

Culturally Relevant, Purpose-Driven Learning & Teaching in a Middle School Social Studies Classroom

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Introduction

Although I do not support a missionary approach to teaching—one in which a teacher desires to “save” students in a community—I seek to demonstrate in this article how a teacher is able to enact her personal conceptions of “calling” to teach students in her own community. In this way, the teacher in this study is not attempting to “fix” the students, but rather to support them in finding purpose in their learning and their lives. Teachers with different orientations, from various backgrounds, and with a wide range of beliefs and positioning can be equally successful teaching students as the teacher described here.

In an era of student testing by any means necessary, it has become increasingly rare to locate teachers who are committed to teaching students to improve society because they are instead under immense pressure to raise test scores (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Ms. Shaw, the social studies teacher discussed in this article, is deliberate in developing learning opportunities that help students think about and identify a purpose for learning and “being” in the world. In this way, this teacher has found a purpose for teaching and has empowered her students to develop a purpose for learning as well.

This teacher’s mindset and practices seem to be consistent with what we know about “good teaching.” Good teaching encompasses what Ladson-Billings (2009) conceptualizes and calls culturally relevant pedagogy, what Gay (2010) describes as culturally responsive teaching, what Moll and colleagues have named funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004), and what Lee (2007) outlines as cultural modeling. In this article I ask the question,

in what ways does this teacher’s ability to emphasize purpose to her middle school students demonstrate cultural relevance in the classroom?

In doing so I focus on an experienced teacher’s conceptions and practices in an urban, highly diverse social context. The teacher in this study stresses the importance of her students understanding the challenges in their local community in order to improve that community. She empowers her students to develop sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2009) as middle school students in a social studies classroom. She attempts to help her students think beyond themselves as they make decisions and experience the world. In this way, she helps her students read and find purpose in the word and world (Freire, 1998).

Sociopolitical Consciousness

I draw from Ladson-Billings’ (1992, 2009) conceptualization of sociopolitical consciousness, a tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy, to explain the classroom context and instructional practices of this teacher as she attempts to help her students see their lives as purposeful. Although her practices are consistent with the instructional theories mentioned above—culturally responsive teaching, funds of knowledge, and cultural modeling—I draw specifically from Ladson-Billings’ tenet of sociopolitical consciousness to help make sense of this teacher’s practices. By leading her students to think about why they are on this earth and what they can do to make a difference in their own community, she becomes a teacher who empowers students to see and find value in themselves and their lives in the grand scheme of their local experiences as well as the world beyond.

In short, this teacher is a learner in her classroom, and research has stressed the importance of teacher learning and understanding of the background and lived

experiences of their students in order to be successful (Gay, 2010; Lee, 2007; Moll & Gonzalez, 2004). In particular, this body of research highlights the need for teachers to develop tools to inquire and learn about the outside-of-school lives of students, including their families and communities.

Lee explains that teachers should think about and use this learning as “cultural data sets” (p. 35) from which to build and learn. Similarly, Ladson-Billings (2009) explains that teachers should study their students when deciding what and how to teach. What teachers learn about students should be centralized both in the curriculum¹—what it is that the students have the opportunity to learn—as well as through instruction—how teachers teach the curriculum.

Moll and Gonzalez’s research points to the necessity to learn from and with the families of students, using this information as important curricular and instructional sites in the classroom. This funds of knowledge emphasis has a powerful connection to how teachers might think about working with families and parents as they develop and refine instructional practices. This framework necessitates that teachers see or perhaps locate characteristics and abilities of students and their families as assets. Moll and Gonzalez’s framework recommends that family members of students teach teachers about home practices that can be linked to the subject matter.

Lee’s cultural modeling framework also empowers teachers to focus on outside-of-school factors that shape learning inside-of-school. However, her framework is linked more closely to the students themselves in everyday practices, while Moll’s framework is broader in scope. Lee’s idea is that students and teachers are actively engaged in knowledge construction and learning about the outside-of-school practices of students and families that can be mirrored and connected to the in-school curriculum in different subject areas.

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Lee (2007), in her important book, *Culture, Literacy, and Learning: Taking Bloom in the Midst of the Whirlwind*, provides explicit examples of how teachers in different subject areas, including literacy and mathematics, can use students' out-of-school experiences to connect with learning in school. Interestingly, some would argue that mathematics does not require attention to students' particular worldviews or outside-of-school cultural practices. Some may even perceive mathematics curriculum and instruction as neutral. However, both Lee (2007) and Ladson-Billings (2009) demonstrate how essential understanding who students really are can be in the teaching and learning exchange across all subject matter areas. The teacher featured in this study learns from her students that they need to feel connected to what they are learning in order to find purpose in it. In essence, her instructional approaches need to be culturally relevant to her students.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Ladson-Billings (1992) conceptualizes culturally relevant pedagogy as an approach that serves to:

... empower students to the point where they will be able to *examine critically educational content and process* and ask what its role is in creating a truly democratic and multicultural society. It uses the students' culture to help them *create meaning and understand the world*. Thus, not only academic success, but also social and cultural success is emphasized. (emphases added) (p. 110)

Three interrelated tenets shape Ladson-Billings' conception of culturally relevant pedagogy: academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness.² Sociopolitical consciousness is about the micro-, meso-, and macro-level matters that have a bearing on teachers' and students' lived experiences and educational interactions. For instance, the idea that the unemployment rate plays a meaningful role in national debates as well as in local realities for teachers, community members, and students would be centralized and incorporated into curricula and instructional opportunities to connect with both teachers' and students' consciousness.

