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I'm Gonna Let it Shine: The Continued Legacy and Promise of Centering Justice in Teaching and Curriculum

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Dr. Brown has published over 50 books, journal articles, book chapters and other educational texts. Her most recent book, *After the "At-Risk" Label: Reorienting Risk in Educational Policy and Practice* was published by Teachers College Press. She is currently completing a research study funded by Humanities Texas and the Spencer Foundation that explores how classroom teachers approach teaching about U.S. and Texas slavery in the context of race.

Dr. Brown has received recognition for both her research and teaching. Her book, *Black Intellectual Thought in Education: The Missing Traditions of Anna Julia Cooper, Carter G. Woodson, and Alain Le Roy Locke* was awarded the Outstanding Book Award by the Division B of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in 2016. She also received the Division K Mid-career Award (2017) and the Kappa Delta Pi/Division K Early Career Research Award (2012) from AERA. Dr. Brown has received numerous fellowships, including the Ford Foundation Dissertation Fellowship and the Wisconsin-Spencer Foundation Research Training Grant. In 2012 she received the Regent's Outstanding Teaching Award, the highest teaching honor given for excellence in undergraduate teaching across the University of Texas system. In 2019, she was inducted in Academy of Distinguished Teachers at UT-Austin, a group comprised of only 5% of all tenured faculty.

Dr. Brown is a recognized and sought-out presenter and curriculum consultant in her local and national communities. As a former elementary and middle school teacher and school curriculum administrator, she is keen to the everyday challenges around race and teaching for justice and equity. Dr. Brown holds a master's degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a bachelor's degree in political science and psychology from University of Houston. She is also mom to two school-aged children that keep her own her toes.

Abstract:

We live and educate in challenging times. From the racial inequities exposed and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic to the widespread protests against police brutality, antiblackness, and racial injustice in the U.S., educators are in the midst of dark, violent, and oppressive conditions. These are not new. They reflect the long journey to freedom—one paved by Black educators that bore witness to both struggle and hope. Reflecting on Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's call to "pivot to the light" in dark times, this paper explores the legacy of Black movement during the bleakest of circumstances. I draw from critical race theory and Black intellectual thought to show why teachers must sit with the dark, while employing a humanizing critical sociocultural knowledge of teaching to reveal what's hidden and illuminate a pathway forward to justice.

***I'm Gonna Let it Shine:
The Continued Legacy and Promise of Centering Justice in Teaching and Curriculum***

Introduction

My goals in this paper are simple and straightforward. I want to inspire you to hold a commitment to socially just teaching and curriculum, while holding up examples of a light-bearer legacy of social justice, grounded in the Black intellectual tradition, both outside and inside the field of education. I will also share perspectives and a teaching orientation designed to help educators develop, nurture, and let their own lights shine towards this effort even and perhaps especially when they encounter feelings of uncertainty, fear, or despondency while doing this work.

This paper developed out of an invitation to participate in the TeacherWorks lecture series. I was asked to ruminate on the following words of sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, taken from her AERA 2017 Distinguished Lecture: “Rather than being consumed by the darkness, I want to pivot toward the light. I want to frame our continued and deepening work as a project of inspired creativity, a deep gesture of nuanced counterpoint.” I was immediately drawn to the idea of *pivot*, a word that is popular in business and leadership and foundational to the game of basketball. To pivot means remaining affixed where one is standing, while moving in another direction that allows for a 360-degree field of vision.

I present this argument in six parts. I begin by examining the word *pivot* and the promise it holds for changing our vision and actions. As we pivot towards the light, I reflect on the characteristics of light and its integral relationship to darkness. I turn to the traditions of Black intellectual thought, arguing that when pivoting to the light, we must let our lights shine, even while bearing witness to the darkness that threatens to destroy us or consume our work. I offer two dark narratives of schooling that undermine efforts at equity and justice, alongside their related counterstories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). I ground these counterstories in a critical race theory in education framework (Dixson, Rousseau-Anderson, & Donnor, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This choice allows me to pivot from dark, dominant narratives that evade race, fail to account for power and the legacy of systemic inequity in the U.S., and that do not reflect the humanity of all people. I conclude by considering the power of harnessing what I theorize as a humanizing critical sociocultural knowledge (Brown, 2012) for teaching that illuminates a path forward towards justice.

A Beginning Exercise

Imagine a classroom that is working well. How does the classroom look? Who's in it? What's in it? What is happening? What is not happening?

Take a few moments to see the effective classroom in your mind. Now, I want you to image what it would take to make that image a reality? Is it possible?

An effective classroom is one where all students—regardless of race, social class, gender, sexuality, language, and ability—fully engage, learn new knowledge and skills, and put them to use in novel, creative ways. The curriculum reflects knowledge connected to students' own backgrounds, while exposing them to a range of perspectives and knowledge, including those that reflect students' families and communities. Students work independently and collaboratively with their peers. They are excited to come to school. They have strong, caring, and respectful relationships with their teachers and peers. And when the inevitable conflict happens, there is a process for addressing disagreements and changing unhelpful or challenging behaviors in humane and affirming ways. Students also have the opportunity to learn from teachers who come from a wide array of backgrounds, including those that look like them and those that do not.

