

Challenging Negative Perceptions of Black Teachers

By H. Richard Milner

In this article, I focus on a case study of an African-American¹ teacher's perceptions about teaching and instructional practices in an urban middle school, Bridge Middle School. I provide a counter to some negative conceptions of Black teachers in general through a focus on this teacher: the way she thinks about her roles and responsibilities as a teacher as well as her pedagogical approaches. In essence, I consider the perceptions and instructional effectiveness of Ms. Shaw, an experienced, African-American female, social studies teacher. It is important to note that I am not suggesting that all Black teachers or their teaching practices are the same. Indeed, similar to Black people in general and those from other racial and ethnic groups, Black teachers are diverse and bring a range of views and instructional practices into the classroom. However, there are some pervasive notions and misnomers about the thinking and practices of Black teachers that I trouble and problematize through my analysis of this teacher.

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To illuminate, negative views of Black teachers' perceptions about their teaching and instructional practices sometimes include:

- Black teachers are too strict and provide too much structure in the classroom learning environment.
- Black teachers 'yell' at students and 'damage' their self-esteem.
- Black teachers do not provide for enough creativity in the classroom.
- Black teachers become too personal with their students and cross professional-personal lines.

My goal in this article is to demonstrate that while conventional wisdom might suggest that the mindsets, perceptions, thinking, and practices described above, for instance, are disadvantageous or ineffective, Ms. Shaw demonstrates that this "wisdom" can actually be myopic in scope and not necessarily accurate.

Several interrelated questions guide this analysis: How does Ms. Shaw think about her role and teaching at Bridge Middle School? How and why does Ms. Shaw succeed with her students? In what ways does Ms. Shaw's identity shape her perceptions and practices at Bridge Middle School? In what ways do or might Ms. Shaw's perceptions and practices be consistent and inconsistent with current discourses about Black teachers? In my effort to debunk some commonly held notions about Black teachers, I employ a counter-narrative analytic tool to explain some of what I learned about Ms. Shaw's work at her school. In the next section, I expound upon what I mean by counter-narrative.

Counter-Narratives in Theory, Research, and Practice

Counter-narrative is used as an analytic tool to examine the extent to which Ms. Shaw disrupts negative conceptions about Black teachers, their conceptions, their beliefs systems, and their teaching. Scholars of critical race theory² in education advanced the idea that counter-narratives are important and central to understanding the nature of reality; in particular, counter-narratives "told by people of color" (Lopez, 2003, p. 84) can contribute to the knowledge base of those often pushed to the margins in education. From critical race theory perspectives, knowledge can and should be generated through narratives and counter-narratives that emerge from and with people of color. Similar to narrative, counter-narrative provides space for researchers to share a teacher's experiences in ways that have not necessarily been told because it provides a different picture into the complexities of teaching and learning. A recurrent theme of this body of work is that the narrative and counter-narrative should be captured by the researcher, experienced by the research participants, and told in a way that builds and extends research, theory, and practice. Critical race theory's advancement of the narrative and counter-narrative centralizes race for the knower and for the known. In other words, race and racism are placed at the center through the narrative and counter-narrative through a critical race theory framework of analysis.

Thus, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explained that “a theme of ‘naming one’s own reality’ or ‘voice’ is entrenched in the work of critical race theorists” (p. 57). Solorzano and Yosso (2001) explained that critical race theory in education works to “challenge . . . dominant ideology” (p. 2) and to centralize “experiential knowledge” (p. 3). Emphases and value are placed on knowledge construction, on naming one’s own reality, and on the multiple and varied voices and vantage points among people of color. Communities of color are empowered to tell a story often much different from the ones that have been portrayed in the past (Chapman, 2007).

Dixson and Rousseau (2005) described the importance of voice and narrative in their review of the literature concerning critical race theory for at least a decade. They wrote that voice concerns “the assertion and acknowledgement of the importance of the personal and community experiences of people of color as sources of knowledge” (p. 10). Similarly, Ladson-Billings (1998) wrote “The use of voice or ‘naming your reality’ is a way that critical race theory links *form* and *substance* [emphasis added] in scholarship” (p. 12). Indeed, the stories of those considered by the dominant culture (and others) to be at the bottom—in many instances, students of color, researchers of color, and communities with large populations of people of color— “illustrate how race and racism continue to dominate our society” (Bell, 1992, p. 144). Such narratives need to be told but often have been dismissed, trivialized, or misrepresented in education research. A counter-narrative provides space for researchers to *disrupt* or to *interrupt* pervasive discourses that may paint communities and people, particularly communities and people of color, in grim, dismal ways. Indeed, counter-narratives can be used as an analytic tool to counter dominant perspectives in the literature such as discourses that focus on negative attributes, qualities, and characteristics of Black teachers. Drawn from the research and theoretical literature, I turn now to a focus on Black teachers and their teaching.