Ladson-Billings (2006) stresses that this tenet is not about teachers pushing their own political and social agendas in the classroom. Rather, she indicates that sociopolitical consciousness is about helping "students use the various skills they

learn to better understand and critique their social position and context" (p. 37).

The construct suggests that students develop a critical consciousness and sociopolitical consciousness in order to move beyond spaces where they simply or solely consume knowledge without critically examining it and thinking about its relationship to broader society. The idea is that teachers create learning environments where students develop voice and perspective and are allowed to participate more fully in the multiple discourses available in a learning context by not only consuming information but also through their participation in deconstructing it (Freire, 1998). Ladson-Billings (1994) further explains that culturally relevant pedagogy uses

... student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture. The negative effects are brought about, for example, by not seeing one's history, culture, or background represented in the textbook or curriculum...culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. (pp. 17-18)

Educators who create learning contexts that can be classified as culturally relevant are those who see students' culture as an asset, not a detriment, to their success (Ladson-Billings, 2009). These teachers actually use student culture in their curriculum planning and implementation, and they allow students to develop the skills to question how power structures are created and maintained in U.S. society.

In this sense, the teacher is not the only, nor even the main arbiter of knowledge (McCutcheon, 2002). Students are expected and empowered to develop intellectually and socially in order to acquire skills to make meaningful and transformative contributions to society. Thus, culturally relevant pedagogy, and in particular sociopolitical consciousness, constitutes what I choose to call purposeful teaching in this context because this teacher motivates her students to think about and critique the broader sociopolitical arena with purpose.

In essence, culturally relevant pedagogy is an approach that helps students "see the contradictions and inequities" (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 382) that exist inside and outside of the classroom. Through culturally relevant teaching, teachers help students develop the skills needed to question inequity and to fight against the many *isms* and phobias that

they encounter, while also allowing students to build knowledge and to transfer what they have learned through classroom instructional/learning opportunities to other experiences.

Methods

Building upon and from the qualitative research of others (Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1992), I conducted research at Bridge Middle School for about two academic years, covering approximately 19 months. I began conducting this research at Bridge in September of 2005. The teacher in this study, Ms. Shaw, was nominated by the principal of the school as a candidate for observation. Broadly, I wanted to learn about, study, and hear the stories of teachers at Bridge Middle School and to understand and describe how and why teachers succeeded there.

As my time at Bridge evolved, I focused in on how Ms. Shaw developed cultural knowledge and competence to teach effectively at this school. Accordingly, I was also interested in this teacher's struggles; what issues did she experience in the school and in her classroom with students that could shed light on the complexities of teaching and learning in an urban and diverse school?

I conducted observations in what Rios (1996) calls the cultural contexts of the teacher's classroom as well as other contexts in the school building. I also analyzed documents and artifacts and conducted interviews with the teacher. Throughout the study, I attended and observed the teacher's classes. I also attended and observed other school-related activities, events, and spaces, including the Honor Roll Assembly, the library, and the cafeteria. I wanted to learn as much as possible about the overall context of the school, including rich and deep details about the nature of the school, its culture, and this particular teacher. I wanted to know what life was like for this teacher, other teachers at the school, and students not only in the classroom but also in other locations in the school. In short, I attempted to gauge the culture of Bridge Middle School.

Typically, I was at the school for half of a day once per week. On some occasions, I was in the school two days. When I was not able to visit the school, the teacher shared her plans and related materials with me to help me "stay current" and to gain an understanding and knowledge base relative to her work, thinking, and development. Although I participated in

some of the classroom tasks, I was more of an observer than a participant. In some cases, I participated in group discussions and assisted with some minor classroom activities. Most of the time, however, I recorded field notes in my notebook related to the interactions I observed between Ms. Shaw and her students.

I conducted semi-structured interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Seidman, 1998) with the teacher, which were tape-recorded, transcribed, and hand coded; these interviews lasted one-to-two hours. Although not tape-recorded or transcribed, I also conducted countless informal interviews with the teacher from which I recorded additional entries in my field notebook.

Interviews typically took place during the teacher's lunch hour or planning block. The hand-coded analysis followed a recursive, thematic process; as interviews and observations progressed, I used analytic induction and reasoning to develop thematic categories. What is outlined in the subsequent sections of this article are representative of the kinds of information Ms. Shaw shared with me and that I observed in the school.

Because the findings are based largely on both observations and interviews, a pattern of thematic findings emerge from multiple data sources, resulting in triangulation. This triangulation is central in data analysis. For instance, when the teacher repeated a point several times throughout the study, this became what I call a pattern. When what the teacher articulated during interviews also became evident in her actions or in her students' actions, this resulted in what I call a triangulation pattern.

