Having an Identity and Standing for a Mission: Curing Racism

Toward Humanity and Justice: The Writings of Kenneth B. Clark, Scholar of the 1954* Brown v. Board of Education *Decision. Woody Klein (Ed.), with foreword by John Hope Franklin. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004. 290 pp., $79.95 (cloth). ISBN 0-275-97509-6.

***Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning After* Brown v. Board of Education.** Catherine Prendergast, with foreword by Gloria Ladson-Billings. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003. 205 pp., $27.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-8093-2524-1.

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As a child of urban Chicago, I entered graduate school in 1962 because my own family history had convinced me that advanced educational attainment was important for a Black woman. No amount of education would be too much; it was all good. Therefore, during the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, I entered graduate school. In the summer of 1963, I coded data and drafted my M.A. thesis, getting information from the news media about the historic and grand "March on Washington." By March 1968, I had completed my doctoral thesis in human development and clinical psychology. The first post-PhD job that I landed, at the Yale University Child Study Center, involved action research evaluation with two public schools in New Haven, Connecticut. In connection with this early study of what is today known as the Comer School Development Program (Comer, 2004), I immediately began to read everything I could find about the education of children, especially the education of lower-income African American children. Perhaps one of the most memorable books I read in that 1968–1969 school year was Kenneth Clark's *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power,* originally published in 1965 while I was doing my clinical psychology internship.

In fact, although I had been a student of psychology since my third year of college (1960–1961) at the University of Chicago, my first encounter with Kenneth B. Clark was this book, in which he carefully discussed, using New York's Harlem community as exemplar, the accountability of public schools and communities for the academic learning of poor children. He emphasized that teaching staff must have high expectations for student academic achievement and that parents and families must insist that schools deliver on those expectations. Clark's book probably helped to change my professional life, because for me it legitimized empowerment of families and, therefore, of communities, in children's school learning—a subject I had entertained in my doctoral thesis. In summary, although I had not been introduced to the political and sociopsychological significance of Kenneth and Mamie Phipps Clark's earlier studies in my psychology courses at Chicago between 1960 and 1966, I later discovered Kenneth Clark's writing for myself. The book *Dark Ghetto* and my immediate post-PhD experience in education became defining influences in my professional career. Later, as I became more of a student of the field of education, I learned to appreciate the powerful impact of the psychologist Kenneth Clark on the field of education in general.[1] It is this broader impact that is detailed in the 2004 volume *Toward Humanity and Justice: The Writings of Kenneth B. Clark, Scholar of the 1954* Brown v. Board of Education *Decision*, edited by Woody Klein.

Racism as Mental Disease: Racial Integration as Cure

Editor Woody Klein is primarily a journalist, who first met Clark in 1964 when the latter sought media support in efforts to retain control of the dispersal and use of substantial federal funds directed to Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited (the organization's 1964 *HARYOU Report* was the basis for *Dark Ghetto*). Klein has exhaustively read and catalogued Clark's writings, producing a volume that obviously celebrates Clark's life and work (the foreword is written by Clark's friend John Hope Franklin) and potentially introduces new scholars to their depth and scope.

Clark's writings are grouped into three sections: "I. The Roots of Racism"; "II. The Continuing Search for Social Justice"; and "III. Race Relations: The Ongoing Struggle." The names of the commentators (26 men, 4 women) on the writings in each of these sections read like a contemporary *Who's Who* in academic and activist circles. In Section I, for example, they include Marian Wright Edelman, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Paul Robeson Jr., Cornel West, Lawrence Plotkin, Roger Wilkens, and Alvin F. Poussaint. Section III concludes with "Afterword: An Academician and Activist," by Clark's only son, Hilton B. Clark. Nine appendixes typically present full drafts of particularly important papers, such as "Appendix to Appellant's Briefs—The Effects of Segregation and the Consequences of Desegregation: A Social Science Statement by Kenneth B. Clark, Principal Author" (Appendix 3). I used several of the appended papers in my graduate class Foundations of Urban Education when we discussed the contemporary status of school desegregation 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*. It was truly wonderful to have this material in one convenient volume, together with thorough citation documentation, useful

and readable footnotes, and expanded bibliography.