Black Teachers and Teaching

Much has been written about Black teachers—their experiences, their curriculum development, and their instructional practices in public school classrooms, both pre- and post-desegregation (Foster, 1990, 1997; Irvine & Irvine, 1983; King, 1993). Siddle-Walker (2000) made the following observation in her analysis of African American teachers during segregation:

Consistently remembered for their high expectations for student success, for their dedication, and for their demanding teaching style, these [Black] teachers appear to have worked with the assumption that their job was to be certain that children learned the material presented. (pp. 265-266)

Black teachers presented in the research literature worked overtime to help their students learn. Although teaching during segregation, many Black teachers operated from the perspective, vantage point, and positioning that they were preparing their students for a world of desegregation (Siddle-Walker, 1996). Moreover,

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pre-desegregation, Tillman (2004) explained that “Black teachers saw potential in their Black students, considered them to be intelligent, and were committed to their success” (p. 282). They saw their roles and responsibilities as reaching far beyond the hallways of their schools, and the teachers had a mission to teach their students because they realized the possible consequences in store for their students if they did not teach them and if the students did not learn. An undereducated Black student pre-desegregation could result in obliteration: drug abuse, gang involvement, or even worse—death.

Research demonstrated that Black teachers were “far more than physical role models.” The teachers brought “diverse family histories, value orientations, and experiences to students in the classroom, attributes often not found in textbooks or viewpoints often omitted” (Pang & Gibson, 2001, p. 260-261). Thus, Black teachers in a sense are texts themselves, and the pages of their texts are filled with histories of racism, sexism, and oppression, as well as those of strength, perseverance, and success. These teachers’ “texts,” like the texts of others, are rich and empowering; they have the potential to help students understand the world (Freire, 1998) and to concurrently change it. Historically, Black teachers have had a meaningful impact on Black students’ academic and social success because they deeply understood their students’ situations and their needs, both inside and outside of the classroom, in no small part because many of them lived in the same communities as their students.

While some of the literature showcases Black teachers’ success with Black students, it is important to note that Black teachers are successful not only with students of African descent but with those from many other racial and ethnic backgrounds as well. The research showed that Black teachers maintain high expectations for their students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Foster, 1998; Siddle-Walker, 1996), and they empathized with rather than pitied the students who were not succeeding academically and socially (McAllister & Irvine, 2002). Many Black teachers did not accept mediocrity in the classroom, and they *insisted* that their students reach their full capacity by making explicit the culture of power (Delpit, 1995), their expectations for success, and what was necessary for students to understand curriculum-related learning opportunities. Developing, implementing and maintaining high expectations for students has been found to be essential because such explicitly taught expectations give students the best chance to mobilize themselves, their families, and their communities. Thus, Black teachers understand that allowing students to ‘just get by’ could leave them in their current (negative) situation.

The care and concern of Black teachers has been described as other mothering (Collins, 1991; Irvine, 2003), or other parenting in that teachers treat their students as their own. In other words, teachers want for their students the best—just as they would want for their own biological children. Students seem to be able to sense teachers’ commitment to them and their care for them. Further, students recognize when there is unnecessary distance between them and their teachers. Students may question: “Why should I adhere to this teacher’s requests, expectations, and

desires when she or he does not really care about me?" Students often act defiantly or disruptively in order to distance themselves from what students perceive as uncaring and disrespectful teachers. This may continue until teachers and students negotiate the level of care and commitment necessary for all to succeed in an academic environment. Many Black teachers, both pre-desegregation and post-desegregation, seemed to understand the nature of care, and this care translated into meaningful learning opportunities for students in the classroom. However, Black teachers, their perceptions, and instructional decisions have also been criticized, both in the research literature as well as in discourses among other teachers, administrators, and parents.

Negative Views of Black Teachers' Approaches

Thus far in my review and conceptualization of the literature, I have discussed and described Black teachers, their perceptions, and their instructional practices in a positive light. I have discussed how:

- Black teachers are role models for students;
- Black teachers develop and explicitly enact and explain their high expectations for students;
- Black teachers take on the role of 'other parents' for their students; and
- Black teachers empathize with, not pity, their students.

Indeed, the literature paints the picture described above of Black teachers. However, there is also a negative picture of Black teachers that is not only prevalent in the literature but also common among the discourses of others regarding Black teachers' perceptions and instructional practices. Consider, for instance, Irvine and Fraser's (1998) description of an interaction between a student and teacher below by borrowing James Vasquez' notion, "warm demanders," a description of teachers of color "who provide a tough-minded, no-nonsense, structured, and disciplined classroom environment for kids whom society has psychologically and physically abandoned" (p. 56):

"That's enough of your nonsense, Darius. Your story does not make sense. I told you time and time again that you must stick to the theme I gave you. Now sit down." Darius, a first grader trying desperately to tell his story, proceeds slowly to his seat with his head hanging low. (Irene Washington, an African American Teacher of 23 Years)

An outsider listening and/or observing the Black teacher's tone, expectations for, and interaction with Darius may frown upon the teacher's approach in Irvine and Fraser's discussion. In fact, I have heard countless criticisms from practicing and pre-service teachers of the interaction between Darius and his teacher: "The teacher is too harsh." "The student did his best and is cut down unnecessarily." "The teacher has no business talking to the student in the way that she does." However, Irvine and Fraser suggested that this Black teacher's approach is grounded in a history and

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a reality that is steeped in care for the student's best interest. They shared that the teacher understood quite deeply the necessity and perhaps urgency to help Darius learn, and thus the teacher acted and responded to Darius accordingly.

