Within the Classroom Walls: Critical Classroom Processes, Students' and Teachers' Sense of Agency, and the Making of Racial Advantages and Disadvantages

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WITHIN THE CLASSROOM WALLS:
CRITICAL CLASSROOM PROCESSES, STUDENTS’ AND TEACHERS’ SENSE OF
AGENCY, AND THE MAKING OF RACIAL ADVANTAGES AND
DISADVANTAGES

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Abstract

Within the Classroom Walls: Critical Classroom Processes, Students’ and Teachers’ Sense of Agency, and the Making of Racial Advantages and Disadvantages

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Despite decades of research and efforts to reform schools, racial disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes, often referred to as the “achievement gap,” persist and concerns about students’ math learning and achievement continue. Among researchers, educational practitioners, and the wider public, explanations for these ongoing problems usually point to structural influences or individual and cultural factors. For example, structures of schooling (e.g. school funding, organization and curriculum) and those outside of school (e.g. family background and neighborhood characteristics) become focal points for understanding educational inequalities and places for intervention. In terms of explanations that look to individual influences, teachers and students are either targeted for their inadequacies or praised for their individual talents, values and successes. Regarding students in particular, racial inequalities in academic outcomes often become attributed to students’, namely black and Latino/a American students’, supposed cultural devaluation of education and their desires to not “act white” and academically achieve. Together, these explanations lead to the assessment that possibilities of teaching and learning are predetermined by a host of structural and individual influences. But how is the potential to teach and learn at least partially
actualized through everyday processes? Moreover, how do these processes, which simultaneously involve structures and individual agents, lead to the production or disruption of racial disparities?

To explore these questions, I investigated processes of teaching and learning in one well-funded, racially diverse public high school with high rates of students’ passing the statewide standardized test, many students going onto prestigious colleges and universities, and enduring racial inequalities in academic achievement. I conducted fieldwork over three years in 14 math classrooms ranging from test preparation classes to honors math classes and interviewed 52 students and teachers about their experiences in school. Through analyzing the data, I find that what happens within the classroom walls still matters in shaping students’ opportunities to learn and achieve. Illustrating how effective learning and teaching and racial disparities in education do not simply result from either preexisting structural contexts or individuals’ virtues or flaws, classroom processes mold students’ learning and racial differences in those experiences through cultivating or eroding what I refer to as students’ sense of academic agency and teachers’ sense of agency to teach. For students, that sense of agency leads to their attachment to school, identification with learning in general and math in particular, engagement, motivation and achievement. As classroom processes evolve in virtuous or vicious cycles, different beliefs about students (e.g. as “good kids” or “bad kids”) importantly fuel the direction of these cycles. Since racial stereotypes often influence those beliefs, students consequently experience racial advantages and disadvantages in classroom processes. As a result, some students fail to learn and achieve not because they fear
“acting white,” but because they do not always get to experience classroom processes that cultivate their sense of being agentic in the classroom space, a sense that is distinctly racial.
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A Moment of Pride and Unwitting Shame

Towards the end of the school year, as students, teachers, administrators and all school personnel take stock of the year and prepare for the upcoming summer break, frenzy and feelings of relief pervade the halls of Riverside High School as people scramble to tie up loose ends and prepare for a few months off in the warm weather. As the process of shutting down continues and energy dwindles, a sentiment of celebration and excitement exist as well, especially for and among the graduating class of 2008 – for their accomplishments and their futures. As a declaration of the school’s impressive accomplishments, the home page of the school’s website proudly presents “The Fabulous Fourteen” of the graduating class of 2008, an announcement that remains on the home page from the end of the academic year of 2008 through the end of the calendar year of 2008. A group picture on the home page displays these chosen 14, a racially and ethnically diverse group of boys and girls, smiling and posing in front of the school. Among these 14 profiled students, ten are the top ten students of the class, by grade point average, and four are “Unsung Heroes,” students chosen by their peers as “ambassadors” of the school. The top ten students are off to the nation’s most widely-recognized

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1 I created this fictitious name of the school to maintain the confidentiality of the school and its personnel. All the names of individuals mentioned in this analysis are also false names created to protect their identities.
prestigious institutions of higher education, including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford. Among the “Unsung Heroes,” one is continuing his education at a prominent HBCU, and the other three are pursuing their education at smaller local liberal arts colleges. Their GPA’s are not mentioned.

Shown by these “Fabulous Fourteen,” the school has much to be proud of.

Emanating from the brief profiles of this upper echelon of students are the same reasons why a local magazine named the high school one of the seven public high schools that “rival their private counterparts” and declared the school to be “prep caliber.” The 14 students list a vast array of activities, from robotics to rugby, and a variety of favorite academic subjects at the school, including Marine Biology, AP Physics, Ceramics, and Business Management. They describe their favorite teachers as engaging, challenging, encouraging and caring. At the graduation ceremony, the superintendent and several school administrators also commend the graduating class for passing the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System), the state’s standardized test that all high school students must pass in order to graduate. The profiles and accomplishments of these exceptional students clearly paint a glowing picture of a school filled with opportunity and enrichment.

While the “Fabulous Fourteen” are a great testament to the school’s success as an educational institution that provides opportunities for academic engagement and achievement, these select 14 students also ironically reveal some of the systemic problems plaguing this school, serious problems that similarly pervade the nation. Among the top ten students, by GPA, there are two Asian students (one South Asian
student and one East Asian student) and eight white students. In comparison, three of the “Unsung Heroes” are black and one is Asian (Tibetan). In a school of 1,541 students, where 64% of the student population is identified as nonwhite (40% of the students are identified as African American, 14% as Hispanic, 8% as Asian, and 36% as White), there was an unequivocally disproportionate representation of whites among the top ten students.²

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A Moment at the Front of the Classroom

The math portion of the MCAS exam³ is coming up in a few weeks, but Ms. Browne will be away for several days before the exam. Since she is concerned that her students will lose time to prepare for the MCAS due to her absence, I offer to help her geometry class review for the MCAS while she’s away. Because Ms. Jefferson, Ms. Browne’s co-teacher, will be there (in addition to the assigned substitute) and because there are only 12 students in class, the teaching situation seems like it will be very manageable. Also, during my time working in the class, the classroom situation was always very orderly with students following instructions, completing their assignments, and learning. Enthusiastically stating their desire to succeed on the test by at least passing or getting higher scores, all of the students express a great deal of motivation to achieve. Furthermore, I feel fairly competent going into the situation since I’ve had a

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² Statistics are for the 2007-2008 school year, the last year of my fieldwork in this school.
³ MCAS is the standardized high school graduation exam in Massachusetts which fulfills requirements of the No Child Left Behind legislation.
good amount of experience helping students prepare for the MCAS. In addition to working in eight MCAS Prep classes (courses where 10th graders review for the MCAS) at Riverside High in the past couple years, I also helped students prepare for the MCAS during afterschool and summer school programs and even received training through Princeton Review years ago to help high school students prepare for the MCAS. Through those teaching experiences, I have successfully worked with some students, forming productive relationships that have extended beyond the end of the course. Given my dedication to teaching and the optimistic setup of the class, I anticipate that it will be a fun and fulfilling teaching experience. However, to my great dismay and confusion, things quickly unravel over the four days when I lead Ms. Browne’s class.

On the first day, I come in with my lesson plan and photocopies of MCAS materials for the students. Trying to make the material relevant and at least somewhat engaging, I prepared and ran through my lesson plan the night before. I get to class and I enthusiastically start going through the lesson. In the class of 12 students, there are four black students (three boys, one girl), four Latino American students (two girls, two boys), one South Asian American girl, and three white students (two girls, one boy). The students don’t seem receptive to what I’m saying, such as my analogy to baseball in explaining how they can be strategic in their approach to the test. As we start to work on practice problems, a number of students are very engaged. For example, Julissa, a Latina American girl, pulls her chair up to mine as I’m explaining to another student how to calculate the means of bowling scores. Students are helping each other figure out how to solve problems and they are excited and proud when they get the correct answer.
However, when I ask them quiet down, such as when other students are trying to answer questions, some students tell me to “chill” and when I can “continue.” I start to feel flustered and disrespected. While that’s going on with the students who are at least engaged, several other students are painfully bored and disinterested by our review of test-taking strategies, particular math topics, and practicing problems. Juan, a Latino American boy, finds the questions to be too easy and a waste of time. His friend Dontell, a black boy, does not find any meaning in preparing for the test. By students’ request, we take a break in the middle of class. During the break, I put a problem up on the chalkboard, my back is to the class, and Juan and Dontell walk out of class. Their ‘voting with their feet’ leaves me feeling rejected and deflated. After class, I debrief with Ms. Jefferson. I’m exhausted and completely disheartened. Ms. Jefferson empathizes and advises me to not take things personally.

I come back the next day and I am far less enthusiastic and becoming guarded. After the bell rings and students continue to talk, I say to them, “Let me know when I can start.” That’s exactly something I hear Ms. Ricci, another math teacher, say to her students when she is losing or has already lost her patience; it sounds terrible. But feeling like I don’t matter and what I try to do in the classroom doesn’t matter to the students, I become less engaged and invested in teaching. My lesson plans now just involve trying to go through a few practice problems, seeing what they feel like working on and helping them with problems of their choosing. Thinking that some students just don’t care about what we’re doing (as seemingly indicated by Juan and Dontell’s walking out), I don’t have any expectations for what we are going to accomplish and I give them
multiple breaks in between working on problems. As we go over some of the problems, a
couple students volunteer to come up to the chalkboard to explain their solutions.
Despite several students’ continuous engagement, other students are just doing their own
thing. In my fieldnotes, I write, “I feel like there is little energy coming from the students
to do the work and I just have to push everything … (but) I have no authority in the
classroom.” Over the course of just 5½ hours in class, things turn from hopeful to
terrible and each 82-minute period over the four days seems to drag endlessly. I come to
feel like the situation is out of control, my efforts are futile, and my interest in teaching
them is gone. By the end of the third day, I write in my fieldnotes, “I feel like I’ve
failed.”

When Ms. Browne returns, I am completely relieved that my four days of leading
class are over and I get to return to the classroom just as an assistant (in addition to being
a researcher). To my surprise, the dynamics between me and the students have
completely changed and improved from when I was there as the lead teacher; students
want to work with me, they seek my help, and I seem to matter to them. For instance,
Brian, a Latino American boy, pulls his chair up to mine so that he gets to work with me
before another student does. When I work with Juan and Dontell, they both are
responsive to me and show how much they do care about being able to understand
concepts and solve problems, disabusing me of my previous thoughts that they just don’t
care about learning. The situation then feels similar to some of my other teaching
experiences at Riverside High when students warmly declare that I’m “mad chill,”
instead of telling me to “chill.” I am left wondering how and why did things come
undone so quickly and seemingly irreparably while I was teaching? Why are they drastically different now that I’m not at the front of the classroom?

* * * * *

Education in the United States enjoys some spaces and moments of success, as illustrated by the way Riverside High School serves students of varying economic and racial backgrounds and provides such enriching opportunities that prepare students to thrive in some of most selective colleges in the country. Nonetheless, persistent problems continue to plague the educational system, namely the problem of ongoing racial disparities in students’ educational opportunities and outcomes. Through displaying its “Fabulous Fourteen,” Riverside High unwittingly shows how the school also embodies this dilemma. (The disproportionate representation of white students among the top ten highest academically achieving students was consistent in 2009 as well). To most individuals, the over-representation of whites in the top academic ranks seems commonplace and predictable; this small snapshot of one high school does not show anything new, surprising or peculiar. Most readers are probably familiar with the “achievement gap” and what it denotes – disparities in levels of educational attainment between blacks, Latino/as, Asians, and whites. However, for many, the normality of this phenomenon stirs profound frustration. Since Brown v. Board of Education decided that each child in the U.S. should have equal opportunities to education regardless of her skin color, the gap in educational achievement between different racial groups has persisted
despite decades of research, policy developments and dialogue (e.g. Wise 2008).\footnote{For some data on the racialized “achievement gap,” see the U.S. Department of Education’s report issued on September 25, 2007 (http://www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/achieve/report-card2007.html). Although Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings highlights different demographic groups’ gains in test scores through the “Nation’s Report Card,” which is based on data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the data from NAEP and other state sources of standardized test scores show that racial disparities in performance on those measures remain. Additionally, the Northwest Evaluation Association issued a report in November, 2006 detailing similar results in a longitudinal study that included test scores of over 500,000 students between grades 3 and 8 (http://www.nwea.org/research/gap.asp). The results illustrate the intransigent nature of the “achievement gap” in test performance between whites, blacks, and Latinos. Furthermore, examination of other academic achievement outcome measures shows that low graduation rates and high dropout rates continue to have a disparate racial pattern. (Losen 2005).} The undying question that then follows is: why do these disparities endure? What actually sustains students’ academic engagement and helps them achieve?

While innumerable answers to these questions exist in academic literature, political debates and public discourse, conversations cluster around several themes: structural causes and individual problems. Regarding the first theme, some analysts (e.g. Lipman 2004; Meier and Wood 2004; Sunderman, Kim and Orfield 2005) examine how students’ academic outcomes are structured by learning opportunities. While the lack of resources and funding strongly and negatively impact the quality of students’ education in many schools, not all racial inequalities in educational experiences and outcomes can be attributed to those structural problems. For example, students at Riverside High generally enjoy the same physical resources which allow some students to academically excel and not others. In terms of theorizing individual sources to these ongoing dilemmas, many researchers investigate how educational problems lie in teachers. For instance, the “Fabulous Fourteen” all speak about great teachers who inspire them and create stimulating academic experiences. While there may be some teachers who are extraordinarily gifted at what they do, most teachers involved in this research project
receive rave reviews from some students and poor evaluations from other students. Most teachers echo a parallel experience of having tremendously fulfilling teaching moments with some students and classes and devastating moments with others.

Additionally, within the conversations that point to individuals as the problems, one of the most widespread theories among academicians and the general public posits that racial inequalities persist because students’ negative attitudes towards school, which they suggest are rooted in racialized cultures, cause them to not achieve academically (e.g. Ogbu 2003). The simplicity of this explanation does not capture the complexity of students’ experiences. For example, Juan and Dontell from Ms. Browne’s class do show how they are bored and disinterested in class sometimes (as many students across racial backgrounds do), but they also exhibit motivation and engagement at other times. Thus, racial differences in how much students learn are not sufficiently explained by simply locating the problems in structures or individuals. Moreover, these unidimensional explanations fail to capture the multidimensional reality of what students and teachers experience within classrooms and throughout everyday educational processes. How then can we understand what leads students to academically succeed and why racial disparities in education persist? Furthermore, how do classroom experiences, i.e. what happens within the classroom walls, shape possibilities of teaching and learning?

**Methods of Research and Analysis**

To investigate these questions, I draw upon qualitative methods, including ethnography and in-depth interviews, to systematically observe everyday processes in
one particular school, Riverside High, and to carefully process students’ and teachers’
accounts of their experiences. While a great deal of quantitative research looks at various
educational factors (e.g. curriculum, resources, teacher qualifications, tracking) and their
varying degrees of impact, that research can be limited in its capacity to illuminate the
complex nature of educational problems by not incorporating analyses of individuals’
subjective experiences and processes. On the other hand, ethnographic methods allow for
an in-depth analysis of the complexity and simultaneity of entangled influences in a
particular time and space. Moreover, this case study method of data gathering and
analysis facilitates investigating processes involving institutional and policy structures
and individuals’ experiences. Specifically, this approach allows me to understand the
everyday, local and contextualized processes through which students and teachers can or
cannot actualize educational opportunities.

Riverside High School

While there are 13 schools in Riverton, a greater Boston metropolitan district,
Riverside High is the only high school and it includes grades nine through 12. Standing
out as a big concrete building, Riverside High starkly contrasts the surrounding
neighborhood which include a large university, smaller brick buildings, a small gourmet
supermarket, quaint little New England styled “bed and breakfasts,” expensive housing
and brick-paved sidewalks. Very few blacks or individuals of African descent live
around the high school and most of the diversity of the surrounding neighborhood is a
result of international students, scholars and affiliates of the university. Most of the
students who come to the school do so from neighborhoods farther away and often take the bus to school.

The high school is divided into four smaller schools of about 400 students each and a technical program of study. Students stay in their small school for most of their freshman and sophomore year classes and stay associated with the small school for the last two years. Within the “block system” of having 4 periods per day of 82 minutes each, the school days rotate between “silver” and “black” days. Some classes meet every day and some classes meet only on the “silver” days or “black” days, meaning that they meet every other day. All eight of the MCAS Prep classes included in this study met every other day, while the regular math classes met every day.

Riverside High offers honors courses and Advanced Placement (AP) courses and the technical program of study includes courses on automotive technology, biotechnology, carpentry, culinary arts, computer programming technology, electronics technology, CADD and pre-engineering and commercial design, business education, health careers and graphic communications. The international studies program at this high school includes grades 9-12 and is designed to meet the needs of “English Language Learners” (ELL) in compliance with federal and state regulations. The afterschool program includes an MCAS preparation course, SAT preparation course, English as a second language, and TOEFL preparation course. There is a teen health center and a daycare on site for students’ and faculty’s children.

This school is a particularly rich place for research on educational inequalities precisely because of how the school and larger district are very diverse based on students’
racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. In the academic year of 2007-2008, out of the 5,682 pre-Kindergarten to 12th grade students who were enrolled in schools in Riverton, 1,541 students were enrolled at Riverside High. Of these 1,541 students, 39.7% were categorized as African-American, 8.4% Asian, 13.7% Hispanic, 0.5% Native American and 36.1% were categorized as White. By gender classifications, 797 students were male and 744 students were female. Other demographic characteristics of the school reveal that 43.8% of the students were classified as low-income and 17.7% were in Special Education. At the end of the 2006-2007 academic year, 42% of the graduating students planned on going onto 4-year private colleges, 20% to 4-year public colleges, 8% to 2-year private colleges, 19% to 2-year public college, 3% to other post-secondary, 5% to work, and 5% to something else or unknown. In 2007-2008, there were 175 teachers in this school.

Although the school is racially and ethnically diverse, with a majority of the students being nonwhite, students with the highest GPAs in the school are mostly white and the higher level classes (i.e. honors and AP classes) are populated mostly by white students. Students’ social lives are also highly segregated by race, which can be observed during lunch time, before school, after school and during homeroom (which is the only classroom space in which students who are ordinarily in standard level classes and those who are in honors and AP classes coexist).

**Entering the field**

The spring semester of 2006 was my first semester of IRB-approved fieldwork and 11th semester working at Riverside High. I first set foot in Riverside High while I
was in college and visiting a fellow teacher’s classroom as part of our college’s outreach program into high schools. We were in the schools providing supplemental social studies curriculum on international studies. When I walked into the school then, I found Riverside High to be very intimidating because of the unfriendly physical environment of cinderblock walls, the maze-like structure of halls, the presence of security guards, teachers policing the hallways, and large dark stairwells.

I started volunteering regularly at this high school in the fall of 2001 as a classroom assistant in an ESL course and also as a dean’s assistant. I received these two assignments through the school’s volunteer program. In the ESL classroom which was comprised mostly of Haitian and Central and South American students, I was assigned to work with two sisters who had just weeks earlier emigrated from Haiti, and had limited English language skills. I also worked for a teacher who was also the dean of one of the small schools and I was supposed to help him with his grading for an AP class that was comprised predominantly of white students. While I continued working with the teacher of the ESL class through the spring of 2007, I ended my volunteer work for the dean within a few months. (Being in the school and working in classrooms, I noticed immediately how many students needed more academic help and guidance and I felt that solely grading papers for the dean did not optimize my abilities to contribute to students’ academic lives.)

During the 2001-2002 academic year, I was also employed and trained through Princeton Review to teach MCAS prep math classes at several high schools in the Boston metropolitan area, including Riverside High. The classes were about 25 to 30 students
each and were mostly made up of black students. Since that was the incipient phase of implementing MCAS, those classes taught through Princeton Review were among the first few classes at this high school created with the distinct purpose of preparing for the test. Throughout the following semesters, I continued volunteering through the bilingual department in English, World History, and Algebra classrooms. I also volunteered through the Bilingual Department’s summer school program teaching math and worked in an afterschool program for bilingual students. During the spring of 2006, in addition to the three MCAS prep classes, I also volunteered in an ESL World History class at the high school and led an MCAS prep workshop once a week for high school age students at a local afterschool center. The students in the workshop came from a nearby charter school, Riverside High, and the local extension school for students with more specific academic, emotional and behavioral needs.

Race was a salient aspect of the school from my first experiences there. As the dean, a middle-aged white man, gave me a tour of the school one day, he showed me what he regarded as the “range” of the school’s environment. After defining the successes of some students through their entrance and matriculation into selective colleges and universities, he led me through the section of the school housing the vocational and technical program. As we passed a couple of classrooms where several boys, mostly black and Latino, were working with some computers, he mentioned to me that the school, even with all of its academic accomplishments, is still “an urban school with problems of an urban school.” His use of the descriptive yet coded term “urban,” combined with his look of concern and trepidation, seemed to imply his reference to the
school’s racial problems. Students also quickly brought Riverside High’s racial problems to my attention. In my first MCAS prep class through Princeton Review, one of the students exclaimed to me, “This school is racist!” He told me to look around the classroom and to note all of the black students in the class. Then he asked me, “Why are there so many black kids in this class?” His question animated my own quest to find answers for him and contributed to the nature of the present research questions.

**My fieldwork and interviews**

While conducting my fieldwork, I explored the larger questions about racial inequalities in education and how students successfully learn through math classrooms. I focused on math education partially because of how there are widespread concerns about racial disparities in math achievement and about how students in the U.S. compare with students in other countries in math performance. Also, given the tremendous focus on standardized testing, my first two years of fieldwork took place in MCAS Prep classrooms, classes geared specifically towards helping students pass the MCAS exam, so that I could understand how students’ academic experiences were shaped by the context of high stakes testing.

Between the academic years of 2005-2006 and 2007-2008, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in 14 mathematics classes where I worked in four different MCAS Prep classes for 10th graders each of my first two years of fieldwork and six regular math classes in my last year. Of the six regular math classes, two were College Prep (CP) Algebra 1 classes (officially listed as High School Mathematics 1), two were CP Geometry classes (officially listed as High School Mathematics 2), one was an honors
Algebra 2 class, and the last was an honors Pre Calculus course. The CP Algebra 1 classes were mostly full of 9th graders, the CP Geometry classes and the honors Algebra 2 class included mostly 10th graders, and the honors Pre Calculus class included students between grades 10 and 12. Between the CP and honors classes, CP denotes the standard level and honors is the more advanced level. Students are assigned to the MCAS Prep class depending on their scores on an MCAS diagnostic test administered during their 9th grade year. For the regular math classes, students theoretically can choose to attend whichever class they would like (honors or CP), but are usually swayed by teachers’ recommendations.

Since the school operates according to the “block system,” a course that meets every day for one semester is the equivalent of a year-long course in the previous system where students attended seven classes a day. I attended each of the 14 classes throughout one semester (all during the spring semester), attending each of the class at least once a week and usually twice a week. The MCAS Prep classes, the honors Algebra 2 class, and the honors Pre Calculus class were semester-long courses. The two CP Algebra 1 classes and two CP Geometry classes were year-long courses. In these 14 classes, I worked with 11 different teachers: one black woman, one Algerian woman, one Moroccan man, one Chinese man, six white women, and one white man.

During class, I usually sat towards the back of the class when the teacher was teaching a lesson and then went around the classroom to work with students when they needed help. A few times, I taught class as well and filled in for teachers when they were absent or helped students review for the MCAS, such as what I did in Ms. Browne’s
class. I often spoke with teachers and students after class, between classes, during their lunch hour, and during teachers’ free periods (most teachers have one free period during the day). At the end of each day, I wrote up fieldnotes either in notebooks or on my computer.

In addition to my participant observation work in classes, I formally interviewed 52 teachers and students, including three administrators, 13 teachers, and 36 students. Most of the interviews lasted one hour with a few that were 45 minutes, many which were 1½ hours and a few which lasted between two and three hours. I interviewed two teachers and three students twice because in the case of the teachers, we did not complete the interview the first time. In the case of the students who were interviewed multiple times, I wanted to follow up with one student about something she mentioned to me in her first interview and the other two students were interviewed in different years (once in 2007, then again in 2008). For four students, I interviewed them in pairs because I scheduled an interview with one student, but then the student brought a friend along. Of the 36 students, 27 are students of color (14 boys, 13 girls) and nine are white students (six boys, three girls). Among the students of color, there are eight black students (five boys, three girls), four Haitian American students (three boys, one girl), one Jamaican American boy, seven Latino/a American students (four boys, three girls), three Ethiopian American girls, one Iranian American girl, one Indian American girl, one Chinese American girl (adopted by a white family), and one biracial boy (half-Finnish, half-Nigerian). Regarding the demographic backgrounds of the teachers, there are eight white teachers (seven women, one man), two black teachers (one woman, one man), one
Haitian man, one Puerto Rican man, and one Moroccan man. Additionally, I interviewed two black administrators (one woman and one man) and one white male administrator. Except for three teachers, three administrators and two students, the interviewees were from the classes where I conducted fieldwork.

Data Analysis

To analyze my data, I coded my fieldnotes based on emergent themes and repeated topics. Based on the themes, I diagrammed processes of what happens within classrooms and how external influences impact classroom dynamics. For the interviews, I did selective transcription, wrote interpretive and analytic memos on each other interviews to understand the meanings of individuals’ experiences and to draw out themes and patterns. I coded the interviews as well and combined analyses of those codes with the codes from the fieldnotes. With my observations, interviews with teachers and students, I triangulated information to understand underlying meanings and dynamics of classroom processes.

How Teaching and Learning Become Possible or Impossible

In providing “prep caliber” education for some students and nurturing their academic development and success, Riverside High can be an exceptional school. However, not all students, especially black and Latino students, at Riverside High enjoy the same educational experiences, opportunities and outcomes. Why are there these stark racial disparities in academic outcomes? Is it because some students just don’t care about school? Or is it related to the way the “Fabulous Fourteen” talk about having
phenomenal teachers and some students at Riverside get to experience those extraordinary teachers while others do not? Contrary to some thinking among researchers and the wider public, my fieldwork at Riverside High reveals that the way educational experiences unfold and how racial disparities result do not fall squarely on the shoulders of either students or teachers. Instead, the answer to ongoing questions about how all students–regardless of racial background–can successfully learn lies, at least partially, in the way dynamic classroom processes evolve in virtuous or vicious cycles and involve teachers and students. Through those cycles, students’ and teachers’ sense of agency in the classroom develops or dwindles, resulting in their growing or diminishing engagement, motivation, and investment in the process of teaching and learning. Moreover, racial disparities are reproduced or disrupted through these classroom processes depending on how notions of race imbue these dynamics and influence the trajectory of upward or downward spiraling processes. As a result of students’ experiences of productive or destructive cycles of classroom processes, they can gain racial advantages or disadvantages in actualizing their capacity to learn and achieve.

While I only led Ms. Browne’s class for four days, my experiences there illuminate aspects of the critical classroom dynamics that I observed in other classes, both MCAS Prep and regular math courses, over the period of three years of fieldwork. How and why did those classes with Ms. Browne’s students go so poorly even when the situation was set up such that successful teaching and learning seemed like real possibilities if not certainties? Even though there seemed to be some preexisting issues, such as how some students had negative learning experiences in Ms. Browne’s classroom
and in other schooling spaces and how some students had strong fears about the MCAS, something happened during those four class periods that led to the dissolution of teaching and learning possibilities. When students did not exhibit the response I was hoping for, I felt frustrated, disappointed and less agentic as an instructor. My own sense of mattering, being efficacious as a teacher, and having authority was at stake because I was the actual teacher, not just a teaching assistant. As my sense of agency withered, I responded by being distant, disengaged and even harsh at times. Students’ sense of agency probably suffered consequently, leading them to become less engaged and motivated to learn. When students acted in those ways, my sense of agency continued to erode and a vicious cycle was underway. Importantly, as students acted disinterested, I probably (and ashamedly) quickly gave into a racialized belief that the situation was hopeless and that the students were likely to “become a statistic,” as one student once put it, anyhow.

Through that vignette and the stories included in the following chapters, it becomes apparent that what happens within the classroom walls matters in making teaching and learning real possibilities or seemingly foregone impossibilities. While students’ sense of academic agency, teachers’ sense of agency and classroom processes are influenced by factors outside of the classroom as well, the focus of this research turns to classroom dynamics to show how something alchemical can happen where everyday learning processes become transformative experiences of growth and fulfillment for both students and teachers. The following chapters reveal what comprises some of that alchemy. In chapter 2, after examining the inadequacies of current research that relegates educational problems to merely structural or individual reasons, I present ways of
conceptualizing how students’ and teachers’ sense of agency is constituted through classroom processes. In chapters 3 through 5, I discuss specific classroom processes to illustrate how students’ and teacher’s sense of agency are made through virtuous and vicious cycles of emotional connections, instruction and discipline. Through those critical processes which can become inflected with racial meanings, students’ academic engagement, motivation and achievement are either destroyed or cultivated. Finally, chapter 6 explores the implications of the alchemy of these classroom processes.
CHAPTER TWO

Classrooms Count
Experiencing agency and the continuing relevance of everyday classroom processes

On September 8, 2009, President Barack Obama opened up the start of a new school year by addressing students and discussing “…the responsibility each of you has for your education.” He continued for about 15 minutes on this broadly televised event telling students about the importance of working hard, not giving up, and putting in their “best effort.” Moreover, although he was speaking to students from across the country and from a wide range of backgrounds, President Obama directed his words at times towards those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. For instance, he acknowledged students’ various challenging life circumstances and insisted that students could not use those conditions as exemptions from working hard. He asserted, “…at the end of the day, the circumstances of your life – what you look like, where you come from, how much money you have, what you’ve got going on at home – that’s no excuse for neglecting your homework or having a bad attitude.” To illustrate the possibilities of overcoming adversity, President Obama offered examples of himself, Michelle Obama, and three students who overcame poverty and other challenges to move towards upward mobility. Addressing an even more specific subgroup of students for a moment, President Obama sent his message of individual responsibility to students who think “…that your ticket to success is through rapping or basketball or being a reality TV star…” While the focus of President Obama’s speech was on what he believed students
could and must do, he also discussed other aspects of education that contribute to
students’ success, such as the work of the government and teachers and parents.

Despite all of the animated controversy surrounding the talk, with Obama’s
harshest critics infuriated and terrified that the President would be indoctrinating their
children with “socialist” ideas, what President Obama delivered actually echoes what
many individuals across the political spectrum and throughout academia have been
talking about as the central, if not sole, reasons for students’ success and failure: mostly
students’ own hard work and also structural reasons. He highlighted how individual
efforts and structural changes are needed to make learning happen successfully. These
elements are supposedly part of the formula that allows those who are historically
disadvantaged (by race, class, gender) to go on to live successful lives. People continue
to talk about individual efforts and structural factors as reasons for educational problems
and possibilities for educational success. But is that all that is needed for students to
learn and to overcome differences and disadvantages and to eradicate racial disparities in
educational outcomes? For instance, when you have students with a lot of interest in
doing well and some structural supports are in place, how come things still don’t go well
sometimes? Why are there ongoing racial disparities in how much students learn and
then how they perform? More generally, how do students learn in school?

Although an expansive body of literature has contributed to our growing
understanding of why and how educational disparities persist, much of the existing
research in this area has become largely divided between analyses that locate the source
of students’ academic wellbeing in students’ own individual attitudes and actions and
those that trace the process back to structures (i.e. learning opportunities, funding), similar to what Obama discussed. Even though both kinds of analyses add to a larger discussion of what influences students’ academic development, this dichotomized approach does not seem to sufficiently capture the complex processes of how learning happens and how disparate educational outcomes are produced. The focus on students’ personal responsibility draws attention away from the persisting relevance of schools and obfuscates students’ actual experiences, while the focus on how schools are structured fails to explore educational processes that bridge possible cause and effect and how students’ agency is produced in those processes. Filling in some of the space between the polarization of problems as individual or structural, this research examines how students’ and teachers’ sense of agency is made within school, particularly within classroom dynamics, and generates students’ academic engagement, motivation and achievement.

To discuss how learning processes develop in classroom settings, I begin by examining how the current polarized discussions of individual/culture versus structure do not adequately capture how and why students learn. I then discuss literature that contributes to an understanding of how possibilities of teaching and learning develop when students and teachers experience agency in the classroom. I explore several classroom processes by which agency is made in the classroom. I then discuss literature that theorizes how race is made significant and how racial inequalities emerge from these classroom processes. This chapter therefore aims to show how the existing literature approaches the problem of racial disparities in academic outcomes through two opposing ends, both of which capture some element of the story, but produce incomplete at best
(from the discussion of school structures and other contextual structures) or erroneous at worst (from the discussion of individual responsibility and racial dysfunction) explanations for ongoing educational problems. Reconsidering the relevance of classrooms and everyday learning processes allows us to see how students learn in school and why racial disparities endure.

A Dichotomized Bind: Individual/cultural vs. structural explanations for educational inequalities

As debates continue and high stakes standardized testing and other school reform measures have been implemented to raise educational standards and to reduce racial disparities in academic outcomes, the so-called “achievement gap” continues to persist and students from certain racial and class backgrounds continue to get left behind (e.g. Magnuson and Waldfogel 2008; Wise 2008). Why do these disparities endure? While researchers continue to investigate a wide range of factors that affect differences in educational outcomes by racial groupings, much of the research and debate has fallen into a polarized discourse of locating the cause of racial disparities within either large social structures or within individuals (i.e. the students themselves or teachers). Specifically, some researchers explain how students’ academic outcomes result from students’ own

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5 Recent reports continue to show persistent racial achievement gaps where black and Hispanic students’ test scores are not as high as their white counterparts’ scores. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics published “The Nation’s Report Card: Mathematics 2009” on October 14, 2009 and reported no significant changes in results of the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in mathematics at grades 4 and 8. ([http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/main2009/2010451.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/main2009/2010451.asp))

motivation and schooling attitudes while other analysts examine how the same outcomes are structured by learning opportunities. Even though both kinds of analyses generally add to a larger discussion of what influences students’ academic motivation, engagement and achievement, this current dichotomized approach to researching questions of persistent inequalities does not seem to sufficiently get at the complex processes of how disparate educational outcomes are produced via both individual agents and structures.