Students and teachers dialogue together in this classroom. They write, read, compute, inquire, solve, experiment, discuss, and create at the highest levels. They also have opportunities to think critically about the world that existed before them and the world where they currently live,

while imagining possibilities for one they wish to inhabit, but is yet to be. The students love themselves and recognize their beauty. They feel no pressure to change who they are or to morph themselves into a caricature image for acceptance. This classroom is also a place for growing. Mistakes will happen; especially when teachers and students find themselves uncertain about how to answer a question or address a problem. This does not bring feelings of uncertainty and fear. They do not give up on their work or their dreams. They do not become resistant and defensive about making changes that are necessary.

I begin this paper by sharing my ideal classroom because my vision of school informs the perspectives and approach I share in this paper. I asked the reader to reflect on a personal ideal vision of schooling because I believe in the power of imagination (Thomas, 2020). We live in a time that requires us to reimagine what schooling means and how it should look for students who are among the most underserved, marginalized, and vulnerable. One of the most intractable challenges in U.S. schooling is improving the educational opportunities and access for BIPOC schoolchildren in the U.S. This is the singular concern that keeps me up at night and has fueled my work as a researcher, teacher educator, school administrator, and teacher for the past 25 years.

The Beginning: To Pivot

My first encounter with the idea of a *pivot* was in the context of playing basketball. Pivoting is a fundamental skill of the game. Basketball has rules about how players can move after they stop dribbling with the ball still in their hands. Once stopping with the ball in hand, a player can shoot the ball or pass it to another player. To move into another direction, the only option is to pivot. Pivoting allows the player to change direction. This is done by keeping one foot planted on the floor and while moving the other foot and rotating into the desired direction. Knowing how to pivot is important because without it a player is likely to receive a traveling violation. This can make the difference in a single possession or even outcome of the game.

As we think about Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's idea of pivoting towards the light of justice in the context of teaching and teacher education, she asks that we take stock of where we are standing. We must remain clear about the nature of that place. There is no doubt: it is one filled with challenge, difficulty, injustice, and what may seem like an impossible opportunity of movement. Yet in this place we must move; rotating and shifting our bodies into another direction that opens up promise of hope and transformed action.

Part 1: Theorizing Light (and Dark)

<i>When you hear the word light, what comes to mind?</i>
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In a recent special issue of the *Journal of Energy History Revue*, issue editors Stéphanie Le Gallic and Sara Pritchard (2019) noted the study of light and darkness as an expanding area of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. This scholarship theorized light(ness) as having multiple facets and possessing an inextricable relationship to darkness. The study of light and darkness reflected a set of complex relations related to multiple definitions and characteristics of light and dark, pointed out nuances in how temporal technologies produce light and dark, and raised justice concerns around who has access to certain forms of light. The authors further note the inherent Western centric focus that often accompanies discussions of light and dark.

The metaphor of light, has been linked historically and culturally to Western notions of progress and development. Across time and through cultural practices, the notion of light has helped shape perceptions of and preferences for light over dark in European and other Western spaces like our own (Introduction, p. 7). In embracing my charge to point our work towards the light of justice, I recognize the racialized nature of this metaphoric relationship. I also recognize how Black communities historically picked up and rearticulated ideas of embracing the light to center their own justice work towards freedom. From this standpoint, then, it makes sense when Le Gallic and Pritchard (2019) ask us “to challenge reductionist frameworks that focus on light alone, without reference to darkness” (Introduction, p. 3). One cannot study light without

acknowledging darkness because they exist symbiotically. They quite literally allow each other to exist.

How does this help us understand light and dark? In order to understand light, we must acknowledge its connection to darkness. In her book, *Dark matters: On the surveillance of Blackness*, sociologist Simone Browne writes about technologies of surveillance used to monitor the movements of Black people during slavery. Light was both a hinderance—it made the person trying to hide visible—and a form of cover and protection. Browne opens chapter two with the words of scholar Frantz Fanon who said about African diasporic peoples, “our history takes place in obscurity and the sun I carry with me must lighten every corner” (in Browne, 2015, p. 63). These words illuminate how Black people (and all historically marginalized peoples) have always drawn from both light and darkness to bear witness to and bring light to injustice, while working, often at the risk of life, towards its eradication.

Part 2: Antiblackness, Soul Values, and Shining Lights

We don't have to look far in history to see evidence of this dance between light and dark for African diasporic people. For example, antiblackness can be understood as a defining societal ethos in the U.S. that views and acts upon Black people as less than human. Antiblackness is a mood and way of being that is normalized and so fully integrated into the fabric of dominant society that it often goes unrecognized and unacknowledged (Dumas & ross, 2016; Grant, Woodson, & Dumas, 2020; Wilderson, 2020). How did we arrive at antiblackness as a defining characteristic in how our dominant society and its institutions address Black peoples? This question is too massive to unpack in our time today. Historian Ibram Kendi (2017) noted the history of racist ideas that emerged during the Enlightenment period of the 1500s and have continued to grow and morph over time and space as the seed and nurturing of U.S. antiblack sentiment.