Irene Jackson understood, according to Irvine and Fraser, the necessity to “talk the talk” (p. 56). There is a sense of urgency not only for Irene to “teach her children well but to save and protect them from the perils of urban street life” (p. 56). Indeed, Black teachers often have a commitment to and a deep understanding of Black students and their situations and needs because both historically and presently these teachers experience and understand the world in ways similar to their students. However, Black teachers are quite often criticized for their tough interactions with students. They are questioned for being too assertive and not compassionate enough for students. Definitions and demonstrations of care vary. Care, for some African-American teachers, may show up in their insistence that students reach their full capacity to succeed; they do not accept nonsense from students—especially when they know that students have the ability to do better or to exceed their current level of performance. Still, there are pervasive criticisms of practices that seem too strict or punitive.

Additionally, in their classrooms, Black teachers were able to develop and implement optimal learning opportunities for students (see, for instance, Ladson-Billings, 1994)—yet in the larger school context, they were often ridiculed for being too radical or for not being ‘team players.’ As evident in my own research (Milner & Woolfolk Hoy, 2003) a Black teacher can feel isolated and ostracized because that teacher may offer a counter-story or counter-narrative (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Morris, 2004; Tate, 1997) to the pervasive views of their mostly White colleagues. Black teachers’ perceptions and instructional practices with their students may be effective, yet inconsistent with their non-Black colleagues. In this way, Black teachers are sometimes ostracized and considered an outsider in their school community because they have a different way of seeing the world or reacting to a situation.

Additional criticism exists regarding Black teachers. For example, Delpit (1995) shared a reaction from a White teacher when talking about the management style and pedagogical approach of a Black teacher:

It's really a shame but she (that Black teacher upstairs) seems to be so authoritarian, so focused on skills and so teacher directed. Those poor kids never seem to be allowed to really express their creativity. (And she even yells at them). (p. 33)

What the teacher in the passage above seems to have failed to understand was that the “Black teacher upstairs” may have been quite effective in providing all students access and opportunities to learn. Black teachers may have a different way of thinking about how best to make learning happen in their classrooms, and they may have different instructional approaches that they enact in their classrooms. Some have not come to understand that different does not necessarily mean deficit (Ford, 2010). In other words, just because Black teachers may have a different

way of doing their work, connecting with students, developing high expectations, and thinking about pertinent issues in a school or classroom, does not necessarily mean they are deficient or substandard. With a discussion of the counter-narrative and Black teachers and their teaching completed, in the next section, I discuss the methods employed as I studied the perceptions and instructional practices of Ms. Shaw at Bridge Middle School.

Situating Myself with/in the Counter-Narratives

In subsequent sections of my discussion of Ms. Shaw, I use first person. I use first person because, in a sense, I am telling my own counterstory as much as I am telling the counterstory of Ms. Shaw. As an African-American, male researcher, and a former secondary school English teacher in a predominantly Black secondary school in the U.S., I engaged in self-reflection of my own thinking and teaching as I analyzed and represent Ms. Shaw and her teaching.

As I was attempting to understand Ms. Shaw, I was also attempting to more deeply understand my own experiences. I remained true to the data and evidence in the study, but I also made explicit my goals, rationales, and thinking in posing questions and in my focus during observations. I agree with Kerl (2002), who wrote, “We cannot necessarily know what is true or even real outside our own understanding of it, our own worldview, our own meanings that are embedded in who we are” (p. 138). Thus, I attempted to situate my own experiences, ways of knowing, and ways of experiencing the world within the story of Ms. Shaw. Below, I describe the research methods employed in the study of Ms. Shaw and her work at Bridge Middle School.

Research Methods

I conducted research at Bridge Middle School for two academic years, approximately 17 months. I began conducting research at Bridge in September of 2005. Ms. Shaw was nominated by the principal at Bridge. 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 and in this case Ms. Shaw succeeded there. Also, I was interested in teachers’ struggles; what issues did the teachers experience that can shed light on the complexities of teaching and learning in an urban school? Moreover, I was interested in how the teachers managed their classrooms, how they were able to get parents involved, and how (in terms of pedagogy and curriculum) the teachers were able to provide optimal learning opportunities for students. At the heart of my analyses was my attempt to understand the teacher’s perceptions and thinking about her work. A recurrent, and perhaps overarching, theme and goal of the study was to understand and to describe the culture of the school. I (1) conducted context observations in the teacher’s classroom as well as other contexts, (2) analyzed documents and artifacts, and (3) conducted interviews with her.