Bridge Middle School

Constructed in 1954, Bridge Middle School is an urban school in a relatively large city in the southeastern region of the United States. According to a Bridge County real estate agent, houses in the community sell for between \$120,000 and \$175,000. There are also a considerable number of rental houses in the school's at-

tendance area. Many of the neighborhood students from higher socio-economic backgrounds in the school's area attend private and independent schools in the city rather than attend Bridge Middle School.³

As a result, a larger number of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds attend the school. Bridge Middle School is considered a Title I school, which means that the school receives additional federal funds to assist students with instructional and related resources. During the 2006-2007 academic year, Bridge Middle School accommodated approximately 354 students. Data available regarding student demographics in 2005-2006 indicates that 59.8% of the students at Bridge were African American, 5.6% Hispanic American, 31.6% White, .3% American Indian, and 2.8% Asian American, indicating a truly diverse learning environment at least in terms of racial and ethnic diversity.

The free and reduced lunch rate increased over a four-to-five year period, between the 2002 and 2006 academic years: from 64% to 79%, respectively. In 2006, there were 27 teachers at the school; 45% of the faculty were African American and 55% were White. Seven of the teachers were male and 20 were female. Tables 1, 2, and 3 summarize this data.

I selected Bridge Middle School because it was known in the district as one of the "better" middle schools in the urban area—relatively speaking. For instance, I asked practicing teachers enrolled in my classes at the university to "community nominate" (Ladson-Billings, 1994) what I called "strong" and some of the "better" urban schools. Bridge Middle School was consistently nominated. Upon my queries, people in the supermarket would also mention Bridge as one of the better schools in the district. When I met with a school official at the district office in order to gain entry into a strong urban school that had celebrated some success, he also suggested Bridge as an appropriate place to work.

Bridge Middle School is known for its competitive basketball, wrestling, track, and American football teams. The school building is brick, and windows at the school are usually open during the summer and spring seasons. There is a buzzer at the

main entrance to the school. Visitors ring the bell, are identified by a camera, and are allowed in by one of the administrative assistants in the main office. When I visited the school, I signed a logbook located in the main office and would proceed to either the teacher's classrooms, the cafeteria, or the library. During my first month of conducting this research (September, 2005), one of the hall monitors insisted that I go back to the main office to get a red name badge, so I could be identified as a visitor/researcher. Bridge Middle School was obviously serious about safety.

The floors in the hallways of the school were spotless. There was no writing or graffiti on the walls. Black history/heritage/celebration posters and bulletin boards occupied nearly all the wall space in the hallways during February in both 2006 and 2007.

Ms. Shaw

An African American, Ms. Shaw was always immaculately dressed. She often wore a stylish scarf to accent her attire, which was often a linen suit that was in unison with student uniforms in the Bridge School District. Ms. Shaw was teaching from the moment the class started until the students walked out the door. Her students were always engaged in some project, discussion, or writing assignment.

Furthermore, I never walked into Ms. Shaw's classroom when she was not at the front of the room. She never sat at her desk, which was in the back corner of the classroom. She was a master storyteller, and students seemed to hang on her every word. On a rotation basis, Ms. Shaw taught the following courses: civics, reading in the social studies, and multicultural education in the United States of America. At the time of my observation, she had been teaching for 35 years, and she had attended Bridge Middle School herself as a child.

Teaching and Learning on Purpose

Several conceptions and practices shaped Ms. Shaw's efforts to develop critically-minded and conscientious students. Below I elaborate on what I conceptualized as purposeful teaching and learning that

Table 1
Students at Bridge Middle School, 2006-2007

African-American	59.8%
White	31.6%
Hispanic-American	5.6%
Asian-American	2.8%
American-Indian	0.3%
Total # of Students	354

Table 2
Teachers at Bridge Middle School, 2006-2007

Ethnic Background	Percentage
African American	45%
White	55%

Table 3
Free and Reduced Lunch

2002	Increase	2006
64%	15%	79%

Ms. Shaw demonstrated. I suggest that her purposeful teaching was indeed consistent with the instructional practices described in the literature as culturally relevant teaching—particularly with respect to the tenet of sociopolitical consciousness.

Ms. Shaw's purposeful thinking and classroom practices related specifically to: (1) building relationships with her students, (2) seeing teaching and learning as a mission and responsibility, (3) remembering race, (4) moving beyond materialism, (5) accepting and serving in multiple roles, and (6) promoting self and school pride.

Building Relationships as a Precursor

Ms. Shaw has what some might conceive of as a traditional mindset and approach to her practice at Bridge Middle School, in that she is most concerned that the students learn “the basics” as they relate to helping others. She believes it to be (in her words) a “responsibility” and “mission” to teach and to help students build a skillset for social success and social consciousness. Her objective for helping her students develop a consciousness to improve the human condition beyond themselves is achieved through the nature and essence of the relationships she develops with her students.

In short, students allow Ms. Shaw entry into their life world experiences so that she can link content/subject matter with community consciousness because she cares about them and demonstrates that care. The relational aspects of Ms. Shaw's practices and interactions with her students are critical because many of her students seem to disconnect in other classrooms I observed at Bridge Middle School when they did not have solid relationships with those other teachers.

Moreover, the students seemed to disconnect when they did not find what Ladson-Billings calls purpose in what they were learning. One student reported how another teacher (a science teacher) was teaching at Bridge Middle “only because she got divorced and needed the money.” Whether true or not, this student and others at the school had constructed their own realities about the level of care and commitment their teachers had for them and the profession.