Building on the work of Saidiya Hartman (1997), theorist Christina Sharpe (2010), argued that transatlantic slavery created the conditions for antiblackness to flourish. What germinated in the institution of slavery continues to impact us today.

While all modern subjects are post-slavery subjects fully constituted by the discursive codes of slavery and post-slavery, post-slavery subjectivity is largely borne by and readable on the (New World) *black* subject. Thinking about monstrous intimacies post-slavery means examining those subjectivities constituted from trans-atlantic slavery onward and connected, then as now, by the everyday mundane horrors that aren't acknowledged to be horrors (Sharpe, 2010, p. 3).

Sharpe pointed out why we can't ever let dark horrors, however great or mundane they may be in our everyday societal life and practices, go unacknowledged. Not seeing and recognizing the dark is what allowed (and I argue continues to allow) antiblackness to flourish unfettered and exponentially. This is why we cannot lose site of the dark, even as we seek out the light.

But let me be emphatically clear. Darkness has never had the power to extinguish the light. Even in the most horrific of times. Historian Daina Ramey Berry (2017) theorized the idea of *soul values* to capture “the internal self-worth African Americans held on to when external forces literally and figuratively sought to strip them of humanity” (p. xiii). Berry (2017) made it clear that even in the face of violence and degradation Black people maintained their sense of self. They never lost or forgot how to shine their beautiful light. Going back to Lawrence-Lightfoot's call, then, we must seek out and pivot towards the light, as Sharpe (2016) also stated:

Aspiration. *Aspiration* is the word that I arrived at for keeping and putting breath in the Black body.

Living, as I have argued we do in the wake of slavery, in spaces where we were never meant to survive, or have been punished for surviving and for daring to claim or make spaces of something like freedom, we yet reimagine and transform spaces for and practices of an ethics of care (as in repair, maintenance, attention), an ethics of seeing and of being in the wake as consciousness, as a way of remembering and observance

that started with the door of no return, continued in the hold of the ship, and on the shore (pp. 130-131).

From the enslaved Africans that survived the horrific transatlantic journey to the Americas, to national race warriors that lived in the U.S. during the 19th and early 20th centuries, Black people have always moved in the dark, doing reparative work while illuminated by justice on their minds.

For example, Harriet Tubman possessed an inner light that oriented her towards a quest for freedom—her own, her family’s, and her other Black brothers and sisters in bondage (Dunbar, 2019). There is also educator Anna Julia Cooper, perhaps the first scholar to address the idea of intersectionality when describing the triple oppressive conditions of race, gender, and social class that Black women in the U.S. navigated in their everyday lives (Grant, Brown, & Brown, 2015). We also find this relationship in the example of Ida B. Wells, a journalist who decided that the light of her pen, which she used to document the dark atrocities of Black lynching and White racial violence towards Black people, offered a syllabus created for Black freedom (Duster, 2020[1970]).

There is also W.E.B. DuBois, the first Black man to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1895. His prolific scholarship began at the turn of the twentieth century and did not end until the 1960s. He offered incisive critique, coupled with robust evidence, analysis, and theorization about the oppressive conditions and inspired hope of Black life in the U.S. (Grant, 2017; Lewis, 2009). Historian Carter G. Woodson recognized the miseducation that befell Black people when their history and culture were ignored or misrepresented in the dominant society. Woodson (2000[1933]) argued this miseducation, the by-product of a White denial of Black excellence, otherwise, it led Black people, including those with the most “formal” education and success, to hold contempt for their Blackness. To combat this, he started Negro History Week, which later became Black History Month and was a stalwart proponent of transforming the curriculum to recognize Black contributions and knowledge (Grant, Brown, & Brown, 2015).

Curriculum spaces illuminate how dark and light co-existed in the fight for Black freedom. For example, in 1900, Charles Carroll authored the book, *The Negro a Beast*, where he argued that Black people were not humans, but were beasts. Carroll drew from Judeo-Christian *Bible* and theology, along with various other fields which he referred to as “scientific” to make his claims. This book is recognized by historians as important in shaping the societal image of Black people as savage and more akin to apes (Kendi, 2017; Fredrickson, 1987).

Yet, in the same year, 1910, W.E.B. Du Bois was asked to curate a social study about Black American life for the Paris Exposition (Battle-Baptist & Rusert, 2018, p. 9). This exhibit included about 60 state of the art data visualizations using relevant primary and secondary data, photographs, texts, and objects. Understanding the power and politics of the visual, Du Bois used this vehicle to transform existing narratives of Black people, who were three decades removed from enslavement. The exhibition director, Thomas Calloway, knew thousands of people would attend the fair and the Black exhibit. He felt it would “do a great and lasting good in convincing thinking people of the possibilities of the Negro” (Morris, 2018, p. 28).