For instance, throughout the study, I attended and observed Ms. Shaw’s regu-

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lar classes, attended other school-related activities, events, and spaces such as the Honor Roll Assembly, the library, and the cafeteria. Indeed, I wanted to learn as much as possible about the context of the school to provide rich and deep details about the nature of the school and the teacher. I wanted to know what life was like for teachers and students not only in the classroom but also in other locations in the school.

Typically, I was in the school for half of a day once per week. On some occasions, I was in the school two days. Also, there were days when I was in the school for an entire day but was usually there for half of a day. My visits were fairly consistent although there were a few weeks when I did not visit the school; for instance, there were weeks when I was out of town at professional conferences. In early January (2007), I had an ankle injury that prevented my visitation for several weeks. Ms. Shaw shared her plans, worksheets, and other materials to help me gain a deep understanding and knowledge base relative to her work and thinking in the context—especially during my absence. 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 or commented on themes as they emerged in a particular reading for instance. Most of the time, though, I observed and recorded field notes in my field notebook.

In addition, I conducted interviews (Seidman, 1998) with Ms. Shaw, which were tape-recorded and transcribed. These semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed and lasted one-to-two hours. These interviews typically took place during the teacher's lunch hour or planning block. Data were hand coded. Essentially, analysis followed a recursive, thematic process; as interviews and observations progressed, I used analytic induction and reasoning to develop thematic categories. Because findings were based largely on both observations and interviews, the patterns of thematic findings emerged from multiple data sources, resulting in triangulation. For instance, when Ms. Shaw repeated a point several times throughout the study, this became what I called a 'pattern.' When what she articulated during interviews also became evident in her actions or in her students' actions, this resulted in what I called 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 sold for between \$120,000 and \$175,000. There were also a considerable number of rental houses zoned to the school. Many of the neighborhood students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and who were zoned to Bridge attended private, charter, and magnet schools in the city rather than Bridge Middle School. A larger number of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds attended the school. Bridge Middle School was considered a Title I school, which means that the school received additional federal funding to

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assist students with instructional and related resources. During the 2006-2007-academic-year, Bridge Middle School accommodated approximately 354 students. In 2005-2006, 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. The free and reduced lunch rate increased over the last four to five years, between the 2002 and 2006 academic years: 64% to 79%, respectively. In 2006, there were 27 teachers at the school with 45% of the faculty being African American and 55% being White. Seven of the teachers were male and twenty were female. Figures 1, 2, and 3 capture and summarize these 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 nominate (Ladson-Billings, 1994) ‘strong’ and some of the ‘better’ urban schools, and Bridge Middle School was consistently nominated. People in the supermarket would also mention Bridge as one of the ‘better’ schools in the district upon my inquiries. When I met with a school official at the district office in order to gain entry into a school, he also suggested Bridge as a place to work.

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

Figure 1
Students at Bridge Middle School, 2006-2007

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

Figure 2
Teachers at Bridge Middle Scgool, 2006-2007

Ethnic Background	Percentage
African-American	45%
White	55%

Figure 3
Free and Reduced Lunch

2002	Increase	2006
64%	15%	79%

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main entrance of the school. Visitors rang the bell, were identified by a camera, and were allowed in by one of the secretaries in the main office. When I visited the school, I signed a logbook located in the main office and would proceed to a teacher's classroom, to the cafeteria, or to 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 obtain a red name badge, so I could be identified as a visitor/researcher. They were serious about safety at the school. The floors in the hallways were spotless. There was no writing or graffiti on the walls. Especially during the month of February of (2006 and 2007), Black history/heritage/celebration posters occupied nearly all the wall space in the hallways.

Ms. Shaw, an African-American Teacher

On a rotation basis, Ms. Shaw taught Civics, Reading in the Social Studies, and Multicultural Education in the United States of America. She had been teaching for 35 years, and she actually attended Bridge Middle School as a student. Ms. Shaw was always immaculately dressed. She often wore a stylish scarf to accent her attire: usually dress pants and a jacket—often a linen suit because it was in unison with students' uniform at Bridge Middle School. Ms. Shaw was teaching from the time the class started until the students walked out the door; she taught from bell to bell. The students were always engaged in some project, discussion, or writing assignment. There was little “downtime” in her classroom. I never walked into Ms. Shaw's classroom when she was not at the front of the classroom. She never sat at her desk that was located in the back of the classroom. She was a master storyteller, and the students seemed to hang on her every word.