It was clear from my observations that Ms. Shaw believes that she is, in her own words, “called” to the work of teaching, and she attempts to cultivate relationships with all the students at Bridge Middle School with the aim of helping them un-

derstand how to contribute to society at large. The importance of relationships in her work is demonstrated in several significant ways. For instance, during a class period I observed, Christine, a student enrolled in Ms. Shaw's fifth period, walked into Ms. Shaw's second period with an “assignment sheet” from in-school suspension [ISS]. Christine looked perplexed, sad, and it was obvious that she had been crying.

Consider the following interaction I observed between Ms. Shaw and Christine:

Christine: Ms. Shaw, fill this [the assignment sheet] out. They [the administration] put me in ISS. (Tears started to flow).

Ms. Shaw: Christine, what's going on?

Christine: I just don't like her [referring to one of her other teachers who had referred her to the office that led to her being assigned ISS.]

Ms. Shaw: Well, Christine, you will meet a lot of folks in your life you don't like. You've got to learn to work with people you don't like. It's going to be alright though because you are smart, and you've got to let that situation roll off your back.

Christine: I knew you were going to say that, but I still don't like her.

At this point, Christine still looks like she is deeply troubled and hurt by either being sent to ISS or by the situation she had experienced with the teacher whom she declared that she does not “like” in another classroom. As Ms. Shaw was gathering “assignments” for Christine to occupy her time in ISS, it appeared that Ms. Shaw noticed the troubled look on Christine's face. She saw that Christine was taking the situation very seriously, and that it was influencing the student in an emotionally serious way.

Ms. Shaw: Okay, Christine, sit down. Just hang out in here with me for a while. You don't need to go to ISS in this state. How is your sister doing? You know I have taught all your older sisters, and you all are smart girls. What would your sister, Tonya, say if she saw you all upset like this?

Christine: She would tell me to calm down.

Ms. Shaw: Exactly. Just shake this situation off, Christine. It is so not the end of the world. You will bounce back from this. How is Tonya doing?

Christine: She is fine. She just got married.

By the time Ms. Shaw finished posing questions to Christine about her sister and reassuring her that she was indeed “alright,” Christine had calmed down. In fact, by the

end of her exchange, Christine looked to be a completely different person. She had calmed down and was now ready to move forward with her punishment in ISS.

When I talked with Ms. Shaw about the interaction she explained that had she allowed Christine to leave her room in the upset state she was in, she worried that she would have run into even more problems. This was not a trivial decision for Ms. Shaw. She already had a class of students in her classroom and could have allowed Christine to leave because she had other responsibilities (her current students in her classroom for that period). Ms. Shaw explained that she saw her work as a teacher as her mission and calling. Clearly, she felt “responsible” for Christine and invited her to hang out in her room until she was in a space to move forward. In this sense, developing purposeful teaching means that she has to understand and care about her students. She has a mission to help her students reach their full capacity.

Teaching as Mission and Responsibility

While it was clear that Ms. Shaw sees her instructional practices as related to mission and responsibility, it is also evident that she wants to instill a level of responsibility among her students that propels them to assist others and to transform communities. She wants her students to develop a mission-minded approach to their decisions and actions both outside and inside of school.

By mission-minded, I mean that she wants her students to think about a broader collective purpose—one that extends beyond themselves personally. She invites her students to think about their “calling in life” and to work to improve conditions that affect others. In essence, Ms. Shaw makes it clear that it is part of her role, responsibility, and calling as an educator to empower her students to “serve” and to “change” their communities in order to improve conditions for the “masses.”

She attempts to empower her students to develop what Ladson-Billings calls a critical consciousness about some of the social realities that they encounter in the Bridge community but are not necessarily aware of. As a brilliantly engaging storyteller, Ms. Shaw shares personal narratives throughout her lessons to help students understand what she is attempting to cover in the content of her courses.

In an interview, she shared:

Now I am almost sixty-five...when we were taught in teacher training, we had a mis-

sion. Our mission was to go out to serve...to reach and to help the generations.

She believes that reminding students that they are on earth to make a contribution to humanity and to think about their “purpose” and contribution to society beyond their current, immediate situations and experiences is essential to their success. Allowing students to think beyond their present mindset and experiences is a major aspect of what she perceives as her responsibility to her students. Ms. Shaw develops purposeful teaching with her students.

The idea of helping students see life beyond themselves and the present is a constant theme of her work because she finds that many of her students do not “think beyond” what is happening at the present moment. She finds that many do not even think beyond their present/local neighborhood. This point was corroborated by a conversation I had with one of the students at Bridge Middle School. The student asked me what I (and my family) had done over the previous weekend. I shared with the student that my wife had convinced me—actually forced me—to go to a shopping mall in a nearby suburb (approximately 15-20 miles from the Bridge County community) over the weekend. The student looked perplexed; she had no idea where this mall was located because she had never left the Bridge County community.