We have another example of dark and light as reflected in the publication of *A Coon Alphabet* (1898) and *The Brownies’ Books* (Johnson-Feelings, 1996). In a paper published with Professor Anthony Brown (Brown & Brown, 2015), we discuss the book, *A Coon Alphabet*—published by William Kemble in 1898, the well-known illustrator of author Mark Twain’s novels. The book was stylized as a traditional alphabet book, with each letter depicting stereotypical and violent images of Black children and adults, as bug-eyed pickaninnies being devoured by animals, recklessly shooting themselves with guns, and as the target of myriad violent mishaps. These images reflected a common racial imagery that existed in other children’s literature that featured Black people during this time.

The Brownies Book were a monthly magazine created by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1920 for Black children and youth. The goal of the publication was to introduce African-American children to the important history and achievements of Black people in America. The magazine included multi-genre texts and illustrations, in addition to “reports on international cultures, articles about the accomplishments of young people from all over the country, and photographs and other beautiful artwork created by African-American artists” (Johnson-Feelings, 1996, book jacket).

These examples offer insight into the relationship between light and dark. It is the dark that fuels the light. Without seeing and acknowledging the reality of the dark, the light cannot exist, manifesting its transformative shine. If light and darkness exist conterminously, how can we use this knowledge to understand the relationship of oppression and resistance? What does this relationship teach us about “pivoting towards the light?” How can this relationship inform and assist our commitment to center justice in teaching and teacher education?

Part 3: Making the Pivot Possible

Critical race theory (CRT) in education offers us a way to pivot towards the light as we seek to center justice in teaching and teacher education (Dixson, Rousseau-Anderson, & Donnor, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Originating from legal studies, CRT offers insights into the foundational role of race in our society, including schooling. It explores why racial disparities exist in the U.S. even after the dismantling of race-based legal segregation (Crenshaw, 2019, p. 52). Whiteness as property, interest convergence, and racial realism are examples of CRT analytical approaches used to show how race has structured longstanding inequity in the U.S. Another CRT tool is counter-storytelling (Bell, 1993; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-storytelling is a transformative form of storytelling that disrupts dominant, majoritarian stories that conceal, evade, or misrepresent the presence and role of race.

CRT in education helps us understand fundamental challenges that impede efforts to teach in socially just ways. For example, a CRT analysis would ask us to think about how race exists in the teaching and curriculum process. One way we can identify the existence of race is located in the stories told about the purposes of schooling. In their book, *Teaching for Social Justice*, education researchers Jeannie Oakes, Martin Lipton, Lauren Anderson, and Jamy Stillman (2018) present two foundational stories that teachers must address if they want to center justice in their teaching.

The first story is meritocracy and its legacy in public schooling. The argument goes that U.S. public schooling was and continues to serve as “the great equalizer” (Oakes, et. al, 2018). This presumes that individuals possessing the most talent or that work the hardest will rise to the top and find academic and societal success. In order for K-12 schooling to reflect a real meritocracy, schools and the process of schooling must operate equally for all students. The difference would be the level of effort or talent displayed by individual students. However, a counterstory to the meritocracy narrative would point out that students have access to differently valued societal resources before they begin school, while they attend school, and after their schooling ends. This counterstory also recognizes that the U.S. meritocracy story fails to account for the unequal opportunities to learn that students experience inside school and classroom contexts. These are too vast and complex to outline in this presentation, but they impact: how students are viewed and acted upon by educators, the kind of curriculum and teaching opportunities students can acquire, how classrooms are organized for student learning, and the expectations educators hold for their students. Using meritocracy to justify why some students find academic success, while others do not, disavows responsibility from educational decision-making and the power of teaching. Teachers and teaching matter.

The second story discussed by Oakes, et. al (2018) is the relationship between deficit-thinking, racial superiority, and white privilege. *Deficit-thinking* is the belief that students’ underachievement or underperformance in school results from something they lack genetically or culturally. Deficit-thinking places blame on individuals, rather than considering how societal assumptions, histories, and systemic and institutional inequities and practices play a role in structuring outcomes.

Deficit-thinking has a long history in education. It stems from deeply entrenched societal beliefs that certain groups have more or less ability than other groups. These determinations were rooted in racial classifications, with groups from western European backgrounds identified as the most intellectually capable and those from African descent as the least capable. *Racial superiority* framed these perspectives and resulted in a societal racial hierarchy that privileged White people, both materially and symbolically (Wilkerson, 2020). In the U.S., white people have historically had more access and accumulated opportunities in society than have people of color. Having a white racial identity offers symbolic privileges that are both unearned and independent of merit or hard work. The only requirement is that one is white. It is not surprising that our

country has a long history of people willing to give up their ethnic, cultural, and racial identities and practices and familial ties just to be recognized as legally or socially white (Hobbs, 2014; Tyack, 1974).