**Pointing Fingers: Research on individual and cultural reasons**

One dominant thread of research has been to focus on individuals, i.e. students and teachers, and students’ racial backgrounds as reasons for why students of certain racial backgrounds do not achieve the same academic outcomes as other students. Within discussions of how individual differences explain academic disparities, structural issues usually are not explored seriously and sufficiently. Moreover, learning processes seem irrelevant.

*“They just don’t care”: When widespread educational and racial problems become just students’ own problems*

President Obama’s exhorting students, particularly students from disadvantaged racial and class backgrounds, to “get serious this year” captures a thought pattern that has dominated discursive spaces within the greater public, among policymakers and also academicians. This thinking has permeated through social science research and through public discourse, involving a broad array of proponents and continuously gaining steam
Despite evidence to the contrary (Alonso, Anderson, Su and Theoharis 2009). For those who emphasize the importance of students’ attitudes towards education and their corresponding efforts as determinants of academic success and racial inequalities in education, students’ agency, i.e. their power to determine their life direction and academic successes or failures, seems nearly absolute. Their motivation seems to come from themselves, internally, and their efforts and attitudes are products of their own values and own caring about education or not. Moreover, some students, namely black and Latino students, presumably just don’t care about school because of their racial/ethnic/class/gender backgrounds. Consequently, their failures can supposedly be attributed to their racial/cultural identification. Structures of schooling and what happens in school everyday – particularly within classrooms – presumably become less relevant.

One of the leading arguments regarding racialized achievement disparities posits that certain students supposedly embody a particularly self-defeating orientation towards school and academics that is very much rooted in their racial identification and cultural value systems (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Ogbu 1978; Ogbu 2003). John Ogbu (1978) first suggested this “oppositional culture theory” more than three decades ago and it still

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6 A few examples of individuals who have been spokesmen (those with the most widely acknowledged voices have mostly been men) includes comedian Bill Cosby, writer John McWhorter, sociologist Orlando Patterson, and anthropologist John Ogbu. Individuals such as McWhorter, an academician who has made the crossover into more mainstream information outlets, disseminate the argument that a psychology of victimization and pathological racial identification that devalues education underlies black students’ lower levels of academic achievement (e.g. McWhorter 2001, McWhorter 2005).

7 The discussion here about how characteristics of individual students affect academic outcomes does not address a persisting though consistently refuted argument that racial disparities in education simply result from differences in intelligence, whether measured through IQ tests or genetics. While both unsophisticated and more nuanced analyses in this vein occurs in both academic and non-academic writing (e.g. Gould 1996; Herrnstein and Murray 1996; Nisbett 2009), my concern here is the discussion around what students bring to their education in terms of values, attitudes and efforts.
holds the imagination of scholars, policymakers and educators and continues to shape how people understand and interpret students’ behaviors. According to this theory, since black students, in their peer cultures and ethnic and racial cultural backgrounds, do not value school and academic achievement, they ostensibly act out in “oppositional” ways, are not academically motivated, and do not achieve highly in school. One particular strand of research that has gained much attention and influence focuses on the “acting white” thesis which argues that “involuntary” or “native minority” students collectively resist dominant white middle class culture and therefore reject associated values and behavior (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). This theory states that black students maintain their racial identity by not conforming to school expectations since they are ambivalent about their schooling experiences. Ostensibly, students who subscribe to a black racial identity and associated peer cultures reject behaviors that appear to be “white,” such as being a good student, partially as an act of defiance against historical racial subjugation. To do well in school would be about “acting white” and not being racially authentic by demonstrating supposedly white middle-class values. Ogbu (2003) demonstrates how even black students in affluent suburbs supposedly maintain similar patterns of self-defeating behavior.

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8 Although Ogbu discusses how environmental influences shape individuals’ valuation of education in his earlier work, the emphasis of his later work is on individuals’ problems. For instance, his early work examines how blacks as “involuntary” immigrants are not socialized to succeed in an educational system dominated by whites and they instead cope with a lower social status with fewer opportunities by devaluing education (Ogbu 1978). Ogbu (1990) also discusses the “job ceiling” and how economic barriers concretize blacks’ attitudes about the few economic benefits of education. However, his later work moves away from discussing the “ecology” which students are immersed in and promotes the simplistic idea that black students supposedly just do not care about school, which in turn leads to their academic failure (Ogbu 2003).
Many scholars have advanced and contested this thesis by highlighting the heterogeneity of students’ racial identification, attitudes and behaviors (Ainsworth and Downey 1998; Bergin and Cooks 2002; Carter 2007; Cook and Ludwig 1997; Datnew and Cooper 1997). For instance, Prudence Carter (2005) disentangles racial identification and academic ambitions and argues that racial identification relates to cultural practices, but not to students’ academic motivations. Research also shows that black students are more engaged than white students (Johnson, Crosnoe and Elder 2001). Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) show that black students try harder in class than white students.

However, while these theories continue to be refuted through extensive research, the focus on students’ behaviors and what is perceived to be cultural and racial extend beyond debates surrounding Ogbu’s “oppositional culture” theory and the “acting white” thesis. For example, Armor (2002) perpetuates an idea that poverty is passed down through generations through culture and behavioral patterns. Supposedly, this transmission of a “culture of poverty” through families explains why low academic achievement persists within certain communities of color. Armor (2002) asserts that family socioeconomic characteristics are strongly related to student achievement. Furthermore, he claims that family socioeconomic status may be passed from one generation to the next, sustaining both low socioeconomic status and low achievement among black families through culture and behavioral features (Armor 2002:185). Thernstrom and Thernstrom (1997) attempt to show how dysfunctional attitudes and behaviors that breed low achievement are not simply attributed to class differences, but
also to racial differences in lifestyles and dispositions. They argue that more disorderly lives and heightened racial consciousness among blacks lead to lower cognitive development and less academic achievement. William Julius Wilson’s recent book *More than Just Race* (2009) tackles this cultural argument again and asserts that cultural analyses are still important for understanding differences in life outcomes, despite researchers’ fears of speaking about culture and cultural pathology. Even though these researchers frame their argument in terms of cultural variables and differentiate their findings from explicitly racist claims about biological racial differences, the difference between claims of culture and claims of biology are often obscured since they perpetuate the same stereotypes about the flaws inherent in a population, whether it is based on “culture” or “biology.”

Thus, although the anthropologist John Ogbu (1978) first suggested this “oppositional culture theory” nearly three decades ago, the theory has found a lasting place in popular discourse and continues to shape how people understand and interpret the assessment of black and Latino students as having cultural deficiencies has a long lineage in academic research and in public dialogue. This perspective is situated within a history of pathologizing certain individuals and communities and attributing their social status to racialized dysfunction, their own efforts and personal failures. Ideas have stemmed from Oscar Lewis’ “culture of poverty” discourse, the Moynihan report that pathologized the “Negro family,” on through a collection of more recent social science research. In *YO’ mama’s disFUNKtional!*, Robin D. G. Kelley (1998) defends black people’s humanity and criticizes scholars for not engaging in the complexity of the black urban experience. Kelley highlights the way social science research has problematically measured culture through behaviors and reduced it to a static entity. In doing so, cultural forms are interpreted as pathological, complexities are obscured and meanings for practitioners are neglected.

In the present moment, the idea of cultural dysfunction and racial pathology has come through within the era of ideological colorblindness. Within this paradigm of purportedly not seeing race, individuals supposedly do not racially discriminate and therefore do not produce and reproduce racism. If racism and widespread racial discrimination no longer exists, it can no longer explain persisting racial inequalities. The logic is then that individuals fail because of their own individual failures. If individual failures have a racial appearance, then people attribute the failings to racial dysfunction. This is what Bonilla-Silva calls “cultural racism.” Ironically, the prevailing ideology of colorblindness allows people to see race as culture as the problem.
students’ behaviors. This body of research that points to students’ own racialized attitudes and efforts as the source of academic success and failure acknowledges structural influences mostly parenthetically, thereby problematically supporting an astructural conclusion that attributes racial disparities in educational outcomes to students and racialized communities. Moreover, there is no examination of the complexity of meaning of students’ behaviors or how students’ attitudes and efforts are constantly made and supported within schools, especially classrooms.

**When it becomes just a problem with teachers**

While there is a lot of attention on students and their individual characteristics as determinants of education, there is a similar focus on teachers and their individual characteristics. For example, discussions about teacher certification, teacher testing, teacher accountability and merit-pay presume that the successful learning is determined by the static and measurable quality of individual teachers (e.g. Lu, Shen and Poppink 2007; Smith and Gorard 2007). Some research recognizes that teachers develop skillfulness as educators, but seemingly prior to or outside of the classroom (e.g. Singer-Gabella and Tiedemann 2008). This contrasts an idea that teachers’ attitudes, efforts and capacity to teach effectively are made through educational processes, just as students are.

**Naming the problem as structural**

In response to those who blame individual students and teachers for academic failure, others have turned to examining structural aspects of students’ academic experiences, from the trappings of poverty in their neighborhoods to school structures.
that constitute the infrastructure of students’ learning experiences. Instead of furthering the idea that persistent racial inequalities are because of racially disadvantaged students’ own faults, this body of research shows how students’ academic motivation and engagement does not simply come from within or because of their racial identification, but because of their contextual structures that are both unrelated to school (e.g. neighborhoods, parents’ level of income and education) and directly related to schools (e.g. tracking, high stakes testing). While this collection of work importantly accounts for the way in which students’ academic success or failures are influenced by external forces (that are not simply superior or pathological racial cultures), structures dominate these analyses and students’ capacity to be agentic is rendered insignificant. In other words, this body of work highlights important influences that shape students’ educational experiences, but often fails to examine the processes by which those factors impact students’ lives and academic outcomes and how students are involved in those processes. The following section examines these different strands of research and the way they capture important elements of students’ educational experiences and how they successfully or unsuccessfully learn, but do not completely illuminate the ways those elements influence students’ experiences and how students are part of those processes.

**Influences from outside of school**

Important research discusses the influences in students’ lives outside of school that impact their academic experiences. In 1966, James Coleman led a group of researchers to produce what would be recognized as the “Coleman Report.” In this highly publicized report, Coleman et al. (1966) drew the conclusions that factors that
were external to schools and not related to educational resources or quality were the strongest determinants of educational outcomes. Although a lot of research has been done to complicate and contradict those conclusions, some research still shows the relevance and impact of students’ lives outside of school on how they learn (e.g. Amato 2005). For instance, people talk about how students’ class background affects students’ academic successes and failures in school (e.g. Sirin 2005; Weis 2008). Some of this research includes Annette Lareau’s (2003) work on how differences in students’ family class backgrounds – shaped by parents’ occupations, the interaction of health and economic traits, cultural capital, etc. – influence the kind of parenting that affects how students engage with their schooling. Other research talks about the ways students’ neighborhoods impact their experience of hope and opportunity in school and life more generally (e.g. MacLeod 1995). While this collection of work helps illuminate aspects of students’ lives, it does not capture the importance of what happens in school, processes and dynamics that consume at least 40% of students’ waking hours throughout the academic year.

**School structures and practices**

Then, when schools are considered, researchers and policymakers examine the many structures of schooling which impact students’ educational experiences and outcomes, with particular attention to how those structures shape inequalities. A few of the vast number of researched structures include school funding, district and school administration, tracking, curriculum development, and high stakes testing policies. For instance, ongoing research on tracking has shown that low-income, black and Latino
children are consistently placed in low-level classes regardless of prior achievement and subsequently receive poorer educational opportunities (e.g. Oakes 1985; Wells and Crain 1997; Wells and Oakes 1998). Furthermore, educational research has also addressed how fundamentally restructuring curriculum to address students’ learning needs are necessary for improving students’ opportunities to become engaged with their own learning (e.g. Conchas 2001; Darling-Hammond 2007, Gamoran and Hallinan 1995; Oakes and Lipton 1999). Lastly, some studies on high stakes testing, especially *No Child Left Behind*, show how the policy can effectively further entrench social inequalities, degrade learning, and recalcify differences between individuals based on perceived group differences (e.g. Lipman 2004).

While this large body of research illustrates important relationships between certain structures of schooling and general trends in students’ achievement, it does not always successfully examine the processes through which the structure and design of school impacts students’ educational experiences and outcomes. In other words, these analyses do not fully capture what actually happens during the school day or within the classroom with those resources (e.g. racially diverse or segregated classrooms) that helps or hurts students in their academic growth by shaping their capacity to learn and achieve. Moreover, students and teachers become largely absent from the research as actors in the processes.

Overall, examining the numerous structural forces that affect students’ educational experiences and outcomes offers insight into how students’ learning is not merely a by-product of their racial-cultural values and individual desires and efforts to
academically succeed. Attention is given to important structures of schooling that affect students’ academic experiences, such as class privileges or disadvantages in their families and neighborhoods, the endowment or impoverishment of schools and classes regarding learning resources, and the pressures and mandates of high stakes testing. However, this research also reveals limitations and gaps in how they help illuminate the everyday processes by which students become engaged and motivated and ultimately, learn.

Investigating issues affecting students’ lives outside of school exposes the necessity to consider what happens when students are in school. Analyzing structures of schooling which shape the context of students’ learning experiences in schools does not necessarily clarify how students learn. Moreover, in all of these analyses, students – their participation in school and their experiences – are relegated to the periphery of assessments. Paired with the focus on analyzing cultural and individual influences on students’ academic achievement, students’ experiences in school are either misunderstood or obscured. Questions remain concerning how students learn and how and why racial disparities become reproduced or disrupted throughout everyday classroom processes.

**Beyond the Bind: Revisiting classrooms, conceptualizing agency and examining racial problems**

Given the limitations of analyses centered on individual/cultural or structural influences where individuals are seen as supremely agentic or subjugated by structures, how can we simultaneously take into consideration both individuals’ agency and
structural factors in understanding how learning happens and why educational disparities are created? Also, do classrooms and what happens there still matter if analyses focus on individual and structural influences that come before classroom processes? To move towards understanding how possibilities of teaching and learning are created in school, especially in the classroom, my research turns to exploring how teachers and students develop and actualize their sense of agency and capacity to teach and learn, respectively, within everyday classroom processes. The sense of agency which is cultivated through classroom dynamics instills in students and teachers a capacity to become motivated and engaged in teaching and learning, eventually helping students achieve. Moreover, this investigation shows how racial disparities emerge at least partially as a result of these processes where the development of classroom dynamics shapes students’ sense of academic agency.

In the following sections, I begin discussing theoretical and empirical work that sheds light on these critical classroom dynamics and the cultivation of students’ and teachers’ sense of agency by first considering ways of conceptualizing agency and their implications. I then look at research that examines key classroom processes related to emotional connections, instruction and discipline. Finally, returning to one of the central questions about how racial disparities emerge, I discuss analytical frameworks and research that illustrate how racial inequalities and injustices become perpetuated through mundane processes of classroom interactions and dynamics. Altogether, this exploration seeks to help correct the fallacy that some students, especially black and Latino students, simply do not care about school. Also, this research contributes to reconciling the tension
between examining structure and agency separately by recognizing the simultaneity of both in students’ and teachers’ lived experiences.

**Conceptualizing agency in the classroom context**

Students and teachers may start off the school year or the semester wanting to do well, but things do not always play out how they hoped for and planned. Why and how does that happen? For students, this conundrum is discussed as the “attitude-achievement paradox” where students report positive attitudes towards school, but do not demonstrate academic performance that is congruent with those attitudes (Mickelson 1990). One way of understanding the underlying causes and processes of this paradox is through examining how students, and teachers, come to experience agency in the classroom and how those experiences shape their subsequent engagement, motivation and achievement in the learning, and teaching, process. Through examining how students and teachers become empowered in the classroom, we can understand how individual effort and hard work is not simply something that students and teachers bring to school and into the classroom with their own will power, but is something made in the classroom.

**Theories of agency**

Drawing on certain theories of agency, students’ and teachers’ attitudes and behaviors towards learning can be understood as being shaped directly by their educational environments. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) offer a theorization of agency that discusses how human agency is enacted through temporal contexts where actors, living simultaneously in the past, future and present, “…continuously engage patterns
and repertoires from the past, project hypothetical pathways forward in time, and adjust their actions to the exigencies of emerging situations” (1012). Moreover, they posit that the constitution and experience of agency are foundational for social engagement.

Applying this theorization of agency to students’ and teachers’ experiences in the classroom, students’ and teachers’ experience of agency and consequent engagement with their work in the present moment is constituted by their past experiences and habits (e.g. how their class has been evolving since its beginning), projections into their futures (e.g. what they anticipate of the direction of the class), and present contingencies of their situations (e.g. what their immediate learning tasks and classroom dynamics are). In this dialogical process, students’ and teachers’ sense of agency and their subsequent actions emerge through a process across time, thereby incorporating the structural conditions of their past experiences, what they imagine will pattern their futures, and what constrains their current circumstances.

Clarifying which aspects of temporal contexts are critical for building experiences of agency, Bruun and Langlais (2003) distinguish between resources that enable certain actions and those that empower individuals “as agents in the sense that they increase the scope of our agency” (italics in the original, 32). In the case of students and teachers in schooling environments, it is necessary to discern which resources, qualities of learning contexts, experiences and processes are constitutive of students and teachers’ experience of agency and their resulting engagement with teaching and learning (e.g. their investment in and motivation for teaching and learning). For instance, teachers’ harsh tactics of discipline may lead students to become obedient and to restrict their acts of
transgression, but students may not experience growth in their sense of agency where they become more empowered to regulate themselves in the classroom. Similarly, certain demands of high stakes testing may lead teachers to urgently provide clear and well-structured lessons that prepare students to take the test, yet simultaneously leave teachers feeling less empowered as math educators.

Furthermore, it is important to focus analytically on students’ and teachers’ experience of empowerment – their sense of agency – as opposed to their actual agency (Reindl 2002). For instance, teachers’ actual possession of power in the classroom vis-à-vis students is inconsequential if teachers do not experience that power.

**Students’ sense of academic agency**

For students, since students’ experience of sufficient and necessary empowerment in classrooms is specifically linked to educational processes, it is useful to discuss it as their sense of academic agency. Students may experience agency in other venues of their lives (e.g. athletics, extracurricular activities, families, peers, and other social groups), but academic agency is about experiencing critical agency in school in general, in specific classes, and in relationship to their academics and schoolwork.

While various influences inside and outside of school shape students’ sense of academic agency, it is their sense of being empowered in each classroom that leads to their engagement, motivation and achievement in the specific class. As a result of classroom processes, students can experience that they matter and belong in a positive way (as opposed to negatively such as when they get in trouble), mastery and potential regarding the academic subject, and authority to regulate themselves. With those
sensibilities, students become more invested in their schoolwork, become more engaged and motivated to learn, and demonstrate academic growth and achievement. They also may develop identities associated with the subject matter more generally, such as when a student comes to think of herself as a “math person.” Without those experiences of academic agency, students can feel helpless and express their lack of engagement as apathy, through disobedience or defiance.

**Teachers’ sense of agency**

Since teachers’ sense of agency has important implications for students’ learning and the evolution of classroom dynamics, their experience of being sufficiently and necessarily empowered to teach is a central part of students’ learning process. Experiencing a parallel sense of mattering in the classroom, competency as an educator of the particular subject, respect and one’s own authority encourages and empowers teachers to more effectively connect with students, present instruction, and manage classroom dynamics. Without experiencing agency as educators, teachers become disinvested in the class, de-motivated to teach, disengaged with teaching, and quit teaching the class (or quit teaching in general, as shown by the high rate of attrition).

**How experiences of agency are made in the classroom**

Following the previous discussion about how students’ and teachers’ experiences of empowerment result in effective processes of teaching and learning, this next section discusses how students’ and teachers’ sense of agency develop through classroom processes of emotional connections, instruction and discipline. In addressing the debate
over tracking and detracking and focusing on what happens within classrooms, Maureen Hallinan (1995) argues that learning is not as much determined by grouping arrangement as it is by cognitive and social processes such as the quantity and quality of instruction, student and teacher expectations about student ability, teacher and student competence, student self-confidence, motivation and effort. Edward Pauly (1992) similarly discusses how effective schooling results from what happens in “the classroom crucible” and how actors in the classroom are given freedoms. Building on this literature, I disentangle several classroom processes to reveal tensions embedded in each process and to show how teachers’ and students’ sense of agency is shaped through each process.

**Processes of emotional connections**

While school reforms in the past several decades (especially since Sputnik) have been concerned with and focused on raising educational standards and quantifiable evaluations of students’ learning with the most recent incarnation as *No Child Left Behind*, emotional aspects of learning have lost a great deal of attention. The dominant discourse of “accountability” has made issues of caring and connecting secondary or seemingly irrelevant altogether. However, educational researchers continue to assert the importance and centrality of emotional processes in successful teaching and learning. Related to K-12 schooling, Nel Noddings (2004, 2005) discusses how cultivating atmospheres of care and emotional support is important and productive for education. Similarly, scholars point out how the development of “learning communities” contributes to the success of educational processes, teachers’ efficacy, and students’ academic growth (Retallick, Cocklin and Coombe 1999). Moreover, these particular classroom
dynamics play out for students of differing backgrounds in widely varying ways. For instance, Angela Valenzuela (1999) presents a compelling exploration of how U.S. Mexican youth can become disadvantaged through “politics of caring.”

Through these classroom processes of emotional connections, such as caring, encouragement, relating, and understanding, teachers and students experience mattering and students come to develop a sense of belonging in the classroom.

**Processes of math instruction**

While effective instruction is the most obvious and indisputably important component of successful teaching and learning, discussions about math instruction lack agreement beyond the idea of its importance. Most central to these discussions is the debate intrinsic to the “math wars.” On March 13, 2008, the National Mathematics Advisory Panel presented *Foundations for Success: The Final Report of the National Mathematics Advisory Panel*, an extensive report summarizing academic research on the state of math learning. The report spawned and also re-ignited intense discussions about what should be taught (i.e. curriculum) and how math should be taught (i.e. instruction) across radio airwaves and into schools. What is a more effective of helping students acquire math competencies: the traditional “drill and kill” model of rote memorization or the “new math” where students learn concepts through methods of “discovery”? As the debates go on, students and teachers continue to struggle on a daily basis with figuring out what works in the classroom.

Within the widely ranging topics of discussion in this debate, one productive focal point attends to examining how students gain mastery in math. For instance, some
researchers discuss how fundamental restructuring of instruction and curriculum to successfully address students’ learning needs is necessary for improving opportunities for students to become engaged with their own learning (e.g. Darling-Hammond 2007, Gamoran and Hallinan 1995). Newmann, Wehlage and Lamborn (1992) offer a specific example of improved instruction. They discuss how “authentic schoolwork” which means “tasks that are considered meaningful, valuable, significant, and worthy of one’s effort, in contrast to those considered nonsensical, useless, contrived, trivial, and therefore unworthy of effort” produces much-needed greater levels of academic engagement among students (Newmann, Wehlage and Lamborn 1992:23). For instance, higher order thinking, an example of “authentic schoolwork,” encourages students to take ownership and interest in their learning and ceases to continue to discourage them with schoolwork assignments that simply demand their compliance. Discussing a more general goal for instruction that focuses on students’ needs, Janice Hale, an educator, researcher and parent of a schoolchild, states succinctly, “We need to eliminate the bell-curve mentality of evaluation for all children. Elementary and secondary schools need to emphasize mastery” (Hale 2001:xxii). Thus, one way to cut through the debate on “math wars” involves paying greater attention to students’ development of academic agency in math classrooms, such as through ownership and mastery. Students’ sense of confidence replaces “math anxieties.” By knowing how to and being supported in effectively meeting students’ academic needs and promoting their math abilities, teachers also experience greater agency as math educators.

**Adding to the challenge: High stakes testing**
Even though the policies and practices of George W. Bush’s pet project *No Child Left Behind* have been interrogated and challenged on many different fronts, the school reform project remains a governing presence in our current educational system that can significantly shape what happens in the classroom. Standardized testing that has potentially costly losses and gains attached to it currently dominates many conversations about elementary and secondary education, what is valued, how that value is measured, and when and how schools are restructured. Guided by the concept of “accountability,” standards and tests are offered as the solution for closing the “achievement gap” by targeting “under-performing” schools. However, even though high stakes testing is offered as the mechanism for reducing racial disparities in educational outcomes, the emphasis on achievement (via testing) and motivation (via high stakes) does not address the learning processes by which students are empowered to achieve.

Advocates and supporters of testing and standards in education articulate various benefits that testing offers students and the American educational system. One such reason is that testing will end what traditionalists call “social promotion.” In that sense, students will not be simply “passed on” through school all the way to graduation without literacy and numeracy skills. Furthermore, NCLB requires test performance results to be reported by group membership, like race and ethnicity, to chart the progress of students and the so-called “achievement gap” between students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds. This should contribute to the alleviation of the “achievement gap” since students and groups will be closely monitored for their progress, knowledge acquisition and academic achievements. Through paying close attention to students’ performances,
students will also be rewards for individual accomplishments. Advocates of standardized testing and the NCLB act believe that these rewards will cultivate a sense of self-efficacy, competency and attachment to school (Phelps 2005).

However, others argue that a culture of accountability and efforts to raise standards has actually resulted in distilling the rigorousness and quality of education by focusing on “factual knowledge or general-process skills” and not “deep knowledge of concepts or learning abilities and techniques” (Singham 2005:33). Instead of promoting inquiry-based learning methods and critical thinking skills, lower-performing schools are pressured to raise their students’ performance scores, usually by just teaching the necessary test-taking skills and material. In these cases, students are drilled to learn low-level skills for short-term and short-lived results (Singham 2005). Various research documents this phenomenon where curriculum is narrowed and less intellectually demanding work is asked of students when schools and administrators are pressured to have their students pass standardized tests (Lipman 2004).

This decrease in educational standards does not affect all students, but only those who are already disadvantaged in the school system. Pauline Lipman (2004) documents how teachers and administrators in the Chicago public school system were advised by central office administrators to focus their instruction solely on the students who were close to passing the standardized test. Their attention should be turned to these “bubble kids,” those students who are close to passing, and away from those who are far above or below the 50th percentile. Thus, for students who have no trouble passing these standardized tests, they can typically continue on in their schooling career that prepares
them for college and professional lives while students who are deemed to be too far below the possibility of passing are systematically overlooked. In short, educational inequalities are widened since “bubble students” in low-scoring schools, probation schools, transition high schools and remedial programs, are steered towards less intellectually challenging test preparation while their counterparts who are predicted to fail simply become self-fulfilling prophecies.

The inequalities that are exacerbated under this testing regime also fall along the conventional lines of class, race, and ethnicity. For instance, low-scoring schools usually serve low-income black and Latino/a students (Lipman 2004:43). These “at-risk” students are increasingly exposed to un-engaging and mindless learning. Discouragement, despair and disempowerment become concretized in their performance results on standardized tests and possibilities for intellectual engagement and personal development quickly shut down. Lipman (2004) reports how tens of thousands of Chicago students have been sent to summer school, retained in their grade, and assigned to remedial schools based only on their performance on a singular test.

Testing demands can also challenge teachers’ sense of agency in the classroom. Pauline Lipman discusses how teachers increasingly face an “existential crisis as they question their own competence and find that their own actions in the classroom are in conflict with the very reasons they became teachers” (Lipman 2004:44). With this sense of alienation, disempowerment and sometimes desperation, unintended consequences result, including teachers and administrators cheating.

**Processes of discipline**
In addition to classroom processes of emotional connections and instruction, classroom dynamics of discipline, often referred to as “classroom management” techniques among practitioners, contribute to shaping teachers’ and students’ sense of agency and cultivating possibilities of teaching and learning. Similar to discussions about the other processes, tensions exist in the academic literature and wider conversations about what effective and appropriate methods of discipline look like. On the one hand, people subscribe to the philosophy and present evidence that students, especially those who come from lower-income backgrounds and who are predominantly black and Latino, need to be disciplined in paternalistic ways and with “zero tolerance.” For instance, in Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism, David Whitman (2008) asserts that several urban charter schools illustrate how paternalistic ways of disciplining students leads to successful educational processes and outcomes. Others, however, discuss how students need to be granted greater leniency for successful classroom management. Contrasting paternalism, several manuals for teachers portray “positive discipline,” including encouraging students and not responding to “bad behaviors,” as the most constructive way of approaching classroom management (e.g. Sprick 2008; Nelsen et al. 2001).

However, when the cultivation of teachers’ and students’ sense of agency is considered, what rises above debates about strategies of classroom discipline is an examination of how teachers and students can experience greater empowerment in the classroom. For example, literature from educational psychology on self-regulation and explorations of critical pedagogy reveal how teachers’ and students’ experience of
authority, a component of their sense of agency, promotes effective processes of teaching and learning. With regards to self-regulated learning, “…the process by which learners personally activate and sustain cognitions, affects, and behaviors that are systematically oriented toward the attainment of learning goals” (Schunk and Zimmerman 2008:vii), students’ capacity to retain their own authority and to experience self-possession lies at the center of discussions of how students develop self-regulation. For teachers, a sense of authority contributes “…to the manner in which teachers exercise control, direct influence, and make decisions about what is actually to take place in their classrooms…” and ultimately either empower or subordinate students (Darder 1997:337). In this sense, authority in the classroom – which does not necessarily translate into authoritarianism for teachers – is a “terrain of legitimation and struggle” (Giroux 1988) that can contribute to the enhancement or erosion of teachers’ and students’ sense of agency. Furthermore, teachers’ and students’ experiences of authority promote self-respect and respect for others, according to Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (1999) conceptualization of respect, which are important dynamics to maintain and promote productive and fulfilling educational experiences. Thus, processes of discipline which cultivate teachers’ and students’ sense of authority lead to the development of mutual respect, students’ self-regulated learning, and the possibility to effectively teach and learn.

How racial significance emerges throughout these processes, shaping inequalities

Returning to the question about how and why educational disparities have had a lasting racial appearance, much of the academic and public discourse focuses on how
structures of racism external to the classroom or individuals’ own willful attitudes and actions (namely those of teachers and students) explain or even determine what happens in the classroom. For instance, scholars who examine how educational processes are determined by structural factors discuss how historical and current forms of racism and racial stereotypes that permeate throughout society decide possibilities of learning in classrooms. In these explanations, teachers and students do not experience or possess agency in the classroom. On the other hand, analysts who focus on how individual factors determine what happens with students’ learning give students and teachers nearly absolute agency in directing educational processes and outcomes. In this framework, teachers and students are solely responsible for what happens in the classroom and their actions and attitudes supposedly develop in a vacuum that is unaffected by historical and persistent racism. However, analyses that highlight structural influences or simply point out individuals’ volition fail to account for the way learning situations are not pre-determined and how race becomes relevant through classroom processes in ways that can perpetuate or disrupt racial disparities. Instead, other research sheds light on how the creation or dissolution of teaching and learning possibilities is strongly related to the way classroom processes evolve, how external issues of race and racism affect those processes, and how individual actors create and participate in those processes.

To show how race becomes significant through classroom processes and how racial advantages or disadvantages in learning are made, I begin by discussing how racism and racial stereotypes persist despite a widespread ideology of colorblindness, posing a fatal threat to possibilities of learning (particularly for students who are
negatively stereotyped). I then discuss how stereotypes can shape classroom processes, teachers’ perceptions of students and students’ sense of their academic selves, teachers’ and students’ sense of agency, and racial disparities in educational outcomes. However, illustrating the interaction of structure and individuals’ agency, these classroom processes can also be disrupted to advance equitable learning experiences for all students.

Proclaiming colorblindness in a context of prevalent racial stereotypes

In this post-civil rights and post-Obama era, many Americans across racial and ethnic background, gender and sexuality, class background, political party lines, etc. declare their own and society’s supposed colorblindness. Many teachers and students in this research also make claims that racism, racial prejudice and discrimination only exist in our collective past and perhaps among several individual social pariahs. However, underneath the disguise of colorblindness and corresponding rules of “political correctness,” beliefs and practices of racism continue to promote ideas of racial superiority, such as the notion that denigrating stereotypes are valid constructs that predict individuals’ behaviors. Derrick Bell (2004:10) describes colorblindness “…as an attractive veneer obscuring flaws in the society that are not corrected by being hidden from view.” Beyond just obscuring societal ailments, ideological colorblindness can function to “…disguise or normalize relationships of privilege and subordination…” (Guinier and Torres 2002:42). Thus, as countless individuals, including educators and

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10 Ideological colorblindness is not inherently problematic, but problematic in its false and premature alignment with reality. Capturing the trappings of promoting “colorblindness,” Patricia Williams (1997) reflects, “While I do want to underscore that I embrace color-blindness as a legitimate hope for the future, I worry that we tend to enshrine the notion with a kind of utopianism whose naïveté will ensure its elusiveness” (4). The naïveté lies in the belief that racism has declined in significance and other issues are now more important. For instance, Omi and Winant (1994) examine how race has become couched in
students, proclaim theoretical colorblindness, the prevalence of readily available stereotypes and other detrimental conceptions of race continue to enable racial status quo, such as racial disparities in education, while being rendered invisible by an ideology of colorblindness.