Upon my queries to Ms. Shaw and other adults in the school, I learned that many of the students had not left their immediate community, so it might be difficult for them to “think beyond their current” situations. Thus, Ms. Shaw wants her students to recognize that they are part of a larger community (beyond Bridge Middle School) and that they need to think beyond themselves and where they are currently when they are making decisions. Of course, this approach is complicated by the fact that many of her students have not physically left the Bridge County community. Thus, Ms. Shaw stresses the need for her students to understand both their local and broader communities.

She engages in explicit conversations with her students about this; they talk about what life is like in other parts of the city, state, and country. She uses her storytelling power to share experiences she has had over the years, dating back as a student in her teacher education program as well as when she was a student herself in the Bridge County community. The students appear captivated by these stories, and it perhaps helps them make connections to outside-of-school aspects of life and also to

the reality that they can leave the Bridge County community if they want. However, what is powerful about the stories that Ms. Shaw shares is the fact that she decided to return to the Bridge community because she considers it “home,” and she cares about the people there.

Remembering Race and Community

Additionally, perhaps because she teaches social studies, she talks about race with her students and about what race means for them. In short, she believes that part of her calling and responsibility is to help her students think about race both currently and from an historical perspective. As a site for examination, she reflects on the intricate and complex nature of race and the role it has in her own outside and inside the classroom experiences. She talks explicitly about race and its relevance in her practices at Bridge Middle School. In the classroom and also during interviews, she reflects often on her own experiences as a student and teacher pre-desegregation, and she discusses how her mindset has been shaped by the “Black community.” She explains that “Black culture” has fostered a sense of community commitment, and she was taught that she should use her increasing individual power and opportunities to influence the Black people in the community.

This broader emphasis on community and change is evident in the kinds of experiences she wants to construct for her students. Ms. Shaw’s ability to think deeply about herself and her own experiences, especially about how her Black identity has shaped her experiences, allows her students entry into her life over the years, which is essential in her helping the students understand their purpose as well as hers. In her words,

In the Black culture, that has also been our mission [to serve and to change/improve communities]. It was our mission and responsibility in our families and our churches and our homes ... [When I was in grade school,] we heard that in different ways . . . we heard that in sermons, [at church and] we heard it at home.

Ms. Shaw regrets that a community-focused discourse about race does not permeate the various institutions her students frequent: school, churches, homes, and so forth. She believes that such “reinforcement” and “consistent messages” are necessary to help students understand and perhaps internalize the idea that life is about more than themselves and that

they should work to improve mankind. She does not believe it is inappropriate to encourage them to contribute to “Black culture.” She believes that the “disconnect” between the messages students receive across different contexts actually hurts them.

Moreover, Ms. Shaw says her decision to design and promote a community-based orientation in her work is precipitated by the fact that she has been helped throughout her life, especially in the Black community, “And so, as I became a teacher, somebody helped me along the way; somebody showed me, and then they corrected me.” As a teacher who has spent many years in the school, Ms. Shaw perceives all the students in the school as “my kids.” She will “correct” students in the hallway or the stairwell if she needs to. From her perspective, the Black community has commissioned her to especially contribute to and improve that community as she is growing older.

She believes that her responsibility is not only to the Black community but to the community in general. However, she doesn’t deny that she has a special commitment to the Black community. When I observed her “correct” and “get onto” students not in her classes, the students all knew her name, and “corrected” their behavior immediately. It clearly appears that she has gained respect from all students in the Bridge school community, not only those students in her classes that she has taught.

There is a clear theme of community improvement in Ms. Shaw’s mindset and practices as she makes connections between what is happening in her life at school and what is happening to her in other spaces, such as at home, in church, and in the Black community. She attempts to live her life without inconsistencies and contradictions. She wants her students to witness her purpose as she lives and teaches it.

She seems to have a recurrent view that, “as an African American,” her goal is to serve, to change, and to improve the situations that are “unfair” and “unjust.” This community emphasis is consistently reinforced in her classroom with her students. For example, she poses higher-level thinking questions, insisting that her students think about why things are/were as they are/were. She asks the students, for example, to think about what could have been done to improve people’s situations in the past, and what can be done in the present.

Her class discussions are very focused

on aspects of history that force students to make explicit links to current-day situations related to issues such as race, rather than focusing on remembering a host of dates, historical names, and events. Her goal is skill development that includes critical and analytic thinking to help students consider important historic and current social ills, such as those related to race.

Yet, she still worries that her students have forgotten about the role of race in society, for example, the history of slavery in the U.S., and how racism can still manifest in their experiences. She wonders if the students are prepared for the racialized experiences that they will inevitably face, especially as they move into high school and adulthood. She worries that they are colorblind, and she believes they (Black students) will eventually experience racism in their lives at some point. Will her students be adequately prepared for these experiences?

In essence, she believes that all of her students need to be more community focused and she draws from her experiences as an African American to discuss why community is so important. It is critical to note that she feels that all of her students need to be more community focused, not just her Black students.

Moving Beyond Materialism

Combined with her emphasis on community and on what she calls her “African-American culture” is her concern that students are more interested in material possessions, and not in those matters that have potential to improve something greater than themselves as individuals. Ms. Shaw believes that society’s intense and relentless focus on material possessions can complicate and move students away from what she believes to be a more germane and important focus on developing knowledge and skills to contribute to and improve society to help others. She believes that students’ growth should develop through service rather than focusing on what they can acquire individually, in terms of materials, from society. It is evident that her commitment to service and purpose as well as her efforts to promote these qualities through her teaching are prevalent in her work because she attended Bridge Middle School herself, and she lives in and shares her students’ community.