Ms. Shaw's Counter-Narrative

In this section, I focus on Ms. Shaw's perception of her roles and responsibilities as a teacher. In essence, she saw teaching as her mission—that is, what she was “called” to do. She felt responsible for her students' academic and social success. This belief system is consistent with much of the established literature about Black teachers' beliefs about teaching and their practices in the classroom as discussed above. The evidence in this study—Ms. Shaw's case—offers additional evidence to counter, debunk, and disrupt negative discourses about Black teachers. As mentioned, the goal of this article is not to suggest that Ms. Shaw is perfect or to suggest that all other Black teachers are flawless in their perspective and respective instructional practices. There are positive and negative qualities, attributes, and characteristics of teachers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. This discussion provides one case of a counter to those who see Black teachers and their work in a negative light.

In addition to seeing her role of a teacher as her mission and as her responsibility to help her students succeed academically and socially, Ms. Shaw accepted and served in multiple roles in order for her students to succeed. This idea may be

somewhat inconsistent with how others may see the role of teachers and teaching. Others may find it disadvantageous and actually inappropriate to view their students in this way. Finally, Ms. Shaw believed that it was her responsibility to build self and school pride among her students. In this way, she encouraged her students to shift their emphases away from individual success to a more collective and community focus. Again, this idea runs counter to those who believe that students should solely work independently. Overall, Ms. Shaw offered a no-nonsense mindset and approach to her work and interactions with her students. This position may leave some believing that students are stifled creatively.

Teaching as Mission and Responsibility

Ms. Shaw made it clear that she saw part of her roles and responsibilities as a teacher to empower her students to serve and to “change” their communities. She felt very strongly that there was a need for her students to develop a mindset to serve their communities and to find ways to change or to improve it. Unlike many other teachers who focus only or mostly on preparing students to pass standardized (high stakes) tests, Ms. Shaw perceived her role as a teacher to empower her students to change and improve their local communities. To be clear, Ms. Shaw was dedicated to preparing her students for success on their standardized exams. However, she *also* wanted them to develop additional skills.

As a brilliant storyteller, Ms. Shaw actually shared personal narratives throughout her lessons to help her students understand what she was attempting to cover in the content. In an interview, she shared:

Now I am almost sixty...when we were taught in teacher training, we had a mission. Our mission was to go out to serve...to reach and to help the generations. And in the black culture, that has also been our mission. It was our mission and responsibility in our families and our churches and our homes...[When she was in grade school,] we heard that in different ways...we heard that in sermons; we heard it at home. And so, as I became a teacher somebody helped me along the way; somebody showed me, and then they corrected me.

Ms. Shaw made important connections between what was happening in her life in school to what was happening to and with her in other spaces, such as at home with her family, in church, and in the community. Mission-driven, Ms. Shaw’s racial and ethnic identity was an important factor in how she thought about her responsibility as a teacher to students at Bridge Middle School. There seemed to be a recurrent position and view that as an African American, her goal was to serve, to change, and to improve the situations that were “unfair” and “unjust” and to help her students see this as part of their responsibilities as well. Such goals and missions were consistently reinforced in her classroom with students. For example, she would pose higher level thinking questions to help illuminate critical and transformational thinking among her students.

Her passion, commitment, and mission as a teacher also seemed to play a role

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in how she constructed the learning opportunities available in the classroom. Her practices could have been perceived as strict. Students were actively engaged in learning from bell to bell; she taught from bell to bell. She did not tolerate nonsense from students. In her view, she saw her work as urgent with her students, so she was quick to “correct” misbehavior and to redirect learning because she felt that she was preparing a new “generation” to improve the world. I observed students in one classroom setting being disruptive and disconnected and walk into Ms. Shaw’s classroom assuming a position to learn. Thus, according to one student I asked about Ms. Shaw and her class in the cafeteria: “Ms. Shaw doesn’t play!”

Perhaps most importantly was Ms. Shaw’s commitment to helping her students realize that life was about more than what one could acquire, materially and individually. She felt that part of her mission and responsibility was to help her students realize that they too were responsible to their communities, and she challenged them to make changes in their communities and to move beyond individual accomplishments and success. Such a position, where Ms. Shaw encouraged her students to move beyond individual success, may run counter to many dominant ways of perceiving and approaching academic success. Many believe that students should work to succeed individually. Their classroom contexts and instructional approaches are situated with individual success in mind. There are very few opportunities for students to collaborate or very few (if any) opportunities for students to think about their local communities for instance.

Students realized that because Ms. Shaw had experienced life pre-desegregation and because she experienced racism firsthand that she did not want them to take for ‘granted’ all the strides that people had made on their behalf. She explained that people had “sacrificed” and “died” for the privileges that her students were able to enjoy. She recalled having to use substandard and sometimes inadequate materials and resources, ‘black only facilities,’ and dilapidated educational facilities. These historical experiences as a Black woman enabled and propelled her to feel responsible for empowering her students to want to succeed not only individually but as a community. Many of her students were African-American, and she provided examples to help her students understand that life was about contributing something to causes greater than themselves—particularly those in their community. Such perceptions and mindsets were practiced in her many civics lessons that she developed and enacted.