In the current context of ideological colorblindness, how then do race and racism appear and function? While the concept of race has changed and evolved across time and space, it has also constantly served generalized functions of demarcating identity and difference, of inclusion and exclusion, and constituting power relationships through bodily demarcations (i.e. skin color) (e.g. Jacobson 1999). In discussing the paradoxically shifting and constant aspects of race, historian Thomas Holt (2002) observes how “…ambiguous boundaries and seeming atemporality have characterized race and the racial for a very long time – perhaps even since its inception – but…these very features explain much of its staying power” (9). Thus, while the idea of race is vague and fluid and must be historicized to understand its specific meanings and connotations, its capacity for transmogrification continuously allows it to be a significant organizing principle. Within the framework of colorblindness, race and racism take on a particular yet familiar appearance and significance where racist beliefs and actions continue to be condoned and reinforced despite individuals’ and society’s best efforts to either mask racism, transform its appearance, or sincerely move beyond racism and towards racial justice and equality.

Furthermore, to avoid discussing race, people have even called race a fabrication (Boxill 2001:23).
Various researchers illustrate how racist attitudes persist and reconstruct power structures that grant certain individuals various privileges, including educational ones. Drawing on his research of individuals’ attitudes, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) discusses the notion of colorblind racism to illustrate racism’s incarnation under the cloak of colorblindness. Mahzarin Banaji’s (e.g. 2006) ongoing studies of “implicit attitudes” and Entman and Rojecki’s (2001) studies on racial representations also reveal the persistence of pervasive racial biases that serve to uphold racial hierarchies of white privilege. Furthermore, research on “the stereotype threat” illustrates how pervasive ideas of race impact individuals perceptions of themselves (e.g. Steele and Aronson 1995). These current conceptualizations of race are consistent with degrading representations of what Daryl Michael Scott (1997) calls the “black damaged psyche.” In line with Scott’s analysis, prevailing perceptions of black and Latino students lead the wider public, policymakers, and educators to relate to students with “contempt and pity.” Moreover, notions of race occur simultaneously with stereotypes of gender and class, similar to Patricia Hill Collins’ (2000) theorization of a matrix of domination. For example, racial privilege cannot be disentangled from privileges of class, gender, sexuality, and immigrant status. Thus, racism and racial stereotypes persist despite (or because of) a widespread ideology of colorblindness and assertions that individuals exist in a social vacuum, endangering possibilities of learning for students who are negatively stereotyped.

When and how race becomes significant in classroom processes
Within this context of ideological colorblindness and persistent racism, ideas of race, such as racial stereotypes, can affect how classroom processes evolve, the way teachers and students experience agency to effectively teach and learn, and how racial advantages and disadvantages in learning develop. In the past few decades, a great deal of research has examined the ways teachers’ perceptions and expectations of students – such as those related to race, class and gender – affect students’ academic experiences and outcomes. This body of work is founded in the psychology literature, specifically Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson’s (1968) seminal piece on teachers’ expectations, Pygmalion in the Classroom. Since then, researchers and practitioners have built a body of work that examines how teachers influence students in subtle ways, such as how messages between and behind teachers’ words impact students’ understandings of their own racialized academic ability and potential. This research echoes Paulo Freire’s (1970) theorization of how teachers’ fatalism about the possibility of teaching can become true through their negative perceptions of students. Therefore, a prevailing ideology of racial stereotypes can shape how teachers perceive students and how students understand themselves, affecting classroom processes of forming connections, instruction, and discipline and unequal racial outcomes.

However, unlike analyses that simply consider educational processes to be pre-determined by external structural influences of race and racism, some research indicates that classroom learning processes can be encumbered by racial problems yet also directly address and counteract dominant racial discourse. The organizing structure of race does not necessarily determine what happens within the classroom walls, but is made through
processes that take place there. Moreover, moving beyond simply talking about how teachers are individually culpable for harboring racial biases and for producing racial advantages and disadvantages, understanding how racial problems materialize requires examining how teachers are also caught in a wider public discourse of racial stereotypes as well as classroom processes where racist beliefs can be easily reinforced and reproduced. By understanding how individual agency is made in relation to structures of race, individuals, especially teachers, can be supported to break insidious classroom processes of perpetuating racial disparities.

Processes of connections

With regards to the way emotional connections are formed throughout classroom processes, concepts of race external to the classroom can influence how students gain a sense of mattering and belonging in certain classrooms. Various studies show how white students experience more privileges in classrooms than their peer students of color despite having similar academic backgrounds. For example, Elizabeth Cohen demonstrates how white students dominate in groups where black students and white students of equal status are given problems to collectively solve (Cohen 2000). Shannon Sullivan (2006) discusses these experiences as “unconscious habits of racial privilege.” She notes particular processes by which educational practices and schooling environments in the United States naturalize and privilege “standards of whiteness” (28). For instance, Sullivan points out “habits of communication” and “modes of public expression” in classroom contexts that mark the space of education with signifiers of race and class (Sullivan 2006:28).
In addition to addressing students’ racialized experiences of belonging in certain classrooms, other researchers and educators discuss how failures to form connections in classrooms are directly related to the way teachers draw upon their outside understandings of race to inform how they interact with students. Recounting her personal experiences, Sekani Moyenda remembers being humiliated as a black student by white teachers and predominantly white classmates (Berlak and Moyenda 2001:32). Then, as a teacher herself, she witnessed white teachers harboring anti-black racist sentiments towards black teachers and students. Analyzing her own experiences as a white teacher, Vivian Gussin Paley (1979) reflects upon her own challenges to teaching and her discomfort in dealing directly with issues of race in the classroom. In her influential text White Teacher, Paley (1979) self-consciously admits that “…teaching children with different cultural and language experiences kept pushing me toward the growing edge…” (112). She recognizes the pedagogical importance of helping students feel like they matter, but also acknowledges the challenge to do so when structures of race and racism impact classroom situations. Paley (1979) reflects, “The challenge in teaching is to find a way of communicating to each child the idea that his or her special quality is understood, is valued, and can be talked about. It is not easy, because we are influenced by the fears and prejudices, apprehensions and expectations, which have become a carefully hidden part of every one of us…” (xx).

Furthermore, Paley (1979) talks about how race emerges through classroom dynamics, such as when she acknowledges being complicit in perpetuating racism each time she remained silent when a student used a racial slur. As a result of teachers’ not
addressing how race influences classroom dynamics, students without racial privileges can experience less agency in the classroom. One girl told Paley that “…she didn’t feel comfortable with most white teachers. ‘They either avoid talking about race like it was a plague, or else they look at me only when black kids are discussed as if the ghetto is the only thing I know anything about. I feel absolutely paranoid when I’m with most white teachers...’” (1979:42). However, the way race is made through classroom processes can be changed. Paley (1979) talks about how a friend helped her see “…that thinking of Ayana, Rena, Karla, Joyce, and Sylvia as ‘the black girls’ kept me from seeing them always as individuals…” (128). Her friend advised Paley: “You don’t want to keep reinforcing stereotypes in your mind… It’s not fair. The next group of black children who come in will be measured against these expectations you’re developing…” (1979:128). Through her realizations, Paley (1979) reveals how classroom processes of forming connections can be burdened by external issues of race and racism, how racial problems can emerge precisely through classroom processes, and how teachers can still disrupt problematic dynamics to forge alternative experiences of teaching and learning.

**Processes of instruction**

In terms of how race becomes significant through classroom processes of instruction, stereotypes can significantly influence teachers’ expectations and students’ own self-perceptions of their academic ability and potential. For example, researchers examine how students’ exposure to teachers’ low expectations or their own internalization of certain dehumanizing and paralyzing stereotypes can lead to students performing accordingly (e.g. Diamond, Randolph and Spillane 2004; Downey and
Psychologist Claude Steele’s large body of research on the “stereotype threat” offers important insight on the implications of stereotypes for students’ learning. In the language of academic agency, Steele’s work shows how stereotypes targeted at certain individuals can compromise and threaten students’ sense of agency, resulting in their fulfillment of the stereotype, i.e. academic performance.

When and how do pervasive stereotypes of individuals’ academic ability and potential affect students’ learning? Investigations of classroom processes reveal how stereotypes can shape teachers’ perceptions and students’ self-perceptions of students’ intellectual capacity, contributing to both teachers’ and students’ sense of agency in the classroom. Beverly Daniel Tatum (2007) discusses how “the power of expectations” largely explains the way race becomes relevant in classrooms and how educational disparities by race occur. The way concepts of race affect processes of instruction is similar and related to the way concepts of sex/gender emerge as seemingly appropriate organizing principles in the classroom. For instance, Lois Weis discusses how a wider narrative of “the differential educability of girls and young women” impacts the way possibilities of teaching and learning develop in the classroom (Weis 2008:12).

Illuminating the relationship between external feedback, labels, self-perception, and educational trajectories, Crosnoe, Riegle-Crumb and Muller (2007) analyze school transcripts and other data on a nationally representative sample of youth and show how girls’ class failures and boys’ diagnosed learning disabilities contributed to students’ negative self-perceptions that truncated their math and science course-taking.
Although ideas about race can impact classroom processes of instruction in ways that promote racial disparities, those dynamics can also be changed when educators are conscious about those external influences (e.g. stereotypes) and actively address situations differently. Theresa Perry (2004) discusses how the ideology of black children’s supposed lower intelligence pervades educational policies and practices, but how communities and educators can approach instructional strategies in ways that dismantle the racist ideology. Examples of educational programs that support black students’ academic success reveal how teachers contribute to students’ development by re-constituting students’ limiting racialized perceptions of their own ability and potential (Hilliard 2004).

**Processes of discipline**

In terms of the way structures of race and racism can affect classroom processes of discipline, research shows how black and Latino students experience more conflicts with teachers regarding discipline than their white peers. For example, Berlak and Moyenda (2001) document an escalation of discipline problems when white teachers are in predominantly black classrooms. Downey and Pribesh (2004) examine this racial problem and investigate why white teachers tend to rate black students’ classroom behavior more negatively than black teachers do. By comparing matching effects among kindergartners and 8th graders, Downey and Pribesh (2004) show how 8th graders and kindergartners receive the same ratings for their classroom behaviors from white teachers. Given these results, the researchers reject the theory that white teachers would rate black 8th graders’ behaviors more harshly because the students would act in more
“oppositional” ways in comparison to kindergartners. Instead, Downey and Pribesh (2004) suggest that their data shows stronger support for the idea that black students are evaluated more harshly than they deserve because of white teachers’ biases.

Exploring how race and gender is made relevant and heavily consequential in schools, Ann Arnett Ferguson (2001) examines everyday processes of disciplining through ethnographic methods. While working in an elementary school, Ferguson (2001) observes how black boys face particular pressures generated by assumptions about race and gender and therefore tend to be more overtly disciplined in schools. For example, Ferguson (2001) notes how teachers express having difficulties working with black boys, being intimidated by this group of students marked by race and gender, and how “problems” emerge when they do not know how to discipline the students. More generally, teachers and administrators perceive black boys as falling into two different categories: “Schoolboys” and “Troublemakers” where the former typically are “doing well” in school and the latter are usually “getting into trouble.” Students recognize these categories as well and “Schoolboys” know the threat of falling into the category of “Troublemakers,” a threat that adult figures embody. Ferguson (2001) explains, “As African American males, Schoolboys were always on the brink of being redefined into the Troublemaker category by the school. The pressures and dilemmas this group faced around race and gender identities from adults and peers were always palpable forces working against their maintaining a commitment to the school project…” (10). Thus, for these students, their racial and gender ascriptions are inextricable and problematically
become meaningful means of identification for teachers who label students according to widely held beliefs about race and gender.

Illuminating one process through which students are classified and treated, Ferguson discusses how “…school rules operate as instruments of normalization. Children are sorted, evaluated, ranked, compared on the basis of (mis)behavior: what they do that violates, conforms to, school rules” (Ferguson 2001:52). The application of school rules relates directly to adults’ perceptions of students as shaped by concepts of race and gender. Specifically, “African American boys are not accorded the masculine dispensation of being ‘naturally’ naughty. Instead the school reads their expression and display of masculine naughtiness as a sign of an inherent vicious, insubordinate nature that as a threat to order must be controlled” (Ferguson 2001:86). For instance, teachers and administrators perceive black boys to be “looters” (Ferguson 2001:83) and “willfully bad” (Ferguson 2001:80) and thereby criminalize black boys based on organizing principles of race and gender (Ferguson 2001:83). The way race and gender are made meaningful through these processes, such as how black boys are seen as more culpable and even terribly incorrigible, therefore endangers students’ opportunities to constructively learn, academically engage and achieve.

Similar to how classroom processes of connections and instruction can be disrupted so that racial disparities do not become reproduced there, race-conscious antiracist discourse in the classroom can help teachers and students confront and deconstruct stereotypes of students’ innocence or criminality based on race and gender. In those ways, race is neither ignored through naïve hopes of being colorblind or
“colormute” nor amplified as a determinant of students’ academic fates (Pollock 2004). Teachers are therefore disabused of erroneous beliefs that students’ problems simply come from students’ home lives or static cultural differences. Through directly addressing the presence of structures of race and racism, teachers can also face their own possible “messianic complex toward the children of oppressed groups” (Titone 2000:173) which follow from perceiving students with either contempt or pity (Scott 1997).

Through examining how structures of race and racism can impinge upon classroom processes and contribute to the reproduction of racial inequalities, it becomes apparent that the problem is neither that external structures completely determine teachers and students nor that individuals are entirely capable of being solely responsible for the presence (i.e. students acting in “oppositional” ways) or absence (i.e. teachers and students being “colorblind”) of race. Instead, race impacts students’ learning experience the degree to which it imbues classroom processes, shapes teachers’ and students’ sense of agency, and leads to racial advantages and disadvantages in learning. In particular, racial stereotypes which associate external bodily features (i.e. skin color) with internal qualities (i.e. laziness or industriousness) can shape classroom processes by affecting teachers’ perceptions of and interactions with students and students’ own sense of academic agency, despite individuals’ earnest efforts to disguise or ignore racial biases and discrimination. In short, race becomes real through these everyday schooling processes.

However, ideologies of race and racism do not necessarily have to determine how possibilities of teaching and learning develop within the classroom. Since many teachers
and students, and nearly every other individual involved with schooling in the U.S.,
adhere to norms of colorblindness, they consequently struggle with speaking about how
racial problems in education endure, how they are reproduced through everyday
educational processes, and how racial stereotypes can influence learning processes and
consequently lead to the distribution of academic advantages based on racial privilege.
Despite and because of these inhibitions, teachers can be supported in explicitly
examining how they interact with ideas of race and make them relevant in the classroom.
Thus, cultivating antiracist pedagogical approaches involve investigating their own
possible stereotypes of students and how those biases play out, such as through making
certain attributions for students’ behaviors. By doing so, teachers experience greater
agency in the classroom, classroom processes evolve in constructive ways, and students
subsequently develop a stronger sense of academic agency to engage in their schoolwork
and achieve.

Conclusion

Why are there ongoing racial disparities in how much students learn (and then
how they perform)? More generally, how do students learn in school? Research and
discussions about persistent racial disparities in educational outcomes (and educational
problems in general) have been largely focused on either individual and cultural reasons
or structural reasons, thus blaming individuals and their “culture” or “structure.” For
example, in Steady Gains and Stalled Progress: Inequality and the Black-White Test
Score Gap (Magnuson and Waldfogel 2008), researchers examine several key cultural
and structural reasons for persisting racial disparities and discuss how issues such as changes in students’ families, income inequality, segregation, teacher quality, and students’ cognitive skills upon entering school have contributed to the “stalled progress.”

Each side of the individual/culture vs. structure discussion depicts educational processes and outcomes as overdetermined and predetermined either by individual differences (e.g. racial/cultural devaluation of learning) or structural problems (e.g. between and within school segregation, high stakes testing etc.). In the former, structural factors are not accounted for (i.e. vicious and virtuous cycles of classroom processes, teachers’ perceptions and stereotypes of students) and individual and cultural factors supposedly account for most, if not all, educational disparities. And in the latter, individuals and their participation in educational processes become absent from the analyses (i.e. students and teachers and their experiences of agency), despite the fact that students and teachers are the ones who are in the classrooms confronting the dilemmas of education everyday.

Instead, my research strives to cut through this polarized discussion and show how individuals and structures can and need to be examined simultaneously to understand how teachers and students act upon and are concurrently shaped by their environments throughout classroom processes, leading to students’ success or failure to learn. In doing so, this research on how students’ and teachers’ sense of agency is made through classroom processes reveals how analyses which focus mainly on individual and cultural sources can be misguided and research which only examines structural reasons can be inadequate. Contrasting ideas that educational processes and outcomes are overdetermined by either cultures/individuals and structure, my research shows how the
possibility or impossibility of learning is actually made in place in the classroom through relational dynamics between teachers and students of emotional connections, math instruction and discipline. Through experiencing agency, teachers and students emerge in the classroom as empowered and committed to act appropriately as teachers and learners, allowing learning to happen. Certainly classroom processes and students’ and teachers’ sense of agency are shaped by influences from the wider context of school and society (e.g. students’ home lives, teachers’ professional experiences, school administration and organization, etc.), but what happens in the classroom still matters in shaping processes of teaching and learning.

By describing three different kinds of classroom processes (emotional connections, math instruction and discipline) in the following chapters, I show how those processes (both at the individual and classroom levels) involve and influence students’ sense of academic agency and teachers’ sense of agency as well, and how virtuous and vicious cycles lead to students’ successful learning or failure to learn. Teachers’ perceptions of students (shaped by racial/class/gender stereotypes) and students’ racial/class/gender subjectivities also importantly affect how processes evolve in class and contribute to the perpetuation of educational advantages and disadvantages by race.

- Classroom processes of connections involve teachers’ showing that they believe students matter through caring about students, encouraging them, relating to them, and understanding them. Students’ sense of mattering and belonging is thus fostered. Teachers’ sense of agency (as being able to relate to students and connect with them) is critical to the development of virtuous cycles, which result
in students’ and teachers’ investment in the class, engagement and motivation to teach and learn.

• Classroom processes of instruction involve teachers’ showing that they believe in students’ ability to learn and potential through providing an engaging, clear, and well-organized progression of learning. Those processes cultivate students’ sense of mastery and potential. Integral to virtuous cycles of instruction is the teacher’s own sense of agency as being able to successfully help students acquire knowledge and become engaged in math education. Virtuous cycles result in students’ engagement, motivation, and achievement.

• Classroom processes of discipline involve teachers’ showing that they respect, trust and believe in students’ authority to self-regulate through providing fair, consistent and flexible guidelines for students’ behavior. Through these processes, students develop their sense of authority to self-regulate. Virtuous cycles involve teachers’ sense of authority and control over the class and result in students’ and teachers’ having the time and energy to engage in productive learning.

These processes are distinct, but are interconnected, strongly related and mutually reinforcing in how they foster possibilities for learning. For instance, vicious cycles in one process influence the development or exacerbation of vicious cycles in another. Similarly, virtuous cycles in one process can influence the development or promotion of virtuous cycles in another process. Because the processes are different but involve the same relationships (i.e. the same actors are involved), having a vicious cycle of one
process makes it a challenge to have a virtuous cycle in the other dynamics or limits the
effectiveness of virtuous cycles of other processes. The alchemical optimization of
learning possibilities happens when virtuous cycles of all three processes are present
within classrooms. When one or two virtuous cycles of these processes are absent,
learning can still happen, but depending on the presence and effectiveness of a virtuous
cycle of another process. When all three are absent, possibilities of students’ learning
depend on what they bring into the classroom and how students work with each other.
Becoming Connected vs. Becoming Alienated
Strengthening or weakening transformative connections of care and commitments to teach and learn

“I think this school is bipolar!”
-Dontell, a black boy in the 10th grade

Natasha tells me that she’s “lucky.” As graduation approaches, she has a sobering awareness that graduating from high school and going to college was not a likely path for her. Natasha reflects on her past, where she is now and where she is going and knows that she could have followed the same path as her older sister or her cousin. Her older sister became pregnant her senior year in high school, consequently did not graduate from high school, did not go to college, and now has two kids at the age of 20. Natasha’s cousin got into trouble nearly every day in school, was periodically suspended from school, and finally dropped out of school. Like her cousin and her sister, Natasha receives a lot of negative messages at home with her parents telling her that she won’t amount to much and her mom repeatedly saying, especially when she is drunk, “I wish I hadn’t had you.” In addition to the emotional and sometimes physical abuse at home, Natasha’s parents, who are both generally preoccupied with their own drug and alcohol addictions and emotional struggles, do not provide much support for Natasha in nearly all areas, including finances and academics. She says that her dad simply “comes around when he wants,” has never had a “real job” and just does work that is “under the table.” Her mom “collects” and stopped working when Natasha was in the 3rd or 4th grade.
Given the overwhelming instability and distress of her home life and her own consequent emotional struggles with depression and panic attacks, how has Natasha managed to keep up with her schoolwork, play three seasons of sports (volleyball, basketball and softball), and participate in theater productions throughout high school?

When I ask Natasha, a white girl whom I met in an MCAS Prep class in 2006, why her experiences differ so much from her cousin Ricky’s experiences in school, where Ricky felt that school was meaningless to him and a place of struggle, she answers simply, “because of my connections with teachers.” She explains how her relationships with teachers and resulting attachment to school has allowed her to follow a direction in life different from the rest of her family (she will be the third person from her entire extended family to graduate from high school and go onto college). In short, Natasha’s experience of being “lucky” has very little to do with her life outside of school and has everything to do with her experiences in school. Numerous other students, including those who come from more privileged and stable backgrounds, echo similar sentiments about how positive and supportive relationships with teachers are vital to their learning and academic success. Teachers and administrators also note the importance of strong teacher-student connections in promoting students’ engagement and achievements in school. How are these important connections cultivated? How do these relationships with teachers impact students’ learning and growth? Furthermore, how and why are there disparities in the kinds of relationships students and teachers build, offering students – such as Natasha and Ricky – differing opportunities to benefit from the connections?
The following discussion addresses these questions by unpacking how processes of connections evolve in the classroom and nurture commitments to teach and learn, how positive emotional connections with teachers support students’ sense of mattering and belonging in class, and how and why students experience inequalities in their opportunities to develop these important relationships. To illustrate the individual and class-level processes by which emotional connections are cultivated or damaged, I describe the dynamics in two classes, Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 course and Mr. Trent’s Algebra 2 course. These two classes exemplify what happens in other classes as well when teacher-student relationships are nurtured in productive ways and when they are worn down. Importantly, Ms. Ricci’s and Mr. Trent’s classes show how teachers’ own sense of mattering and their perceptions of students are important components of virtuous cycles of connections and vicious cycles of alienation. Overall, these two highlighted classes illustrate patterns that occur in other classes where relational classroom dynamics are not determined by individual characteristics of teachers or students, but are shaped by unfolding processes of developing or destroying transformative connections of care.

**A Pernicious Cycle of Alienation**

When I work with Jevon in one of Ms. Christie’s MCAS Prep classes, I notice that he sometimes pays attention to what is going on in class and other times seems to be in his own world. When I ask Jevon, a Jamaican boy in the 10th grade, why he doesn’t pay attention in class at times, he explains that when the teacher is “nice,” like his 9th grade math teacher Ms. Ricci, then it is much easier for him to stay engaged in class. In
his experience, Ms. Ricci seems to care about them, such as when “she explains stuff; she helps you …and all that.” He believes that other students liked her too and everyone generally did their work as a result. Several other students talk about how much they like Ms. Ricci and appreciate the way she cares about them and their learning. When I meet Ms. Ricci, I notice how she often tells the students in this class that she “loves” them and is committed to them. Furthermore, she demonstrates her desire and capacity to develop tight bonds of care with students in her other classes. Students in Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class also discuss and demonstrate their desire and capacity to build constructive emotional connections with teachers and to cultivate their commitment to learning. Together, teachers and students share several great moments in class when they successfully relate to each other and are collectively engaged in the process of teaching and learning.

However, by the end of the semester, connections between Ms. Ricci and the students become acrimonious. For instance, Rafiq diplomatically tells me that Ms. Ricci is not a “preferred teacher,” especially because she creates an “intense and unpleasant atmosphere.” Experiencing frustration on her end of these strained relationships, Ms. Ricci tells me that she will refuse to teach certain students from this class next year if they are assigned to her classes. Even though Ms. Ricci and the students have successful experiences of building productive relationships and learning elsewhere, why do relationships deteriorate into hostile alienation in Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class?

Given the evidence that the teachers and students are capable of fostering functional and productive relationships, the failure of this class cannot be simply
explained by the class participants’ not caring about teaching or learning or being prone to antagonizing relationships. Also, the breakdown of classroom connections cannot be merely attributed to the fact that this class is a CP class because students and teachers mention other CP classes where teachers and students bond well and develop their investment in and attachment to class. In fact, Ms. Ricci’s CP Geometry class that same semester experiences more productive classroom processes of building emotional connections. Instead, teacher-student relationships deteriorate in this classroom because of how an insidious cycle of discouragement and alienation develops. Similar to what happens in a couple of Ms. Thompson’s MCAS Prep classes, a few of Ms. Christie’s MCAS Prep classes, Ms. Flores’ Algebra 1 class, and Ms. Browne’s Geometry class, teachers’ and students’ sense of mattering erodes through vicious cycles of strained connections, directly reducing their investment in teaching and learning in that classroom. Moreover, teachers’ perceptions of students, shaped by stereotypes, and students’ own subjectivities exacerbate these processes. However, as certain enriching and productive moments in Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class reveal, things could be very different and connections could have developed in a way that supported effective teaching and learning.

**When Ms. Ricci’s efforts to care devolve into discouragement**

When I start attending this class at the beginning of the spring semester, the students are at the halfway point into the yearlong course which is officially called “High School Mathematics 1.” Within this class of 18 students, one student is in the 11th grade, two students are in the 10th grade, and the other 15 students are in the 9th grade. Shakeila,
a black girl who is the one student in the 11th grade, enters into the class halfway into the semester after moving down from her honors class. Of the 18 students, there are ten black students (five girls and five boys), two Latina American girls, two Middle Eastern American girls, two white boys, one Haitian American girl, and one Asian American girl. Although the two teachers in the classroom are technically co-teachers, Ms. Ricci and Ms. Bauer, both white women, have a strained relationship which manifests as Ms. Ricci acting as a lead teacher and Ms. Bauer acting as a teaching assistant.11

Even though classroom connections between teachers and students are already slightly strained at the beginning of the semester, Ms. Ricci, who has been teaching for 25 years, tries to show that she cares about students, such as through joking with the students and putting music on for them as they work. Also, Ms. Ricci sometimes effectively connects with students through trying to relate to them. For example, as the topic of racial and ethnic stereotypes arises one day in class, Ms. Ricci responds to students’ curiosity about her upbringing in an Italian household and shares with them several childhood stories. Promising the students that she will make them homemade pasta and bring it to class in a couple weeks, she asks them what kind of pasta they would prefer. However, amidst all of the rapidly developing antagonisms, the pasta party, as promised, never happens.

Despite Ms. Ricci’s efforts that are intended to care for the students, she also harbors distrust towards the students which she reveals when she tells me after class one day that she simply does not trust the students in this class as much as the students in her

11 Because Ms. Bauer’s teaching role in the class becomes marginalized, this discussion about teacher-student connections focuses on relationships between Ms. Ricci and the students.
geometry class whom she has worked with before. Her misgivings about the students in this class become expressed through her actions towards them. For example, Ms. Ricci displays a sign on her wall that says “Choices, Decisions and Consequences.” She often repeats this phrase to students in her Algebra 1 class in order to remind them that there are clear and inflexible repercussions for what they choose to do and how they decide to act. When problems arise with several students in class, especially Antone and Alan, two black boys in the 9th grade, Ms. Ricci enacts this principle, becomes indignant, and punishes the students by giving them detention and sending them to the dean’s office.

While this treatment seems consistent with her posted sign, Ms. Ricci treats most students in other classes in a very different way. For instance, Alex and Ariel, two Latino American boys in her geometry class, take a girl’s blueberry muffin one day, refuse to return it and then damage the pastry even after the girl and I ask for them to return it. As I become flustered and frustrated, Ms. Ricci comes over, tells the boys to return the muffin and asks them to come see her after class. Contrasting the harsh tone that she uses with students in her Algebra 1 class, Ms. Ricci does not raise her voice with Alex and Ariel, deftly addresses the problem, quickly puts the matter to rest, and moves on with class. Similar to Antone and Alan’s behaviors in the Algebra 1 class, Alex and Ariel are trying to be playful. While Ms. Ricci cares to recognize and understand that about Alex and Ariel’s behaviors, her distrust and consequent lack of patience disables her from considering Antone and Alan’s actions in the same way.

As students respond to her lack of patience and harsh treatment with disengagement, Ms. Ricci quickly concludes that the students’ failure to display
comprehension (which is actually largely due to poor processes of instruction) and their perceived lack of discipline (which results mostly from ineffective classroom processes of discipline) reveal that students do not care about her or the class. Experiencing mounting frustration, Ms. Ricci’s expressions of harsh discouragement become louder and more frequent. Her growing hostility manifests as she angrily tells students that she wants to record how much time they waste in class and when she orders students to “lose the ‘tude.” Also, in front of the entire class, she shames individual students, such as Rafiq, and tells them that they lack some basic math skills. Towards the end of the semester, her acerbic tone peaks. On several occasions, she tells the entire class that more than half of them are failing the class, informs them in a threatening way that she will be recommending summer school for many of them, and says plainly, “I’m scared for what’s going to happen to you next year.” At one of the lowest points in this class’ vicious cycle of alienation and antagonism, Ms. Ricci calls into question students’ fundamental character and worth and cries out to them, “In all of my 30 years of teaching, I have never given up on a class of students like I have on you!”

Disintegrating students’ sense of mattering

Similar to most students whom I spoke with and worked with (regardless of their support outside of school and academic accomplishments), students in this class are not invulnerable to Ms. Ricci’s words of discouragement and her harsh treatment; their sense of self and possibilities for learning are directly and negatively impacted. Rafiq, a white boy in the 9th grade, tells me how he feels like “crap” when Ms. Ricci tells the entire class

12 Since Ms. Ricci informs me that she has been teaching for 25 years, her claim here that she has been teaching for 30 years may be an exaggeration used for emphasis.
that they’re not going to pass the course. He understands that Ms. Ricci is trying to warn students that there will be dire consequences if students don’t get their act together, but he feels that her warnings just succeed in putting them down, demeaning them, and fostering a sense of hopelessness.

Other students echo Rafiq’s sentiment and further add that feeling diminished leads them to lose interest in doing their work. When I ask Steven, a black boy in the 9th grade, what helps him stay motivated and engaged in school, he says that he needs to be “in the mood.” Offering examples from Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class and other classes, he explains that when a teacher is “mean” to him, then he is not going to be “in the mood.” Most students in Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class, including Rafiq and Steven, illustrate this exact dynamic of disengagement and disinvestment when they experience discouragement and disparagement. As a result of the “intense and unpleasant atmosphere” in the classroom where they feel like they do not matter in a positive way, students do not enjoy learning and experience decreased motivation and engagement with their learning. Even for students like Rafiq, Antone and Steven, who all speak about enjoying learning math and understanding math in the past, their interest in learning diminishes while being in Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class. For Rafiq, this results in his feeling “dumb” this year. In other classes, students individually and collectively display the same process of alienation and disinvestment, such as when Juan, a half-Dominican and half-Puerto Rican American boy in the 10th grade, thinks that his teacher Ms. Browne is “mean” and does not care about her students. Because he feels that he and other
students do not matter to Ms. Browne, Juan, who generally enjoys and excels in his math classes, does not care about class and is failing as a result.

**Eroding Ms. Ricci’s sense of mattering**

As students become increasingly disengaged and disinvested because they feel like they do not matter in class, Ms. Ricci experiences a diminishing sense of agency as well. When students do not adequately show that they care about the class, she feels as if her presence in the classroom and her efforts to connect with and educate students are futile and do not matter. This is similar to when Mr. Trent experienced his classes to be a disaster and then thought that he should have retired before the semester started. In response to what happens in the classroom, Ms. Ricci talks about “taking things personally” because her self-worth is on the line through her teaching. Thus, resonating with other teachers’ experiences, Ms. Ricci’s intense frustrations express her experience of stymied efforts and also her struggle to actualize her worth as a teacher.

Reflecting upon his experiences of disappointment and aggravation in the classroom, Mr. Trent tells me, “Sometimes you just can’t take it.” Although he believes that teachers should try to encourage all students all the time, he explains how teachers’ own frustrations sometimes pile on and how students’ actions and attitudes can discourage the teacher from continuing to support and care about the students. Mr. Trent describes experiencing futility: “You’re going out of your way to encourage a student and they’re not doing anything. Your encouragement is going nowhere.” In those situations, teachers themselves experience discouragement and a reduced sense of mattering. With her Algebra 1 class, Ms. Ricci encounters the same dynamic and
responds in a similar way through giving up on connecting with and supporting students. Her own experience of alienation translates into a defensive hostility as well, as shown through her denigration of students and other antagonistic comments towards them (e.g. “I don’t want any of you saying that I didn’t teach you! Don’t you dare say that!”). Through these processes, the pernicious cycle of alienation and disinvestment continue.

**How negative perceptions of students fuel the vicious cycle**

On the first day that I meet Ms. Ricci, she tells me how special the students are to her, but warns me about how they are “difficult” as well. The notion that the students are “difficult” becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy across the semester not because the belief accurately describes what transpires in class, but because that negative perception of students animates her treatment of students and leads her to make certain attributions for their behaviors. For example, from the beginning, the idea that the students in her Algebra 1 class are not trustworthy becomes expressed through her minimal amount of patience, compassion and effort to understand students and reasons for their actions. Also, as students become disengaged because of vicious cycles of discouragement and alienation, Ms. Ricci simply attributes their lack of interest and effort in class to a pervasive “culture of disrespect and laziness” among certain students; they supposedly just don’t care. As a result of her belief that the students have flawed characters, Ms. Ricci asserts that these students do not need to be gently cared for, but harshly disciplined.

