The Power of Teaching in the Struggle for Justice

Deborah Loewenberg Ball
@deborah_ball

Robert Noyce Southeast Conference ● University of South Alabama
June 2, 2023 ● Mobile, AL
Understanding the power of the work of teaching and its role the struggle for justice

How is teaching powerful?

What does it mean to foreground the “power” of teaching?

How can we as teachers leverage that power?
1. How is teaching powerful?
Video: Is there a teacher who had a significant impact on you?
2. What does it mean to foreground the power of teaching?
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.
How do macro level factors interact with everyday practices?
How do macro level factors interact with everyday practices?

The relationships between—

Macro-level structures (in environments)
(e.g., institutional racism, history of intelligence as the property of white people, anti-Black “scientific” racism; legacies of violence against Black and Indigenous people)
How do macro level factors interact with everyday practices?

The relationships between—

Macro-level structures (in environments)
(e.g., institutional racism, history of intelligence as the property of white people, anti-Black "scientific" racism; legacies of violence against Black and Indigenous people)

and

Micro-level interpersonal interactions (in everyday life and in classrooms)
(e.g., teachers' judgments of students, who is seen as “smart,” disproportional punishment and assignment to special ed and gifted programs)
How do macro level factors interact with everyday practices?

The relationships between—

Macro-level structures (in environments)
(e.g., institutional racism, history of intelligence as the property of white people, anti-Black “scientific” racism; legacies of violence against Black and Indigenous people)

and

Micro-level interpersonal interactions
(in everyday life and in classrooms)
(e.g., teachers’ judgments of students, who is seen as “smart,” disproportional punishment and assignment to special ed and gifted programs)

Notice that the arrows run both ways.

The environments in which we are all steeped shape what we take for granted and do, but learning these as normal further reinforces their persistence in society.
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.**
3. How can we as teachers leverage that power?
Fractions as numbers:
The instructional goal for student understanding

3.NF.2.a
Represent a fraction 1/b on a number line diagram by defining the interval from 0 to 1 as the whole and partitioning it into b equal parts. Recognize that each part has size 1/b and that the endpoint of the part based at 0 locates the number 1/b on the number line.
What number does the orange arrow point to?
Explain how you figured it out.
Aniyah

Toni
Viewing focus

What do you see about each girl’s mathematical knowledge and skill?
Video: Aniyah and Toni

This video and additional supporting materials are available online here.
Discuss

What do you see about each girl’s mathematical knowledge and skill?
What would happen next?

What are the possible results?
In the next moment, what is likely to happen?

NORMALIZED NEXT MOVES

RESULTS
In the next moment, what is likely to happen?

NORMALIZED NEXT MOVES
- “Can someone help Aniyah out and show what we call the whole on the number line?”

RESULTS
- Aniyah is excluded and her mathematical contributions are sidelined.
In the next moment, what is likely to happen?

NORMALIZED NEXT MOVES

• “Can someone help Aniyah out and show what we call the whole on the number line?”

• “Great, Aniyah, almost! But remember that the whole is from 0 to 1.”

RESULTS

• Aniyah is excluded and her mathematical contributions are sidelined.

• Aniyah’s answer is signaled to be incorrect and she is positioned as not having contributed to the work.
In the next moment, what is likely to happen?

NORMALIZED NEXT MOVES

• “Can someone help Aniyah out and show what we call the whole on the number line?”

• “Great, Aniyah, almost! But remember that the whole is from 0 to 1.”

• “Thumbs up if you agree with Aniyah; thumbs down if you disagree.”

RESULTS

• Aniyah is excluded and her mathematical contributions are sidelined.

• Aniyah’s answer is signaled to be incorrect and she is positioned as not having contributed to the work.

• Aniyah’s solution is “voted” on by her classmates.
What else is likely?

NORMALIZED NEXT MOVES RESULTS
What else is likely?

NORMALIZED NEXT MOVES

• “Toni, when you’re ready to participate appropriately by not playing with your hair and laughing, and have a question to ask, I will come back to you.”

RESULTS

• Toni is publicly excluded from the discussion.
What else is likely?

NORMALIZED NEXT MOVES

• “Toni, when you’re ready to participate appropriately by not playing with your hair and laughing, and have a question to ask, I will come back to you.”

• “You need to be a better listener, Toni. Aniyah already explained why she picked one-seventh. Who else has a real question for Aniyah?”

RESULTS

• Toni is publicly excluded from the discussion.

• Toni is judged to not be listening, her question is judged as not good, and she is excluded from the discussion.
What else is likely?

NORMALIZED NEXT MOVES

• “Toni, when you’re ready to participate appropriately by not playing with your hair and laughing, and have a question to ask, I will come back to you.”

• “You need to be a better listener, Toni. Aniyah already explained why she picked one-seventh. Who else has a real question for Aniyah?”

• “In this classroom, we are respectful of one another. When you are ready to be respectful, you can rejoin the discussion, Toni.”

RESULTS

• Toni is publicly excluded from the discussion.

• Toni is judged to not be listening, her question is judged as not good, and she is excluded from the discussion.

