

How Teachers Make Historical Explanation Meaningful for Democratic Citizenship

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## ABSTRACT

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Enduring misconceptions exist regarding the value of learning history. Many history teachers are engaged in lecture- and recitation-based forms of instruction that seem to be at odds with the goal of helping students to develop skills and dispositions important for democratic citizenship. This study asked whether history teachers' most ubiquitous core teaching practice, the explanation of historical content, had the potential to support civic ends. The study analyzed transcriptions of 43 classroom observations and interviews of ten U.S. history teachers. Findings pointed to five forms of historical explanation that have the potential to make explanation meaningful for preparing students for democratic citizenship. Findings also revealed factors that influenced teachers to make decisions to explain historical content in particular ways. The study has implications for improving teacher education and professional development with the goal of helping history teachers to make explanation meaningful and contributory toward their students' preparation for democratic citizenship.

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## DEDICATION

For Mr. Cannon, my favorite teacher


## PREFACE

My second day of student teaching was September 11, 2001. Right before I was to teach, I sat in an empty classroom with some of the other social studies teachers watching the live footage on the television. The principal came on the announcements and said that everyone was to turn off the televisions and “please continue with meaningful instruction.” The other social studies teachers and I looked at each other as the end-of period bell rang. I walked across the hall to my classroom. It was a U.S. history class full of juniors and seniors. The first question came from a boy in the back of the room: “Am I going to be drafted?” We began to talk about the Constitution, and what introducing the draft would require. I don’t remember much else that happened during that class period or that day, but I will never forget this student’s face when he asked that question. And I will also never forget the principal’s voice on the PA system saying, “please continue with meaningful instruction.”

What is meaningful instruction? Some of the social studies teachers with me that day mentioned that they wished they could keep their televisions on because it was “history in the making.” In hindsight, I think it was better to turn them off because we did not know who might have had family members involved, nor what additional footage might show. For me, meaningful instruction was telling my student that he would most likely not be drafted. The principal’s admonition stayed with me as I embarked on nine years as a middle school teacher. I thought often about what this term, “meaningful,” meant to me, and what it might mean to my students. There was something in my student’s question about the draft that suddenly made understanding the Constitution *matter*. I thought about how I might always help my students to understand why what they were learning mattered, and I was always excited to answer the question, “Why do we need to learn this?”

In the summer of 2008, I had the special opportunity to work for a month in the office of my Congressman, Jason Altmire, as part of a Congressional Fellowship from the James Madison Memorial Fellowship Foundation. In his six years in office, Altmire went five and a half years without ever missing a vote. There was a sentence in my Civics textbook that explained the phrase, “servants of the people” by giving the example that business owners could ask their representatives for help understanding new regulations:

**Servants of the People** A member of Congress plays a second important role as a servant of the people. In this role, a member gives information and help to constituents who have special problems. The owner of a business, for example, may want to know the latest government rules that apply to her business. Many members of Congress place a great deal of emphasis on this role because it helps a member’s constituents directly—and makes them more likely to vote for him or her for reelection.

 **Reading Check** Explain what is meant by the phrase *servant of the people*.

I believed that the term, “servants of the people,” was important for my middle school students to understand, but the textbook’s definition was not meaningful for them. Instead, I told them three stories about my time working in Congressman Altmire’s office. Each story made it clear why the term “servants of the people” was meaningful.

The first story recounted how Altmire’s office received a phone call one day from the mother of a soldier who had been wounded in Iraq. Her son was being asked to pay back his enlistment bonus because he couldn’t finish out his term of duty because he was wounded.

When the House and Senate couldn’t agree on a bill to stop the practice, Altmire went to the press and, under pressure from the public and the media, the Department of Defense reversed its policy.

Second story: I ran into the mother of a friend of mine from elementary school in the grocery. I asked her how her daughter was doing and told her I had just spent a month working in Congressman Altmire's office. She said, "Altmire?! We LOVE Altmire!" She proceeded to tell me that my friend had contracted malaria while working in Africa to purify water systems. The family got a phone call that she wasn't doing well and that they needed to come to Africa right away. The family was all ready to go to the airport when they realized their passports had expired. It was almost 5pm on a Friday. They called Altmire's office, who got the passport office in Harrisburg to stay open until 9pm when the family could get there so that they could renew their passports. The office then arranged for them to take a later flight out. The family got to Africa in time and my friend ended up being okay.

Third story: Altmire's local office got a call from a family. One of their family members was hiking in the mountains of Peru. They needed to contact the man right away because his mother was dying and he needed to come back home to see her before she died. Altmire's office contacted the U.S. embassy in Peru, who found out that there was a tiny relay station with a phone at the base of the mountain where the man was hiking. They rang the phone, and miraculously, someone from the local village answered. The villager rounded up some men, and they hiked up the mountain to find the man. The U.S. embassy then arranged for a special flight home for the man, who made it in time to see his mother before she passed away. Altmire, and the staff in his offices, were servants of the people.

I think about these three stories often, and about my student who asked on 9/11 if he was going to be drafted. If we are going to "continue with meaningful instruction," then we need a better understanding of what the term "meaningful" means. This dissertation is an attempt to better understand what meaningful historical explanation looks like in practice, how to enact it,

and why. It is my hope that the findings it contains will help teachers make learning history more meaningful for democratic citizenship for their students.



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Problem Statement**

In August of 2017, Charlottesville, Virginia became the center of white nationalist activity. Approximately one hundred Nazi sympathizers, holding torches, marched through the University of Virginia campus the night of Friday, August 11. They got into violent skirmishes with counter-protesters before police broke up the march. The next day, hundreds of additional protesters, most belonging to neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups, rallied to “Unite the Right” and protest the removal of a statue of the Civil War Confederate General, Robert E. Lee, from a park in Charlottesville. The right-wing protesters, several of whom displayed swastikas and confederate flags, shouted neo-Nazi, anti-Semitic, and racist chants. The National Guard had to be called in to break up the violence that ensued between them and counter-protestors. When one white supremacist purposely drove his car into the crowd of counter-protestors, one young woman was killed and nineteen other people were wounded (Stolberg and Rosenthal, 2017).

On Saturday afternoon, August 12, in a press conference with reporters at his golf resort in Bedminster, New Jersey, President Donald Trump said, “We condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides. On many sides” (Thrush and Haberman, 2017b). He did not mention white supremacy. President Trump was then silent for two days on the events in Charlottesville, even as other Republicans responded clearly and decisively. Senator Orrin Hatch, of Utah, tweeted, “We should call evil by its name. My brother didn’t give his life fighting Hitler for Nazi ideas to go unchallenged here at home.” Florida Senator Marco Rubio explained the violence in Charlottesville as “a

terror attack by #whitesupremacists.” House Speaker Paul Ryan issued a tweet stating, “The views fueling the spectacle in Charlottesville are repugnant. Let it only serve to unite Americans against this kind of vile bigotry” (West, 2017). Facing criticism from the public, the media, and Republicans and Democrats alike for not specifically condemning white supremacy, President Trump broke his two-day silence on Monday, August 14 by reading out a prepared statement condemning neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan. Then on Tuesday afternoon, August 15, he returned to his original stance, argued that there were some “very fine people” among the white supremacist marchers, and blamed “both sides” for the violence (Thrush and Haberman, 2017a).

Several issues in the episode above hold particular resonance for history teaching today. First, one of the most ubiquitous practices history teachers engage in today is the practice of explanation. Critics have argued that President Trump’s explanation for the violence as contributed by “many sides” and “both sides” may have served to maintain the support of his base, but in doing so provided an explanation that failed to acknowledge views that, though permitted under free speech, are inimical to democratic ideals of equality and freedom (Thrush and Haberman, 2017b). In an article entitled, “Trump Gives White Supremacists an Unequivocal Boost,” New York Times reporters Glenn Thrush and Maggie Haberman noted that, “President Trump buoyed the white nationalist movement on Tuesday as no president has done in generations – equating activists protesting racism with the neo-Nazis and white supremacists who rampaged in Charlottesville, Va., over the weekend” (Thrush and Haberman, 2017a). President Trump’s explanation conveyed a specific message. The current moment in our nation's history is one that begs for a better understanding of what it means to explain, with the recognition that explanations convey meaning.

This is particularly true of explanations that happen in history classrooms, as opposed to explanations in other subjects such as math. All historical explanations involve specific narrative choices that are the result of interpretation about the causes or consequences of a historical event. The attempt to reconcile the explanatory nature of history teaching with the desire for civic skills better suited to inquiry-based instruction is nothing new. One of the criticisms of the 1932 “Report of the Commission on the Social Studies,” written by Charles Beard, was that it attempted to “combine an authoritarian ‘frame of reference’ with the cultivation of effective and independent thinking” (Bode, 1935, p. 346). This problem, however, appears with explanation whenever it happens, regardless of the time period in which it occurs. Peter Seixas explains that “the problem of rendering judgments in history is complicated by the fact that historians—and all of us—confront not the past itself, but traces and representations of the past from a position in the present.” In the process of explanation, our historical understandings become shaped by our own particular experience and social location while moral judgments may become intertwined with aspects of the dominant culture (Seixas, 1994, p. 264). Further research is necessary in order to better understand the ways that history teachers convey meaning through the process of historical explanation.

A second dilemma suggested by the protests in Charlottesville is the often-contradictory demands of a pluralist society. President Trump acknowledged this by his statement that “many sides” exist in the debate over how to remember the Confederacy and the history of slavery. Education that happens within a democracy is, by its very location, susceptible to this challenge of pluralism. Teachers must navigate the dilemma presented by the competing demands of having to provide top-down explanations for historical events, while acknowledging the myriad

views that exist within our democracy and the many interpretations and explanations that these views present.

A third challenge indicated by the events in Charlottesville is that the needs of society today involve problems of human relations. The current educational climate, however, focuses on STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and math) rather than on the humanities, while testing and accountability measures focus on individual literacy skills rather than on social needs. Such a disconnect is not unlike the one the United States faced shortly after the launch of Sputnik in 1957. The National Defense Education Act that was passed in 1958 called for hundreds of millions of dollars to be invested toward the improvement of instruction in mathematics and science (Evans, 2004). Around that time, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) issued a report on the “ways and means of strengthening the social studies” which stated, in part:

Science and math themselves, important as they are, cannot provide solutions to many of the grave problems that we face today. The most serious issues of our time lie within the field of human affairs. For the solutions to these problems, we must look to the social sciences and the humanities (Minutes, 1958).

A little over a month after the protests in Charlottesville, on September 25, 2017, President Donald Trump issued a moratorium to the Education Department to issue \$200 million in grants to support STEM education, arguing that it would “better equip America’s young people with the relevant knowledge and skills that will enable them to secure high-paying, stable jobs...increasing [America’s] economic growth and prosperity” (Strauss, 2017).

At a time when STEM skills are prized by a world increasingly governed by capitalistic notions of value, a research agenda designed to better understand explanation in history

classrooms may not seem all that important. Yet, history holds great potential to address this problem of human affairs. Charlottesville shows us that one of the most significant issues facing us today involves a conflict between the need to allow diverse perspectives and the need to get along with others in a diverse society. Walter Parker describes this struggle democracies face as the question of “How can we live together justly, in ways that are mutually satisfying, and which leave our differences, both individual and group, intact and our multiple identities recognized?” (Parker, 2003, p. 20). History teachers must engage with this question constantly in the course of providing historical explanation. For example, the Choices curriculum from Brown University, in a unit addressing the events in Charlottesville, asks, “How do we honor complex, traumatic histories in ways that are inclusive and yet avoid replicating injustices from the past?” (Introduction—The Charlottesville Protests, p. 4).

Another reason to engage in a study about historical explanation is that no one is currently looking at it. Indeed, the entire research base surrounding explanation in history classrooms is thin, and consists mostly of the work of one researcher, Gaea Leinhardt (c.f. Leinhardt, 1993; Leinhardt, 1997; Leinhardt, 2001; Leinhardt & Steele, 2005). Very little recent research has expanded on Leinhardt’s work specifically with history teaching beyond one study that was done with English Language Learners and language in historical explanations (Achugar & Stainton, 2010). Fogo (2014) identified “explain and connect historical content” as one of nine core practices of history instruction. The History Group within the Core Practices Consortium is currently focusing their efforts on the core practices of “Model and Support Historical Writing” (De La Paz, 2005; Monte-Sano, 2008); and “Facilitate Discussion of Historical Topics” (Reisman, 2015). Research has also been done to investigate “Model and Support Historical Reading Skills” (Nokes, 2013; Reisman, 2012); and “Assess Student

Thinking about History” (Smith & Breakstone, 2015; Van Hover, Hicks, Irwin, 2007).

However, there are no current research projects investigating what Fogo’s panel specified as “Explain and Connect Historical Content.”

A final reason to study historical explanation is that this is what history teachers are doing. Pressure from state standardized testing has forced social studies teachers toward more traditional teaching methods of lecture and recitation (Barton, 2011; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Nokes, 2010; Saye & SSIRC, 2013, VanSledright, 2002), even as guidelines such as the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards from the National Council for the Social Studies call for building students’ citizenship skills through engagement with multiple perspectives and document-based historical inquiry. There appears to be a gap between the civic skills we want students to be able to know, understand, and do, and the old-fashioned explanatory teaching methods many history teachers are using to get them there (Whelan, 2006; Van Sledright, 2002). How can a student learn to understand multiple perspectives, for example, if his teacher is lecturing at him every day?

The effort to help both new and veteran teachers engage in more inquiry-based instruction is an uphill battle. Research has found that new teachers tend to revert to lecture and recitation-mode even if they have practiced more inquiry-based methods in their teacher education programs (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Martell, 2013; van Hover & Yeager, 2003). And that is not to say that teacher educators should stop trying to teach them such methods. But what if the most ubiquitous teaching method history teachers use, that of the explanation of historical content, could be put in the service of civic ends?

## **Research Questions**

This dissertation study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do teachers enact historical explanation in a way that is meaningful for democratic citizenship? and (2) Why do teachers choose to explain history as they do within a pluralistic democracy? The exploration of both of these questions is necessary in order to fully understand how teachers make historical explanation meaningful for preparing students for democratic citizenship.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Democratic Citizenship**

The 1958 statement from the National Council for the Social Studies that the “solutions” to problems of “human affairs” lie in the “social sciences and humanities” is just as relevant today as it was exactly 60 years ago. The events in Charlottesville reveal that problems of “human affairs” are still ever present in our democracy, and indeed, often rooted in questions of democracy itself. Social studies and history instruction holds the potential to help students to understand the complex idea that a pluralistic democracy is based on acceptance of multiple viewpoints, but also rests on a deliberative process whereby citizens interpret these multiple views and then form a consensus on the best way to promote equality and justice while protecting people’s rights. If we want to better understand how history teachers can enact historical explanation in a way that helps to teach the above ideas, and in a way that is meaningful for democratic citizenship, then we must have a clear understanding of what “democratic citizenship” means.

The literature points to a variety of conceptions of the idea of “democratic citizenship.” Some researchers, who Walter Parker (1996) describes as “traditional,” emphasize the acquisition of political knowledge such as “the foundational aspects of the American political system including structures and process of government” (Niemi and Junn, 1998), as well as an understanding of core principles and values of American democracy (cf. Butts, 1988). Others emphasize more aspects of civic participation, what Barber (1984) calls “strong democracy.” Barber describes a “strong democracy” conception of citizenship as one which is “not simply a system whereby people elect those who govern them, but a system in which every member of the



community participates in self-governance. It entails not merely voting and overseeing representatives but ongoing engagement in the affairs of the civic community at the local and national levels” (1989, p. 355). This may include:

Debate and deliberation on policy, formulating agenda, developing a faculty for making public judgments (and distinguishing them from self-serving private judgments), participating in referenda, serving in local and regional civic and political offices (PTAs, planning boards, town councils, neighborhood associations, community boards, arbitration panels, and juries), supporting and working for political parties and public interest groups, as well as voting...and engaging in political [public] talk. (Barber, 1989, p. 355)

A third group of researchers move beyond knowledge and beyond civic participation, and emphasize a more active ability to critically examine institutions and society (cf. Engle & Ochoa, 1988). Westheimer and Kahne (2004) refer to this type of citizen as a “justice-oriented” citizen (p. 238). Under this conception of citizenship, schools are “political classrooms” where teachers help students to “develop their ability to deliberate political questions” (Hess & McAvoy, 2014). These questions often involve conflict and controversy (Hess, 2009). Researchers argue that several skills and dispositions are necessary for engaging in this type of deliberative discussion. These include the ability to evaluate evidence and construct claims (Levstik & Barton, 2005; Monte-Sano, 2010), the ability to listen to and understand perspectives that might be different from one’s own (Barber, 1989; Merryfield, et al., 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2013; Seixas & Peck, 2004), and the development of empathy (Brooks, 2011; Cunningham, 2007; Endacott, 2014; Lévesque, 2008). Hess and McAvoy (2014) argue that “Mastering the ability to talk across political and ideological differences helps create an informed citizenry—an essential component

of democratic society—by teaching students to weigh evidence, consider competing views, form an opinion, articulate that opinion, and respond to those who disagree” (p. 5).

A focus on exploring why and how teachers engage in historical explanation is supportive of all three of the above conceptions of education’s role in preparing democratic citizens. Mastering the political knowledge students need for democratic citizenship requires an ability to explain many complex concepts and to make connections among various aspects of historical content and contemporary issues. This knowledge is then applied when students engage in the type of political talk necessary for building “strong democracy” skills (Barber, 1984). Furthermore, students who engage in the study of different sources as well as in deliberative discussion have the potential to gain an understanding of multiple perspectives.

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) note that “Studies that fail to reflect the varied range of educational priorities in relation to democratic values and capacities will tell only part of the story” (p. 264). The teachers in this dissertation present elements of all three of the above conceptions of democratic citizenship and they emphasized different motivations for using historical explanation to support it. But the teachers also exhibited consensus around a specific interpretation of the democratic beliefs and values that contribute to such conceptions of citizenship. Therefore, it is important in this literature review to highlight one more aspect of what the literature says about how teachers enact certain political values when they explain. As noted in the introduction, this larger question must be addressed if we are trying to help students to develop the “open-mindedness” necessary for democracy (Dewey, 1933, p. 136) using a method—explanation—that conveys a particular interpretation. We might ask the question, “how do we know if an explanation is good for democracy rather than for an authoritarian

regime?” The answer lies in how teachers might recognize ideas of plurality while at the same time drawing a line that explanations might not cross.

Diana Hess (2002) explains that controversial public issues (CPIs) can be considered “open” or “closed.” For example, the question of interracial marriage can be considered a “closed” issue since the Supreme Court in *Loving v. Virginia* declared that bans on interracial marriage were unconstitutional. Hess considers same-sex marriage an “open” issue when it is presented as a constitutional or policy question, because this is how this question is currently treated in society today. In her research, Hess notes that teachers’ views on controversial public issues affect their decisions of what to discuss and what not to discuss in the classroom (2002, p. 32). Although she herself argues that gay rights should be considered an “open” controversial public issue, she also presented data that revealed that some teachers do not believe that gay rights issues are controversial public issues. Regarding one of the teachers she studied, Hess explained:

Joe does not believe that gay rights issues are CPI. Instead, he likens such issues to human rights issues, on which there are no legitimately differing views. Thus, he does not select gay rights as a CPI because his personal value system directs him to treat such issues as moral issues that have one clearly right position. About gay rights, Joe stated, “The correct answer is that people should not be discriminated against on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual preference, physical disability.” Likening the denial of equal rights for gays to historical abuses of human rights, such as slavery and Nazism, Joe advocates including gay rights in the curriculum, but as an example of the denial of civil rights, not as a CPI (Hess, 2002, p. 32).

The teachers presented in this dissertation all drew a line similar to the one Joe drew. For example, they explained that they did not allow students to debate the Holocaust, and that when students expressed racist views, they tried to help their students to understand that such views were wrong. We will see in Chapter 5 that the teachers who made historical explanation meaningful for democratic citizenship took explanation out of the past and used it to help their students to understand the present. The literature noted above helps us to understand the range of skills and dispositions the teachers in the study were aiming to develop through historical explanation, as well as why it might be important to gain a better understanding of how the teachers' own political views and values shape the choices they make surrounding explanation.

### **Core Practices**

The desire to better understand historical explanation as a core practice in history instruction comes out of a larger renewed interest among researchers who wish to use a better understanding of disciplinary core teaching practices in order to improve teacher education. Such researchers have begun investigating what these core practices might be, what components make up each core practice, and how these core practices are enacted in the classroom (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Cook & Brown, 1999; Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009; Zeichner, 2012). One challenge facing teacher educators, especially those in history/social studies, is that most of the core practice research has been done in math, English/language arts, and science. There exists very little literature that provides empirical data to connect teaching and learning in history (Fogo, 2014; Wilson, 2001).

Fogo (2014) established a launching point for this work in history when he conducted a survey of 26 expert history educators to determine what they believed were the core set of instructional practices for teaching history. Specifically, they were asked to identify “what

teaching practices impact students' ability to engage in historical analysis and understand the major explanatory accounts and concepts of history?" (Fogo, 2014, p. 152). After three rounds, the panel delineated nine practices that characterize an inquiry-based approach to teaching history: "Use Historical Questions," "Select and Adapt Historical Sources," "Explain and Connect Historical Content," "Model and Support Historical Reading Skills," "Employ Historical Evidence," "Use Historical Concepts," "Facilitate Discussion of Historical Topics," "Model and Support Historical Writing," and "Assess Student Thinking about History." However, Fogo only established a framework of nine potential core practices for history teaching. His study did not give specific guidance as to what teachers actually could do in the classroom in order to enact these practices.

There is a powerful need to better understand the "how" of teaching. In far too many teacher education programs, the focus centers on learning to manage students or curriculum activities, and less on helping pre-service teachers understand *how* to help students learn to think critically (Adams & Krockover, 1997; Freese, 2006; Grossman, et al., 2009; Levine, 2006). Add on top of this the multitude of educational reforms that only give guidance on the ends of education (e.g. The Common Core State Standards), rather than the means, and those that only test the ends (e.g. State Standardized Assessments) rather than helping teachers know possible ways to get there, and you have a perfect storm where, from beginning to end, new and veteran teachers are not provided with the support they need to better engage in the heart of the teaching process.

As explained in the introduction, a number of the core practices Fogo (2014) identified are currently being examined by history researchers who are part of the Core Practices Consortium, a group of teacher educators from different universities who have joined together to

improve the preparation of novice teachers through practice-based instruction. These core practices include “Model and Support Historical Writing” (De La Paz, 2005; Monte-Sano, 2008); “Facilitate Discussion of Historical Topics” (Reisman, 2015); “Model and Support Historical Reading Skills” (Nokes, 2013; Reisman, 2012); and “Assess Student Thinking about History” (Smith & Breakstone, 2015; Van Hover, Hicks, Irwin, 2007). However, no one is currently examining what Fogo’s panel specified as “Explain and Connect Historical Content.” Few research studies in general have examined explanation specifically in history classrooms. Most of the studies that have been done were done by one researcher, Gaea Leinhardt (c.f. Leinhardt, 1993; Leinhardt, 1997; Leinhardt, 2001; Leinhardt & Steele, 2005). Perhaps the practice of historical explanation in social studies classrooms is so foundational that research regarding it has simply been overlooked. Or perhaps little research has been done on it because it is often not done very well. Nevertheless, its ubiquity makes it all the more important to study. It makes sense to more carefully examine a teaching practice that history teachers are likely to engage in anyway, and to see if and how this practice has the potential to be done in such a way as to promote skills for democratic citizenship.

### **Leinhardt’s Work on Instructional Explanations in History**

The most significant research into the core practice of historical explanation was done by Gaea Leinhardt in the 1990s. In addition to math classrooms, Leinhardt (1993) studied one expert history teacher (Mrs. Sterling) and her Advanced Placement U.S. History class for an entire semester. Leinhardt created a typology of four types of explanations: common, disciplinary, self, and instructional. Her research focused mostly on instructional explanations. Leinhardt (1997) defined instructional explanations as those that were “designed to teach...a particular aspect of subject matter knowledge” (p. 223). Through her observations of Mrs.

Sterling's class, Leinhardt identified two classes of explanations: *blocked*, which refers to "explanations in which the teacher or student gives a self-contained, reasonably complete explanation," and *ikat*, which refers to "explanations in which the teacher makes indirect or passing reference to a concept or idea that is later extended and used in an elaborated way" (Leinhardt, 1993, p. 48). Leinhardt noted that blocked explanations occur over the course of a single unit of time, such as a class period, and ikat explanations are woven in and out of multiple lessons throughout the year. However, the terms *blocked* and *ikat* only partially explain when explanations occur. For example, Leinhardt did not explore more specific questions, such as investigating whether certain types of explanations are used to begin or end a class. There is more research to be done to explore the "when" of historical explanations.

Leinhardt (1993) stated that blocked and ikat explanations are used for at least four kinds of occasions in history classrooms: to explain metasystems, events, structures, and themes. This could be described as the "what" of the explanation, since these terms describe what is actually being explained. Since Leinhardt used the term "occasion," we could also consider these elements as part of the "when," but the terms themselves evoke less of an element of time than they do an element of the substance of the explanation. Leinhardt uses the term *metasystems* to describe the "tools" of history: "analysis, synthesis, hypothesis generation, perspective taking, and subtext interpretation" (p. 49). *Events* are the "narrative base, the story," of history and include such things as "wars, assassinations, treaties, and proclamations" (p. 49). *Structures* include "the rules of politics or economics, (e.g. the form of the Roman government, the three estates in France, and the U.S. Constitution)." Leinhardt writes that *themes* "frame events and justify gradual alterations in the structures" such as "the tension between agrarian and mercantile interests in the early colonial and revolutionary periods" (p. 49). She did note that "events" are

often explained through the use of stories, but she did not examine more specifically how stories convey and support explanation. There is an opportunity to further explore this model in order to better understand what history teachers are explaining and what makes these elements disciplinary specific.

Leinhardt expanded on this model in 1997 and identified four goal states for such explanations: “understanding the nature of the problem or query under discussion; completing in a coherent way the multiple verbal strands that comprise the explanation; using appropriate, accessible representations and analogies; and identifying fundamental disciplinary principles as they are used” (p. 221). This could be considered the “why” of the explanation, or in other words, these four categories, according to Leinhardt, explain why explanations occur in history classrooms. The chart below displays how one can categorize Leinhardt’s model:

**Table 1. Leinhardt’s Model of Instructional Explanations in History Teaching: What, When, and Why**

<b>Leinhardt’s Model of Instructional Explanation in History Teaching</b>		
<b>(Author)’s Term</b>	<i>Leinhardt’s Term</i>	<i>Leinhardt’s Categories</i>
WHAT	occasion	metasystems, events, structures, themes
WHEN	class/form	blocked, ikat
WHY	goal state	understanding the nature of the problem or query under discussion; completing in a coherent way the multiple verbal strands that comprise the explanation; using appropriate, accessible representations and analogies; and identifying fundamental disciplinary principles as they are used

While Leinhardt identified the form instructional explanations take (blocked and ikat), the occasions they are used (to explain events, themes, etc.), and the purposes of such explanations (such as understanding a problem or disciplinary principles), she only gave a few details in noting actually *how* a teacher enacted the explanations in the classroom. For example, she refers to a few “devices” Mrs. Sterling uses in the context of providing historical



explanations: she switches from third person to first person voice, references previous explanations, she gives partial or complete if/then statements, provides analogies, or summarizes. Although she does take a closer look at analogy in a subsequent study (Young and Leinhardt, 1998), Leinhardt mostly explores the “how” at a large grain size. For example, she states:

Sterling starts with a broad, global question and then asks a series of supporting questions, each of which may be answered either by her or by members of the class.

What is especially interesting about this didactic structure is that it leaves lots of room for both the students and the teacher to move and change directions. If the students can answer, they do so, and Sterling either modifies, expands, or summarizes their response.

If they cannot answer, then Sterling either builds a more elaborate presentation of context so the students can then generate answers, or she answers for them.” (Leinhardt, 1993, p.

65)

Below is Leinhardt’s contribution to the “how” of historical instructional explanations:

**Table 2. Leinhardt’s Model of Instructional Explanations in History Teaching: What, When, Why, and How**

<b>Leinhardt’s Model of Instructional Explanation in History Teaching</b>		
<b>(Author)’s Term</b>	<i>Leinhardt’s Term</i>	<i>Leinhardt’s Categories</i>
WHAT	occasion	metasystems, events, structures, themes
WHEN	class/form	blocked, ikat
WHY	goal state	understanding the nature of the problem or query under discussion; completing in a coherent way the multiple verbal strands that comprise the explanation; using appropriate, accessible representations and analogies; and identifying fundamental disciplinary principles as they are used
HOW	device	she switches from third person to first person voice, references previous explanations, she gives partial or complete if/then statements, provides analogies, summarizes

There is more research to be done to explore the “how” of instructional explanations in history. Very little recent research has expanded on Leinhardt’s work specifically with history teaching beyond one study that was done with English Language Learners and language in historical explanations (Achugar & Stainton, 2010). Although research on history teaching has examined teaching for the purpose of preparing students for democratic citizenship (c.f. political efficacy: Levy, 2011; c.f. empathy: Brooks, 2011; Cunningham, 2007; Endacott, 2014), no current research has specifically looked at how the core practice of “explain and connect historical content” (Fogo, 2014) can be used to support instruction that is meaningful for encouraging democratic ideals and dispositions in students.

### **Second-Order Historical Thinking Concepts**

One place to start to explore the connection between explanation and democratic citizenship is to look at “second-order” historical thinking concepts. These are concepts that “give shape to the discipline of history” (Lee, 2005, p. 41). They include such concepts as “time, change, empathy...cause, evidence, and accounts” (Lee, 2005, p. 41). “Second-order” concepts are consistent with the “Big Six concepts” described by Seixas, Morton, and Peck: significance, evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, perspectives, and ethical dimensions (Seixas & Morton, 2013; Seixas & Peck, 2004). Seixas and Morton (2013) explain that these six historical thinking concepts only make sense when applied to specific content, and that “historical content cannot be truly understood as anything other than a series of disconnected bits of data to be memorized without a grasp of the historical thinking concepts” (p. 4). So we must take these concepts into account when we examine the ways that teachers explain historical content.

A closer examination of these concepts also finds a number of connections to citizenship skills. First, second-order concepts such as the “Big Six” serve to strengthen students’ “historical thinking skills,” which support civic literacy by improving students’ ability to read for understanding, interpret historical questions, contextualize sources, make arguments based upon evidence, and think critically. Second, the last two “Big Six” concepts of perspectives and ethical dimensions are also closely tied to issues of citizenship and democracy because they have the potential to touch on issues relating to democratic ideals and concepts such as beliefs, values, rights, equality, and justice. Explanations that make such connections take historical content out of the realm of “long ago and far away” and make it meaningful for students. In describing in the Forward to their book the challenge that Seixas and Morton (2013) sought to overcome in developing their “Big Six” historical thinking concepts, Ken Osbourne notes that “the teaching of history has too often been confined to textbook coverage and the recitation of facts that are devoid of any meaning for students and equally devoid of any defensible educational purpose” (p. v). Seixas and Morton’s (2013) Big Six historical thinking concepts are thus important tools to consider when exploring how meaningful explanations can serve the purpose of preparing students for democratic citizenship.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The findings in this dissertation are set within the context of a conceptual framework based on three fundamental elements of teaching: teachers' beliefs, teachers' knowledge, and teachers' practice. Although all three are integrated when teachers enact instruction, it may be helpful to examine each separately in order to better understand why it is important to take all three into account when examining how and why teachers engage in historical explanation that is meaningful for democratic citizenship.

#### **Teacher Beliefs**

The previous chapter detailed the variety of beliefs that teachers hold regarding democratic citizenship. But there exists comparatively less research that explores teachers' beliefs on how history instruction specifically can be used to support the development of students' civic skills and dispositions (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Since historical content lies in the past, then teaching history *for* democratic citizenship requires some belief regarding how the past could be made relevant to living in the present. Van Straaten, Wilschut, and Oostdam (2016) explored this idea by examining how the concept of historical relevance has been articulated in literature on historical philosophy, educational philosophy, and constructivist learning theory. They note that history could be made relevant when it is used for the purpose of "building a personal identity," "becoming a citizen," and "understanding the human condition" (p. 490). Their research provides a good starting point for taking this analysis of the literature, and applying it to empirical research and actual observational data of teachers' practice. In particular, such research can help expand upon their identification of history's potential to help students develop into active citizens, and whether if, in practice, "understanding the human

condition” is perceived as a separate purpose or part of citizenship. In addition, empirical research might reveal additional teacher beliefs that either do not fall within these three categories, or consist of concepts that span more than one of these three categories. More research is also needed to determine how such beliefs shape instruction. Chapter 6 will explore in detail how the beliefs of the teachers in this dissertation study influenced the ways they used historical explanation to support students’ civic learning. Chapter 7 will detail how the observational data indicated the ways in which these beliefs fall more along a continuum than in separate categories.

