

# Liberating Practice: Using the Power of Discretionary Spaces

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Tri-County Culturally Responsive Mathematics Institute  
Spring Leadership Conference: Leading to Liberate  
May 14, 2024 • Livonia, MI



# What is in a name?

1. What is your **name** and how did you get this name, and why?
2. Share your name and what is important to you about it.



# So — what IS in a name?

## Names are —

- Personal and represent what we want to be called by others
- Important for acknowledging and respecting others
- Reflect culture, family, political, and historical meanings
- A way of respecting identities
- Important for seeing and connecting people and what they do and say

## Liberating practice

1. Today's framing argument

2. The power of discretionary spaces

3. Supporting learners' mathematical flourishing by liberating practice



## Liberating practice

1. **Today's framing argument**

2. The power of discretionary spaces

3. Supporting learners' mathematical flourishing by liberating practice

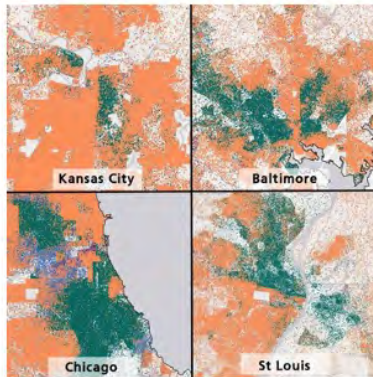


# **Liberating practice:** *(lib' er a ting prak' tis)*

1. Classrooms that are culturally responsive and in which the goal of the curriculum is liberation and centers the knowledge and experiences of Black and Brown students
2. Practice that is liberated from normalized patterns that harm Black and Brown students



# The pervasiveness of racism and racial injustice



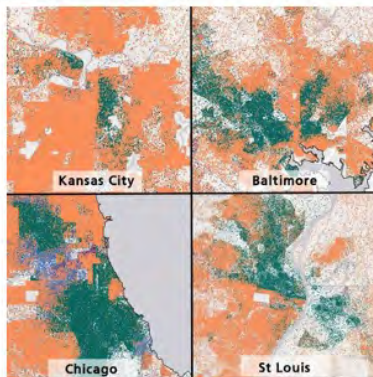
OUR CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM NEEDS REFORM

Being uninsured is *deadly*.  
A comprehensive review of studies, published in the Annals of Internal Medicine, confirms that **thousands of people die each year because they don't have coverage**. We need to close these gaps and cover everybody with improved Medicare for all.  
PNHP [pnhp.org/mortality](https://pnhp.org/mortality)






# The pervasiveness of racism and racial injustice



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**PNHP**  [pnhp.org/mortality](https://pnhp.org/mortality)

What does schooling have to do with it?







**NOTICE:**  
VOTERS ARE REQUIRED TO WEAR MASKS,  
PRACTICE SOCIAL DISTANCING,  
AND BE MINDFUL OF THE OTHER PEOPLE  
IN YOUR COMMUNITY

← 6 FEET →



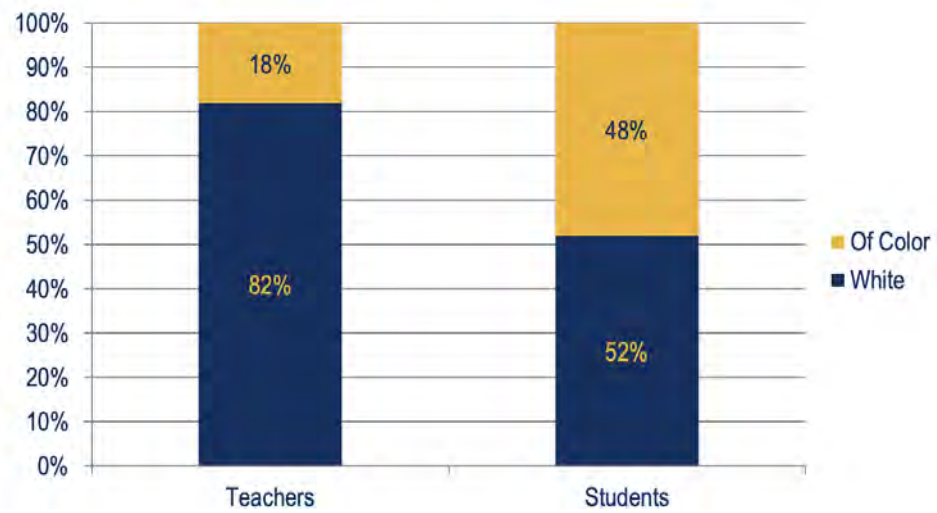


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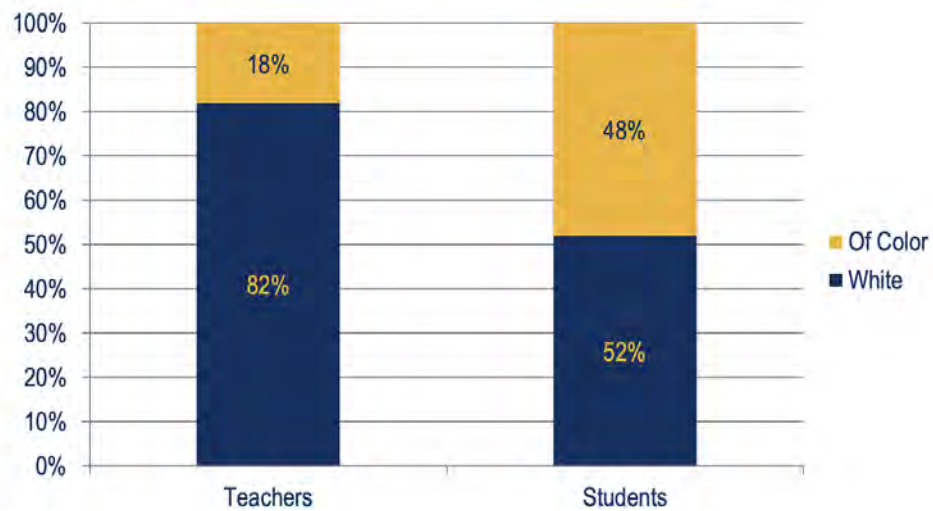
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## DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDE IN THE U.S.: K-12 TEACHERS AND STUDENTS



## DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDE IN THE U.S.: K-12 TEACHERS AND STUDENTS



### 2004 DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Distinguished Lecture

#### Landing on the Wrong Note: The Price We Paid for Brown

by Gloria Ladson-Billings

The first part of the title of this talk is taken from Ajay Heble's (2000) book *Landing on the Wrong Note, Jazz, Dominator, and Critical Practice*. I have chosen this musical image to convey the problem of good intentions gone awry. No musician plans to play the wrong note. The plaintiffs, litigators, Supreme Court Justices, and civil rights advocates all expressed good intentions regarding *Brown*, and although playing one wrong note does not destroy or invalidate an entire performance, it does create a kind of dissonance that is more or less idiosyncratic depending on one's vantage point. I am referring to the results of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision as a kind of landing on a wrong note.

#### ABSTRACT

Finally, I have written on *Brown* because this past fall I was called upon to be an expert witness in a school funding case in South Carolina (Abbott et al. v. State). The case involves evidence that their property was used for their children's education.

We examine the impact of having a same-race teacher on students' long-run educational attainment. Leveraging random student-teacher pairings in the Tennessee STAR class-size experiment, we find that black students randomly assigned to a black teacher in grades K-3 are 5 percentage points (7% more likely to graduate from high school and 4 percentage points (13% more likely to enroll in college than their peers in the same school who are not assigned a black teacher. We document similar patterns using quasi-experimental methods and statewide administrative data from North Carolina. To examine possible mechanisms, we provide a theoretical model that formalizes the notion of "role model effects" as distinct from teacher effectiveness. We envision role model effects as information provision: black teachers provide a crucial signal that leads black students to update their beliefs about the returns to effort and what educational outcomes are possible. Using testable implications generated by the theory, we provide suggestive evidence that role model effects help to explain why black teachers increase the educational attainment of black students.

