florida A&M flew up here to my house, and sat on my couch, and told my mother, 'If she comes to Florida A&M, we're going to take care of her.' And that's all my mother wanted to hear." So again, we see that professional, personal side.

We have an entire generation that doesn't know our history. They don't know the things that we would expect in our community, let alone have a teacher that would take them by the hand and say, "Here's a possibility for you."

JAMES D. ANDERSON: We didn't have that problem because the teachers, as well as parents and community, were constantly reminding us of what came before. Long before Black History Month, they had Negro History Week. And when we had Negro History Week, it would culminate in an entire school event—all twelve grades in the auditorium. The teachers would sing, there were poems. Because we were in Alabama— Tuskegee wasn't far away—George Washington

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Carver, Booker T. Washington, and they would always remind us: "These are the shoulders you're standing on."

Now that transmission of culture—history, politics, social movements—is less assured, so many young people have been disconnected from all that has gone before them.

The guidance that we got from our Black teachers rebounded and reverberated in so many ways. You wake up one day and realize all that was given to you. At the time, as I said earlier, we just thought it was normal. It was just in the water. But no, it was cultivated. It was in the choices that Black teachers made. It was an understanding of professionalism, of the kind of moral and social guidance that they were supposed to give you.

Gloria Ladson-Billings: That's part of the work I did on the education debt, which I've called the *moral debt*. That's the one part that wasn't empirical—I can't quantify it, but I know it's there. There are some things that are just *wrong*. What I believe Black teachers bring to the table is a reminder of the moral obligation that you have. We owe each other, we are accountable to one another. And there is none of that in the way in which teacher education is even offered today. It's highly individualistic: "You're the teacher, you make the decisions, you say who passes, you say who failed." And that's not the way in which Black teachers were actually approaching the work. They saw a moral obligation to ensure that their students were successful, because their families and the community were counting on that success. Once you pull these teachers out of the community, they begin to see the kids as unredeemable. I think that's the challenge that we are facing.

The historical experiences of Black teachers should inform present policy. Most teacher education programs and school districts are desperate to recruit and retain more teachers of color, especially Black teachers. However, few of these institutions look to the history of Black teachers to address this concern. Historically, Black people have chosen teaching as a profession because of its dual missions of racial uplift and career advancement. A careful look at the role of HBCUs may illuminate the field when it comes to increasing the numbers of Black teacher candidates. Interesting, alternative certification programs and charter schools have been more aggressive in seeking out Black teacher candidates. The promise of shorter routes to teaching coupled with guaranteed placements in schools and communities serving Black students have made becoming a teacher through alternative routes more attractive.

James D. Anderson: What do policymakers need to know from historians to improve their understanding of the present challenges and opportunities regarding race and education?

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Gloria Ladson-Billings: Policymakers need to examine the historical patterns of Black education disparities. Since enslavement, Blacks were prohibited from receiving education, and subsequent to Emancipation there was no immediate mandate to educate Black children, especially in the South. As we moved to compensatory attendance, the historical record shows that Black children were often relegated to substandard, poorly resourced schools without fully certified teachers. The long history of race, education, and law demonstrates the ongoing battle for educational access and equal opportunity. Landmark cases such as *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), *McLaurin v. Oklahoma Board of Regents* (1950), *Brown v. Board of Education I, II* (1954, 1955), *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* (1973), *Regents of University of California v. Bakke* (1978), *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003), *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007), and *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2013) all underscore how hard Black people have had to fight to gain access to quality education at both PK-12 and collegiate levels.

There are several questions at the intersection of history and policy that scholars might pursue:

- At what levels should policy be aimed to address education disparities between Black and White students? Local? State? Federal?
- What is the role or potential impact of reparations in helping to correct these inequities? In the 1960s, the federal government looked to affirmative action as a form of redress, and studies like Bowen and Bok's *The Shape of the River* assert that the policy helped to almost single-handedly create the Black middle class.
- What can we learn from protest movements that may inform our way forward?
- How do we address the resurgence of anti-Black sentiment evident in hate groups, militia, and national politics that underscores national divisiveness?

James D. Anderson: I'd be interested in scholars pursuing a few more questions as well:

- Vindictive desegregation plans resulted in the wholesale dismissal of tens of thousands of Black teachers. How do we redress this wrong and remedy the desperate need for Black teachers in our K-12 schools?
- In the case of *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* (1973), the US Supreme Court held that unequal funding of

public education based on property taxes is not an unconstitutional violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause. Given this ruling, how can contemporary parents and children in property-poor districts achieve equality of opportunity in public education?

- The recent scholarship on *ethnoburbs* addresses suburban residential areas with significant clusters of ethnic minority populations. Do the rising ethnoburbs offer a new promise of suburban school desegregation?
- School segregation and inequality are the products of systemic racism in our political economy. Are K-12 schools constrained to being the "handmaiden" of systemic racism, or might they play a role in its elimination?

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