Teachers that want to teach for social justice must understand the complex stories of meritocracy, deficit thinking, racial superiority, and white privilege to avoid drawing from them in their practice. These narratives may go unexamined by teachers, even as they inform instructional decisions and judgements made about students. Sadly, teachers often go into classrooms not understanding race and without experience interrogating whiteness. This is the case for all teachers because K-12 schools and teacher education struggle to address issues of race. This is exacerbated for many white teachers that have limited personal experience to draw knowledge from about race (Warren, 2015).

Our society has a paradoxical relationship to race. We are drawn to the topic, yet recoil from addressing it in systematic and productive ways. Scholars refer to this as colorblindness, and more recently, color/race evasion (Kohli, Pizarro, & Nevárez, 2017). This refers to the practice of choosing not to acknowledge how race exists in and impacts society. Color-evasiveness in schools translates into an absence or unwillingness to consider how race plays out in the everyday realities of teaching and learning. This leads to denials that race matters, as well as the practice of replacing race-based explanations with cultural deficiency arguments that blame racial disparities on presumed cultural deficiencies of individuals and groups.

If educators want to teach for social justice, they must interrogate the pervasive majoritarian stories that inform U.S. schooling. Color-blind and race-evasive practices maintain and normalize whiteness. This allows educators to disavow the significance of race in schooling, approach curriculum as racially and socio-politically neutral and devoid of power, read and act on students in disproportional, disparate ways, and hold students of color to low expectations for learning. We unfortunately find these practices occurring too frequently in K-12 schooling. In our efforts to teach in a just way, we cannot ignore the darkness. It is imperative that we understand it, recognize it when it appears, and pivot accordingly.

Part 4: Pivoting to Sociocultural Knowledge

The stories I just discussed are a few that undermine equitable and just teaching. But they are more than just stories. These stories reflect a particular kind of knowledge that educators and others hold about the nature of schooling and what's appropriate to overtly address in schools. I call this sociocultural knowledge and I argue it is foundational to, yet often goes unacknowledged in teaching and teacher education.

When I use the term sociocultural knowledge, I refer to knowledge related to social and cultural matters and contexts that exist in schools. This knowledge reflects the overt, subtle, and nuanced ways that social and cultural factors operate in the decision-making, organization, materials, and viewpoints leveraged in the teaching and learning process (Brown, 2012; Brown & Kraehe, 2010). One way to understand sociocultural knowledge is to think about the other kinds of knowledge that exist in teaching. One example is disciplinary knowledge (Muller, 2009). Disciplinary knowledge is the dominant, consensus knowledge identified as foundational to the specific fields of study, like mathematics, science, literacy, and social studies. Another kind of teaching-based knowledge is knowledge about the nature of children and adolescent child and adolescent development.

My research and teaching focus on the role of sociocultural knowledge in the everyday work of teaching. This knowledge informs how educators make decisions about what content and materials to share with students and the instructional methods they should employ. Sociocultural knowledge informs how teachers view their role and responsibility as teachers, as well as the perspectives they hold about their students' and the families, communities, and cultures to which they belong (Ladson-Billings, 2009[1995]). Many of the everyday professional decisions and judgements made by educators are informed by sociocultural matters, even when they aren't recognized as such.

My interest in sociocultural matters of teaching and curriculum is not novel. It is part of a legacy of scholarship designed to transform teaching and curriculum that ignored, misrepresented, or minimized the importance of sociocultural knowledge in teaching and curriculum practices. For example, since the 1970s, multicultural scholars, like James Banks

(1993), Carl Grant and Christine Sleeter (1987), and Geneva Gay (1997), advanced different typologies of multicultural schooling and culturally responsive teaching that centered around providing students more equitable curriculum and teaching practices. Other scholars, like Jacqueline Jordan Irvine (1990), Carol Lee (2007), Ana Marie Villegas (1988), and Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) advanced pedagogies that recognized culture and power in their culturally responsive, culture centered, and culturally relevant teaching approaches. Others, like Joyce King advocated transforming the curriculum (1995), and Arnetta Ball (2009) on leveraging the generative nature of culture centered pedagogy in and outside of formal classrooms. All of this work built on the legacy of scholars of color who came before them, like Carter G. Woodson (2000[1933]), who had a deep understanding of the dark, recognizing how a normalizing whiteness allowed inaccurate and misrepresented curriculum knowledge about Black people to solidify a place in official school curriculum. His life's work and legacy sought to shine light on Black knowledge and its underrecognized contribution and excellence.

This legacy continues into the present. Launching from Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy, Django Paris (2012) advanced a culturally sustaining pedagogy that asks educators to attend to culture while also accounting for its complex expression in the lives and identities of contemporary students. Scholar Christopher Emdin's (2016), *reality pedagogy* is another example of a teaching approach that aligns with the identities and interests of youth of color. Curriculum scholar, Bettina Love (2019) brings a light to bear in her call for *abolitionist teaching* where teachers pivot towards justice by resisting quick fix reforms and practices that marginalize already disenfranchised students. Finally, Ghody Muhammad's (2020), *historically responsive equity pedagogy* harkens back to the past, shining a light on the pedagogical work of early Black literacy advocates and educators.