Educational Researcher, Vol. 33, No. 7, pp. 3-13

OCTOBER 2024

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# Racial injustice is systemic.

- Social systems are structured with patterns of racism and injustice.
- The people who work in these systems are educated in our nation's schools.
- The teachers and curricula dominant in our education system comprise a curriculum of white supremacy.



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It is also systemically embedded in normalized teaching practice.





# The content we teach and whose knowledge it represents

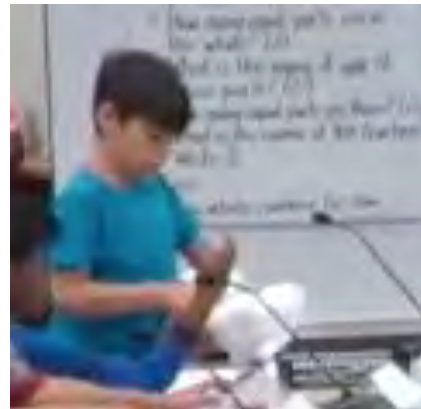


# The culture, norms, and routines of the classroom, the school, and relationships with families and the community — and whose norms these reflect

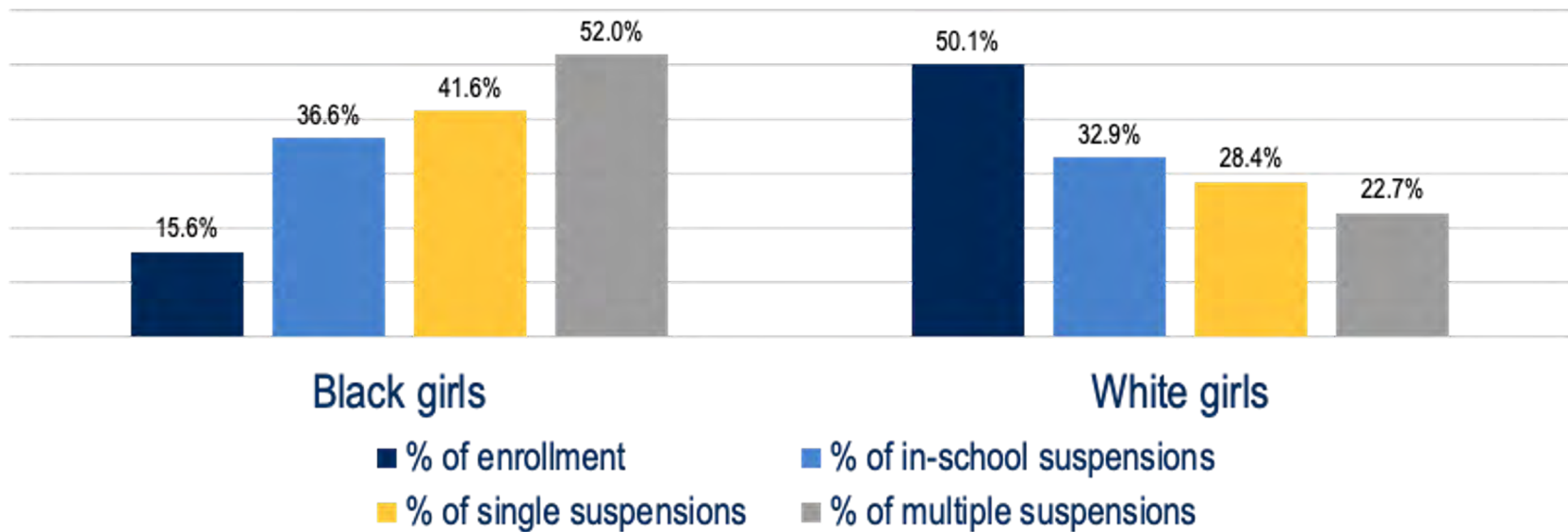


What does **carpet time** look like?