### **Teacher Knowledge**

Wilson (2001) has noted how research on teaching has often considered teacher knowledge as something separate from teacher beliefs. In particular, research in the 1980s explored how the type of specialized subject-matter knowledge teachers had might be different from the kind of knowledge a person had who was well-educated about a particular subject (Ball & Bass, 1999; Shulman, 1986). These researchers argued that a teacher’s understanding of the discipline caused him or her to make specific instructional decisions. Shulman (1987) proposed that teachers combine their knowledge of subject matter with their knowledge of teaching methods when they make choices about how to help students learn specific content. He named this type of teacher knowledge “Pedagogical Content Knowledge” (PCK). Teachers exercising their Pedagogical Content Knowledge would utilize “the most regularly taught topics in one’s subject area, the most useful forms of representation of those ideas, the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations – in a word, the ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others” (p. 9). Pedagogical Content Knowledge would also include knowledge of “what makes the learning of specific topics easy or

difficult,” as well as knowledge of common misconceptions students might have and “knowledge of the strategies most likely to be fruitful in reorganizing the understanding of learners” to address their misconceptions (p. 10). According to Shulman, a true professional would be able to demonstrate knowledge beyond mere subject matter and beyond isolated pedagogy, to show mastery and understanding of how the interaction between content and pedagogy is fundamental to getting students to learn.

Monte-Sano and Budano (2012) took the concept of Pedagogical Content Knowledge and applied it to teaching history. They created a four-part framework of “representing history,” “transforming history,” “attending to students’ ideas about history,” and “framing history.” “Representing history” consists of how teachers present the discipline of history – as fixed knowledge or as interpretation that is drawn from an analysis of documentary evidence. It addresses “how teachers communicate to students what history involves, and in particular, how one knows in history” (p. 5). “Transforming history” is how teachers translate “history content into lessons and materials that target the development of students’ historical understanding and thinking” (p. 5). “Attending to students’ ideas about history” relates to how teachers respond to students’ disciplinary thinking within the classroom. “Framing history” is a “teacher’s skill in selecting and arranging topics of study into a coherent story that conveys the connections and interrelationships between events as well as the historical significance of events and people” (p. 7).

Two of Monte-Sano and Budano’s categories, “representing history” and “attending to students’ ideas about history,” have particular resonance for understanding how history teachers explain historical content in ways that are meaningful for democratic citizenship. “Representing history” is a useful lens for looking at how teachers take up specific historical content and

explain it to students. Studying the choices teachers make regarding how to present specific historical topics allows us to examine the ways in which these choices do and do not support civic understandings. Different learning outcomes ensue when a teacher chooses to represent historical content as fixed or interpretive. The process of instruction matters as well because teachers are also making choices about whether and how to integrate student voices into the lesson. When we look at explanation through the lens of how teachers “attend to students’ ideas about history,” we can analyze not only how teachers respond to students’ misconceptions, but we can also examine how making students responsible for explaining can help support democratic citizenship.

### **Teacher Practice**

Grossman, Hammerness, and McDonald (2009) argue that the emphasis on knowledge research in the 1980s “obscured the importance of other aspects of teaching, including the need for skill in orchestrating instructional activities” (p. 273). They argue that teacher education should be organized around the types of core practices explained in Chapter 2, one of which is “explain and connect historical content” (Fogo, 2014). But they call for research to move beyond a focus on simple teacher behavior such as the “competency-based teacher education” research of the 1960s and 1970s (Forzani, 2014). Instead, Grossman, Hammerness, and McDonald (2009) see teachers as “decision-makers and reflective practitioners” (p. 274). They would prefer that teacher education “move away from a curriculum focused on what teachers need to know to a curriculum organized around core practices, in which knowledge, skill, and professional identity are developed in the process of learning to practice” (p. 274).

I utilize Grossman, Hammerness, and McDonald’s (2009) conception of teachers as “decision-makers and reflective practitioners” in this dissertation when analyzing the data and

drawing conclusions about why and how the teachers in the study engaged in historical explanation in ways that supported democratic citizenship. But in the process of this analysis, it became clear that research on frameworks of teacher knowledge could still be useful for understanding the decision-making process that teachers use. In particular, Monte-Sano & Budano's (2012) Framework of Pedagogical Content Knowledge for Teaching History could be utilized not just as a framework of inert knowledge, but as lenses through which to frame practice *as it is enacted*. Their category "attending to students' ideas about history" is really a category that has the potential not just to describe what teachers know how to do, but as a way to explore what they *actually* do.

This dissertation takes up this idea of practice-based research as a conceptual framework within which to draw conclusions that could potentially be used to improve teacher education. Hiebert and Morris (2012) argue that one reason that the U.S. has failed to improve the quality of classroom instruction despite a strong desire to do so is that improvement efforts have been focused on addressing teacher qualifications rather than on improving teaching itself. They support efforts to organize teacher education around core practices, but they would like such understandings to be developed within "the exact context in which it will be used," such as having teachers implement and reflect collectively on lessons they actually teach. They note the illogicality of the current situation in which "teachers take their best ideas with them when they retire" (p. 93). They explain, "Everyone needs to start over when they enter the profession" (p. 93). Hiebert and Morris (2012) call for the storage of knowledge "in a way that can be shared among teachers and passed along to support continuous, lasting improvement" (p. 94). Such stored knowledge could be in the form of "annotated lesson plans" which explain to teachers both "what to do and why/how to do it that way" (p. 95). The research in this dissertation



incorporates this idea in that it looks at what the teachers observed actually did, and then analyzes both how and why they did it.

A conceptual framework that only focuses on one element of teaching (beliefs, knowledge, or practice) does not provide a complete picture. Teaching is complex work (Ball & Forzani, 2009). The concept of “practice” itself has many different interpretations and facets (Lampert, 2010). In an article in which they explore how rehearsals might be used to improve novice teachers’ enactment of “ambitious” mathematics lessons, Lampert, et al. (2013) explain that “Practices, principles, and...knowledge must be used *in relation to one another*, not in isolation. Furthermore, they must be used *in relationships among teacher, students, and the content to be learned*” (p. 228). Reisman, et al. (2018) explore this intersection of practices, beliefs, and teacher knowledge through the core practice of facilitating whole-class, text-based discussions in history classrooms. Teaching moves that “orient students to the discipline,” “orient students to each other,” “orient students to the text,” and “engage students as sense-makers” all involve how teachers take up their beliefs about history, and use their knowledge of their students, content, and pedagogy, to enact historical discussions in disciplinary ways. The picture they present of how teachers’ beliefs, knowledge, and practices interact within the core practice of facilitating whole-class historical discussion provides a good model for exploring the enactment of other disciplinary core teaching practices such as “explain and connect historical content” (Fogo, 2014).

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODS

This study analyzed teacher-student dialogue from observations of ten U.S. history teachers in seven different middle and high schools spread across five school districts in two different states in the northeast. The broad goal of the observations was to better understand how teachers of varying years of teaching and expertise enacted the core practice of “explain and connect historical content (Fogo, 2014).” More specifically, I was looking for ways that teachers made explanation meaningful for the purpose of preparing students for democratic citizenship. I received IRB approval to both videotape and audio-record the observations. Six of the ten teachers consented to be video-recorded, and these were also audio-recorded. The other four teachers were only audio-recorded.

For each observation, I collected the handouts or worksheets the teacher distributed during the course of the lesson. Eight of the ten U.S. history teachers were observed three times each, one (Mrs. Lehrer) was observed 6 times, and one (Mrs. Ellery) was observed 13 times. Mrs. Ellery invited me to observe all five of her class periods three times each, so I spent three full school days in her classroom and observed all but two class periods. All of the observations were transcribed, analyzed, and coded.

All of the teachers participated in one semi-structured interview, and all ten of the U.S. history teachers’ interviews were transcribed. The interview protocol is included in Appendix A. The purpose of the interview was to ask the teachers specific questions about how they explained historical content in the lessons that were observed. Broader questions were also asked about each teacher’s philosophy of teaching in order to better understand their stated sense of purpose.

Pseudonyms were given for each teacher. The tables below summarize the data on the participants and the demographics of their schools:

**Table 2.1 Participant Data: School-Related Information**

<b>Teacher*</b>	<b>District and School*</b>	<b>Subject Observed</b>	<b># of Times Observed</b>
Miss Gross	Appleton Middle School	7 <sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History	3
Mr. Klein	Appleton Middle School	7 <sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History	3
Mrs. Davis	Bakerstown High School	Regents U.S. History	3
Mr. Phelps	Commonplace High School	AP U.S. History	3
Mr. Kent	Dorseyville High School	AP U.S. History	3
Mrs. Warren	Appleton High School	Regents U.S. History	3
Mrs. Lehrer	Eastman High School	AP U.S. History and Regents Level Participation in Government	6
Mrs. Ellery	Eastman Middle School	7 <sup>th</sup> and 8 <sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History	13**
Mrs. Brown	Eastman Middle School	8 <sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History	3
Mrs. Thomas	Dorseyville High School	8 <sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History	3

\* Pseudonyms

\*\* Each of Mrs. Ellery's five classes were observed three times each except for two periods

(continued on next page)

**Table 2.2 Participant Data: Background Information**

Teacher	Years Taught	Age	Undergrad. Major	Undergrad. 2 <sup>nd</sup> Major or Minor	Masters Degree	Previous Career(s)
Miss Gross	4	26	History	Adolescent Education	Literacy Education 5-12	---
Mr. Klein	19	54	Education	---	History Education	Air Force; Manager at Wendy's
Mrs. Davis	7	30	Political Science	History	Social Studies Education	---
Mr. Phelps	15	37	History	Secondary Education	American History	---
Mr. Kent	23	45	History	---	Liberal Studies; School District Administration	---
Mrs. Warren	19	49	Political Science	---	Law Degree; Masters in Teaching	Lawyer
Mrs. Lehrer	14	36	History	Secondary Education	U.S. History	---
Mrs. Ellery	12	34	History	Secondary Education	American History	---
Mrs. Brown	9	34	History	Secondary Education	Special Education	---
Mrs. Thomas	20	53	Political Science	---	Education; Administration – Building and School Leader	---

**Table 2.3 Participant Data: Awards Received for Teaching**

Teacher	Awards Received for Teaching
Miss Gross	None
Mr. Klein	None
Mrs. Davis	None
Mr. Phelps	Teacher of the Year (nominated by students); PTA Honorary Life Achievement Award
Mr. Kent	Teacher of the Year (selected by dept. chair and admin.); News 12 Educator of the Week
Mrs. Warren	None
Mrs. Lehrer	James Madison Memorial Fellowship; Susan B. Wilson Civic Educator Award from the League of Women Voters; Finalist for State Teacher of the Year; District Teacher of the Year (nominated by administration); Most Enthusiastic Teacher (selected by students for Yearbook)
Mrs. Ellery	James Madison Memorial Fellowship; Gilder Lehrman State History Teacher of the Year
Mrs. Brown	None
Mrs. Thomas	Teacher of the Year for the School (chosen by dept. chair and principal)

## Participants

Efforts were made to recruit teachers who were considered exemplary based on recommendations of their administrators. However, many of the administrators put out the call to their whole department, so the final sample ended up being, in terms of teaching ability, essentially a random mix of teachers who agreed to participate. All of the teachers in the study were white. Efforts were made to observe teachers with a wide range of teaching experience. The final sample consisted of five teachers who had taught less than 15 years, and five teachers who had taught for 15 years or more. Originally, eleven teachers were observed. The first teacher observed (Mr. Olum) was a World History teacher and the remaining ten teachers were U.S. history teachers, so the World History teacher's data was taken out of the study.

**Table 3.1 School Demographics: Total Enrollment, Free/Reduced-Price Lunch, SES**

Teachers	School	Total School Enrollment	Free Lunch		Reduced-Price Lunch		Economically Disadvantaged	
			%	#	%	#	%	#
Mrs. Gross, Mr. Klein	Appleton Middle School	789	8	63	2	14	11	82
Mrs. Warren	Appleton High School	1,534	8	123	1	20	10	156
Mrs. Davis	Bakerstown High School	898	8	73	2	17	10	90
Mr. Phelps	Commonplace High School	1,247	6	69	3	33	14	174
Mr. Kent, Mrs. Thomas	Dorseyville High School	1,422	16	232	2	35	22	322
Mrs. Ellery, Mrs. Brown	Eastman Middle School	419	Subsidized Lunch: 16%*				Data unavailable	
Mrs. Lehrer	Eastman High School	492	Subsidized Lunch: 14%				Data unavailable	

\* Eastman School District was located in a different state than the other schools, so the data made available by the state was presented differently.

**Table 3.2 School Demographics: Racial and Ethnic Representation**

Teachers	School	Number of Students/Percent of Racial and Ethnic Representation											
		White		Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander		Hispanic or Latino		Black or African American		American Indian or Alaska Native		Multiracial	
		%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#
Mrs. Gross, Mr. Klein	Appleton Middle School	66.5	493	25.9	209	6.3	53	0.4	2	0	0	0.9	13
Mrs. Warren	Appleton High School	78.9	1,196	15.8	271	4.5	75	<1	6	<1	1	0.5	8
Mrs. Davis	Bakerstown High School	83.7	725	5.2	51	8.5	78	0.4	4	0.6	4	1.6	15
Mr. Phelps	Common-place High School	82	987	5	64	11.8	164	1	14	<1	1	<1	5
Mr. Kent, Mrs. Thomas	Dorseyville High School	55.1	779	17.4	258	14	214	13.3	191	0	0	<1	3
Mrs. Ellery, Mrs. Brown	Eastman Middle School	87	n/a	1	n/a	6	n/a	1	n/a	0	n/a	4	n/a
Mrs. Lehrer	Eastman High School	88	n/a	3	n/a	7	n/a	0	n/a	0	n/a	2	n/a

All of the teachers in the study cared deeply about their students and their backgrounds show a wide range of experiences, beliefs, and characteristics. Miss Gross had only taught for four years and so she was almost not included in the study, which originally called for teachers who had taught for at least five years. After observing her, I determined that the quality of her teaching was already on par with the veterans in the study. Mr. Klein and Mrs. Warren were each on their second career. Mr. Klein had spent six years in the Air Force and then was a General Manager or an Area Director for Wendy’s restaurants. Mrs. Warren had been a lawyer. Miss Gross, Mrs. Davis, Mrs. Lehrer, and Mrs. Thomas were deeply committed to social justice. When Mrs. Davis was asked if she had received any teaching awards, she said no, but that she

had received many wonderful “thank yous” from students and that those were more important to her. When I asked Mrs. Brown if there was anything else she wanted me to know about her and her teaching, she said that she just wants the kids to know that she cares. Mrs. Brown coaches track and goes to all her students’ sporting events. Mr. Phelps, Mr. Kent, Mrs. Lehrer, and Mrs. Ellery were multi-award-winning teachers.

### **Lessons selected to observe**

Efforts were made to observe the same content among as many teachers as possible to allow for better comparisons. Because the observations were done in May and June of 2017, there was limited time available to plan for this overlap, but some overlapping of content was still successful. Content that overlapped included the Civil Rights Movement, George Washington’s Presidency, and the Civil War and Reconstruction.

### **Data Analysis**

During the course of the 43 observations and 10 interviews, I took detailed field notes. Major themes that appeared were written in the margins. All 43 classroom observations and all ten interviews were transcribed. These transcriptions were then analyzed for themes as well. For Round 1 of the coding, after all the observations were completed, I compiled these themes and used grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) to find patterns and group them into categories. The categories initially had no connections among them and included the following: Coded as “Themes”: when to introduce student voices, do you give your own views or let students decide, AP vs. Regular; Coded as “Strategies”: use of analogies, personification, purpose of using primary sources; Coded as “Making Connections”: to students’ lives, to earlier content, to current events, explaining relevancy and why content matters; and Coded as “Empathy”: example of empathy, is explanation enough to generate empathy?

For Round 2, these categories were then rearranged and regrouped into the following codes and worded as questions: Who controls the explanation? (This includes: do you give your own views or let students decide); When does a teacher choose to introduce student voices?; What is explanation as an academic exercise? (This includes AP vs. Regular); What is explanation as preparation for democratic citizenship?; What happens when you add relevancy but it is entirely teacher-controlled explanation?; How do we get students to understand the multiple perspectives of the past while still helping them to recognize injustice? (This includes use of analogies, personification, purpose of using primary sources, and making connections); and What are the pressures teachers face?

For Round 3 of the coding, I made a separate list of all of the examples of teacher dialogue and teacher-student dialogue that connected to the themes above. Then next to each one, I listed the qualities or characteristics displayed in the example, such as whether the teacher explicitly linked historical content to racism or to civil rights, made students responsible for doing the explaining, or made connections to students' lives. When I compared this list to my other two lists of general themes and themes worded as questions, I noticed that many of the codes and examples had something to do with how teachers explained certain content, and other codes and examples had more to do with pedagogy, or the process of teaching and explanation. So for Round 4 of the coding, I sorted each example into "Content" and "Process" based on what was most powerfully represented in the example.

Round 5 of coding: I also noticed a third element during Rounds 3 and 4 of coding, which was that some explanations seemed to be functioning in ways that were different from other explanations. Some explanations simply answered a "why" or "how" question about the historical content, but did not really have much to do with supporting knowledge or skills for



democratic citizenship. I created a code to describe this simply as “explanation.” Other explanations helped students develop empathy, or made connections to students’ lives or to current events. It was these explanations that seemed to be functioning more in the way of supporting civic ends. So I made a list of different forms of explanation that I observed in the data that were meaningful for democratic citizenship: explanation is given for why historical content matters, explanation establishes relevance by making connections to students’ lives, explanation establishes relevance by making connections to current events, explanation is given for multiple perspectives, and explanation addresses empathy. It was these codes that formed the basis for what I identified in my data as the key connection between “explanation” and “democratic citizenship,” and thus, they became the main unit of analysis for the dissertation.

### **Context and The Final Round of Coding (Round 6), or “Why the enactment of historical explanation matters”**

In their book, “Teaching History for the Common Good,” Barton & Levstik (2004) explain that history education has the “potential to prepare students for participation in a pluralist democracy” and can help students learn to be citizens who “engage in collaboration toward a common good” (p. x). They believe that teachers who are “deeply and genuinely committed” to preparing students to participate in a pluralist democracy are more likely to engage students in inquiry activities that allow students to “work with evidence, develop interpretations, and consider multiple perspectives” (p. 259). Regarding the concept of pedagogical content knowledge, they explain:

In recent years, programs of teacher education and professional development have focused on teacher knowledge as the key to reform: If teachers know more--about content, pedagogy, and the intersection of the two--then surely their instruction will be

better. Our review of the available evidence, however, suggests that this is not true. Neither teachers' knowledge of history--including its interpretive nature--nor their knowledge of how to represent content to learners has a decisive impact on classroom practice. Although such knowledge is probably necessary for engaging students in historical interpretation, it is by no means sufficient. If we want to change those practices, we must change the purposes that guide those practices (p. 258).

The data in this study does support Barton & Levstik's argument that teachers with a stronger sense of democratic purpose will be more likely to implement disciplinary inquiry-based instruction that supports those practices. Teachers in the study who saw explanation as serving the purpose of encouraging democratic dispositions and skills were more likely to include aspects of meaningful explanation in their teaching. However, the study data also indicated that teachers faced a number of different instructional dilemmas when enacting meaningful explanation. They responded to these dilemmas with a variety of pedagogical choices. There is still more to be explained about the practice of explanation in history classrooms, and its potential for preparing students for democratic citizenship.

In the 14 years since Barton & Levstik published their book, research into "core teaching practices" has revealed more of the intricacies involved in the specific aspects of disciplinary teaching. Researchers have contributed new understandings regarding what it means to make connections and establish significance, especially surrounding specific areas of content (Harris, 2014). We can build on Barton & Levstik's thesis and strengthen the ultimate goal, which is to prepare our students to work for the common good. The hope is that by better understanding core practices such as explaining and connecting historical content, facilitating discussion of historical topics, modeling and supporting historical writing, modeling and supporting historical

reading skills, and assessing student thinking about history, teacher educators can help new and veteran teachers more effectively use their pedagogical content knowledge to follow through on their sense of democratic purpose. This dissertation study strives to better understand the possibilities of one of the most ubiquitous teaching practices in history classrooms – that of explaining historical content – with the goal of using this knowledge to improve how history teachers engage in it.

Another reason to re-examine Barton and Levstik’s thesis is that the educational context has changed since they wrote their book in 2004. Pressures from testing, standards, and accountability have intensified as states have begun tying teacher evaluations to student performance, while increases in testing in English/language arts and mathematics has reduced time on task for social studies (Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014). The data for the study was collected in May and June at the end of the school year, when all of the high school teachers in the study felt pressures from end-of-year high stakes state standardized exams. In the interviews, many teachers talked about their strong sense of democratic purpose, but they also explained that the pressure to review for the state standardized test forced them to forgo more inquiry-based activities in favor of rapid-review lecture and recitation mode. Pressure to cover the content made them reluctant to spend time on group work or even class discussion, even though earlier in the year they had engaged students in inquiry-based instruction designed to strengthen civic skills.

For Round 6 of coding, I went back through all of my data and identified various instructional dilemmas that surfaced when teachers enacted different forms of meaningful explanation. I analyzed the pedagogical choices the teachers made in response to these instructional dilemmas. I found that their responses involved decisions related to the

representation of *content*, or to the *process* for explaining that content. It is this “how” of teaching, and of historical explanation in particular, that deserves further study.

### **Organization of the Findings Chapters**

The study’s findings indicate that even if teachers have a firm sense of democratic purpose and a robust understanding of disciplinary teaching concepts, they still need strong Pedagogical Content Knowledge in order to carry out these understandings effectively and appropriately. The Findings chapters utilize all three parts of the Conceptual Framework explained in Chapter 3 – teachers’ knowledge, practice, and beliefs – and their role in making historical explanation meaningful. After Round 6 of coding, I had a model that showed how explanations are made up of *content* and *pedagogical process*, the two inherent parts of Pedagogical Content Knowledge. The study data also indicated that there were forms of explanation that made some explanations more meaningful than others for the purpose of supporting students’ democratic learning. The first findings chapter (Chapter 5 – What is An Explanation and How is it Enacted?) sets up and more thoroughly explains the model for how teachers move from “general historical explanation” to “meaningful historical explanation.” Chapter 6 examines why teachers might choose to enact meaningful historical explanation in different ways, especially in light of their beliefs about the role of history and the instructional dilemmas posed by the context of their classroom and students. Monte-Sano and Budano’s (2012) model of Pedagogical Content Knowledge for Teaching History provides framing for Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 by giving us a lens through which to examine how teachers “represent history” and “attend to students’ ideas” about history.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS, PART 1

#### WHAT IS AN EXPLANATION AND HOW IS IT ENACTED?

The “how” of historical explanation deserves a much closer examination than research has accorded it thus far. Although we know a lot about how students learn history, we know relatively less about the complex pedagogical choices teachers make when they explain history. Part of this may be due to the fact that the researchers who have studied historical explanation, such as Leinhardt, have focused more upon the “what” and “why” of explanations than the “how.” Others, such as Levstik and Barton, have focused more on pedagogical beliefs related to historical explanation than on pedagogical behaviors. When the “how” of history does get examined, research usually focuses on methods of problem-based inquiry, which more clearly lends itself to supporting students’ skills for democratic citizenship than does historical explanation. Lecture and recitation are not methods people immediately think of as ones that support teaching for social justice.

In order to challenge these assumptions, we need to explore what has often been overlooked, which is that explanation itself is a much richer concept than are the two common, and generally maligned, pedagogical techniques often used to carry it out. The ability to explain is something that is fundamental to citizenship, and to living and acting in the modern world. Parents must be able to explain answers to children’s questions about how our society came to be the way it is, informed voters must be able to explain political candidates’ positions, activists for social change must be able to explain the causes of injustice. If we begin with the assumption that historical explanations can matter for democracy, then it becomes much more important that

we break the concept of an explanation apart in Chapter 5 to understand how it does so, before we delve deeper into exploring why teachers may choose to do so in Chapter 6.

Chapter 5 is organized into three sections: (1) Defining the boundaries of an explanation, (2) How pedagogical content knowledge is enacted within explanation, and (3) How teachers move from general explanation to explanation that is meaningful for democratic citizenship. The data from the teachers' observations provided a rich base of analysis from which to explore these three areas. Starting with an explanation's boundaries is important because it can help us to break apart an often opaque teaching process. It allows us to identify how a teacher engages in smaller teaching moves specifically designed to explain answers to discrete historical questions. The second section of Chapter 5 uses Monte-Sano & Budano's (2012) Framework of Pedagogical Content Knowledge for Teaching History to better understand how teaching moves related to *content* and *process* allow a teacher to "represent" historical information and "attend to students' ideas about history" when they explain. A fundamental part of this is understanding who participates in the explanatory process (the teacher alone or both the teacher and the students), and the ways this can shape the interpretive nature of historical explanation. The significance of this for democratic citizenship will be explored in more detail in Chapter 6. Finally, the third section of Chapter 5 gets to the heart of how a teacher utilizes disciplinary frames to take explanation out of the past, and make it meaningful for living and acting in the world today.

### **What is an Explanation?**

What is an explanation? In particular, how can we recognize explanations that happen in secondary history classrooms? The data from the study showed that the boundaries of an explanation can be defined in three different ways: (1) by identifying where an explanation

begins by noting the stated or implied question the explanation answers, (2) by identifying what turns facts into explanation by noting connections among historical content, concepts, accounts, and (3) by identifying where an explanation ends by noting its grain size, which clarifies the period of time over which an explanation occurs during or across class periods. For the purposes of clarity in laying out this basic model of explanation, each of the above will be explored through one particular lesson from Mrs. Ellery about the U.S. annexation of Hawaii, with evidence coming from the classroom dialogue of two of her class periods.

### **Where An Explanation Begins: Stated and Implied “Why” and “How” Questions**

Although explanations themselves are statements, these statements are generally in answer to a stated or implied question. One way to identify an explanation is to identify the question that the explanation is addressing. Young and Leinhardt (1998) explain, “Instructional explanations are given in response to, and are shaped by, queries. Many historical queries probe beyond the facts and details to the meaning or import of a historical event, structure, or figure” (p. 192). Although it is similar to the verb, “to describe,” the verb “to explain” goes farther. Explaining is description for a particular purpose. The Oxford English Dictionary identifies the verb “to explain” as, “to describe or give an account of *in order to bring about understanding*, to explicate; to give details of, enter into details respecting. Occasionally with indirect question as object” (my italics, OED Online). Identifying a verbal passage as being introduced for a particular *purpose*, which is to *bring about understanding* regarding a particular something, makes it easier to hone in on the question associated with this purpose.

Of the five main question words in the English language (who, what, where, when, why, and how), two of these questions words (why and how) seem to lend themselves better than the others for the purposes of identifying explanation in history classrooms, although answers to all

of the question words contribute to the make-up of an explanation. When explanation appears in history classrooms, sometimes the question words of “why” and “how” are explicitly stated, and at other times they are implied questions. When the question words “who,” “what,” “where,” and “when” appear, they tend more toward serving the purpose of description rather than explanation. When their answers are put together, however, they can support the explanation of larger stated and implied “why” and “how” questions. Take the following excerpt from Mrs. Ellery’s class. In it, she provides an explanation for an implied “why” question, but asks the student a descriptive “what” question:

**Mrs. Ellery:** [reading from the textbook]...With the explosion of the *U.S.S. Maine* in February of 1898, signaling the start of the Spanish American War, establishing a mid-pacific fueling station and naval base became a strategic imperative for the United States [stops reading from the textbook]. What do they eventually call the naval base on Hawaii? Student 7?

**Student 7:** Pearl Harbor.

The implied question Mrs. Ellery is answering above with her explanation is, “Why was it strategically important for the United States to establish a fueling station and naval base in the middle of the Pacific Ocean? The term, “Pearl Harbor,” that the student supplies in answer to Mrs. Ellery’s “what” question does not serve the purpose of answering the larger why question. It is simply a descriptive detail.

The excerpt above demonstrates how Mrs. Ellery could enact explanation herself in answer to an implicit “why” question. The following two excerpts from class discussion show how she asks students for explanation by using explicit “why” and “how” questions and how these differ from descriptive questions. After the class read through and annotated together a passage of background information about the events that led to the U.S. annexation of Hawaii, Mrs. Ellery checked for understanding by asking for the students to explain:



**Mrs. Ellery:** Why is the United States getting involved, Student 1?

**Student 1:** Because the white sugar planters wanted them there.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Exactly. This has entirely been orchestrated by those white sugar plantation owners.

Mrs. Ellery's use of the question word "why" indicates that she wants her student to explain in his answer, rather than just describe. Notice how the student's use of word "because" also signifies that the student is providing a reason in answer to a "why" question. His explanation serves a purpose in furthering a question of understanding, rather than contributing only an independent fact.

Another excerpt can show us how stated and implied "why" and "how" questions are constantly woven through recitation/discussion-based explanation. In the following passage, Mrs. Ellery provides more explanation in answer to implicit "why" questions, and then asks the students for explanation by using the question word, "how." The students answer using the word "because," noted in italics:

**Mrs. Ellery:** ...Lili'uokalani is queen of this country. She knows obviously that there are problems with the American businessmen living in her kingdom. But never did she anticipate the U.S. government sending in their military. She thinks this is a problem within Hawaii that she can solve within Hawaii. Meanwhile, the U.S. is sending in their marines. *How* do you think native Hawaiians feel about this? Think about perspective. Student 2?

**Student 2:** They probably don't like it *because* it is their homeland and when people are coming in, especially after they've let them use their sugar farms. They're probably going to be a little confused of as of why and if um, their queen is keeping any secrets from them.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Right. So native Hawaiians are going to wonder what is going on. Did the queen have something to do with this? What do you think, Student 3?

**Student 3:** Well, I was going to say that they probably feel attacked a little *because* all of a sudden all these like, military troops are just coming on their land without their knowledge.

In the passage above, Mrs. Ellery is addressing the questions, “How did Queen Lili’uokalani feel about the marines landing in Hawaii?” and “Why was she surprised?,” even though these questions are not stated outright. Even though Mrs. Ellery then uses the question word, “what,” in “What do you think, Student 3?,” she is really asking Student 3 to explain her answer to the “how” question: “How do you think native Hawaiians feel about this?”

It is important to recognize how explanation serves the purpose of answering stated and implied “why” and “how” questions because history teaching is often thought of (and, indeed, enacted) as the simple repetition of facts. Approaching historical explanation with the idea that it can serve the larger purpose of preparing students for democratic citizenship means that we need to understand how explanation goes beyond description to serve a purpose in the first place. Being able to recognize where the “why” and “how” questions are, is the first step in learning how to utilize them more intentionally. As we will see in Chapter 6, this will be especially important when teachers must make pedagogical choices to address various instructional dilemmas that surface in the course of enacting meaningful explanation.

### **What Turns Facts Into Explanation: Connections Among Historical Content, Concepts, and Accounts**

Just as the explanations we just examined differentiated themselves from description by answering “why” and “how” questions, explanations also depend upon presenting connections among facts, rather than simply stating a fact. The first part of Fogo’s (2014) definition of the core practice of “explain and connect historical content” states, “The teacher uses historically appropriate and comprehensible explanations to describe and connect historical content, concepts, and accounts.” We can see the idea of explanation as depending upon connections among content, concepts, and accounts in a passage from one of Mrs. Ellery’s other class periods

that also was studying the U.S. annexation of Hawaii. What is significant about this passage is that it demonstrates how connections function to create a *sequence* that constitutes a full explanation. In the passage below, Mrs. Ellery starts off with an “implied why” explanation of why the sugar growers wanted Hawaii to be annexed to the United States. A student then provides a fact in answer to a “who” question (that the economy was run by the United States). Then this is then followed by a connection that turns this fact into part of the complete explanation to Mrs. Ellery’s implied “why” question. Notice that Mrs. Ellery even uses the word “connection” in asking for the explanation:

**Mrs. Ellery:** The sugar growers were convinced there was only one way to survive, annexation to the United States. So overall, Lili‘uokalani wanted power in the hands of Native Hawaiians but the economy was suffering. The economy was mostly run by whom?