These scholars did not have the goal of creating a fool-proof method that anyone could simply pick up and use to ensure enactment of equitable and just teaching. They knew this was impossible to do and that such teaching required serious work and attention. These scholars keenly recognized that mainstream teaching was grounded in an expansive kind of knowledge integrally linked to belief systems and societal stories deeply entrenched in our nation's fabric. These contexts were complex, knotty, and difficult to untangle. They required an awareness of sociocultural knowledge, but also a willingness to learn, grow and engage sociocultural knowledge critically and reflexively in practice.

These scholars also realized that the work of the socially just teacher who is educating historically marginalized children of color was never only about making sure these children could read, write, compute, and think well. Nor was it only about helping them make a good grade on a test or get into college. They authentically cared about their students, along with their families and communities. They also wanted to ensure the students acquired knowledge and skills for academic success, while maintaining a strong sense of self, and the ability to see, critique, and act towards social justice.

I call these scholars *light bearers* and they, along with their work, reflect the longstanding legacy and promise of centering justice in teaching and curriculum. This is what fuels the work of light bearers, past and present. Unfortunately, in many academic, policy, and practice-based settings, their work has been ignored, viewed as unnecessary, or when considered, is enacted only superficially and without deep engagement and sustained commitment. Yet when we take their legacy seriously, pivoting to understand and incorporate their fullest expression in our practices, we bear witness to the dark and let our own lights shine.

Part 5: Light Bearer Teachers: Embracing a Humanizing Critical Sociocultural Knowledge for Teaching

To become a light bearer teacher, we must teach in ways that are hopeful, caring, equitable, skillful, humanizing, responsive, and sociopolitically aware. Yet, we must do this in a world and schooling system that is oriented towards inequity and injustice. What attributes are needed to begin this journey, whether working with preparing, novice, or experienced educators? While there are many, I believe that four are foundational and a good place to begin the journey.

The first attribute is to remain a *constant learner*. This requires that teachers possess the following qualities including, openness, curiosity, engagement, and fearlessness.

- *Openness*. This signals a willingness to learn by creating a space to seek out new ideas and perspectives. It requires a vulnerability that acknowledges the uncertainty that deep learning brings.
- *Curiosity*. A curious mind is open and excited to learn. It initiates asking questions and rooting out answers that lead to deeper understandings.
- *Engagement*. One cannot ask questions without taking up an intentional engagement to learn. Engaged learners are mindful and present to learning.
- *Fearlessness*. Fearless learners must stretch beyond personal comfort zones. They must not fear pivoting and changing directions when needed.

The second attribute is *acquiring sociopolitical awareness*. To acquire sociopolitical awareness, educators need to have knowledge and understanding of the dark—the history of and ongoing practices of oppression, injustice, and inequity. Educators shouldn't become despondent or cynical by this knowledge, but rather use it to inspire continued action, especially when encountering challenges and complexities. There is no set curriculum to learn, but there are important entry points, particularly when studying race, for example, such as understanding it is a social construct that has material impact and the differences between interpersonal, institutional, and structural racism. Gaining a beginning level of knowledge is possible through university coursework, particularly at the foundational level of teacher education. More attention should be given to developing this knowledge base by requiring coursework in ethnic studies and in the social sciences (Brown, 2018; Urrieta, 2007). Having opportunities to apply this knowledge in real-life classroom and teaching contexts is needed, as well.

The third attribute is *searching for the good*, or what sociologist Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) calls, “recognizing the goodness” in others by seeking to find the assets and strengths that students bring to school. Doing this inspires and empowers us to act in critical, transformative ways. Fundamentally we need to shift our focus away from identifying what students “lack,” either academically and or in their home or community environments to acknowledging the assets and resources that students bring with them to school. We do this when we approach students not as objects or “at-risk” but as human beings full of potential and ability to learn and achieve (Brown, 2016). It also requires that schools and teachers operate as partners in students’ academic lives and not solely as all-knowing authorities who need to put knowledge into students (Freire, 2018). Instead, the teacher’s goal is to draw out, or “mine” (Ladson-Billings, 2009[1995]) valued knowledge out of students in order to help them connect to new knowledge. These connections bridge school, families, and communities, but also encourage teachers to work collaboratively with colleagues, shining their collective lights of justice.

The fourth attribute is *acknowledging the power of teaching*. The teaching encounter—where the teacher and the student meet—holds problem and possibility, whether in a classroom between teachers and children, youth, or adults. Teaching matters. Teaching alone cannot end racism, sexism, heteronormativity, economic inequality, ableism, or language and religious discrimination. It also can't transform our communities and society into just and equitable spaces where all have full access to this country's democratic promise. Yet teaching serves as a microcosm of our society. Teaching encounters bring people together, each with their own desires, experiences, knowledge, and perspectives, all that collide with the histories and expectations of the varied communities in which they are a part.