In short, Ms. Shaw is committed to helping her students realize that life is about more than what one can acquire materially. She feels it is her mission and

responsibility to help her students realize that they too are “responsible for their communities,” and she challenges them to make changes in their communities when they witness something that is unfair, unjust, or just simply “wrong.” Through the many stories she shares, her students come to realize that because Ms. Shaw has experienced life before desegregation and because she has experienced racism firsthand, she does not want them to take for granted all the sacrifices people have made before them and on their behalf.

She explains that people have died for the privileges that we are able to enjoy currently, and she believes that some of her students do not realize how “close” we still are as a country to segregation and the broader, more systemic forms of “discrimination, racism, and sexism.” Thus, her decision to highlight community over material possessions is often couched in her reflections about times when she had substandard materials, such as “Black-only facilities and resources, used textbooks,” and dilapidated educational facilities.

When students do not handle their educational materials properly, she reminds them that at one point in U.S. history, Black students had only “hand-me-down” and “used” books. She reminds her White and Latino students, too, about material conditions and experiences pre-desegregation.

Meeting “Heroes”

Ms. Shaw is also deliberate in introducing her students to people from the Bridge County area and beyond who have made tremendous strides forward in their careers and communities. She explains that these “heroes” are successful because they have purpose. Her thinking is that these people have decided to dedicate their lives to something beyond themselves.

She explains to her students that they need to contribute to the community so that the community and society can succeed as well. For instance, she extolled the experiences of then Senator Barack Obama, Ruby Dee, Dr. Bobby Lovett, Reverend Andrew Young, Ervin “Magic” Johnson, and others. Ms. Shaw wants her students to learn about these individuals’ stories because it allows them to recognize each historical “journey” and how their own journeys are inextricably tied to those they discuss in the classroom.

She believes that students sometimes see the end result without recognizing that many people we celebrate and hold in some form of reverence have gone through hardships—including deep-rooted poverty

and abuse—to get to where they are. It is in the core of these discussions, where Ms. Shaw shares background experiences and hardships of historical contributors, that students seem most interested.

Because many of the students at Bridge experience some form of poverty and hardship, hearing the stories of those who have overcome such circumstances seems to be important to their understanding and engagement—and ultimately their purpose. Material possessions, she explains, are the rewards of hard work and dedication, and many of these individuals had “service as their mission, not things.”

Indeed, Ms. Shaw sees it as her responsibility and mission to accept and serve in multiple roles. She is concerned that her students care more about what some of the students call “the bling [material possessions such as fancy cars, expensive clothing and jewelry]” than they do issues that concern the broader human condition. She believes that the media has actually “harmed” students and seduced them into concentrating on the “wrong” things.

Accepting and Serving in Multiple Roles

An important aspect of Ms. Shaw’s teaching is her recognizing and undertaking multiple roles with her students. She explains that although they may not realize it in teacher education programs, whether traditional or alternative, teachers will need to assume and serve in multiple roles in their social context. Assuming multiple roles means that teachers move beyond strictly focusing on teaching subject matter.

In their practices, Ms. Shaw believes that teachers must learn that they either accept the multiple roles that students need and come to expect of them or work to circumvent these roles. Successful teachers, in Ms. Shaw’s view, understand that teaching involves teachers doing much more than teaching—that teachers also need to serve students in myriad ways and in a range of meaningful roles.

As Ms. Shaw explains:

There are some teachers who are saying, ‘That’s [serving in multiple roles] not our job,’ but it becomes your job because somebody’s got to take on that role [different roles that students need assuming] for the students. A lot of things I didn’t understand either...when people told us when I started teaching that you are going to be the social worker; you are going to be the parent; you are going to be the friend... when they said all that stuff I said ‘sure,’... but I see that I’ve become that. And I can

either take that role, or I can say...I am out of here.

Ms. Shaw finds that students enter the learning context with a variety of needs and many of those needs require that teachers address them—beyond teaching their particular subject matter. As a teacher whom one of her students referred to as her “mama,” Ms. Shaw has come to assume multiple roles in her practice in order to bridge gaps that some of her students have. However, early on she did not understand the multitude of these needs when she was a student learning to teach. In her practice with students over the years, she explains that she has assumed roles that she never thought she would need to assume as a classroom teacher.

Ms. Shaw understands and believes that positive relationships with her students are critical to her success as a teacher at Bridge Middle School, and she also understands that those other relationships need to be supplemented through other roles such as those of “friend” or “parent.” When students see teachers in roles that “fit” or are responsive to their needs, they are willing to trust the teacher enough to learn from him or her—to push themselves to engage in materials that may have seemed “difficult otherwise.” Thus, the fact that Ms. Shaw assumes and performs roles that fill voids in some students’ lives has propelled her to be able to get students to open up to her. This has allowed her to build relationships with her students that she may not have been able to had she not assumed the different roles they needed.