Moreover, Ms. Ricci’s perceptions are subtly shaped by stereotypes of race and class. From the first day that I meet Ms. Ricci until the last time I see her for the
semester, she tells me that she is “colorblind” and that she doesn’t see “color” and race when students enter her classroom. Furthermore, she adds that she is disturbed by people who point out race, such as when a researcher mentioned that she is a white woman talking to a black student. Contradicting her self-perceptions, Ms. Ricci reveals several times across the semester not only her recognition of race, but also her beliefs in the significance of racial meanings. For example, Ms. Ricci tells me that students’ failure to learn and to be engaged in school results from something changing “culturally or demographically” where students are becoming increasingly “lazy,” “uncaring” and “disrespectful.” To contrast these “cultural” or “demographic” changes, she then tells me about how people in Italy (where her extended family is from) are extremely respectful and embody dignity. Through Ms. Ricci’s comparison, she conveys her belief in the cultural inferiority of individuals from non-Italian backgrounds and a broader perception of how culture also means race and ethnicity.

Ms. Ricci’s negative perceptions of students are inflected with meanings of socioeconomic differences as well. For instance, when she tells me about some senior students’ destructive pranks, Ms. Ricci tells me that you wouldn’t expect it from the guilty students because they are “affluent students.” In other words, she believes that students behave in certain ways according to their class background where students from wealthier backgrounds ostensibly act in more respectable ways and students of lower income backgrounds are presumably more likely to commit unlawful acts of transgression. These meanings of race, ethnicity, class and culture shape her negative perceptions of students as “difficult” and flawed. Consequently, in Ms. Ricci’s
interactions with students, she often quickly attributes students’ faults (such as when Joane, a Haitian-American girl in the 9th grade, does not follow Ms. Ricci’s orders to cut the frilly edge of her paper) to their “culture” or “upbringing” (Ms. Ricci tells Joane in front of the entire class that either Joane is not representing her upbringing well or she was not raised in a respectable way).

**Ending up disconnected and disinvested**

If Ms. Ricci and the students demonstrate their capacity to form productive connections and become engaged in teaching and learning in other classrooms, why do emotional connections and possibilities of teaching and learning in this class dissolve by the end of the semester? Although Ms. Ricci and the students actualize their ability to cultivate transformative connections of care and nurture their commitments to teaching and learning in other classroom settings, a vicious cycle of distrust, discouragement, alienation and disinvestment occurred in this classroom such that teaching and learning became seemingly impossible. From the beginning, Ms. Ricci tried to develop connections with students, but really didn’t trust the students much and she had negative perceptions of them. So then she was quick to lose patience with them, not having much compassion or trying to understand them, and discouraging them. For the students, as they experienced being not cared for and being discouraged, they lost a sense of mattering, and they lost interest in doing work and wouldn’t be “in the mood” to do work. Ms. Ricci then experienced students’ reactions and disengagement to be frustrating and discouraging, leading her to have a lowered sense of mattering. Moreover, she attributed students’ behaviors to her negative beliefs about students (and not the classroom
processes that generate them) and then they were reinforced and fueled the vicious cycle – race/culture/class/ethnicity was a convenient explanation. She discouraged them severely feeling that that was appropriate and treated them harshly. She was increasingly unkind in her attitudes and actions towards students.

The situation just kept deteriorating as students felt worse, became less invested in class and Ms. Ricci felt worse, became less invested in class. Everyone felt discouraged and estranged from each other, resentment and hostility grew, and the thin thread of good will broke. Exemplifying vicious cycles, care and encouragement disappeared. While particularly bad relations developed between Ms. Ricci and Alan, Steven, and Antone, bad relations between Ms. Ricci and the entire class developed as well. While this vicious cycle of connections was worsened by bad processes of instruction and discipline as well, alienation and antagonisms and disinvestment destroyed possibilities of teaching and learning as shown when students and Ms. Ricci gave up. While this pernicious cycle of alienation, antagonisms and disinvestment played out in several other classrooms in similar ways (classrooms in this fieldwork and also other classrooms that students and teachers discuss), other classrooms experienced the opposite kind of dynamic and illustrated the kinds of dynamics that nurture the sorts of relationships that Natasha experienced.

A Productive Cycle of Connections

Mr. Trent’s classes last semester sound as if they were a lot like Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class and other unsuccessful classes in which connections between teachers
and students were severely strained and little was accomplished. Ms. Jefferson, who teaches in Ms. Browne’s Geometry class this semester, worked with Mr. Trent in his classes last semester and tells me they were very difficult and they had several difficult students. Carlos, a Salvadoran American boy I worked with in one of Ms. Christie’s MCAS Prep classes, was in one of Mr. Trent’s classes last semester and he also tells me how the class didn’t go very well and Mr. Trent seemed unpleasant and impatient with the students. These are the classes that Mr. Trent is talking about in the passage above where he thinks he should have retired last June when he was going through the class since it was so unpleasant. Also students in Mr. Trent’s Algebra 2 class talk about how they have experienced classes in the past or currently in which there are antagonistic relationships between the teachers and the students and everyone sounds like they become disinvested and defeated, similar to the pernicious cycle of alienation in Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class. They disliked those classes and didn’t learn much in those classes. For instance, Melanie tells me how much she does not like her history teacher this semester and she knows that the teacher doesn’t like her either. She feels disrespected by him. As a result, she bitterly states that she simply does not care about the class and only does enough work to get by. Lily talks about how she doesn’t like it when teachers don’t act like they care, give them too much work and do other things that lead to her disengagement and boredom.

However, despite Mr. Trent’s past teaching experiences that were negative and students’ past and current experiences that also involve discouragement and alienation, things in this Algebra 2 class go extremely well. Lily, an Asian-American girl in the 10th
grade, tells me that there is a nice “bubbly feeling” in the class. William, a Latino-American boy in the 10th grade, similarly talks about how he really likes Mr. Trent and that the classroom has a “calm learning environment.” They talk about how they learn a lot. Many of the students that I speak with from that class echo similar sentiments about the Algebra 2 class where they like, if not “love,” Mr. Trent, feel like they learn a lot, and enjoy the atmosphere of the class in general. Mr. Trent really likes the class as well. How and why did the class turn out so well, in a way that sharply contrasts what happened in Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class and other classes with vicious cycles of emotional connections?

Given the examples above of classes where Mr. Trent and the students in this Algebra 2 class have had terrible experiences of disconnection and disinvestment, the way in which the class turned out well cannot be attributed solely to individual traits where the students and teacher are simply pre-disposed to building healthy classroom connections and engaging in productive learning. Also, many people, including the students in this class and Mr. Trent, assume that the success of the class is simply because it’s an honors class, but teachers and students both in this class and other classes have mentioned numerous other honors classes that go poorly and other CP classes that go well. Thus, the success of the class isn’t just determined by the structural context of it being an honors class or what individuals bring into this classroom space. Something alchemical happens in the synergy of students’ and the teacher’s attitudes and actions in this class, their energy and engagement. The following analysis will describe what happened over the course of the semester where students’ and teachers’ sense of
mattering are made through virtuous cycles of emotional connections in the classroom, having positive implications for students’ learning. It will also look at the role of teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the class. What happens here is similar to what happens in several MCAS Prep classes with Ms. Thompson and Ms. Christie and Ms. Ricci’s Geometry class.

**Fostering fruitful emotional connections**

From the beginning of the course, things are pretty good and Mr. Trent shows that he cares about the students. From my first day in class, he was joking with Sanjay, an Indian-American boy in the 10th grade, who asks about getting an extra lunch. Mr. Trent sits down next to Melanie, a white girl in the 10th grade who just moved to Riverton and transferred to the school, and asks her about her past, her move, and what she wants to study in college. Things just grow stronger over the semester as well, as a virtuous cycle of emotional connections develops in this class of 15 students. Initially, Mr. Trent, a white man who has been teaching for 36 years, first receives a roster of 28 students for this semester-long honors Algebra 2 class. Upset that the class was so large, he managed to get the class split into two smaller classes and so it’s just 15 students now. There is one 11th grader and the rest are in the 10th grade. There are eight white students (three girls and five boys), four Asian students (one girl and three boys), one black girl, one Ethiopian girl, and one Latino-American boy.

Like on the first day of class, through the end of the semester, Mr. Trent makes efforts to connect with students, relates to the students and jokes with them. For instance, when students are talking about Harry Potter, he tries to understand what they are talking
about. Students share things with him and he patiently tries to understand their point of view and experience.

(fieldnotes April 14, 2008) Melanie asks Mr. Trent if she can use his computer. She says, “I have to show you the best thing!” … Mr. Trent starts with the “SAT Question of the day.” He starts reading, “3, 6, 8, 11… The first 4 terms of a sequence are shown above. Which of the following…” “MR. TRENT!!!! OH MY GOODNESS!!!” Melanie screams out loud. …[Mr. Trent] stops mid-sentence …goes over to the computer and asks her what it is…She shows him pictures of porcupines and hedgehogs with diapers on. … He starts to smile and half of the class gets up to see the computer…. Melanie says, “This is the funniest thing ever! Oh my goodness, this really got me going!!!” I don’t think anyone thinks that it’s as funny as she thinks it is. Mr. Trent goes back to the board and asks what the answer to the question is and Sanjay calls out, “I know, Mr. Trent. It’s either A, B, C, D, or E.” Mr. Trent then says, “You’re starting to sound like me.”

This example shows how he cares about students’ experiences and also jokes with them. Because of the way he cares about relating to students and allows for opportunities for this to happen, there is an easygoing nature of the learning atmosphere, while being structured as well. This is similar to how Lily believes that all of the students in her Algebra 2 class love how Mr. Trent has “a great personality,” can joke with students and still get the students into “work mode.”

Similarly, Mr. Trent tries to understand students’ experiences with learning. For instance, Lily talks about how Mr. Trent understands that it can be hard to do math for 82 minutes straight and allows them to blend work and play. While he provides structure for their learning, he also is very considerate of their experiences. So while he consistently gives homework and goes over it in class the next day, he doesn’t give them that much homework and gives them time to do it in class. Similarly, at students’ request to have a party, he allows the students to have a party a couple times during class where
he and students all bring in food. In these ways, he shows that their experiences are important and listens to them. He also shows that he cares about their well-being and about nurturing them in some ways. For instance, he often provides bottled water for them and passes them out when they are doing their work in class.

Also, through his instruction, he shows that he cares about students. While processes of instruction are discussed in the next chapter in greater detail, the way in which he builds connections through his instruction is very important. For example, through providing structure for students and their learning, he shows that he cares about students’ growth, progress and achievement. This is similar to what Ms. Jefferson describes when she says that providing structure for students’ learning shows that someone cares about them. Also, when they are doing their homework in class, Mr. Trent is there to help them if they need the help. Lily says that that is very helpful for them not just in terms of developing comprehension and mastery, but in terms of feeling encouraged and supported. Mr. Trent is very patient in explaining material to students and acts caring in that way as well. For instance, William tells me that he really likes Mr. Trent “a lot” because of how Mr. Trent explains the material clearly and thoroughly.

Additionally, Mr. Trent is compassionate and patient with helping them do their work, like when he gives Matteo many opportunities to complete his work and pass the class. Throughout the semester, Matteo, a white boy who is the one student in the 11th grade, never demonstrates interest in class or doing his schoolwork and draws in his notebook instead (being engrossed in drawing fantastical creatures and narrating stories), until the end of the semester when he frantically works to catch up on work because he
does not want to fail the class and have to take another math class again. (If he passes this course, he will complete his graduation requirements for taking math classes.) At times, I become very frustrated working with him because he doesn’t know how to do problems right after Mr. Trent just explained how. But I never see Mr. Trent get frustrated with Matteo and he actually just gives Matteo a list of work to complete in order to pass the class. This contrasts how Ms. Ricci refused to give certain students in her classes opportunities at the end of the year to make up work that they missed over the semester, even after the students asked for the opportunity. Moreover, as an example about really caring about students, Matteo didn’t get moved down to a lower grade despite failing the class mid-semester. When I asked Mr. Trent whether or not he would move Matteo to a lower grade, Mr. Trent said that he wouldn’t at this point in the semester because he had faith in Matteo as a good kid who would turn around (which is different than having beliefs in his abilities). However, at that same point in the semester, other students were being moved down from honors classes into Ms. Ricci’s CP class, revealing that other teachers did not have qualms about moving students between classes at that time.

**Feeling connected and experiencing mattering as a student**

As a result of Mr. Trent’s efforts to relate to students and understand their experiences, to accommodate them and respect their needs, to demonstrate that he cares about them through his instruction, students feel like they matter a lot in the classroom. Through those experiences, the students become interpersonally and emotionally connected to the classroom space. They feel like they belong in class. His instructional
methods of explaining material and structuring their work not only help students’ confidence and courage to do their work, but also help them feel like they matter. That sense of mattering supports their sense of having agency in school and in that class. As opposed to students in Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class and some other classes where destructive processes of emotional connections develop, students feel like they matter in a good way in this class. As a result, students become engaged in class, invested and attached to class.

Many students from this class talk about how they feel encouraged and cared for in this class, and therefore that they matter there. For example, Melanie, who “loves” Mr. Trent’s class and has a particularly close bond with him, talks about how Mr. Trent’s class has made her adjustment to the new school a lot better. She tells me that she knows that her friends at her former school love her and make her feel great there, but the adjustment to this school has been hard because she needs to cultivate those relationships and find a place of feeling like she matters here. She says that some faculty and staff at Riverside are “not really nice” and it brings her down. And then when people encourage her, it directly shapes how she sees herself. For example, one of the deans at the school remembers Melanie and it makes her “feel good” that even though the dean works with hundreds of students, she remembers Melanie. She says, “It’s just nice to know that someone cares and wants to encourage.” By remembering Melanie, the dean makes her feel as if she matters. She says, “People’s comments can either bring you down or really uplift you.” Even after talking for one hour about how hard work is the reason why students – and people in general – succeed or fail in life, Melanie talks about how
encouragement and other ways that people show that students matter is very important in shaping how students feel connected and believe that their presence is important to someone else.

Numerous students in other classes talk about how teachers’ encouragement and helping them with work makes them feel like they matter and motivates their engagement with learning. While recalling several negative experiences with teachers, Selamawit, an Ethiopian American girl in the 10th grade, suddenly remembers and excitedly describes a very positive experience she had with her history teacher. She asked him a question about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and her teacher went to the library to look up information about her question. When her teacher did that, Selamawit says, “it made me feel good because … people don’t acknowledge students and that he acknowledges them – he was more than a teacher.” To further illustrate how her connection with her history teacher was transformative, she recounts how this teacher helped her move into an honors history class (she takes mostly CP classes) and even enthusiastically helped her with her report for the honors class. For Selamawit, her teacher’s investment in her and care for her were embodied in his acts of acknowledging her and helping her, which made her feel “good,” as if she matters. The direct effects of his caring and support included her engagement in learning and her move into a higher track.

**Experiencing fulfillment and feeling agentic as a teacher**

Unlike his experiences with several classes last semester where Mr. Trent felt like his efforts to teach were pointless and he should have just retired, he feels the opposite sense of mattering here. When students’ engagement and investment in class expands...
because they feel like they matter there (motivated by mattering), Mr. Trent feels like his efforts are fruitful, that his presence in the classroom and work as a teacher matters. It is the opposite of when his encouragement goes “nowhere.” His encouragement in this class is going somewhere, into students’ engagement and investment in class. Through their investment in class and not just being students who “waste” their time in school and “take up space,” students return the encouragement to Mr. Trent. They show that they care about his class and him as a teacher. He experiences fulfillment and his own sense of agency as a teacher and his own sense of mattering as a caring teacher develop. The growth of his own sense of mattering as a teacher manifests as his caring and connecting more with them (like when he allows for students to have parties on “π day” – March 14 – and brings in things for students as well), thereby adding to the productive cycle of connections and engagement.

Positive beliefs about “honors students”

While a virtuous cycle of strong and positive emotional connections develops in this classroom because of Mr. Trent’s and students’ acts of caring and their growing sense of agency, positive perceptions of students importantly contribute to the cycle as well. After the first day of class, Mr. Trent tells me that there is a “world of differences” between CP and honors classes: students in CP classes are very “obnoxious and loud” and students in honors class are “nicer” and care more about school. Already having those perceptions of students, Mr. Trent treats students from the first day of class as if they are deserving of being cared for, encouraged and trusted. For instance, Mr. Trent does not interpret Sanjay’s comment about wanting to go to lunch instead of staying in
class as Sanjay’s lack of desire to study or being obnoxious, but as his just being playful. Instead of reprimanding Sanjay or being annoyed by his comment, Mr. Trent just jokes back with him. Over the semester, Mr. Trent’s beliefs about “honors students” continuously shape his sense of agency (i.e. that the students are capable of being taught and of forming productive connections), his perceptions of students, his treatment of them, and his interpretations of their behaviors.

As the semester continues, Mr. Trent’s positive beliefs about students become a self-fulfilling prophecy when he treats students in ways that construct and enforce their sense of agency and when students consequently express their growing sense of academic agency in ways that are consistent with Mr. Trent’s positive beliefs about students, such as when students demonstrate their commitment to the class. Mr. Trent’s beliefs become reinforced and he explains to me that things are going well in the class simply because they are “good kids.” Although students show how their motivation and caring about school is at least partly made in the classroom through processes of emotional connections, Mr. Trent attributes students’ motivation and caring about school to what they bring into the classroom (e.g. their own personal motivation or good upbringing and home life) and even discounts his role in enhancing their attachment to learning. Then, when some students routinely act in ways that could be interpreted to be “obnoxious and loud” (e.g. interrupting class with unrelated and irrelevant comments, like Melanie’s comment about the diaper-wearing animals; talking on their cell phone in class; individually and collectively protesting assignments and asking for less work), Mr. Trent
treats those incidents as aberrations or regards them as normal adolescent behaviors and
maintains his belief that the students are generally decent and worthy.

Students also think that they’re “good kids” because they are in an honors class, which influences how they do in class. For students at Riverside High, the label of “honors” is as meaningful for them as it is for Mr. Trent and other teachers. They come into the class with the sense that they are better overall and superior academically and with their behaviors for being in honors classes. For instance, Lily says that the “really really really REALLY bad stuff” doesn’t happen in honors classes and happens in CP classes. Drawing on her mom’s description of CP classes as “do-your-friend’s-hair classes,” Lily characterizes students in honors classes as students who “want to learn” and “who want to get somewhere.” In contrast, CP classes are full of students “who really don’t care and who are just kind of ladedadeda I have to go to school.” Despite her own experiences in various honors classes where she has had poor learning experiences, Lily still thinks that students have better work attitudes in honors classes than in CP classes. Not only are the distinctions between CP and honors classes clear, but students take on an identity of being an “honors student.” For example, when I talk to Claude, a white boy in the 10th grade, about the courses he has taken at Riverside High, he emphasizes that he takes honors classes whenever possible which is an expression of how he’s “supposed to be a good student.” These identities do not dictate what happens during class, as shown through students’ ineffective experiences of learning in other classes, but are made relevant and reinforced through the classroom dynamics. Specifically, when Mr. Trent acknowledges and cares about students’ experiences,
students’ sense of academic agency – which shapes their identities of being “good students” – develops and their subsequent attitudes and actions reflect those beliefs.

**Racialization of “good kids”**

Furthermore, the distinctions between CP and honors classes and students are imbued with racial meanings, according to many students and teachers. Echoing Ms. Ricci’s perceptions of students in her CP classes, some students in Mr. Trent’s Algebra 2 class express their belief that students in CP classes are academically inferior to students in honors classes for racialized reasons. For example, Claude states with a discernible streak of hostility his belief that black students are generally not motivated to do work and are “relaxed about their future,” resulting in racial differences between class levels. More specifically, he assumes that black boys are more interested in “pumping iron” than doing schoolwork because they yearn to be “tougher” and because “their role models are not the smart people” (citing the rapper 50 Cent as the supposedly typical role model for black boys). William, like many other Latino American students I spoke with, is aware of similar negative stereotypes of Hispanics. Because he experiences people denigrating Hispanics, including himself and his two older brothers, for ostensibly not being industrious and academically inclined, he actively works to defy those degrading stereotypes. For example, in addition to enrolling in honors classes at Riverside High, like this math class with Mr. Trent, William takes classes at a local university and earnestly strives to cultivate and demonstrate his intellectual engagement and achieve. Despite the presence and persistence of some black and Latino students in honors classes – such as William – and the evidence that students of color in CP classes are also strongly
motivated to learn and achieve, many other students share Claude’s belief that honors classes are filled with more white students because they presumably care about school more than students from other racial groups, especially black and Latino students.

Thus, the positive beliefs about honors students which fuel virtuous cycles of classroom connections can and often do involve ideas about race where whiteness gets mapped onto the honors distinction and the positive characterizations of students in honors classes and also students more generally. As a result, some students develop a racialized sense of mattering in their classes and of being attached to and engaged in those specific classes, thereby contributing to virtuous cycles of emotional connections. Also, racializing the honors versus CP distinction and employing stereotypes more broadly bear implications for which students get to experience and participate in more classroom processes of productive emotional connections where students’ sense of academic agency and possibilities of learning are nurtured. For example, although Mr. Trent does not speak about race explicitly in his classroom and promotes a notion of colorblindness (e.g. in response to Sanjay’s frustration that his race is not adequately represented by the categories listed on a job application of Asian, black, white, non-white Hispanic, Mr. Trent tells Sanjay to assert that he just belongs to “the human race”), Mr. Trent cultivates the strongest relationships in the Algebra 2 class with white students. Given his expressed tendency to connect more with students who seem “nicer,” Mr. Trent perhaps relates to, trusts and cares for white students the most because he harbors some racialized expectations similar to those mentioned by Claude and Ms. Ricci. The racialization of positive beliefs about students’ characters may also similarly explain
patterns that other students mention – but struggle to explain – where some teachers develop the strongest connections with white students in their classes.

**Ending up connected and invested, but with limitations**

Of the 14 classes included in this research, Mr. Trent’s Algebra 2 class was the most successful where students generally really enjoyed coming to class and learning and did learn. Even though it was the most successful, it also exemplifies what happened successfully in other classrooms as well. However, like in the other classrooms, the success of the class was not predictable because Mr. Trent and the students experienced other classes where connections did not go well. Despite experiencing failures of classes before, this class went really well – partly because of the processes of instruction and discipline as well, but definitely because of a productive cycle of emotional connections. Through these processes of connections, Mr. Trent believed students were good, then trusted them, encouraged, and cared for them. His actions then cultivated students’ sense of mattering which influenced their engagement in class and commitment to class. As students acted in those ways, Mr. Trent felt more encouraged and had fulfilling experiences that shaped his own sense of mattering as a teacher. His beliefs about students got stronger as well, which then encouraged him to act in more caring, understanding, supportive and patient ways. This feedback loop becomes a virtuous cycle that spirals upward, strengthening students’ sense of academic agency and Mr. Trent’s sense of agency along the way, thereby cultivating opportunities for productive and engaging teaching and learning. This process of connecting made a lot of teaching
and learning possible because good will was fostered, people felt more encouraged, connected and invested.

Importantly, the virtuous cycle was fueled by Mr. Trent’s and the students’ positive perceptions of students. Mr. Trent had positive beliefs about students as good students because they are “honors students,” perceptions that may have also been influenced by racial meanings, just as they are for some other teachers and students. Those positive beliefs then supported his sense that he could connect with students. Students had positive beliefs about themselves as well when they distinguished themselves as good kids because they are honors students and perhaps because they are racially superior as well. Those beliefs may have influenced their capacity to connect and engage with learning. They were also given opportunities to experience and demonstrate that sense of being good students through these virtuous processes. Mr. Trent and the students evoked and reinforced their beliefs that the students are fundamentally good students, a salient identity that is cast in the language of being “honors kids.” The way Mr. Trent and the students operated according to that a priori and constantly made and re-made belief through their actions and interactions fostered a virtuous cycle where Mr. Trent and the students developed positive emotional connections. Students’ sense of academic agency and positive learning outcomes were continuously promoted. But not all students experienced the same relationships with Mr. Trent.

Moreover, another limitation to these processes was the excessive entitlement that was fostered. Mr. Trent’s acknowledgment of students’ experiences, accommodating
them, and being flexible and patient with them also promotes excessive entitlement in
students where some students are allowed to do nearly anything they want to, even taking
away from other students’ learning experiences. Some students developed a strong sense
of entitlement with getting their way and getting away with things (like with Melanie,
shown in the above example when she disrupts the class with unrelated matters). In other
classes, excessive entitlement also manifests in demands for higher grades or special
treatment, such as getting into honors classes when they are not qualified to (like with a
student in Mr. Asmaoui’s class). Dan, a white boy in Mr. Asmaoui’s class, also talks
about how some students feel entitled to get higher grades. Perhaps because of having
their sense of mattering cultivated, they think that they are excessively empowered to do
anything and get their way. They experience excessive entitlement because their
experiences seem most important.

**Conclusion**

Although Natasha is a remarkable individual who inspires many around her with
her story of survival, her successes have much to do with what she has experienced in
school, namely her relationships with teachers. Natasha believes that these critical
connections she formed with teachers were similar to the ones her sister sought to form
with boyfriends, as they both tried to find ways of “getting out of it,” their troubled home
life, and to feel like they matter somewhere, to someone. In contrast to her tumultuous
home life where she didn’t feel like she mattered, her teachers at school made her feel
like she was important. Her survival and success in school – and in life generally – has to
do with the nurturing and supportive connections she built with adult figures in her life, especially her teachers. In addition to helping her feel like she generally mattered in the world, teachers helped Natasha feel like she mattered in school in particular. For example, Natasha tells me that “…having teachers be positive like made you want to go to school. …They got you so interested in being in school and it just definitely made me feel like school was better than home and so I’d always want to go. Even when I was sick I’d go to school.” In terms of being “positive,” she refers to her teachers’ words and actions of encouragement that support her emotionally by instilling in her a healthy and necessary sense of being worthy and deserving. Also, when things just felt too much for Natasha and she wouldn’t want to come to school, her teachers motivated her to come to school, were there to understand her situation and encourage to keep on going. Through their affirmations, she became “interested” in school, engaged and attached to school, particular teachers and classroom spaces, as she felt like she mattered in those spaces, much more than she did at home. For other students, teachers’ encouragement was similarly important for helping them feel empowered within the walls of the school and each classroom.

While Natasha’s story illustrates the transformative benefits of these emotional connections between teachers and students, not all students are fortunate enough to experience many, if any, of these relationships in school and in classrooms. Differences in students’ experiences are largely related to the way vicious or virtuous cycles of emotional connections develop within classrooms. Natasha was fortunate enough to experience several productive and positive cycles with teachers, but students like Dontell
are less lucky. When I ask Dontell about his experience in school, he tells me that the school is “bipolar.” At first, I’m not sure what he means. He and his friend Juan, a Latino American boy in the 10th grade, explain that sometimes teachers are nice to you and sometimes they aren’t; thus, they’re “bipolar.” Although Dontell was referring to his experience in school in general, he was also specifically referring to his experience in Ms. Browne’s class. In that classroom, a vicious cycle of emotional connections evolved where students felt like Ms. Browne did not care for them and that they did not matter in class. Students, including Dontell and Juan, become increasingly detached and disengaged from class. What leads to these different cycles?

The two highlighted examples of Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class and Mr. Trent’s Algebra 2 class illustrated how pernicious and productive cycles of emotional connections can develop. When teachers care about, encourage, relate to and/or seek to understand students, students’ sense of mattering and belonging in that classroom space grows. Experiencing that they are cared about, encouraged, understood and basically matter in a positive way motivates students to become more invested in the classroom project of learning. There is a belief that if they matter, then what they do matters as well. However, processes of forming emotional connections do not always work out – not entirely because of students’ and teachers’ failings, but because of how vicious cycles of alienation and demoralization can emerge throughout the duration of a course and seemingly obliterate possibilities of forming productive classroom connections, as shown through Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class. For instance, classroom processes of forming emotional connections mostly start with teachers’ approaches (i.e. their attitudes and
actions towards students) and teachers occupy a sanctioned position of power which enables them to make interventions and change the dynamic of vicious cycles, but teachers’ capacity to connect with students depends largely on their own experience of agency (i.e. their sense of power), which is also made throughout classroom processes. For example, Ms. Ricci set the tone for the class, but did not experience care and openness from students (i.e. students seem uncaring and unwilling to connect, close to teachers). Then she can become demoralized and discouraged. Teachers’ loss of agency in turn contributes to vicious cycles of failed connections as they become more alienated from students and emotionally and energetically disinvested from the class. Students respond to the alienation and experiences that they don’t matter by disengaging and becoming disinvested in the class and learning. On the other hand, virtuous cycles of classroom connections occur when the opposite happens: teachers experience encouragement and fulfillment, which thereby supports and strengthens teachers’ sense of agency and encourages them to form constructive emotional connections; students then experience teachers’ care and encouragement, which thereby promotes their own sense of agency and encourages them to become more attached to the class and responsive to the teacher.

Moreover, evolving beliefs and perceptions of students are at the heart of classroom processes that spiral upward and downward. The beliefs and perceptions of students’ worth are made and re-made in each interaction and each moment. In the case of these connections, the most important element is how teachers and students see students as good or bad throughout the classroom process, as they interact and respond to
each other. In particular, racial (class and gender) disparities result when those social categories become meaningful and influence behaviors and attitudes. For instance, when stereotypes of and prejudices towards students become meaningful in class, teachers, such as Ms. Ricci, may not encourage, trust or even plainly care about certain students as much, thereby producing and reproducing patterns of racial inequalities as racially disadvantaged students do not enjoy the benefits of the critical and transformative connections of care.
Adding up Successes or Failures

Relational processes of instruction, teachers’ sense of efficacy and students’ racialized sense of academic mastery and potential

“You’re always going to look to your left and be like, ‘Ok, well he’s white. He probably knows what’s going on.’”

-Victoria, a Latina American girl in the 10th grade

It is almost the middle of the semester and the quarterly exam is coming up. Ms. Ricci asks the students to complete a review packet which includes problems very similar to those on the upcoming exam. Ariel, a Latino boy who was in Ms. Ricci’s year-long class last year as well, is not doing his work and he seems very apathetic and disengaged. I ask him why he doesn’t want to do his work. He says to me sullenly, “I don’t know what to do.” I start working with him on the first problem where he needs to find the area of a regular polygon. I try encouraging him and helping him figure out how to approach the problem. Alex, who sits next to Ariel and seems to be a good friend, is also working on the problem, but using a different method to approach the problem. Alex suggests his approach to Ariel, but Ariel does not want to look at what Alex is doing because he wants to know how to do it for himself. After he successfully solves the first problem, he goes onto the second problem which involves finding the area of a shaded region in a regular polygon. At one point in Ariel’s calculations, he needs to know what $12^2$ is. He turns to me and asks me what it is. I try to mask my shock that he really does not seem to be able to recall what $12 \times 12$ is immediately. So that he doesn’t get stuck and feel stuck, I suggest that he uses information that he already knows in order to figure it out, such as
figuring out what $12^2$ is by doing 12 times 10 and then adding two 12s. He knows how to do that, it seems to make sense to him and he moves on with the problem after calculating what $12 \times 12$ is. When Ariel and Alex both figure out the area, they are really excited. On a different problem, Ariel needs to find the length of the base of a triangle given that the area is 80 inches$^2$ and the height of the triangle is 10 inches. He asks me how to do the problem. And I tell him, “You know this! What do you know? You know the formula for the area of a triangle!” And I encourage him to start there. Later when Ms. Ricci is explaining how to solve one of the problems to the class, Ariel expresses confidence in his own method and says that her way is much more confusing than necessary.

How come Ariel does not initially try to do his work, but then gains momentum and succeeds? What Ariel does is something directly in between what Nicole, who does not think math can be fun, says about how there is no “savior” for math and what Juan states about how when you know how to do math, it is “mad easy.” This results partially from what happens in the classroom, how he develops a sense of mastery and potential throughout school and then has the confidence and courage to become engaged and do his work. The above example illustrates how students’ efforts to work reflect their experience of mastery, i.e. their sense of knowing how to approach their work. Although enjoying and doing well in math is narrated as some sort of fixed innate trait, examining what happens within the classroom reveals how students’ efforts and successful learning develop precisely through classroom processes of instruction and are not determined beforehand by either individuals or structures. These relational processes of instruction
evolve in productive or destructive cycles depending on how teachers and students experience agency, thereby supporting or damaging students’ engagement and learning.

The following classes illustrate how processes of instruction develop within the classroom effectively and ineffectively. Ms. Ricci’s Geometry class exemplifies what happens when instruction fails. Unlike the conclusions of many analyses of academic success and failure, teaching and learning does not fail in that classroom simply because of individuals’ failure, but because of how teachers and students relate to each other across the classroom. What happens in that class is similar to what pans out in Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class, Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer’s Algebra 1 class and several MCAS prep classes from 2006 and 2007. Directly contrasting Ms. Ricci’s class, Ms. Browne’s Geometry class (the same course as Ms. Ricci’s class) shows how classroom processes can evolve in ways that are both ineffective and effective. Mr. Asmaoui’s Pre Calculus class, similar to Mr. Trent’s Algebra 2 class and a couple MCAS prep classes, shows how math instruction can succeed by cultivating the teacher’s and students’ sense of agency. There are some limitations to the way teaching and learning happens in that classroom space over the semester, but students generally develop a sense of academic growth. Collectively, these classes demonstrate how it is not simply what comes before class, but what happens in class that matters. Moreover, these classes show how teachers’ perceptions of students as possessing ability and potential or not can heavily impact their instructional approaches and the direction of classroom processes.