• Toni is publicly named and shamed as “disrespectful,” rebuked, and her role in advancing the mathematics is sidelined.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Talk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BOSS</td>
<td>Who asked the big topic question? Who do you think the answer will be? Discuss your reasoning for coming up with the answer. What does it cause us to do in the classroom? (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOSS</td>
<td>I think the answer is going to be: It depends on your reasoning for coming up with the answer. (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOSS</td>
<td>And you know, tonight, there is a light on. That’s why we’re working and telling everyone now, you’re thinking about it, you’re thinking about this question. (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOSS</td>
<td>That’s why we’re working and telling everyone now, you’re thinking about it, you’re thinking about this question. (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Diagram:**
- **Students:**
  - Arrows indicate interactions between students and teachers.
- **Teachers:**
  - Arrows show how teachers influence students.
- **Environments:**
  - Circles represent different environments where learning occurs.
  - Arrows indicate how environments interact with students and teachers.

---

**Table:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start</td>
<td>The class begins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask</td>
<td>Teachers ask questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answer</td>
<td>Students respond.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think</td>
<td>Students think about the question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk</td>
<td>Students discuss their thoughts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen</td>
<td>Teachers listen to students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think</td>
<td>Teachers think about the question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answer</td>
<td>Teachers respond.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Diagram Notes:**
- **Environments:**
  - Different environments are shown, representing various learning spaces and contexts.
- **Students:**
  - Arrows show movement and interaction among students.
- **Teachers:**
  - Arrows indicate guidance and feedback given by teachers to students.
- **Stuff:**
  - Represents tools, resources, and materials used in the learning process.

---

**Diagram:**

- **Students:**
  - Circular icons represent individual students.
- **Teachers:**
  - Circular icons represent teachers.
- **Environments:**
  - Various environments are shown, including classrooms, libraries, and outdoor areas.

---

**Diagram:**

- **Teachers:**
  - Circular icons represent teachers.
- **Students:**
  - Circular icons represent students.
- **Environments:**
  - Various environments are shown, including classrooms, libraries, and outdoor areas.

---

**Diagram:**

- **Teachers:**
  - Circular icons represent teachers.
- **Students:**
  - Circular icons represent students.
- **Environments:**
  - Various environments are shown, including classrooms, libraries, and outdoor areas.

---

**Diagram:**

- **Teachers:**
  - Circular icons represent teachers.
- **Students:**
  - Circular icons represent students.
- **Environments:**
  - Various environments are shown, including classrooms, libraries, and outdoor areas.

---

**Diagram:**

- **Teachers:**
  - Circular icons represent teachers.
- **Students:**
  - Circular icons represent students.
- **Environments:**
  - Various environments are shown, including classrooms, libraries, and outdoor areas.

---

**Diagram:**

- **Teachers:**
  - Circular icons represent teachers.
- **Students:**
  - Circular icons represent students.
- **Environments:**
  - Various environments are shown, including classrooms, libraries, and outdoor areas.

---

**Diagram:**

- **Teachers:**
  - Circular icons represent teachers.
- **Students:**
  - Circular icons represent students.
- **Environments:**
  - Various environments are shown, including classrooms, libraries, and outdoor areas.

---

**Diagram:**

- **Teachers:**
  - Circular icons represent teachers.
- **Students:**
  - Circular icons represent students.
- **Environments:**
  - Various environments are shown, including classrooms, libraries, and outdoor areas.
Teacher

Who would like to try to explain what you think the answer is? And show us your reasoning by coming up to the board?

Other children

Laying on arms

teachers

stuff

Dante

You did not!
Teaching is dense with "discretionary spaces"
This video and additional supporting materials are available online here.
Using discretionary spaces with care

- Interpreting Toni as asking a real question that she means.
- Hearing Toni’s question as central to advancing the mathematical content.
- Reinforcing her mathematical identity, not choosing to read her body as disruptive.

- Interpreting Aniyah as competent to answer questions about her ideas.
- Hearing Aniyah’s explanation as central to advancing the mathematical content.
- Reinforcing her mathematical identity, not choosing to read her body as struggling.

- Other children hear Aniyah as getting the discussion going, and Toni as asking an important mathematical question.
- Aniyah and Toni are both positioned as contributing to the discussion.
- Children see a teacher attending to Black girls as mathematical thinkers and contributors to collective work.
14 minutes after where we stopped

TONI AND JENNA

AND: On an “exit ticket,” 28 of the children were able to correctly identify a different fraction (2/5) on the number line.

ANIYAH

I did well on my goal today because my goal was to share my ideas with the class and I did. I went up to the board and shared my idea with the class on fractions.
Moving On

Discretionary spaces describe the many spaces and moments in which teachers make subjective judgments that either:

- act from habit and from patterns of white supremacy institutionalized in experience and professional training
- or act to dismantle anti-Black racism and white supremacy.

Understanding content knowledge for teaching also matters for doing this meaningfully!
What would it take to learn to use the discretionary spaces in teaching in ways that disrupt white supremacy, instead of reinforcing and perpetuating it?
What regularly fills the discretionary spaces in teaching?
What regularly fills the discretionary spaces in teaching?