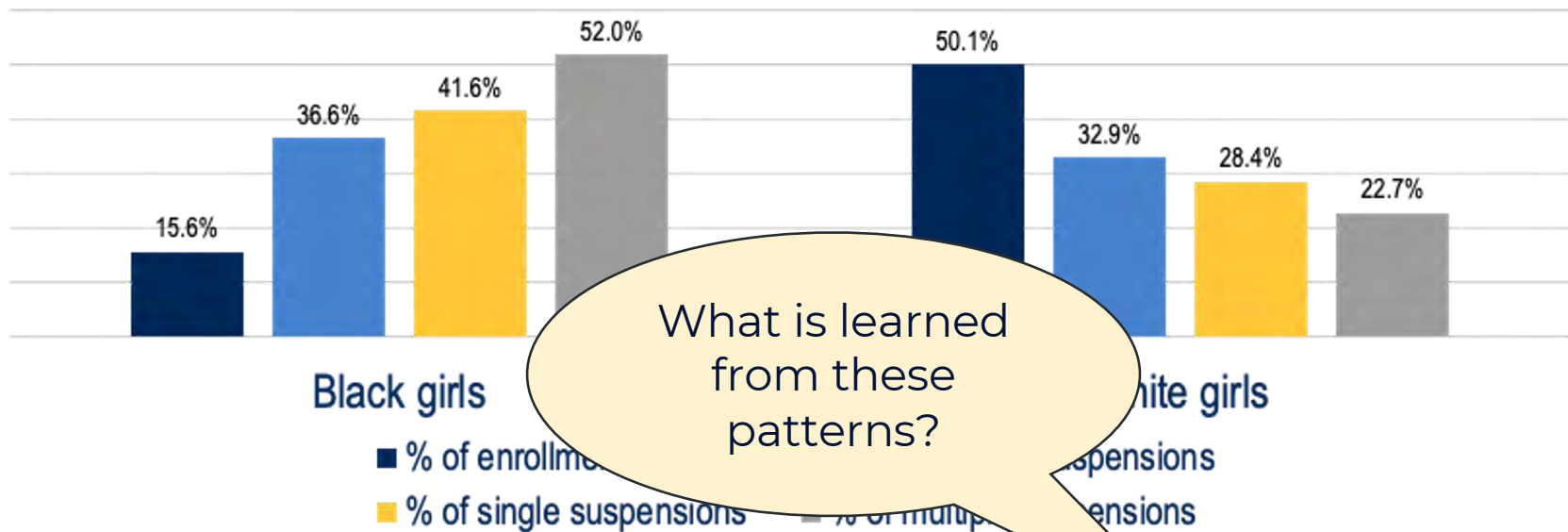




# Patterns of discipline and punishment



# Patterns of discipline and punishment



## Liberating practice

1. Today's framing argument

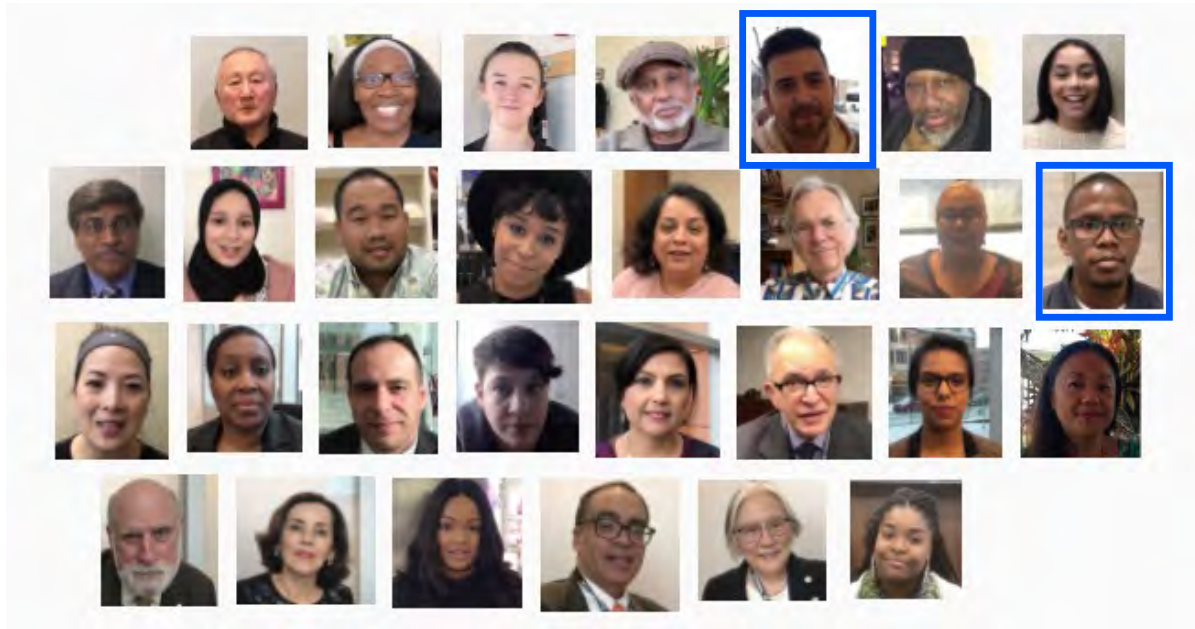
**2. The power of discretionary spaces**

3. Supporting learners' mathematical flourishing by liberating practice



# Is there a teacher who had a significant impact on you?





**Codee**

**Brendan**

**What stands out to you?  
What patterns do you notice?**



## Video: Brendan



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## Video: Codee



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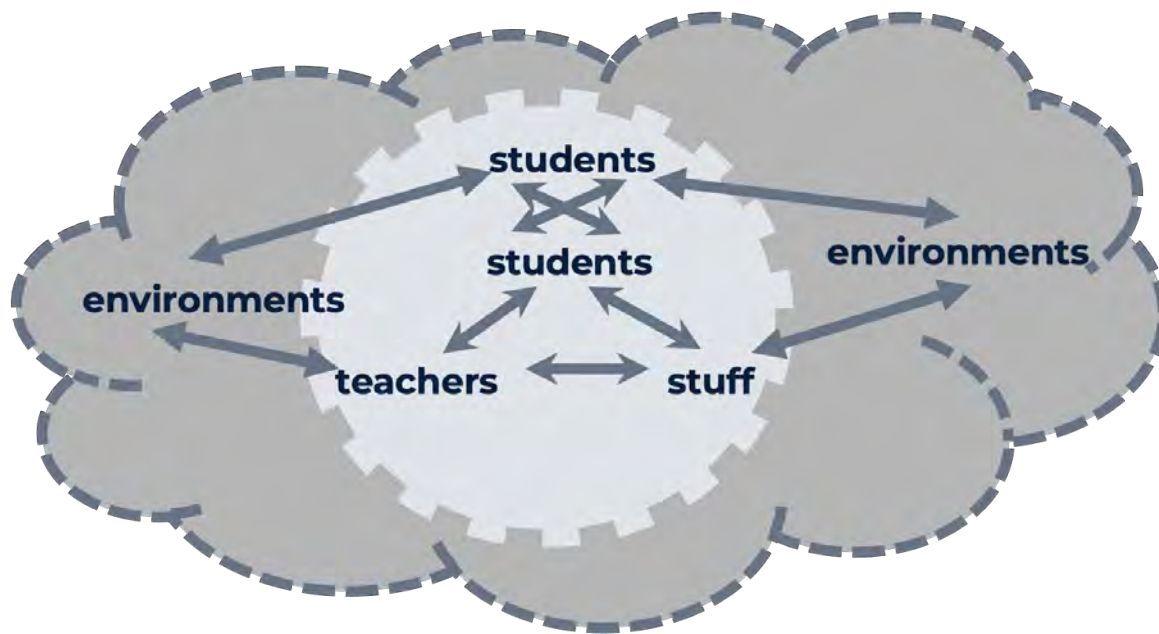


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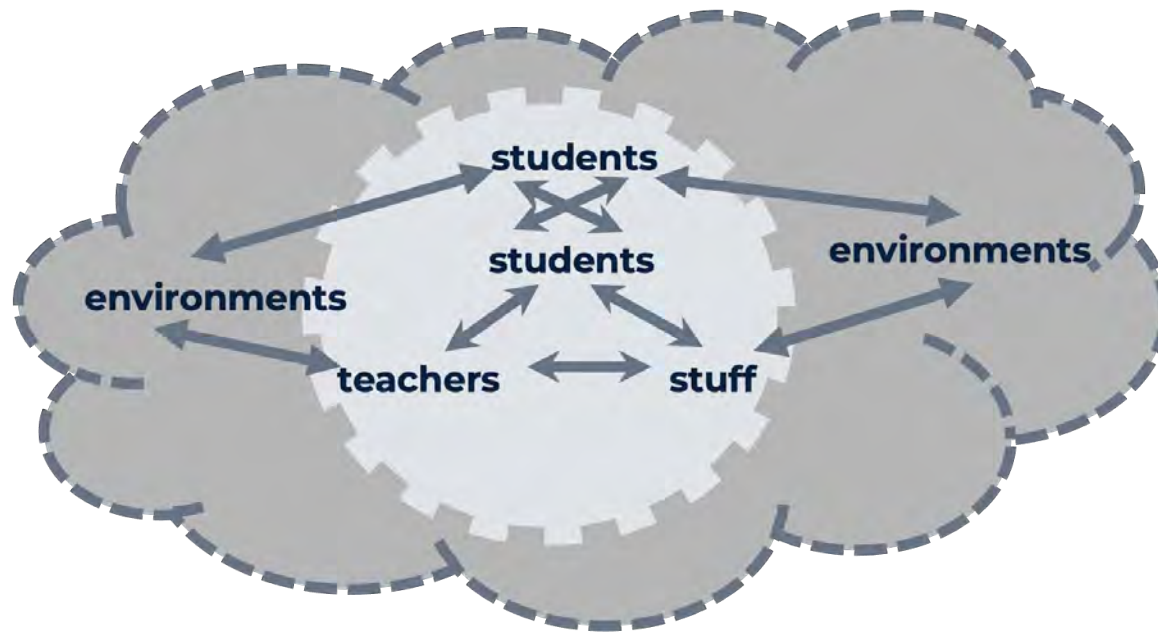
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**Discretionary spaces** lie in the many, many moment-to-moment moves, uses of language, and decisions that are inevitable in practice.