**A Vicious Cycle of Instruction**
(fieldnotes from February 25, 2008) ...The first bell has just rung. The second bell comes on and it’s some soul music. Ms. Ricci starts to dance in the hallway to it while waiting for other students to come into class. She sees a couple students and tells them lovingly, “Put one foot in front of the other! Doesn’t this music just get you going?!”

…Class begins and Ms. Ricci tells the students to all get out their textbooks and that they are going to put up the objectives together. They all get their books. They start going through the objectives from chapter 5, sections 5-1 through 5-5. She asks them, “You all probably forgot a lot over the break, right?” Ariel says (jokingly but perhaps also seriously), “Everything!” She doesn’t get mad, but then wants to review. People all seem to be paying attention to her. She asks them to explain to her what the objectives are. She tells them that she is not going to check the textbook herself, but will rely on the students to tell her. They call out some of the objectives. A few students are responding and a few are very quiet. They discuss bisectors, centroids, orthocenters, medians, altitude.

… A teacher comes in the room and Ms. Ricci tells the other teacher that she’s so proud of the students and tells the teacher what they’ve been doing – going over the objectives and how the students have been telling her everything. After she goes over the objectives, she draws an angle and has the students…tell her about bisectors and about congruent segments. She emphasizes that she’s so proud of them with their work on chapter 5 and that only 2 students didn’t understand the theorem. Later, she returns the quizzes and reads out the grades. She reads them out in a random order and mixes around the papers so people don’t know what other students got on the quiz. …She reads out how many 100’s there were to show how proud she is of them.

It is one month into the spring semester and things are generally going well in this class; Ms. Ricci seems to be effectively conveying lessons and engaging students and the students are learning. In this class of 17 students, mostly 10th graders and two 11th graders, the course is formally called “High School Mathematics 2” and instruction and curriculum is comprised of teaching geometry. Unlike most courses in the school, it is a yearlong course that begins in the fall semester and continues through the spring. Ms. Ricci and Ms. Bauer co-teach the course. There are some very positive things going on in this class that would support a prediction that teaching and learning will be successful
in this classroom. First of all, Ms. Ricci, a white woman who has been teaching for 25 years, can be a highly effective math instructor. For example, Victoria, a half-Dominican and half-Cape Verdean American girl in the 10th grade, tells me how she was very excited to take this class with Ms. Ricci because she learned a lot in her 9th grade class with Ms. Ricci last year. Eighth grade math teachers at the middle school advise their students to enroll in Ms. Ricci’s classes when they get to high school and students have called her “amazing” as a teacher. Ms. Bauer, a white woman who just started teaching at this school this year, tells me that Ms. Ricci’s students’ MCAS scores are generally very high. As shown through the above example, Ms. Ricci can be very effective at engaging and encouraging students. Moreover, while some individuals, including teachers and students in this school, would predict that students in this class will not want to and cannot learn because it is a CP class, nearly all of the students in this class demonstrate through their class participation and work that they possess a strong desire and capacity to learn and achieve. At times, students are very engaged in learning, such as while calculating an angle of elevation or the lengths of the sides of a quadrilateral.

However, even with all of these positive inputs into the class, the teachers and students become nearly completely disengaged and disinvested in the process of teaching and learning by the end of the semester. For example, a couple weeks before the school year ends and grades close, only half of the students hand in their assignments even when asked repeatedly across several days to turn in their work. When addressing how students will fare next year in Algebra 2, Ms. Ricci chastises the students and harshly says to the entire class, “You’re not prepared” (fieldnotes from May 29, 2008). How and
why does this class surprisingly fail? By exploring how instruction evolves across the semester, we begin to see how the development of teachers’ and students’ sense of agency through these processes of learning is more influential than the structural context of the classroom situation and what individuals bring to the space.

**Developing ineffective instruction**

In this Geometry class, Ms. Ricci worked with many of the students last year, she has relationships of trust and good will with them, and she sees the students as fundamentally “good kids.” As a result, Ms. Ricci has good emotional connections with most of the students in this class and classroom dynamics of discipline are generally functional throughout the semester, unlike in her Algebra 1 class. However, regarding classroom processes of instruction, it is a very different story. Although aspects of Ms. Ricci’s instruction\(^\text{13}\) are successful throughout the semester, her instructional methods develop across the semester in generally ineffective ways that leave students without a constructive and productive sense of mastery and potential.

**Slow progress**

Throughout the semester, Ms. Ricci spends a great deal of time going through the material, trying to help students understand concepts and develop skills while falling behind in the curriculum according to the schedule established by department standards. For example, Ms. Ricci has students in this class and in her Algebra 1 class work on just a handful of problems for numerous days. The objective on the blackboard sometimes

\(^{13}\text{The analysis of teachers’ instructional methods in this class will focus on Ms. Ricci’s instruction since Ms. Bauer’s actual instruction is marginal and minimal. This results from strained dynamics between Ms. Ricci and Ms. Bauer where Ms. Bauer feels like Ms. Ricci is not willing to let go of controlling what happens in the classroom and Ms. Ricci thinks that Ms. Bauer does not do enough to help out in the classroom. Ms. Ricci therefore acts like a lead teacher even though they are both supposedly co-teachers.}\)
stays the same for about a week or more (e.g. working on 6 MCAS problems), indicating either the lack of progress or the lack of structure through updating students on objectives. Over the semester, she reiterates numerous times to the students how things need to be repeated “27 times meaningfully” for students to learn material (e.g. February 25, 2008 fieldnotes). She explains to me that she goes over material again and again so that the students will master the skills. Without a lot of repetition, they supposedly will not learn and remember the concepts and the algorithms. For instance, as they work on practicing how to do means-extremes for triangles, she says to the class, “I know hardly any of you will be able to remember this, because I can’t!” Ms. Ricci is humble and honest with the students about her own struggles, but she then assumes students have the same challenges that necessitate the same remedy – to practice problems numerous times. Similarly, Ms. Ricci also asks students to check their work over and over, not just once or twice or “thrice,” but “quad” times. In these efforts to foster accurate and thoughtful work and help students master skills, Ms. Ricci actually ends up providing lessons where students become bored by the repetition, disengaged, and ironically thwarted in developing a sense of mastery and growth.

Certainly, Ms. Ricci sometimes slows down her teaching because students lack some skills, such as basic multiplication skills. However, students of the same academic background in Ms. Browne’s CP High School Mathematics 2 class (the same course) move through material more quickly and demonstrate greater facility with new concepts, such as when they work on calculating angles of depression and elevation. Furthermore, while many individuals (including parents, teachers, administrators and students) believe
students in CP classes move through curriculum more slowly because they are less capable and/or less motivated, students in Ms. Ricci’s Geometry class and Algebra I class mention how they enjoy being challenged and going at a faster pace. They are frustrated and bored by the excessive repetition. For example, Victoria enrolled in this yearlong course because she initially was extremely panicked and “hyperventilating” at the idea of taking geometry. However, by the end of the school year, she is very regretful that she took this course and says “…honestly I think I could have crammed the whole thing into one semester instead of a full year…” because of how repetitive Ms. Ricci’s teaching is. Moreover, the repetition is not effective in helping her learn and after a yearlong course of geometry, Victoria continues to believe, “I just don’t get a grasp of stuff. Math is not for me.”

Debilitating assistance

Then when students are given work to do in class, Ms. Ricci often eagerly and earnestly tries to help them with their work. For instance, I work with Renee and Rachael, two black girls who are very engaged with their work and strive to succeed academically, on finding the length of one side of a trapezoid using the Pythagorean Theorem. After working on one problem with them, they seem to be catching on and I leave them to try figuring out the next problem which uses the same techniques on their own. Ms. Ricci is going around helping everyone and comes by to see how the girls are doing as soon as I leave. Renee and Rachel ask her for help and she crouches down next to their desk to help them. Since Ms. Ricci is very worried that students are not going to be ready for the upcoming standardized quarterly exam, she feels compelled to offer and
provide students with a lot of help. This situation reflects Ms. Bauer’s observation that students do not do their work because they know that Ms. Ricci will do it for them. Furthermore, Ms. Ricci’s constant assistance comes at the cost of at least distracting students and at worst enabling them by not allowing students to develop their own abilities. For example, on one day, Ms. Ricci gives the students some MCAS problems to complete and then interrupts them to go over the problems together. Theresa, a Latina girl sitting next to me, exasperatedly says to me, “Oh my god, I hate when she does that! I hate the way she teaches! I know every teacher has different styles, but it’s so annoying sometimes!” I ask her what she means and Theresa explains, “Like when she goes over all these things and I just want to do my work! She starts with one thing and then keeps on going over other problems!” For Theresa, Ms. Ricci’s desire to help students backfires when students are not given the time and opportunity to do work for themselves and develop the capacity to figure out problems on their own.

Exploring this aspect of the vicious cycle of instruction further, the more students do not move forward with their work, the more Ms. Ricci thinks that she needs to help them. For example, earlier on in the semester, Ms. Ricci explains to me after class that she is aware of not wanting to “feed” answers to students, but she also feels like she has no other choice but to help students by walking them through each assignment, each problem. As students seem as if they continue to not understand concepts despite working on them for a while, Ms. Ricci then responds by continuously trying to help students in ways that deprive students of opportunities to develop their own mastery over the material. As an exact response to Ms. Ricci’s instructional methods, students do not
move forward with the material quickly. For instance, they seem to show that they do not have a mastery over concepts and therefore do not know how to manipulate different skills, such as applying the Pythagorean Theorem to a problem that asks for the length of a trapezoid’s side. Students’ demonstrations of not understanding material leaves Ms. Ricci thinking that she just needs to continue supporting students a great deal and fulfilling students’ academic needs for them while failing to do so. This feedback loop involves the deterioration of both students’ and Ms. Ricci’s sense of competency as learners and an educator.

**Inadequate and unenforced structure**

In addition to going slowly through the curriculum and helping students a lot, Ms. Ricci also does not consistently provide clear and challenging structure for students’ learning. Throughout the semester until the last couple weeks, Ms. Ricci does not always clearly explain what students need to do for homework and does not enforce their homework by checking it. In terms of assigning work, she sometimes tells them very clearly what to do for homework, but often the assignments are unclear and she just tells students what their homework is as they are on their way out the door. In addition to the lack of clarity and consistency with assignments, Ms. Ricci usually does not assign a lot of work, such as completing four MCAS problems for homework in one night. She also does not assign problems from their textbook unless she or Ms. Bauer makes photocopies of the pages to give students. Since they have enough textbooks so that each student could bring one home, I ask Ms. Ricci one day after class why she does not assign more work from the textbook. She tells me matter-of-factly that students will not bring the
books home to do their work. When I ask if she has asked students recently to bring home books in order to do homework, Ms. Ricci reveals that the possibility does not even exist in her mind and tells me she knows from her many years of experience that there is no chance students will take their books home to do their work. Similarly, when they work on practice problems for MCAS, students are given packets of MCAS problems to work on at home. When students do not bring their packets back to class, Ms. Ricci does not hold them accountable and thereby demonstrates that she does not have high expectations for students and their engagement with learning.

Almost every class illustrated this dynamic where students are not provided clear and enforced structures. For example, one day about one-third through the semester, Ms. Ricci asks the students if they have done their homework from the night before. Students tell her honestly that most of them did not. They begin to go over it in class, describing shapes and finding the lengths of the sides of quadrilaterals. At the end of class, she tells the students, “I’m a tad disappointed, but I’m also proud of the work that you’re doing. Why do you think I’m disappointed in you?” Renee responds, “Because we didn’t do this for our homework.” Ms. Ricci agrees with her and tells the students that they need to do their homework. This pattern continues throughout the semester (until the last couple weeks) where Ms. Ricci shares her disappointment with the students, but does not change her instructional approach in any way that reflects a belief in students’ ability to be responsible for their academic growth. In fact, this lack of enforced structure combined with Ms. Ricci’s earnest desire to help shapes a dynamic between teachers and students where students do not do much of their own work and Ms. Ricci fills in for them. For
example, most students come into class one day without their homework, which was a chapter review, completed. In response, Ms. Ricci gives students her answer key and they are told to copy whatever they have not done with a red pen, to distinguish the copied answers from their own work done with a pencil (fieldnotes from March 19, 2008). As I go around the classroom, students don’t need any help from me because their task is quite simple: just copy the answers. Although Ms. Ricci’s intentions are to give students the answer key so that they will know how to answer the problems and work through the algorithms, students take the task literally and see it mostly as just an exercise of copying answers.

While Ms. Ricci is trying to accommodate students, she ultimately reinforces a pattern in which students are not expected to complete their work, develop their skills and learn material. Students mention to me how they are fully aware of these patterns in Ms. Ricci’s instructional approach and behave accordingly. In one illustrative example, Ms. Ricci gives students time during class to complete a take-home test which was supposed to be finished – as its name suggests – at home, but was not by most students. She asks the students to complete the problems in class while working in pairs and tells them that she will be collecting the work at the end of class.

(fieldnotes from March 24, 2008) I ask Alex where his packet [the take-home test] is. He says that he left everything at home. I ask him what he’s going to do then since Ms. Ricci’s going to collect their work. He says that he knows that she’s not going to collect it. I ask him how he knows that. He says that he’s known her for a year and a half and knows that she won’t collect it. He knows that she’ll give them more time to finish their work. I give Alex a piece of paper so that he can write down the work and the answers, but he says he’ll just do it later. At the end of class, I am surprised, but Alex is absolutely right. Ms. Ricci asks them if they need extra time and they say yes and don’t have to turn in their work.
While her flexibility with allowing students to complete their work in class can reflect Ms. Ricci’s desires to be sympathetic and understanding, constantly not challenging students to complete their work reveals Ms. Ricci’s low expectations for students’ ability to do their work in a timely way and learn. In other words, she treats the students as if they do not have the capacity to do more work and learn more. As a result, students figure out the dynamic, are not challenged to do their work, and act accordingly, just as Alex describes. Students in her Algebra 1 class speak about the same dynamic where many do not complete their assignments because there is no consistent structure positively reinforcing their work.

**Fearful messages of failure**

Lastly, Ms. Ricci frequently tells students that they need to be worried about upcoming work and tests, especially the MCAS. Each day until the very last day of school, Ms. Ricci reminds students how many days there are left in the school year (which is posted on the blackboard at the front of the classroom) and how much more material they need to cover. At the beginning of class, she often says, “A lot to do! Do you see what day it is?” The dates for the MCAS exam are also written on the blackboard. Unlike the other three classes with 10th graders who are taking the MCAS (Mr. Trent’s Algebra 2 class, Mr. Asmaoui’s Pre Calculus class, and Ms. Browne’s Geometry class), there is a lot of discussion about MCAS in this class. At various points throughout the semester – even after the students have taken the test – Ms. Ricci reminds the students that they cannot graduate from high school if they don’t pass the MCAS.
(fieldnotes from April 14, 2008) … [Ms. Ricci] says that the MCAS is coming up … and she says that she doesn’t mean to make them nervous, but they should be worried about it. She says that they need to care and not to think that they can just go into it unprepared. She says that students have gone into taking the test and didn’t care about it and then “it’s a slap in the face” when they get their scores back and don’t pass. Ms. Ricci tells them, “I’ve held students crying in my arms who didn’t pass and won’t graduate.” Students ask more questions about the MCAS and she tells them that if they don’t pass the test, they can make portfolios. While the school has had a great record with the portfolios and having all the students graduate, she reminds them that it’s not a guarantee doing the portfolios.

During that class and at other times, Ms. Ricci tells the students that she is warning them about the test and strongly advising them to be anxious in order to prepare them and make them aware of the stakes involved in the test. Although Ms. Ricci says that she does not seek to make students “nervous,” she does exactly that through her frequent warnings about the test which express an urgency underpinned by fear and anxiety. Similarly, Ms. Ricci does not express confidence or faith in students’ academic abilities or potential whenever she informs them that she is nervous for them and their academic futures in general. For example, even after the students finish taking the MCAS at the end of May, Ms. Ricci asks the students to take the diagnostic test given to 9th graders in order to place the 9th graders in MCAS prep classes for their 10th grade year. Alex and some other students ask Ms. Ricci why they are taking the diagnostic test if they have already taken the MCAS. Ms. Ricci responds and says that she hopes that all of the students in the class pass, but not everyone will. She then fatalistically warns them, “You’ll feel awful when you realize that you have failed.” With her discouraging admonitions that supposedly come from a place of care, Ms. Ricci communicates anxiety and fear to the students regarding their academic potential and frequently suggests that
academic failure is a looming threat and very real possibility for them. The implications of this pedagogical approach, and the others mentioned above, for students’ sense of academic agency are discussed in the following section.

**Eroding students’ sense of academic mastery and potential**

At the beginning of the semester, Ms. Ricci’s instructional strategies seem helpful, or at least innocuous, as she seems to be addressing and meeting students’ needs and helping students become engaged and achieve. As illustrated by the excerpt of fieldnotes from February 25, 2008, students are doing some of their work and doing fairly well in their performance. However, as the semester continues, the way her specific teaching methods impact students’ learning becomes apparent. Specifically, the way Ms. Ricci’s instructional approach affects students’ sense of academic agency becomes manifested through students’ behaviors in class, such as their disengagement and the dissolution of their motivation and achievement, as shown in the example with Ariel at the beginning of the chapter. Upon exploring why students do not do their work by themselves and rely upon asking teachers for help, students reveal that the reasons are partly rooted in their sense of not being able to do the work, not trusting themselves and having the courage to take risks in doing the work on their own. It is not because they do not care, are lazy or even “oppositional.” Those thoughts and feelings may have existed prior to this class, but they become reinforced or even develop throughout this class as they receive messages from Ms. Ricci that they are incompetent and with limited ability and potential. Furthermore, without consistent structure in place for their work and a clear sense of progression, students do not complete their work because it seems as if
their doing work does not matter: Ms. Ricci does not collect their work and consistently provide feedback for the students on their progress and development of academic mastery.

As a result of Ms. Ricci’s enabling students a lot and also discouraging them, Ariel and many other students lose their sense of being able to approach work themselves and try things. With a lot of reliance on Ms. Ricci’s help, they lose the confidence and courage to try their work themselves. For example, Regine, a Haitian girl, expresses this same dependency when she constantly asks me to sit with her to do work and help her even when it seems as if she could try the problem on her own and succeed. Students in other classes, such as Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer’s Algebra 1 class and Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class, also demonstrate this similar dynamic. This differs from Lily’s discussion about how it helps when teachers are available to help but do not just do the work for the student. The teacher’s presence can help students begin to build confidence and courage to take risks. Getting a lot of help and then receiving messages of anxiety and fear around their capacity to achieve all leads to students experiencing little mastery over the material, geometry, and feeling like they have very little potential. This leads students to not internalizing their skills, having the confidence and courage to try to do work on their own and then continuing to want more help. They don’t understand things then and they don’t do things on their own. The opening example with Ariel reveals that dynamic.

Despite Ariel’s not knowing or remembering what 12x12 was, he probably could have figured out how to do the problems based on his own math skills. But he does not
have a strong sense of academic agency – a sense of mastery and potential to be able to muster the courage and confidence to approach problems and try things on his own. Ms. Ricci tells students that “confidence is a gift,” but does not help instill it in students in ways that can help themselves. Once he experiences those aspects of his academic agency, he gains momentum, builds confidence and continues doing his work. Other students express a similar dynamic where they are sometimes self-sufficient, know how to do work and/or try to figure out how to do things on their own or with other students.

Revealing another classroom dynamic that leads students to not do work, Victoria, who candidly admits to not doing her work in this class, talks about how the presence or absence of structure in class influences her engagement with and motivation to do work. Victoria explains the situation in Ms. Ricci’s class at the end of the semester: “…she says that we don’t turn in our work, but I feel like we never have work to turn in. … you know when you go home and you’re like, ’Ok, tonight I have Math, I have science and I have Spanish homework. I’m like, ‘Ok, I have Spanish, nothing for math.’ Even if I do, I don’t do it…because it’s not going to count against me; it’s not going to be collected.” She tells me about how Ms. Ricci assigned “lesson pages” for homework before and she collected them consistently for a while. “Those [lesson pages] sometimes I would like do and I would make sure I had like 1 through 8 or whatever it was. It worked well but then she stopped.” With the absence of that consistent structure, Victoria does not know what to do for work and does not do it when she actually does have work because she has learned from Ms. Ricci’s responses that the work that Victoria might do does not even matter. With this system, Victoria does not experience any
ability to learn and achieve. Expressing feelings of frustration and hopelessness, she explains, “I don’t understand. I have a C in that class, I’ve had a C the whole year, but yet I feel like there’s nothing in that class that could give me a C. Like I don’t do anything. Even if I do work in class, she doesn’t collect it, she doesn’t have proof that I did it so how am I going to get a C.” Victoria feels as if there’s nothing that she did to get the C and nothing to do to get a better grade. There is no structure to support developing her sense of mastery or potential, so her sense of agency does not develop.

Contrasting what happens in Ms. Ricci’s class, in one of her other classes, the teacher provides clear instruction for what work she needs to do, including work to make up, and has a clear system of collecting and grading work. This helps Victoria feel empowered to actually do something about her learning situation and also is a message from her teacher that her teacher believes in her ability and potential to succeed.

“...History has got me on my toes because it’s an intense course. That’s a good class… You have to be committed to it… it’s a well-structured class and it’s difficult. …That’s the only class that I always know oh I like have to turn this in. And even if you don’t turn it in you can turn it in late like with late passes and stuff.” She explains how “you’re not allowed to turn in late work without a late pass.” Sometimes other classes might give you partial credit for late work, but you can’t turn it in without a late pass in this class.

With a late pass, you can get full credit no matter how late it is. The teacher gives a package of late passes one for every month at the beginning of the semester. Right now, Victoria has one for May and one for June. As other examples of how the course is structured well, “…she does a lot of group work, she has binder checks, she numbers all
the sheets, everything has numbers so like if you’re like what sheet is that and she’s like ‘it’s 49a.’” Moreover, despite the class being “really crowded” with “almost 30 kids,” “…everything gets done, everything gets checked.” To help students know what to do to succeed, her teacher “consistently checks work” and “…every couple weeks she’ll give you your grade...she’ll give you a little strip of paper with all the work you’re missing.” She mentions that she has to get started preparing for the final in that class for next week. The presence of consistent structure motivates Victoria to do her work and engage in her learning because she experiences being empowered in her own academic development and achievement. Implicit in the structure is also the teacher’s belief in students’ ability to learn and achieve since structure explicitly communicates expectations. Given opportunities to do work and learn, to demonstrate her learning, and to get feedback on her academic progress, her history teacher’s instructional approach communicates a belief that Victoria can learn and achieve. Other students express similar desires to be appropriately challenged and explain how that shows teachers’ believing in them.

Through being challenged and achieving, students experience a sense of mastery and develop a sense of academic potential. A sense of achievement, whether reflected through getting answers correctly on an assignment or getting a high grade on a test, helps motivate and encourage students by bolstering their sense of competency and capacity to learn. For example, while working with Renee one day, she says, “I’m so happy when my answers match those in the back of the book!” When Victoria points out to Ms. Ricci that her test was incorrectly graded and she deserves a few more points on her exam, Ms. Ricci makes the correction and Victoria is very happy about the grade...
change since it reflects her ability to solve math problems correctly. Incidents such as
these reveal how wanting to get good grades is not necessarily about “grade-grubbing,”
but the dynamic is important to students in the way scores seem to meaningfully reflect
students’ academic abilities. Wanting to get credit for what they did and what they know
is at least partially about seeking validation. Conversely, when students receive low
grades, they experience those marks as reflections of their ability and potential.
Throughout this class, students begin to receive lower grades and that is demoralizing.
When they receive low grades and the tests are graded fairly, they just accept it, such as
when Renee receives a D- on a test and when Ahmad fails a test. Reflecting the dynamic
where receiving low grades just makes a student feel like he can’t do work, Ariel was just
returned a test on which he did not get a very high score. He seemed discouraged from
that as well in the example above. For students in this class, receiving consistently low
scores – because they have not developed the math skills and/or the confidence and
courage to do the work – eats away at their sense of mastery and potential.

While students’ not doing work can simply seem like apathy and lack of
motivation, the situations with Ariel at the opening of this chapter and with other students
in this class and other similar classes show how students’ lack of initiative, apparent
motivation and consequent achievement result from specific classroom dynamics. Their
lack of engagement and motivation is not so much an act of disobedience or defiance, but
of demoralization. Their sense of academic agency, specifically mastery and potential,
are undernourished and lead them to not do their work. Students at least partially do not
do work when they feel like there is little structure for doing their work. With work in
class going slowly and then not having enforced and consistent structure for homework and work, students do not develop a sense of mastery and potential as they do not have opportunities to do work and to receive feedback on how they are doing. Ms. Ricci’s low expectations for students come through her teaching methods and students internalize those messages. They actually do like doing work and having opportunities to learn and succeed (i.e. getting their homework checked and corrected). Thus, Ms. Ricci’s instructional methods are largely ineffective at cultivating students’ sense of mastery and potential. Without a strong sense of academic agency, students become disengaged, express less motivation to learn, and do not achieve as much. They experience less confidence and courage to engage in doing work and consequently do not.

“Teachers are not machines”: Wearing down teachers’ sense of agency

Although Ms. Ricci’s instructional approaches are mostly ineffective and negatively impact students’ sense of academic agency, her teaching methods are also a response to students’ behaviors and a manifestation of her deteriorating sense of agency. For instance, towards the beginning of the semester, Ms. Ricci is happy with instruction and she is proud of how students are doing because students are engaged and doing well and she feels agentic. Feeling efficacious, she continues to encourage them and tries to engage them. In an e-mail to me on March 2, 2008, she wants to show me quiz results when I come back to school and writes, “You will be so proud of each of their efforts . . . the clarity and careful step-by-step algorithms impressed me - and I know that they will impress you, too . . ..” However, as time passes and classroom processes of instruction begin to spiral downward, Ms. Ricci feels increasingly frustrated and defeated. After
class one day, she exasperatedly says to me, “I don’t know if I’m even doing anything for them sometimes!” Largely in response to her instructional methods, students do not do their work, depend on the teaching staff to help them do work, and do not perform well on tests. Consequently Ms. Ricci becomes frustrated and loses a sense of efficacy as an educator. As a teacher, she feels like a failure. She then responds by being very harsh with students, such as her messages of harsh discouragement and then not providing students with appropriate opportunities to learn and achieve. She admits to running “…a little low on the 'uplifting moments' that help to me deal with the less-productive days….” As students respond to her discouragement with more disengagement, the vicious cycle of devolving relational processes of instruction continues to spin.

Illustrating this process, as the semester continues, students are not doing their work and turning in assignments because of how they do not feel like they are able to do work and/or because they feel like it is pointless to do work. Their grades on tests and quizzes drop. This all generates frustration and erodes Ms. Ricci’s sense of efficacy. For instance, one day towards the middle of the semester, Ms. Ricci reviews tests with the students. Even though Ms. Ricci has given the students numerous opportunities to hand in their tests, not every student has turned in his/her test. She even gave the students answer keys for the test so that they could make corrections and complete their test. Ms. Ricci eventually collected the tests, but says that people can still turn in their test although she’s going to count them as late (which is an unclear policy, unlike Victoria’s history teacher’s system). Ms. Ricci reads the scores out loud; there are a few 90s, and some 80s, but a lot in the 70s, 60s and 50s. Expressing her tremendous frustration and
also a degree of giving up, Ms. Ricci says to the students that she’s not going to take the responsibility any more if they don’t do well and fail. Although students’ failure to hand in their work and bad performance are directly related to the fact that she lacks consistent structure and enables them, it is just frustrating from Ms. Ricci’s perspective since she believes she has been very understanding and flexible to help them achieve. She feels like she has to do everything for them, is tired of doing that and feels like it is ineffective. Sahar, an Iranian-American 9th grader from her Algebra 1 class, explains the dynamic of how Ms. Ricci loses a sense of efficacy. She says that when Ms. Ricci gives back tests and reads out the grades, “…if we fail it’s like…she fails.”

As the semester wears on, Ms. Ricci’s sense of efficacy and competency as an educator wears down. Ms. Ricci’s frustration mounts; she feels like the situation is out of control and hopeless. Things become “personal,” she feels like she’s “crazy” because nothing that she does seems to work and she makes a lot of effort (even if her efforts are unhelpful), and she feels terrible about herself. The frustration takes a toll on her. On graduation day, I stop by her classroom after school and I find her feeling dejected. She tells me this is the first time in her 25 years of teaching when she’s not going to graduation because she just feels so terrible about the whole learning process. She vents her frustration, starts crying, and tells me, “Teachers are not machines.” Teachers in other classes that are caught up in intensely vicious cycles of instruction, namely several of the MCAS prep classes, express the same feelings of disappointment and defeat. In class, her experiences of palpable frustration translate into instructional approaches of being harsh, punitive and discouraging.
A couple weeks before the end of the semester, Ms. Ricci seems to have run out of ideas of how to encourage students to do their work so she becomes impatient and harsh. Like the students, she is frustrated by the slow progress. For example, she says to the students, “We spent the whole class working on this one problem.” Ms. Ricci then declares, “I need you to be invested in this.” Also, at the beginning of class one day, Ms. Ricci asks students to hand in their chapter review assignment. She tells them, “If you don’t have it, that’s too bad. I’m collecting them now and anything late will be penalized. This is the Ricci I should have been from the beginning.” Some students hand in their assignments. She says, “I have 9 of them. I’m sorry, but this is sad. You will fail then.” She tells them if they don’t bring in the test, then they are not prepared for Algebra II since handing in work is what will be expected of them. With regards to moving onto Algebra II, she says, “You’re not prepared, some of you.” She first says it with a really harsh tone scolding everyone, but then adds “some of you.” Ms. Ricci goes on about how she is so frustrated and upset with how little work is turned in by the students. She says that 6 out of 17 students turned in their chapter review and 10 out of 16 turned in their practice test. Ms. Ricci is fed up and demoralized. Her upbeat quotes of inspiration around the room (e.g. “Once you realize how good you really are, you will never settle for ‘playing’ less than your best! -Reggie Jackson (‘being’)) are in stark contrast to the actual dynamics in the classroom where both teachers and students are discouraged, disinvested, and defeated. As a witness to this, I would be more appalled by Ms. Ricci’s harsh tone if I did not also witness her trying day after day – not effectively but very effortfully – and not have much in return.
Ms. Ricci’s frustration manifests not only as harshness and impatience, but intense discouragement. When students do not successfully complete assignments, she tells them without mincing any words that they simply do not have mastery. Besides for making an observation and drawing an inference about students’ current abilities, Ms. Ricci seems to be communicating a conclusion about students’ present and future academic potential. In another example, after students take the MCAS diagnostic test designed for 9th graders, Ms. Ricci goes over it in class and tells the students repeatedly how devastated she was when she was grading the tests because of how poorly they performed. In a random order without students’ names, she first reads out loud the grades which include one 92, three 83s, four 75s, one 67, two 58s, two 50s, two 42s, and two 33s. As Ms. Ricci goes over the work on the chalkboard, she tells them that she was crying when she was grading these tests because it was so depressing for her. From one problem to the next, she says to the students, “I just continually cried as I did this.” For instance, she cried when students put down 5 as the solution to $17 + (-22)$ and when students chose 54 or 64 as the solution to $-8 \times 6$. Ms. Ricci tries to soften the blow by telling the students that it makes sense why they would not know how to do these problems because they were not “raised” in classrooms that taught these things.\footnote{Ms. Ricci and some other high school math teachers express great dismay and aggravation with what students are learning and what they are failing to learn based on the instructional strategies of primary schools’ curriculum. Revealing some students’ lack of preparation, one 10th grader in Ms. Ricci’s geometry class decided that 38 is the solution to 20% of 40 while taking the 9th grade MCAS diagnostic test. Mr. Asmaoui talks about how even students in his AP Calculus class struggle with the more elementary task of manipulating fractions. I have worked with several 9th and 10th graders who do not know whether negative numbers go to the left or the right of zero on the number line. As another illustration of the curricular disconnect between the schools, some teachers and students discuss how very little memorization happens in the feeder schools and students are neither asked nor encouraged to memorize their multiplication tables. When I visited one of the primary schools, an 8th grade math teacher tells me that she does not ask students to memorize their multiplication tables because she prefers to work with students on more challenging}
However, her sense of devastation about their lack of knowledge overrides those comments and other supportive comments such as “You’re not stupid” and “I love you” that do not seem to be fully congruent with her disposition.

The erosion of Ms. Ricci’s sense of agency as a math educator and her consequent harsh treatment of students is similar to what happens in Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class, Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer’s Algebra 1 class and several MCAS Prep classes. The teachers move from being very accommodating to being very rigid and harsh with the students. Unfortunately, contrary to teachers’ beliefs or hopes, neither approach successfully cultivates students’ sense of agency and their capacity to become engaged with their learning and motivated to achieve.