**Student 1:** U.S.

**Mrs. Ellery:** So, it's run by the U.S. Why? What is the connection? Student 2.

**Student 2:** Um, because then you've controlled a lot of things that go on in Hawaii.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Umm-hmm. Why? Who controls it? Is it the Native Hawaiians? Student 3.

**Student 3:** Isn't it the people from like the U.S., like the higher power here control it there?

**Mrs. Ellery:** Why? Because they had invested money in-

**Student 3:** The sugar plantations.

**Mrs. Ellery:** In the sugar plantations. So the sugar plantations are mostly run by white Americans and if those white Americans are losing money they're going to want to do something about it. Lili‘uokalani as a Native Hawaiian, does she really care about what the white Americans want? No, she cares about her people. She demonstrated that when she closed the ports. But if there's a whole section of the country that's losing money--remember Hawaii is an independent country, people are going to be upset about that. So something to consider as we look at this is that divide between the Native Hawaiians and the white Americans living in Hawaii.

This passage contains all of the elements we have discussed so far: stated and implied “why” and “how” questions, the use of the word, “because,” and a statement of fact that is followed by a connection that turns it into part of the overall explanation. Just saying that the Hawaiian economy was run mostly by the U.S. is not explanation in itself. It becomes explanation when it is connected to the larger “why” question because it serves the purpose of helping to explain why the U.S. cared about the success of Hawaii’s economy.

There is also a larger guiding question at work in the above passage, which is Mrs. Ellery’s goal of helping the students to explain and compare the perspectives of the white sugar growers to the perspective of the native Hawaiians. The explanation contains the supporting detail of the “what” question: “What does each group believe?” But the answer to this “what” question serves to support the “why” question: “Why do they believe what they believe?” Making the statement that the sugar growers wanted the United States to annex Hawaii may not itself be explanation. But it becomes explanation when one connects it to the following series of connected facts: The sugar growers want the U.S. to annex Hawaii *because* the economy is losing money, *because* Queen Lili‘uokalani closed the ports, *because* the Chinese laborers working in the sugarcane fields brought an epidemic of smallpox to Hawaii. Making these connections turns a description of the sugar growers’ beliefs into an *explanation* of *why* they believe *what* they believe.

The idea of sequencing, like explanation itself, is an often overlooked and underappreciated part of pedagogical practice. It is often easier for students to state a fact, such as “the U.S. annexed Hawaii,” than to make a connection between and among facts to explain why. Structuring classroom questions so that students are asked to first elucidate facts, and then to make connections among these facts, is a type of sequencing that helps them to explain.

Furthermore, a fundamental part of making historical explanation matter is helping students to explain connections between the past and the present. Giving students practice in first making connections among historical facts is important for helping them to make the larger leap that is necessary when explaining why history is relevant to today.

### **The Grain Size of Explanations**

Now that we can locate where an explanation begins and what turns facts into explanation, how can we identify where an explanation ends? Leinhardt suggested two categories of boundaries when she identified *blocked* explanations as “explanations in which the teacher or student gives a self-contained, reasonably complete explanation,” and *ikat* explanations as “explanations in which the teacher makes indirect or passing reference to a concept or idea that is later extended and used in an elaborated way” (Leinhardt, 1993, p. 48). These terms go partway in describing the location of an explanation, but they are not entirely sufficient to fully describe where a historical explanation ends. Blocked and ikat explanations may be combined and occur at what we can refer to as different *grain sizes*.

The smallest possible unit of explanation in answer to the questions words “why” or “how” could be considered *Level 1 Grain Size*. These explanations can then be combined in larger chunks to answer larger questions represented in the lesson. As such, these larger chunks of explanation could be considered *Level 2 Grain Size*. If an explanation can be broken down into *more than one* explanation that contributes to it, then it would be considered *Level 2 Grain Size*. Also, *Level 1 Grain Size* refers to what was *actually discussed* during the lesson. It is theoretically possible that these explanations could be broken down further. If the teacher ends up doing this subsequently, then these would turn into *Level 2 Grain Size* explanations, with the subsequent component explanations being *Level 1 Grain Size* explanations. Finally, the guiding

question(s) for the entire lesson, if any, would be *Level 3 Grain Size*. The term *Level 3 Grain Size* can also be applied to explanations that occur over multiple class periods or even the entire school year. *Level 3 Grain Size* refers to larger guiding questions that serve to structure the presentation of content, while *Level 2* and *Level 1* are smaller component explanations that contribute to these overarching questions.

I decided not to create a “Level 4 Grain Size” to describe explanations that occur over multiple class periods, because *Level 3 Grain Size* explanations are already defined as overarching questions. Theoretically, the number of divisions is infinite. The determination to have only three levels makes parsing out the explanations easier. It also attends to the three pedagogical functions these explanations serve: to guide (*Level 3*), to support (*Level 2*) and to provide details (*Level 1*). The essential structure of the model is that *Level 1 Grain Size* explanations combine to form *Level 2 Grain Size* explanations, which themselves combine to form *Level 3 Grain Size* explanations. Furthermore, these terms do not serve to replace Leinhardt’s terms *blocked* and *ikat*. While *Level 1 Grain Size* explanations most often take the form of *blocked* explanations, *Level 2 Grain Size* explanations could be *blocked* or *ikat*. *Level 3 Grain Size* explanations would most likely be characterized as *ikat*.

Mrs. Ellery’s lesson on the annexation of Hawaii is part of a larger chapter with the goal of developing a *Level 3 Grain Size* explanation. Mrs. Ellery began class by explaining this objective. Note that she includes the phrase “in order to explain” in her chapter objective:

**Mrs. Ellery:** Okay, so today we are going to be continuing our look at the United States becoming a world power. So just to review from yesterday, our objective for this chapter is to examine America’s growing power and influence in order to explain its changing relationships with other countries.

The answer to this question could be considered a *Level 3 Grain Size* explanation, as well as an *ikat* explanation, because it is spread across multiple class periods and is made up of multiple

smaller explanations. Mrs. Ellery's lesson on Hawaii itself is also guided by a question asking for a *Level 3 Grain Size* explanation: "Students will be able to explain differences between perspectives when analyzing primary sources about the annexation of Hawaii." This question cannot be answered without providing smaller groups of explanations about the perspectives of each of the sources. Yet, when one puts these explanations together, they collectively become an explanation that answers the lesson's guiding question.

An example of a *Level 2 Grain Size* explanation would be an explanation that answers the implied question of "Why did U.S. annex Hawaii?" The answer to this question occurs at different points throughout the class period, so this would be considered to be an *ikat* explanation by Leinhardt. But more specifically, this explanation is a smaller piece of answering the *Level 3 Grain Size* question guiding the entire lesson, so it would be considered *Level 2*. It would not be considered *Level 1*, however, because it can be broken down into multiple *Level 1* explanations, and by definition, *Level 1* explanations, as they appear in classroom dialogue, are not broken down further. One *Level 1* explanation that contributes to the *Level 2* explanation of "Why did the U.S. annex Hawaii," is that the United States wanted to build a naval refueling base in the Pacific Ocean.

At other points in the period, Mrs. Ellery presents two other *Level 1* explanations that support this *Level 2* explanation. One explanation is that the U.S. entered the Spanish-American War after the explosion of the USS Maine, and so wanted to establish a naval refueling base in the Pacific Ocean. Another reason appears in the passage below. The students are looking at the last paragraph of the "Joint Resolution to Congress to Provide for Annexing the Hawaiian Islands to the United States (1898)." Mrs. Ellery explains what the paragraph is about, asks a student to repeat the earlier explanation regarding the motivation of the white sugar planters, and

then adds an additional *Level 1* explanation, which is that the U.S. wanted to help its own people rather than the native Hawaiians:

**Mrs. Ellery:** I do want to point out to all of you this last paragraph here, cause I always find it interesting, talks about the public debt of Hawaii. In this paragraph, they're saying that the U.S. is also taking over Hawaii's debts. So any money owed to other places. Why would they do that? Who does Hawaii owe money to?

**Student 4:** Doesn't- don't they owe the U.S. money?

**Mrs. Ellery:** Yes.

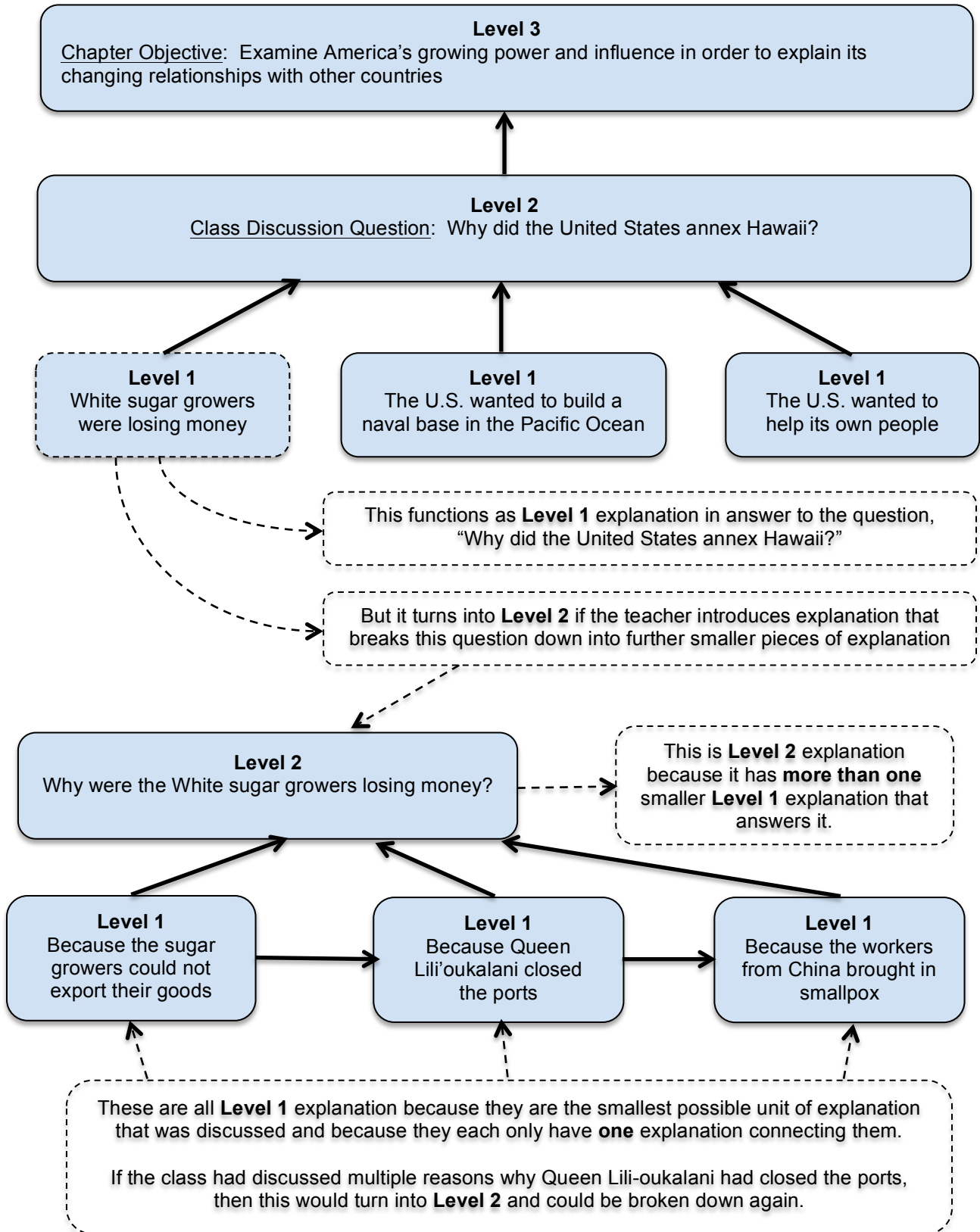
**Student 4:** Because they closed down the sugar and stuff.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Yes. So they owe money to Americans. So at first you might look at this and say, "Oh well that's nice. [chuckles] They're gonna take over Hawaii's debt." But Hawaii is in debt to American sugar plantation owners. So the United States government is basically helping out its own people, not native Hawaiians.

To review, the *Level 2* explanation presented above is an explanation that collectively explains why the United States annexed Hawaii. The classroom data shows that it is made up of three *Level 1* explanations: the white sugar growers were losing money, the U.S. wanted to build a naval base in the Pacific Ocean, and the U.S. wanted to help its own people. One interesting point of note is that if the teacher or students breaks down one of these *Level 1* explanations further, they turn into *Level 2* explanations. For example, the explanation "White sugar growers were losing money" can be broken down further into the following explanations in answer to the implied question of "why": because they could not export their goods, because Queen Lili'uokalani closed the ports, because Chinese laborers working in the sugarcane fields brought in smallpox. Developing a system of "grain size" helps us to better identify where explanations occur so that these explanations can be isolated for further analysis. The diagram on the following page provides a visual map to help identify where explanations begin and end based on grain size level.



Figure 1. Grain Size



Why does grain size matter? Grain size matters because explanation is often structured around a combination of overarching guiding questions and smaller explanatory questions. For example, we will see in Chapter 6 that Mr. Kent organizes a lesson around the question, “To what extent was the Civil Rights Movement successful?” In order to answer this question, students must grapple with smaller questions that link past and present, such as why schools were segregated during the 1950s and why schools are still segregated today. Both the larger question and these smaller questions that support it are necessary if students are going to gain a thorough understanding of content through the process of explanation, especially if teachers want students to then apply this understanding. Just as democracy itself is structured around hierarchies of local, state, and federal government, questions of democracy also swirl in both small and large circles. Explaining to the school board why the high school football stadium needs recycling bins necessitates an understanding of larger questions of climate change. Problems related to school funding stretch into larger questions of structural racism. Grain size matters not only to understand explanation as a concept, but also to understand the role it can play in how teachers can use smaller explanations to help students arrive at the larger explanations that are meaningful for democracy.

### **How Pedagogical Content Knowledge is Enacted Within Explanation**

In the final step of the coding process described in Chapter 4, I identified that teachers were making pedagogical choices regarding the historical *content* they were explaining, and regarding who would be involved in the *process* of explaining it. Although all four elements of Monte-Sano and Budano’s (2012) framework of Pedagogical Content Knowledge for Teaching History play a role in the enactment of historical explanation, two elements in particular seemed to be particularly useful in specifically identifying teachers’ explanatory pedagogical choices

related to content and process. These two elements include how teachers “represent history” and how teachers “attend to students’ ideas about history” (Monte-Sano & Budano, 2012).

Examination of the data showed how these two elements of pedagogical content knowledge were enacted in the course of teachers’ historical explanations. Before we look at classroom data that demonstrates this, it is helpful to first present an overview of the findings below. This will make them easier for the reader to identify within the complexity of the teaching process presented in the subsequent excerpts of classroom explanation.

When teachers engaged in the process of historical explanation, the data showed that they chose to represent historical content either as a fixed narrative, or in a more disciplinary interpretive way. Teachers were also “attending to students’ ideas about history” (Monte-Sano & Budano, 2012) in two different ways related to process. They were either engaging in “teacher-only explanation” by explaining the historical content by themselves with no intervening student voices, or they were making students part of the process of explaining through what I term “shared explanation.” Shared explanation occurs when both the teacher and the students contribute to the explanation. The data revealed two different forms of shared explanation. First, there is the possibility that both the teacher and the students are making statements that contribute to the explanation. The second form of shared explanation is more complex. This is when the teacher is *only* asking questions, and the students are doing the bulk of the explanation through statements. This is considered shared explanation because the teacher is guiding the students in a specific direction through the introduction of questions. The teacher’s questions thus play a role in shaping the explanation the students provide. A form of explanation called “student-only” explanation can be argued to exist, but since this dissertation is

primarily focused on teachers' instructional choices surrounding explanation, data analysis centered on instances where teacher voices played a role in guiding the explanatory process.

Because teachers are often making pedagogical choices related to content and process simultaneously, data analysis that revealed the findings above was done on transcripts of classroom dialogue in which representations of historical content were woven together with teacher-centered and shared explanatory methods of “attending to students ideas about history” (Monte-Sano & Budano, 2012). It is therefore important to examine an excerpt of classroom explanation that demonstrates how a teacher's representation of history is often intertwined with the explanatory method they use to present it. First, a note on Mrs. Ellery's practice: Mrs. Ellery utilizes a number of different disciplinary pedagogical strategies and verbal teaching moves that have already been identified in the literature. These include, among others, sourcing, contextualization, re-voicing, conceptual press, and stabilizing content knowledge. In the excerpts below, I have kept these codes, written in blue, in order to show how Mrs. Ellery makes explanatory pedagogical choices related to form and process within other teaching moves that have already been established as being effective for improving students' historical thinking skills. While these strategies are not the focus of this dissertation, they are still important to recognize in order to present a clear picture of Mrs. Ellery's pedagogical content knowledge. The excerpt from Mrs. Ellery's class below will also demonstrate the concepts of implied “why” and “how” questions; connections among historical content, concepts, and accounts; and grain size that were explored thus far. Most importantly, though, we will begin to see how pedagogical choices related to *content* and *process* point to a form of historical explanation that makes the explanation of the past more meaningful for democratic citizenship.

Mrs. Ellery continued her lesson with her eighth grade class about the U.S. annexation of Hawaii by having the students work in groups to examine primary sources that represent different perspectives on the annexation. In the passage below, Mrs. Ellery is asking the students to explain what they learned about perspective from these documents. The explanatory pedagogical strategies as well as the other features of explanation are listed in blue italics directly *before* the text to which they apply. Mrs. Ellery starts off by highlighting the *Level 3 grain size* guiding focus on perspective. She uses shared explanation by asking questions that get the students to explain. These explanations represent history as interpretive because the students are analyzing the evidence from the documents; Mrs. Ellery is not telling them what to think:

**Mrs. Ellery:** All right. Someone share something that you noticed about perspective for this document. Student 1? \* *Level 3 Grain Size - Guiding Question for the Lesson*

**Student 1:** Um, the Hawaiians wanted to be able to go back to their original culture in Hawaii.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Umm-hmm. Good. \* *Conceptual Press* Can we add to that? Student 2?

**Student 2:** Uh, they wanted to be left alone to the U.S. and wanted to stay there.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Umm-hmm. Student 3.

**Student 3:** People of many ages, um, wanted to go back to their culture.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Good. \* *Revoicing* So this isn't something that's just older people or just younger people, it's mix of the two. What else? \* *Evidence, Conceptual Press* Wanna hear at least one more piece of evidence. Student 4?

**Student 4:** Many native Hawaiians wanted, both men and women, have open opinions on the annexation of Hawaii and turning back with their culture and stuff.

We can see from the process of shared explanation above that the students are making interpretive statements about what the native Hawaiians' views are on U.S. annexation. The implied question the students are answering is "Why do the native Hawaiians not want to be

annexed to the United States?” It is also important to recognize, however, that it is not just the occurrence of the students’ voices that qualifies an explanation as “shared.” Consider the passage below, which follows directly from the above:

**Mrs. Ellery:** Umm-hmm. Good. \* *Sourcing* Did anyone notice who they addressed this to? Right up here, so there's the title “Petition Against Annexation” and then who did they address it to Student 5?

**Student 5:** Um, William McKinley.

**Mrs. Ellery:** William McKinley. And who's he?

**Student 5:** President and Senate of the United States.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Right [sic]. So they send it both to the President of the United States and to the Senate. \* *Connect historical content* Remember, in the Senate is where they were currently trying to decide whether or not to annex Hawaii. \* *Close Reading* The other thing I want you to kind of pay attention to is the language. In these last couple of little lines here in their intro they say, "They earnestly protest against the annexation of the Hawaii Islands to the United States in any form or shape." In any form or shape. \* *Teacher-only explanation, stabilize content knowledge* They don't wanna be a state, they don't wanna be a territory, they don't wanna be a military base. They would prefer to remain their own independent country.

When the students provide the answers of “William McKinley” and “President of the United States” they are not actually doing explanation. They are providing descriptive facts. Many teachers use this type of “fill-in-the-blank” –type recitation and think they are asking the students to explain, when in reality it functions more as a Jeopardy Game-like recitation of facts. In this format, it is the teacher who is really the one doing the explaining because she is the one eliciting the facts in order to connect them together into an explanation. She makes the connection between whom it is that the petition is directed to, which the students just identified, and the historical content that it is the Senate who will decide on the matter. Mrs. Ellery follows the students’ descriptive facts with a teacher-only explanation explaining what it is that the native Hawaiians want and do not want. Her teacher-only explanation at the end is a fixed

representation of content because it presents all the native Hawaiians as wanting the same thing. Later, however, we will see that Mrs. Ellery goes back to an interpretive frame by highlighting the specific perspective of the native Hawaiian women.

This teacher-only fixed explanation, which functions to stabilize content knowledge, is important for setting up the basis for the next teaching move that Mrs. Ellery makes, which is to turn back again to shared explanation by asking the students a series of stated “why” questions. These “why” questions make it so that the students are the ones who will do the interpreting and explaining themselves:

[Skip one turn]

**Mrs. Ellery:** Okay. All right. On the next page, the document is called Page 22 of the Women's Petition. So here's my question for you, and this is what I'd like you to write down in the margin note. This is the same message as the previous document. \* *Use of a stated “why” question* Why would they write two documents? Write it down and then we'll talk about it. So in the margin, I want you to answer the question, \* *Perspective* \* *Use of a stated “why” question* "Why would they create two different documents, one for men and one for women?" Okay, write down what you think about that.

It is in answer to these “why” questions that we begin to see something very special happen when the students begin to explain. Part of making historical explanation meaningful for democratic citizenship is taking explanation out of the past and connecting it to the present. The type of thinking this requires asks students to develop and utilize skills that can support civic participation. This includes an ability to articulate beliefs from the point of view of someone else and to contextualize them within that person’s own time and place. It also includes recognizing how democratic ideals such as equality, rights, and self-determination have shaped civic action across time periods. As Mrs. Ellery asks the students to explain, we can see the power of shared explanation to strengthen the students’ development of these skills and

understandings. We can also see how Mrs. Ellery uses teacher-centered explanation at the end to reinforce these ideas:

**Mrs. Ellery:** Okay, what do you think? Student 1?

**Student 1:** Um, they wrote a second document to show that there are two sides of this argument and so that- and to show that- that the white- wealthy white farmers weren't the only ones that were against the annexation.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Good [sic]. Can we add to that? \* *Contextualization* Think about the time period.

**Student 4:** Well, in the U.S. at this time, women didn't have the right to voice out their opinions, so they make it look like, \* *Personification* "Hey, well, [if] we're in your country then our women won't have their opinion for, like, we're our own independent country we can shout -- voice our opinions and plus if they send two um, like, documents to the president, so it's going to just have a greater impact than just one.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Very good, Student 4. \* *Re-voicing* So two documents are going to show the greater impact. They're also making it known that in Hawaii women are considered equal. \* *Contextualization* During this time period -- I mean, look, we are looking at before the amendment that gave women the right to vote in America. They're showing women have that right in our country. We as women don't want to be part of your country because we would lose our rights. So yes, men and women in Hawaii during this time period had equal rights, which is something that women did not have in the United States. That's a big deal.

Not only would be they losing independence, losing economic control, the women of the islands, were they to be exiled to the United States and become citizens of the United States, they would lose their rights. \* *Perspective* That's an important perspective. So if you haven't jotted that down yet please make sure you do so. That obviously, these women are going to feel very strongly about losing those rights of equality that they have.

In the passage above, it was the student who made the connection to the lack of voting rights of women in the United States at the time. This allowed Mrs. Ellery to reinforce the skills of contextualization and understanding of perspectives that can make historical explanation valuable for living in a pluralist democracy.

Although Chapter 6 will explore in detail various reasons why teachers may choose one form of representing content or engaging in process over another, some comments from Mrs.



Ellery's interview can help us to understand the choices involved in content and process more clearly. One of the assumptions that is pervasive in teaching is that student-centered forms of instruction are preferred over more teacher-centered forms. Likewise, disciplinary instruction in history calls for representing history as interpretive rather than as a fixed story. As noted above, it is easier to see how shared interpretive explanation lends itself to strengthening skills for democracy than it is to see how teacher-centered fixed explanation does so. Mrs. Ellery provided some important insights as to when teacher-only fixed explanation could also be used to support democratic ways of thinking:

**Mrs. Ellery:** When it comes to more controversial topics, um, and I don't mean modern day controversial, I mean more historically controversial, when it comes to Jim Crow laws, when it comes to the start of the KKK, um, I make an effort to have them understand that in no uncertain terms this was wrong. Um, middle schoolers are very impressionable. I find that, um, if left to their own devices, um, some students try really hard to do the right thing, and other students are mean.

And I have had instances where I have students who have been racist. And they didn't understand that what they were doing or saying was wrong. So when it comes to something that is more-- I don't know how I want to put it. More-- I don't know. I'm using the word controversial, but that's not quite the word I wanna go with. It's-- it's hard to look at even as an adult, that these things happened. Um, when they cover, in English class, they cover the text, the book, the novel Boy in the Striped Pajamas [about the experiences of two boys in a concentration camp during the Holocaust].

And so we do a mini lesson in history class, although it's part of my curriculum, um, we do a mini lesson in history class about World War II. And the English teacher and I really try to make sure that they understand that that type of treatment is, and was, and always will be, wrong. Um, I don't want my students to grow up thinking that kind of hatred is okay. So, that is a point where I kind of take my teacher hat and put it on a little tighter and say that this is it, end of discussion.

Mrs. Ellery explains that with middle school students especially, it is important to help them understand “historically controversial” topics. Topics such as the KKK and the Holocaust are not presented as interpretive. Mrs. Ellery sees her choice to represent such topics as fixed, and to use teacher-centered explanation to explain them, as methods that support the kind of thinking

good citizens should have. She uses the metaphor of a “teacher hat” to convey that she, as the teacher, has an important role to play in guiding how students think about historical content. Sometimes it is necessary to move out of the role as facilitator and into the role of “teacher” and directly explain difficult content to students, especially when it is important that the students understand it in a specific way. Mrs. Ellery understands that the study of history is not just about learning about the past, but that it is important for living in the world today. Her comment reveals that a teacher’s orientation toward the purpose of history instruction and historical explanation can have an effect upon the pedagogical choices they make. This will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 6.

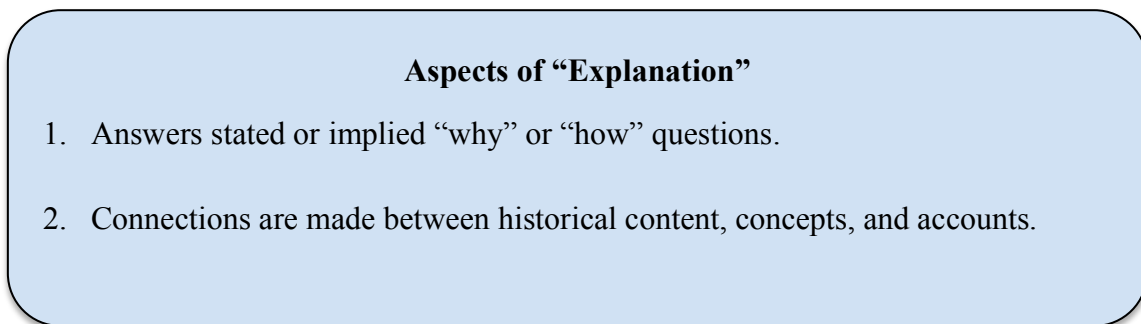
Understanding decisions of content and process become more important when the historical content being discussed is made valuable for living in the world today. How teachers choose to represent historical content, as fixed or interpretive, and how they choose to enact the process of explanation, by doing it themselves or sharing this process with the students, both have great significance for whether and how teachers can use historical explanation to support students’ skills for democratic citizenship. As I examined the data from the observations of the teachers in the study, I noticed that other teachers in addition to Mrs. Ellery were also utilizing pedagogical choices surrounding content and process to make historical explanation more meaningful for democratic citizenship. The final section in Chapter 5 below explores the variety of different ways they did this and identifies features that make each form recognizable within teachers’ practice. What we will see as we examine these different forms of meaningful explanation is that their enactment is more complex than it may at first seem.

## Meaningful Explanation

One piece of understanding explanation in secondary history classrooms is being able to identify what an explanation is, where it occurs, who provides it, and how. But a more significant piece, and one that is at the core of this dissertation, is gaining an understanding of why explanation matters. It was suggested in the introduction that studying history has the potential to help students learn to be citizens who can better confront the problems of human affairs that our society faces. The question is whether this can be done through the method of pedagogy that most history teachers tend to use – historical explanation. Therefore, it is necessary to go beyond the boundaries described so far, and to identify where connections exist between explanatory methods and living in a democracy.

As we have already discussed, explanation in secondary history classrooms in its most basic form involves providing answers to stated or implied why/how questions, and making connections among historical content, concepts, and accounts:

Figure 2. *Aspects of Explanation*



Yet, a careful examination of the data revealed that there were instances where some of the teachers were moving beyond this. These teachers were making connections to the contemporary world in order to help students understand the ways that people interact. They were using explanation to model and encourage empathy, or to help students to understand

multiple perspectives, skills that are necessary in a pluralistic society. These types of explanations enabled teachers to move beyond helping their students to learn history better, and toward helping their students gain knowledge, skills, and dispositions that could help them to understand and confront the world they live in today. In short, these teachers were making explanations *meaningful*.

I found instances in all ten teachers' lessons where they each made some connection between the past and the present. However, three teachers in particular: Mrs. Davis, Mrs. Ellery, and Mr. Kent, did not just use the present to help students understand the past, but also used the past to help students better understand the present. Miss Gross did to some extent as well, but it was her interview comments rather than her classroom practice, that shed light on what Mrs. Davis, Mrs. Ellery, and Mr. Kent were doing, which helped to frame much of the analysis. With 43 total observations, each with a transcript at least 30 pages long, I was not able, at the time this was written, to do a complete numerical analysis of the frequency of instances of meaningful explanation for each teacher. But it was clear that except for the three teachers mentioned above, instances of meaningful explanation were relatively few. Because the observed lessons occurred in May and June, it may have been that pressure to review for end-of-year state tests affected the teachers' pedagogical choices and made them not want to deviate too far from a focus on studying the past alone. This makes Mrs. Davis's, Mrs. Ellery's, and Mr. Kent's use of meaningful explanation at this time of the school year even more significant. Coincidentally, each of these three teachers taught a different level of U.S. history (middle school, regular 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and Advanced Placement 11<sup>th</sup> grade), so their data provides a slightly more robust basis for analysis. The meaningful historical explanations provided by each of these

three teachers will be the primary source of data analysis for the remainder of Chapter 5 and for Chapter 6.

Before we explore the different ways that Mrs. Davis, Mrs. Ellery, and Mr. Kent made historical explanation meaningful, it might be helpful to look at one example from another teacher's classroom that shows what happens when there is no explanation at all. Because limitations of organization and space prevent me from also providing an example where this teacher did engage in meaningful explanation, I have chosen not to identify this teacher's name. The teacher designed an activity to help her students review for the end-of-year state test. She told the students to get into groups. She provided them with a chart containing boxes for each of the post-World War II presidents, as well as a list of events to sort into the boxes. For example, some of the phrases included, "Pardoned Nixon," "Assassinated in 1963," and "Promoted anti-poverty and civil rights through his Great Society." After the students sorted the phrases, they were to complete a box at the bottom for each president that said "Rate from 1-10 and explain why." The students were then to rank each of the presidents from most influential to least influential.

Although the students were to "explain why" they ranked the presidents the way they did, most of the class was spent on sorting the phrases into the boxes. One excerpt of dialogue from one particular group provides a stark example of what happens when lack of explanation turns history into something that is meaningless. The students were working on the phrase, "Backed NATO intervention against Serbia to stop 'ethnic cleansing'." Pay particular attention to the phrases that I have put in italics. The dialogue proceeded as follows:

**Student 2:** [reading from paper] Backed NATO intervention into [sic] Serbia to stop ethnic cleansing? *Uh, ethnic cleansing was which president?*

**Student 1:** Ask Student 5.

**Student 2:** [calling over to student in the next group over] Student 5, ethnic cleansing? [no response] Good job, Student 5.

**Student 1:** He didn't tell you nothing. [Calling over to another group] Student 9, *which one was the one that said ethnic cleansing?*

**Student 2:** [calling over to Student 9's group] Serbia, which president was like, we need to stop that?

**Student 9:** [calling back] I don't know. We put Carter.

**Student 2:** [turning back to his own group] Let's think. It's not Ford, or Nixon. Or Truman. It should be the president...