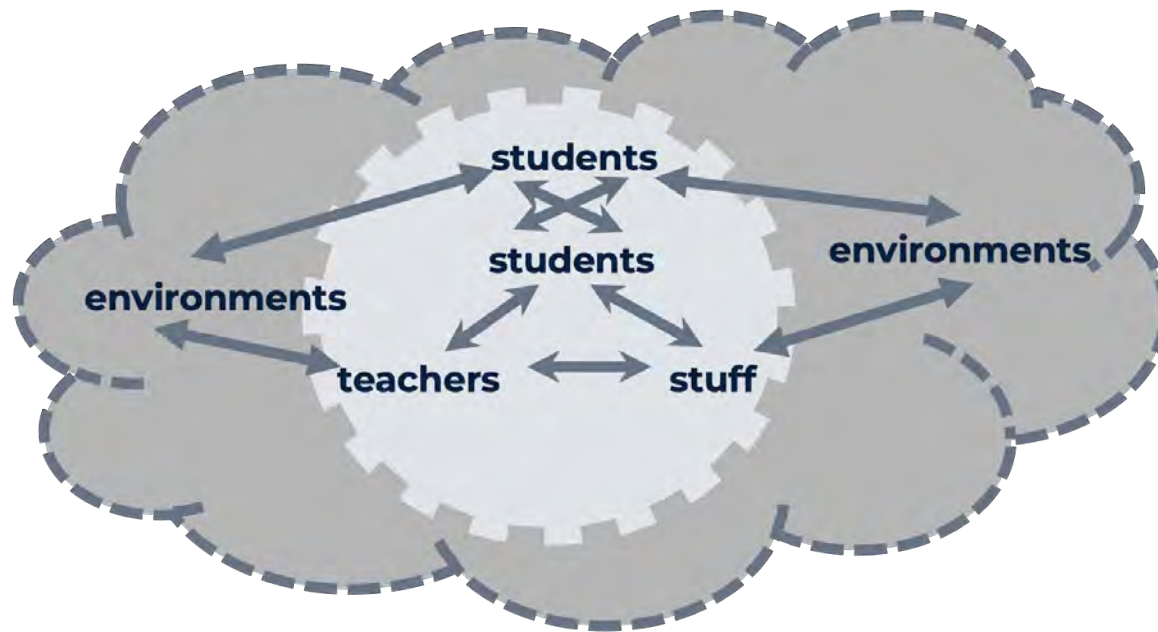
These are both crucial resources for supporting students and also where harm happens.



# 1. Teaching and learning are constructed interactively and are interpretive.



1. Teaching and learning are constructed interactively and are interpretive.
2. They take place within broad historical and socio-political environments.





1. **Teaching is powerful.** When it is done with care and judgment, students can thrive—learn content, develop positive identities, learn to value others and work collectively.
2. Teaching also involves **enormous discretion.**
3. How that discretion is exercised can either reinforce racialized and oppressive patterns of social, personal, and epistemic injustice and harm, or it can **disrupt these patterns.**



# Re-seeing the familiar

## Context

- Fifth grade class
- Predominantly Black children, a few Latine and white
- Working on mathematical reasoning, permutations

## Viewing focus

### What is likely to happen next?

This is a lens on “normal” practice.



# Miah and her classmates

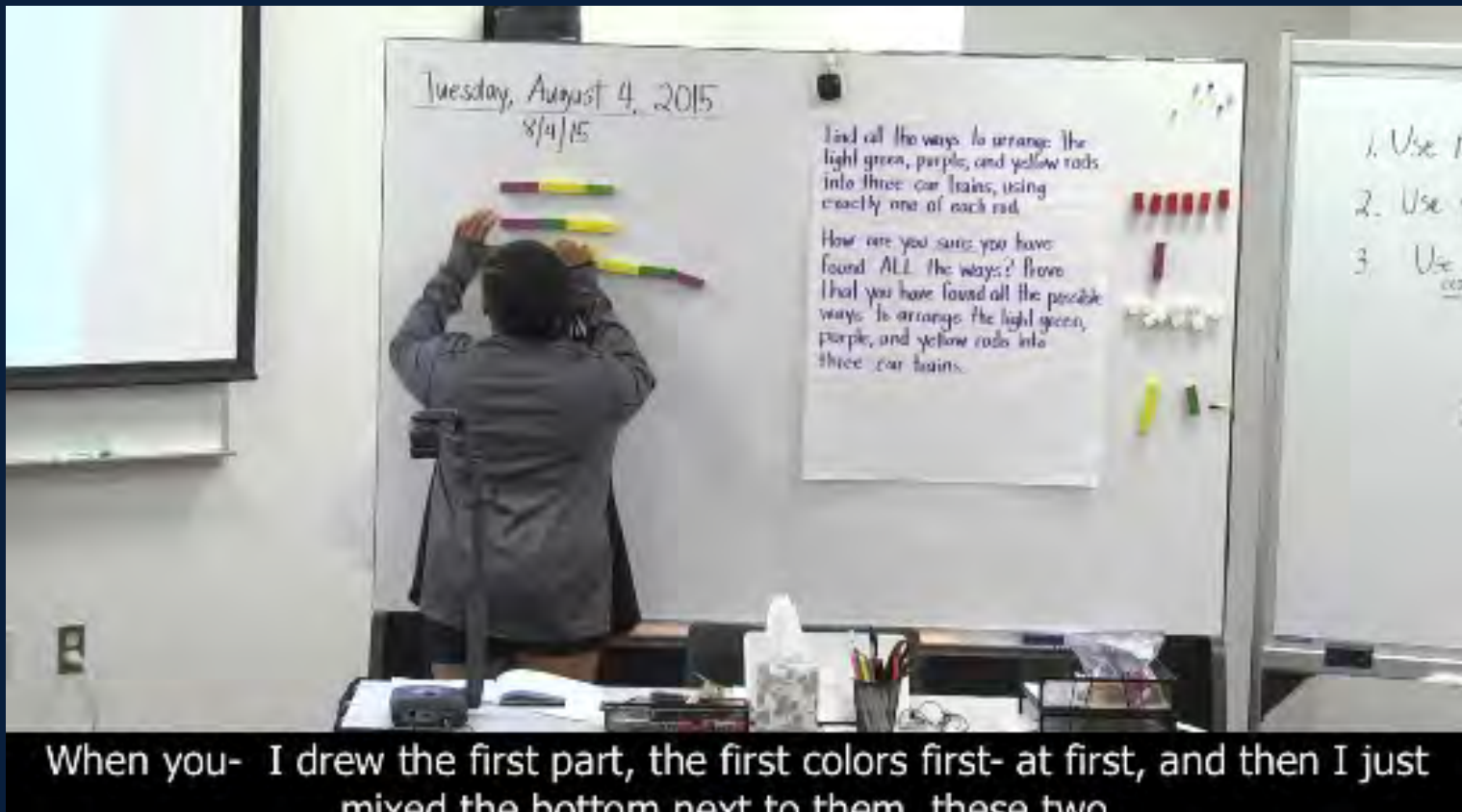
Find all the ways to arrange the light green, purple, and yellow rods into three-car trains, using exactly one of each rod.



How are you sure you have found ALL the ways? **Prove** that you have all the possible ways to arrange the light green, purple, and yellow rods into three-car trains.

**Miah presents her proof.**

## VIDEO: Miah's proof



What is likely  
to happen  
next?

What are the  
possible  
results?



# What is likely to happen next?

**NORMALIZED NEXT MOVES**

**RESULT**



# What is likely to happen next?

## NORMALIZED NEXT MOVES

- “Great job, Miah. Miah showed us that we can arrange the rods 6 ways. Does everyone see that?”

## RESULT

- Miah, a Black girl, is praised for having the right answer. But she is not positioned to take up comments from her peers.

# What is likely to happen next?

## NORMALIZED NEXT MOVES

- “Great job, Miah. Miah showed us that we can arrange the rods 6 ways. Does everyone see that?”
- “Very nice, Miah. Miah showed us that we can put the purple rod first two times and switch the green and the yellow rods, then put the green rod first, and switch the purple and yellow two times, and then the same, putting the yellow first and switching the other two.”

## RESULT

- Miah, a Black girl, is praised for having the right answer. But she is not positioned to take up comments from her peers.
- Miah’s answer is taken over and revoiced and extended by the teacher. Her agency is removed.



# What is likely to happen next?

## NORMALIZED NEXT MOVES

- “Great job, Miah. Miah showed us that we can arrange the rods 6 ways. Does everyone see that?”
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- “What Miah did was something that mathematicians figure out with a factorial— $3 \times 2 \times 1$ .”