**Being influenced by negative perceptions of students**

As students fail to learn and Ms. Ricci experiences less agency as a teacher, she tries to understand the source of students’ failure. Is it her fault or the students’ fault? Teachers and students seem to be the only possible sources of the problem. But since she experiences a lot of shame around the failure of learning in the classroom, she repeatedly emphasizes other things that influence what happens in the classroom, from the instruction in elementary and middle schools to students’ own individual problems and their family and cultural backgrounds. Her negative perceptions of students – what she blames in part for students’ failure to learn – is something that shapes her sense of agency exercises. To her, it seems to be an unimportant and unnecessary exercise since students always have calculators with them in their cell phones or other handheld devices ostensibly readily available to them. However, as a result, some students, like Ariel, can become hindered in their learning by not having the basic skills to help them move forward. For other students, such as many that I spoke with in higher level math classes, they have received supplemental math education outside of school through working with parents and math tutors.
and what she brings into her instructional approaches from the beginning of the semester. Throughout the semester, she attributes students’ behaviors to those perceptions, continues to feel disempowered and has these ineffective approaches to teaching as a result. Those negative perceptions, inflected with race and class, shape her sense of agency by being fatalistic about the situation. Students also have negative perceptions of themselves that develop or are reinforced in class, which then affect their sense of mastery and potential.

**Teachers’ perceptions and their implications**

From the beginning, she says that other teachers do not like working with the students in CP classes, but they are the “cream of the crop” to her. She then warns me that it is difficult working with these students. (The other teacher in the room when she said that said that Ms. Ricci is “masochistic” for choosing to work with “those students.”) Through those statements, Ms. Ricci communicates her recognition that the students are seen by others as having problems. She asserts that they are the “cream of the crop” to her because others perceive them to be “bottom of the barrel.” By saying that in addition to warning me that it is difficult working with these students, she expresses that there is something different about these students that makes them more difficult to work with. Thus, there is something about how the students need to be treated differently. This comes through in her teaching methods where she believes that she needs to teach slowly because they won’t pick up material faster. Also, she believes that she needs to help them a lot because they are unable of helping themselves and doing work for themselves. Ms. Ricci also believes that students will not do more work and need to be constantly
accommodated because they generally lack motivation and are unable to do more work. Her instructional methods thus are expressions of her beliefs about students’ academic abilities and their potential. Almost every other teacher (including Mr. Trent, Mr. Asmaoui, Ms. Flores, and Ms. Bauer) expresses the same beliefs about the students based on their enrollment in CP classes. For teachers such as Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer, those negative perceptions also influence their sense of agency in the classroom and influence their teaching methods, thereby fueling a vicious cycle of instruction.

As the semester continues and students behave in ways that seem to be congruent with her beliefs, she attributes their actions to those ideas about them – that the students just lack motivation, are lazy, not interested in learning and don’t care because they are simply that way in a permanent way. By making those attributions, her negative beliefs about students become reinforced; she loses a sense of agency that she can do anything about their learning. So then she continues on with her ineffective instructional strategies, assuming that the situation is hopeless and there’s no other way of doing things. Some other teachers make the same attributions and fall into the same dynamic where they believe that students just do not care, do not have the abilities or the potential. They also lose a sense of agency and then implement unsuccessful teaching approaches.

However, contrasting Ms. Ricci’s and some other teachers’ attributions, teachers in other classes make different attributions of students who demonstrate the same behaviors of not doing their work and not performing well on tests. For example, Mr. Trent does not think that Matteo, a white boy in the 11th grade who is in the Algebra 2 class, is just an uncaring, lazy, and hopeless student even though Matteo does not pay attention in class
and draws in his notebook instead, does not do his homework and complete assignments, and does not do well on tests and quizzes. Mr. Trent just thinks that he needs a “pat on the back” and “kick in the rear” to do the work, thus implying that Matteo possesses the ability to do work and the potential to learn and achieve. Thus, it is not inevitable for students’ behaviors to reinforce or even construct negative perceptions about students, depending on how teachers make attributions for students’ behaviors and what teachers believe about students.

Importantly, these negative perceptions about students based on their enrollment in CP classes is also racialized and affected by class. Not only are there observable racial disparities between CP classes and honors classes (even though some teachers, administrators and students say that the racial difference is not as bad as it used to be), the difference in enrollment is openly spoken about as a big concern, such as in math department meetings and school-wide assemblies. Teachers also talk about students’ class backgrounds in the different classes. For instance, teachers such as Ms. Bauer and Ms. Ricci talk about how students in their CP classes need to be taught math in terms of money because that is what is relevant to them when they come from working class backgrounds. Also, teachers talk about race and class together, using race as proxy for class: for example, they observe that whites tend to be wealthier than other racial and ethnic groups. Also, teachers may not talk about students in racial terms in so many words (e.g. “black students do this or that…”), but they talk about race in other ways such as by referring to students’ “cultural background.” Thus, when teachers talk about
their different perceptions about CP and honors classes, they are sometimes also talking
about race and class.

The way teachers have negative perceptions of students that are influenced by
notions of race and class, namely stereotypes, has far-reaching implications for what they
perceive to be the academic abilities and potential of students and how they need to
approach teaching students. There is a fixed sense of students’ abilities and potential and
that can affect how teachers feel like they lack agency and the power to change the
situation and also how they need to approach instruction. For example, teaching math to
students in terms of money assumes that they do not have abilities or potential to become
intellectually engaged with math. Furthermore, this instructional approach and
assumption means that students will not be able to learn more advanced levels of math
(since it seems it would be pretty tricky to teach Calculus in terms of money).

Students’ perceptions of themselves

Students also have negative perceptions of themselves that are imbued with ideas
of race and class, which play into classroom dynamics. They are similar to teachers’
perceptions of students in that they sometimes believe that their academic abilities and
potential are limited simply because of their racial background. For instance, Victoria
talks about how another student Claude, a white boy who is in Mr. Trent’s Algebra 2
class, is in her homeroom and how he does well in school. After she alludes to the way a
white girl seems to receive more praise than she does, I ask her if she thinks that Claude’s
whiteness is related to his ability to do work. Victoria explains very matter-of-factly, “He
looks like he knows what he’s doing. I mean I don’t think it’s necessarily that you have
to be white. I guess you can be black and know what you’re doing. But occasionally honestly, it’s not the case.” I ask her if she is saying that most of the time if you know what you’re doing, you’re white and if you don’t know what you’re doing you’re black or a person of color. She confirms that this is what she’s saying. Other students express similar beliefs: they think that their race is somehow meaningful in terms of their abilities, such as their chances of receiving praise and doing well in school is related and determined by racial dynamics.

Students also talk about differences in students’ class backgrounds in the different tracks and how students’ class background can shape their academic experience and future. In terms of ways students talk about class differences, they use as a proxy for class where students live in the district. For instance, West Riverton is known as the wealthier area whereas the other regions (North, South and East Riverton) are known as more working class. Students talk about race and class entwined as well, as one maps onto the other in this district. They mention how class background has implications for where students go in life, like what Rehana, an Indian American girl in Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class, talks about in terms of living in North Riverton and how she wants to get out of that region. William, an Ecuadoran-American boy in Mr. Trent’s Algebra 1 class, talks about a similar thing where he believes that people in the East Riverton, where he lives, do not become very educated and have few opportunities for upward mobility.

These perceptions that students have of themselves that are influenced by racial stereotypes and class can influence how they do in school when they are reinforced by learning processes. For instance, through this vicious cycle of instruction, Victoria’s low
sense of her academic ability and potential are just reinforced through the processes of not receiving challenging and well-structured instruction that supports her academic growth and achievement. Her sense of academic agency, of experiencing mastery and academic potential, becomes undernourished and remains limited. However, these self-perceptions do not need to dictate students’ learning experiences, as shown by students in other classes when they receive constructive and helpful instruction. For example, Carlos has low perceptions of his academic ability and potential, believing that he belongs in CP classes and that his academic future is questionable. This is illustrated by an incident at the beginning of the semester when he walks into a class and sees all white students in the class, he immediately leaves knowing that that is not his class and he does not belong there because of the racial make-up of the students. Being enrolled in auto mechanic classes, he thinks that he’s just going to do that. The idea of going to college to do something different is a reach. But then in one of his classes, his teacher challenged him a lot with engaging lessons and pushed him. He says that it was a CP class but felt like an honors class by the workload. But he appreciated the class so much because the teacher demonstrated that she believed in him and his academic abilities and potential through pushing him. When he achieved and got onto the honor roll for the first time, he could not believe his accomplishment. He gained a strong sense of mastery and potential.

Thus, Ms. Ricci and other teachers’ negative perceptions of students as static learning subjects, especially as not very engaged or lacking potential as informed by race and class, shape their own sense of agency and instructional strategies. For instance, Ms. Ricci enables students because she believes that they cannot do things on their own.
While they attribute these perceptions to the CP vs. honors class distinction, race and class are wrapped into their perceptions as well. Fatalism easily results from these perceptions of students. Also, students’ own experiences of their intellectual ability and potential based on their racial/class subjectivities affect their sense of academic agency and how they engage with work. However, their perceptions can be easily changed when they experience productive relational processes of instruction that strengthen their sense of academic agency and counter concepts of ability and potential based on race and class.

**Virtuous Cycles of Instruction**

While the deterioration of the learning process in Ms. Ricci’s class gathered so much momentum that failure seemed unavoidable, as reflected by teachers’ and students’ comments, the spiraling downward of instruction even given the circumstances of this class is not predetermined and inescapable. Not only are Ms. Ricci and Ms. Bauer successful in other teaching situations and students engaged and achieving in other learning environments, but other classes show how virtuous cycles of instruction are not only possible but actualized. Throughout the eight MCAS Prep classes and the six classes from 2008, several classes exhibit partially to completely successful processes of instruction. Those virtuous cycles contrast the vicious cycle in Ms. Ricci’s class involving teachers’ negative perceptions of students, teachers’ ineffective instructional approaches, students’ loss of academic agency, the formation or reinforcement at times of students’ racialized negative perceptions of their academic abilities and potential, students’ resulting disengagement and lack of achievement, teachers’ consequent
enervated sense of efficacy as instructors, and teachers’ continuously unproductive instructional methods. Revealing a different trajectory of classroom instruction, a brief discussion of two classes shows how possibilities of teaching and learning can be cultivated through relational processes of instruction. Ms. Browne’s Geometry class, the same course as Ms. Ricci’s Geometry class, illustrates how processes of instruction are not simply determined by individuals or the structural context (e.g. that it is a CP class). In Mr. Asmaoui’s Pre Calculus class, the processes of instruction evolve in even more productive ways while having limitations as well. Contrasting Ms. Ricci’s Geometry class, these classes show how the vicious cycle of instruction is far from inevitable.

**Ms. Browne’s Geometry class**

With Ms. Ricci’s Geometry class going poorly, she and many others attribute the failure of teaching and learning in that class mostly to structural and individual factors associated with the students who populate CP classes – e.g. they supposedly don’t care, they don’t have enough skills to begin with, the failure of their past education determines the failure of their present learning situation. However, Ms. Browne’s Geometry class is the same CP course as Ms. Ricci’s and the processes of instruction in that class follow a different trajectory; things go fairly well. How and why does instruction partially succeed in this class? Although success is unexpected based on what people think about CP classes and students in those classes, much more teaching and learning happens because of the way some virtuous cycles of instruction evolve in that classroom space. Those productive relational processes of instruction involve a feedback loop of teachers’
effective instructional methods, the development of students’ sense of competency and potential, students’ engagement and achievement, and teachers’ sense of efficacy which then loops back to encourage teachers’ effective instruction. Fueling the cycle are teachers’ more constructive and less fatalistic perceptions of students’ abilities and potential. Unfortunately, virtuous cycles of instruction in this class are limited and not as positive and productive as those in other classes, such as Mr. Trent’s class, because of the way classroom processes of developing emotional connections are unsuccessful and dynamics of discipline are strained. Nonetheless, what happens in this class regarding processes of instruction shows how the dissolution of learning and teaching in Ms. Ricci’s Geometry class and some other classes could be very different.

**Addressing students’ academic needs, providing structure**

In comparison to instructional strategies in Ms. Ricci’s Geometry class, Ms. Browne and her co-teacher Ms. Jefferson often present a deliberate pace for students’ math education through addressing students’ learning needs (including deficits) and moving forward with a generally clear and consistent structure. As a consequence, these approaches support students’ experience of mastery and academic potential in this class of 12 students.

Echoing what many other math teachers at Riverside High vocalize, Ms. Browne, a black woman who has been teaching math at this high school for 25 years, recounts her experience that students do not arrive at high school with sufficient mastery over necessary arithmetic skills and other basic math proficiencies. Although those shortcomings in students’ education and their abilities frustrate her and she even
expresses being resigned to her belief that the situation with students’ prior math education will not change, Ms. Browne nevertheless tries to deal with gaps in students’ math knowledge whenever and however she can. For instance, she intersperses prime number and multiplication drills into the geometry curriculum so that students build adeptness with their understanding of numbers. One day, as a break from the geometry curriculum, Ms. Browne asks students to stand up so that they can go through the prime number drill. Students are familiar with the exercise and start going around the room from one student to the next naming prime numbers in sequence. When students do not know the next prime number, they have to sit down. Students become energetically engaged with the drill as a game, where they are proud of success and disappointed with losing.

Similarly, Ms. Browne sometimes successfully provides structure for students’ learning such that students have a routine for knowing what to do and for moving along in their work. The process of going over homework one day in class illustrates this dynamic. At the beginning of class, Ms. Browne asks the students to take out their homework. After checking off who completed their homework and who did not (a number of students completed the assignment), Ms. Browne announces the answers to the problems and asks students to put up the problems that they were uncertain of on the blackboard. Before students go up to the blackboard, she tells them she wants to first quickly review a few things with them, including geometric means and how a square with sides of $6\sqrt{2}$ would have a side of 12. All of the students pay attention to this brief lesson and then four students approach the blackboard to put up problems. While putting up one
of the homework problems, George, a black boy, encounters a challenge while solving his problem when he does not know how to reduce √56. (In this homework problem, students are given a right triangle where the length of the hypotenuse is 9 units and the length of one of the legs is 5 units. They have to find the length of the other leg.) When Ms. Browne tells him to do a factor tree, George tells her that he doesn’t remember how to do that. Referring to my earlier conversation with Ms. Browne about students’ arithmetic skills, she then turns to me and says, “See what I mean?” She then goes to the board and shows him how to do a factor tree by taking perfect squares out of the radical. Upon understanding Ms. Browne’s model and doing his own factor tree, George finds the square root of 56 to be 2√7.

This moment in class demonstrates a productive process of instruction that occurs at various times throughout the duration of the course where Ms. Browne provides and enforces clear and consistent expectations and procedures for students’ learning (e.g. the routine of doing homework, checking it and reviewing the problems at the blackboard) and effectively and quickly addresses students’ knowledge gaps. Contrasting Ms. Ricci’s instructional approaches, Ms. Browne does not make a big fuss during class when students do not complete their homework or when they reveal a gap in their math skills (some students in Ms. Ricci’s geometry class also did not know how to simplify radicals). Despite her own frustrations, Ms. Browne tries to promptly help students catch up. Moreover, students are given opportunities to develop their own sense of mastery when they are expected and empowered to do their own work.
Ms. Jefferson, the co-teacher who serves as more of a teaching assistant\textsuperscript{15}, also shows how providing clear expectations and procedures for students helps them develop a sense of mastery and academic potential. During my interview with Ms. Jefferson, a white woman who just started teaching at Riverside High and is finishing graduate school simultaneously, she just finishes sharing her belief that it’s too late at this point (in high school) for students to pick up study skills and work habits if they aren’t trained to do these things when they’re younger. Contradicting her own previous comment, Ms. Jefferson then tells me about how she helped Juliana, a Salvadoran-American girl in Ms. Browne’s class, develop a structure that supported her engagement and learning. As Juliana stopped doing her homework and her test scores plummeted, Ms. Jefferson wondered what was underlying the sudden change. Juliana told Ms. Jefferson that she didn’t care about doing schoolwork anymore because she tried her hardest and still didn’t get good grades. In response to that, Ms. Jefferson developed a system with Juliana of checking her homework at the beginning of class. According to Ms. Jefferson, Juliana responded to that very well and now comes into class each day to proudly show Ms. Jefferson her homework. Similar to what Victoria and other students discuss about why they appreciate and need structure for their learning, this process encourages Juliana to become and stay engaged and motivated with her work because she has a sense of being capable of developing competency and achieving.

\textsuperscript{15} Although Ms. Browne and Ms. Jefferson are technically co-teachers, Ms. Browne acts like a lead teacher. Although this is similar to the situation with Ms. Ricci and Ms. Bauer, there is not much tension between Ms. Browne and Ms. Jefferson, unlike in Ms. Ricci’s and Ms. Bauer’s relationship.
Thus, as a result of certain instructional methods, Juliana and other students develop a sense of competency and experience their academic potential. Consequently, students complete their work and demonstrate some academic growth, which then supports teachers’ sense of efficacy and affirms their instructional approaches. For example, Ms. Jefferson experiences an encouraging sense of agency as an instructor when she effectively helps Juliana become more engaged and motivated with her learning. Through that experience where Juliana responds positively and does not “throw it back” in Ms. Jefferson’s face, Ms. Jefferson is encouraged to continue believing that teachers cannot assume that students are just acting up when they do not complete their assignments, but need to ask students how they are doing and discuss with them what they think will help them move in the right direction.

**Having positive perceptions of students’ abilities and potential**

Importantly, teachers’ optimistic beliefs about students’ academic abilities and potential advance the virtuous cycles of instruction in this class. For example, Ms. Jefferson’s positive beliefs about Juliana’s capacity to become engaged and achieve underpin Ms. Jefferson’s instruction. With that perception of Juliana, Ms. Jefferson feels like she can help Juliana’s situation (as opposed to think that Juliana just can not do work anymore) and provides a helpful structure that meets Juliana’s needs. Through Ms. Jefferson’s efforts, Juliana receives encouragement and a message that her ability to learn and achieve is possible. Thus, these positive perceptions of students and resulting practices support the development of students’ academic agency and also teachers’ sense of agency as instructors.
Similar to Ms. Jefferson’s belief in Juliana’s ability to grow academically, Ms. Browne’s belief that students in this class embody academic potential positively influences her instructional methods and the virtuous cycles of instruction in this class. Despite Ms. Browne’s expressions of frustration regarding what students know and what they don’t, some of her instructional approaches in class reflect a hopeful desire to help students develop math skills and a sense of mastery. For instance, even while feeling frustrated, Ms. Browne still helps the students move through the geometry curriculum while patching holes in their knowledge of prerequisite math, such as through her prime numbers and multiplication exercises. Unlike Ms. Ricci and some other teachers, Ms. Browne holds students to higher expectations of learning, such as routine homework, because she believes they can achieve. In short, students in Ms. Browne’s class enter into the geometry course generally with the same levels of preparation that students in Ms. Ricci’s class have (such as not knowing their multiplication tables fluently), but virtuous cycles of instruction develop in this class, unlike in Ms. Ricci’s class, in part because the teachers believe that students’ academic fates are not sealed and something can still be done for them.

In terms of the way stereotypes of students based on race, class and gender shape perceptions of their abilities and potential, Ms. Browne not only dismisses those notions but also strives to counteract their damaging effects for students of color, especially black and Latino students. For example, when she was teaching an honors geometry course a few years ago, Ms. Browne noticed on the first day of class that the students were all white. In the previous year, she had taught Algebra 1, the course that directly precedes
the geometry course, so she knew there were some students of color who were qualified and capable of being in the honors geometry class. Knowing that “…nobody pushed [the students of color], nobody encouraged them – not even the guidance counselors – to take the honors class…,” Ms. Browne then went to the guidance counselors and told them that she wanted certain students to be placed in her honors geometry class. Upon recruiting several students of color to be in her honors geometry class, Ms. Browne mentions that “…they were just as competitive as the other kids…” and did well in the course. Reminding her of her own educational experience of not being encouraged and pushed, Ms. Browne believes that “…had I not been teaching geometry honors, they wouldn’t have been there.” This one incident reflects larger patterns in the way racial advantages and disadvantages can be distributed through the educational system, and also reveals how actively counteracting negative perceptions of students can disrupt those patterns.

**Mr. Asmaoui’s Pre Calculus class**

What happens in Mr. Asmaoui’s class is even better in terms of virtuous cycles of instruction. Why does this class go well? Although people might think that this class is simply going to be great because it’s an honors class, there is evidence that that would not necessarily be the case. For instance, other students in honors classes talk about how bad their classes are, showing that not all honors classes go well. Also, although the students come into this class with more math skills and study skills than some students in other classes, students’ abilities do not just determine the success of the learning situation since several of the students, including Dan and Tracy, talk about how their experiences
in other classes were unproductive and meaningless. For example, Dan, a very engaged student in this class, experiences disengagement in another class where he is not learning much in the class, which is reflected in his grades. He did not like his geometry class in the past either. Furthermore, Natasha, a white girl whom I worked with in an MCAS prep class in 2006, tells me that she had a terrible learning experience with Mr. Asmaoui, whom students call Mr. A both because it is shorter and because they find it difficult to pronounce his name correctly. Mr. Asmaoui talks about his terrible teaching experiences in the class. Thus, the success of this Pre Calculus class does not simply result from his being an incredible teacher. So then how and why do processes of instruction go well in this class?

Throughout the duration of this course, Mr. Asmaoui’s class shows how students develop a sense of mastery and potential and he develops a sense of agency as an instructor. The feedback loop between students’ sense of agency and the teachers’ sense of agency is very clear here. Mr. Asmaoui believes that the students in this class are exceptional and have great academic ability and potential since it is an honors class and they are “honors students,” and his instruction reflects his beliefs. He feels like he can be an effective instructor and provides clear guidance for the students with his lessons and other instructional approaches. Students develop and experience their sense of mastery and potential, gain skills and stay motivated with their work. Given the feedback of students’ engagement and achievement with learning, Mr. Asmaoui’s perceptions of students as good students strengthen and his sense of efficacy as a teacher expands. His own sense of agency then becomes reflected in his teaching which then continues on the
virtuous cycle. Mr. Asmaoui’s class therefore evolves into a virtuous cycle of instruction, similar to Mr. Trent’s class and some MCAS Prep classes as well.

However, the processes of learning that evolve in this class have limitations in how much students gain with a sense of mastery. Specifically, processes of instruction do not involve a lot of engagement and students learn math skills by mastering rules and formulas, and not necessarily mastering concepts. And there is competition among students that is to the detriment of those who do not always come out on top, thereby shaming those who demonstrate having less mastery. While this class goes a lot like Mr. Trent’s class, it does not go as well because there are not strong emotional connections in this class.

Challenging students and providing means to reach high expectations

This, like Mr. Trent’s class, is a semester-long course. This class has 13 students in it with five 10th graders, six 11th graders, and two 12th graders. Mr. Asmaoui has been teaching at Riverside for 5 years and is from Morocco. Mr. Asmaoui’s instructional approaches help students develop a strong sense of mastery and potential by offering a balance of challenging and feasible instruction where he provides means for them to reach the high expectations. He challenges them a bit – with the pace and quantity of work, and the concepts – and gives them the tools to do their work. Dan, a white boy in the 10th grade, talks about how he likes being challenged and it keeps him engaged. In his Algebra 2 class, he would be engaged if he didn’t know what was being taught and it was new material. But if he did know it already, then he would be bored and lose interest and become disengaged. The same goes for him in this class. And since Mr. Asmaoui’s
instruction is challenging, then he is engaged. However, if the teacher does not provide
means for students to reach those challenging expectations, then students disengage and
become demotivated feeling like they can’t do the work. For instance, Dan talks about
how he didn’t like his Geometry class because the teacher would assign work to do in
class and teach new material while they’re still learning how to do the first assignment.
So they would have to do several things simultaneously and he didn’t like that because he
could not focus and try to learn new material while trying to master other concepts.

In terms of what this challenging but supportive instruction looks like, Mr.
Asmaoui gives students clear routines with their work to learn concepts and practice
problems. This provides good structure to help students develop skills and master
material to meet the challenging pace and content of work. On a typical day, they first
review homework. There are clear expectations for doing homework, which then allows
them to practice at home what they learned, review what they just learned in class and
move on with a new lesson in class. Sometimes, they’ll do a “warm-up” activity at the
beginning of class, like when they go through problems on the SmartBoard (the
electronic projection screen hooked up to his computer). The “warm-up” reviews exactly
what they have been doing, such as going through several multiple choice questions that
have to do with phase shifts and shifts in sinusoidal equations. He then is reinforcing the
concepts that they just learned. Then they go onto the new lesson. He gives students
handouts that are very clearly typed up and laid out. First, they go through the objectives,
then Mr. Asmaoui teaches them the rules and properties with examples (e.g. learning
what graphs of $y=sinx$ and $y=cosx$ are). And then they have example problems that they
solve together. With the example problems, he describes steps for them to follow. And then they are asked to work on problems by themselves. Students appreciate this structure with learning math because it simultaneously challenges them with the pace and content of the work and also gives them a way of doing their work. Tracy, an Ethiopian-American girl in the 10th grade, likes how he gives them clear, detailed and well-organized notes that they can study. Her former math teacher Ms. Pokrovsky did that as well. Dan talks about how he liked when his Algebra 2 teacher would write notes up on the board and students would copy them down. They were given a way to do their work and other students discuss how they like having clear structures with class that support their learning.

**Cultivating students’ sense of mastery and potential**

Unlike in Natasha’s class where Mr. Asmaoui’s instructional methods made her feel like she did not have abilities and potential, students in this pre-calculus class experience a greater amount of mastery and potential because his clear explanations seem to help most students understand what’s going on and their sense of being good at math. When students in Natasha’s class asked Mr. Asmaoui questions, Natasha says that Mr. Asmaoui would not respond to questions and explain material, but would refuse to repeat things and just harshly and impatiently exclaim, “You should know this already!” Upon hearing those sorts of comments, Natasha and many other students in class became scared to ask questions and consequently did not, even when they did not understand material. To get through class, she then relied on her friends’ help to figure out what was going on in class. Juxtaposing Natasha’s account of Mr. Asmaoui’s teaching style in her class, Mr.
Asmaoui acts in a completely different way in this class and seems willing to and available to help students and then actually helps them.

Because of how Mr. Asmaoui acts, students ask questions, receive help, and develop their understanding of material and their own confidence and courage to do work. Importantly, his help builds their independence and not dependence. For example, Tracy says he’s more helpful than her other teachers because he actually comes to you when they’re doing their homework in class and sits next to you if you need his help. Then he explains step by step how to do something. He explains what is helpful and important to know. For example, Tracy says that for a particular problem, he’ll tell you that you need to know the unit circle by heart. And then when she goes home and does her work, she remembers that Mr. Asmaoui said to go over the unit circle for that problem. This is like what Lily talks about with getting help from Mr. Trent in class – that he was supportive and helpful when needed, helping them figure out how to do things on their own. Similar to Mr. Asmaoui’s approach in this class and Mr. Trent’s approach in Lily’s class, teachers in the MCAS Prep classes and Ms. Browne were available to help but did not jump into help students before they were given a chance to try things on their own. In that way, students gain support in developing independence and skills, and not become enabled. Unlike Ms. Ricci’s assistance that fosters a sense of dependency, Mr. Asmaoui’s instruction fosters a sense of students’ independence and their own mastery.

When students have the skills and understand things, they develop their sense of mastery, are less frustrated and become more engaged and motivated. Then they
sometimes like the class more. Because he knows how to do work, Dan likes doing his work. But in his Spanish class, he didn’t understand it, became bored and therefore didn’t try hard in that class. (His disengagement also resulted from feeling like the teacher didn’t seem to care about him.) Part of the feedback loop of classes that go well is when students know how to do the work.

By building their skills, most students in the class gained a sense of progress and potential, sometimes on a daily basis and also across the duration of the course, preparing them to continue onto higher levels of math. Their sense of potential strengthens their attachment to learning math. Their pursuit of higher math classes is partly in preparation for college (being on a competitive track), but they also do it because they have a sense of being able to do it. One day, I ask Damon, a white boy in his sophomore year, what he’s taking next year and he says he’s going to be taking Calculus BC next year. In his senior year, he might look into taking a math class at the local university. He says he likes math. Dan is going to be taking Calculus BC next year as well. Afterwards, he might also take a class at the local university. This is different than other students who have their sights set on not even doing that well in math, like Victoria and many other students. Even if they come into class beforehand with those ideas, the notion that they have great intellectual potential is reinforced in class by either developing competency and their sense of potential or not.

**Strengthening Mr. Asmaoui’s sense of efficacy**

As students are responsive to his instruction (e.g. Tracy says that she “loves” Mr. Asmaoui’s teaching style), become motivated and engaged to learn, learn material and
demonstrate their understanding, that positive feedback encourages Mr. Asmaoui and validates his efficacy as a teacher, thereby affirming and reinforcing his effective instructional approaches and fueling a virtuous cycle of instruction. However, revealing how a teacher’s success as an instructor is not predetermined and that his sense of agency is also made through relational processes of instruction in class, Mr. Asmaoui’s fulfilling teaching experience in the Pre Calculus class is completely different than his experiences of crippling frustration in some of his other classes.

Where students lack skills and have knowledge gaps in the Pre Calculus class and AP Calculus class, Mr. Asmaoui just works to help them, including in class and after class depending on how much students need help. He feels agentic and capable of helping the students there. However, in some other classes and with other students, he feels so frustrated when students don’t have necessary skills. One day after class, I mention that some students seem to get frustrated when they don’t have the skills and can give up. He inserts that teachers get frustrated as well. He says that when students lack skills, become frustrated, and give up, teachers also get frustrated with students’ lacking skills and then teachers can easily give up. According to Mr. Asmaoui, as students “try and fail” and then “maybe …stop trying,” their struggles then put strain on the teachers as they give teachers a “hard time.” In that dynamic, students’ and teachers’ lose a sense of agency to cultivate possibilities of teaching and learning. Like in Natasha’s class, Mr. Asmaoui’s frustrations then translate into ineffective instructional strategies where his frustrations overpower his ability to help students learn material.

Positive beliefs of “honors students”
How come Mr. Asmaoui becomes very frustrated and unable to help students in some classes when they lack skills, but is able to help students in other classes? In classes that are full of students who lack a lot of skills partly due to poor past instruction, Mr. Asmaoui, like other teachers, feel so overwhelmed with all that they need to cover with the students. However, part of the reason why he gives up with students in some classes and not with students in this Pre Calculus class when they lack skills is because he believes in these students’ potential. His believing that they can do work makes him feel more agentic in that space as a teacher.

Mr. Asmaoui’s assumptions of honors students’ academic abilities and potential contribute to his greater patience, confidence and sense of being efficacious. At the beginning of the semester, he says that he doesn’t need my help with the class because they’re honors students. Thus, he anticipates and assumes even before working with them, that these students will need less help because of their honors designation. This proves to be true across the semester, but largely because of the structures he implements that help student develop competency and confidence (the process discussed in the previous section). Unlike Ms. Browne, he believes the students are good and they don’t need to be dutiful, so Mr. Asmaoui is not paternalistic towards them (like how Mr. Trent treats his students in the Algebra 2 class). For example, he negotiates some things with students, like turning off lights to do work or allowing students to do extra credit, even if he doesn’t like the idea of extra credit work.

Although he shares with me on various occasions across the semester his frustration with how students are ill-prepared in the feeder schools with their math skills,
that frustration does not manifest as a significant obstacle to his sense of efficacy in this classroom. He says that he has frustrations with all students, including students in pre-calculus and calculus classes, who struggle with basic math skills like arithmetic. “It’s a barrier for me to teach them,” he says. For instance, Mr. Asmaoui says that students are taught things like slope with stairs in the middle school, but this doesn’t help them apply it to things later on. He says that it’s fine if they derive things, like how he derived Euler’s number the other day, but then they have to drill to have mastery because being able to talk about things abstractly isn’t the same as having mastery over the skills.

However, Mr. Asmaoui seems to experience this “barrier” as much more immovable in CP classes than it is in honors classes. Since he sees honors classes and its students as “nearly perfect” (in a statement directly following his comment about his frustrations with even higher level classes), he experiences greater agency vis-à-vis “honors students” and therefore implements a better practice of confronting and addressing the skill-level “barrier” by simply helping students master skills. Like with Ms. Browne, he demonstrates through his teaching that he believes that students have the capacity and potential to master skills.

In short, even though many of the students in this class come in with supportive resources outside of school that endow them with educational capital (such as motivation, skills, confidence and courage), Mr. Asmaoui’s class shows how productive cycles of pedagogy evolve when he provides instruction for students that allows them to gain experiences of competency, growth, and agency in knowing how to learn and achieve. Importantly, students’ learning and growth feeds Mr. Asmaoui’s own sense of agency in
the classroom, thereby creating a feedback loop that constantly spirals upward. As these dynamics constitute the core nature of virtuous cycles, Mr. Asmaoui’s positive beliefs about students and his hopefulness about the students (namely their academic abilities and potential) and his teaching situation support his sense of agency as a teacher. That sense of agency, his experience that his actions can influence students’ academic growth, translates into his pedagogical methods where his high expectations for students are embedded in the structure that he provides for his class. Nonetheless, dysfunctional learning processes occur as well, especially when students’ caring is mostly about being achievement-oriented and competitive, and teaching methods support that in class.

**Conclusion**

In examining why some students seem to care more about learning and achieving than others, the previous chapter looked at how emotional connections in the classroom affect students’ learning by shaping their sense of academic agency (e.g. mattering). This chapter turns to examining a very obvious source of students’ learning: instruction. However, while instruction is obviously an important part of students’ learning (as educators spend countless hours in “professional development” workshops figuring out how to develop curriculum and effective lesson plans), how it works is less obvious. For instance, why does the same student complete her work and excel in some classes, but not in others? Or why does the same curriculum and lesson plan from the same teacher engage some students and some classes, but not others? Although these kinds of differences have often been attributed to differences in what students bring into the
classroom (e.g. cultural backgrounds and values, class differences, academic skill levels, or intelligence), those explanations for why instructional methods succeed or fail do not capture the dynamic nature of classrooms. Illuminating what happens within the classroom space, my fieldwork shows that important classroom processes, involving both teachers and students, shape the evolution of effective and ineffective instruction. These processes affect students’ learning by shaping their sense of academic agency (e.g. mastery and potential), which in turn influence students’ levels of engagement, motivation and achievement. Furthermore, teachers’ own sense of agency transforms through these classroom dynamics and plays a critical role in propelling processes of pedagogy in positive or negative directions.