**Student 3:** Yo, yo, Carter.

**Student 2:** Maybe it's Eisenhower.

**Student 3:** Carter.

**Student 2:** Carter? [in a funny voice] Jimmyyyy. [asking Student 3] Maybe? Or, you know?

**Student 3:** Naw, just...

**Student 1:** [looking in textbook] There's nothing in Carter so...

**Student 2:** [Student 2 gets out his smart phone and starts typing something into Google. He then reads what comes up] ...in 94. It took place between 92 to 95, so it has to be Clinton.

**Student 3:** Or was it Carter?

**Student 2:** He was in the 80s. [speaking slowly as he types into his phone] NATO intervention...

**Student 3:** I think it was Carter, dude.

**Student 2:** [reading from his phone] NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. It was 99.

**Student 1:** So it's Clinton?

**Student 2:** It says 92 to 2004.

**Student 5:** [calling over to Students 1, 2, and 3] What question were you asking me before?

**Student 2:** *Serbia. Clinton, right?*

**Student 5:** Yeah.

**Student 2:** [triumphantly] HAH!

In the above dialogue, the term, “ethnic cleansing” has become meaningless. The phrasing Student 2 uses, “Ethnic cleansing was which president?” and the phrasing Student 1 uses, “Which one was the one that said ethnic cleansing?” essentially turns the question into “Who is ethnic cleansing?” As a result of the activity’s design, the students are more focused on which presidential term the event took place during, rather than what the event itself is about. No where is there any indication that the students understand that ethnic cleansing is about the mass genocide of a particular group of people. By the end of the dialogue, the students are not even using the term “ethnic cleansing” anymore. It just becomes “Serbia.” Student 2’s excitement at the end upon getting the correct answer is evident in his exclamation, “HAH!” When meaningful explanation is missing, a term like “ethnic cleansing” becomes nothing more than trivia.

The examples of meaningful historical explanation from the classrooms of Mrs. Davis, Mrs. Ellery, and Mr. Kent were significantly different from the excerpt above. As noted in the Data Analysis section, coding indicated that there were at least five different ways that these teachers made explanations more meaningful: explanation establishes relevance by making connections to students’ lives, explanation establishes relevance by making connections to current events, explanation is given for multiple perspectives, explanation addresses empathy, and explanation is given for why historical content matters. After I coded the observation data, I went back into the literature to see what connections there might be for what I found. These

descriptions, I felt, could be used as focusing devices for better understanding each form of meaningful explanation and how to recognize it within a teacher's practice. First, I noticed that some of the forms of meaningful explanation I had identified were reflected in language from Fogo's (2014) definition of the core practice of "explain and connect historical content." Likewise, Seixas and Morton's (2013) "Bix Six" historical thinking concepts also contained some connections. So I developed the list of five forms of meaningful explanation on my own based on the data, but my analysis of how these appeared in my data, and the wording of the final model describing different forms of meaningful historical explanation were influenced by language in the literature.

The first part of Fogo's (2014) definition of the core practice of "explain and connect historical content" reads: "The teacher uses historically appropriate and comprehensible explanations to describe and connect historical content, concepts, and accounts..." (p. 194). This, as noted above, describes a basic element of historical explanation as it is focused on better understanding the past. It does not necessarily convey any explicit connection to the present or to democratic citizenship. Therefore, I determined that this verbiage described "explanation" itself, but not what I identified as "meaningful explanation." I decided that Fogo's (2014) core practice definition could be split into "explanation" and "meaningful explanation." I took the phrase "describe and connect historical content, concepts, and accounts" and used it to frame the second portion of the description for general explanation, displayed in Figure 2 above.

The other half of Fogo's (2014) definition contains the following language: "When appropriate, the teacher connects historical content and concepts to the personal and cultural experiences of students and also helps students see the distinctions between their personal and cultural experiences and historical content under study. This practice includes making relevant



connections between historical and contemporary events and phenomena” (p. 194). I took this language and modified my original phrase, “connections to students’ lives and to current events” to now read, “(1) Relevance is provided via connections to students’ personal and cultural experiences and (2) Relevance is provided via connections to contemporary events and phenomena.”

What is the difference between these first two portions of Fogo’s definition? In other words, how is describing and connecting historical content, concepts, and accounts different from the types of connections that are made between historical content and the personal and cultural experiences of the students, as well as between the historical content and contemporary events and phenomena? And why does this distinction matter for making explanation meaningful for democratic citizenship? One challenge of teaching history is how to help students understand abstract concepts and ideas. Students, especially in middle school, tend to focus on their immediate world and have a difficult time understanding beliefs and actions that are different from what is familiar. This is why Fogo’s (2014) definition included the portion which says, “also helps students see the distinctions between their personal and cultural experiences and historical content under study.” Making connections can help build a framework upon which greater understandings can be built. But just making connections between content and accounts that are only in the past has limited usefulness if a teacher’s goal is to use history to better help students understand the present, and to understand their role in our current democracy. A bridge has to be built that takes the content out of the past in some way. Historical explanations can take on greater meaning for students when a teacher connects the content to students’ personal and cultural experiences and to contemporary events and phenomena.

What does establishing relevance using such connections look like within classroom practice? What features might we look for to recognize this within the explanations that teachers and students give in 7-12 history classrooms? Consider this excerpt from Mr. Kent. Mr. Kent's goal was to try to help students to evaluate how successful the Civil Rights Movement was, and more specifically, to understand why schools are still segregated today. The class discussed many possible contributors to the modern-day incidence of school segregation including de jure segregation, de facto segregation, and the role that racism played in these. In the portion of the lesson presented below in which the class discussed de facto segregation, Mr. Kent decides that he does not just want to tell the students about a particular Supreme Court Case using teacher-centered explanation. Instead, he decides that understanding the case's significance to the present would be more powerful if he could connect it to the students' own lives:

**Mr. Kent:** Did I ever teach you about the cases in Seattle and Louisville?

**Student:** Like quotas?

**Student:** No.

**Mr. Kent:** Not exactly quotas, but did I ever te-- I didn't teach you Seattle?

**Student:** No.

**Mr. Kent:** Just bear with me for a second here. And it really is interesting. I'm going to ask you a quick question. Would you guys rather go to the school closest to you or the school that's conceivably better, but it's going to be a two-hour bus ride?

**Students:** Closer.

**Students:** Better.

**Mr. Kent:** Assuming the school's safe.

**Students:** Closer.

**Mr. Kent:** Who's picking closer? Oh, you mean you don't want to be up two-hours earlier?

**Student:** That's crazy.

**Mr. Kent:** Of course not, right?

**Student:** Two-hour bus ride.

**Mr. Kent:** In Seattle and Louisville-- now those are cities, everybody, those are cities-- the school boards decided that they had to integrate the schools. So, [Student 12], they were bussing kids from one side of the city to another, to make sure the schools were integrated. Parents fought this. I hope you're all listening to me. Some of the parents who fought it were black parents who didn't want their kids on the bus for an hour and a half a day.

[skips a few turns]

**Student 7:** That's kind of like how the de facto kind of kicked in.

**Mr. Kent:** It is. I think that's a great connection that you're making. It is. And again the solution, to me, is fix all the schools. If the school is all black, it doesn't-- it shouldn't matter. It should be a good school. But I'm getting too angry about this, right? Well, you know, it's my, uh, and [Student 4] doubts me. That's okay. I'm going to make it happen.

One experience that is so prevalent in students' lives that it occurs every single day is a student's trip to school. We can see in the excerpt above that some students would rather go to a closer school, and some would rather go to a better school. Relating the content to the students' lives helped them to understand that the issue of school segregation is more complex than simply instituting laws that bus students to different schools. What is also significant about the passage above is that because of Mr. Kent's choice to connect the content to the students' experiences, it is a student, rather than Mr. Kent, who makes the connection between modern-day segregation, and the term "de facto" segregation. Mr. Kent even recognizes this by noting, "I think that's a great connection that you're making." What was originally an obscure Supreme Court case the students had never heard of now has relevance for helping the students to understand one possible reason that schools today are segregated. It should be noted that the single passage

above does not do justice to how Mr. Kent expands upon the complexity of the causes of modern school segregation over the course of the entire class period. We will see in Chapter 6 how he draws students' attention to aspects of structural racism. But the portion of the lesson above can help us to see how linking historical content to students' lives with an eye toward illuminating aspects of modern society can be a powerful tool for making historical explanation meaningful.

How might a teacher's use of connections to "contemporary events and phenomena" appear different from connections to "students' personal and cultural assets"? In a different class period of Mr. Kent's, the students were discussing the question, "To what extent was President George Washington responsible for the formation of political parties?" In the passage below, we can see how Mr. Kent makes the historical content more relevant by showing how the beliefs of Hamilton and Jefferson about the role of government are similar to the beliefs of the two main political parties today about the role of government:

***Music playing:** It must be nice, it must be nice to have Washington on your side.*

**Mr. Kent:** Wow. Student 1-

**Student 1:** Yeah.

**Teacher:** -my, my resident fan of Hamilton.

**Student 1:** Whoa

**Mr. Kent:** Wouldn't you say that he's arguing there that Washington had something to do with the creation of Political Parties?

**Student 1:** Oh, yeah because he sided with Hamilton.

**Mr. Kent:** Because he sided with Hamilton.

**Student 1:** Yeah

**Mr. Kent:** Correct. And I think that that's definitely where the arguments that the Jefferson people would make. And again, Jefferson resigned as Secretary of State because it-- what, to-- well, to run for President and also to, bum, I would say to establish

his point of view on the government. I hope from that song, if I ask you, what's the big difference in philosophy between Hamilton and Jefferson? What would you say? Just general philosophy. Different view on the role of government. What would you say the difference is? And that is a difficult question but an important question.

**Student 2:** Jefferson cared more about I guess the common people.

**Mr. Kent:** Jefferson definitely cared more about common people, whereas Hamilton cares more about, or it appears to be Hamilton cares more about who?

**Students:** The wealthy

**Mr. Kent:** The wealthy. Good. What about the role of government in that? Who would be more-- yes?

**Student 3:** Hamilton wants stronger central

**Mr. Kent:** You got it. Hamilton wants a stronger federal government. Stronger central government. Whereas Jefferson wants more--

**Students:** States rights

**Mr. Kent:** States rights. So, does that sound familiar to anybody? Is that the same argument today? That I'm trying to-- What do Republicans today believe more about?

**Students:** States rights

**Mr. Kent:** What do the Democrats believe more about?

**Student 2:** Federal government

**Teacher:** Federal government having more power. It's the same theme. So this creates our first two political parties and what are they called?

**Student 4:** Federalists

**Mr. Kent:** Federalists, and...

**Student 2:** Democratic Republicans

In the passage above, Mr. Kent uses shared explanation to get the students to be the ones who explain the actual difference in philosophies, instead of him telling them directly. The facts the students provide about the differences in views are connected together to answer the larger

implied “how” question of, “How did George Washington, Hamilton, and Jefferson have an impact on the key difference between the Democratic Platform and the Republican Platform today?” Understanding what today’s Democratic and Republican parties believe about the purpose of government does not directly connect to the students’ lives, but it does establish an important connection to understanding the “contemporary phenomenon” of political parties and their differences. Being able to explain that Democrats see a larger role for the federal government and that Republicans see a smaller role for it is fundamental if students are to understand how party-based campaigning, voting, and legislating affect the type of direction and impact parties have upon society today.

I noticed excerpts of explanation in Mrs. Ellery’s class where she also connected Jefferson’s and Hamilton’s beliefs to political parties today, but Mrs. Ellery did it in a slightly different way that presented what I saw as a different form of meaningful historical explanation. One of Seixas and Morton’s (2013) “Big Six” historical thinking concepts is “perspectives.” Based on the data, I determined that this concept could be divided into three different forms: historical perspectives, modern-day perspectives, and multiple perspectives. The data demonstrated that all three could be used within meaningful explanation to help students learn how different beliefs coexist in a pluralistic democratic society, how they impact how people vote, and how they impact how our political leaders govern. The excerpt from Mrs. Ellery’s class below demonstrates how the same historical content Mr. Kent’s class discussed can be enacted to support a form of meaningful explanation that supports an understanding of historical and multiple perspectives:

**Mrs. Ellery:** So, the U.S. was in an awkward position. Jefferson says that this-- that crushing the French Revolution was an attack on Liberty everywhere. Said, "If we shut this down, if we shut this down, we are going to ruin everything." Hamilton says that British trade is too vital to risk war because Britain was America's primary trade partner.

And Hamilton is trying to pay off the...

**Students:** Debt.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Debt. Yes. Washington declared that the U.S. would remain neutral and would not take sides. Something he probably hoped he could do with Hamilton and Jefferson. He also said that entering a war was not in the new nation's interests. [silence] Yes?

**Student 7:** Um, do you think they disagree with each other on purpose?

**Mrs. Ellery:** I don't think so. I think, especially after reading a lot of their letters, I think that they just had very different political ideals. So just like, um, Trump and Clinton. They come from different backgrounds. They have different ideas of what is right for this country. Both of them were coming up with their best ideas on how to fix things. Those ideas were just very different.

The similarity in content to Mr. Kent's lesson can help clarify the difference between the two forms of meaningful explanation that they use. Mr. Kent's lesson was designed to help the students understand what the two political parties believed. Although these two ideas do represent different perspectives, his greater emphasis is on the impact Hamilton's and Jefferson's beliefs had on today's party platforms. Mrs. Ellery, however, places a greater emphasis on the fact that Trump and Clinton have different perspectives. She explains the occurrence of their differing perspectives in a way that is meaningful for democratic citizenship because it helps students to see that political views involve people believing that different ideas are "right for this country." Since middle school students are at an impressionable age, Mrs. Ellery does not want to argue that Trump's views are "right" or that Clinton's views are "right." She also does not reveal what she herself believes, in case students should think that this is the "right" way to believe. Instead, she uses explanation to set the stage for her students' development of their own political beliefs. Her use of meaningful explanation is also designed to help her students learn that people, and politicians, may have multiple perspectives on what is right for the country, but that they are not necessarily disagreeing "on purpose." Learning to accept the idea of multiple

perspectives is an important skill for living in a pluralistic democracy.

One more excerpt from one of Mrs. Ellery's classes can help us to understand that the explanation of a single different perspective can be valuable as well, and can even be used to shed light on multiple perspectives. In the excerpt below, a student references a perspective Mrs. Ellery had told the class about in a lesson weeks before, so this also demonstrates how the idea of using "perspective" as a form of making explanation meaningful is something that Mrs. Ellery consistently integrates into her lessons in such a way as to help her students internalize these ideas. The student's comment below also demonstrates how Mrs. Ellery had used the story to represent how history is interpretive:

**Student 1:** Is this thing another, um, another thing, like what you said with your friend when you were in college how she had a different-- when she learned about whatever war it was, they had a different name for it, is this one of the things where there's different points of views depending on where they are?

**Mrs. Ellery:** Well, there's definitely different points of view, not necessarily from within the United States, the way the Civil War was with my friend, um, but I do think that the Spanish learn about this war in a different way than we do in their history classes. This is definitely something that is our perspective on this, is the American perspective. Mm-hmm. And once we get to the end of this section, I think you'll understand why the Cuban perspective is also very different. Um, which is something that [Student 4] brought up a little while ago. Okay?

The student above is referencing an explanation Mrs. Ellery had given about how a friend of hers in college had referred to the Civil War as the "War of Northern Aggression." Mrs. Ellery takes this explanation of this one perspective, and then uses it to show that just like people within the United States may have different interpretations of history, different countries may have different interpretations of history as well. Emphasizing history as interpretive as well as using "perspectives" as a form of meaningful explanation helps Mrs. Ellery to develop a way of thinking about others that is important if students are going to live with others who think differently, both within our democracy, and in the larger world.



One skill/disposition of democratic citizenship that is similar to, but also different from perspectives, is the concept of “empathy.” Barton & Levstik (2004) divide empathy into “Empathy as Perspective Taking” and “Empathy as Caring.” However, Seixas and Morton (2013) use the category “Historical Perspectives.” My data indicated that there were times when teachers wanted to help students to understand “multiple perspectives,” but did not intend to generate empathy. For example, Mrs. Ellery had students read President McKinley’s arguments for annexing the Philippines, but the purpose of doing so was to have them *explain* McKinley’s perspective, not necessarily to *empathize* with that perspective. So I decided to keep “Multiple Perspectives” and “Empathy” as separate categories. It also seemed to me that the term “historical perspectives” may not clearly convey that this category contains attempts to explain modern-day perspectives or to compare and contrast multiple perspectives. So this language was combined into: “The explanation addresses historical, modern-day, and/or multiple perspectives.” I chose to leave the “empathy” category broad because the literature contained so many different interpretations of what this term involves.

Highlighting episodes of empathy in history can be a powerful tool for developing students’ utilization of it when living in a pluralistic democracy. Mrs. Davis used empathy in three different ways in her lessons on the Civil Rights Movement to make historical explanation more meaningful. First, she asked students to engage in thinking exercises that asked them to place themselves within the shoes of historical actors:

**Mrs. Davis:** So yesterday we started talking about the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, the causes of the Civil Rights Movement. And today we're going to be looking at what methods Civil Rights Activists were using, okay, to institute some sort of change.

So what I'd like you to do, right, is with your partner, I've got a situation up here I want you to talk about. So imagine that you are an African-American Civil Rights Activist, considering the issues that you're facing, okay, that we talked about yesterday. So,

segregation, voting restrictions, intimidation. Which method do you feel would be most effective and why? [On board are written the terms “political,” “social,” and “economic”]

The class then views documentary video footage of the different forms of protest such as bringing a case to the Supreme Court (political), civil disobedience (social), and boycotting (economic). In the portion of the class where students have observed both black and white young people being attacked for sitting at lunch counters and riding busses through the South, Mrs. Davis highlights the role that non-violent forms of protest plays in generating empathy for the Civil Rights Movement. Notice how she utilizes a “why” question to get the students to think critically about the role that empathy plays in creating social change:

**Mrs. Davis:** Why do you guys think that they were so adamant about being non-violent? About not hitting back? Why do think that was important? Talk with the people around you. Take 30 seconds, go. Why do you think it was important to be non-violent?

[The students talk with those around them for a minute]

**Mrs. Davis:** If you think about the history of violence, right, amongst the African-American community. Most white people hadn't really seen that, right? Unless they were actively engaged in it, but like-- especially, like, in the north, northeast, where we talked about people moving into suburbs and stuff. I mean, they didn't really see all the violence that African-Americans were exposed to over generations, right?

This is on TV and they're seeing—right? The white community is seeing white kids that they can relate to, because they have probably, children their age. Being beat-up alongside these young, black kids. And it's almost, like-- shocks people. To see how violent people could get over desegregation. And the white community, a lot of them didn't know that that's what black people experienced for generations, you know, down South. And also in-- in-- in northern cities as well. Right?

So think about this as on television, right? It's been televised and it's, kind of, like, "Look, we're doing the moral, right thing. These people are evil," right? They're the bad ones. So, just take a minute. Just answer that question, okay. I mean, what's pretty crazy too, if you think about, these are young people, 18, 19, 20 years old, doing this.

Mrs. Davis's students are in eleventh grade, and so are 16 and 17 years old. They are quite close in age to the young people they are watching getting attacked in the documentary footage. Mrs.

Ellery's choice to highlight the protesters' ages at the end of her explanation serves to strengthen the empathy the students are already thinking about when considering how white Americans at the time may have reacted to seeing peacefully-protesting young people being attacked by dogs and water hoses.

The text above came from Mrs. Davis's second observed lesson on the Civil Rights Movement. In the third lesson, she continues to emphasize the concept of empathy in her explanations by showing the students footage of the Children's March, and talking about the four little girls who were murdered in the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. At the end of the lesson, she gives the students the following prompt, which asks them to apply what they now understand to acting in democracy today:

**Mrs. Davis:** Imagine that today you're an activist, right, and you're trying to have a major change in society, it doesn't matter what the movement is, what your course is, right? Thinking about the Civil Rights Movement, what methods do you think you would use today? Okay, so thinking about the Civil Rights Movement, what methods do you think you would use? And use-use specifics from, like our key vocabulary specifics examples from what we talked about.

Mrs. Davis asks her students once again to imagine being an activist, but this time she wants them to use what they have now learned as a result of thinking about the role empathy plays in creating social change. Chapter 6 will present more excerpts of Mrs. Davis's classroom explanations that explore her use of empathy and why she might have chosen to use this as her primary form of meaningful explanation.

The last form of meaningful explanation that I observed in the data was a teacher's explicit use of language that called attention to the reason why certain content mattered for living in the present, and for democracy. Seixas & Morton (2013) discuss the concept of "significance." But the term "significance," as used in the literature, includes explanation that relates to why historical events might be important to the past itself. I was looking for passages

of explanation that demonstrated why historical concepts were significant in ways that connected to the present, and so I chose to use the term “mattered” rather than “significance” to describe this form of meaningful explanation.

An excerpt from Mr. Kent’s class reveals specific features that can help us to recognize how “explaining why it matters” is a form of making historical explanation meaningful. One feature is that whole lessons can be designed around a question that draws out this idea. Mr. Kent taught a lesson designed around the question, “To what extent can the current political landscape learn from the lessons of the Compromise of 1850?” This guiding question situates the content as being important for learning lessons that apply to the present. Within this lesson, we can see Mr. Kent using another feature of making explanation matter by using the term “important,” as in the phrase, “it is important because...”. But the meaningfulness of Mr. Kent’s explanation is not simply due to the fact that he alerts the class to the reason certain content is “important.” It is that it is important *because* it helps the students to understand a concept (“compromise”) that is meaningful for the present and for living and acting in a democracy:

**Mr. Kent:** This—Student 3, I struggle with this tremendously. I keep going back and forth and say, "Of course, slavery is an abomination." But yet do I want to prevent the Civil War? And what Henry Clay did, you cannot-- Did it prevent the Civil War in 1850?

**Student 3:** Yeah.

**Mr. Kent:** Yeah, of course it did. So, does that mean-- And Student 4, your points are well taken. It-- But it-- Really, I do struggle with it because, of course, we want slavery to be over as quickly as possible. So that's the debate you guys have to figure out. And it is important because there are issues today that we can't agree on. And should be-- Would we be willing to compromise on some of them to make us move forward as a country even if it means you might not get everything that you want?

**Student 4:** It's really the context of the time.

**Mr. Kent:** It depends on the context of the time period.

**Student 3:** There could be, like, stuff, like, 20 years from now that people are saying, like, I can't believe this happened. I can't believe that there had to be--

**Mr. Kent:** What is something today that you would absolutely not want to co-- Like, what is something you would not want to negotiate on that you think should automatically be either protected or erased?

Mr. Kent explains that understanding the significance of Henry Clay's use of compromise "is important because there are issues today that we can't agree on." A student then argues that the context of the time matters. Mr. Kent builds on this comment by then asking the students to consider how the context of their own current time matters. Toward the end of the class period, he asks the students to discuss and explain their answers to the following prompt, which forces them to apply what they learned about Henry Clay and compromise to public issues that shape our modern world:

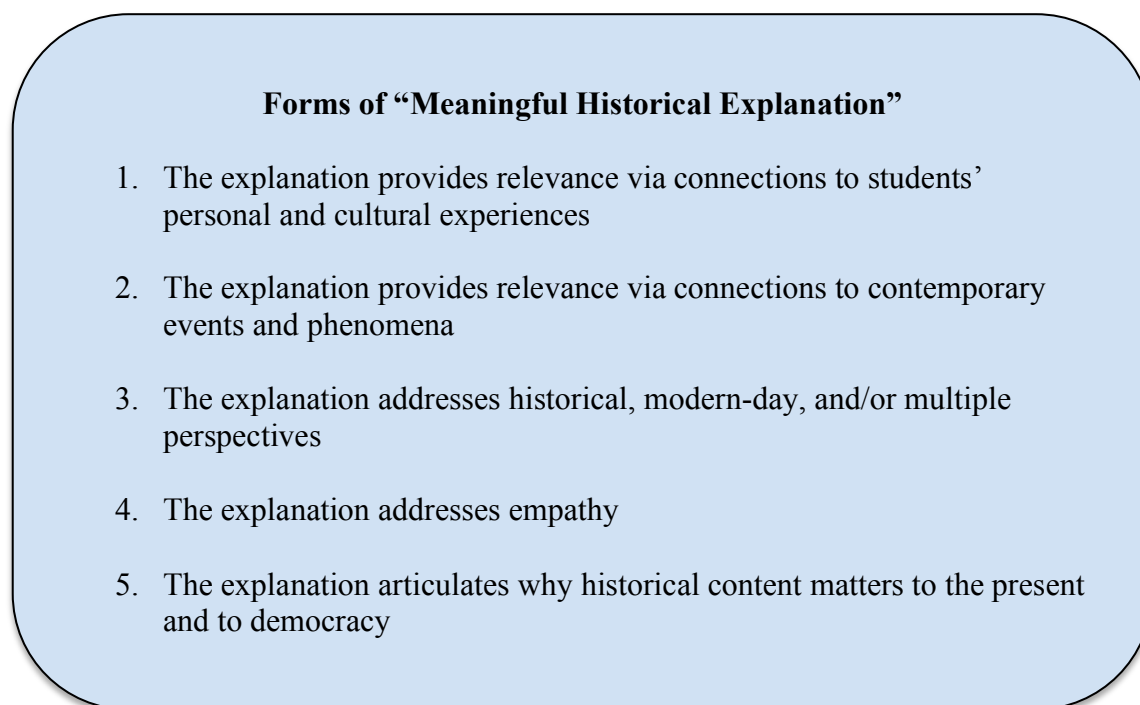
**Mr. Kent:** I want you to take one of these issues and tell me which one you think would be best served by a Compromise of 1850 type of legislation: Healthcare reform, education policy, tax reform, immigration: Which one do you think you would be best able to use the skills of Cl—Henry Clay and come up with a compromise that you think would be the most effective.

A central feature of making historical explanation meaningful is not just using the present to better understand the past, but using the past to help guide civic action in the present. Mr. Kent's exercise asks students to expand their thinking beyond just the content of Henry Clay and what compromises he made in 1850, to understanding how the use of compromise might matter for responding to controversial public issues today. When students explain their answers to the prompt, they are participating in something that is not just an academic exercise, or a recitation of historical content. They are gaining experience with utilizing a skill that matters for democratic citizenship.

We can now articulate a description of different forms of meaningful historical explanation that can form the basis both for analysis in Chapter 6 of why some of the teachers in

the study chose to engage in it, and for a research agenda designed to improve teacher education and professional development centered around the use of historical explanation:

Figure 3. *Forms of “Meaningful Historical Explanation”*



The five forms of meaningful historical explanation listed above should provide a useful starting place for strengthening the explanatory practices in which new and veteran teachers already engage, and for helping them to think about how to enact such practices in a way that matters for democratic citizenship.

### **Summary**

Mrs. Davis, Mrs. Ellery, and Mr. Kent showed us how thoughtful consideration of the variety of pedagogical choices open to teachers can help to make historical explanation meaningful. All three were committed to helping their students become good citizens, something many teachers strive for. But these three teachers were perhaps unique in that they utilized the process of historical explanation in order to do this. Their examples of practice are

significant not because they were perfect, but because there were lessons to learn from the pedagogical choices they made.

Earlier, it was noted that Miss Gross enacted meaningful explanation to some extent as well. But it was her interview comments more than her practice that allowed me to take the choices made by the other teachers and to frame them in a way that more clearly presented the significance of the pedagogical choices related to *content* and *process* that teachers make when they engage in meaningful historical explanation. An examination of some of these comments from Miss Gross's interview can help us to understand how all of the elements presented in Chapter 5 fit together: the boundaries of an explanation, why it matters that we understand the role *content* and *process* play in the enactment of meaningful historical explanation, and why articulating the different forms of meaningful historical explanation is important for improving history teaching today. Her comments also reveal that making these types of pedagogical choices are not always easy. Teachers must often confront various instructional dilemmas, particularly when they decide to enact meaningful historical explanation. Miss Gross's comments also give us some insight as to why it is important in Chapter 6 to explore the reasons why history teachers are making various kinds of pedagogical choices surrounding meaningful historical explanation.

Miss Gross had a very strong sense that she was preparing her students for democratic citizenship, and this shaped her decisions regarding content and process. I asked Miss Gross, "What do you like about teaching history?" She responded:

**Miss Gross:** Uh, so much. It's my favorite thing ever so that [chuckles] Um, um, I don't know, I like telling stories. I also am largely into telling stories of underdogs and stories of people who have been oppressed or marginalized in some way.

Um, I realized this year that I'm a little bit biased in the way that I deliver the information. Like, when I talk about Indian removal, I mention how unfair it is. And

some of the kids were like, “No, I think it was the right thing to do.” And I’m like, “Okay, you can think that way. Uh, I don’t.” Um, but I try my best, like, after I’ve realized that, I try my best to be like, “Maybe I should be a little bit more objective in how I deliver information.”

But I’m-I’m so into social justice because I feel like that makes people better. Like as far as-- Yeah, uh, like, addressing this c-civil responsibility we have in, um, in [our state], part of the social studies framework's framework is teaching civic responsibility and I feel like social justice lends itself so far into that. When you're looking at oppressed groups of people, whether it be in 1600 or 1960, you know. I feel like that's so important. So I like to tell stories of that to make kids more aware and then, of course, connecting that to today.

Miss Gross chooses not to remain objective when explaining content like Indian Removal for a number of reasons. First, she explained that teaching civic responsibility is part of her state’s Social Studies Framework, and she sees her choice to explain Indian Removal as an injustice as supporting the development of students’ civic responsibility. She also personally believes that teaching for social justice “makes people better.” Miss Gross does not see historical accounts such as Jackson and Indian Removal as merely historical content to memorize. She wants her students to recognize that Indian Removal was wrong – and she tells her students that she believes it was wrong. Although in the interview passage above she said that she allows students to make the argument that Indian Removal was right, she is not comfortable with them doing so. Miss Gross is conscious of the fact that she’s “a little bit biased” in the way she delivers information, and she wonders if she should be more objective.

Miss Gross expresses a commitment to using historical explanation to develop in her students dispositions that support good citizenship. The significance of the concepts presented in Chapter 5 can be demonstrated in Miss Gross’s description of how these beliefs influenced her to develop a lesson in which she establishes relevance by making connections to contemporary events and phenomena. As a teacher who had only taught for four years, Miss Gross explains how she struggles when making a choice between using teacher-only explanation, and choosing



between fixed or interpretive representations of content. In the incident she describes below, her choice was made more difficult because one of her colleagues, Mr. Klein, as well as her department head, wanted her to use more shared, interpretive explanation. Miss Gross's comments reveal that her own sense of history's value for democratic citizenship, as well as her assessment of students' background knowledge and readiness, affected her choice to use teacher-centered explanation rather than shared explanation:

**Interviewer:** How do you decide when you should explain something versus asking the students to explain something?

**Miss Gross:** Um, it's a little tricky. Sometimes I feel-- I don't know. That one's really tough and I'm still trying to gather my bearings in that. Because sometimes I try to get them to explain something that they don't really have the basis for. And it's not me saying, like, "Okay, you know nothing about this, can you tell about it?" It's like, I try to give them the building blocks for it but it still wasn't enough building blocks for them to explain information in the way that I wanted them to. And then other times I feel like I'm taking the reigns too much and they can verbalize something without me doing it for them. So it's-- I'm still finding a balance in that.

Um, like, when I talk to Mr. Klein about things, he'll usually tell me that I need to explain things to the kids because I ask him, like, how he teaches. He's been doing this, like, since I was, like, ten years old. Um, so he definitely has a better grip on it than I do. Um, but then other times I find that-- No, I think I could've asked them to explain something without me directing them. The other day we were talking about John Brown and um, whether he was a hero or a domestic terrorist. And I was talking to the kids about terrorism today and it was so unfortunate that it happened the same day of Manchester and it was Monday night. So I literally taught that lesson on Monday and then, of course, the terrorist attack has to happen that same night. It was, like, so heart-breaking and then we have to talk about it the next day, you know.

But, um, I was actually getting observed by my chairperson on Monday and she gave me a suggestion, have them verbalize, um, how terrorism relates to the world today because I did it all for them and really the point of me doing that, because I get very, like, so boxy and I don't want kids to think that Islam equates to terrorism. Like, yes, there is a connection in it in the world today but I don't want kids to run home and think that Islam is a-a religion that's f-founded on terrorism. Um, so I usually take the reigns more on that because I feel like I have a responsibility to tell kids about that particular thing in life. Um, but my chairperson said, "No, they could've done it on their own. Like they've -- if you gave the-- you gave them the building blocks, but you didn't have to, like, build it for them. Like they could've done it." So I was like, "Okay." So I'm still figuring that out. Long story short, I don't really know yet.