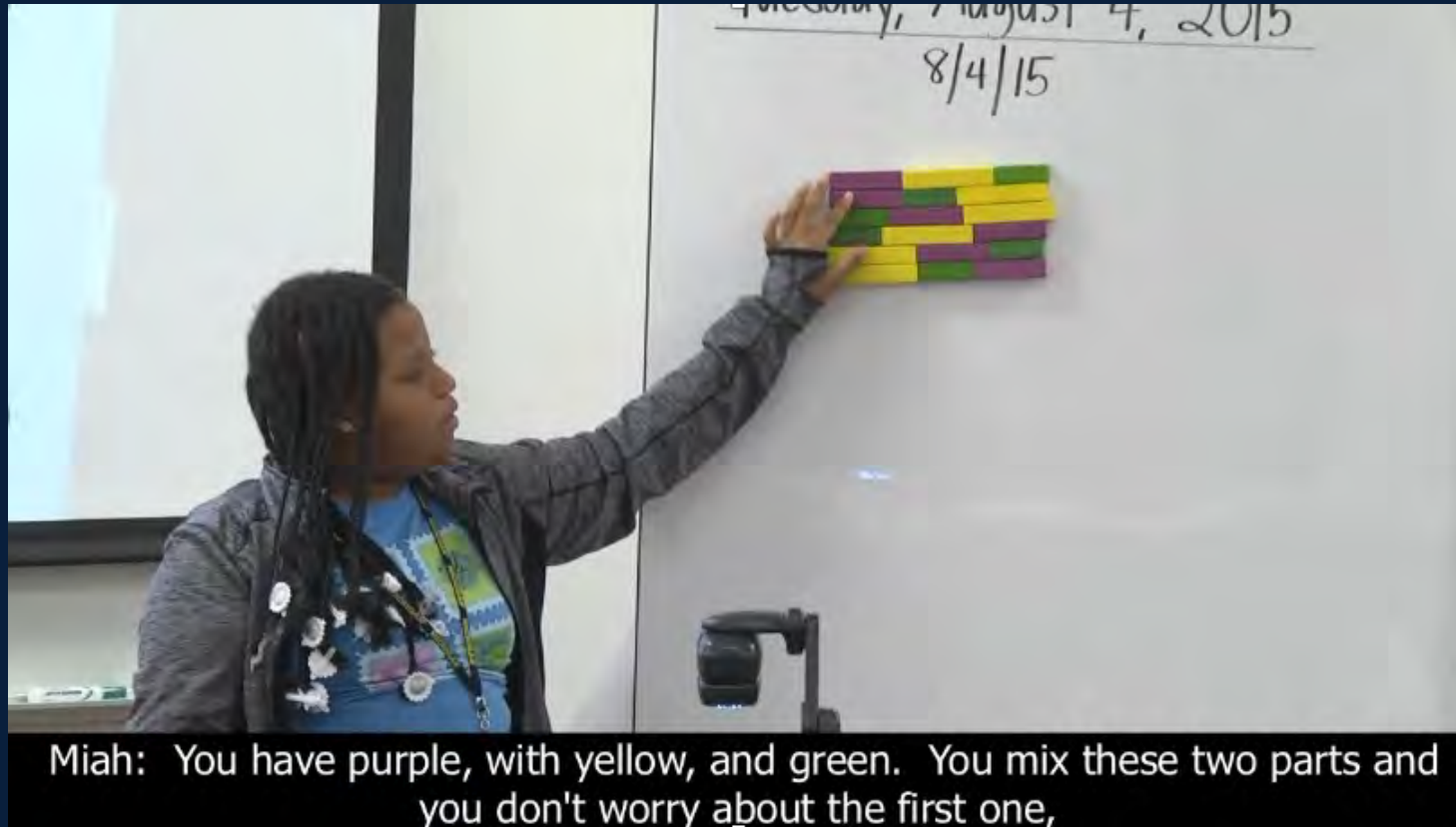
## RESULT

- Miah, a Black girl, is praised for having the right answer. But she is not positioned to take up comments from her peers.
- Miah’s answer is taken over and revoiced and extended by the teacher. Her agency is removed.
- The class is not engaged in restating and commenting on Miah’s solution, so neither she nor her classmates are positioned to do collective work.

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## VIDEO: Miah explains her proof to the class



## How does this disrupt normalized practice?

- Miah is positioned as the author of the explanation and the class as her peers to consider her solution.
- Miah is supported to hold the floor.
- Miah and her classmates are trusted to engage in the work.



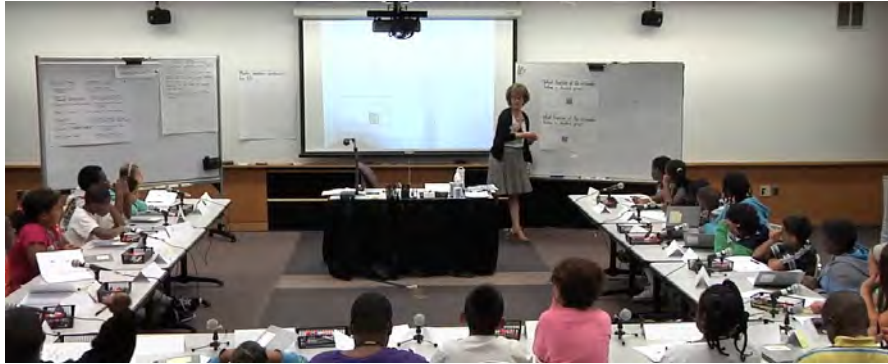
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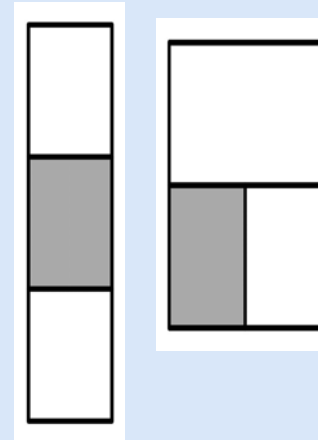
2. The power of discretionary spaces

**3. Supporting learners' flourishing by liberating practice**

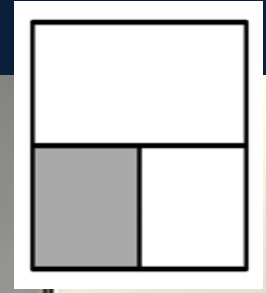




**What fraction of each rectangle below is shaded gray?**



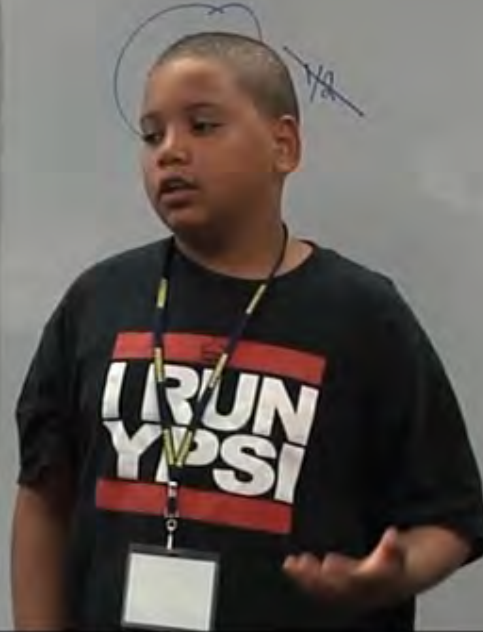
## Video: Antar, Gabriella, and Gabi



What fraction of the rectangle below is shaded gray?



What fraction of the rectangle below is shaded gray?