I believe in the power of teaching and teachers and have devoted my work to considering the thorny places where we need to see and think differently about what we are charged to do every day in the classroom. How, then, do we make our teaching truly count? The light-bearer teacher recognizes their work as continuous and recursive. It does not reflect a set destination where the teacher will eventually arrive. This kind of teaching is always about becoming; an idea recently popularized by former First Lady Michelle Obama (2018) and described in previous philosophical treatments on personal and spiritual nature of teaching (Ayers, 2015; Palmer, 2017). Teaching with a sense of sociocultural awareness is always about reflecting, planning, doing, and ultimately, becoming. Equitable and just light bearer teachers remain lit, aiming to

transform the darkest of conditions—whether individual, institutional, or structural—that threaten to undermine the full flourishing of students.

Part 6: Doing the Work of HCSK

We can shine our lights for equity and justice through a teaching approach I call a humanizing critical sociocultural knowledge of teaching (HCSK) (Brown, 2012). At its heart, this work understands the complex relationship between acknowledging the dark, while fiercely tending to and shining our light in the name of equity and justice.

HCSK is culturally affirming and recognizes sociocultural knowledge as foundational to its work. It does not approach teaching as a one-size-fits-all method. It recognizes that good teaching is always carefully planned and executed, while also capable of *improvisation*. It is also *situated*, always existing in the midst of a context that is understood as both social and political in nature. Finally, it is *all-encompassing*, concerned with all aspects of teaching and learning and not only one or a few elements. This kind of teaching does not prescribe a definitive set of teaching methods, but rather describes a *teaching stance*, an orientation, a framework, a set of working assumptions that teachers use to guide their professional judgements and decision-making.

First, a HCSK is *improvisational*. In my experience, people often get nervous when they hear the words improvise and teaching together. I draw from the following definition of improvisation: “to make or fabricate out of what is conveniently on hand” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/improvise>). Using this term does not mean that teachers are not invested in clear planning. It also does not mean they do not hold high expectations for student learning, or a strong commitment to provide a culturally affirming learning experience. Like jazz, a musical artform grounded in standard music compositions, while bending, stretching, reinterpreting, and transforming these basic pieces, improvisation is open to and seeks to offer something fresh during each new reiteration (Dixson, 2006). The musician that lacks substantial, technical knowledge and skill about music and performance, as well as a clear plan for execution will find it impossible to improvise successfully.

Foundationally, if a teacher is to embrace a teaching stance that values improvisation, the teacher must know their content, how to teach that content, how to organize the classroom for learning, and how to build strong relationships with students, and cultivate a community of learners that respects students’ families and cultural backgrounds. This teaching orientation does not rely on or advocate that HCSK teaching can be distilled into a set of immutable methods. It does not begin and end with learning a few quick teaching tricks. It understands the need to embrace teaching as fluid, flexible, and comprised of practices that must continually grow to meet the unique and communal needs of students (Philip, 2019; Sawyer, 2004).

This does not mean there are no clear considerations that teachers should attend to when respecting improvisation and sociocultural knowledge in their teaching. Teachers should look for and expose their students to a wide-range and diverse set of curricula materials that value and draw from the cultural knowledge of students of color. These materials should also provide all students with exposure to new and unfamiliar cultural knowledge. This teaching should also understand the longstanding stereotypes and biases that lead to low learning expectations for students and the over-policing of students of color and their disproportionate disciplinary treatment. Teachers should also understand the teaching moves that support and maintain these inequities.

When encountering potentially useful teaching methods, the teacher that values sociocultural knowledge and improvisation will try them out and revise as needed. They engage in thoughtful, well-thought out planning and have a clear design for execution every time they teach. Yet they also understand the social nature of teaching and learning (Brown & Kraehe, 2010). They know that what works in one time or space or with any particular student isn’t necessarily going to work with others. They respect their students, recognizing them as individuals with unique desires, proclivities, and dreams, but also as members of groups that share repertoires of shared cultural knowledge and practice (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). The improvisational teacher is not a rigid executer. They feel efficacious and remain committed to doing the work even and especially when something goes awry.

Finally, HCSK is committed to asset-based, critical understandings of teaching that account for how power and inequities exist in society and are implicated in teachers' instructional decision-making. This is foundational knowledge in the teacher's working toolkit. It is a fundamental component that informs the teacher's reservoir of practice-based knowledge.

Second, a HCSK of teaching is *situated and contextual*. This means the everyday life of teaching is embedded in sociocultural contexts and concerns. The questions that follow reflect important, everyday issues teachers confront in their work. The knowledge one holds around sociocultural markers such as culture, race, gender, social class, ability, language, and religion inform how teachers address these issues, particularly when this knowledge is tacit and unacknowledged in everyday practice. For example: How should a teacher make decisions about what to teach and how to teach it? What knowledge should they draw on? How should a teacher decide if a student is making adequate academic progress? How should a teacher determine if they are successfully meeting students' needs? How should the teacher read students' behavior in class? When is student behavior perceived as appropriate or not? How does the teacher make sense of why this behavior is occurring? Is the inappropriate behavior indicative of students' will and choice or does the classroom environment or approaches to teaching and curriculum elicit the behavior? What criteria does the teacher use when making this judgement? While this is not an exhaustive list of questions teachers should consider and address daily in their work around the sociocultural, it offers a place to begin.