Based on my observations, Ms. Shaw teaches the students life lessons, and these life lessons often emerge from what she has come to know in her own story. She makes explicit connections to her students’ lives outside of the school context. These connections are not only made in relation to the students’ present lives but also their future lives.

Preparing for the Future

For instance, Ms. Shaw explains to her students the importance of honesty, what is necessary to secure a good paying job, and the importance of building and “securing” social security. In an interview she shared: “...I do want them to work, so they can get some Social Security money in the system...who is going to take care of you for the rest of your life? And who wants to?” She speaks candidly with students about what happens when people do not

develop knowledge and skills and in many ways she assumes roles that allow her to teach the students life lessons beyond the stated and expected curriculum.

In short, Ms. Shaw shares real consequences with her students, which allows them to think about realities that they may not have ever or previously thought about without her insight. Because she is at an age where she could retire, she is attempting to provide a window for her students that allows them to visualize what is possible and also what challenges they might face. The students learn how being conscious and conscientious about the decisions they make currently could affect their future. In this sense, Ms. Shaw assumes the role of mentor and counselor because she wants her students to start—or to continue—thinking beyond their current situations and to imagine a point in their lives when they can receive social security in retirement.

It is important to note that Ms. Shaw attempts to demystify and break down some of the anxiety many of the students may feel about preparing for their futures. To be clear, Ms. Shaw is unyielding about sharing information with students that could impact their current and future lives. She refuses to present everything as “easy,” and she explains to students that they will experience difficulties in their lives, some of which will be consequences of matters far beyond their control. For instance, she shares with her female students that in their professions they will possibly earn less than their male counterparts.

Expressing to students that they are not immortal and that life will bring challenges that they will need to be prepared to work through by building the appropriate knowledge, skills, and attitudes is something that the students seem to appreciate and is a consistent theme of Ms. Shaw’s approach to teaching and learning. She wants her students to take their learning and lives seriously, and she is very direct and deliberate about how life could be if the students do not engage, work hard, and serve the broader community.

During my entire time researching at Bridge Middle School, I never observed Ms. Shaw having to send a student out of the classroom for a discipline issue. I never observed a student being disrespectful to her. I am not sure how many middle school teachers focus their students on Social Security as a priority, but Ms. Shaw attempts to paint pictures for students that help them think about where they are headed, along with demonstrating multiple options

and pathways that can end with personal and community success or failure.

While Ms. Shaw provides concrete examples of how life can be for students in the “real world,” she is also careful to explain to her students that they will not have all the answers:

They understand what their purpose here is. I am not here to entertain you. I am here to help you and direct learning and guide your learning. I keep telling them I don’t know everything because now there is so much information that we’ll never know. So, they understand. But, I’ll tell you what, I know how to learn the answer, and I’ll show you how [to find the answers to problems]. So I make that clear. So I’m not all knowing...

She stresses to her students that they must become lifelong learners and work to discover the information that they do not know in order to succeed and to solve problems. Such learning opportunities are important for students who may struggle to understand their life purpose—why they are on earth, and what they are supposed to be doing while here.

Promoting Self and School Pride

Consistently, Ms. Shaw also encourages and promotes self pride and school pride among her students at Bridge Middle School. She particularly urges her female students to take pride in themselves as women and to think about their futures as she wants them to become independent and empowered to reach their goals. She worries that they will engage in actions and behaviors that could “hurt their futures” when it comes to sex, drugs, and hanging out with a “bad” crowd. She stresses to both genders the importance of attire and appearance and urges them to take pride in how they look and how they carry themselves because they were representing not only themselves but also their school, their parents, their ancestry, their community, and her as their teacher.

Ms. Shaw believes that when educators invest in students and teach them that they are important contributors to a broader school social context, students will be more willing to build pride in their school while simultaneously assembling and enhancing pride in themselves. While much of the purpose of Ms. Shaw’s work is focused on how students should work to build humanity and to reject individual materialism, Ms. Shaw is also focused on helping students feel pride in themselves as well as their community.

In some ways, she suggests that it

is difficult for students to take pride in something beyond themselves if they do not take pride in themselves first. She is equally committed to building school pride at Bridge Middle School and to students building a sense of personal pride. This is important to her because many of the teachers and students in the school see themselves as a family. One recurrent question in Ms. Shaw's classes is, "What is good citizenship at this middle school?" She wants her students to treat others well and to reflect the positive attributes of the school when they go out into the local and broader community.

Ms. Shaw believes that some of the core values evident before desegregation, when she was a student at Bridge Middle School, need to be revived and returned to, especially regarding pride and values:

In urban schools, we are going to have to go back—you know, in the sixties we were making so many gains, and there was so much self-pride—why? *Because we were proud of what was on the inside and not on the outside.* We have to go back to our core values. Love and respect for one another, integrity, humility, self-discipline, honesty. *And its not that they don't have that, it's just that it can be lost in a world where 'stuff' matters more than people.* (emphasis added)

To be clear, Ms. Shaw is not criticizing or blaming the students solely for any lack of character or integrity or for having the wrong values. Rather, she points to a society that often pushes and rewards materialism and "stuff" over people's hearts and minds. Indeed, Ms. Shaw stresses that school and self-pride is essential, and conveying this belief is one of the main goals in her teaching. Her students respond to these ideas, as Ms. Shaw regularly reminds them of the importance of doing what's right, always.