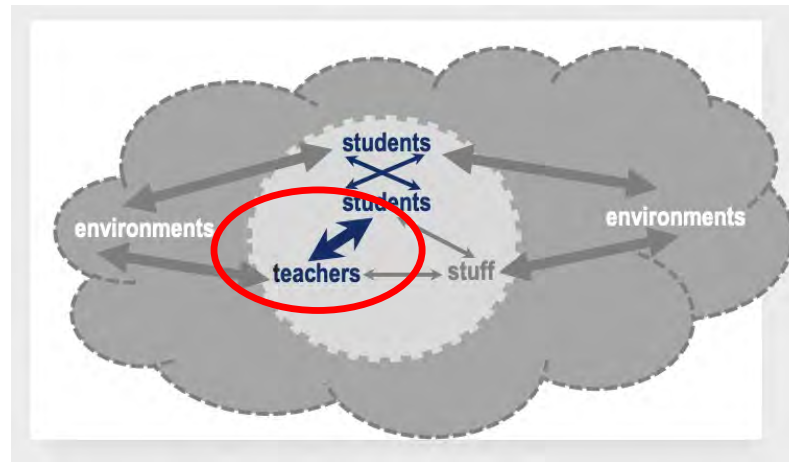
Antar: I think it's not a fraction because all the parts are not equally the same.



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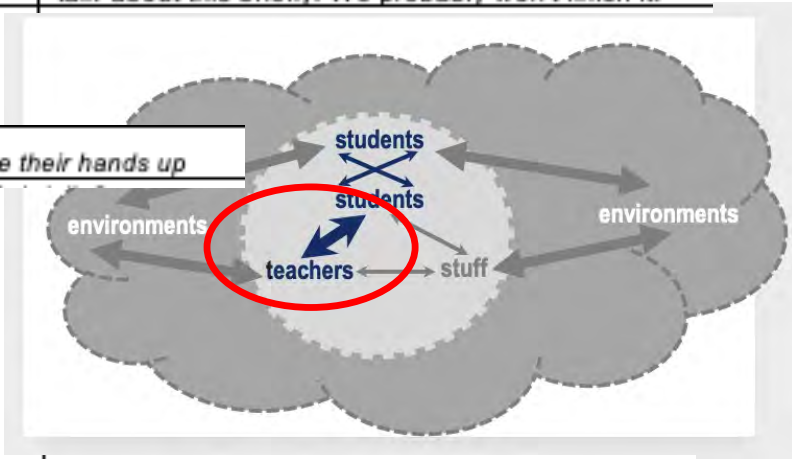
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Teacher	Who'd like to answer what you think about the second rectangle? We're only going to be able to talk about this briefly. We probably won't finish it.	Launch discussion
Teacher	Who'd like to explain what you think? Antar, what do you think?	Choose student to call on
Teacher	Could you come up to the board and explain? Thank you.	Frame task for student who is presenting
Teacher	I really like the way that people who are coming to the board are doing today. You are explaining really well.	Acknowledge competence
Teacher	Here's a marker. Can you explain your thinking?	Provide material support
Antar	I think it's not a fraction because all of the parts are not equally the same shape.	Listen
Teacher	Can you say that one more time to the class?	Support presenter
Antar	I think it's not a fraction because all the parts are not equally the same.	Listen
Teacher	Can someone repeat what Antar said? Very nice, Antar.	Orient students to presenter
	<i>Many students have their hands up</i>	
Teacher	What did he say? Gabriella?	Choose student to call on
Gabriella	Oh. He said that he doesn't think it's a fraction because not all the parts are equal.	Listen
Teacher	Is that what you said?	Position first student as authority
Teacher	Okay, would someone like to comment on that? Agree or disagree with him?	Orient students to one another
Teacher	Okay, let's see, how about Gabi.	Choose student to call on
Gabi	I disagree.	Listen
Teacher	What do you think?	Pose question
Gabi	I think the fraction is one-fourth.	Listen
Teacher	One-fourth? Do you want to come up and say why you think it's one fourth?	Frame next step, support next presenter
Teacher	Antar, do you want to stay there or do you want to sit down? Okay. Thank you very much. You did a good job of explaining your thinking.	Position student with agency, acknowledge competence
Teacher	So, let's hear what Gabi's thinking.	Orient students to one another
Gabi	I think it's one-fourth because, like he said, all the fractions aren't the same, but you can make them the same by dividing a line down the middle.	Listen
Teacher	Here's something you can use so if someone wants to take it off again, they can. Okay, so now explain what you've done. Talk to the class, okay?	Provide material support
Gabi	I divided it down the middle because, since it's not equal, you have to make it equal.	Listen
Teacher	And so then you decided?	Probe
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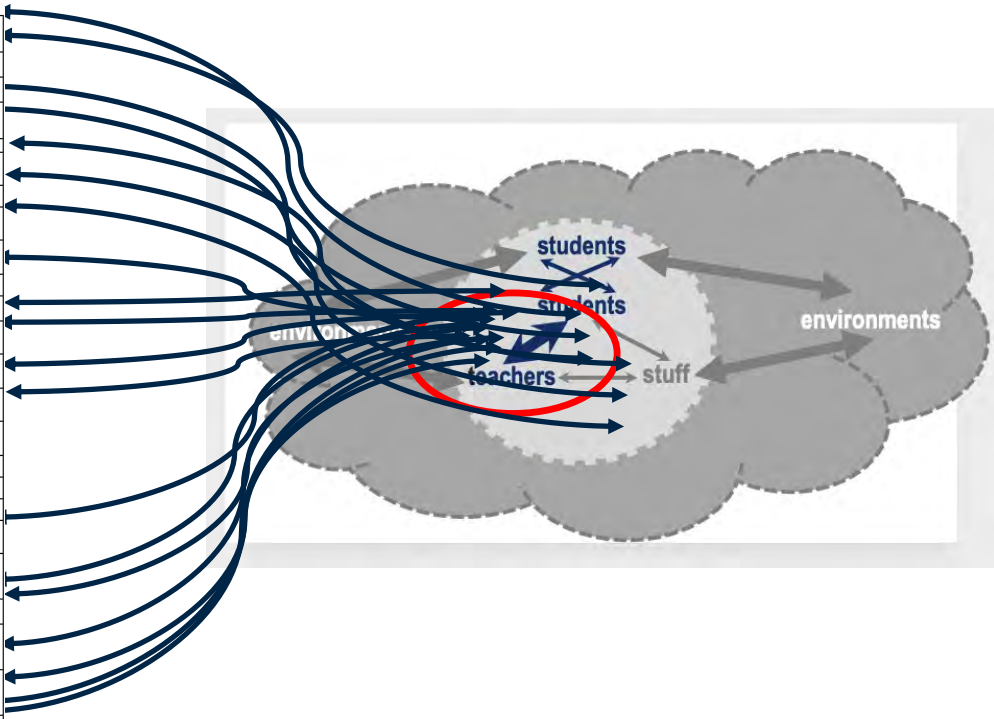