Moreover, teachers’ racial beliefs of students (as being smart and able or “limited” and unable, as optimistically possessing or hopelessly lacking academic potential) and racialized attributions for students’ behaviors shape the direction of classroom processes of instruction by affecting teachers’ and students’ sense of agency. Students’ racial subjectivities, which are also made through classroom processes of instruction, evolve with students’ sense of mastery and potential. For example, Victoria, a Latina American girl from Ms. Ricci’s Geometry class, tells me about how she has come to understand her own academic potential.

I think there’s just those people who look to me like they have a perfect grasp of everything. Like this girl that …I’ve known her since I was in fourth grade. I’m not her friend or anything, I just know her because she graduated with me … from the same middle school…. And she’s incredible! Like I look at her and …she knows everything. She’s taking …AP chemistry and…I can’t even understand CP chemistry! She’s so amazing. (I ask her how it makes her feel.) I don’t know, I’m like well she’s white. I won’t even lie to you. I’m like, she’s white. And like, I
don’t know. I feel like, I don’t know, I don’t know how to say it. And she’s more intelligent than me.

Even before I mention anything about race, Victoria indicates to me that her sense of herself, her intellectual abilities and academic potential, are tied up with ideas of race and racial inferiority. When I ask her why she thinks that she cannot do well in school, she says that it’s because she never really has. Thus, being caught up in vicious cycles of instruction, such as the one in her geometry class with Ms. Ricci, Victoria’s experiences of struggles and failures add up to a fading sense of academic agency, something that becomes justified and normalized because of her sense of racial inferiority.
Losing Control vs. Gaining Authority
Classroom dynamics of discipline, racial problems, and students’ self-regulation

The bell rings to signal the start of class, students are filing in from lunch and the classroom reverberates with students yelling and talking to each other. Ms. Flores informs me that although the students have been acting “like it’s June” from the beginning of the year, it’s even worse now that it’s actually June. A few weeks remain in the school year and Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer’s Algebra 1 class is struggling and all but completely failing to exhibit discipline, get work done and learn. The two teachers try to get students to settle down and complete their class assignment for the day. Ms. Bauer hands out packets to students with the day’s “agenda,” listing the objective “to solve applied quadratic problems” and containing problems about factoring. Students continue to talk across the room. To get students’ attention to focus on their work, Ms. Flores says to the students, “If you hear me, clap once. If you hear me, clap twice. If you hear me, clap three times.” Several students clap after each command. Ms. Flores projects the class assignment (what students have in their packets) onto the screen at the front of the classroom and starts filling in problems. She calls on individual students to pay attention and yells at the entire class as well. After several fruitless attempts, she finally says to the entire class, “I am not teaching anymore. I don’t care if you pass, if you fail, whatever.” Ms. Flores then gives all but two students detention and calls the school’s four deans that handle discipline issues. Two deans come, stand at the front of class and
note which students will be coming to detention after school. The classroom quiets down a good deal, but students express resentment and confusion about why they all have detention. I hear one girl say to a couple girls sitting near her that the situation is like the “old white substitute lady” who acts as if she’s afraid of students and calls security for anything and everything. She says that one student even asked the substitute, “Have you never been close to black kids before?”

Although Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer’s Algebra 1 class does not reflect what happens in all of the classes at Riverside High, it does represent dynamics that occur in a number of classes and some teachers’ and students’ experiences. In these classes, students and teachers deal with a substantial amount of discipline conflicts, including numerous disruptions in class, students receiving detentions and being sent to their dean’s office regularly, and some students getting suspended and even expelled. Conflicts arise in class, student-teacher relationships dissolve into antagonisms, and efforts to teach and learn seem futile. However, for some classes and some students at Riverside High, they rarely experience these kinds of issues and conflicts over discipline are as foreign to them as the idea of not graduating from high school. Why and how do these dysfunctional dynamics develop? How do these processes affect students’ learning? Furthermore, why do some students, teachers and classes experience more frequent and more intense discipline problems than others?

To explore these issues, I highlight two classes that exemplify classroom processes of conflict versus harmony. Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer’s Algebra 1 class, similar to Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class and several MCAS Prep classes, illustrates what
happens when classroom dynamics of discipline break down into a dysfunctional cycle. Mr. Trent’s Algebra 2 class is then revisited to show what happens when processes of discipline effectively promote students’ learning. The dynamics in Mr. Trent’s class also reflect what happens in Mr. Asmaoui’s Pre Calculus class and to some extent what happens in Ms. Ricci’s Geometry class and a few MCAS Prep classes. Through unpacking themes from these classes, I illuminate tensions and possibilities within these processes of discipline and punishment. What results is an exploration of how authority is negotiated in the classroom space so that students do or do not become empowered and motivated to not only learn and excel academically, but even simply to stay in school.

**Wrestling for Control: Destructive Cycles of Discipline**

In discussing her approach to classroom management, Ms. Flores tells me about how she strives to adapt to students’ needs in order to help them self-regulate. For instance, she addresses what she perceives to be students’ constant exposure to technology and shortened attention spans by allowing students to use their ipods in class to help them focus (some students mention that doing that does help them). In the same vein, she sends students text messages during class to get their attention when she sees that they are using their cell phones. Furthermore, Ms. Flores sought to build community with students at the beginning of the school year by including students in conversations about establishing classroom rules. These methods seem to succeed in her other classes; Paul, a Latino-American boy from one of Ms. Flores’ other math classes, mentions that his class with Ms. Flores runs fairly smoothly. In this Algebra 1 class, the learning
environment is also calm and productive sometimes, such as when several students go with Ms. Bauer to work in her office upstairs. If things go well in this class sometimes and the learning environment is without conflicts over behaviors, why do intense struggles occur most of the time in Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer’s Algebra 1 class? If students at times demonstrate self-regulation in this class and in other classes and if the teachers sometimes effectively manage what happens in this classroom and other classrooms, then why do classroom dynamics of discipline generally fall apart and deteriorate into struggles?

As shown by the example above, things clearly deteriorate by the end of the school year in this year-long class. The students do not follow the teachers’ instructions and the teachers get frustrated and punish the students. The following discussion examines how this vicious cycle of discipline evolves and how Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer’s Algebra 1 class captures the nature of tensions when discipline becomes a heated site of contestation, precluding learning and students’ academic growth. This class of 14 students exemplifies unproductive dynamics of other classes as well. Like in Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class and several MCAS Prep classes, issues surrounding discipline were particularly salient in this class, as shown through the frequency of disruptions and punishments, culminating in Ms. Flores’ telling students that she is giving up with teaching.

“A lot of rope,” then unfair disciplining, and students’ eroding sense of authority to self-regulate
In the second semester of this class, there are seven black students (four girls, three boys), one Caribbean-American girl, one half-black and half-Latina American girl, one Latino American boy, and four white students (three boys, one girl). Through trying to accommodate students’ needs, such as by creating “community” instead of enforcing rules, Ms. Flores, a white woman who just started teaching at Riverside High, does not provide clear boundaries for students’ behaviors. Structures of discipline are not clearly established and consistently reinforced in this class of mostly 9th graders. Students consequently act up. Ray, a white boy in the 9th grade, says that Ms. Flores “gives a lot of rope” and “we just kind of hang out with it.” Although the students are initially granted a lot of leeway and authority to figure out what to do with those freedoms, they do not develop a sense of authority to self-govern when boundaries are not clearly developed. Contrasting his experience in this class, Ray says that with a lot of structure in his other class, there are clear parameters of what will happen if he does or does not do his work. Without clear guidelines in Ms. Flores’ class, students do not follow Ms. Flores’ or Ms. Bauer’s instructions because they are not encouraged to do so and have not internalized a sense of authority to self-govern. Other students discuss similar experiences where their behaviors change drastically from disruptive to cooperative when they are in situations where they are given clearer direction and structure. Through trying to develop “community,” not being consistent with rules, and granting so much leeway in class, Ms. Bauer, the co-teacher, thinks that students now do not have a sense of clear expectations and consistent boundaries for developing authority to self-govern wisely. It is similar to the dynamics with instruction where students, such as Victoria, would like
some fair and consistent structure so that they can figure out what to do and how to conduct themselves in productive ways.

This dynamic is similar to what happens in one of Ms. Christie’s MCAS Prep class where Terrance, a black boy in the 11\textsuperscript{th} grade, says that Ms. Christie does not provide sufficient boundaries for the students. He says that when you have a class with your friends, a lot of the students will talk and when you have a teacher who is “not picking up, stepping up,” problems occur. Referring to the teacher, he explains that “you can send a person to the office only so many times.” In other words, instead of simply punishing students and getting rid of them, he wishes that Ms. Christie would establish clear and consistent rules for their behaviors. In his current math class, Terrance is in there with friends, but the teacher maintains boundaries that help him learn. Diplomatically, he attributes the dysfunctional dynamic in Ms. Christie’s class to both the students and the teachers, the students who are disruptive and teachers who are not adequately creating order. This is similar to what Nicole, a black girl in the 11\textsuperscript{th} grade, says about how students do want and need a teacher to “step up” and control the classroom and manage it in some ways. When the teacher fails to do so, Nicole says that everything goes “downhill.” Importantly, students show how they desire having structure and the having teachers provide order, but not being overly authoritative. However, in Terrance’s class with Ms. Christie, Ms. Christie becomes frustrated with students’ behaviors and expresses her frustration through talking to the students as if they are little kids and yelling at them. This results in students’ feeling like they lost their sense of
authority when they actually wanted boundaries to gain authority to self-regulate. Students then become disengaged and lack motivation to do work.

When feeling stressed, teachers sometimes punish students unfairly and students become angry and resentful about the unfair punishment. Ray describes a situation where he got in trouble for supposedly being under the table when he says he was not. He then got frustrated because he got in trouble. He says that sometimes “teachers aren’t reasonable” because they “only go with what they saw” and don’t try to figure out what happens. So he gets in trouble a lot, even when he’s not doing something “that bad,” and then he gets angry. I witness one of those moments when Ms. Flores sends Ray to his dean’s office, Ray then becomes very angry and throws paper on the floor on the way out because he feels like he is being punished unfairly. Similar situations occur with Antone, Steven, and Rafiq with Ms. Ricci. Students’ frustration then contributes to the escalation of conflict over discipline and punishment. Students feel like their authority is being taken away and then do things to assert and regain their authority. Ray tells me that he does things that he knows are not good and that if he were to get caught, there would be serious consequences. I ask him why he does those things and then he says because he wants to.

In a similar situation, Melanie, a white girl from Mr. Trent’s Algebra 2 class, reacts to her perception of unfair treatment and authoritarian teachers the same way some students in Ms. Christie’s class, and many other classes, do. She tells me about how she’s generally “really good with teachers,” but doesn’t get along with her current history teacher because she thinks that he doesn’t like her (“students can just get a feeling that a
teacher doesn’t like you”), treats her unfairly (“when you do the littlest thing wrong, then he picks on you”), and asserts his authority over her. Consequently, she becomes angry, “does as little work as necessary,” could “care less about class,” and ultimately does not want to learn in that classroom space.

In terms of being treated fairly, students express wanting to have consistent boundaries and rules for their conduct, allowing them to both establish their own authority to know what to do while respecting the teachers’ authority. When they feel like they are not being treated justly, students talk about how they feel like their self-worth and authority is being challenged. For example, after Trevor left school because of getting in trouble, Varisha, one of his best friends, became very sullen and also distrustful of teachers and administrators. She felt as if Trevor, a black boy in one of Ms. Christie’s MCAS Prep classes, hadn’t been given a fair chance, got a bad reputation and consequently got in trouble with teachers a lot.

…I see [Varisha] sitting in [Trevor’s former] seat off to the side of the table…I ask her how Trevor is doing and she tells me that he’s doing well and doing better in school [at the alternative school] actually. (She says they talk nearly every day.) He might be able to come back next year – maybe not. …We have a long conversation about how teachers started to not like him. Varisha tells me about how one day she was just saying to Trevor that he had something nasty in his drink and then Ms. Christie yelled at them. And it was so unfair to Varisha because other kids were talking too but they didn’t get in trouble – but she and Trevor were always targeted in a way. She also tells me about how he was extremely disliked by another teacher. (She told me before that when Trevor does his work, he can do it really well.)

As I work with Varisha, a Caribbean American girl in the 10th grade, she is just tuned out and she does a bit of work, but her heart and attention isn’t there. She seems to be thinking about her best friend who got kicked out of school. Varisha’s experience in
class shows something that other students talk about and demonstrated in class as well. Because she felt that Trevor was unfairly kicked out of school and because she herself felt mistreated, then her trust in Ms. Christie (and other teachers) diminished and she became more demotivated and disengaged in class. For instance, on a different day, she told me that because Ms. Christie doesn’t want to work with her and is dismissive of her, she doesn’t care about the class. Varisha explained that Dante acted up because he felt like he was mistreated and she ended up doing the same thing as she felt like she was being treated unfairly and that her agency was being taken away. The more resistant Varisha became and the less work she did, the more frustrated Ms. Christie became, and tensions grew. Talking to Ms. Christie, I heard about how her feelings were hurt as well and how she was offended by Varisha. A similar thing happened to two girls in another one of Ms. Christie’s MCAS prep class where animosity grew between Ms. Christie and two girls, Sammi and Rachel, when the girls felt like they were disciplined unfairly. Students talk about similar situations in other classes.

**Feeling demeaned and defeated: Teachers’ dissolving sense of authority**

When students just “hang out” with “a lot of rope,” Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer become frustrated. Feeling incredibly frustrated, the teachers themselves lose a sense of agency and authority to govern the class. Ms. Flores talks about how teachers get frustrated. She talks about how she told the students that they clearly have no respect for her and has stopped teaching before. She tells me that students were so rude at some points, and “you’re human and there’s only so much that you can take.” She says that you don’t want it to be personal and it’s mostly not personal, but she’s not a “super-
teacher.” One student just got back from a ten day suspension for putting Purell hand sanitizer in a water bottle and giving it to Ms. Flores to drink. Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer, the co-teacher who specializes in Special Education, are frustrated because they think that he came back too early. Expressing her overwhelming sense of demoralization, Ms. Flores states, “They stomp all over you and treat you like crap.” She says that she loves the students and that a lot of the students are wonderful, but it gets really frustrating after they’ve talked so much about community-building throughout the school year and all of the conferences and meetings after school. She loses her sense of authority in the classroom.

Similarly, Ms. Christie was first very flexible with the student because she recognizes that the class is only to prepare them for the test. She is generally easygoing and understanding and some of her other classes that semester went well. But then in her class with Terrance, she was so frustrated and she felt like she lost her sense of authority when the student did not listen to her. Then she responded not by “picking up” or “stepping up,” but by demeaning them and saying that she was “babysitting” them. At the end of the semester, she tells me that on “bad days,” she’s created situations where things are “never going to work.” She recognizes that that’s why it’s good that there are two of them (Ms. Khalouf, her teaching assistant, and herself) so that there is at least one person with whom the student can possibly work and connect.

**Teachers vs. Students: Escalating conflicts**

In response to students’ behaviors, teachers sometimes then treat students unfairly and harshly. With conflicts over discipline and their experiences of demoralization, Ms.
Flores and Ms. Bauer express their frustration through yelling at students, punishing them sometimes severely and unjustly, and (in the case of Ms. Flores) simply giving up in class, like in Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class. They become more authoritarian. Even while participating in efforts to discipline students more harshly, Ms. Bauer believes that implementing and enforcing harsher rules at the end of the year is unfair since the guidelines were not put in place in the beginning of the year. Students talk about how they sense when teachers don’t like them and are very responsive to teachers’ giving up on them. In Adina’s Algebra 1 class last year, there were a lot of tensions between the teacher and the students. Based on how the teacher treated the students, Adina, an Ethiopian-American girl in Ms. Ricci’s Geometry class, says that “it was obvious” that the teacher did not like the students. Ms. Bauer mentions that the class has told her that Ms. Flores hates them and asked why she even teaches. Ray says that on one of the days that Ms. Flores gave up, he acknowledges “we were acting up a lot” but she “way overreacted” when she said that she was giving up and calling the deans. He says that it was as if Ms. Flores was asserting her authority over the students.

It is only about one month into the semester and four students have to stay after class because they get in trouble during class for not following Ms. Christie’s orders. There are five tables in class with 2 chairs at each table in Ms. Christie’s classroom. Ms. Christie made a rule where only two students are allowed to sit at the back table. However, on that day, Anthony, Tenzin, James and Terrance all want to sit at the back table and no one moves when Ms. Christie tells them that only two can stay there. After she asks them again to move, only Anthony, a black boy in the 10th grade, changes his
seat. She gets upset and reprimands them during class and orders them to stay after class as well. After class, she dismisses Anthony because he moved after her second request and continues to scold the other three boys, with Ms. Khalouf echoing her at times.

…she is telling them that this is the only class that gives her this much trouble and that there is no reason for them to be acting this way. …she likens them to her 2 year old daughter in daycare and [says the two year olds] don’t give the teachers problems. She says that they (these students) give her more trouble than the two year olds. …She says that since she and [the teacher from the corresponding English MCAS prep class] both have a difficult time with them then it must be something about the students and not the teachers. …She says that they need a babysitter and not a teacher. Unfortunately, she’s not a babysitter so that’s not going to work for them, she says.

Through these words, Ms. Christie is obviously expressing her extreme frustration with the students. She is drawing the metaphorical line in the sand and telling students that she is no longer going to tolerate their behaviors. However, by calling the students more immature than two year olds, she shames them, globalization their behaviors to being permanent characteristics of them, and names them as fundamentally flawed. (This is different than the way Mr. Trent handles uncooperative behaviors in his class where he gives them multiple chances.) While Ms. Christie’s frustration is very understandable, her condemnation of the students as immature doesn’t seem to account for the way these 15-16 year old boys are individuals who are transition from childhood to adulthood, where they have child-like ways of conduct, but are also developing the capacity to care for themselves as adults. (Chris’ story illustrates this dynamic where he talks about his friend who recently passed away with whom he used to play like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Although Chris, a black boy in another one of Ms. Christie’s MCAS Prep classes, appreciates when teachers and administrators grant him freedoms to express his
capacity for self-regulation like an adult, he also is like a child in the way he plays with his friends.) By yelling at the students in front of the entire class, tensions permeate the classroom. This differs from teachers, such as Ms. Browne, who address students outside of class, privately and/or individually so that negative feelings don’t extend to the entire class and dominate the class environment.

There are individual problems and class-level problems, as shown by what happens in this class, Ms. Ricci’s two classes, and several of Ms. Thompson’s and Ms. Christie’s MCAS Prep classes. As problems increased between Ms. Christie and Varisha, Varisha did not want to do “her” work, referring to the work given by Ms. Christie thinking Ms. Christie doesn’t like her. There were several students in Ms. Christie’s class who did not have problems with her or her teaching assistant, Ms. Khalouf. However, Ms. Christie had problems with many students in the class and the problems over wrestling for authority played out over matters of discipline and punishment, contributing to an overarching tense class-wide environment.

**Fueled by negative perceptions of students**

Similar to vicious cycles of emotional connections and instruction, negative perceptions of students influence teachers’ sense of authority and agency and students’ as well. The students are first seen as not having authority or having the capacity to develop authority to self-regulate, so then Ms. Flores is really flexible with them. And then she becomes harsh and disciplines them as if they are incorrigible. Providing some structure (in addition to freedoms) stems from a belief in students’ abilities to self-regulate. Their lack of structure – giving them “a lot of rope” – was because there was a sense that
students ought to be enabled because they seemed incapable of having sufficient authority to govern themselves.

What constantly fueled these vicious cycles were teachers’ beliefs that students ranged from being deeply troubled to utterly incorrigible. Teachers’ experiences of frustration in class, e.g. from students’ disobedience and disruptiveness, reaffirmed their low expectations of students. But their low expectations also added energy to their frustrations. Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer felt like all these issues outside of class often dominated and precluded their ability to make any changes in students’ behaviors. For example, Ms. Flores attributes students’ behavioral problems to their own individual attention issues and problems at home. Ms. Flores says that the kids are “really troubled” and have “severe issues.” She says that for CP classes, there is a high rate of attrition and behavioral problems like bringing weapons to school. Similarly, Ms. Bauer talks about how there is probably one student in class out of the 14 who doesn’t have an “emotional issue”; the others have family issues, documented special needs, or something. Ms. Bauer also says that some students don’t try, are “lazy” and goof around.

Even though Ms. Flores says that they acknowledge these problems and try to work with students’ issues, she and Ms. Bauer have some attitudes of fatalism about their own teaching situation and students’ academic futures. Ms. Flores experiences reduced agency as a teacher because she perceives students’ issues to be nearly totalizing and impossible to change. For instance, when I asked Ms. Flores what led to students’ acting up and not paying attention in class, she attributed it to individual and cultural issues (their “attention issues” and also home issues and parents’ lack of involvement). Ms.
Flores says she doesn’t mean to sound biased, but she believes that some students won’t fit in a more traditional academic setting. Also, she says that family issues and outside of school issues that are race and class related become huge hindrances. For example, she says that she also doesn’t want to seem inappropriate, offensive and racist, but she says that students with single parents have a lot of issues. Besides being problematic and potentially unfounded judgments, these racialized thoughts lead her to have a fatalistic attitude and corresponding actions where students are just deemed to have too many issues to learn. Then, when Ms. Flores does try to teach, she does it in a very paternalistic way.

Then, in terms of school-related factors, Ms. Flores says that major problems in class resulted from students’ experiencing a lack of encouragement in school, traveling together (what Ms. Bauer calls the “herding phenomenon”), and having different norms by levels of tracking (CP or honors) for monitoring each others’ behaviors in class. With these perceptions of students as something like damaged goods, they felt like they were given nearly impossible teaching situations and their resulting desires to give up therefore seemed to make sense. Several other teachers I spoke with, including Ms. Ricci, Mr. Trent and Mr. Asmaoui, expressed similar sentiments about particular students and classes. Of the beginning 25 students, Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer perceived the 16 or 17 students who had documented special as very troubled. Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer talk about how the administration could have re-organized the situation so that it wouldn’t be so stressful. In this remaining group, Ms. Bauer says that there is probably 1 student who
doesn’t have an emotional issue. Ten out of the 14 kids are in programs where administrators, social workers and teachers talk about kids.

**A respite**

Aggravating the vicious cycle, Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer are frustrated with the co-teaching situation. Similar to seven other co-teaching situations (out of the 12 total co-taught or jointly taught classes), co-teaching contributed to the stress of the situation. Both Ms. Bauer and Ms. Flores believe they could have handled the situation differently, and perhaps better, if they weren’t in the situation of co-teaching. Thus, the learning environment changes when the teachers split up the class. Feeling like things are out of control downstairs, Ms. Bauer feels like she needs to discipline harshly to regain control of the situation. However, in her own space, she is able to provide students with the kind of structure and flexibility that helps them grow and become. One day when students are very disruptive in class, Ms. Bauer says that she will take some students upstairs to her office. The teachers developed the idea of splitting up the class from time to time to help students focus. Her shared office upstairs is about 1/3 the size of the classroom downstairs with another teacher’s desk and desks and chairs for students in it. There’s an even smaller room attached to her office that one student likes to go into. The students go upstairs to take a quiz and they are much more settled and self-regulating. Ms. Bauer says that some students love going upstairs with her, but some students feel the small space is cramped.

The dynamics are completely different upstairs. Several students have told her that she yells at them when she is downstairs with Ms. Flores in the main classroom. Ms.
Bauer says that she’s much better in her own space when the students go upstairs. Her decreased levels of stress and frustration and increased sense of control and agency play out in her ability to advance more productive dynamics of discipline. She believes that both “scaffolding” to create boundaries and some “flexibility” to offer leeway are very important for students. In her upstairs classroom space, Ms. Bauer experiences the opportunity to guide students in these ways that promote their own sense of authority and develop their capacity to self-regulate. For example, in the upstairs space, students are given clear instructions by Ms. Bauer as to what they can and can’t do, such as the freedom to sit where they like and the clear task of taking the quiz in a certain amount of time. She says the dynamics here are like what she did when she had her own classroom in her former school, where she experienced a lot more independence to create a relaxing and safe home-like situation in school. According to Ms. Bauer and from what I saw, this kind of system works well for students as they are able to trust their own sense of authority to regulate themselves.

This dynamic is similar to when learning happens in Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class because teachers work with students individually. In Ms. Christie’s class with Varisha and Terrance, some learning, albeit a limited amount sometimes, still occurred within the vicious cycle of discipline partly because Ms. Christie broke the class down into small groups, having teachers work with different groups depending on the nature of their relationship. In those moments, some of the unproductive tensions were disrupted.

**Cultivating Good Faith: A Constructive Cycle of Discipline**
In contrast to the preceding examples of classroom processes, revisiting Mr. Trent’s Algebra 2 class (first introduced in the Chapter 3) allows us to examine how effective dynamics of discipline work. While my fieldwork took place in several classrooms where discipline was a domain of contention and conflict, Mr. Trent’s Algebra 2 class, Mr. Asmaoui’s Pre-calculus class, and a few of Ms. Thompson’s and Ms. Christie’s MCAS Prep classes illustrated processes of discipline that were generally functional, harmonious and productive. Since people usually think about discipline as either lenient and chaotic (as illustrated by Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer’s Algebra 1 class) or strict and orderly (as exemplified by Ms. Browne’s Geometry class), how and why do classroom dynamics of discipline work out in this class where there is a functional amount of order and also plenty of leniency? Since Mr. Trent is so lenient, why doesn’t the class just dissolve into total chaos where all of the students come into class late and demand parties all of the time? Why don’t things turn out in this class like they did in Mr. Trent’s classes the previous semester where the classes were full of distractions, disruptions and disorder (according to him and his former co-teacher Ms. Robinson)? The answer lies in the way students and Mr. Trent negotiated authority in the classroom where students developed a sense of authority to self-regulate and Mr. Trent experienced a sense of authority to enforce guidelines while granting freedoms and flexibility.

**Being simultaneously firm and flexible with rules, nurturing students’ sense of authority**

It is still just the beginning of the semester, but Sanjay, an Indian American boy in the 10th grade, already seems to be running out of steam. He is resting his head on his
desk and is apparently either asleep or falling asleep. Mr. Trent walks by his desk and gently nudges Sanjay to waken him. I note that Mr. Trent does not get mad at him or make a big deal out of the situation and shame him, unlike when Ms. Ricci yells at Sahar, an Iranian American girl in the 9th grade, for facing the wrong blackboard as Ms. Ricci moves from the blackboard at the front of the class to the one at the side of the class. That treatment lasts throughout the semester where Mr. Trent provides and enforces certain guidelines for students’ behaviors (e.g. Sanjay is not allowed to sleep during class) while also being flexible and understanding. This allows students to develop their sense of authority to self-regulate where the clear boundaries support students’ establishing a sense of what to do and what not to do, while the flexibility allows students to develop and trust their internal gauge of what works for them.

**Providing clear boundaries**

In this class of 15 students, there are eight white students (three girls and five boys), four Asian students (one girl and three boys), one black girl, one Ethiopian girl, and one Latino-American boy. A clear sense of boundaries is established when students transgress the boundaries and Mr. Trent quickly shows and enforces the boundary. For instance, one day when Mr. Trent gives them a set of problems to work on, Pete, a white boy in the 10th grade, is drawing something very intently, has his headphones on, and is clearly not doing his work. Mr. Trent walks over to his desk and asks him what he’s doing. Pete immediately and dishonestly transforms the situation so as to reason with and even seek pity from Mr. Trent. Sounding desperate, Pete explains, “Trent, my headphones broke and I’m trying to fix them.” Mr. Trent does not seem the least bit
swayed into pity and simply and firmly tells Pete to get back to his work. Similarly, on another day, Pete continuously and disruptively talks to his neighbor Sanjay while Mr. Trent is giving a lesson. After stopping his lesson several times to tell Pete to stop talking, the disruptions end when Mr. Trent picks up Pete’s books and backpack, places them on a desk at the opposite side of the room, and tells Pete to move there. Mr. Trent then continues on with his lesson. Despite these situations with Pete, animosity did not build between Pete and Mr. Trent.

When Mr. Trent establishes boundaries for students’ behaviors, he does not make a big deal out of the situation and just promptly addresses the issue to get the student back on track with doing work. This was Mr. Trent’s methods of working with students and disciplining them over the semester: he addressed issues, laid out clear parameters (telling them to do work sometimes), gave them the benefit of the doubt by not accusing them of essential character flaws (i.e. that they are “bad kids”), and did not make issues a big deal. Thus, even though students did act out in class in ways that were not always constructive and productive, Mr. Trent just reminded them of the guidelines for conduct and continued to grant them numerous chances. This is like what happens with Sanjay, Pete and Matteo (when Matteo, a white boy in the 11th grade, continuously did not do his work). This provides students with parameters within which they can govern themselves appropriately.

**Being flexible**

In addition to firmly yet forgivingly providing and enforcing clear boundaries, Mr. Trent is also flexible with students’ behaviors to show that he respects their
experience and trusts their own authority to handle themselves. Mr. Trent offers students a good deal of flexibility, allowing students to govern themselves by their own sense of authority. William, a Latino American boy in the 10th grade, discusses how he appreciates how Mr. Trent is “flexible with rules” and talks about how students can come into class at nearly any time and not get in trouble, such as when Jack, a white boy in the 10th grade, comes into class about 15 minutes late. This contrasts how some teachers are fixed with the school’s rules about tardiness. Also, Lily, an Asian-American girl in the 10th grade, tells me that Mr. Trent shows a tremendous understanding for how students cannot be expected to work straight for 82 minutes during class. She says that for learning math, that amount of time is particularly long and painful if not punctuated with breaks and freedom for students to do other things. This is exactly what James talks about as well where he says that part of the problem with Ms. Christie’s MCAS Prep class was that he couldn’t do math for that long. Mr. Trent allows students to draw on the whiteboard until class begins (and even sometimes after class has begun). He also allows some disruptions, does not make a big deal out of them, and returns right back to work.

The most important thing for Mr. Trent is that students learn and complete their work. Thus, if students work better with listening to music, he allows that. If they are finished their work, then they can do homework from other classes or anything else they want to do, such as do Sudoku or play on handheld gaming devices. Through this flexibility, he supports students’ developing a sense of how to conduct themselves to complete their work.
Recognizing, appreciating and enjoying Mr. Trent’s consistent rules and flexibility, students cultivate their sense of authority and self-trust to regulate themselves and exhibit self-discipline to complete their work and learn. Experiencing authority to conduct themselves, students become more engaged in work. Students also generally perceive fairness which supports their sense of authority and ability to self-govern because they don’t have to resist unfair exertions of Mr. Trent’s authority. Students react to experiences of unfairness like students in other classes, where they become disengaged because they feel disempowered and feel like they are stripped of their agency (example with Melanie and her history teacher). This is similar to James’ experiences of fairness in his classes.

Supporting teachers’ sense of authority, building a virtuous cycle of respect and learning

While he accommodates students a lot in the class through being understanding about their work and their desires to play – respecting their authority and granting them authority – they return the respect by listening to him and paying attention and respecting him. Appreciating Mr. Trent’s tactics of discipline and acting according to them, students respect Mr. Trent in return by listening to him, doing their work, and also taking advantage of their freedoms. For instance, one day Richard, an Asian American boy in the 10th grade, is throwing his bottle repeatedly into the trash can. This irritates Mr. Trent a lot. Melanie, herself experiencing a lot of authority in class, then gets upset at Richard and reprimands him for acting “immature” and like her younger brother. She wants
Richard to respect Mr. Trent. This all supports Mr. Trent’s sense of authority as a teacher in the classroom.

As Mr. Trent experiences support and his own sense of authority, he continues to provide constructive approaches to discipline where he has clear and consistent guidelines and also is lenient, thus closing the feedback loop of good faith where both students and Mr. Trent experience their own sense of authority. They build a tacit agreement of mutual respect and consideration where students respectfully do their work when they need to and they can have liberties to do basically whatever else they want. For example, even though Mr. Trent did not grant students’ every request to not do work or to do less work (and that exchange played out nearly every day), he did allow the students to have a party a couple times during class where he and students all brought in food. Because of the way this virtuous cycle of discipline plays out, Mr. Trent does not experience major conflicts with students, or as William puts it, “No one is against Mr. Trent.” As a result of this virtuous cycle, the students learn a great deal because there is time and energy to actualize opportunities to teach and learn in this classroom.

**Positive perceptions of students**

Just like in the virtuous cycles of emotional connections and instruction, positive beliefs about students influence teachers’ sense of authority and agency and the trajectory of classroom processes, either spiraling upward or downward. According to Mr. Trent, there is a lot of “clowning and talking” in CP classes. In honors classes, students supposedly just pay attention and get “right to work.” So for him, the discipline is different where students in CP classes seem more unruly and the other students seem like
really good kids. From my observations over the semester, the students generally did get
their work done. However, they were not always immediately on task and they actually
did act in ways that could be interpreted as “clowning and talking” or just disobedient.
For instance, Tommy (a white boy in the 10th grade who tells me that he is very
competitive) tries to physically fight with Pete several times, Pete likes to whistle in
class, Tommy chews gum and blows huge bubbles, and Pete more often than not does not
pay attention in class and makes up answers when called upon. However, students and
their unlawful behaviors are not criminalized or perceived as “bad” because Mr. Trent
sees them as fundamentally “good kids” whose capacity to self-regulate and authority can
be nurtured. Students perceive themselves as that too. Tommy says that tracking in high
school removed “troublemakers” from his classes.