In addition, Ms. Shaw was deliberate in introducing to her students people from the Bridge County area and beyond who had made tremendous strides in their careers and communities. She explained that students in the urban communities needed to develop a “mindset” to contribute to community so that it could “succeed” as well. She shared the life histories and experiences of President (then Senator) Barack Obama, Ruby Dee, Dr. Bobby Lovett, Reverend Andrew Young, Ervin “Magic” Johnson, Jr., and Johnnie Cochran, Jr, for instance. Indeed, Ms. Shaw perceived her role and responsibility as a teacher to empower students to improve their communities and to think beyond themselves. Moreover, her perceptions and

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practices could be considered strict, stern, and firm; such approaches, though, were grounded in a reality that she cared about her students and felt a sense of urgency that her students learn in order to succeed in their lives. In many ways, she accepted and severed in multiple roles at Bridge Middle School.

Accepting and Serving in Multiple Roles

As mentioned, many Black teachers adopt roles of surrogate parents to their students. Moreover, as explained and evident in the literature, Black teachers also adopted other roles for their students such as counselor, friend, mentor, social worker, and/or adviser. Ms. Shaw also embraced the idea that she performed many roles for her students, depending on their needs:

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 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 got to go; I am out of here.

Thus, students are coming into the learning context with needs that must be met. And teachers often find themselves serving in multiple, different roles in order to bridge the gap—to become relevant people in the lives of students. However, some may criticize this idea that so many Black teachers seem to perceive as common. Some would suggest that Black teachers get too personal when they attempt to help students with needs beyond those of academic and/or intellectual development. In many urban schools and in many schools with large populations of students of color, students whose first language is not English, and students who grow up in poverty, teachers come to understand that they will sometimes have to adopt and assume roles beyond that of traditional teacher. As Ms. Shaw mentions in her interview, teachers must become the social worker, friend, or parent when needed. *This means that teachers help direct and guide the development of the whole student—not just fragmented parts of him or her.* In its simplest form, teachers care about the total development of the students just as they would their own biological children.

Ms. Shaw understood and believed that relationships are critical to the success of teachers. When students see teachers in a role that fits or is responsive to one of their needs, they seem to be more willing to ‘trust’ the teacher enough to learn from the teacher—to push themselves to engage in materials that may have seemed “difficult otherwise.”

Based on my observations, Ms. Shaw taught the students life lessons—she provided learning opportunities beyond what would show up on a standardized test. She assumed multiple roles: she was responsive to her students; she attempted to deeply understand the needs of her students; she worked hard to meet the needs of the whole student. These life lessons often emerged from what she came to know

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in her own story. She made explicit connections between herself and her students. She made connections to what was happening to her students outside of school. Ms. Shaw (explicitly) helped her students think about life currently and to project and predict how life might be in the future. For instance, Ms. Shaw explained to her students the importance of hard work, what was necessary to secure a good paying job, and even the importance of building and “securing” social security:

...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? So, people are on [criticizing] Bill Cosby—some people don't like what he said; he is right to a certain degree. Michael Eric Dyson [who criticized Bill Cosby] and Bill Cosby need to come together.

Ms. Shaw was adamant about the importance of unity in the school and also in the African American community. While she realized and recognized that there would be incidents where people disagreed (and disagreement can be healthy at times), she also stressed the importance of people coming together to create strategies and “action plans” to make changes for improvement. The students were engaged and frankly hanging on Ms. Shaw's every word—perhaps because they were able to draw real life connections to the points Ms. Shaw made. In essence, Ms. Shaw perceived her role and responsibility to help her students build unity and to think about life beyond where they were currently.

It is important to note that Ms. Shaw attempted to demystify and break down some of the anxiety many of the students may have felt about preparing for their futures. To be clear, Ms. Shaw was serious about sharing information with students that could impact their current and future life experiences. She refused to present everything as “easy.” She wanted the students to take their learning and lives seriously, and she was very direct and firm with how life could be if the students did not “engage, work hard, and serve.” I am not sure how many middle school teachers would focus on the importance of “putting money into the system” for social security. How many teachers would see helping students understand Social Security as a priority for their students' development in middle school? But Ms. Shaw attempted to paint pictures for students that could help the students think about where they were headed, demonstrating multiple options and pathways that could end with personal and community success or failure. For her, “they [the students] need to think about these things” because many of them have not really had a chance to think about their life experiences when their mothers and fathers are not around (post-graduation for instance). At the same time, she explained to the students that she and they would not have all the answers. Ms. Shaw helped her students understand that she was sometimes “tough” on them because she understood how life could be for her students, many of whom were growing up in poverty, if they did not maximize their learning and educational opportunities available to them. She stated: “They [students] understand what their purpose here is. *I am not here to entertain you* (my emphasis added). I am here to help you and direct learning and guide your learning.”