1. Teachers’ experiences in a society filled with racism and oppression.

Lortie (1975), Banks, Grant and Koskela, Moll
What regularly fills the discretionary spaces in teaching?

1. Teachers’ experiences in a society filled with racism and oppression.
2. Normalized practices in schools that institutionalize dominant values and habits.

Lortie (1975), Banks, Grant and Koskela, Moll Anyon (1981), Heath, Martin, Tuck
What regularly fills the discretionary spaces in teaching?

1. Teachers’ experiences in a society filled with racism and oppression.
2. Normalized practices in schools that institutionalize dominant values and habits.

Lortie (1975), Banks, Grant and Koskela, Moll
Anyon (1981), Heath, Martin, Tuck

Professional education does not effectively intervene on these.

Professional education and teaching experience often teach these.
What does it take to disrupt the patterns that marginalize and reinforce racism?
What does it take to disrupt the patterns that marginalize and reinforce racism?

- Seeing Aniyah’s explanation and Toni’s question as key to the class’s work

What does it take to disrupt the patterns that marginalize and reinforce racism?

• Seeing Aniyah’s explanation and Toni’s question as key to the class’s work

• Taking as axiomatic the brilliance of Black children, and thus Toni and Aniyah

What does it take to disrupt the patterns that marginalize and reinforce racism?

- Seeing Aniyah’s explanation and Toni’s question as key to the class’s work
- Taking as axiomatic the brilliance of Black children, and thus Toni and Aniyah


Knowing and using mathematics in teaching (MKT)
Interpreting Toni as asking a mathematical question that she means
What does it take to disrupt the patterns that marginalize and reinforce racism?

- Seeing Aniyah’s explanation and Toni’s question as key to the class’s work
- Taking as axiomatic the brilliance of Black children, and thus Toni and Aniyah
- ... AND having something different to DO


Knowing and using mathematics in teaching (MKT)

Interpreting Toni as asking a mathematical question that she means
What does it take to disrupt the patterns that marginalize and reinforce racism?

- Seeing Aniyah’s explanation and Toni’s question as key to the class’s work
- Taking as axiomatic the brilliance of Black children, and thus Toni and Aniyah
- ... AND having something different to DO


Knowing and using mathematics in teaching (MKT)

Interpreting Toni as asking a mathematical question that she means

Having a repertoire of practices that can be adapted and used in contexts
There is no neutral.

*Imani Goffney, Ibram X. Kendi
This is our work.

We have power in our collective efforts to leverage the power of teaching to advance justice in our everyday practice, and to learn, to grow, to share, and to push forward with the fight.
Upcoming programs at TeachingWorks
Registration available now
Learn more at teachingworks.org

1. **July 24-28, 2023 in Detroit, MI**
   Virtual Participation Available
   **Elementary Mathematics Laboratory**
   Explore the complexity of teaching and investigate and challenge what it means to use skillful teaching to disrupt patterns of injustice.
   teachingworks.org/eml

2. **August 2023 in Ann Arbor, MI**
   **Introduction to Practice-Based Teacher Education Workshop**
   Familiarize yourself with the basic concepts and tools of practice-based teacher education and approaches to teaching instructional practice.
   teachingworks.org/pbte-workshop

3. **October 2023 in Ann Arbor, MI**
   **Coaching Institute**
   Unpack and practice the work of coaching and supporting beginning teachers to build your instructional skill in a supportive and dynamic environment.
   teachingworks.org/coaching-institute

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
© 2023 Deborah Loewenberg Ball • School of Education • University of Michigan • Ann Arbor, MI 48109 • dball@umich.edu
THANK YOU!

dball@umich.edu
https://deborahloewenbergball.com/
@deborah_ball
Credits

Image on slide 6:

Image on slide 6:

Image on slide 6:
Image on slide 6:
Graphic from “Six policies to reduce economic inequality” by john a. powell, Othering & Belonging Institute.
Retrieved from https://belonging.berkeley.edu/six-policies-reduce-economic-inequality

Image on 6:

Image on slide 6:
Photo from “UN agrees to urgent debate on racism and police violence,” Deutsche Welle (DW).
Image on slide 6:

Image on slides 14–16:
Photo from “Why You Need an Experienced Real Estate Agent” by Elizabeth Weintraub, the balance. Retrieved from https://www.thebalance.com/experienced-real-estate-agents-1798883

Image on slides 14–16:
Credits

Image on slides 14–16:
“Police.” by Flickr user G20 Voice
Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/

Image on slides 14–16:
Photo from “Want to be a poll worker? Philly says it’s responding to ‘unprecedented’ number of applicants” by Ximena Conde, WHYY

Image on slides 14–16:
Photo from “Trump Rioters Storm U.S. Capitol (photos),” Variety
Image on slides 15–16:
Photo from “20 Classroom Interventions for Children with Anxiety Disorders” by Jerry Kennard, Ph.D., HealthCentral. 

Image on slide 16:
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/