This volume clearly establishes that Clark has been a lifelong, principled supporter of racial integration at all social and institutional levels of American society. Furthermore, he firmly believes that racial segregation is bad for both Whites and Blacks. In the foreword John Hope Franklin gently reports Clark's quiet but firm and reasoned opposition to continuing segregation even when found in historically Black colleges: "We had a lot in common. For one thing, there was Howard University . . . we both believed that our society had to move forward and the only way it could do so was through integration in all walks of life. We differed in one concept. He thought black colleges were dispensable, and I did not . . ." (p. xv). In reference to a 1995 question as to what Blacks should call themselves, Clark is reported to have said, "White" (p. 81).

The writings compiled by Klein in Section I, "The Roots of Racism," as compiled by Klein, essentially argue to an American audience that racial prejudice is a disease, a form of mental illness whose existence adversely affects adults and, especially, vulnerable children, regardless of their race. Rather than focus on the etiology or causes of racism, this section focuses on the expanding branches or tentacles of racism—the dire consequences of the disease for all who are in any way exposed to it. Although cited quotations indicate how persistently Clark argued against racial prejudice in America, by 1992 he was quoted acknowledging that, "as a psychologist, . . . I'm enjoying watching the irrationalities of my fellow human beings, including myself. I look upon my life as a series of glorious defeats. No, not despair. I am merely looking at what exists" (Klein, p. 38).

Section II, the largest, chronicles Clark's persistent struggle for social justice in a host of complex American institutions, such as the American Psychological Association, civil rights groups, business corporations, the military, and American political institutions, including the federal courts; in the process he worked with key Black and White politicians. As a scholar–activist, Clark spoke anywhere he felt he could advance the dual causes of racial equality and social justice. One particularly poignant story, originally published by Clark in1964, involved his then 14-year-old son's reaction to hearing him speak before the Ethical Culture Society of Philadelphia. I know about that organization because I live and work in Philadelphia—it had to be one of his most supportive, though predominantly White, audiences. His speech having ended, Clark found his son, who declared that he had been ready to leave for some time. Clark writes:

> When I asked him how he had enjoyed the talk . . . [he] looked at me with a terrifying, unctuous smile. He came up, took my hand, and said, "Dr. Clark, I want to tell you how much I enjoyed your talk. I learned a very complex thing this morning. I learned that Negroes are human beings, too, and that if you are cruel to them they react the way other human beings react." I was sick—sick at the penetrating, devastating truth my son had imposed upon me, and which has not left me since . . . he would not accept my contention that if one is to survive one has to deal with the problems and frailties of human beings without the kind of *crushing severity* [italics added] my son brought to the situation. (p. 52)

Nonetheless, as an adult, Clark's son had some profound comments about him, which appear in the last chapter of Section III (Chapter 19). He stressed Clark's separation of his professional life from the personal life and joy experienced with and by his wife and children. Describing his father as both "an academician and an activist," Hilton Clark states:

> My father's major contribution to this nation's dialogue on civil rights was adding substance to the debate. Getting people to look at things rationally, objectively, and using hard data to substantiate opinions, directions, and action—not just shooting from the hip. . . . People may not have liked what he said, but they had a hard time challenging it in terms of its validity. If you wanted to attack what he said, you had to get your facts together. (pp. 196–197)

Hilton Clark also commented on his father's gift for activism: "He always dealt with the issues, and part of that was talking with allies and associates as well as dealing with those with differing opinions. It was creative conflict, and he was very good at it. . . . Kenneth Clark bridged the gap between academicians and activists in the streets because he was able to communicate plainly. . . . He was not swayed when black power became popular but was able to examine the concept objectively" (pp. 196–197).

By 1993, Clark reported being disappointed with the nation's progress toward racial integration: "I am forced to face the likely possibility that the United States will never rid itself of racism and reach true integration. I look back and shudder at how naive we all were in our belief in the steady progress racial minorities would make through problems of litigation and education" (Klein, pp. 81–82). Nonetheless, in his commentary on this passage, former U.S. attorney general Nicholas deB. Katzenbach credits the *Brown* decision, saying that it "was instrumental in breaking down formal (de jure) segregation in the South and became the intellectual foundation for the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s and this entire nation's commitment to an integrated society" (Klein, p. 82). Thus, although Katzenbach agreed with Clark on the failure of school desegregation efforts, he boldly asserted the importance of *Brown* to more general national advances in racial integration. Clark's family, friends, and colleagues, like Clark himself, envision his contribution to the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* as the most enduring legacy of his scholar–activist career. Racially separate schools were found to be unequal because, as is indicated in the psychological studies of racial attitudes and preferences conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark, Black children in those schools develop a deep sense of racial inferiority. The resultant efforts to desegregate schools, of course, were only a part of the much larger bevy of efforts to eliminate or neutralize all racial barriers to opportunity and social mobility throughout American society.