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At the same time, Ms. Shaw made it clear that she was not perfect and that she did not know or have all the answers. Such a position, from my observations of her classroom, helped her students see her for a real person. In her words:

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. So I make that clear. So I'm not all knowing...and then I hit this over and over again.

Ms. Shaw's willingness to allow her students entry into her life-world (phenomenology speaking) is critical because her students needed to realize that she was indeed a "real person" who was not all knowing at all times.

Thus, students understood that they needed to become lifelong learners and work to discover information that they did not know and not expect for the "answers" to be given to them. Such learning opportunities are critical for students who may struggle to understand why they are on earth and what they are supposed to be doing while here. Such broad-level philosophical endeavors were consistent themes in her classroom and in her talks and discourse about her work. Again, she wanted her students to develop mindsets and practices that far exceeded traditional notions of what typically happened in social studies classrooms: the learning of dates and "landmark" events in the U.S. and abroad for example.

Ms. Shaw consistently pushed self and school pride among the students. Again, her actions countered many traditional notions about what should happen in a social studies classroom. She urged the female students in the school to take pride in themselves and to "think about" their "future." She wanted her students to become independent thinkers, not relying on others to take care of them; she also wanted them to develop and reach meaningful goals. She stressed to both gender groups of students the importance of attire and appearance. She urged the students to take pride in how they looked, represented themselves, and also how their school was portrayed when they were out in the community based on their actions.

Self and School Pride

Ms. Shaw was insistent and committed to building Bridge Middle School and student personal pride. In a sense, Ms. Shaw was building community and family pride because many of the teachers and students in the school saw themselves as part of a family, and they saw Bridge as a community. For instance, one recurrent question in Ms. Shaw's classes was, "What is good citizenship at this middle school?" Perhaps a reason Ms. Shaw was so committed to school pride was because she actually attended Bridge Middle School as a student herself. She had observed significant changes in both the demography of the school and also the community. She had also observed somewhat of a decline in school pride over the years. Historically, Ms. Shaw felt that the school had been one where students and teachers had relentless pride in their school and consequently their community. They had a level of "appreciation" for Bridge Middle School that she hoped would return

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among her students. Thus, Ms. Shaw saw Bridge as her school. And she perceived the students in the school as her students, not just those in her classes. She would, for instance, “get onto” students in the hallways when they were being “disrespectful” or when they were talking too loudly while walking to lunch.

To explain, Ms. Shaw believed that some of the core values that were evident in the 1960s, before desegregation, and when she was a student at Bridge Middle School needed to be returned to:

In urban schools, we are going to have to go back—you know, in the 60s 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* (my emphasis added). We have to go back to our core values. Love and respect for one another—integrity, humility, self-discipline, honesty. *And it's not that they don't have that, it's just that it can be lost in a world where stuff matters more than people* (my emphasis added).

To be clear, Ms. Shaw was not necessarily criticizing the students or blaming them for a lack of or a loss of the characteristics outlined above. Rather, she points to and critiques society and the world that often push materialism over people. She was very concerned that people in society cared more about “stuff” than people; consequently, she worried that her students would adopt this mindset where they sought materialism and not the value of people.

Ms. Shaw explained that she wanted her students to understand that they should be concerned about what is on the inside of them, not necessarily the outside. Indeed, Ms. Shaw stressed that self and school (or community) pride were essential, and the conveying of this belief became one of the goals of her teaching. Her teaching demonstrated this, and the students seemed to “buy-in” as Ms. Shaw consistently reminded them of the importance of doing “what’s right” even when others harm you. She taught the students the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!” Thus, when conflicts emerged between students, she was quick to remind them that the conflict would and must pass because they had more important community-centered connections to make. In many ways, Ms. Shaw’s conviction to “press onward” demonstrated how she thought about and perceived her work as a teacher. Because she believed that her roles and responsibilities were to teach and empower her students to succeed in the midst of difficult situations and circumstances, she refused to allow her students to fail. In her heart and mind, she believed that her students were “[her] children” whom she had to empower. She was relying on them because she considered herself part of their community.

Implications and Conclusions

In this article, I have used a case study of Ms. Shaw’s perceptions of her teaching and her practices at Bridge Middle School as a site to analyze and ultimately challenge and disrupt some negative discourses and ideology about Black teachers. I have not suggested that all Black teachers are the same nor have I argued that all Black teachers are perfect. Indeed, there is huge variation between and among

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people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Instead, I provide a counter-narrative to some negative perceptions of Black teachers that, I hope, allow others to rethink (or at least expand) their negative perceptions of this group of teachers. In essence, Ms. Shaw's thinking and actions are consistent with many of the positive characteristics and qualities available in the research literature about Black teachers and their teaching; this literature and the case of Ms. Shaw disrupts some negative views of Black teachers.

It is impossible to generalize the findings of this case study to others. Generalization is not the intent of this discussion. However, there is potential and promise in transferring some of what we learn about Ms. Shaw and her practices to other teachers and other situations.