Miss Gross understood that her students did not have the “building blocks” to come to an understanding on their own that Islam is not founded on terrorism, but she also was not sure how to give them the building blocks to do this. Because she wanted to make sure they understood the content in a specific way, she felt a “responsibility” to explain this concept to them rather than having them explain it. Her orientation toward the purpose of history influenced her choice to connect the historical content about John Brown to terrorism today, but she ran into difficulties when she realized she had to make pedagogical choices regarding how she would represent this concept, and how she felt it would be best to engage in the process of explanation. Chapter 6 will explore in detail why the pedagogical choices relating to content and process are so important for understanding how teachers decide to manage the instructional dilemmas they face, and why teachers choose to use meaningful historical explanation.

## CHAPTER 6

### FINDINGS, PART 2

#### THE DILEMMAS OF TEACHING WITH MEANINGFUL EXPLANATION

In the last part of Chapter 5, we saw how teachers could take historical explanation and make it meaningful for students. This happened when teachers gave historical explanations a broader purpose beyond the academic. No longer was the purpose of teaching history to simply have students know all the same things and perform well on a test. Instead, the pedagogical choices the teachers made gave historical explanations greater value, such as the ability to help prepare students to reflect on and critique contemporary problems and practices. Chapter 6 recognizes that a fundamental part of understanding *how* teachers shift explanation from general to meaningful when they enact it is better understanding *why* teachers are making these choices in the first place. What causes a teacher to choose to use explanation to help students understand multiple perspectives, or to make a connection to their own lives? And what does using these forms of meaningful explanation open up for young people?

Moments of pedagogical choice arise in teaching when teachers must confront instructional dilemmas (Lampert, 1985). Therefore, in order to better understand what motivates these pedagogical choices, we must start by better understanding the instructional dilemmas that inspire them. Lampert (1985) describes teachers as “dilemma managers.” She argues that “some classroom problems are better managed than solved” (p. 194), and that a teacher as dilemma manager “accepts conflict as endemic and even useful to her work rather than seeing it as a burden that needs to be eliminated” (p. 192). Lampert’s characterization of teachers as dilemma managers provides a generative framework for exploring the dilemmas inherent within explanation in history classrooms.

An examination of the data revealed that meaningful explanations were mired in a number of different teaching dilemmas. What was unique about the dilemmas that surrounded teachers' attempts to engage in meaningful explanation was that they touched upon issues that had implications for living and acting in the world today, and not only issues regarding helping students to understand why something happened in the past. For example, teachers struggled to manage dilemmas relating to discussing issues of race with white students, dilemmas relating to helping students avoid presentist thinking when interpreting the past, and dilemmas relating to how to help students understand connections between historical discrimination and institutionalized racism today.

As mentioned above, the first major finding explored in Chapter 5 was that the teachers were shifting explanation from general to meaningful by making specific instructional choices. As I analyzed how teachers sought to manage the dilemmas they faced, two additional findings emerged in the data – one related to content, and one related to pedagogical process. These two findings demonstrate the connection between knowledge and practice explained in the conceptual framework in Chapter 3. The first finding, regarding content, and connected to Monte-Sano and Budano's (2012) "representing history" piece of their PCK for Teaching History Framework, is that this shift toward meaningful explanation had significant consequences for whether and how the teachers represented history as interpretive or not when they explained. In some cases, teachers felt obligated to present a specific view, or a fixed interpretation of history, in order to make the explanation meaningful for the present. In other cases, the meaningfulness of the explanation was dependent upon presenting multiple perspectives and representing history as more interpretive.

The second finding, regarding pedagogical process, and related to Monte-Sano and Budano's (2012) "attending to students' ideas about history" piece of their PCK for Teaching History Framework, is that a teacher's choice to use forms of meaningful explanation caused them to make an accompanying conscious choice to use teacher-only explanation, or to invite students to do more of the explaining through shared explanation. These two different forms of explanation helped the teachers in the study to attend to students' ideas in different ways, and in the process, allowed them to manage pedagogical dilemmas in different ways. This suggests a number of questions: When might teacher-only explanation be more meaningful than shared explanation, and vice-versa? What, if anything, is missing when explanation is purely top down? What specific dilemmas are teachers trying to manage when they choose teacher-only explanation over shared explanation? And what meaningful understandings, or misunderstandings, result when the explanation comes out of the students themselves? What emerges in the exploration of this second finding is thus a larger question that has implications for teaching through explanation in a democracy and building students' skills for democratic citizenship: When teachers explain, how do they manage this balance between telling their students what to think, and helping them learn *how* to think?

**Mrs. Davis: Helping Students to Understand the Experience of Groups Different From Themselves With Whom They Have Little To No Experience**

Before we can explore the dilemmas Mrs. Davis faced and the resulting pedagogical choices she made, we must gain a clear picture of what it was she wanted to explain. The three observations of her class coincided with her unit on the Civil Rights Movement and the following examples come from the first of these three lessons. The sequence of Mrs. Davis's explanatory passages plays a role, so it is important to highlight its progression. Mrs. Davis

began her lesson by telling the students what the main idea was that was going to be explained during the unit:

**Mrs. Davis:** So, kind of our big idea is people are motivated by the conditions in and under which they live, so we're gonna be looking at what were the conditions for African Americans in the 1950s, right, and what is that gonna motivate them to do, all right, in the Civil Rights Movement.

In addition to the “big idea” she explained above, Mrs. Davis had written the following lesson objective on the students’ worksheets: “Aim: What factors led to the Civil Rights Movement?” She began the lesson by telling the students they were going to begin with the “case study” of Emmett Till and she explained how his story was connected to the big idea:

**Mrs. Davis:** So I wanted to start off talking about the Civil Rights Movement with kind of a case study, um-- so, to be black in the United States, okay, in the 1950's wasn't easy, whether you lived up in the Northern cities or whether you were down South. Okay? But it was particularly worse living in down South. So Emmett Till was-- the boy is 14 years old, okay, he was living in Chicago. Um, and he went down South, he went to Mississippi to visit his aunt and uncle...

In this short introduction, Mrs. Davis connected the content she was about to explain to the big idea by noting that it “wasn’t easy” to be black in the 1950s in both the North and the South, but that it was “particularly worse” living in the South. Her explanation about the conditions in which African Americans lived was designed to set the context for the explanations that followed about Emmett Till, which would, in turn, reinforce students’ understanding of the main idea. It would also establish background knowledge needed for the subsequent lessons where the class would learn how these conditions motivated African Americans to act during the Civil Rights Movement by exploring political, social, and economic methods of protest.

Thus far, Mrs. Davis’s explanations were focused on what had happened in the past, and as such, would be considered general rather than meaningful explanations. For example, she followed the second explanation above by explaining the basic facts of what Emmett Till did

("...he supposedly says something fresh to a white woman..."), how he was murdered ("...they drag him out of bed, bring him to a barn, torture him, kill him, and throw his body into the river..."), and that nothing happened to the three men who did it ("they were found not guilty, and they actually had admitted in the paper afterwards that they had done it..."). Mrs. Davis then had the students listen to a Bob Dylan song about Emmett Till, and the questions the students had to answer about the song were also focused on general explanation that centered around what happened in history: "1. Who was Emmett Till? 2. What happened to Emmett Till? 3. How could we blame segregation for incidents such as this one? 4. How incidents [sic] such as this one have motivated the Civil Right movement?"

At this point in the lesson, which is about 8 minutes into the class, Mrs. Davis's general explanations begin to shift toward meaningful explanations. In these meaningful explanations, we can see evidence that certain instructional dilemmas are motivating Mrs. Davis to make this shift. The fundamental aspect of meaningful explanation is that it serves a purpose beyond explaining the past by connecting the history to living in the present. This is evident in Mrs. Davis's explanation below about why she wanted to show the students a picture of Emmett Till's dead and mutilated body:

**Mrs. Davis:** You know when we talk about things like this happening in history, you know, like a young 14-year old kid being brutally tortured and murdered. I feel like it's sometimes hard for us to even relate to the fact that things like this happened and that they still happen today, because it just, it seems so barbaric that we can't even relate to it. And every time, like, I talk about the story of Emmett Till, like I've been teaching this for seven years, like, I still-- it still bothers me, like, it's-- I still, like, get worked up hearing about this-this story, that people could be so, so disgusting because of the color of your skin...

Notice in the above passage that Mrs. Davis includes the phrase, "...and that they still happen today...". By using this phrase, Mrs. Davis is taking the explanation out of the realm of "long ago and far away," and directly explaining to the students that brutality like this still happens in

today's world. Why would Mrs. Davis make this pedagogical choice to shift to meaningful explanation by using this phrase? The answer is partially revealed by the rest of her explanation in the passage above, which provides a clue regarding one of the dilemmas Mrs. Davis was confronting. She said, "I feel like it's sometimes hard for us to even relate to the fact that things like this happened and that they still happen today, because it just, it seems so barbaric that we can't even relate to it." There are a number of parts to this sentence. First, Mrs. Davis is telling the students that she believes it is hard for students to relate to such a murder. She says to them that this is because of three reasons: 1) that it is hard to believe that things like this happened in the past, 2) that it is hard to relate to the fact that they still happen today, and 3) because it is too barbaric to even relate to. What Mrs. Davis is doing here is making a conscious choice to make her students aware of her, and their, pedagogical dilemma: that the content will be difficult for her students to relate to, to process, and to understand.

When we put this explanation in conversation with her comments from her interview, it provides a window into how Mrs. Davis's explanatory pedagogical choices emerged from several different pedagogical dilemmas she was facing. It also reveals that Mrs. Davis's reasons for introducing meaningful explanation are more complex than what she represents to the students:

**Mrs. Davis:** Yeah, I mean there is--there is no diversity. [laughs] So, they cannot empathize with the--the plight of a minority, whatsoever. Um, so, that's why I kind of just-- I-- It's-- They're coming from a place of ignorance. So, I feel like my job is to just show you this is what happened. This is real. You know, it was serious. It did happen and I think a lot of them are shocked that this is actually real American history, you know?

This interview comment shows that, for her, the dilemma does not only stem from the barbarity of the murder and the students' general unfamiliarity with the historical brutality of racism and segregation, but that she perceives that her students' race, and their own life experiences, play a



role in their ability to process the content. It is not just that the students do not know about historical racism; it is that they are unfamiliar with modern-day racism as well. Mrs. Davis's comment to the class that, "it's sometimes hard for us to even relate to the fact that things like this...still happen today," is an intentional pedagogical choice to make her explanation meaningful, and to use this form of meaningful explanation to confront the specific instructional dilemmas she is facing. It is essentially a more gentle way of calling attention to the fact that her white students may not have experienced discrimination in their own lives, and so may have a harder time even understanding why and how discrimination happens both in history and today.

Three other pedagogical choices are revealed in the above interview passage from Mrs. Davis, and these choices are also a direct result of her attempt to manage the dilemmas she was confronting. First, Mrs. Davis said that because her students are coming from a "place of ignorance...I feel like my job is to just show you this is what happened." This demonstrates that she is making a conscious choice to "attend to her students' ideas about history" (Monte-Sano & Budano, 2012) by using teacher-only explanation rather than shared explanation to communicate this understanding. Second, she said she would "show" them "this is what happened." This indicates that she is also making a choice to "represent history" (Monte-Sano & Budano, 2012) by presenting a fixed interpretation of the content. The students will not be looking at primary sources from differing perspectives or doing the interpretive work themselves. Finally, and most importantly, her interview comment reveals the primary form of meaningful explanation Mrs. Davis will choose to use to manage her dilemma: an appeal to empathy. She believes that her white students "cannot empathize with the plight of a minority, whatsoever." But she also believes that she can help them come close by showing them the shocking image of Emmett Till's dead and mutilated body. She said, "I think a lot of them are shocked that this is actually

real American history, you know?” Though it may be difficult for her white students to empathize with the discrimination experienced by people of color, Mrs. Davis decides that an appeal to empathy is the very method that might help them to overcome their barrier to understanding. These three decisions: making a “process” choice to use teacher-only explanation over shared explanation, making a “content” choice to represent history as fixed over interpretive, and making a choice to use empathy as a means of meaningful explanation, are pedagogical choices that, though distinct, interact and reinforce each other. As such, the following analysis will demonstrate how all three are woven together as Mrs. Davis engages in the process of meaningful explanation.

At the end of the first paragraph of her classroom explanation introducing the image of Emmett Till, Mrs. Davis says, “And every time, like, I talk about the story of Emmett Till, like, I've been teaching this for seven years, like, I still-- it still bothers me, like, it's-- I still, like, get worked up hearing about this-this story, that people could be so, so disgusting because of the color of your skin.” Mrs. Davis is showing the students that she is emotionally affected by this image, implying that the students are about to be as well and that this is okay. I asked Mrs. Davis more about her choice to use such a graphic image with her students:

**Interviewer:** Can you explain that a bit more?

**Mrs. Davis:** Yeah, yeah. Um, just tough topics. If we're talking about slavery, if we're talking about, you know, women's rights, um, like the suffrage movement or something, you know, I'll-I'll kind of set a tone of something that's a little bit more serious... Yeah, so like, that's how I would frame it. Like, let me start with something that's really gonna upset them and kind of draw them in to show them how serious this is and then let's have a discussion and kind of, you know, show some footage and stuff.

Mrs. Davis is making a conscious choice to appeal to empathy and to upset her students in order to “draw them in.” In this comment, she also suggests that an additional dilemma occurs whenever a teacher tries to teach “tough topics” like slavery, women’s rights, and the suffrage

movement. For Mrs. Davis, such tough topics require a teacher-centered form of explanation rather than the use of more student-centered shared explanation. She explained:

**Mrs. Davis:** ...with a serious topic like the Civil Rights Movement, I think they can't do it on their own because they won't take it seriously and I want them to, so it's kind of like, uh, shush and just listen.

Both of these comments demonstrate how her choice to appeal to empathy stems directly from the multiple dilemmas she identified: that her students are unfamiliar with the history of brutal racism, that her white students have difficulty empathizing with the "plight of the minority," and that "tough topics" are difficult to teach for the two previous reasons, and because her students "won't take [them] seriously." I asked Mrs. Davis to explain more about her choice to use such a shocking image, and why her students might have a tendency to not take the content seriously:

**Mrs. Davis:** You know, it's not coming from a rah-rah form of patriotism, like, way of teaching civil rights. Where, you know, they learn about it in eighth grade. But it's more, oh, Martin Luther King, let's hold hands, you know? Like, that's kind of their perspective. They have no idea really what it's about."

If the students have "no idea really what it's about," then what does Mrs. Davis want her students to understand? Below is the passage of classroom explanation that directly follows the one presented earlier in Chapter 6. As Mrs. Davis continues to explain to her students why she is deciding to show them the graphic image of Emmett Till, her appeal to empathy becomes more explicit, as well as the focus of what it is she wants them to understand through her explanation:

**Mrs. Davis:** ...Um his mother, when they went to have the funeral, said that, "I wanna have an open casket because I want people to know what they did to my son. I want the whole world to know that this stuff happens in the United States, this stuff happens in the South." I wanna show you guys, it's a little upsetting, but I wanna show you the picture, because I think, you know, it's important for us to see it too.

Mrs. Davis warns the class that the image will be upsetting, but her explanation that surrounds this warning reveals that the upsetting nature of the image serves a purpose both for building the understanding of the students' themselves, and for strengthening the understanding of people

living outside of Mississippi in the 1950s. The way Mrs. Davis verbalizes what Emmett Till's mother wants the world to know parallels the very understanding that Mrs. Davis wants her students to have. Building empathy will help mediate both the historical and the classroom dilemmas of ignorance and lack of compassion. Both women want it to be known that "this stuff happens in the United States." Mrs. Till's efforts to help white Americans not living in the South understand the brutality of what African Americans were experiencing is, thus, quite similar to Mrs. Davis wanting her white students to build empathy for the "plight of the minority" in order to better understand the discrimination and racism of the past and of today.

Mrs. Davis continues the passage of classroom explanation by making another appeal to empathy. This appeal links her explanation of Emmett Till's story back to the main objective of the lesson, which was to explain how conditions motivated African Americans and others to act during the Civil Rights Movement:

**Mrs. Davis:** ...So imagine, you know, if you are living in the U.S. at this time, and this image is going around, right? How upsetting that would make you feel, especially if you're African-American. And a lot of African-Americans who were involved in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, in the 1950s was his age. So they were inspired by this, like this has to stop. This is disgusting, and it's happening at this point in history.

Asking the students to imagine "how upsetting that would make you feel," directs the students to their emotional response to the image. Adding the phrase, "especially if you're African American" recognizes for the students, once again, that they must take a leap in order to do this because they are white. Finally, Mrs. Davis appeals to empathy by reminding the students that many of the African Americans who were inspired to become involved in the Civil Rights Movement were around Emmett Till's age, so they could empathize with him maybe better than people much older. Likewise, the students in her class are teenagers as well, and so they have

the connection of age to draw upon when imagining the emotions teenagers might have experienced at the time in reaction to seeing this image.

Mrs. Davis recognizes in her interview that helping her students to arrive at this empathetic understanding is difficult. The students provided very few verbal comments in class as well as exhibited little visible emotional reaction, even to the upsetting image, so I asked Mrs. Davis about this:

**Mrs. Davis:** Uh, I'm trying to-I'm trying to remember. A lot of times they won't, in the moment especially with the Emmett Till thing, like, I've had kids, like, start crying, you know what I mean? In-in class. So, it's like, I don't wanna put them on the spot where they're gonna like cry in front of-- [laughs] You know what I mean? In front of the whole class and be embarrassed and whatever. So I kind of let them, like, I kind of back off a little bit.

Um, it's funny, like, I'll have them say things to me outside of class. Like in the hallway or something. You know, like when it's just me and them, like, "Oh my god, that was horrible," like, you know, they're very concerned about what their peers think.

This comment reveals something that has not yet been noted, which is that opportunity costs result when pedagogical choices are made in the process of managing instructional dilemmas related to meaningful explanation. Mrs. Davis does not want to embarrass her students, and she feels that calling on them to speak and voice their reactions to the upsetting image would put them in the difficult position of revealing their emotional responses in front of the class. But the cost of relying only on teacher-centered explanation rather than inviting student voices to speak through shared explanation, is that Mrs. Davis does not have as much opportunity to both check for her students' understanding and to hear what they are thinking. She does note that the students have revealed their reactions in the hallway to her, but these brief interactions do not afford the same opportunity to verbally assess students' understanding of the historical content as would the "in-the-moment" process of "attending to students' ideas" (Monte-Sano & Budano, 2012) afforded by shared explanation.

My follow-up questions to Mrs. Davis were thus geared to better understand how she went about arriving at an understanding of her students' ideas about history, since I was not able to directly observe many extended examples of student participation through shared explanation during the course of the three observations. I asked her to speak more about her students' reluctance to speak about what they were learning about the Civil Rights Movement:

**Interviewer:** Why do you think they can't talk in front of their peers about this?

**Mrs. Davis:** Uh, right now there is a very bizarre climate that's going on. And, like, with the election and just the-the things that have been in the news. I've seen recently this year, a lot of, I don't know, more, like, animosity towards minorities and immigrants. And it's-it's disturbing but I haven't seen that in, like, a long time. So and I think the kids can feel that that's in the room.

Mrs. Davis explains that current attitudes toward immigrants and minorities play a role in her students' choice to not voice their reactions in class. I wondered if Mrs. Davis was actually attending to her students' ideas, or only attending to her perceptions of her students' ideas.

Additional interview questions showed that she was responding to actual comments the students had made in the past that revealed their political views. I pressed her to explain further:

**Interviewer:** You said that, um, there is more animosity towards immigrants and minorities, and that, because of that, they are not as comfortable talking about it. But then you said that there isn't a lot of minorities in the school. Um, so, can you explain more of it what you mean there?

**Mrs. Davis:** So, yeah. Who-- I think that there are kids that-- There are a ton of kids that tend to be more-- There is, like, very liberal liberal kids that tend to be very, like, sympathetic and empathetic to that type of thing. And then there tends to be kids that are, like, kind of, roll their eye. You know what I mean? Like, roll their eyes to it. You know, that, Trump-ism, I don't, like, everything is over-exaggerated. People are wimps. You know, get over it, type stuff. Um, so I feel like they know that those two sides exist in the room and it's like they're just kind of quiet and pent-up with their views, like the whole country is. [laughs]

**Interviewer:** Oh, I see.

**Mrs. Davis:** You know what I mean? It's like, uh, a little, like, microcosm of the larger climate of, political climate.

Mrs. Davis's perception of her students' race and their experiences is, thus, not the only contributing factor to the instructional dilemmas she faces. The students' political views also play a role. Mrs. Davis recognizes that she has students in her class who subscribe to "Trumpism," or the belief that "everything is over-exaggerated" and "people are wimps." These white students, who have likely not experienced racism, she believes, have developed political views that make it harder for them to take content related to racism seriously. So she chose to use meaningful explanation and appeal to their empathy by showing them the graphic image in order to shock them into taking it seriously.

In pressing her further on this point, Mrs. Davis explained that it is not only her students' lack of experience with discrimination and their political views that affect their ability to understand content, and hence, her choices on how to explain it to them. But it is also their general lack of background knowledge regarding serious topics in general that also makes it more difficult to explain. Mrs. Davis noted:

**Mrs. Davis:** You know, where I grew up watching, like, *Gone with the Wind*. So, I had an idea of what, like, the old South should look like, even-- you know, um, even though, you know, slavery wasn't portrayed accurately. But you-you know, what I'm saying, like, the context of what an era looked like. Where I feel like they have none of that. It's like they have nothing to attach. They have no background knowledge to attach the new information to.

This comment provides a clue as to why Mrs. Davis continued her explanation to the class about why she was going to show the upsetting image Emmett Till in the following way:

**Mrs. Davis:** ...I mean we're talking about the '50s, right? Like my parents were born in the '50s. I know for you guys it seems a really long time ago, but it isn't, like my mom talked about what it was like growing up in the Civil Rights Movement.

Mrs. Davis is acknowledging to her students that it will be hard for them to understand the context of the time period of segregation because, while her mother can understand this better

because she lived through it, the students have not even seen movies depicting the South and the era of the 1950s, which, to them, is long ago. The content is foreign to their own experiences as a result of their race, as well as to their general subject matter knowledge of history. Hence, this passage also indicates why Mrs. Davis may have chosen to begin her Civil Rights Movement unit with the story and image of Emmett Till. In addition to wanting to set the tone and shock them, discussing his story helped her to create a layer of background knowledge and context within which to fit the subsequent information she will be explaining to them about the Civil Rights Movement.

Finally, the last paragraph in Mrs. Davis's explanation about Emmett Till serves to remind the students again why this content is meaningful and why it matters that they are about to learn it:

**Mrs. Davis:** ...Um, so this stuff is still really kind of fresh for us and I think, you know, not I think, I know it's why there are still so many racial tensions today in the country, right? Um, so what we're gonna look at today is basically why did the Civil Rights Movement start, like what were some causes of it...

In this last paragraph of explanation, Mrs. Davis again makes an explicit connection to today: "...I know it's why there are still so many racial tensions today in the country...". The reason she is explaining the story of Emmett Till thus expands from simply making sure her students are able to recount how his story motivated people to act during the Civil Rights Movement, and instead grows to wanting her students to understand that racial tensions exist in our country today because of the type of brutality that Emmett Till experienced.

A closer look at a few additional comments Mrs. Davis made in her interview reveals that her choice to introduce forms of meaningful explanation did not only stem from her attempts to manage her instructional dilemmas, but were also motivated in an important way by how her



own social justice orientation dictated that she manage these dilemmas. I asked Mrs. Davis what she thought her students needed to know about history and she explained:

**Mrs. Davis:** I think they need to know--basically, that's my philosophy, is how can they understand the context of the world that we're living in. Um, and let's then trace it back, like, what-- where are the roots of this in history? And I think that my--because I have more of a political science background, that, you know, I'm not one of these peop-I love absolutely love history, but I-I wasn't like a history person that would obsess over every single date and, you know, um, it's more to me about solving current issues. It's like more of a, you know, social justice kind of mentality.

Mrs. Davis wants her students to “understand the context of the world that we’re living in,” and to learn about history in order to be more informed when thinking about “solving current issues.” This social justice orientation was clearly reflected in her explanation about why the students needed to see the graphic image of Emmett Till. She wanted her students to not only understand the history, but also to understand the history for the purpose of confronting the present. Her use of meaningful explanation was thus an intentional choice that stemmed both from her attempt to manage her instructional dilemmas, and from her educational philosophy regarding why her students needed to learn history. Although the orientation a teacher expresses in an interview does not always get carried out in their practice (Evans, 1990), it is nevertheless an important factor in a teacher’s decision-making process when confronting instructional dilemmas related to meaningful explanation.

This last piece of Mrs. Davis’s enactment of meaningful explanation—recognizing the way in which her philosophical orientation plays a role in her pedagogical decision-making, makes it possible to suggest a navigational process that, as we shall see in the rest of Chapter 6, is supported by the data from the other teachers in the study. The process shows that a teacher comes to the work of teaching with an educational philosophy. When this teacher is confronted with an instructional dilemma relating to explanation, this philosophy may (or may not)

influence the path the teacher takes in order to navigate the dilemma. The teacher then makes a set of pedagogical choices in order to confront or manage the dilemma. These include deciding on the form their explanation will take: general or meaningful; the pedagogical process they will use to “attend to their students ideas about history” (Monte-Sano & Budano, 2012): teacher-only explanation or shared explanation; and the way the teacher will “represent historical content” (Monte-Sano & Budano, 2012) as fixed or interpretive.

If we were to put into words the navigational map for Mrs. Davis, it would appear as follows: Mrs. Davis approaches teaching with a social justice orientation. This influences her to seek out ways to connect the history her students are learning with the modern world for the purpose of helping her students to understand and confront contemporary problems and practices. Before she sets out to present her meaningful explanation, Mrs. Davis knows she must confront certain instructional dilemmas. She wants her students to relate to the “plight of the minority,” but she knows that this will be difficult given their unfamiliarity with the background knowledge of the history of brutal racism, their lack of personal experience with discrimination, their political views that both encourage insensitivity and discourage verbal emotional responses to content, and their tendency not to take “tough topics” in history seriously. Mrs. Davis’s social justice orientation and her knowledge of these dilemmas influenced her to make the choice to use empathy as a method of meaningful explanation in order to “shock” the students into taking the content seriously. Her social justice orientation also dictated that she must get her students to understand the content about the Civil Rights Movement in a way that helped them to see learning about the history as important to the process of “solving current issues.” This caused her to take control of the explanation and present a fixed understanding of the content rather than

opening it up to more of a student-centered inquiry-based activity where the students would be given more responsibility for interpreting the content.

Mrs. Davis's choice to present a fixed interpretation of the content and to use teacher-centered explanation to do this were two important pedagogical techniques that helped her to manage these dilemmas. But it was her choice to use forms of meaningful explanation such as making it explicit to students why the content was important to know, and appealing to their sense of empathy, that allowed her to acknowledge her students' worldviews while still communicating her own commitment to helping her students understand how racial tensions came to be the way they are today. Mrs. Davis's pedagogical choices surrounding meaningful explanation thus enabled her to turn a lesson about the past into one that mattered for the present.

### **Mrs. Ellery: Helping Students to “See past the end of their own nose”**

The observations of Mrs. Ellery's eighth grade class occurred during a unit on American imperialism. Her curriculum was organized around her textbook's overall objective for each unit and key idea for each lesson. During the first observed lesson, she explained the chapter objective as follows: “So, just to review from yesterday, our objective for this chapter is to examine America's growing power and influence in order to explain its changing relationships with other countries...”. Mrs. Ellery taught a sequence of lessons on the topics of the U.S. annexation of Hawaii, the Spanish American War, and the U.S. annexation of the Philippines. At the beginning of her second observation, which was about the Spanish American War, she explained the lesson's key idea to the class:

**Mrs. Ellery:** ...So, what starts as a type of rebellion or revolt within Cuba becomes a war that the United States is involved in. And because of the Spanish American War, and the type of battle that it becomes, it is not confined to just Cuba. It also extends to some

of the Spanish colonies in the Pacific Ocean...Our key idea, of course, is that the United States went to war with Spain and gained colonies in the Caribbean and the Pacific...

The chapter objective and the lesson key idea, provided by the textbook, were worded in such a way as to present more factual ideas. They noted that students were to know *that* American power expanded and *that* the United States went to war with Spain and gained colonies. Mrs. Ellery's initial goal was to use general explanation in order to help her students to explain *why* these occurred. Her use of general explanation at the beginning of class thus helped helped her students to gain a base of historical knowledge upon which they could build connections to the present in the rest of the lesson. Below is how Mrs. Ellery used general explanation to establish this grounding of content information by setting up the context for the causes of the Spanish American War:

**Mrs. Ellery:** ...[reading from the textbook] Many Cubans were forced from their homes and placed in camps. Thousands died from starvation, and I'm gonna add disease to that as well...The revolt in Cuba caused alarm in the United States. Business leaders were concerned because the fighting disrupted U.S. trade with Cuba. Most Americans, however, became outraged when the press began to describe the brutality of Spanish officials. Two New York City newspapers in particular stirred up people's emotions...

In the passage above, Mrs. Ellery wanted to explain to the students why the United States decided to go to war with Spain. This general historical explanation was designed to prepare the students to think about the response of ordinary Americans to the events in Cuba, which would be the focus of the remainder of the lesson.

It is at this point in the lesson that Mrs. Ellery's explanations begin to show elements of meaningful explanation. In the passage below, Mrs. Ellery establishes a modern-day connection to students' lives by linking yellow journalism headlines to what students are familiar with from social media:

**Mrs. Ellery:** And these are actual headlines from that time period. We have, "Woman Jumps From Brooklyn Bridge, Survives Mad Leap!" With a crazy illustration. We have,

“Spanish Ships On Our Coast!,” “Mysterious Warships Seen By Incoming Vessels, May Be Privateers,” “Died In Folds of Old Glory!,” “Crisis Is At Hand,” “Spanish Treachery.” These are huge headlines. We don’t see headlines like that on newspapers anymore. Where do we see stuff like that? Student 4?

**Student 4:** Social media.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Social media. How many of you get annoyed by, like, the click-bait in your social media feed? I definitely get annoyed by it. My aunt is notorious for re-posting any story that has a sensational headline. Last week, it was something about a bat with three heads. Like, really aunty? That? Come on. But I think that today, we are used to seeing these types of click-bait headlines. Um, they're trying to get anyone to read the story. Or lists, or quizzes. How many of you have seen a BuzzFeed quiz recently? Because they're all over my newsfeed.

So, this is the late 1800s, early 1900s version of that. Except they were doing it to sell newspapers. And just like today, when people get very worked up over what is now being described as fake news, people got really worked up about things back then...

By explaining the connection above, Mrs. Ellery’s intention was to show students that sensational headlines occurred both back then and today, and that both stirred up people’s emotions. The meaningfulness of this explanation rested in part upon Mrs. Ellery wanting the students to understand the difference in context between then and today – that people view sensationalized headlines today on social media, but during the time of the Spanish American War, such headlines appeared on actual newspapers. But more importantly, Mrs. Ellery wanted her students to understand that they have had similar experiences and reactions to that of Americans who were living at the turn of the century.

Mrs. Ellery believed that it was important to draw connections between the past and her students’ lives. In the interview, I asked Mrs. Ellery about her use of this form of meaningful historical explanation:

**Mrs. Ellery:** So, with this particular class, um, I don’t know that I would have made the connection to social media with every class. But this particular class, um, they were always very, very involved on their phone. What’s on their phone is what mattered most to them. Um, so I think that it would have naturally come up in the conversation with that class anyway. Uh, Student 3 in particular. That would have been Student 3, Student

2, I think, there's a Student 4 in that class, too.

Um, they were constantly on their phones. And with that particular class, they were so worked up about stuff that was constantly being posted that I actually had a shoe organizer in the back of my room for them to put their phones in. So, I think with them, it would have naturally come up as part of the conversation. So, I don't know that that was necessarily a conscious decision to bring up to social media. But I do think that making connections to today is something that we have to do with all students.

Mrs. Ellery knew that the students were “worked up about stuff that was constantly being posted,” and so for her it was natural to make this connection between her students’ world, and the reactions of people in 1898 to the exaggerated headlines about the revolt in Cuba.