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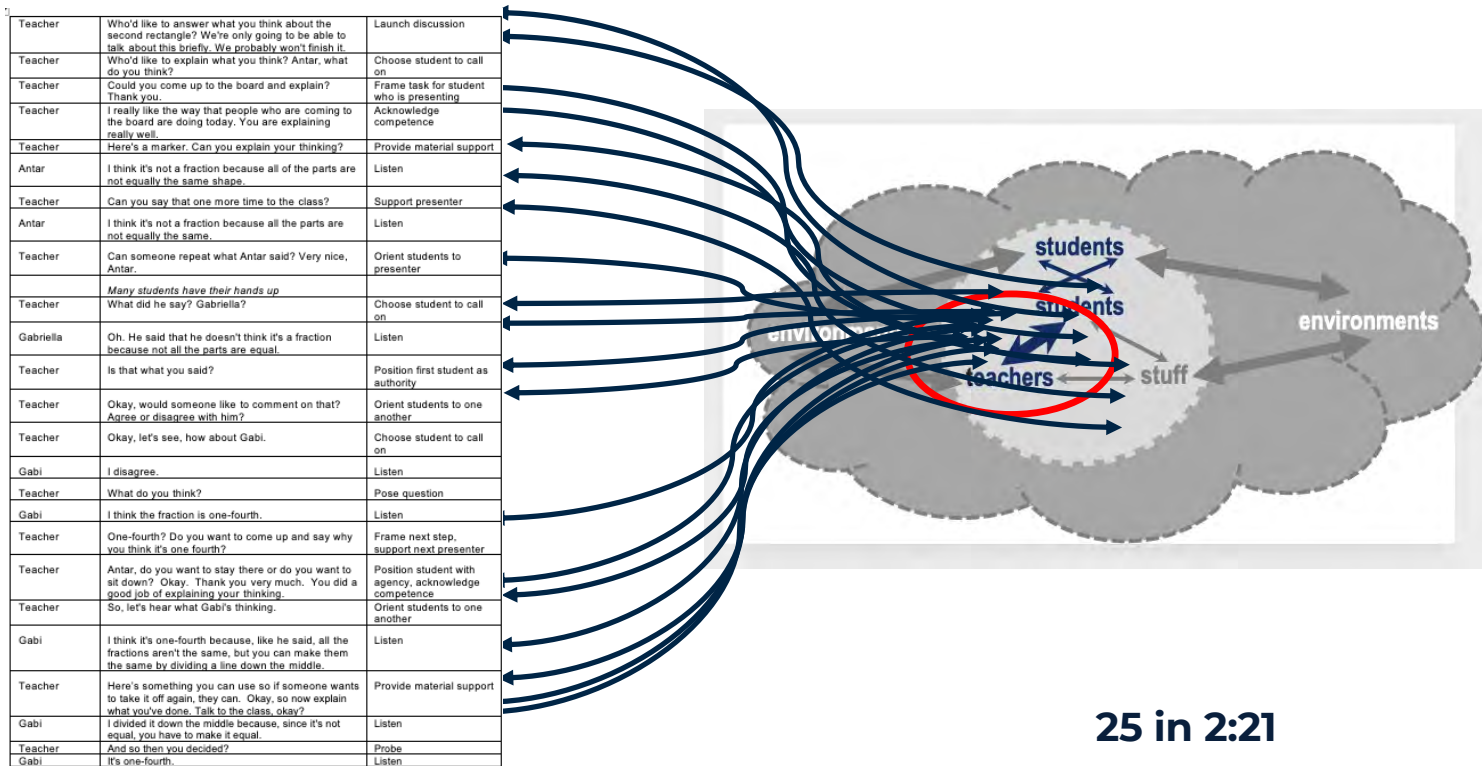




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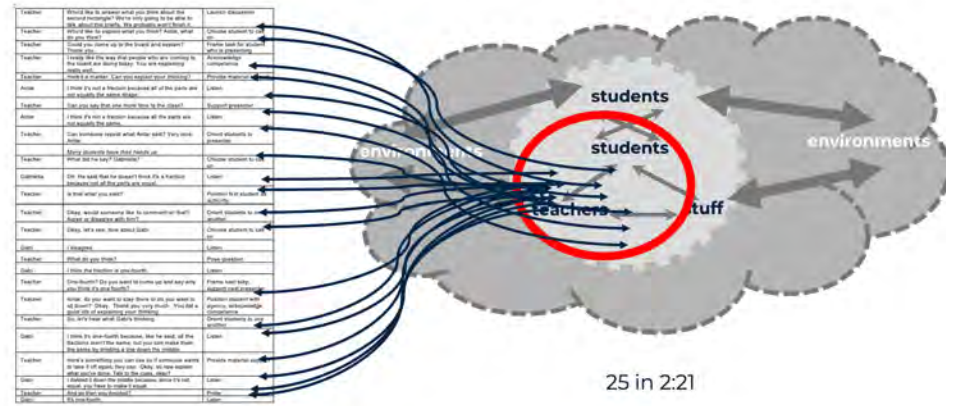


# Teaching is dense with “discretionary spaces”



# Discretionary spaces and the power of teaching

- A discretionary space is where interpretations, next moves, comments, or questions are necessarily determined by the teacher—and not by a policy or curriculum.
- These interpretations and actions are learned through firsthand experience in society and in school.
- These interpretations and actions are also habituated. (Ngo, 2017, Noel, 2018, Sfard)



# And as the lesson is ending...



Antar's  
right. It's  
not equal.

## VIDEO: Kassie

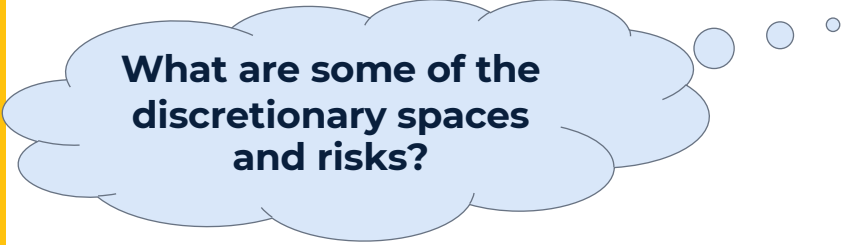


Kassie: I disagree because- The question was asking what fraction of the rectangle is shaded gray already,

**These moments: Filled with discretionary spaces related to reinforcing or disrupting patterns of racism and harm**



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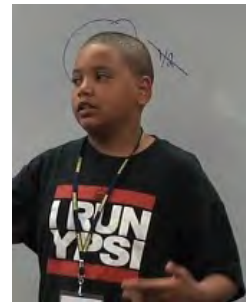


**What are some of the discretionary spaces and risks?**



**These moments: Filled with discretionary spaces related to reinforcing or disrupting patterns of racism and harm**

What are some of the discretionary spaces and risks?



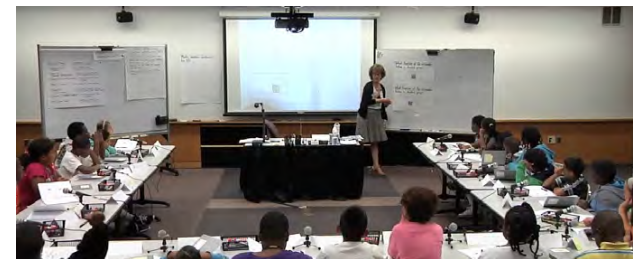
**Antar**



**Gabi**



**Kassie**



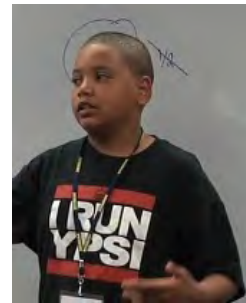


## These moments: Filled with discretionary spaces related to reinforcing or disrupting patterns of racism and harm

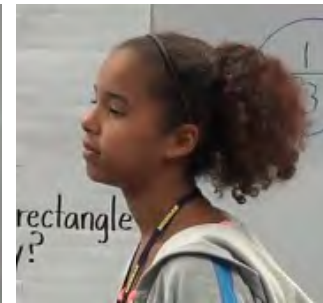
- How are these three different Black children—Antar, Gabi, and Kassie—positioned in front of their classmates—as contributing to the mathematics, as lacking understanding? Are their brilliance and humanity seen?
- What is signaled about being a “doer of mathematics”—both what and who?
- What mathematical understanding is developing in the class?
- How are Antar, Gabi, and Kassie experiencing their teacher, their peers, this lesson?
- What are the other children in the class learning about Black children, about who and what it means to be “smart”?

(Gholson, 2021; Wilkes, 2021; Gholson & Martin, 2014; Langer-Osuna, 2015, 2017; Leonard & Martin, 2013; Martin, 2012, 2015)

What are some of the discretionary spaces and risks?