Literacy as White Property, Reparations as Cure

The year that the Klein volume was published—2004—was also the year of the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education.* Many public presentations and writings offered critical appraisals of the national legacy of this historic Supreme

Court decision (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2004; Orfield & Lee, 2004; Pickren, 2004). Therefore, when I was invited to review the Klein volume, I was also invited to discuss one such appraisal: Catherine Prendergast's *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning After* Brown v. Board of Education.

I must reiterate that I pursued higher education because I believed it would give me an advantage as a Black woman. I had no thought of school desegregation and, in fact, had attended de facto racially segregated elementary and high schools in Chicago. Once admitted for graduate studies at Chicago, I encountered conceptual models that advanced notions of the benefits of higher education for lower-income people, including Blacks. Furthermore, during my graduate work I learned that sociopsychological studies indicated that, as a group, African Americans highly value formal education. These findings made intuitive sense to me, for they had surely been supported in the actions of African Methodist Episcopal (AME) minister Reverend Oliver Brown (after whom the *Brown v. Board of Education* case was named) on behalf of his daughter Linda's elementary school education in Topeka, Kansas. He firmly believed that she and other Black children would receive a better education in predominantly White public schools (see Morris, 1986, for a good discussion of the background of the Civil Rights Movement, and Patterson, 2001, for a more recent critical overview of the movement's legacy). In summary, I learned in graduate school that education is a powerful remedy for the poor and disadvantaged, a disproportionate number of whom were then, as now, African American.

Author Catherine Prendergast, bent as she is upon deconstructing such fallacious beliefs, would have me, after 40 years, unlearn the intuitive, connotative connections that I made during my graduate studies between education and social justice—in particular, between literacy and racial justice. Prendergast, an associate professor of English when this provocative volume was published, extensively analyzed the rhetoric and argumentation that surrounded *Brown v. Board of Education* I (1954) and II (1955) and subsequent related legal cases (e.g., *Washington v. Davis,* 1976; *Bakke,* 1978). She concluded that they essentially affirm, by leaving it unchallenged, *"literacy as White property"* (italics added). Her analyses of Supreme Court rulings (also published in a 2002 *Harvard Educational Review* article) are followed in her book by an exhaustive discussion of a study by Shirley Brice Heath of the processes of desegregation in the Black and White working-class communities of Trackton and Roadville (fictional names; *Ways With Words,* originally published in 1983). Subsequent chapters in Prendergast's book consider contemporary race and literacy issues in higher education; one chapter is a case study of a public alternative high school, established in 1971 and later named "High School X" in honor of Malcolm X, which attempted to "create citizens free of prejudice" (Prendergast, p. 120).

Prendergast masterfully demonstrates how Heath consciously[2] eliminated discussion of historic racial prejudice of Whites toward Blacks in a pursuit of the clash between home (working-class) and school (mainstream) cultures in the Piedmont area where Roadville and Trackton are located, *even though the context in which the Heath study was conducted was one of school desegregation.* Prendergast comments:

> That the very presence of African Americans in their workplace is a sign to the working-class Whites of Roadville that they belong elsewhere makes problematic any conception of a natural racial and linguistic border between the two communities and makes necessary an investigation of how racism and the institution of segregation shape literacy. . . . *Ways [With Words]* could most fruitfully be read now not as a chronicle of separate but equal unraced communities but as evidence of the persistence of prejudice, a story that suggests the failure of the arguments in favor of desegregation to broker lasting reforms toward equity, and as a story that reveals the different and racialized meanings literacy acquires in response to historical shifts. (Prendergast, pp. 63–64)

Similarly, in the subsequent chapter, Prendergast points to the hypocrisy between how this nation has typically referenced southern European immigrants, including immigrants of color, and the educational policies proposed by the late President Ronald Reagan:

> From Reagan's radio address, a Reaganomics of race and literacy can be deduced . . . public schools, particularly those with programs that address the needs of non-White students, are merely a drain on the government and the White American taxpayer. Non-Whites are entitled to literacy, *but only if it does not cost Whites anything* [italics added] either now or in the future. The Reaganomics of race and literacy therefore presumes literacy to be the property of Whites. (p. 105)

What Prendergast nicely demonstrates in her case study, however, is that the pursuit of racial justice in schools is costly to both Whites and Blacks, regardless of how well-intentioned the two groups:

> What I did see [i.e., as a school participant observer] is that issues of racism's impact on literacy practices are more complex than single variable discussions of dialect difference, culturally based learning styles, or curriculum generally allow, and that the content of literacy practices—what those practices are actually saying deserves much attention. . . . At its best, literacy is a process of lifelong learning, a source of potential social engagement and critique, fuel for self-affirmation, and a means to restore justice to the law. At its worst, and too often in the present national dialogue on the subject, it is an excuse to delay long overdue reparations. (Prendergast, pp. 161–162, 176)

I do strongly resonate with Prendergast's embrace of complexity. Over time, and in reference to African Americans, I find that the educational programming associated with Freedom Schools (Ransby, 2003) and the educational reform efforts linked to the Comer School Development Program (Comer, 2004) have the molar levels of complexity most compatible with my own preferences. In both approaches, for example, Black children are viewed as whole persons, for whom race is an important part of their lives, and for whom systemic changes in schools are required in order to serve and teach them. I agree wholeheartedly with one of my University of Pennsylvania colleagues, Marvin Lazerson, who recently argued in the book *Education Gospel: The Economic Power of Schooling* that we must continue to stand firm and resolute in the belief that the aims of education could be greater than simply to serve as a pathway to economic success (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004). To

Grubb and Lazerson, this view is particularly important because there is strong evidence that this nation's economic fortunes are not directly tied to excellence in our educational institutions. Economic success is surely necessary, but it is not sufficient to sustain this nation's will and commitment to public schooling throughout the 21st century and beyond. We need the kind of cultural, social, and legal commitment that is etched in Constitutional guarantees regarding access to public education for all of our children and youth.

Concluding Thoughts

Predictably, the two volumes reviewed here differ in important assumptions. Prendergast does not see literacy education or even racial integration as a remedy for racial inequalities but, rather, pins hope on the possibility of future reparations. Instead of viewing racism as a societal disease, she emphasizes that American cultural and social stratification rely on inherently corrupt forms of racial stratification. Clark apparently was satisfied with the professional role of "scholar–activist," addressing and exposing the consequences of racial prejudice and discrimination; but Prendergast probably could not envision any effective activism that does not specifically include attention to the historical and causal social forces that ultimately eventuated in today's racial inequalities.

Interestingly, neither volume pursues an in-depth discussion of why racial justice is so elusive—specifically, why racism is so intractable. What, for example, is the basis of the apparent commitment of American society to keeping Black economic wealth at less than 1%? On this issue, recent scholarly publications have increasingly suggested cultural and social experiences as causative factors affecting both psychological and neurobiological factors in individuals (e.g., Eberhardt, 2005; Jones, 1997). Furthermore, as a society, we continue to have important legal cases (Cosby, 2004) that support the spirit and mission of *Brown v. Board of Education* (e.g., *Gratz v. Bollinger,* 2003; *Grutter v. Bollinger,* 2003), just as we have cases that appear to reverse its original mission (e.g., *Bakke,* 1978). However, given the ably reported legal history in both of these volumes, I concluded it could be years before racial justice is achieved within American legal structures. Obviously, we must persist in trying—we are a nation governed by a Constitution and by laws. I believe a next step is to work to include equitable education as a right for all citizens in our Constitution, just as the new South Africa has done in its Constitution (Slaughter-Defoe & Frantz, 2004).

Surprisingly, however, there are many similarities between the ideas and arguments presented in the two volumes. Both demonstrate an appreciation for appropriate argumentation, rhetoric, and evidence. Both portray the history of federal court decisions regarding racial segregation and related presumed remedies as key to understanding the nation's predicament regarding racial integration today. In addition, the two volumes agree that school desegregation as a strategy for achieving racial justice has failed. They share a respect for the role of White power and privilege in disenfranchising and marginalizing Blacks. Both volumes envision the traditional cultural-difference perspective as too sharply drawn and, rather, acknowledge the historically porous quality of Black–White relations, while expressing frustration at the apparently intractable pervasiveness of racism throughout American institutions. And finally, both volumes are inspirational in that they stress the importance of having an identity and standing for a mission in the quest for racial justice.

NOTES

[1]And still later, I learned that Mamie Phipps Clark was a co-creator and co-founder of Project Head Start (see Lal, 2002).

[2]Prendergast conducted an independent examination of the private papers and letters associated with *Ways With Words.*

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