Mrs. Ellery’s choice to introduce connections between past and present was designed to confront an instructional dilemma related to how her students saw history. As we will see, this dilemma has three parts that are all interrelated. The first element of her dilemma is that her students do not care about learning history because they have difficulty seeing its relevance to their lives. They lack the empathy necessary to relate to the past, and to connect the past with the present. Mrs. Ellery explains below how middle school students especially tend not to look beyond the frame of their own little world. She wanted them to understand why learning history mattered, and how it could help them to understand why the world is the way it is today. She felt that making connections to their lives was therefore a logical and necessary way to confront such a dilemma:

**Mrs. Ellery:** Many students especially in middle school, the world that revolves around them, there is a certain lack of empathy because they are at an age developmentally where they are focused in on themselves. So, it's not that they don't care about the outside world. It's that developmentally, they are so focused on- - they're growing and changing in what's going on in their own life. So, to them, they look at history and history is a dead subject.

So, for us to show that history matters, and it does matter to today's society, we have to make a connection as teachers to their life... Otherwise, they're not going to look past the end of their own nose. Not because they don't care about the world but because it's not what they are interested in right now. So, if I want them to be interested in history, if I

want them to care about how history back then impacted the world today, then I- it-it's my responsibility to make those connections.

Mrs. Ellery explained that her middle school students “lack empathy because they are at an age developmentally where they are focused in on themselves.” Her students see history as a “dead subject.” If she could help the students to see the relevance of the history to their lives, then they would better understand its value.

Mrs. Ellery continued her explanation to the class by using connections to the students’ lives to illuminate the significance of the yellow journalism headlines. Making these connections to the world the students knew, she hoped, would generate the empathy the students initially lacked:

**Mrs. Ellery:** I don't know if you guys are ever standing in the-- in line at Stop and Shop, or at IGA and you see the magazines, and you're like, "What? That can't be real." Like, "Hilary Clinton's Alien Baby." True headline from two weeks ago. Not true as in, like it actually happened, but true as in it was a headline. So today, we look at that and we're like, "Yes, okay." You know, little bit of sarcasm going on there.

But think about this, they know there's an actual rebellion happening in Cuba. That is real. They know that the Spanish are being cruel. That is real. But the stories amp everything up. So people's emotions are getting involved. Just like any of our emotions get involved when we find out that children are being hurt, or mothers and babies are being killed. That would get at any of us...

In the explanation above, Mrs. Ellery directs students’ attention to “people’s emotions,” and she tells the students that this is “just like any of our emotions get involved when we find out that children are being hurt or mothers and babies are being killed. That would get at any of us.”

What she is trying to show them is that the Americans of one hundred years ago who are viewing these sensational headlines are reacting in much the same way that her students probably would to similar headlines. Mrs. Ellery is hoping that establishing this connection will help the students to “look past the end of their own nose.”

In the examples of classroom explanation above, Mrs. Ellery has relied mostly upon teacher-centered meaningful explanation. As the class continues, Mrs. Ellery begins to pivot toward shared explanation in order to help the students take even more agency in making the relevant connections. This allows her to better “attend to her students’ ideas about history.” The process of shared explanation serves to introduce student comments that reveal a second feature of the dilemma in the way the students see history. This is that when students do “look past the end of their own nose” and start to examine historical content, they tend to impose their own modern-day beliefs upon actors of the past. This presents an interesting conundrum for Mrs. Ellery, because the very method she uses to get the students to see the relevance of history – making connections to the present – may inadvertently encourage the students to see the past from the position of the present, instead of to contextualize it from the perspective of its own time. The following example of shared explanation continues directly from the preceding passage:

**Mrs. Ellery:** ...That would get at any of us. [Student 2 raises his hand] Student 2.

**Student 2:** So, but I think all those people also just believed whatever was put on paper because it isn't like today where you can fact check it.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Mm-hmm.

**Student 2:** Today you can just go online and with a few clicks, you can find the truth.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Mm-hmm, absolutely. I agree with that...

To Student 2, the Americans who believed the headlines were at a disadvantage because they did not have the advanced technology people have today that would allow them to “fact check” what they read. Although Student 2 is technically correct, his explanation shows evidence of presentism, the tendency to apply present-day beliefs or understandings to actors of the past. Student 2 is actually being kind in saying that the Americans of 1898 were not just gullible; they



were at a disadvantage in that they did not have the same access to information that people will have over a hundred years later. Yet, he misses the intention of Mrs. Ellery's previous explanation, which is to say that modern day Americans are emotionally affected by similar headlines as well, and that some of them, like her Aunt, believe such headlines even with the modern-day capability of "fact checking" them. Mrs. Ellery's use of shared explanation allows Student 2 to contribute a comment that reveals to Mrs. Ellery that her attempt to manage her dilemma by introducing connections to her students' lives may not have addressed the dilemma as well as she intended. While it did serve to develop a little empathy by making the students more interested in discussing the Spanish American War and its connections to the present, it did not address the students' tendency to look at the past in a presentist way.

So far, we have seen two elements of the dilemma Mrs. Ellery faces in how her students see history: their lack of interest in it, and their tendency when they do become interested in it to look at it from the point of view of the present. The next section of classroom dialogue reveals a third feature of this same dilemma, which is that the students have difficulty contextualizing. Contextualization is the historical thinking skill of placing historical events and people within their own time period, and looking at them from their location in the past. The ability to contextualize almost functions like an antidote to presentism. So Mrs. Ellery's dilemma is compounded by the fact that her students have presentist tendencies, and at the same time have difficulty contextualizing. The excerpt below, which again proceeds directly after the above, displays this difficulty the students have with contextualization:

**Mrs. Ellery:** ...Mm-hmm, absolutely. I agree with that. [Student 5 raises his hand]  
Student 5.

**Student 5:** [Looking at the two images of front pages of newspapers displayed on the SmartBoard] How come it says baseball on both of the newspapers?

**Mrs. Ellery:** Oh, baseball is the most popular sport during this time period, so you can't see baseball games because it's before TV. But everybody wanted to read about them. Okay? All right. So, American public opinion forces President McKinley to take action. He demands that Spain halt its harsh treatment of Cubans...

Student 5 wondered why the word “baseball” would be written on a newspaper from the time. It is hard for students to contextualize and think of a time when the primary method people would learn about the outcome of baseball games would be through newspapers rather than television. This difficulty with contextualization may seem like a minor issue in the case of this baseball question, but it becomes a larger issue when the class continues discussing the Cuban experience during the Spanish American War. We can see in the passage below that Mrs. Ellery’s attempts to manage the dilemma through emphasizing connections between past and present may have indeed influenced the students to continue looking at the past in a presentist way. The student below is now interested in the content, but has difficulty understanding why U.S and Cuban relations are bad today, if the U.S. was trying to help the Cubans during the Spanish American War. Mrs. Ellery chooses to respond to this misconception by returning to teacher-centered, fixed explanation:

**Student 4:** I'm actually really confused. So, is-- are Cubans the bad, like, people in this war or is Spain?

**Mrs. Ellery:** Spain. So, at this point, Cuba is a Spanish colony. Spain was treating the Cubans terribly so America gets involved. They want to save the Cubans from the terrible Spanish.

**Student 4:** But don't the Cubans, like, not like the U.S. now?

**Mrs. Ellery:** Things get complicated over the next 100 years.

**Student 4:** So you'd think that they would be pretty happy that we were like, saving them.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Wait till the end of the war. Wait till you find out what the U.S. does next.

**Student 4:** All right.

**Mrs. Ellery:** So when I say the U.S. wants to “save” the Cubans, I used finger quotes [Mrs. Ellery makes a finger quote gesture].

**Student 4:** Yeah.

**Mrs. Ellery:** We'll get there.

**Student 4:** Okay.

**Mrs. Ellery:** [laughs] Very good insight, though. I'm glad that you've been paying attention to current events. Okay, I have a couple of headlines from newspapers that were in America after the explosion of the USS Maine...

In applying a modern-day understanding of Cuban-U.S. relations to the history she was learning, Student 4 was following the same line of reasoning Mrs. Ellery just presented when she said Americans today would react to sensationalized headlines in a way similar to Americans of the past. In addition, the Student 4 explains a “fixed” rather than an “interpretive” version of history in which a war has “bad” people and “good” people. In an effort to address the student’s misconception, Mrs. Ellery simplifies the story for the student and presents a “fixed” interpretation where the U.S. wants to “save the Cubans from the terrible Spanish.” Mrs. Ellery wants her students to understand that the U.S. is not necessarily following its democratic principles in Cuba, and she also wants her students to understand how history impacted the world today. Mrs. Ellery must figure out how to address all three pieces of the dilemma that have been noted thus far regarding how students see history: lack of interest in it, a tendency toward presentism, and difficulty contextualizing, if she is to help her students arrive a meaningful understanding of the content.

Mrs. Ellery explained in her interview that she did figure out a way to address this three-part dilemma that did not involve her continually reverting to teacher-centered explanation to correct the students’ misconceptions. Mrs. Ellery realized that she could use shared explanation

to manage this dilemma if the shared explanation was structured around the examination of primary sources. Mrs. Ellery recognized that for students to be able to contextualize, they must be given guided practice in doing so. This would require that they look not just at any primary sources, but at primary sources that presented multiple points of view. Strengthening this skill of contextualization would address the students' tendency toward presentism as well. So Mrs. Ellery decided to use another form of meaningful explanation – a focus on explanation of “perspectives” – in order to address the dilemma that “connections to students' personal and cultural assets and to contemporary events and phenomena” was not able to address on its own. Here is how she explained this choice in her interview:

**Mrs. Ellery:** I think it's definitely a dilemma no matter what time period we're looking at because if you want something to matter to them, it needs to connect to their lives. But then they are looking at it through their own, like, 2017 goggles. Um, and I think that's why it's so important to not just use book sources and not just use-- by book sources, I mean the textbook, um, secondary sources and not just use, like, discussion-based techniques. They have to look at primary sources. So, whether it is sources from one particular side, if that is all you have, or sources from both sides, you have to look at something from the time period and it's not something that's easy to figure out.

Mrs. Ellery explains that having students look at primary sources is one way to introduce shared explanation while helping to model and teach historical thinking skills at the same time. When a teacher designs a lesson around a central historical question, and asks the students to explain an answer to this question based upon examination and interpretation of primary source evidence, this puts more of the burden of explanation onto the students but also makes it possible for the teacher to “attend to students' ideas” (Monte-Sano & Budano, 2012). We will see that this is exactly what Mrs. Ellery decides to do in her lesson on the U.S. annexation of the Philippines the next day.

There is one more pedagogical choice Mrs. Ellery discusses that helps her mediate the dilemma of how her students see history. This is the pedagogical choice she makes when she

does not have primary sources available. In these cases, she does use teacher-centered fixed explanation in order to appeal empathy and generate the emotional connections the students lack.

I asked her about her response to Student 4's difficulty with contextualizing Cuban-U.S.

relations:

**Interviewer:** You said to Student 4 that the U.S.- "Wait 'til you see what the U.S. does at the end of the war to Cuba."

**Mrs. Ellery:** Yes, the Constitution.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Can you explain that?

**Mrs. Ellery:** Yes. So at the end of the Spanish American War, the-the Cuban people get their independence from Spain. The United States, who helped them write their Constitution, puts in the Platt Amendment. The Platt Amendment is the agreement that says that the United States has the right to intervene in Cuban affairs. It basically gives the United States the ability to walk in and do with that whatever they want in Cuba. The people in Cuba are not happy about that.

**Interviewer:** I-- um, I noticed that you didn't have the students look at primary sources in your lesson on Cuba, beyond the headlines in the newspapers. Could you speak about that?

**Mrs. Ellery:** I actually do have some primary sources that we look at, um, with that but it comes mostly from the anti-imperialists. It's not necessarily from the voices of people in Cuba, the anti-imperialists speak- kind of speak on behalf of the Cubans...I haven't been able to find anything that was, like, a trustworthy source on that...If you look at the Platt Amendment and we talked about the—like, kind of, I think, put yourself into the shoes, but that's not really what I want them to do. Like, that they can't put themselves into the shoes of somebody in Cuba during that time period because that that's impossible but again looking at it through your own eyes. When you have a lack of sources, at least that empathy part is better than nothing at all.

Mrs. Ellery's explanation of the Platt Amendment during class discussion, as well as her emphasis on the emotional reactions of ordinary Americans functioned not just as regular explanations of content, but functioned in a more meaningful way by appealing to the students' empathy. Mrs. Ellery said how, in the absence of sources, her explanation of this content served to encourage students' empathy because in this case they did not have the resources to be able to

practice contextualization, and to learn about perspectives through primary sources. She explained, “When you have a lack of sources, at least that empathy part is better than nothing at all.”

During the lesson that occurred the next day, I got to see how Mrs. Ellery used shared explanation and primary sources to strengthen her students’ sourcing and contextualizing skills, in order to confront the three-part dilemma of how her students see history. Mrs. Ellery took students through a Document Based Lesson on the U.S. annexation of the Philippines. Her focus for the lesson reveals how she consciously chose to use “perspectives” as a form of meaningful explanation to address the dilemma that “establishing relevance through connections” was unable to fully address. Mrs. Ellery asked the students to explain an answer to the central historical question, “Did the United States make the right decision when it annexed the Philippines?” The wording of this question appears to invite presentism by directing the students to answer it based on their own moral beliefs. However, Mrs. Ellery heads this off by making it clear in her opening explanation to the class that the students were going to answer this question from the perspectives of the sources they were about to examine:

**Mrs. Ellery:** Okay. Ladies and gentlemen, the title of this page is Annexation of the Philippines and the question that it asks is, "Did the United States make the right decision when it annexed the Philippines? So, when it goes in and helps them fight for independence but then takes them over themselves, was that the right thing to do? And I know that some of you already have some thoughts about that, but we're going to let the sources do the talking today. So, we're going to start with background information. We're going to read this together and I want you to mark up the text, as we read. I want you to have a minimum of two margin notes...

By explaining to the class, “we’re going to let the sources do the talking today,” she is reminding them that they are to think carefully about how the authors of the sources would answer the question, and not how they themselves living in 2017 would answer the question. Mrs. Ellery put the students into groups to annotate, analyze, and interpret excerpts from three different

perspectives: that of the Anti-Imperialist League, President William McKinley, and William Jennings Bryan. The first portion of the three-part dilemma Mrs. Ellery faced regarding how her students see history was that her students were not interested in it. Mrs. Ellery had explained that her students thought of history as a “dead subject.” Evidence from class discussion showed that Mrs. Ellery’s choice to introduce shared explanation through the study of perspectives within primary sources helped to mediate this aspect of the dilemma and inspire student interest in the content. The following excerpt comes from a group of students examining the source from the Anti-Imperialist League:

**Mrs. Ellery:** So, I see for the first one a few of you underlined "Spirit of 1776." What is the Spirit of 1776?

**Student:** [unintelligible] liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Which is from the?

**Student:** Declaration of Independence.

**Mrs. Ellery:** So, when it says that they are going to extinguish the Spirit of 1776 in those islands, what is it saying?

**Student:** It's not gonna have either three of those 'cuz they want to be independent.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Mm-hmm. And the U.S. is kind of denying that to the Philippines?

**Student:** Yes.

**Mrs. Ellery:** All right. Write that down.

**Student:** I find this really interesting.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Why?

**Student:** I don't know. I just really like this one.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Oh, I'm glad to hear it.

**Student:** Normally, like, history isn't my forte.

**Mrs. Ellery:** [laughs] [Turning to another group] Which one are you guys on right now? Source one or source two?...

For this student who explained that she is now interested in this history when normally she is not interested, the content has now become meaningful instead of something just to repeat by rote on a test. Notice how Mrs. Ellery used shared explanation in the dialogue above to get the students to explain what the idea of “extinguishing the Spirit of 1776” meant in the primary source. Shared explanation allowed Mrs. Ellery to “attend to her students’ ideas about history” (Monte-Sano & Budano, 2012), and check that they understood what the source was arguing.

By the end of the two class periods presented, there is evidence that Mrs. Ellery was able to manage her dilemma using multiple forms of meaningful explanation: relevance through connections, empathy, and perspectives. She also used a mix of teacher-centered and shared explanatory processes, and an introductory fixed but ultimately interpretive form of representing historical content. During the final lesson she asked the students to explain an answer to the guiding question, “Did the United States make the right decision when it annexed the Philippines?” The students did not answer based on their own moral framework, but rather from the perspective of the authors of the sources. This revealed that her use of these three forms of meaningful explanation helped to specifically confront her students’ tendency toward presentism. Here is a student explaining the source by President William McKinley to the class:

**Student:** I said that the U.S. helped Filipinos break away from Spanish rule but then they annex the Philippines back so they did exactly the same thing.

**Mrs. Ellery:** Right, so the Americans are acting just as bad as Spain did. Okay.

**Student:** They think they did the right thing.

Notice that the student said, “They think they did the right thing,” and not “I” think. This student understands the U.S. government’s perspective on wanting to annex the Philippines at the same



time as recognizing that the United States was behaving hypocritically. This example of student explanation demonstrates that he is not looking at the past from a position in the present, but rather explaining McKinley's perspective from the situation of his own time. The student also does not mistake explanation of McKinley's perspective for empathizing with it. Getting students to articulate the perspectives of historical actors, especially those actors whose actions appear contrary to democratic ideals, is not easy. But Mrs. Ellery's persistence in trying different forms and different combinations of pedagogical choices demonstrates that the instructional dilemma of how students see history can be managed through thoughtful teaching.

Mrs. Ellery's choice to confront her dilemma by using primary sources to introduce meaningful explanation through the concept of "perspectives" is significant and deserves some further discussion. Although other teachers in the study did use primary sources, Mrs. Ellery was the only teacher during the course of my observations who enacted a document-based lesson around a central historical question. This allowed her to combine her use of shared explanation with "representing history" (Monte-Sano & Budano, 2012) as interpretive. Also, unlike some of the other teachers, Mrs. Ellery used primary sources not to just help her students explain the past more thoroughly, but she used them to make the past more meaningful. A number of the teachers introduced primary sources into a lesson in order to have the students add more details to make an explanation more thorough. Mrs. Ellery introduced primary sources specifically to help her students understand conflicting perspectives. Some of the other teachers in the study had the students answer questions about primary sources in a way that essentially served an "English/Language Arts" purpose of answering the question, "Can you explain the main idea of this primary source in detail?" As evidenced by her document-based lesson on the U.S. annexation of the Philippines, Mrs. Ellery had her students answer questions that revolved

around the idea of, “Can you explain why these two sides think differently?” If Mrs. Ellery could get her students to understand the perspectives of historical actors from the position of their own time rather than from the position of the present, she could address the dilemma she was facing regarding how her students tended to see history. This type of interpretive explanatory skill is one that is meaningful for democratic citizenship.

Mrs. Ellery’s orientation toward teaching and history impacted how and why she engaged in meaningful explanation and the pedagogical choices she made in how and when she used it. Mrs. Ellery wanted students to understand that what happens in history is directly connected to how the world is today:

**Interviewer:** Mm hmm. How would you explain to your students what the discipline of history is all about?

**Mrs. Ellery:** I tell them on the first day of school that the only way to know where our country is going is to find out where it's been. And, those are not my words, when I was in elementary school I read that and my grandma's Reader's Digest and it always stuck with me. Um, there's also a quote by Michael Crichton about not knowing history is like being a leaf and not knowing you're part of a tree. I'm paraphrasing that because I can't remember the exact quote but it's-- it's a great quote [laughs]. Um, and I tell them that everything that led to them sitting in this classroom on this day has all impacted their life and that our story is the story of history.

Mrs. Ellery had explained part of her students’ dilemma in how they saw history as a “certain lack of empathy because they are at an age developmentally where they are focused in on themselves.” Both Mrs. Ellery and Mrs. Davis faced a dilemma that involved students’ lack of empathy. Both also used primary sources to address this dilemma. But the portion of Mrs. Ellery’s dilemma relating to empathy manifested itself differently than it did for Mrs. Davis’s students because the two teachers were explaining different historical content. The role that content plays in the process of meaningful explanation and managing instructional dilemmas deserves some further attention. Mrs. Davis had remarked that her white students had difficulty

empathizing with the experiences of people of color because their life experiences had not made them familiar with modern-day discrimination. For Mrs. Ellery, her students' "lack of empathy" was due to their being at a developmental stage where "they're not going to look past the end of their own nose." During a later portion of the interview, Mrs. Ellery explains that when she teaches about the Civil Rights Movement, her white students have difficulty relating to the experiences of African Americans in a way similar to Mrs. Davis's white students:

**Mrs. Ellery:** And I'm very conscious of the fact that I teach in a primarily white district, and they have not experienced the type of hardships that were experienced by African-Americans during Jim Crow, or during the Civil Rights Movement, or even today.

My students don't experience that. So I try to do my best to let the African-American voices tell their own story, um, so that students have a better understanding. And it's not just I'm a white student in a white classroom, listening to a white teacher tell me about these stories.

What this may indicate is that the particular historical content being explained plays a role in which dilemmas surface during the course of an explanation, as well as what pedagogical choices a teacher makes in order to respond to those dilemmas. Dilemmas relating to race may, thus, play a bigger role in content that directly addresses issues of race. For Mrs. Ellery's unit on American imperialism, her objective was as follows:

**Mrs. Ellery:** I wanted them to understand that there were various perspectives regarding America's new power following the Spanish-American war. And that the United States kind of had these democratic principles that it wasn't necessarily following concerning Cuba and the Philippines.

We can see that this is consistent with Mrs. Ellery's focus on learning history in order to gain a better understanding of the world today. Although for both units Mrs. Ellery wanted her students to understand contemporary perspectives, when she discussed her unit on American Imperialism, her focus was not on race but on how the past shaped the present:

**Mrs. Ellery:** Now, there are times where we're working on DBQ, so there'd be primary sources three days in a row. Or it would be, "Okay, this is a longer section" so it'd be

notes for two days, and then the source, but we always get to some sort of connection to the past. I want to make history real for them or else it's not gonna matter...The only way to understand where our country is going is to find out where it has been. Um, and I believe that. I believe that the U.S. expansion into the Philippines, even though was a hundred plus years ago, still matters. 'Cause our foreign policy today is still a descendant of those policies. And-and everything is a reaction to something that happened before.

This comment stems directly from her educational philosophy, which influences her to want her students to understand why “history matters...to today’s society.” Thus, the pedagogical methods of meaningful explanation that she uses to confront the dilemma of empathy for the unit on American Imperialism come less from a desire to address issues of race, and more from a desire to help her students overcome their nearsightedness, empathize with historical perspectives, and draw connections between the past and the present.

In the passages of meaningful explanation from Mrs. Ellery’s lessons, we can see that she makes pedagogical choices about how to connect historical content to the students’ lives in order to help them understand the connections between then and now. She wants her students to learn history not simply to know how and why it happened, but because it matters for understanding the modern world. As we saw, one cost of her choice to show her students these connections was that this influenced students to see the past in a presentist way. The pedagogical choices she then made were also reflective of the dilemmas associated with the particular content under study. Mrs. Ellery, made explanation meaningful by specifically directing her students to a more interpretive form of historical study based upon primary source documents that helped her students confront their struggle with contextualization and which gave them practice with interpreting documents from multiple perspectives. Mrs. Ellery’s use of shared explanation allowed her to hear students explain, which in turn revealed misconceptions in their historical thinking. She then used a fixed interpretation of content when she wanted to correct these students’ misconceptions, but ultimately decided that giving the students experience interpreting

and explaining the historical content for themselves would help them to better understand the multiple perspectives of the past. Students' active involvement in doing the explaining thus made the content more meaningful for them, and allowed Mrs. Ellery to strengthen historical thinking skills that would help her students avoid presentist thinking.

### **Mr. Kent: “We really haven’t done enough”**

#### **Helping Students Learn to Critique Modern Social Issues**

All three of Mr. Kent's observed lessons were designed around understanding how historical events connected to the world today. His primary goal was to use meaningful historical explanation to help his students learn to critique contemporary social issues. In his first observation, he explained the history behind the Compromise of 1850 and then asked students to talk about what types of compromises might be necessary in order for the Congress to tackle modern issues such as healthcare and immigration reform. His third lesson was focused on the development of political parties after Washington's presidency, and what the constant cycle of changing political views might mean for the development of political parties today. But it was his second lesson, centered around explaining and comparing school segregation in the 1950s with school segregation today, that provides the clearest picture of the instructional dilemmas Mr. Kent faced when he engaged the class in meaningful explanation.

Before we can explore Mr. Kent's dilemma, we need to first understand how and why he used meaningful explanation. Mr. Kent began with meaningful explanation. His opening explanation establishes the primary form of meaningful explanation he chooses to use, which is connections to current events and to students' lives. He makes a link between the content and a

community near where the students live, helping him to set the context for his objective for the lesson:

**Mr. Kent:** Today's topic for you guys is going to be the Civil Rights Movement, but I definitely focused it on, probably my favorite topic, and that is schools and what we are doing here. So let's first do, um, before we do our review... This weekend in [name of nearby community]. Have you guys heard of [name of nearby community]?

**Student 1:** Yes.

**Mr. Kent:** Yes in [name of] county. Flyers were distributed all throughout the town, um, uh, for the KKK. Yes, here.

**Student 2:** What?

**Mr. Kent:** Yes, this weekend, for the KKK. Um, yes.

**Student 3:** You're lying.

Mr. Kent did not only want to connect the past to the present. He wanted to make it clear why the content the students were about to explore was important and relevant to the world in which the students lived. Specifically, he wanted his students to understand that racism was real and existed near their community. As evidenced by the student's response, "You're lying," Mr. Kent faced a barrier in communicating this understanding to the students. Later interview comments reveal that, in a way similar to Mrs. Davis, some of Mr. Kent's students had prejudiced views, and many of them had not encountered modern-day discrimination. Therefore, making sure the students understood right at the beginning of the lesson that racism still existed today, and not just existed, but existed near where they lived, was not just a motivational technique. It served to establish a piece of background information that was fundamental to Mr. Kent's objective, which was to help his students to critique current conditions in society.

Mr. Kent wanted to use meaningful explanation to create an even stronger connection between the content and his students' lives, so after he shared two additional stories about recent racism in the country, he connected the content to the students' own school:

**Mr. Kent:** ...I could go on and on and on about these stories. Look on top [pointing to the PowerPoint displayed on the SmartBoard] at my question, of course, to what extent was the Civil Rights Movement a success? I'm still going to argue that we did achieve tremendous success. This classroom is an example of that success. Why is this classroom a perfect example? Student 1.

**Student 4:** Because we are not all white.

**Mr. Kent:** Because you are not all white. Do you know that this school used to only have white students in it? The school—you didn't know that?

Mr. Kent established two opposing ideas in his opening explanations, both of which surprised and engaged the students: one, that there is still rampant racism in the country today, even near where they live, and two, that the Civil Rights Movement has achieved "tremendous success" because the students' own school used to not admit black students, and now it is "not all white." Now that he has grabbed the students' attention and established the complexity of the issue, he can utilize the strengths of shared explanation to let his students take on more of the burden of interpreting this conflicting information.

The process of shared explanation opens opportunities for the students themselves to make further connections, rather than having Mr. Kent provide all of these connections for them. Mr. Kent proceeded by asking the students to look at statistics from two nearby school districts. These school districts have drastically different racial makeups. Mr. Kent wanted the students to consider the guiding question, "To what extent has the Civil Rights Movement been a success" in light of these statistics. The explanations the students contribute reveal that the process of shared explanation helps them to grapple with the complicated nature of the causes of present-day school segregation in their immediate community:

**Mr. Kent:** ...Fairview High School has 90-- I looked it up-- 93% White students, Fairview. Gerryville High School has 98% Black and Hispanic students. What do we know about Fairview and Gerryville?

**Students:** They are next to each other.

**Mr. Kent:** They are next to each other. Fairview and Gerryville are right next to each other. There they are [pointing to the map displayed on the SmartBoard]. There's Fairview. There's Gerryville. And look at the numbers there. Wha-- does this mean that the Civil Rights Movement has been a success? Student 5?

**Student 5:** I don't think so.

**Mr. Kent:** You don't think so? No? Student 6, go ahead.

**Student 6:** Well, you-- because of -- it's not like we were, like,-- they don't, like, get forced-- it's, like, where they live. It's like--

**Mr. Kent:** We base our attendance in school on the ju-- lines that are drawn in the district. You're exactly right. Is this illegal? Does this violate state law?

**Student 6:** No.

**Mr. Kent:** No. It doesn't. Because the way we draw up our districts is based on local towns. We don't have large county school districts, so there is no violation of law. But is it a good situation? That's for you to decide. Student 7.

**Student 7:** Um, what's that word that's used to, uh,-- you mentioned it in class. How even though we are not segregated anymore, but we, kind of,-- but -

**Mr. Kent:** Yeah.

**Student 7:** - the de facto?

**Mr. Kent:** Oh, very good. You figured it out yourself.

**Student 7:** Yeah.

**Mr. Kent:** De facto versus de jure. Those are Latin terms...

[skip 7 turns]

**Mr. Kent:** ...and before we review what we learned about the 1950s and before we look at some statistics, I am just going to ask you—we all understand that there is still racism, correct?...



Notice how in the above passage Mr. Kent sets up the information necessary for problematizing the guiding question, but it is the students who explain and interpret the statistics. Mr. Kent only jumps in after the students have given their explanations. He also emphasizes the students' role in doing the interpretive work necessary to confront modern social issues like segregated school districts by saying, "But is it a good situation? That's for you to decide." Student 6 explains that people living in Fairview and Gerryville were not "forced" to live separately, and on her own, Student 7 identifies the term "de facto" segregation to describe the situation. Yet Mr. Kent does not leave the explanation there. In a "shared" explanation, the teacher can also contribute important pieces that move the discussion forward. In this case, Mr. Kent tries to build on the students' contributions by starting with the understandings they explain, and then problematizing them by reintroducing the concept of racism with which he opened the class. Since the students have now given an explanation that implies that people today have chosen to live in segregated communities, he wants to make sure all the students understand "that there is still racism" before he continues the lesson.

In the interview, Mr. Kent noted that the above sequence was one of the most effective parts of the lesson, particularly because of the shared nature of the explanation:

**Interviewer:** Pick a concept that you explained in any one of the three lessons. What do you think is most effective about how you explained?

**Mr. Kent:** I think that the-- the statistics on black-- in the second class. I actually thought the most eye-opening part of that class was when the girl was asking about de jure and de facto. Because that came from her-- that wasn't in my lesson. And I can see from kids that they really did understand the different reasons for why segregation still exists. So in terms of clearly explaining something, I actually thought that was the most effective part of the day...because the student volunteered, I was able to take that and really explain with the- - with the-- with the statistics--I really think kids left understanding-- that concept very well.

The process of shared explanation allowed Mr. Kent to check for understanding, and allowed a student to contribute an explanation that moved the class forward. Mr. Kent noted that the student's contribution of the term "de facto segregation" to describe the situations in Fairview and Gerryville "wasn't in my lesson." Mr. Kent was intending to focus on the effects of racism upon school equality. But he noted that "because the student volunteered, I was able to take that and really explain...with the statistics...".

Mr. Kent articulated in the interview why he values the potential of shared explanation to allow this opportunity for shared meaning-making. He prefers shared explanation to teacher-centered explanation because shared explanation allows him not only to better "attend to his students' ideas" (Monte-Sano & Budano, 2012), but also to help him to give his students' comments greater meaning by building on them and acknowledging that what they say is valuable:

**Mr. Kent:** The best lessons take what students offer and then build on it. Because you want kids to think that what their comments are-- that their comments matter. That there's value to what they're saying. And you know, the ideal lessons are when a student will say something then another student will respond...But yet you as a teacher, it's a skill. You have to listen to what the kids are saying. If you don't listen to their comments, then you're not-- you're not gonna get comments in the future. Kids aren't gonna speak just for the sake of speaking. They wanna know that there's meaning. So, but again that's a-- that's a skill that has to be developed where you can think on your feet, 'cause you don't know what the kids are going to offer.

As the class discussion continues, the process of shared explanation becomes even more powerful because the students themselves begin to make connections between the content and their own lives. When a student makes a connection between the content, the school her mother attended, and why she herself moved to her current school district, the class can see how and why confronting current social issues is meaningful to their immediate world:

**Mr. Kent:** No question. There's no doubt people move for the schools. See, my sadness, Student 7, is that I can't believe we even have to have this discussion. Every

school should be great in America. There should be no such thing as a failing school. Every kid, in my opinion-- that's my goal, maybe 10 years from now I'll do it, Student 4.

**Student 4:** Sure.

**Mr. Kent:** Sure. You don't sound confident. Every school should at least give kids an opportunity. If a kid doesn't take advantage of the opportunity, that's different. But every school should look like this. Every school should have classrooms where kids are behaved and where instruction is going on and you have an opportunity. Student 7.

**Student 7:** Um, my mom, uh, went to Harper High School and it was recently shut down. It was closed down, because graduation rate-- I think the last class, only nine graduated. [Later in the class Student 7 looks up this statistic and tells the class that 24 graduated].