Mr. Trent treats them accordingly, allowing them certain freedoms and trusting
them. During my interviews with Mr. Trent, he explains to me how his teaching methods
for CP and honors classes are different. For honors classes, he has more of a “loosey
style” where he gives them more freedom in class. He believes they can handle it and
believes that “honors kids” come into class with more motivation that comes from
themselves or “at home.” He gives them this respect and they return the respect through
following his instructions in class when he asks.

Potentially excessive authority and racial advantages and disadvantages

A negative aspect of these dynamics of discipline is how they fostered students’
sense of excessive entitlement. Granted so much leniency, students felt like they could
do anything and successfully tested and pushed boundaries with their behaviors. For
instance, students got away with things in this class that other students in other classes
would not get away with, such as talking on a cell phone in the middle of class. By being
allowed to do nearly anything they want, students can develop an unhealthily over-
inflated sense of power and privilege. This is shown through some students in class, such
as Melanie, Tommy, Jack, and Claude. For example, one day Jack comes in late to class.
Instead of being afraid of being reprimanded, he draws a picture on the board of Mr.
Trent as a “Rasta-man” to show that he pays tribute to Mr. Trent. Melanie often
interrupts class with random and irrelevant comments, like that it’s a leap year and going
to prom.

Moreover, some students got away with more than other students. For instance,
Mr. Trent loses his patience with Richard when Richard is throwing his bottle in the trash
can. However, he allows Melanie to make phone calls to friends during class,
interrupting the entire class. Lily says, “I do think that it is unfair” that Melanie can call
her friends the middle of class – that she’s allowed to do that. Although Lily thinks that
if anyone else did it, there would be a similar response and the person wouldn’t be told to
hang up immediately, she continues by saying, “but I do think that she gets away with
quite a bit.” Melanie’s phone calls are right in the middle of class and Lily says that it’s
quiet so students and Mr. Trent listen in on the conversation. “And she says really weird
things to her friend” and gives updates to her friends like “I’m in Algebra class with Mr.
Trent, everybody say hi!” Thus, while positive dynamics of discipline are fostered with
all students in class, some individual students experience more leniency and greater
authority than other students. Without knowing Mr. Trent’s intentions or beliefs about
race, racial patterns are visible in class where those who take advantage of Mr. Trent’s flexibility and those who get away with those actions are almost always white students in class.

**Conclusion: Negotiating Authority**

While a lot of influences outside the walls of the classroom and the school affects how students behave in class, my fieldwork in various math classes show how certain processes evolve within the classroom walls to shape students’ actions and attitudes. All of the 14 classes I worked in showed slightly different ways dynamics of discipline and punishment evolved, but several patterns emerged across the range of classes showing how processes affect students’ sense of academic agency and their learning. In some classes, such as Mr. Trent’s class, discipline seemed to never be a concern or an infrequent one at most, since students appeared to respectfully follow teachers’ instructions when asked to and teachers were pleased with students’ general conduct. Throughout these classes, students and teachers negotiated authority such that both teachers and students were granted and held some authority and the lack of conflicts over discipline supported students’ learning. In other classes, the opposite occurred. Discipline problems dominated the class’ time and energy, students didn’t seem to follow teachers’ instructions and teachers were frustrated to the point of giving up. Students and teachers were at odds in trying to negotiate authority where teachers and students both felt like they were stripped of their authority and needed to re-claim their agency. The amount and quality of students’ learning diminished as escalating conflict consumed time.
and energy and students and teachers became less engaged in their collective project of teaching and learning.

**All struggle and no learning**

Vicious cycles of discipline tore Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer’s class apart and little learning happened because a significant portion of the class – regarding both time and energy – was consumed by conflicts over discipline. Fueling the vicious cycle was the erosion of teachers’ and students’ sense of agency. Moreover, the teachers’ sense of authority and control over the class was undermined by their frustration with the co-teaching situation and their perceptions of the students – individually and collectively – as impossible to manage. Ms. Flores’ and Ms. Bauer’s negative perceptions of students as unable to self-regulate shaped their strategies of discipline. This was like their comments about how all these students documented special needs and other issues. Enabling or disciplining students harshly seem to be the only possible strategies when students are seen as pitiful or contemptible and fatalism rules. As Ms. Flores initially gave students little consistency and clarity in guidelines for their behaviors, that jeopardized students’ sense of authority to self-regulate because there were low or no expectations for their behaviors. In that way, Ms. Flores expressed her beliefs in students’ limited capacity to act agentically and conveyed that through enabling their behaviors. Additionally, their perceptions and beliefs about students play into how they adjudicated situations with students and how they judge students. As issues with students’ behaviors arose, the teachers felt disrespected, out of control, and less and less agentic. They then responded by cracking down on students. Within those dynamics of
discipline, students experienced the treatment to be unfair, they did not experience as much authority and the capacity to trust their own authority to self-regulate, and they acted defiantly as a result. Students’ behaviors then reduced the teachers’ sense of control.

Vicious cycles of emotional connections and instruction co-evolved with the vicious cycle of discipline. Similar to Ms. Ricci’s Algebra 1 class and her geometry class, as Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer demonstrated their low expectations for students’ capacity to learn and achieve, students responded by not doing their work. Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer then experienced a great deal of frustration and a sense of defeat that lowered their sense of agency in the classroom. The vicious cycle of discipline and instruction seemed to worsen the cycle of emotional connections where the teachers wanted to relate to the student, but did not succeed because of the conflicts and the lack of work.

Ultimately, there was the failure for students to experience authority to self-regulate in the classroom space. Ms. Bauer approximates that 2/3 students don’t do their work because they don’t know how to do it or that they are really distracted. When I sat in class, I noticed students around me doing work at times and asking each other and the teachers questions in order to learn concepts, but they didn’t have the parameters put in place that allowed them to consistently self-regulate and act in disciplined ways to do work. When the class was all together, even when students do not follow Ms. Flores’ and Ms. Bauer’s instructions for doing their work, they are sometimes still trying to learn, figuring out problems and helping each other think through algorithms. However, the
way the overall class deteriorated with the vicious cycle of discipline had real consequences for what happened to students’ academic lives. The class started with 25 students, but at the end of the year, there were only 14 students left in the class. Although one student moved to an honors class, the other students either dropped out of school or were removed from Riverside High and sent to alternative schools.

**A productive balance of authority**

In Mr. Trent’s class, students and Mr. Trent seemed to share corresponding perspectives on discipline, thereby allowing for amicable implicit negotiations of authority through which both students and Mr. Trent retained and enhanced their sense of authority. Mr. Trent experiences authority and control in the class when he perceives the students to be trustworthy and respectful. Because of his beliefs about these students, he gives them flexibility and trusts them to regulate themselves, he provides and enforces fair rules to respect their capacity to act in disciplined ways, and he grants them the benefit of the doubt when they demonstrate problematic behaviors (e.g. being late to class, not doing their work, not following his instructions). Fostering these constructive dynamics of discipline, Mr. Trent provided some guidance for students’ conduct and a large helping of leniency. Within those conditions, students develop and trust their own sense of authority to self-regulate. They don’t experience being controlled, but they experience self-possession. In turn, they respect Mr. Trent’s rules and Mr. Trent experiences his own authority in the classroom. Trust and good faith develop between students and Mr. Trent, fueling the virtuous cycle of discipline. Through these classroom processes, possibilities of teaching and learning are created as Mr. Trent and the students
have the time and energy to teach and learn, respectively, because they are not caught up in expending energy in matters of discipline. In short, the class succeeds because a virtuous cycle of successful discipline develops through which Mr. Trent and the students experience agency, especially their own sense of authority.

Processes of discipline in Mr. Trent’s class seem to work because Mr. Trent does not approach the class with completely rigid methods, which would be the opposite of and seemingly only alternative to Ms. Flores’ unsuccessful approach of “a lot of rope.” For example, Ms. Browne’s class embodies that rigid alternative and demonstrates a lot of order, but does not promote a constructive cycle of discipline like Mr. Trent’s class does because students do not have an opportunity to develop their own sense of authority. Her class may provide orderliness (showing that order can be created in CP classes) and therefore offer time and energy for learning. She may also experience more authority as a teacher, but those processes of discipline still do not promote student’s sense of authority which sustains their self-governance and engagement in learning. Through rigidly maintaining order and being very strict and paternalistic with clear and well-established rules for students’ behaviors, the students are very obedient and do their work, but do not develop a sense of authority to self-regulate and do not become engaged. For instance, they come to the board to do work, they stand up for certain exercises, and they go to see her when they are getting their work checked. When problems come up, she addresses them immediately and effectively and does not make a big fuss about things. However, through simply obeying external authority, they do not become attuned to and follow their own sense of authority to self-regulate. For example,
when Ms. Browne is not in class, then students act up, unlike students in Mr. Trent’s class where they just continue doing things as they usually do. For instance, when there was a substitute, they became uncooperative because they were just used to being obedient with Ms. Browne. But Ms. Browne’s inflexibility is also shaped by her experiences of frustration with students’ behaviors and the experience of lacking support. For example, Ms. Jefferson’s bad experiences with students taking advantage of her affect how she trusts or distrusts students.

Furthermore, although Ms. Browne and Ms. Jefferson held positive beliefs about students’ intellectual abilities and potential (as noted in Chapter 4), they had negative beliefs about students’ needing to be disciplined which shaped their approach to discipline. Contrasting their beliefs, Mr. Trent believes in the Algebra 2 students’ basic goodness. Those conceptions of students propel virtuous cycles of fulfillment in his class. Mr. Trent makes the distinction between honors vs. CP classes meaningful and significant as they affect his perception of students’ level of respect for teachers and capacity to self-regulate. Moreover, those beliefs seem to be infused with notions of race that translate into advantages for most of the students in Mr. Trent’s class.

Contrasting Ms. Browne’s class where processes of discipline exacerbated processes of connections and instruction, virtuous cycles of connections and instruction are also present in Mr. Trent’s class and are different from but related discipline. While positive dynamics in each of the cycles support the positive development of other cycles, emotional connections have a particularly strong relationship to discipline. Caring and understanding fosters trust and respect between teachers and students. Also, engaging
students in lessons and also providing clear structure for their work (aspects of instruction) helps students stay focused on their work and self-regulate (aspects of discipline).

**Understanding problems and possibilities with discipline**

How and why do dynamics of discipline develop in tense versus harmonious ways? Within strained classrooms, why do students not follow teachers’ orders and why do teachers yell at students and sometimes treat them unfairly? There are a number of seemingly obvious answers to these questions, a dominant one being that some students just do not care about school and consequently act in defiant, disrespectful, and oppositional ways. According to this prevailing explanation, the problem lies in individuals and the solution therefore needs to be individualized, namely through punishment. Moreover, students who encounter discipline problems ostensibly come from backgrounds, e.g. familial, racial, class, where valuing education and being respectful in school are not fostered. While these theories may seem true from a particular vantage point, further investigation reveals a much more complicated picture of how and why conflicts over discipline emerge. By directing our attention to what happens in classrooms and understanding why those processes matter, we begin to see how students’ abilities to act in productively disciplined ways result significantly from how teachers establish certain systems of discipline and how virtuous or vicious cycles evolve. Namely, when students experience classroom structures of discipline that empower them, their sense of authority to self-regulate becomes elevated, thereby supporting their capacity to learn. Conversely, students’ experience of authority to self-
govern diminishes when they are subjected to punitive and paternalistic systems of
discipline that disempower them, often resulting in their disobedience. However, even as
teachers’ actions and attitudes set off productive or destructive systems of discipline,
teachers themselves are also (in addition to the students) embedded in virtuous or vicious
cycles of classroom dynamics. Their own experiences of fulfillment and/or frustration,
support and/or vulnerability, agency and/or disempowerment are shaped by and in turn
influence divergent trajectories of upward or downward spiraling classroom processes.
Finally, teachers’ perceptions of students, especially racial and gender stereotypes, and
underlying currents of racial tensions play important roles in these classroom processes,
creating racial patterns in how students are disciplined and punished.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Breaking Vicious Cycles, Cultivating Virtuous Cycles
Transforming students’ and teachers’ sense of possibility through empowering learning situations

As debates and research continue to examine how schooling in the United States can be improved to better all students’ learning and especially the education of those who have been historically and continuously disadvantaged, everyday schooling and classroom processes march on. While the research that focuses on structural matters and individual responsibility add to a larger discussion of what possibly influences students’ academic motivation, engagement and achievement, this current dichotomized approach to researching questions of persistent inequalities does not sufficiently get at the complex processes of how disparate educational outcomes are produced, such as all that happens between the sounding of the bells to signal the start and end of class. The story that I present here does not toss out these prevailing explanations of racial inequalities completely, but reveals some critical processes that complicate structural analyses and the unidimensional causality and blame of popular theories which point to students’ and teachers’ individual responsibility. Exposing and analyzing classroom dynamics begins to reveal how complex environments, which are constituted by individual actors and their actions and structured by educational practices and policies, directly shape outcomes that can take the form of persistent racial disparities. In particular, this research shows how what happens within the classroom walls day after day can significantly shape how
teachers effectively or ineffectively teach and how students successfully or unsuccessfully learn.

Through talking to numerous students and teachers and participating in and observing 14 math classes at Riverside High, I present these findings that effective teaching and learning does not happen simply because of individuals and culture (e.g. what students and teachers bring into the classrooms as “good” or “bad” students and teachers) or structures (e.g. tracking of classes) and because learning situations are overdetermined, but because of the way classroom dynamics evolve relationally and how teachers and students experience agency through those processes. Certainly, there are some teachers who really may not care about teaching, but this research shows that situations in most classrooms are not overdetermined by teachers being categorically “good” or “bad,” but how they are made as teachers in place as well. Through virtuous and vicious cycles of emotional connections, instruction and discipline, students’ sense of academic agency is cultivated or eroded. In particular, their sense of mattering, mastery of and potential with math learning, and authority to self-regulate – which all support their engagement with learning, motivation and capacity to learn – is created or deteriorates throughout these critical classroom processes. Through teachers’ actions, they convey messages to students about their beliefs about students – that students matter, are competent, have academic potential, and have authority. Students’ then receive those messages and incorporate them into their sense of academic agency. Highlighting another important part of these cycles, I show how teachers’ sense of agency is made as well throughout these relational processes and significantly influence the trajectory of
these cycles in upward or downward spirals. Moreover, teachers’ perceptions and stereotypes of students influence these cycles by shaping teachers’ own sense of agency and how students’ subjectivities and sense of academic agency are made. As a result of teachers’ perceptions about students, classroom processes tend to go in vicious cycles for certain students (i.e. black and Latino students), which results in the erosion and even annihilation of their sense of academic agency. Without a strong sense of academic agency or any at all, students do not become engaged in their learning, invested in classes, motivated to learn and achieve.

In terms of MCAS and MCAS Prep classes, the presence of the test emphasizes test performance and achievement for all students. However, for students who do not feel confident about passing the test and/or who are predicted to fail, my fieldwork and interviews show that the MCAS exam affects their educational experience more by instilling in them or exacerbating a fear of failing and by becoming another domain where they experience frustration and less agency. Also, in those students’ general math classes (not MCAS Prep classes), there is greater emphasis on preparing for the test and time and energy consumed to do so, such as when I worked with Ms. Browne’s class. With regards to classroom processes in MCAS prep classes, the same vicious and virtuous cycles of emotional connections, instruction and discipline can occur. Vicious cycles are sometimes exacerbated because there is an added element of being choice-less for students with regards to taking the test and being in the class (and for teachers if they are assigned to teach the class without choosing to do so). With emotional connections, vicious cycles of alienation and disinvestment may occur and become aggravated by
students’ frustrations with the test and the class and teachers’ frustrations with students’ apparent lack of investment. Regarding instruction, preparing for the MCAS means a lot of rote learning which can be disengaging. In vicious cycles, teachers and students become frustrated. In virtuous cycles, teachers and students feel efficacious as students gain mastery over the test material. With discipline, the same things can happen that happen in other classes. However, exacerbating vicious cycles, students and teachers can sometimes clash more in MCAS prep classes because students (and teachers who are just assigned to teach the class) feel disempowered. Teachers’ perceptions and race/gender/class stereotypes of students affect classroom processes in MCAS classes just as they do in other classes as well.

Contributing to the literature and current discussions about educational practices, my illustrations of these three critical classroom processes – emotional connections, instruction and discipline – show how what happens within classroom walls matter, even while influences from outside of the classroom also impact how possibilities of teaching and learning are actualized. In fact, when what happens inside and outside of the classroom are both taken together, it appears that influences can converge to create a large divergence between students in terms of their sense of academic agency. More specifically, students who were interviewed in this research speak about influences outside of class that are both related to school and unrelated to school that shape their overall academic experiences. For example, students’ cumulative experiences with relating to other students and teachers, course tracking, and dealing with discipline issues and school authorities reinforce their experiences within specific classrooms.
Additionally, students’ lives outside of school can impact their overall sense of academic agency as they perceive of possibilities, are influenced by parents and friends. Combined with what happens in classrooms, students can experience a racialized accumulation or disaccumulation of academic agency across time and space, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of racial and class disparities in educational outcomes. However, even while recognizing these possibilities of divergence between students, this present research importantly shows how classrooms continue to count and can redirect students, such as Natasha, in directions that would be seemingly impossible given their lives outside of classrooms.

**Really helping students learn**

To intervene in the perpetuation of racial disparities in education and improve educational processes more generally, schools – especially classes – need to cultivate students’ sense of academic agency since it is not an innate, genetic, racial, or otherwise given quality. Through developing a sense of mattering, mastery and potential, and authority to self-regulate, students can become more engaged and motivated to learn, and strive for and achieve higher standards of learning. Importantly, teachers need to experience their own sense of agency in order to support students’ development of agency. Since part of their sense of agency comes from how they perceive students, teachers’ perceptions and beliefs about students need to be addressed. Although my research shows how certain practices can be helpful for building teachers’ and students’ sense of agency, it seems less important to focus on what practices, tactics, strategies and
approaches are used and much more important to focus on whatever helps cultivate students’ and teachers’ sense of agency to learn and teach. By empowering both students and teachers, possibilities of teaching and learning can be fostered and materialized.

In referring to her own personal struggles while teaching and other teachers’ potential issues as well, Ms. Bauer says to me that teachers need to take care of themselves before they can take care of the students. As a flight attendant was routinely going through the safety instructions of telling passengers to put on their oxygen masks before assisting children, a man sitting next to Ms. Bauer commented that it seems ridiculous. Ms. Bauer then said to him that what’s ridiculous is if you cannot assist anyone else because you yourself are incapacitated. She relayed this story to me to draw the parallel with teaching and to express her strong belief that teachers need to tend themselves in order to be present and able to assist students in their learning and academic growth. My research indicates support for Ms. Bauer’s belief as well while also adding a layer of complexity. When teachers sustain themselves, tend and mend their own sense of agency in the classroom, they can experience the capacity to promote virtuous cycles of classroom dynamics that nurture students’ sense of academic agency. The examples throughout my research of how and when teachers initiated changes to improve processes of connections, instruction and discipline illustrated exactly that.

However, presenting another layer to Ms. Bauer’s analogy, this research also shows how teachers need to be supported as well and that their sense of agency is made in ways that can either seem or truly be out of their control. For example, when Ms. Thompson, Ms. Flores, Ms. Ricci and Ms. Browne experienced that they were not
adequately supported by the administration with regards to what they could improve their teaching situations, they felt as if their hands were tied behind their back in certain ways. The unproductive co-teaching situations also demonstrate how teachers felt unsupported and placed in difficult situations. Contrary to those experiences, some teachers were able to maneuver through systems outside of the classroom which promoted their sense of agency in the classroom. For instance, Mr. Trent was able to work with the administration to change the size of his class which allowed him to experience the teaching situation as more manageable. Thus, through supporting teachers, students are supported as well. Without experiencing their agency in classrooms, teachers become less effective, disinvested, and perhaps even leave. With that in mind, part of the answer to reducing the rate of attrition for teachers may be to cultivate their sense of agency in the classroom.

Importantly, a core element of classroom alchemy – and what cultivates both students’ and teachers’ sense of agency – are teachers’ beliefs about students: students’ goodness, their academic abilities and potential, and their capacity for personal growth. Given the way these beliefs can become heavily infused with problematic notions of race, as well as class and gender, it may be crucial for how we proceed with educational processes to recognize and address how we individually and collectively conceptualize of race and all students’ academic potential. First of all, it seems necessary that teachers, and the rest of us, move beyond the myth of colorblindness to be more honest with talking about issues of racial issues, racism, stereotypes and biases. For instance, perhaps if Ms. Ricci were less concerned about being perceived as a racist and investing her time
and energy into professing her colorblindness, she may be able recognize and change when and how notions of race and racial hierarchies shape her interactions with students. By recognizing how biases and stereotypes play into the way teachers relate to students in critical ways, potentially vicious cycles of racial disadvantages and student disengagement can evolve into virtuous cycles of opportunities and successful learning.

Racial theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1996) articulate this idea.

So today more than ever, opposing racism requires that we notice race, not ignore it, that we afford it the recognition it deserves and the subtlety it embodies. By noticing race we can begin to challenge racism, with its ever-more-absurd reduction of human experience to an essence attributed to all without regard for historical or social context. By noticing race we can challenge the state, the institutions of civil society, and ourselves as individuals to combat the legacy of inequality and injustice inherited from the past. By noticing race we can develop the political insight and mobilization necessary to make the U.S. a more racially just and egalitarian society. (159)

Through recognizing race in these counterhegemonic ways, we can also widely promote the idea to all students, especially those who are continuously fed racist messages of their academic inferiority and lack of potential, have the right and capacity to develop their sense of academic agency – their sense of mattering in schools, having intellectual capacities and potential, and being capable of managing themselves and tending their schoolwork. By doing so, Victoria, a Latina American girl from Ms. Ricci’s Geometry class, may believe that she too embodies the potential to learn and achieve, just like Claude and her other white peers. And James, a black boy from one of Ms. Christie’s MCAS Prep classes, may imagine being able to attend college based on his academic abilities and potential and not simply his football skills, and finally give up his fear of “becoming a statistic.”
Appendix: List of Classes, Teachers and Students

Classes included in this fieldwork:

MCAS Prep class 1 with Ms. Thompson
Spring 2006 semester-long class, co-teacher Mr. Lee
13 students: 11 10th graders, 1 11th grader, 1 12th grader
- 1 Haitian girl
- 1 Ethiopian American girl
- 3 Latino/a American students (1 girl, 2 boys)
- 3 black students (1 girl, 2 boys)
- 5 white students (4 girls, 1 boy)

MCAS Prep class 2 with Ms. Thompson
Spring 2006 semester-long class, co-teacher Mr. Lee
12 students: 1 9th grader, 9 10th graders, 2 11th graders
- 2 Haitian students (1 girl, 1 boy)
- 3 Latino/a American students (2 girls, 1 boy)
- 4 black students (1 girl, 3 boys)
- 3 white students (1 girl, 2 boys)

MCAS Prep class 3 with Ms. Thompson
Spring 2006 semester-long class, co-teacher Mr. Lee
5 students: 5 10th graders
- 1 Haitian girl
- 2 Latina girls
- 1 black boy
- 1 white boy

MCAS Prep class 4 with Ms. Thompson
Spring 2006 semester-long class, co-teacher Mr. Lee
11 students: 11 10th graders
- 1 Haitian American boy
- 1 Latina American girl
- 3 black students (1 girl, 2 boys)
- 4 white students (1 girl, 3 boys)
- 2 Asian American students (1 girl, 1 boy)

MCAS Prep class 1 with Ms. Christie
Spring 2007 semester-long class, teaching assistant Ms. Khalouf
12 students: 2 9th graders, 10 10th graders
- 1 Caribbean American girl
• 6 black boys
• 4 white students (3 girls, 1 boy)
• 1 Asian American boy

MCAS Prep class 2 with Ms. Christie
Spring 2007 semester-long class, teaching assistant Ms. Khalouf
11 students: 11 10th graders
• 1 black girl
• 1 Middle Eastern girl
• 1 Latino American boy
• 4 black boys
• 4 white boys

MCAS Prep class 3 with Ms. Christie
Spring 2007 semester-long class, teaching assistant Ms. Khalouf
12 students: 12 10th graders
• 1 Jamaican American boy
• 2 Latino American boys
• 6 black girls
• 1 biracial (half black, half white) boy
• 2 white students (1 girl, 1 boy)

MCAS Prep class 4 with Ms. Christie
Spring 2007 semester-long class, teaching assistant Ms. Khalouf
7 students: 7 10th graders
• 5 black students (4 girls, 1 boy)
• 2 white students (1 girl, 1 boy)

CP Algebra 1 with Ms. Ricci
2007-2008 year-long class, co-teacher Ms. Bauer
18 students: 15 9th graders, 2 10th graders, 1 11th grader
• 10 black students (5 girls, 5 boys)
• 2 Latina American girls
• 1 Haitian girl
• 2 Middle Eastern girls
• 1 Indian American girl
• 2 white boys

CP Algebra 1 with Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer
2007-2008 year-long class, co-taught
14 students: 14 9th graders
• 7 black students (4 girls, 3 boys)
- 1 Caribbean-American girl
- 1 half-black and half-Latina American girl
- 1 Latino American boy
- 4 white students (3 boys, 1 girl)

**CP Geometry with Ms. Ricci**
2007-2008 year-long class, co-teacher Ms. Bauer
17 students: 15 10th graders, 2 11th graders
- 1 Ethiopian American girl
- 1 Haitian girl
- 1 Middle Eastern boy
- 5 Latino/a American students (2 girls, 3 boys)
- 4 black students (3 girls, 1 boy)
- 5 white students (2 girls, 3 boys)

**CP Geometry with Ms. Browne**
2007-2008 year-long class, co-teacher Ms. Jefferson
12 students: mostly 10th graders (not confirmed)
- 4 black students (1 girls, 3 boys)
- 4 Latino/a American students (2 girls, 2 boys)
- 3 white students (2 girls, 1 boy)
- 1 South Asian American girl

**Honors Algebra 2 with Mr. Trent**
Spring 2008 semester-long class
15 students: 14 10th graders, 1 11th grader
- 1 black girl
- 1 Ethiopian girl
- 1 Latino American boy
- 4 Asian American students (1 girl, 3 boys)
- 8 white students (3 girls, 5 boys)

**Honors Pre Calculus with Mr. Asmaoui**
Spring 2008 semester-long class
13 students: 5 10th graders, 6 11th graders, 2 12th graders
- 1 Latina American girl
- 1 Ethiopian American girl
- 1 Asian American girl
- 1 Middle Eastern boy
- 9 white students (5 girls, 4 boys)
**Teachers of these classes:**  
*(in alphabetical order)*

Mr. Asmaoui – a young Moroccan man  
Class: Pre Calculus, 2008

Ms. Bauer – a young white woman  
Classes: Algebra 1 with Ms. Ricci, Algebra 1 with Ms. Flores, Geometry with Ms. Ricci, 2008

Ms. Browne – a middle-aged black woman  
Class: Geometry with Ms. Jefferson, 2008

Ms. Christie – a young white woman  
Classes: MCAS Prep with Ms. Khalouf, 2007

Ms. Flores – a young white woman  
Class: Algebra 1 with Ms. Bauer, 2008

Ms. Jefferson – a young white woman  
Class: Geometry with Ms. Browne, 2008

Ms. Khalouf – a middle-aged Algerian woman  
Classes: MCAS Prep with Ms. Christie, 2007

Mr. Lee – a middle-aged Chinese man  
Classes: MCAS Prep with Ms. Thompson, 2006

Ms. Ricci – a middle-aged white woman  
Classes: Algebra 1 with Ms. Bauer, Geometry with Ms. Bauer, 2008

Ms. Thompson – a middle-aged white woman  
Classes: MCAS Prep with Mr. Lee, 2006

Mr. Trent – a middle-aged white man  
Class: Algebra 2, 2008

**Students mentioned in the text:**  
*(in alphabetical order)*

Adina – an Ethiopian American girl in the 10th grade (from Ms. Ricci’s 2007-2008 Geometry class)
Ahmad – a black boy in the 10th grade (from Ms. Ricci’s 2007-2008 Geometry class)

Alan – a black boy in the 9th grade (from Ms. Ricci’s 2007-2008 Algebra 1 class)

Alex – a Latino American boy in the 10th grade (from Ms. Ricci’s 2007-2008 Geometry class)

Anthony – a black boy in the 10th grade (from Ms. Christie’s 2007 MCAS Prep 1 class)

Antone – a black boy in the 9th grade (from Ms. Ricci’s 2007-2008 Algebra 1 class)

Ariel – a Latino American boy in the 10th grade (from Ms. Ricci’s 2007-2008 Geometry class)

Brian – a Latino American boy in the 10th grade (from Ms. Browne’s 2007-2008 Geometry class)

Carlos – a Latino American boy in the 10th grade (from Ms. Christie’s 2007 MCAS Prep 3 class)

Claude – a white boy in the 10th grade (from Mr. Trent’s 2008 Algebra 2 class)

Damon – a white boy in the 10th grade (from Mr. Asmaoui’s 2008 Pre Calculus class)

Dan – a white boy in the 10th grade (from Mr. Asmaoui’s 2008 Pre Calculus class)

Dontell – a black boy in the 10th grade (from Ms. Browne’s 2007-2008 Geometry class)

George – a black boy in the 10th grade (from Ms. Browne’s 2007-2008 Geometry class)

Jack – a white boy in the 10th grade (from Mr. Trent’s 2008 Algebra 2 class)

James – a black boy in the 10th grade (from Ms. Christie’s 2007 MCAS Prep 1 class)

Jermaine – a black boy in the 10th grade (from Ms. Ricci’s 2007-2008 Algebra 1 class)

Jevon – a Jamaican American boy in the 10th grade (from Ms. Christie’s 2007 MCAS Prep 3 class)

Juan – a Latino American boy in the 10th grade (from Ms. Browne’s 2007-2008 Geometry class)
Juliana – a Latina American girl in the 10th grade (from Ms. Browne’s 2007-2008 Geometry class)

Lily – a Chinese American girl in the 10th grade (from Mr. Trent’s 2008 Algebra 2 class)

Matteo – a white boy in the 11th grade (from Mr. Trent’s 2008 Algebra 2 class)

Melanie – a white girl in the 10th grade (from Mr. Trent’s 2008 Algebra 2 class)

Natasha – a white girl in the 10th grade (from Ms. Thompson’s 2006 MCAS Prep class)

Nicole – a black girl in the 10th grade (from Ms. Christie’s 2007 MCAS Prep 3 class)

Paul – a Latino American boy in the 9th grade (from one of Ms. Flores’ other 2008 math classes)

Pete – a white boy in the 10th grade (from Mr. Trent’s 2008 Algebra 2 class)

Rachel – a black girl in the 10th grade (from Ms. Ricci’s 2007-2008 Geometry class)

Rafiq – a white boy in the 9th grade (from Ms. Ricci’s 2007-2008 Algebra 1 class)

Ray – a white boy in the 9th grade (from Ms. Flores and Ms. Bauer’s 2007-2008 Algebra 1 class)

Regine – a Haitian-American girl in the 11th grade (from Ms. Ricci’s 2007-2008 Geometry class)

Rehana – an Indian American girl in the 9th grade (from Ms. Ricci’s 2007-2008 Algebra 1 class)

Renee – a black girl in the 10th grade (from Ms. Ricci’s 2007-2008 Geometry class)

Richard – an Asian American boy in the 10th grade (from Mr. Trent’s 2008 Algebra 2 class)

Sahar – an Iranian American girl in the 9th grade (from Ms. Ricci’s 2007-2008 Algebra 1 class)

Sanjay – an Indian American boy in the 10th grade (from Mr. Trent’s 2008 Algebra 2 class)

Selamawit – an Ethiopian American girl in the 10th grade (from one of Ms. Ricci’s former math classes)
Shakeila – a black girl in the 11th grade (from Ms. Ricci’s 2007-2008 Algebra 1 class)

Steven – a black boy in the 9th grade (from Ms. Ricci’s 2007-2008 Algebra 1 class)

Terrance – a black boy in the 10th grade (from Ms. Christie’s 2007 MCAS Prep 1 class)

Theresa – a Latina American girl in the 10th grade (from Ms. Ricci’s 2007-2008 Geometry class)

Tommy – a white boy in the 10th grade (from Mr. Trent’s 2008 Algebra 2 class)

Tracy – an Ethiopian American girl in the 10th grade (from Mr. Asmaoui’s 2008 Pre Calculus class)

Trevor – a black boy in the 10th grade (from Ms. Christie’s 2007 MCAS Prep 1 class)

Varisha – a Caribbean American girl in the 10th grade (from Ms. Christie’s 2007 MCAS Prep 1 class)

Victoria – a Latina American girl in the 10th grade (from Ms. Ricci’s 2007-2008 Geometry class)

William – a Latino American boy in the 10th grade (from Mr. Trent’s 2008 Algebra 2 class)

Total number of students and teachers included in this fieldwork:
(not including additional teachers and students participating in interviews)

172 students

- 59 black students (28 girls, 31 boys)
- 56 white students (24 girls, 32 boys)
- 26 Latino/a American students (13 girls, 13 boys)
- 10 Asian American (including South Asian, Southeast Asian, and East Asian) students (5 girls, 5 boys)
- 7 Haitian students (5 girls, 2 boys)
- 5 Middle Eastern American students (3 girls, 2 boys)
- 4 Ethiopian girls
- 3 Caribbean American students (2 girls, 1 boy)
- 2 biracial students (1 girl, 1 boy)
11 teachers

- 1 Moroccan man
- 1 Algerian woman
- 1 black woman
- 1 Chinese man
- 7 white teachers (6 women, 1 man)
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