The contextual nature of sociocultural knowledge requires that teachers acknowledge how sociocultural concerns exist in their everyday decision-making. It means understanding how sociocultural factors like race, social class, gender and culture can privilege or curtail students' opportunities to learn. Teachers must not shy away from addressing inequitable or unjust conditions because of fear or a need to appear nice (Castagno, 2019). Rather, they see the dark for what is: an important context that makes teaching for justice imperative. It fuels and drives their work. To address the sociocultural complexities in teachers' everyday decision-making I offer these questions as a beginning guide for ongoing planning and critical reflection: *What is the context (historic and local) that informs this teaching moment? Under what conditions, for what reasons, and to whose benefit am I making this particular curricular or pedagogic choice or judgement?*

Third, a HCSK of teaching is *all-encompassing*. This means that when we acknowledge and choose to forefront sociocultural matters in our teaching, we do so because these issues impact all aspects of schooling, teaching, and learning. HCSK teaching is not only for teachers of color, students of color, or students from lower income or working-class backgrounds, or those attending schools in impoverished urban or rural communities. All of these spaces need HCSK but they are not the only ones that need it. Recognizing the contextual nature of teaching discussed earlier, it is clear that sociocultural issues impact the entire teaching and learning process. A few of these include: the identities of teachers and students and the social locations from which they come; the curriculum and teaching approaches valued and used in the classroom; the knowledge comprising the disciplinary knowledge taught in the classroom, as well as the pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge used; how teachers organize the classroom and their students to learn; and the teachers' beliefs about the purpose of schooling, their perspectives on their role and responsibility as teachers, and what role and responsibility they believe their students and their families hold; and how teachers view their students and the families and communities from which they come.

Conclusion: Bearing Witness to Injustice and Pivoting to The Light

In this paper, I asked that we consider the legacy of light bearers in the tradition of Black intellectual thought and education practice because their legacy is too brilliant to overlook. They serve as beacons, steadily guiding us towards our mark. To be sure, their work was never easy. It was hard and still is. It requires courage, knowledge, unwavering faith, and an urgency to continuously learn, act, and reflect.

I'm reminded of the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his fiery text, *Why We Can't Wait*. Published in 1963, this work was a reminder of the continued importance of non-violent social change in the U.S. This text brought attention to the dehumanizing conditions that characterized Black life and the promise of the movement to transform those conditions. He

expressed disappointment with White Christians that sympathized with the freedom fighters but lacked urgency to combat injustice. Like his fellow light bearers, Dr. King, too, realized the power of acknowledging the dark, while pivoting towards the light.

Fast forward to 2020. In his book, *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*, scholar Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., implores us to sit in the darkness we too often seek to escape in search of a more hopeful range of vision. He noted that "[i]t is not enough to merely acknowledge these dark moments when the politics of fear threaten to overwhelm...but then [to] move quickly to examples of hope that affirm the country's sense of its own exceptionalism. We fail to linger in the dark moments at our peril" (p. 25). The lingering he proposes is not about waiting. Rather, it is about seeing and bearing witness to the horror, acknowledging that the darkness exists and is not only a figment in the imagination of some. It is also about feeling the darkness, understanding what exactly it means and how it defines who we are because we have allowed such destruction to metastasize in our world. Fundamentally, Glaude understands that we must sit in the darkness if there is any possibility of unrooting the malignant histories that continue to strangle efforts at realizing our democracy's full promise.

We live and educate in trying times. And we cannot wait for the system change. We must be the change and light inside that system. To do this, though, we must see and illuminate what needs to change. We must acknowledge its weight. And then we must act. These actions require that we disrupt dominant, majoritarian narratives. We must seek to understand how sociocultural conditions shape our teaching practices and interrupt those that help sustain the durable inequities that flourish in our society and schools.

Of this I am clear: we must be the change we seek. We must become the difference makers, the light bearers, always pivoting towards justice in our educational practices. We need to value and take seriously sociocultural knowledge as integral in the work of schooling. Then, we must harness a critical, humanizing orientation towards that sociocultural knowledge, leveraging it for a more just and equitable schooling for all students. A HCSK orientation to teaching asks us to learn about the dark; to witness it, anticipate its presence, and use it to illuminate the critical, relevant, equitable, and humanizing education our students deserve.

Doing these things, we let our lights shine—individually and collectively—to bring a fuller expression of justice to our practice. We cannot wait to do these things. We owe it to ourselves and to our students. Our lives and prosperity depend on it. It is time, in fact, well beyond the time for us all to become the *lit*, light bearing educators both our students and our world needs.

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