**Mr. Kent:** Oh my G-d.

**Student 7:** No, I'm serious. I read a whole article. Yeah. And that's why-- I mention that, because that's why my mom wanted to move out to [the suburbs], because I used to live in [the city].

**Mr. Kent:** And that's where you were zoned for. Right.

**Student 7:** Yeah, I was like, "Mom, if we stayed in the area where we, uh, where-- where I grew up, where I was born, I would've ended up going to Harper High School", and all that. But she's like, "I don't want her to go through all that, because it was a bad school."

**Mr. Kent:** We-- do you guys think we live in, like, a little bit of a bubble here?

**Students:** Yeah.

In a meaningful explanation, the historical content serves a purpose beyond the academic. In the explanation the student gives above, the student goes beyond simply knowing about the past, and even beyond just coming to an understanding of the present. She makes a personal connection that reveals why the content matters to her own life.

Mr. Kent's choice to make the historical content meaningful through connections to current events and to the students' lives is similar to that of Mrs. Ellery. But what makes Mr. Kent different from Mrs. Ellery is the way his commitment to communicating a particular social

lens butted up against his pedagogical belief that shared explanation was the best way to encourage citizenship skills. In the passage above we can see Mr. Kent begin to reveal his own beliefs. He says, “See, my sadness, Student 7, is that I can't believe we even have to have this discussion. Every school should be great in America...”. Mr. Kent is revealing his own personal connection to the content: as a teacher, it hurts him to see that all schools do not have the same resources as his own.

Mr. Kent believed the best way to help his students learn to critique contemporary social issues was to have his students shape the meaning-making process through shared explanation. Giving his students more responsibility for interpreting the connections between the past and the present, he felt, would teach them the deliberative skills necessary for good citizenship. But Mr. Kent faced a dilemma when he opened up the meaning-making process to his students because he wanted them to understand the content through a particular social lens. When they did not arrive at this understanding, Mr. Kent felt the need to step in with teacher-centered explanation in order to assert the fixed interpretation he wanted them to have.

In the interview, Mr. Kent clearly expresses a preference for the interpretive nature of shared explanation over a teacher-centered explanation that represents content as fixed:

**Interviewer:** What do you think is the difference between a successful lesson and an unsuccessful lesson?

**Mr. Kent:** Uh, if students are engaged, the most important criteria is student engagement. Where, unfortunately, school seems to be too focused on delivering information and not enough on asking kids to think in class. Especially now when information can be looked up very easily.

**Interviewer:** Uh-huh. So how do you-- what do you do to try to get kids to think, versus just deliver information.

**Mr. Kent:** Ask questions that are open-ended. Ask questions that don't have a specific answer that require kids to form opinions for themselves--And then, specifically for social studies-- Although I think this would be hopefully the same for every class. It's

very easy to make connections with current topics, so they see some relevance to the material that's being taught.

Mr. Kent believes school should be more focused on "asking kids to think." Presenting them with interpretive questions "that don't have a specific answer," and that "make connections with current topics" are methods of meaningful explanation that promote both engagement and critical thinking.

In practice, however, Mr. Kent's preference to remain within this student-centered interpretive frame was more difficult than he anticipated. We can see Mr. Kent's dilemma begin to appear in the excerpt below when he chooses to intervene with teacher-centered explanation when one student does not track his line of reasoning:

**Mr. Kent:** Student 8, what are you concerned about today in America? What are your concerns? What are your worries?

**Student 8:** Terrorism.

**Mr. Kent:** Oh, terrorism. Are we all in agreement? Are we all in agreement that terrorism is a concern? Student 9, wait, you think that's more troubling than integration? Oh, you do? Am I being too sarcastic, Student 10?

**Student 10:** No, not at all.

**Mr. Kent:** Not at all. We should all be on the same page fighting against terrorism. You know what happened in Times Square this weekend, what happened on Friday. A car, right-- did you hear about this? A car tragically hit a group of people.

[A student starts waving his arms around in imitation of what the reactions of people might have been to a car coming toward them]

One girl, your age, from Michigan. Think about how awful--

[skip three turns]

**Mr. Kent:** Her sister was 13 and boy, it's really not that big of a story, is it. Can I ask you a question?

**Student 11:** Wait, what happened?

**Mr. Kent:** A man who was in the military, who was discharged, who was troubled. Very, very troubled.

**Student 8:** He was high--

**Mr. Kent:** What's that?

**Student 8:** We learned about it in Driver's Ed. He was high.

**Mr. Kent:** Yeah, he was on drugs, but it's beyond that. This is an example of our country, in my opinion, not doing enough to deal with people leaving the military under terrible conditions. And he ran into a group of people in Times Square-- I think it was on 42nd, 43rd street and yeah, it happened Friday, I believe. See, now some of you didn't even hear about it. And I'm not saying it's not all over the news, would you agree? Can I ask you a question, Student 8? If that man pledged allegiance to ISIS and was on ISIS websites, do you think this would've been a bigger story? And the same outcome happened. I'm asking your opinion.

**Students:** Yes.

**Mr. Kent:** You do, but it's the same exact crime. Yet, if it's terrorism, everybody-- or if they use that word, right, everybody goes crazy.

**Student 8:** Did he, like, mean terrorism? Like, did he mean to hurt people or was he just, like, high?

**Mr. Kent:** You don't think he meant to hurt somebody?

**Student 10:** He got out of the car saying, he wanted to kill all of them.

**Mr. Kent:** Yeah, but the outcome-- my point is this, the outcome is the same and yet depending on the motives, America would react completely differently.

**Student 8:** It's either manslaughter or its murder but...

**Mr. Kent:** Okay and you're entitled to that opinion. What I'm trying to say, is do we all agree, Student 10, that everybody wants to prevent these acts from happening? How can we still be fighting about race relations, when we are dealing with an enemy that we should all agree on? That's what saddens me about the lack of progress. And you're shaking your head, some of you-- and I feel so strongly about this.

I look at the efforts that were made from people in the 1950s and '60s and I definitely think progress, as Student 4 said, look at our classroom. There's great progress right there, but we really haven't done enough, I think. Well, I should wait, right? I'll wait and let you guys decide on that. Thank you for shaking your head. Student 15.

Unlike in earlier passages of explanation where the students contribute more of the explanatory language and provide different interpretations to the guiding question, Mr. Kent takes control here and wants the students to come to the understanding that he has of the material, which is that racism is holding back society's progress. When Student 8 does not track his analogy and line of argument, Mr. Kent makes the choice to explicitly explain the connection the student misses. He says to them, "How can we still be fighting about race relations, when we are dealing with an enemy that we should all agree on? That's what saddens me about the lack of progress. And you're shaking your head, some of you-- and I feel so strongly about this...". At the end of the passage, however, he realizes that he may have crossed the line too far into telling the students what to believe. He says, "There's great progress right there, but we really haven't done enough, I think. Well, I should wait, right? I'll wait and let you guys decide on that...". Mr. Kent realizes that he has strayed from his original emphasis on letting the students arrive at their own interpretations, and tells the students he will try again to let them be the ones to decide on an explanatory answer to the guiding question.

Mr. Kent's students begin to recognize this shift in how he is now directing more of the course of the explanation.

**Mr. Kent:** ...What saddens me, is that we can't focus on this, because we still need to deal with some of the issues related to race relations. So okay, before I look at-- show you some statistics on schools. You all right, Student 7? Oh, it clicked.

**Student 7:** It all came together.

**Mr. Kent:** I love when it all comes together.

**Student 7:** At first, I didn't know what you were arguing for, because you said, like, terrorism and then we were talking about, like, relations here.

**Mr. Kent:** Now it all-- by the way, I'm not arguing anything. I just want you guys to argue-- yes, I'm leading you in that direction, of course. Okay, so let's-- can we first test and see how much you remember from the early aspects of the Civil Rights Movement...

When Student 7 uses the phrase “you were arguing,” Mr. Kent realizes he is no longer allowing the students to come to an interpretive understanding of the content, and that the students are realizing this as well. He then says “by the way, I’m not arguing anything. I just want you guys to argue—yes, I’m leading you in that direction, of course...”. It is in this phrase that we see the clearest representation of Mr. Kent’s struggle: he wants to lead the students in a specific direction and toward a specific critique of racism’s role in modern-day segregation, but he also wants the students to do the arguing rather than himself. Mr. Kent is trying to maintain a delicate balance between desiring to represent a fixed understanding of history through teacher-centered explanation, and allowing the students to form and explain their own interpretations of the question through shared explanation.

Why, if Mr. Kent so values using shared interpretive explanation, does he leave this interpretive frame to express his own views and to convince his students to think as he does? Mr. Kent’s dilemma is bound up within the difficulties he faces in wanting to communicate to students a specific understanding of the content at the same time as building the civic skills that he sees as so valuable to democracy. This conflict is a result of his strong commitment toward building students’ skills for democratic citizenship, and his orientation toward this as being the purpose of school, the purpose of learning history, and the purpose of meaningful historical explanation. For him, all three are directly linked to citizenship. In the interview, he explained that, “I love making the connections to today. I just love for kids—as you watch kids start to form their own opinions, start to form their own political views. And they use the context of history to do so.” Additional interview comments reveal the value that Mr. Kent places upon developing in his students’ skills and dispositions that support democratic participation:



**Mr. Kent:** I focus much more on-- emphasize more of the social studies aspect of it. Because not everybody's gonna love just memorizing historical information. But you use the history to inform people so they can be productive citizens. And we've really lost sight of the socialization aspect. I mean we have people doing very bad things in our society and school is supposed to be socializing, but we're not. We're testing.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Mr. Kent:** And history is a great way to help socializing. I mean today there is no question that there are kids that sat in that class who have prejudicial views in the second period. You use the history not to lecture, not to belittle, but to hopefully get kids to understand that disliking people for the color of their skin is not productive. It's not-- It's not a trait that's gonna move the country forward.

Mr. Kent believes that school plays an important role in “socializing” students. He believes history can be used not only to “inform people so they can be productive citizens,” but also to “get kids to understand that disliking people for the color of their skin is not productive” and will not “move the country forward.” He explained that he does not want to tell students what to believe. He would rather the students arrive at this understanding on their own. But we can see from his classroom explanations that the process of “socializing” students through shared meaningful explanation is not so easy. Mr. Kent wants his students to develop their own political views, and to be citizens that can use their political views to “move the country forward.” But his orientation toward history’s role in developing good citizens will not allow him in good conscience to let those political views be based on prejudice or racism. Therefore, even though he says that one cannot lecture the students into adopting views that support good citizenship, his value system urges him to do so when shared methods of explanation do not work.

In his interview comments, Mr. Kent consistently argues for the use of shared interpretive forms of explanatory classroom discourse to instill in students the dispositions that support democratic ideals. I asked Mr. Kent to explain more about his thought process when he decided

to build on Student 8's answer and draw analogies around terrorism and racism. His answer demonstrates again why he believes that using a shared process of explanation, where students are made primarily responsible for making meaning, is so important for addressing students' views that are contrary to his concept of good citizenship:

**Interviewer:** You mentioned in that lesson that terrorism was something that everybody should be concerned about or that can-- can be unified around. And you paired that with the concern about racism in the country. Can you explain sort of what you were thinking about?

**Mr. Kent:** Yeah. So, that particularly is directed to the fact that I know that there are kids in that room with race issues. And you can't lecture them about it cause that doesn't change anybody. So you have to figure out a way and we're all in agreement that nobody wants to be attacked by a terrorist organization. Since we're all on agreement on that, shouldn't we all come together racially? Since fighting with each other is gonna distract us from the fact that there are people who want to do us harm. White people want to do us harm, black people, Muslim-- everyone--they come from different backgrounds. And that-- I specifically chose to teach history to the middle class because of the kids in that class who I know are on the edge of, um, you know, one day walking down that-- that negative path. I think we just have to just recognize, you know, when you look at what we've done, it's okay-- the fact that it's not perfect. It's okay to look at our problems but we want to learn from them.

We can see from Mr. Kent's response that he believes that "you can't lecture" students who have "race issues" into changing their views. So he tries to apply logic to find a topic that all of his students, even those who are prejudiced, can agree upon, which is the threat from terrorism. As evidenced by the video recording of his class, which shows a student waving his arms around in response to the discussion about the tragedy in Times Square, Mr. Kent faces a challenge in getting some of his students to take violence seriously, let alone racism. While other teachers might altogether avoid a discussion of controversial public issues in the class, however, Mr. Kent states that "it's okay to look at our problems." But he explains, "we want to learn from them." In other words, students should study history not just to know about it, but to learn from it and use it to develop dispositions that support the common good. Mr. Kent believes the most

effective way for students to learn from the country's problems and avoid "one day walking down...that negative path," is to feel like they have agency over the interpretive process.

I asked Mr. Kent more about the class discussion around terrorism and racism as well as what his objective was for the lesson. His answer revealed his reluctance to move toward teacher-centered explanation, but it also showed how his educational philosophy motivates him to want his students to come to a specific understanding of the content:

**Interviewer:** Is one of the two terrorism or racism you believe a bigger, um, problem in our society today?

**Mr. Kent:** Well, I personally think racism because terrorism is overblown. I think people-- that's kinda, you know, of course terrorism is horrific, but there are 58,000 people dying on the roads every year. There is a drug epidemic that's killing thousands of people every year and, you know,--So I prob-- but I want the kids to come to that, you know?

**Interviewer:** Uh-huh.

**Mr. Kent:** I don't want-- you know I want-- I don't want to just give them my view.

**Interviewer:** So the topic, the Civil Rights Movement when, um, when you- - when you thought about, you know, where am I gonna go with this in sort of teaching it, the objective, what-- what was your objective?

**Mr. Kent:** The objective is to show kids that there is still racism even with the great gains of the Civil Rights Movement, that we still have concrete quantifiable problems in our country. And then as a country, we can't move forward on problems that we should all agree on when we're disagreeing with each other simply because of prejudicial views.

Mr. Kent explained that he does not want to use teacher-centered explanation: "I don't want to just give them my view." He wants "the kids to come to" the understanding that racism is a major problem in society today. Mr. Kent's guiding question for the lesson was "To what extent was the Civil Rights Movement a success?" But he did not just focus on the prevalence of modern-day segregation. He wanted his students to understand that "there is still racism even with the great gains of the Civil Rights Movement," and that "we can't move forward on

problems that we should all agree on when we're disagreeing with each other simply because of prejudicial views." Mr. Kent's objective was not just about understanding the past, nor was it just about linking past and present. It was about using historical explanation in a meaningful way to help his students to develop views that supported democratic citizenship.

For Mr. Kent, citizenship does not just involve developing political views. It is about learning to participate in the deliberative process. Sometimes, this may involve acknowledging uncomfortable realities, as well as understanding that the country's social problems cannot always be reduced to easy explanations. During the final portion of the class, Mr. Kent asks the students what would happen if their area went to a county-wide school system. The class discusses how the district could save money by having only one superintendent, and how the county could offer specialized high schools. We can see by the students' answers that they have fully internalized that Mr. Kent is asking them to participate in an interpretive process. The students even use the word, "interpret." But we can also see Mr. Kent step back into the discussion and explain his viewpoint even more assertively than he did before:

**Student:** I don't think, like, kids would, like, want to go, like, to high school with-- I-- like, with none of their friends.

**Mr. Kent:** Most kids would choose to go where?

**Students:** Closest.

**Mr. Kent:** Close to their home. But you have to understand, that some kids from Gerryville might now choose to go to--

**Students:** Fairview.

**Mr. Kent:** Fairview...

[skip five turns]

**Mr. Kent:** So-- but don't lose-- don't lose sight of the controversies. It would definitely allow kids from minority schools to go to schools that are predominantly White, and

that's probably why-- not just us that's-- by the way-- Massachusetts, New Jersey, Connecticut. And it-- Let me ask you though, is that a racist or is that a, "I want to keep my school as a community school view," or are they both the same? This is where it gets touchy.

**Student:** Wait, say that again?

**Mr. Kent:** Is that-- Do you think that if a school in Connecticut wants to keep itself small, do you think that that's racist or do you think that that's wanting to keep itself small? This is a touchy subject.

**Student 13:** It can be interpreted--

**Mr. Kent:** You think it's wanting you just keep it as your own small community school?

**Student 13:** It can be interpreted as racist.

**Mr. Kent:** It can be interpreted that way.

**Student 14:** But, like, you're not-- you're not preventing black people from moving into town. It's not like you're saying black people can't live here. It's not really racist.

[students chattering]

**Mr. Kent:** You don't think it is, but it can be. Right. Yeah. I-- I'm going to tell you this. I believe-- I believe this is, in my opinion, the problem that needs to be addressed to deal with every other problem we have. When we fix our school system-- system, when we stop having schools that are literally pipelines to jail. When we fix-- but it's true, Student 9, what? It's so sad, right? But when we know the statistics, when-- when— when, um, Student 7 tells is that the school has to be closed down because 9% are graduating. Well, if you don't have a high school diploma today, is there a wealth of opportunities for you? So the-- the reality is, Student 9, we have the highest incarceration rate of any modern economy in the world...

In examining Mr. Kent's explanation of his views above, we can see clearly both why he chose to focus on schools in examining the success of the Civil Rights Movement, and why he chose to use connections to students' lives as his primary form of meaningful explanation. Mr. Kent believes that fixing our school system is "the problem that needs to be addressed to deal with every other problem we have." He wants his students to develop political views that support civic action to address this problem. But he knows that before they can develop these views,

they have to care. They have to understand why school inequality matters, and how racism plays a role in this. The immense number of connections he drew to students' lives during the lesson, and especially the connections the students formed on their own, all contributed to developing such an understanding.

At the end of class, Mr. Kent returns to interpretive, shared explanation. His pedagogical choices throughout the lesson were designed to support his students in doing the critical thinking necessary to understand the complexities of school segregation past and present. One student's comment in particular at the end of class demonstrates that Mr. Kent has indeed helped his students to think more critically about issues involving racism. Mr. Kent builds on this student's comment in presenting his final question to the class as the bell rings:

**Student 15:** I think it also may be interpreted as racism, though not directly, because if their parents were not allowed to go to a good school then they couldn't get educated and they couldn't make money to live in wealthy communities and get a good education, so it's kind of like a domino effect and it keeps on happening and happening.

**Mr. Kent:** It's a great observation and you basically took me to the last question I was going to ask you today...[skip five turns] [bell rings] So, um, uh, but my last question--can I just quickly pose it to you? If I say, to you, "What holds kids back the most today?" Would you say that it is racism or would you say that it is income inequality that holds kids or people back the most? Let's just get a quick showing of hands—who says it's racism that holds people back? [no one raises their hand]. Who says it's income inequality? [all of the students raise their hands] Whoah, okay. To be determined-- to be continued. Great job. I'll see you all tomorrow...

Mr. Kent's choice to pose the final question as a dichotomy is significant, given that much of his lesson was focused on trying to help his students to understand the complexity of factors that contributed to present-day school segregation. However, it makes more sense when examined in light of his commitment to trying to represent historical explanations as interpretive, and to allowing his students to be the ones who do the interpreting. Though asking the students to choose between racism and income inequality simplifies the concept the students were

discussing, it allows Mr. Kent to end the class with a seemingly open-ended, interpretive question on which the students' weigh in rather than having him have the final word. Ultimately, he wants the students to understand that racism and income inequality are interrelated, but he can safely allow the students to do the interpreting without straying from his ethical beliefs because both answers support his social lens. Notice at the end that although the vote was universal, Mr. Kent says "To be determined-- to be continued." When I asked Mr. Kent about the role that student participation played in his lesson, he explained:

**Mr. Kent:** Well, um, the fact that kids were willing to speak out about some of the examples that they gave [regarding Harper High School] or their views, like their shock that this school used to not allow black kids to go to school here. It's how the process begins. But it's an ongoing process. And if there are programs throughout the year, that there are small groups-- Cause we've had issues here where kids have put the N-word on Instagram, and you know--

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**Mr. Kent:** It's gotta be an ongoing thing. It can't-- the dialogue is constant. It's far more important that we socialize kids properly rather than--we didn't have any Trump issues but, you know, we've had issues in the past.

To Mr. Kent, the work of "socializing" students and using history to prevent kids from "walking down that negative path" is an "ongoing process." Allowing students to decide on the interpretation at the end of class fits with Mr. Kent's philosophy that the best way to engage students in meaningful explanation is to help them feel agency in the learning process, to acknowledge that their views matter, and to give them practice in forming opinions that would better allow them to participate in the political process in the future. Mr. Kent believes the students will not be able to do this if they approach the country's problems with prejudicial views, but at the same time, he believes that he cannot get the students to change their views by lecturing at them. They have to come to these ideas on their own. Thus, Mr. Kent did his best to

maintain the process of shared explanation until it was clear that he had to step in and explain the views he wanted them to have.

In thinking long and carefully about Mr. Kent's dilemma, I believe that his choice to revert to teacher-centered explanation and to voice his own views throughout the class period may not be as counterintuitive as it may initially seem. Part of participating in democratic deliberation is understanding that questions of democracy are often quite complicated. Although it appears that Mr. Kent is emphasizing a fixed understanding of content, what he is really doing is providing the more complex content knowledge that he knows the students might *not* be able to come to on their own. Being able to make connections between racism and income inequality and under-funded schools and "pipelines to jail" requires a complex framework of background knowledge about institutionalized, structural racism. Mr. Kent only has 50 minutes within which to communicate these complex understandings that he sees as so vitally important to democratic participation. Although I do believe he feels very strongly about the importance of school quality and equality, I think that, contrary to appearances, his use of teacher-centered fixed explanation may function less as telling his students what to believe than as part of his design to help give his students the tools to be able to engage in more complex discussions of contemporary social issues.

More importantly, Mr. Kent believed he could not help his students to do this if the history he was teaching remained in the past. As evidenced by the multiple ways he explained connections to the students' lives and to current events, Mr. Kent sought to establish a foundation of connections upon which new ideas could be built. His students could not move forward if they only understood why historical events happened. He had to help them understand how the past shaped the present, and not only that, but what this meant to the process



of moving the country forward. Mr. Kent's lesson makes it clear that teaching history through meaningful explanation is a complex navigational process of pedagogical choices that involves making decisions about how much agency to give students in explaining, and how to navigate the shoals between telling students what to think, and teaching them how to think. Ultimately, what we can learn from Mr. Kent is that while student agency contributes to the meaningfulness of the lesson, the teacher plays an important role in guiding this process. It remains the responsibility of the teacher to utilize the possibilities of meaningful explanation to make history matter for citizenship. A fundamental part of this is establishing the connections between our history, the world of today, and students' lives, for it is these connections that create the framework necessary to generate both understanding and growth.

The table on the following page provides a composite picture of the dilemmas and barriers Mrs. Davis, Mrs. Ellery, and Mr. Kent faced. It also displays the pedagogical choices they made in response to these dilemmas and to their desire to carry out their educational philosophy regarding the purpose of historical explanation.

Table 4. *Elements of Practice*

	<b>Mrs. Davis</b>	<b>Mrs. Ellery</b>	<b>Mr. Kent</b>
<b>Lesson Topic</b>	Causes of the Civil Rights Movement / Emmett Till	U.S. Annexation of Hawaii, the Spanish-American War, U.S. Annexation of the Philippines	"To what extent was the Civil Rights Movement a Success?" with specific attention to schools and (de)segregation
<b>Dilemma</b>	How to help students to understand the experience of groups different from themselves with whom they have little to no experience	How to help middle school students "see past the end of their own nose" and understand why history matters for understanding the present	How to help students learn to critique contemporary social issues while understanding them through a particular social lens
<b>Barriers</b>	Students' prejudicial views, lack of background knowledge about modern and historical racism, lack of lived experience of discrimination, tendency to not take "tough topics" seriously, "Trumpism" political views that both encourage insensitivity and discourage verbal emotional responses to content	Middle school students' self-focus, tendency toward presentism, difficulty with contextualization	Students with prejudicial views, strong personal views that students need to understand that racism "won't move the country forward" and that school quality is affected by institutionalized racism
<b>Educational Philosophy</b>	Social justice, learning history is about "solving current issues"	History can help us to understand the present	Students should form their own opinions in order to participate in the political process
<b>Form of Meaningful Explanation</b>	Empathy, telling students why content was important for them to know  Shows them image of Emmett Till in order to "shock" them into taking content seriously and to generate empathy for the "plight of the minority"	Connections to students' lives, multiple perspectives  Connects yellow journalism headlines to social media, Document-Based Lesson on multiple perspectives toward the U.S. annexation of the Philippines	Connections to students' lives, connections to current events  Connections to their own school, to racial make-up of nearby schools, to racism near their neighborhood, ethical issue of forced desegregation
<b>Content</b>	Represents history as fixed	Begins with fixed and moves toward interpretive	Tries to represent history as interpretive, but conveys fixed at times
<b>Process</b>	Teacher-only explanation  Purpose of choice – so students take away a very specific understanding of the significance of Emmett Till both to the Civil Rights Movement, and to the legacy of institutionalized racism today	Initially teacher-only explanation and then moves to shared explanation and student work on a Document-Based Lesson	Shared explanation (with interspersed periods of teacher-only explanation)  Argues that shared explanation is better because it helps him to communicate that what the students say matters, and helps him to build on student explanations and attend to his students' ideas about history
<b>Implications</b>	Use of teacher-only explanation does not enable her to check for her students' understanding	Use of connections to students' lives influences students to see the past in a presentist way	His commitment to his beliefs and his goal to communicate a specific understanding sometimes does not allow him to maintain his interpretive/student-centered shared explanation pedagogy

## CHAPTER 7

### DISCUSSION

#### MEANINGFUL HISTORICAL EXPLANATION AND DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

At first glance, a research focus on explanation in history classrooms may seem a peculiar choice for a dissertation. Criticisms of traditional lecture and recitation-oriented history instruction, and of history instruction in general, abound. A number of scholars have asked some form of the question, “why spend time on learning history when students are not going to be historians?” (Lee, 2005, p. 40). Time devoted to history instruction is routinely being reduced in favor of increased time spent on math, English, and science instruction (Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014). In the public mind, history teaching is embodied by the scene in the movie *Ferris Buhler’s Day Off*, in which, during a lesson on the Hawley-Smoot Tariff, the history teacher played by Ben Stein draws, “Anybody? Anybody?” as students drool, blank-faced, in utter boredom. Beyond even the recognition of the need to improve how history teachers teach, there exists a crisis in helping people understand why history instruction even matters.

At the same time, the country today is struggling with issues related to basic democratic citizenship. Public politics and deliberation are marked by charges of fake news and distrust of facts, while politicians themselves display a lack of empathy and difficulty respecting multiple perspectives. Fear and ignorance of “the other,” based on perceptions of race, ethnicity, religion, etc. shape voter action at the same time as Congress has entered an era where sticking to one’s guns (double entendre intended) is seen as more admirable than the effort required to reach across the aisle to compromise for the common good.

The research undertaken in this dissertation sought to address two important gaps suggested by the above realms of concern. First, most of the literature surrounding history’s role

in citizenship education focuses on more inquiry-based methods such as participatory action or class discussion of controversial public issues (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). But these inquiry-based methods are not the methods that many history teachers are using, especially new teachers. So I asked, if history instruction has the potential to play a role in addressing issues of democratic citizenship, can this be done through the method of instruction that history teachers tend to use the most: historical explanation? Second, when we find teachers who are able to challenge the prevailing conception of useless, boring history by making history matter for today and for democracy, *how* are they enacting historical explanation in support of such civic ends, and *why* are they making these pedagogical choices?

The Findings presented in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 point to an intersection of pedagogical beliefs and pedagogical knowledge/action, two areas that have often marked a divide in research on history teaching (Wilson, 2001). As noted in Chapter 4: Methods, Barton & Levstik (2004) have weighed in on the side of pedagogical beliefs as being a more important factor in determining whether a teacher's practices support students' skills for democratic citizenship. They argued:

Neither teachers' knowledge of history--including its interpretive nature--nor their knowledge of how to represent content to learners has a decisive impact on classroom practice. Although such knowledge is probably necessary for engaging students in historical interpretation, it is by no means sufficient. If we want to change those practices, we must change the purposes that guide those practices (p. 258).

The findings in this dissertation do not dispute their core argument that teachers oriented toward preparing students for pluralistic democracy are more likely to enact practices that support it. However, what the data from Mrs. Davis, Mrs. Ellery, Mr. Kent and the other teachers show is

that the enactment of explanation that is meaningful for democratic citizenship is a complex process. Teachers who embark on meaningful historical explanation encounter a plethora of instructional dilemmas. The teachers in the study faced dilemmas relating to how to help students to understand the experience of groups different from themselves with whom they have little to no experience, how to help middle school students “see past the end of their own nose” and understand why history matters for understanding the present, and how to help students learn to critique contemporary social issues while at the same time ensuring that they understand the historical content through a particular social lens. They also faced barriers relating to students’ prejudicial views, lack of background knowledge, presentism, and difficulty with contextualization. In order to manage these dilemmas and confront these barriers to student learning by using historical explanation, these teachers made pedagogical decisions relating to which *form* of meaningful explanation to use (empathy, connections to students’ lives, multiple perspectives, etc.), how to represent historical *content* (as interpretive or fixed), and how to carry out the *process* of attending to students’ ideas about history (through teacher-centered explanation or shared explanation). The findings indicated that while pedagogical beliefs may be the cannon that launches the quest for a history instruction that supports democratic citizenship, beliefs alone are not sufficient to manage the dilemmas in which meaningful explanation is mired. The pedagogical content knowledge of teachers plays a vital role in helping them to navigate the rocky path.

This dissertation study asked the following research questions: (1) How do teachers enact historical explanation in a way that is meaningful for democratic citizenship? and (2) Why do teachers choose to explain history as they do within a pluralistic democracy? The answer to the first question, as indicated by the data, was noted above: teachers use their pedagogical

content knowledge to make instructional choices related to the *form* of meaningful explanation, *content*, and *process*. Regarding the second research question, the data in the study indicated that the teachers' pedagogical choices were made in order to accomplish two related purposes: (1) to enact their beliefs about the purpose of history instruction and its relationship to democratic citizenship, and (2) to manage instructional dilemmas that arose during the process of meaningful explanation. The findings suggest a number of bigger ideas that can be viewed through these two purposes. This discussion chapter is thus organized initially around the different philosophical orientations the teachers in Chapter 6 had toward the purpose of history instruction, and then within each section, the implications of teachers' pedagogical choices are set in the context of the dilemmas they faced. Ultimately, the goal is to demonstrate why an understanding of teachers' pedagogical choices related to *form*, *content*, and *process* are such an important part of making explanation meaningful.

### **A Continuum of Ways That Meaningful Historical Explanation Can Support Students' Skills and Dispositions for Democratic Citizenship**

Part of rescuing historical explanation from its place at the bottom of the pedagogical food chain is recognizing what types of dispositions and skills for democratic citizenship that a more meaningful form of historical explanation aims to support. The range of possible skills and dispositions indicated in the literature is wide. More inquiry-based forms of civic education have been found to develop skills and dispositions including critical thinking (Burbules & Burk, 1999), political autonomy—"the capacity to make un-coerced decisions" (Parker, 2014, p. 357), critical consciousness (Friere, 1970/2008), and solidarity (Rorty, 1989). In the history literature, citizenship skills are often presented as literacy skills that strengthen students' ability to read primary sources, write historical arguments based upon interpretation of evidence, and to think

historically in ways that allow students to source, contextualize, and corroborate these sources (Monte-Sano, 2008; Nokes, 2013; Reisman, 2012).

The data in this study pointed to those skills and dispositions of democratic citizenship that appear when history literature crosses over into the civic education camp. These include the development of empathy (Brooks, 2011; Cunningham, 2007; Endacott, 2014; Lévesque, 2008), an appreciation of multiple perspectives (Barber, 1989; Merryfield, et al., 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2013; Seixas & Peck, 2004), and the ability to reason and interpret unfamiliar arguments when engaged in deliberation with others (Hess & McAvoy, 2014). The study also indicated that a teacher's educational beliefs about the role of historical explanation motivated them to use historical explanation in pursuit of the skills and dispositions listed above.

There are relatively few articles that discuss the practical aspects of using history to establish skills and dispositions relevant to democratic citizenship, or the pedagogical beliefs that guide this practice. The article by Van Straaten, Wilschut, and Oostdam's (2016) is one of the few that do. As noted in the literature review in Chapter 2, they articulate three objectives for relevance in history teaching, including: "building a personal identity," "becoming a citizen," and "understanding the human condition" (p. 490). But they draw these objectives from the literature on historical philosophy, educational philosophy, and constructivist learning theory, rather than directly from empirical data. This dissertation aimed to fill that gap in understanding what the data could shed light on regarding the dispositions and skills students had the potential to develop as the result of meaningful explanation, and the pedagogical beliefs and behaviors that would support this.