For instance, she stresses to students who were having disagreements that they must not allow the conflicts to define who they are and who they are becoming. For her, doing what is "right" matters more than retaliating against someone who has "mistreated" or "disrespected" another. Ms. Shaw clearly assumes multiple roles and shares information with students far beyond what is expected of her in the curriculum, and she does this because she believes that part of her role is to help students build pride in themselves and in the Bridge Middle School community. In her opinion this will ultimately help students find purpose in the classroom learning milieu and in society, leading students to having pride in their home communities and beyond.

Implications and Conclusions

We must continue learning from teachers like Ms. Shaw in order to improve the preparation of teachers in teacher education. As Sleeter (2001) reminds us, researchers should consider focusing their study of P-12 schools in ways that provide conceptual and practical understandings that can be implemented in teacher education. Sleeter encourages us to take a "backwards approach" to our work in the preparation of teachers.

But it is difficult to assist teachers in building the kinds of mindsets and practices demonstrated by Ms. Shaw because they will operate through systems that can make it difficult for them to develop purposeful teaching in a way similar to Ms. Shaw. In light of the pressure for many teachers to teach to tests (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012), any understanding that students can learn important skills and knowledge about aspects of life that extend beyond what might show up in a standardized examination is important.

However, are we preparing future teachers and currently practicing teachers for failure if we introduce them to alternative ways of teaching that address students' social development and awareness? Ms. Shaw demonstrates awareness in her practices with her students and a commitment to those students. Through her life and actions, she helps her students think about and find purpose in the classroom and encourages them to think about their purpose in the community as well.

There is compelling evidence that teachers' instructional practices can serve as the difference-maker in classrooms (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lee, 2007). Using Ladson-Billings's tenet of sociopolitical consciousness as an analytic tool to explain the practices of Ms. Shaw provides additional evidence that making the curriculum more relevant for students will be effective. Moreover, I am hopeful that others will further explore purposeful teaching as a way to help educators understand what it is and what it looks like in various social contexts, both in the U.S. and abroad.

I am also hopeful that this case sets forth the idea of purposeful teaching as an added dimension of what it means to teach with cultural relevance. Ms. Shaw believes that students need to understand that they are placed on earth for a reason and to live up to and fulfill that reason. In this sense, I argue that teachers need to be prepared to do more than teach subject matter such as

science, language arts, social studies, and mathematics.

Teachers can play an enormous role in how students engage, conduct themselves, learn, and achieve in urban classrooms as well as other educational contexts. More research studies are needed to help us develop more knowledge about teaching with cultural relevance—particularly how to prepare teachers to teach with cultural relevance.

Notes

¹ Curriculum can be defined as what students have the opportunity to learn in schools (Eisner, 1994; McCutcheon, 2002). Eisner (1994) postulated several important forms of the curriculum: (a) the explicit curriculum concerns student-learning opportunities that are overtly taught and stated or printed in documents, policies, and guidelines, such as in course syllabi, the common core standards, or on school websites; (b) the implicit curriculum is intended or unintended—it is not stated or written down, but is actually inherent to what students have the opportunity to learn; (c) a third form of curriculum, the null curriculum, deals with what students do not have the opportunity to learn. Thus, information and knowledge that are not available for student learning are also a form of the curriculum because students are actually learning something based on what is not emphasized, covered, or taught. What students do not experience in the curriculum becomes messages for them. For example, if educators are not taught to question, critique, or critically examine power structures, the students are learning something—possibly that it may not be essential for them to critique the world in order to improve it. From Eisner's perspective, what is absent is essentially present in student learning opportunities through the curriculum.

² What Ladson-Billings actually envisioned, however, was that culturally relevant pedagogy would allow for and facilitate student learning: "what it is that students actually know and are able to do as a result of pedagogical interactions with skilled teachers" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 34). Academic achievement, then, is about student learning. The idea is that if students are learning then they will be able to produce the types of outcomes, such as on standardized (high stakes) examinations, that allow them to succeed academically. For Ladson-Billings, cultural competence is not necessarily about helping teachers develop a set of static information about differing cultural groups in order for teachers to develop some sensitivity towards another culture. Rather, for Ladson-Billings, cultural competence is about student acquisition of cultural knowledge regarding their own cultural ways and systems of knowing society and thus expanding their knowledge to understand broader cultural ways and systems of knowing. Such a position, Ladson-Billings explained, with a focus on cultural competence being on students runs counter to the ways in which

other disciplines such as medicine, clergy and social work may think about and conceptualize cultural competence. In medicine, for instance, physicians are sometimes trained to develop a set of information about differing cultural groups to complement their ability to work with people who may be very different from them. For instance, it seems viable and quite logical for younger physicians to be educated to work with older patients. Bedside manner for physicians might also be enhanced when they develop knowledge about people living in poverty or people from a different racial or ethnic background from the doctor. The notion that physicians are attempting to deepen their knowledge-base about cultural groups for which they have very little knowledge and understanding can serve as essential knowledge for physicians as long as they realize the enormous range of diversity inherent within and among various cultural groups of people.

³ The practice of students attending magnet, private, and independent schools rather than their zoned schools was very common in the district.

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