Ms. Shaw saw her work as far more than an opportunity to teach a "traditional" curriculum. Similar to teachers pre-desegregation, she saw her role to empower students to serve their communities: to improve and transform those spaces that were distressed, underdeveloped, and in turmoil. Moreover, she empowered her students to recognize and fight against injustice. At the root of Ms. Shaw's practices and mindset was one of purpose and mission. There was an intensity steeped in her practices and belief systems related to improving the localized community while other, more mainstream and traditional practices seem to too often focus more on individual success. For Ms. Shaw, there was and needed to be a shift from individual success to student responsibility for collective/community success and achievement.

In addition, Ms. Shaw was stern, direct, and provided a no-nonsense approach to her practices and interactions with her students. Simultaneously, she offered a mother-like relationship with the students in her classroom as well as the broader Bridge Middle School community. She was frank with her students about the consequences and possibilities of their lives, practices, and experiences. In other words, she explained that there were real consequences to the actions of her students.

To her students, she stressed the importance of building for the future and contributing to social security for instance. Ms. Shaw's no-nonsense approach could have been interpreted as inappropriate and perhaps too mean or structured for some. However, her approach seemed to work—even though it was perhaps inconsistent with how others see the work of teachers and how they should approach the teaching and learning exchange in the classroom. To be clear, Ms. Shaw was not inappropriately strict with her students. She and her students laughed at times but were serious at other times, too. This strictness appeared inescapably linked to her mission and perceptions of what she was supposed to do as a teacher at Bridge Middle School. She felt "called" to teach and was not willing to allow her students to reach mediocrity when indeed they were capable of so much more. While Ms. Shaw provided students learning opportunities to build their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions beyond what might show up on standardized tests, she was very deliberate in ensuring her students learned and were exposed to such a "traditional" curriculum as well. She realized how important it would be for her students to prove successful on such examinations. Consistently, Ms. Shaw

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was relentless in her tone and structure of excellence that she constructed in the classroom. This means that she did what was necessary to confront and construct a classroom milieu that empowered students to realize the benefits of engaging in learning opportunities and to do their very best.

Also, Ms. Shaw's commitment to helping students understand the role that historical figures have had on the privileges that students enjoyed was also common in her teaching. She reminded her students how life was for Black people, in particular, pre-desegregation. Further, she reminded students what it was like to have outdated books. She stressed to students that there were those throughout history who had sacrificed their lives for the students' benefit and that they needed to appreciate education and value the sacrifices that had been made for them, particularly from their ancestors. She also wanted her students to understand the life experiences of African American politicians and other "role models." Their understandings of these influential people allowed students to see how there were those who had succeeded with backgrounds similar to theirs (socio-economically, racially, and from the same gender).

Finally, I want to stress the need to continue dialogue and discourses related to the disruption and countering of negative perceptions of Black teachers. Counter-narrative as an analytic tool may prove to be a powerful heuristic to extend and expand current dialogues and discourses—some available in the literature while others are persistent among and between people in schools, universities, homes, and other social contexts in society. Both conceptual and empirical discussions can only help us understand the intricacies of how teachers—and in this case a Black teacher—are successful teachers of all their students, even though their perceptions and practices may seem inconsistent with others. In this way, the research and conceptual literature could clarify misconceptions about Black teachers and concurrently build a knowledge-base about these teachers' mindsets, perceptions and consequently practices to meet the needs of their students. I am hopeful that researchers, theoreticians, and practitioners continue exploring Black teachers' perceptions and practices, and practitioners continue engaging in dialogue that trouble and disrupt what we know and *what we think we know* about teachers and especially Black teachers.

Notes

¹ The terms African American and Black will be used interchangeably throughout this article.

² Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced critical race theory into education in a *Teachers College Record* publication and argued that although studies and conceptual discussions examining race existed in the field of education, the field needed an explanatory theory to assist researchers and theoreticians in discussing race to move the field forward. Tate, Ladson-Billings, and Grant (1993) cited scholarship associated with critical race theory in their analysis of the history of school desegregation law and related implementation. Later, in an article published in *Urban Education*, Tate (1994) referenced critical race theory as a school of thought associated with critiquing stock racial narratives while interjecting voice

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scholarship as a means to build theory and inform practice in the law. Tate argued this was a sound strategy for education scholarship as he reflected on his educational experiences in a successful urban Catholic school while also describing the tensions created by voice scholarship in academic research. It can be argued that Derrick A. Bell laid the foundation for critical race theory in two law review articles entitled: *Serving two masters: Integration ideals and client interests in school desegregation litigation* (1976) and *Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Dilemma* (1980). In addition to the counter-narrative principle (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001), there are several additional important tenets or principles of critical race theory in education. For a more exhaustive list, see Ladson-Billings (1998), Dixson and Rousseau (2005), and Tate (1997).

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