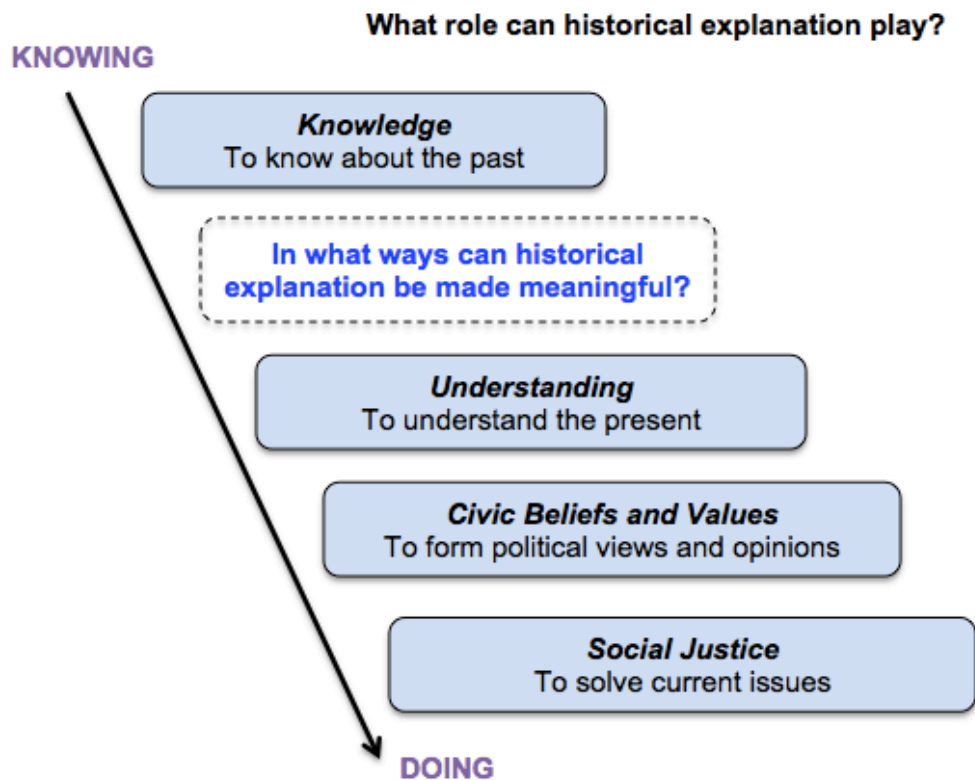
The democratic skills and dispositions indicated above and in the literature review in Chapter 2 display a wide range of levels of democratic action. When I examined the three

teachers presented in Chapter 6, I noticed that these different levels of action were also embodied in the beliefs of each teacher. The three teachers in Chapter 6 believed that history could be made useful for democracy in different ways. These function almost like a continuum moving from knowing to doing. The baseline, reflected in common practice, is the idea that students should study history in order to know about the past. Mrs. Davis, Mrs. Ellery, and Mr. Kent moved on from this baseline by using historical explanation to encourage different forms of civic thinking in their students. This continuum of how the teachers thought about the role of historical explanation is important for understanding the significance of the pedagogical choices the teachers made.

Although all three of the teachers demonstrated an effort to pursue all three elements on the continuum, each presented a primary way of thinking about the role of history and historical explanation in promoting students' skills and dispositions for democratic citizenship. Mrs. Ellery argued that students should learn history in order to better understand the present. Mr. Kent then expands upon this idea by arguing that history can be meaningful for helping students to form political views and opinions. Mrs. Davis then takes this one step farther and believes history is meaningful for helping students to understand how to solve current issues. This continuum is represented in Figure 4 on the following page:



Figure 4. Continuum of Historical Explanation’s Role in Supporting Democratic Citizenship



It should be noted that these categories are not mutually exclusive to each teacher presented in Chapter 6. All three of the teachers utilized different points on the continuum in the course of making pedagogical choices related to meaningful explanation. Mr. Kent exhibited a commitment to social justice when he argued to the class that “we really haven’t done enough” to confront racism in society. Mrs. Davis verbalized history’s value for understanding the present by telling her class “it’s why there are still so many racial tensions today in the country.” And Mrs. Ellery believes in history’s ability to help students form their own views and to respect the views of others by modeling the importance of multiple perspectives. The teachers’ decisions to take up different places on the continuum at different times were influenced by the context of their students and classroom, including the beliefs students had or the prior knowledge they lacked, as well as the nature of the specific historical content being explained. The

framework this continuum represents gives us three windows (understanding, civic beliefs and values, and social justice) through which to view the larger questions of democracy that arise from the pedagogical choices these teachers make when they confront various instructional dilemmas in the course of enacting meaningful explanation.

### **Historical Explanation for the Purpose of Understanding the Present**

Helping students to understand how the past impacts the present is one way to make historical explanation meaningful for democracy. For example, Mr. Kent's lesson asked students to evaluate the question, "To what extent was the Civil Rights Movement successful?" By using the process of shared explanation in which connections were made to his students' lives, the students learned that segregation is still a very real condition, especially in the northern United States. Mr. Kent's lesson helped his students to understand that while equality may be a democratic principle, it is not always actualized. This understanding is valuable to citizenship because it helps students to grapple with the idea that there is still work to be done to move society forward. As Mr. Kent put it, "we really haven't done enough." Regardless of whether Mr. Kent's students choose to eventually become activists for civil rights, or to become regular voters, or even to just donate to needy causes, they will be prepared with the understandings that can help them to participate in a way that supports a "strong democracy" (Barber, 1984).

Another lesson we can learn from the teachers presented in Chapter 6 is that teachers choose content that often takes up these contemporary issues, but they must be prepared to face the dilemmas that this choice entails. Mrs. Davis wanted her students to understand how the past impacted the present in order to better process the way racism still affects our society today. But her choice to focus on content that dealt with issues of race caused her to consider how the context of her classroom and students affected their understanding of racial tensions.

This issue of historical content knowledge, and its role in helping students to make connections between the past and the present, is more important for democracy than it might at first seem. Recently, a study released by the Southern Poverty Law Center indicated that students in the U.S. are not being taught about slavery in a historically accurate or comprehensive way. Data showed that “only 8 percent of high school seniors surveyed can identify slavery as the central cause of the Civil War,” and that “Fewer than 1 in 4 students (22 percent) can correctly identify how provisions in the Constitution gave advantages to slaveholders.” They attribute this to the lack of “deep coverage” in the classroom by history teachers, the failure of textbooks to comprehensively and accurately portray slavery, and weak state content standards. They explained, “Of the 15 sets of state standards we analyzed, none addresses how the ideology of white supremacy rose to justify the institution of slavery; most fail to lay out meaningful requirements for learning about slavery, about the lives of the millions of enslaved people, or about how their labor was essential to the American economy” (SPLC). Without such background knowledge, the students surveyed could not make the connections necessary to explain the significance and legacy of slavery and its connection to institutionalized racism today.

A similar recent study also revealed significant gaps in adults’ knowledge (especially that of Millennials) about the Holocaust, and that “a majority of Americans (58 percent) believe something like the Holocaust could happen again” (Claims Conference Survey). Poland is currently considering a law that would make it a crime to assert that any Polish citizens cooperated with the Nazis. NPR noted that “while the United States has also asked Poland to rescind the law, Israeli media reported Friday [April 13, 2018] that the White House and State Department have asked the Israeli government to tone down its public criticism” (Nicholson,

2018). Although the potential law applies only to Poland, American citizens and history teachers alike must consider the role our democracy plays in arbitrating such questions of historical truth. This erasure of facts only heightens the importance of understanding the complexities of the enactment of meaningful historical explanation in American classrooms.

We saw in Chapter 6 how sometimes Mr. Kent stepped in to provide teacher-centered explanation in order to emphasize the complexity of the content the students were discussing. He helped his students to understand that modern-day segregation went well beyond seemingly simple choices about where to live. Helping students to understand this complexity, and more significantly guiding them through a process where they arrived at these complex understandings on their own, was an important way to prepare students to utilize the complex thinking skills they will need as citizens. In the same vein, the lack of knowledge and the simplification of it, or the failure to represent its complexity, suggest larger issues connected to the choices history teachers make when they enact meaningful explanation. Teachers are “curricular gatekeepers” who, by translating standards and curriculum into lessons, have significant power to influence what students learn (Thornton, 2005). The recent news reports presented above highlight the importance of understanding why teachers might make a choice to represent historical content as fixed or interpretive.

The findings in Chapter 6 that shed light on a teacher’s choice to represent history as fixed rather than interpretive, are particularly significant, given that this is what many history teachers are doing. Because the study did not evaluate student work, we cannot know for certain the impact of a teacher’s choice to use fixed over interpretive representations of content. But we can discuss the significance of the reasons why the teachers chose to represent content in this way. Setting this in the context of the teachers’ instructional dilemmas can help to make this

clear. Mrs. Davis believed an effective way to establish both historical content knowledge and an understanding of its connection to the present, was by generating her students' empathy for the historical experiences of African Americans at the time of the Civil Rights Movement. To carry this out, she chose to use teacher-only explanation so she could try to make sure the students received a fixed representation of the content, and truly understand the brutality and seriousness of the information. Her lesson was not designed with an interpretive frame, such as to help students understand the different points of view on segregation. In the subsequent two lessons, she did have the students examine different approaches to protest during the Civil Rights Movement, including economic, social, and political forms, as well as discussing non-violent vs. more militant forms of protest. However, she believed she had to establish students' understanding of racism in a fixed way first, before they could discuss the larger implications of this. Teacher-centered explanation thus made sense as a process that would help her to communicate this initial fixed understanding.

Mr. Kent, on the other hand, chose to use shared explanation to reinforce students' background knowledge about the Civil Rights Movement and help them to make connections to the present. In Mr. Kent's case, his commitment to making sure the students understood the content in a specific way at times caused him to revert to teacher-centered explanation, which he believed was necessary in order to make sure the students were understanding what he wanted them to understand. Likewise, Mrs. Ellery used teacher-centered explanation to correct students' misconceptions associated with their lack of background knowledge. What the data from these three teachers may indicate is that, contrary to the popular assumption and enduring misconception that traditional, teacher-centered explanation is a less-effective form of instruction than student-centered teaching, teacher-only explanation can be used with intention to ensure

students understand the content knowledge necessary for making history meaningful for understanding the present.

### **Historical Explanation for the Development of Civic Beliefs and Values**

Although Mr. Kent also valued helping students to understand the significance of the past to the present, his orientation toward historical explanation carried larger connotations regarding the role such explanations could play in helping students to form political views and opinions. Mr. Kent explained that the process of socialization helped students to develop views that supported democratic ways of thinking. This socialization process that schools serve would prevent students from going down a “negative path” and would help them to understand that racist views would “not move the country forward.” In contrast to Mrs. Davis’s use of teacher-only explanation, Mr. Kent preferred the process of shared explanation for building these skills. He argued that since the students could not be lectured out of their prejudicial views, it was better to engage them by creating opportunities for them to come to understandings on their own. Participating in shared explanation and giving them a chance to interpret history would support this. The process of shared explanation also allowed Mr. Kent to act as a guide and lead the students toward political views that would support democratic citizenship. For example, he utilized a connection to terrorism to demonstrate that there are modern-day issues for which most are in agreement. He hoped that by understanding this, he could get the students in his classroom with prejudicial views to see that views such as theirs are not productive for moving the country forward.

As suggested by these findings, what role can historical explanation play in supporting students’ development of political beliefs and opinions that support the process of democracy? Specifically, what can we learn from Mr. Kent’s commitment to representing history as

interpretive and using shared explanation, and his choice to revert at times to a fixed representation of history through teacher-only explanation? Such questions can best be understood in light of a current debate within public discourse. Recent articles and op-eds have revived the question of whether the voting age should be lowered to age 16, especially in light of the civic engagement that students in Parkville, Florida have demonstrated and inspired in high school students around the country. Empirical evidence shows that lowering the voting age may encourage lifelong voter participation (Dahlgaard, 2018). Researchers in Denmark have even found a “trickle-up effect” that shows an increase in the voter turnout of the parents of newly enfranchised young voters (Dahlgaard, 2018). But the question that repeatedly arises in this debate is whether 16-year-olds are ready to take on the civic responsibility of voting in an informed and responsible way (Steinberg, 2018). Research has demonstrated that the “cold cognition skills,” the ones people use when they have time to deliberate and reason logically with facts are already in place by age 16 (Steinberg, et al., 2009). “Hot cognition abilities,” those of self-regulation that allow us to “make good decisions when we are emotionally aroused, in groups, or in a hurry,” do not fully develop until age 22 (Steinberg, et al., 2009). Advocates of lowering the voting age have argued that the “cold cognition skills” are the ones necessary for voting. Mr. Kent’s quest to help strengthen his students’ skills at interpretation and deliberation around contemporary social and political issues supports this idea that practice with cold cognition skills can support later civic participation.

Mr. Kent’s pedagogical choices take on a larger significance when examined in light of this. Mr. Kent was focused on developing his students’ deliberative skills, and not only their historical knowledge. Several social studies researchers have drawn connections between citizenship and skills such as the ability to evaluate facts, draw reasoned conclusions, and

deliberate with peers (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Parker, 2010; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Mr. Kent believed that students could not gain these skills unless they participated in the process of explanation, and that the most generative way to do this was to suggest that they had an important role in shaping the interpretation of the explanation. Through the process of shared explanation, Mr. Kent could acknowledge that his students' views mattered and could build on what they said and use it to advance the explanation and understanding of the class. He could also "attend to his students' ideas about history" (Monte-Sano & Budano, 2012) and address their misconceptions. We saw how Mr. Kent's use of shared explanation invited students to make connections to their own lives, such as the student who talked about moving school districts to avoid the school her mom had attended. We also saw that students exhibited a misconception during the context of the discussion about de facto segregation. The students started to form an interpretation that modern segregation was only caused by people making choices to live near others who looked like them. Mr. Kent brought the conversation back to the role that racism plays in order to confront this misconception. He stepped in to emphasize his own views about the significance of racism in preventing our country from moving forward.

This suggests a number of questions: What happens when teachers do not allow historical explanations to be interpretive? Was Mr. Kent imposing his own moral views on his students? Would other combinations of pedagogical choices have allowed him to manage the dilemma of his students' prejudicial views in a way that did not impose a particular understanding of citizenship? In situations where teachers are giving students more control over the explanation, should teachers give their own views or let students decide? Do history teachers have a moral obligation to tell students that a historical decision or event was wrong? These



questions do not have easy answers. Yet they are questions that history teachers consciously and unconsciously address every time they begin to explain.

The significance of interpretive choices in history can be demonstrated in sharp relief by the current nature of textbooks in Texas. A new social studies curriculum approved by the Texas Board of Education in 2010 promotes “capitalism” and “Republican political philosophies.” Students in Texas began using the textbooks that were written based on this curriculum in 2015. The textbooks present slavery as having an “upside,” and downplay its horrors, explaining that slavery created a “distinctive African-American culture, in which family was central, Christianity provided ‘hope,’ folktales expressed ‘joy,’ and community dances were important social events” (Rockmore, 2015). The textbooks also used grammar manipulation by writing about the “upside” of slavery in active voice, and putting the drawbacks of slavery in passive voice, in essence hiding the role of the perpetrators. The Texas textbooks and the findings from Mr. Kent and Mrs. Davis make it clear that interpretive choices play a significant role in conveying meaning that matters for democratic citizenship.

The findings from Mrs. Ellery reveal another reason why democratic citizenship and teacher-centered explanation might not be as oppositional as popular assumptions may imply. Mrs. Ellery’s lessons display a balance between teacher-only explanation and shared explanation. She intervenes at moments of misconception in order to correct misunderstandings, but in the end still allows the students to be responsible for the explanation. Mrs. Ellery also uses teacher-centered explanation to model historical thinking skills such as sourcing, contextualization, corroboration, and close reading, and then gives students practice with these in order to help them understand multiple perspectives. Students may exhibit “cold cognition” skills by the age of 16, but this ability to reason based upon evidence must be learned along the

way. The combination of teacher-only and shared explanation used by Mrs. Ellery and by Mr. Kent, reveals why teachers' pedagogical choices play an important role in these teachers' enactment of their educational beliefs and orientation toward history.

### **Historical Explanation for Social Justice**

As noted before, democratic citizenship is not only about reasoning skills, but it is also about the type of dispositions young people need to be deliberative actors (Barber, 2016). This is where teachers' orientations toward the role of meaningful historical explanation in supporting social justice come into play. Westheimer & Kahne (2004) write about the "Justice-oriented citizen" who "critically assesses social, political, and economic structures to see beyond surface causes" and who "knows about democratic social movements and how to effect systemic change" (p. 240). At first glance, historical explanation may seem to be the least likely pedagogical method by which to encourage social-justice oriented citizens. But if you read the excerpts from Westheimer and Kahne's definition above, you will see that social justice citizenship is not only about actively working for change. It is also about gaining the knowledge and understandings necessary to support that work. Mrs. Davis, by explaining different forms of protest and asking her students to evaluate which was most effective in creating change (political, social, or economic methods), was helping her students to learn about "democratic social movements and how to effect systemic change." The prompt she gave the students at the end of the third observed lesson asked them to imagine that they were an activist working for change today, and to articulate which methods they believed would be most effective for creating the change they desired. For Mrs. Davis, who had a strong social justice orientation, this was not just an academic exercise. It was about asking the students to make the connections between the

past and the present that would strengthen the understandings necessary for them to become more conscientious civic actors.

Mrs. Davis also had to take into account her students current dispositions, as well as what disposition they would need to have to understand the historical content in a way that supported social justice. Using empathy as a form of meaningful explanation to address her students' lack of background knowledge and prejudicial views was not a random choice. It was a recognition that meaningful historical explanation could be used to support the type of democratic dispositions young people need to be deliberative actors.

Mrs. Davis articulated that her classroom was a “microcosm of the larger political climate.” History classrooms are spaces of learning that are situated within a democracy, and all that a democracy entails. This means that teachers must be conscious of a wide variety of viewpoints and ideas as they navigate the path of meaningful explanation. Mrs. Ellery's focus on helping students to explain multiple perspectives was not just so they could better understand the past. Developing an understanding of multiple perspectives was important for living in a democracy based upon the tolerance of multiple views. It was also about generating understanding of others who may view the world differently than the students' did (Barber, 1989; Merryfield, et al., 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2013; Seixas & Peck, 2004). This is vitally important in a world where political leaders and American citizens alike verge toward an absolutist form of thinking where all Muslims are considered terrorists and people with a different color of skin than they have come from “sh\*thole countries” (Davis, Stolberg, & Kaplan, 2018).

Mrs. Ellery's desire to help her students understand the choice of the United States to help free the Filipinos, and then President McKinley's choice to annex the Philippines, was not

to condone this choice, but to help her students grapple with the complexity of historical views and historical action. She wanted to help students learn to avoid the type of presentist thinking that imposes modern-day views upon actors of the past. Students given practice with this form of thinking have the potential to also apply this skill as citizens, and to not impose their own beliefs upon others living in the world today. Mrs. Ellery faced a challenge because she did want to make sure the students understood the U.S. annexation of the Philippines as an injustice. She wanted her students to explain McKinley's choices without empathizing with them. Her choice to engage students in a document-based lesson was not based solely on the idea that student-centered learning was better, but came from the recognition of how teaching history in a disciplinary way could promote the types of dispositions and skills that were valuable for citizenship.

In looking back at the research questions guiding this study, the findings point to an intersection of the “why” and the “how” of teaching through meaningful historical explanation. The “why” inspired these teachers to engage in meaningful explanation in the first place, but it was their pedagogical content knowledge that helped them to enact the “how” that allowed them to manage their instructional dilemmas and to carry out their objectives. As noted in the introduction, one goal of this dissertation was to investigate the juxtaposition of two opposing circumstances in history teaching: (1) that many if not most history teachers are using traditional, explanatory methods of history instruction such as lecture and recitation (Barton, 2011; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Nokes, 2010; Saye & SSIRC, 2013, VanSledright, 2002), and (2) the widespread belief that such methods do not lend themselves towards preparing students for democratic citizenship. The data in this study proves otherwise. Historical explanation can help students to develop an understanding of multiple perspectives and a respect for others' views that

might be different from their own. It can generate empathy in a world where ignorance of the “other” produces fear and misunderstandings. And finally, it can even create the conditions necessary for citizens to engage in the work of social justice, for before one can go out and create change, one needs to understand how the past has contributed to the present conditions that require change in the first place.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The teachers examined in this study generously opened up their classrooms for observation. In doing so, they made it possible for the lessons they taught to expand beyond the historical content, and beyond the walls of their classroom, to help improve history teaching and the teacher education of new teachers. And just as their lessons helped students build understandings that moved from describing the world, to explaining the world, to providing understanding that helps change the world, the findings presented in this dissertation hope to do the same. As Mr. Kent explained in his interview, “It's okay to look at our problems, but we want to learn from them.” So what can we learn from the struggles the teachers faced, and the pedagogical choices they made in order to make historical explanation meaningful? What possibilities do the findings presented hold for changing the way history teachers teach and for improving how new social studies teachers learn to teach?

The findings in this study demonstrated that historical explanation could indeed be enacted in such a way as to make the learning of history matter for living and acting in a democracy. But teachers are not guaranteed to understand how to use historical explanation to support students' skills for democratic citizenship, especially when all popular assumptions point to its inefficacy at being a method for doing so. History curriculums are often focused solely on the goals of having students better understand the past, and so provide little guidance on making history more relevant to today's world. Research indicates, too, that students on their own are not likely to make connections between the past and the present (Foster, Ashby, & Lee, 2008). New teachers need structured teacher education, and practicing teachers need thoughtful professional development that can help them to learn pedagogical beliefs and behaviors that

support their students' development of this type of thinking. The findings point to a number of different considerations that professional development designers and teacher educators alike should keep in mind when supporting teachers' efforts to enact meaningful historical explanation.

First, one important method of supporting teachers is to provide them with concrete, actionable lesson plans that demonstrate how to enact practices within specific topics of study. This is especially important for new teachers who may not have a wealth of resources to draw upon when they are just starting out. This dissertation presented lessons in which meaningful explanation was used to teach about the Civil Rights Movement, the Spanish-American War, the U.S. Annexations of Hawaii and the Philippines, and schools and segregation. Such sample lesson plans can call attention to how content is represented, and when, for example, common student misconceptions might be better addressed through teacher-only explanation rather than shared explanation. To call for professional development and teacher education that offers specific, actionable recommendations for practice is not to advocate for scripted teaching – far from it. It is more akin to the analogy of providing a craftsman with a higher quality set of tools and letting the craftsman decide on when and how to use them.

Teacher educators and professional development leaders should understand, however, that just providing sample lesson plans may not be enough to ensure their effective enactment. Indeed, the findings in this dissertation also point to a recognition that classroom context plays a vital role in teachers' decision-making process. If teachers are going to use meaningful historical explanation to address students' civic learning needs, then they must consider questions of who their students are, what they already know, and what they believe. Mrs. Davis, Mrs. Ellery, and Mr. Kent were all very much aware of the instructional dilemmas they faced when enacting

meaningful explanation. They understood what background knowledge their students were missing, what worldviews their students had, and how their students tended to look at history and historical actors. The forms of meaningful explanation they chose to use were the result of careful consideration of how each form would address their own students' needs. New and practicing teachers could be asked to participate in activities that ask them to think more intentionally about who their individual students are, and to brainstorm, alone and with other teachers, pedagogical responses that take this information into account.

Part of this support may also include serious conversations within professional development sessions, and more importantly within student teachers' teaching methods courses, about the misuse of methods of meaningful historical explanation. For example, teachers may ask students to connect historical content to their lives in a way that causes them to misinterpret the meaning of this content. Comparing segregation to different sizes of bedrooms between siblings represents segregation as something that was just unfair, and does not address the real implications of racism. Another example is how teachers often use simulations to help students understand and then explain complex concepts and to develop empathy for historical actors. Students are usually asked to participate in the simulation, and then to explain what they were feeling and what historical actors must have thought and felt in the same situation. While the development of empathy is one way to make historical explanation meaningful, as evidenced by the way Mrs. Davis used it, "well-meaning" teachers may think that simulations related to the Holocaust or slavery are effective for developing such empathy. Professional development providers and teacher educators can respond to this by utilizing resources that have already been developed by organizations whose mission supports a social justice conception of citizenship.



The Anti-Defamation League Braun Holocaust Institute distributes a handout to teachers listing the following reasons for why simulations should not be used:

- They are **pedagogically unsound** because they **trivialize the experience of victims** and can leave students with the impression at the conclusion of the activity that they actually know what it was like during the Holocaust
- They **stereotype group behavior** and **distort historical reality** by reducing groups of people and their experiences and actions to one-dimensional representations
- They can **reinforce negative views** of the victims
- They **impede critical analysis** by **oversimplifying complex historical events and human behavior**, leaving students with a skewed view of history
- They **disconnect** the Holocaust **from the context of European and global history**

Explanations that are meaningful for supporting students' skills and dispositions for democratic citizenship are stronger when teachers can use resources that represent history in a more meaningful way. Primary source accounts provide testimony that gives students a more authentic representation of people's experiences than an imaginary situation that students may recreate. The ADL's handout presents alternative ways for using the process of explanation to develop empathy:

- **Drawing on primary source materials**, such as photographs, artwork, diary entries, letters, government documents, and visual history testimony
- **Assigning reflective writing exercises** or **leading in-class discussions** that explore various aspects of human behavior such as scapegoating or making difficult moral choices
- **Inviting survivors and other eyewitnesses** to share their stories

Teacher often may not know how to utilize these resources and use them to help make students' explanations more meaningful. In their methods courses, teacher educators can help student teachers to understand how to use primary source documents to teach students skills for contextualization and sourcing, which will help students explain history from the context of the time and help them to avoid imposing their own beliefs on historical actors. These student teachers could then practice implementing such lessons in their placements, and reflect on them with their cooperating teacher. Teacher educators should discuss with student teachers how

listening to a survivor explain their experiences, and then asking students to explain what they learned from hearing this survivor, can be an even more powerful form of explanation than what comes out of many simulations. It may not be enough to tell new and practicing teachers that they should help their students to develop empathy, or that they should incorporate multiple perspectives into their lessons. Cautionary handouts like the one above make it clear how easily teachers could think they are engaging in meaningful historical explanation that supports ideals of democratic citizenship, when in reality the meaning that gets conveyed through the explanation that comes out of these simulations is quite the opposite.

Finally, this study provides renewed hope for addressing what seems to be an insurmountable gap that appears when student teachers demonstrate an understanding of inquiry-based teaching practices in their methods courses, but revert to lecture and recitation-based explanatory methods in their first few years of teaching (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Martell, 2013; van Hover & Yeager, 2003). Perhaps it is overly ambitious, or perhaps it is idealistic, but I believe the findings in this dissertation suggest that it is possible to begin an agenda of teacher education reform that challenges the idea that new teachers' growth can only come through experience and through trial and error. Why not take the explanatory method that new teachers tend to use *anyway*, and show these new teachers how to enact it in more meaningful ways? Student teachers need guided practice, both in their methods courses and within their placements, in learning how their explanations and their pedagogical choices are shaped by their own philosophical beliefs, as well as in how they might think carefully about how these choices can be informed by the context of their own classroom and their students' needs. If teacher educators are going to help student teachers explain in a more meaningful way, they need to break apart the complexity of verbal moves involved in teaching history through explanation,

and to help new teachers understand how specific choices are made regarding form, content, and process.

Teacher educators and professional development providers working with veteran teachers could start by providing teachers with the chart of the five different forms of meaningful explanation outlined in Chapter 5. Teachers could be shown specific examples, like the ones in Chapter 6, of how Mrs. Davis uses empathy, how Mrs. Ellery uses multiple perspectives, and how Mr. Kent uses connections to students' lives and to current events with specific historical content. Teachers could be asked to identify what instructional dilemmas these three teachers were confronting, and how these manifested themselves when these teachers began to use meaningful explanation. Teacher educators could then call attention to these teachers' specific choices surrounding content and process, and how these choices are influenced both by the teachers' orientations toward the purpose of history and by their students' instructional needs. New teachers must be shown not just generic lesson plans, but specific examples of other teachers' practices in order to learn how to think carefully about how their own orientation toward history and how their students' needs both interact with the specific historical content under study. For example, Mrs. Davis's white students did not have much knowledge of racial discrimination, which became an issue when she was teaching content related to race and wanted them to empathize. But it was also something she had to take into account specifically because she wanted to communicate an understanding of the content that supported social justice. Had she simply wanted her students to explain who Emmett Till was, they may have been able to do this without needing empathy. But Mrs. Davis wanted them to understand why Emmett Till mattered, and so making pedagogical decisions in light of her students' worldviews and background knowledge thus became more important. Mrs. Ellery explained that her white

students also had difficulty understanding racial discrimination, but this did not present as significant a barrier to understanding the Spanish American War and its connection to the present as did the students' self-focus and tendency toward presentism. Providing student teachers with the opportunity to analyze, discuss, and explain these specific examples can better help them to understand how certain instructional dilemmas might manifest themselves more strongly when different content is being explained, especially if they want their students to view the content as meaningful.

New teachers could also be taken through sample lessons to be shown how content is often represented as fixed, and how it could be presented in a more disciplinary, interpretive way through asking students to interpret and corroborate primary sources. They could be shown where to find resources online of sample Document-Based Lessons and encouraged to use these in their classroom until they have built up the content knowledge needed and have the time to research and develop such lessons on their own. Teachers should also be asked to discuss why they think they often choose to explain content themselves, and what they think influences them to invite students into the process of shared explanation. They should be asked to consider when teacher-centered explanation might be a better method to use than student-centered shared explanation, but also how shared explanation has great benefits when enacted in a thoughtful and meaningful way. More importantly, new and practicing teachers alike should be asked to think critically about what these choices mean for democratic citizenship. Once teachers understand the concrete examples of how choices surrounding form, content, and process are responses to a teacher's beliefs and to students' needs, they could be asked to brainstorm how these ideas could be used within their own classroom, with their own students' needs, and with the content they teach. All throughout these conversations, facilitators should help teachers to understand how

such choices surrounding explanation move history instruction from understanding what happened in the past and why, to making these understandings matter for living in the present and participating in civic life.

Research into the core teaching practice of “explain and connect historical content” (Fogo, 2014) holds great promise because it starts where teachers are at instead of where they are not. This does not mean that helping teachers to understand the process of moving from general explanation to meaningful historical explanation is easy. We saw that even teachers like Mrs. Davis, Mrs. Ellery, and Mr. Kent, who had experience enacting meaningful explanation, faced hurdles in carrying it out. But in most cases, the dilemmas they faced were hurdles, not walls. These teachers tried to make historical explanation meaningful because they understood the potential of explanation to do so, and because their own educational philosophy made them feel an obligation to use their teaching to help prepare good citizens. Desire alone, however, was not what allowed them to jump their hurdles. These teachers were prepared with pedagogical content knowledge that allowed them to make thoughtful choices relating to the *form* of meaningful historical explanation they used, the way they represented historical *content*, and the *process* they felt would best help them to enact it in a way that supported students’ preparation for democratic citizenship.

In referring to one of his favorite teachers in his 2013 Presidential Address to the American Historical Association, historian William Cronon explained that, “When magic happens in a classroom, it is because someone worked hard to create it” (p. 17). The field of teaching could benefit from more research that draws actionable lessons from the hard work teachers do, for placing hopes that magic will happen on its own to prepare good citizens is just wishful thinking.

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## APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol Questions [using Spradley's (1979) categories]:

1. (Grand Tour Question) What do you like about teaching history?
2. (Mini-Tour Question) How can you tell when students understanding something? How can you tell when students do not understand something?
3. (Example Question) Can you give me an example of how you get students to make connections, rather than just telling them?
4. (Experience Question) Can you tell me about some of your experiences with a particularly successful lesson?
5. (Contrast Question) What is the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful lesson?
6. (Native Language Question) What types of questions do you ask students?

Additional Questions:

7. What did you want your students to understand about [topic of lesson(s)]?
8. What did you think was most effective about how you explained [content/concept/skill]?
9. How would you explain to your students what the discipline of history is about?
10. Why do you think history is important for students to learn?
11. What is your philosophy of teaching?
12. How do you know if your students have learned?
13. Do you use primary sources in your class?
14. How did you learn to teach in the ways that you teach?
15. What role does the culture of the school play in your teaching?