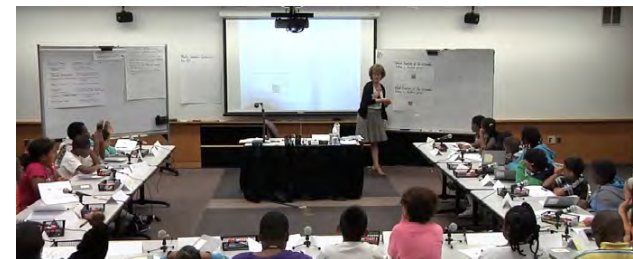
Antar



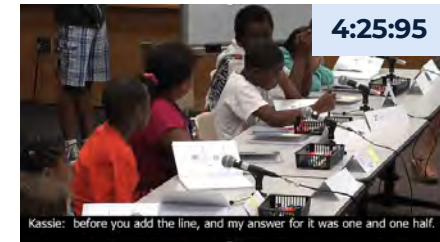
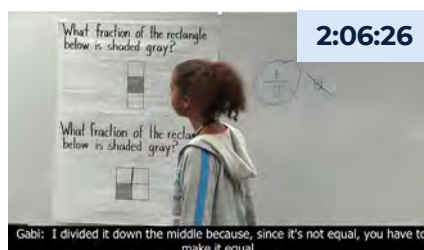
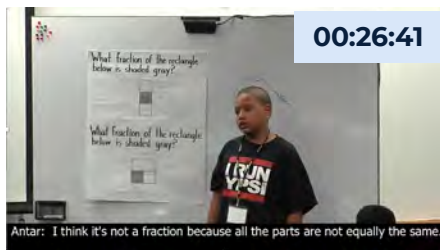
Gabi



Kassie

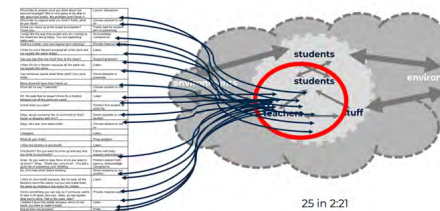


# Liberating practice: Leveraging discretionary spaces



- Racial narratives about 'ability' and struggling learners (Nasir & Shah, 2011; Shah, 2017)
- Patterns related to Black girls (Gholson, 2016, 2021; Joseph, 2017; Sengupta-Irving, 2020; Sengupta-Irving & Vossoughi, 2019)

- Area models with fractions
- Patterns related to being a "doer of mathematics while Black" (Martin)
- Views of mathematics as centered on narrow ideas about "correctness" and "errors"



What would it take to learn to use the discretionary spaces in teaching in ways that advance students' mathematical flourishing?



# Where are the discretionary spaces in **YOUR work** that matter for students' flourishing?





2024

# Elementary Mathematics Laboratory

June 17–21

The School at Marygrove  
Detroit, MI

June 24–28

Grand Rapids Public Schools  
Grand Rapids, MI



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# THANK YOU!



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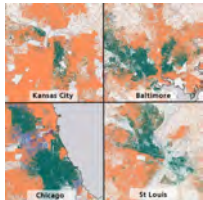


Image on slides 7–8:

Graphic from “Why don't black and white Americans live together?,” by Rajini Vaidyanathan, *BBC News*.

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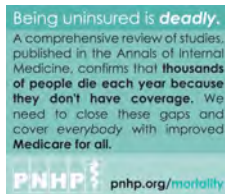


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Graphic from “Lack of health insurance and U.S. mortality,” *PNHP*.  
Retrieved from <https://pnhp.org/news/lack-of-health-insurance-and-u-s-mortality/>



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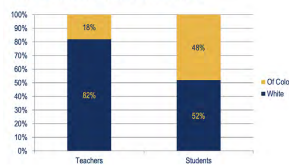
Image on slides 10–11:  
Photo from “20 Classroom Interventions for Children with Anxiety Disorders” by Jerry Kennard, Ph.D., HealthCentral.  
Retrieved from <https://www.healthcentral.com/article/20-classroom-interventions-for-children-with-anxiety-disorders>



Image on slide 11:  
Photo from “10 Ways Well-Meaning White Teachers Bring Racism Into Our Schools” by Jamie Utt, *everyday feminism*.  
Retrieved from <https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/08/10-ways-well-meaning-white-teachers-bring-racism-into-our-schools/>

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DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDE IN THE U.S.:  
K-12 TEACHERS AND STUDENTS



#### ABSTRACT

We examine the impact of having a same-race teacher on students' **long-run educational attainment**. Leveraging random student-teacher pairings in the Tennessee STAR class-size experiment, we find that black students randomly assigned to a black teacher in grades K-3 are 3 percentage points (7%) more likely to graduate from high school and 4 percentage points (13%) more likely to enroll in college than their peers in the same school who are not assigned a black teacher. We document similar patterns using quasi-experimental methods and statewide administrative data from North Carolina. To examine possible mechanisms, we provide a theoretical model that formalizes the notion of **role model effects** as distinct from teacher effectiveness. We envision role model effects as information provision: black teachers provide a crucial signal that leads black students to update their beliefs about the **returns to effort** and what educational outcomes are possible. Using testable implications generated by the theory, we provide suggestive evidence that role model effects help to explain why black teachers increase the educational attainment of black students.

Data on slides 12–13:

Center for American Progress. (2014). *Teacher diversity revisited: A new state-by-state analysis*. Washington, DC: Boser.

Retrieved from <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/TeacherDiversity.pdf>

Image on slide 13:

Gershenson, S., Hart, C. M., Hyman, J., Lindsay, C. A., & Papageorge, N. W. (2018). The long-run impacts of same-race teachers (Version 1). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.57912/23891583.v1>



Image on slide 13:

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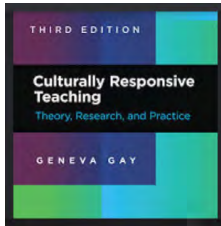


Image on slide 16:  
Gay, G. (2018). Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice (Third edition). Teachers College Press.



Image on slide 16:  
Photo from “Changing Curriculum Can Change a Student's Life: Why Massachusetts Should Pass Ethnic Studies Legislation” by Marilyn Flores, *Latinos for Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.latinosforeducation.org/2021/05/25/massachusetts-pass-ethnic-studies-legislation/>



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Photo from “What does an anti-racist math class look like?” by Ashley Okwuosa, *TVO Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.tvo.org/article/what-does-an-anti-racist-math-class-look-like>

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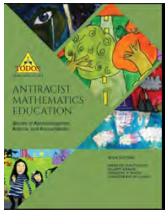


Image on slide 16:  
Strutchens, M., Krause, G., White, D. Y., Bay-Williams, J. (Eds). (2023). *Antiracist mathematics education: Stories of acknowledgment, action and accountability*. TODOS Mathematics for All.



Image on slide 16:  
“Child time out corner”  
Retrieved from <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-child-time-out-corner-sitting-carpet-rug-multi-ethnic-racial-diversity-24437536.html>



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Photo from “Cause for Alarm: Addressing North Carolina Early Childhood Suspension and Expulsion Rates,” by Ebonyse Mead, MA, MS, CFLE and Kara Lehnhardt, MBA  
Retrieved from <https://www.smartstart.org/cause-for-alarm-addressing-north-carolina-early-childhood-suspension-and-expulsion-rates/>

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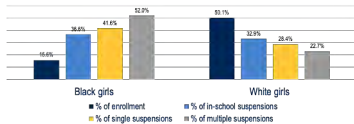
Retrieved from <https://elaulaconbotas.wordpress.com/2015/12/21/rug-rules-carpet-time/>



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Photo from "When can my school discipline me? What is corporal punishment," by Judge Tom, AskTheJudge.info

Retrieved from <http://askthejudge.info/what-is-corporal-punishment/>



Data on slides 18–19:

Epstein, R., Blake, J., & González, T. (2017). *Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of Black girls' childhood*. Washington, DC: Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality.