

Challenges faced by visible minority & Aboriginal teachers in Alberta schools

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on Race Relations (NAARR)



Interviewees

- 12 total, 11 visible minority, 1 Métis
- 10 currently employed, 6 districts from Calgary to Greater Edmonton
- 2 not currently teaching in schools (1 maternity leave & 1 college instructor)
- 9 phone interviews, 3 emails
- All consented to have stories used
- Found interviewees through a variety of contexts



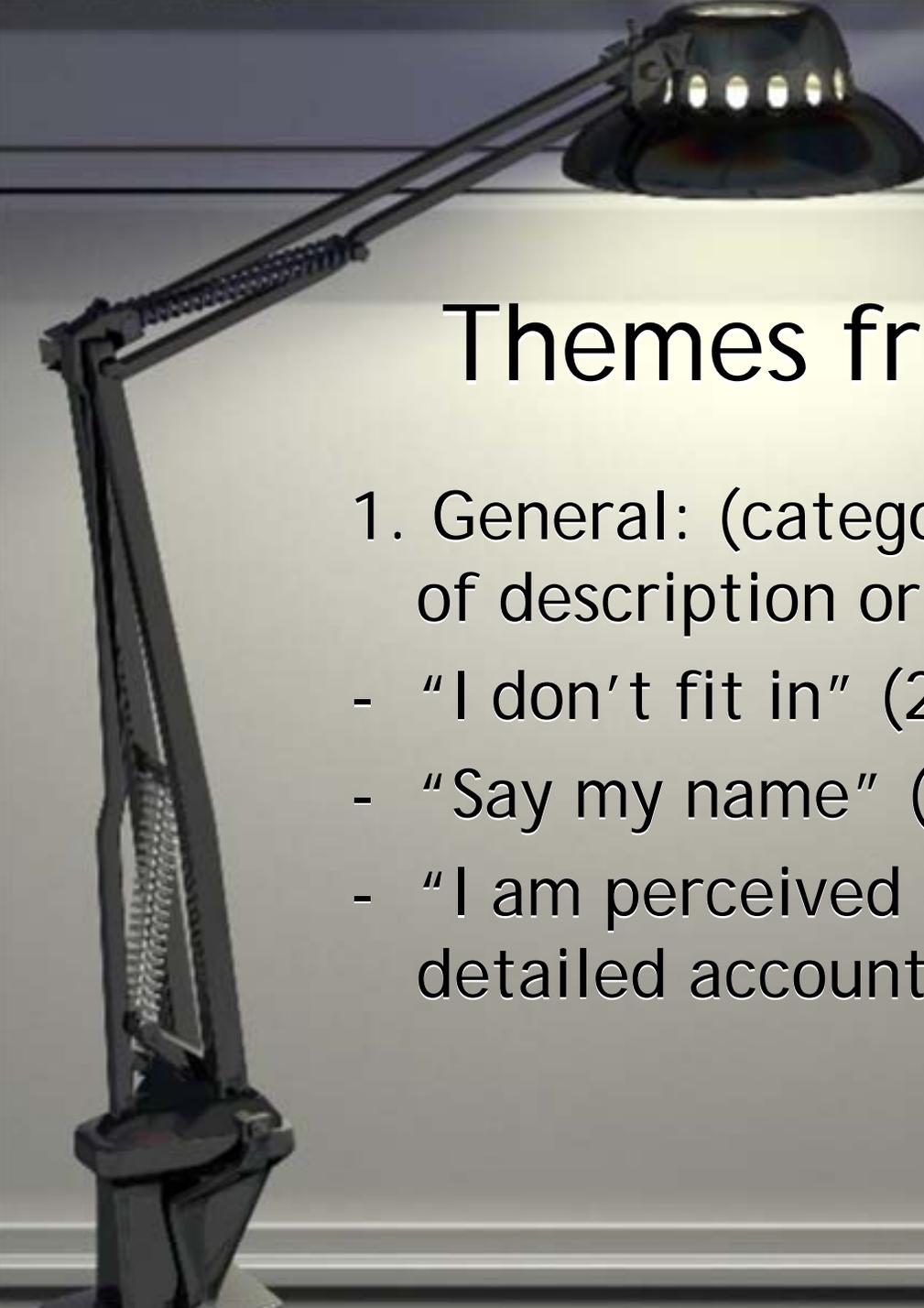
Interviewee portraits

Male	Female	Immi- grant	Born in Canada	+10 yrs teacher	5-10 yrs teacher	-5 yrs teacher	Sub- stitute	Not now in school system
4	8	6	6	5	2	2	1	2



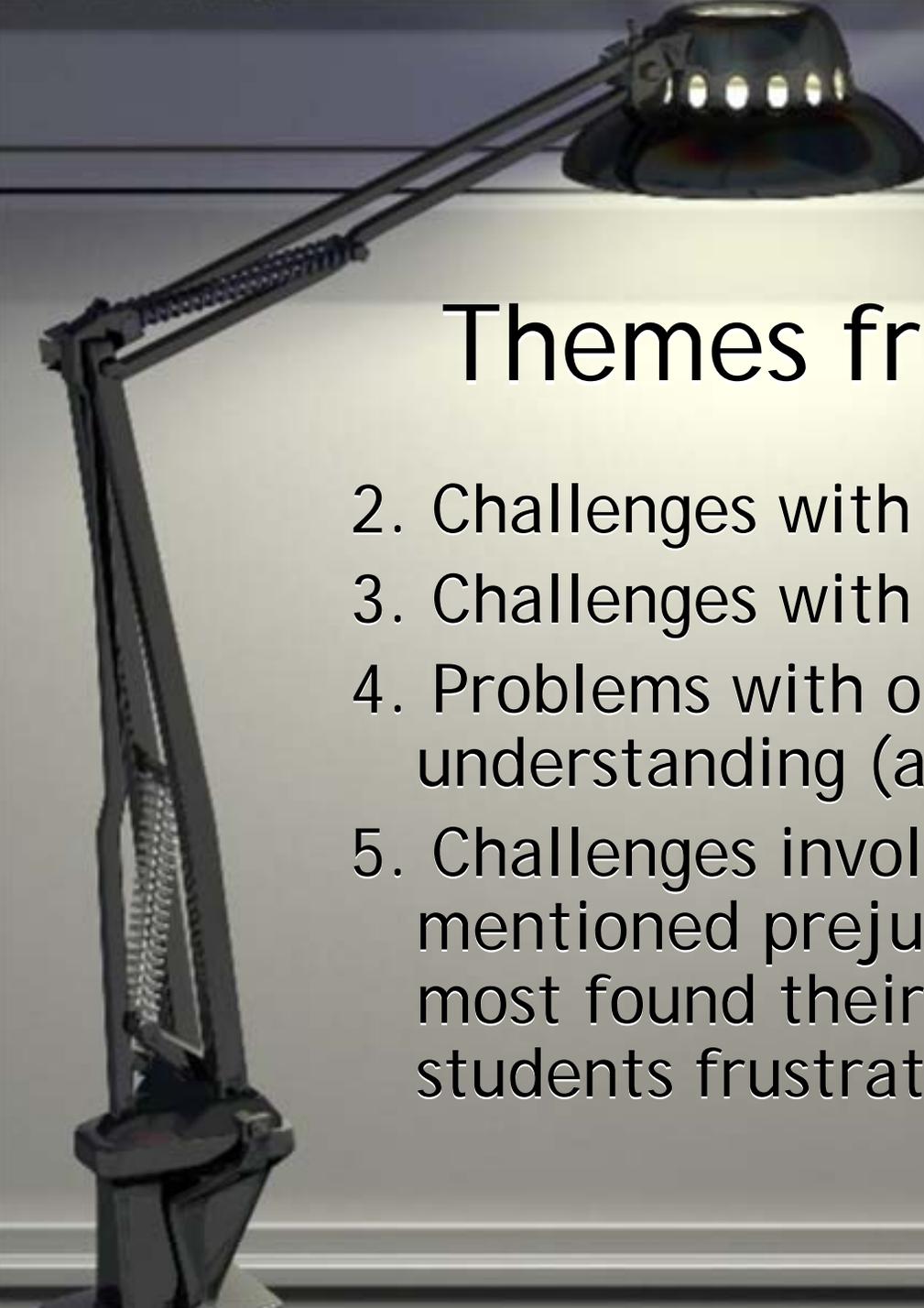
Interviewee demographics

Middle Eastern	1
South East Asian	2
African	3
Black Canadian	1
Caribbean	1
Mainland Chinese	2
Métis	1
Mixed race	1



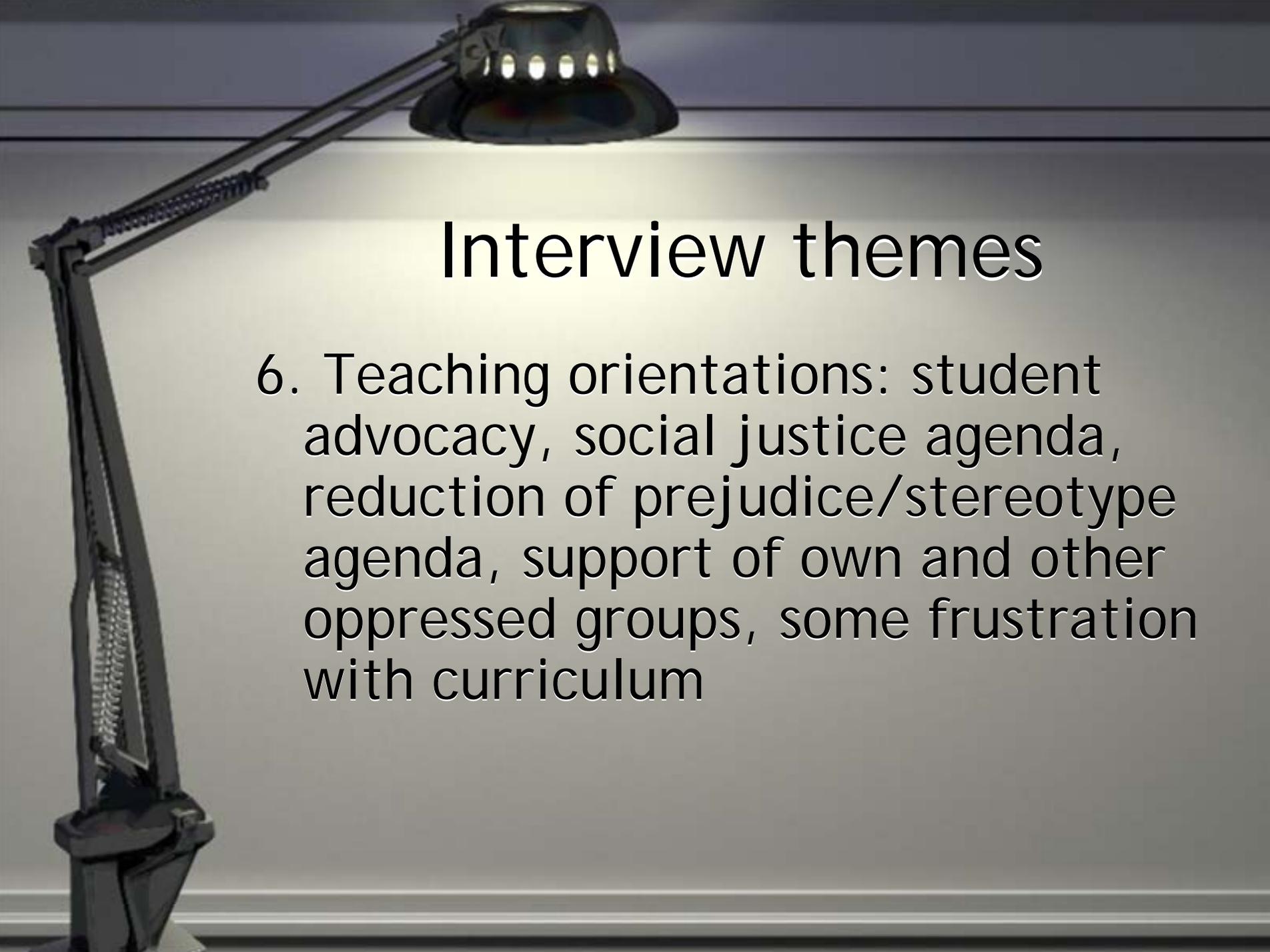
Themes from interviews

1. General: (categorized by theme, length of description or frequency)
 - "I don't fit in" (20 incidents)
 - "Say my name" (6 detailed accounts)
 - "I am perceived of as incompetent" (8 detailed accounts)



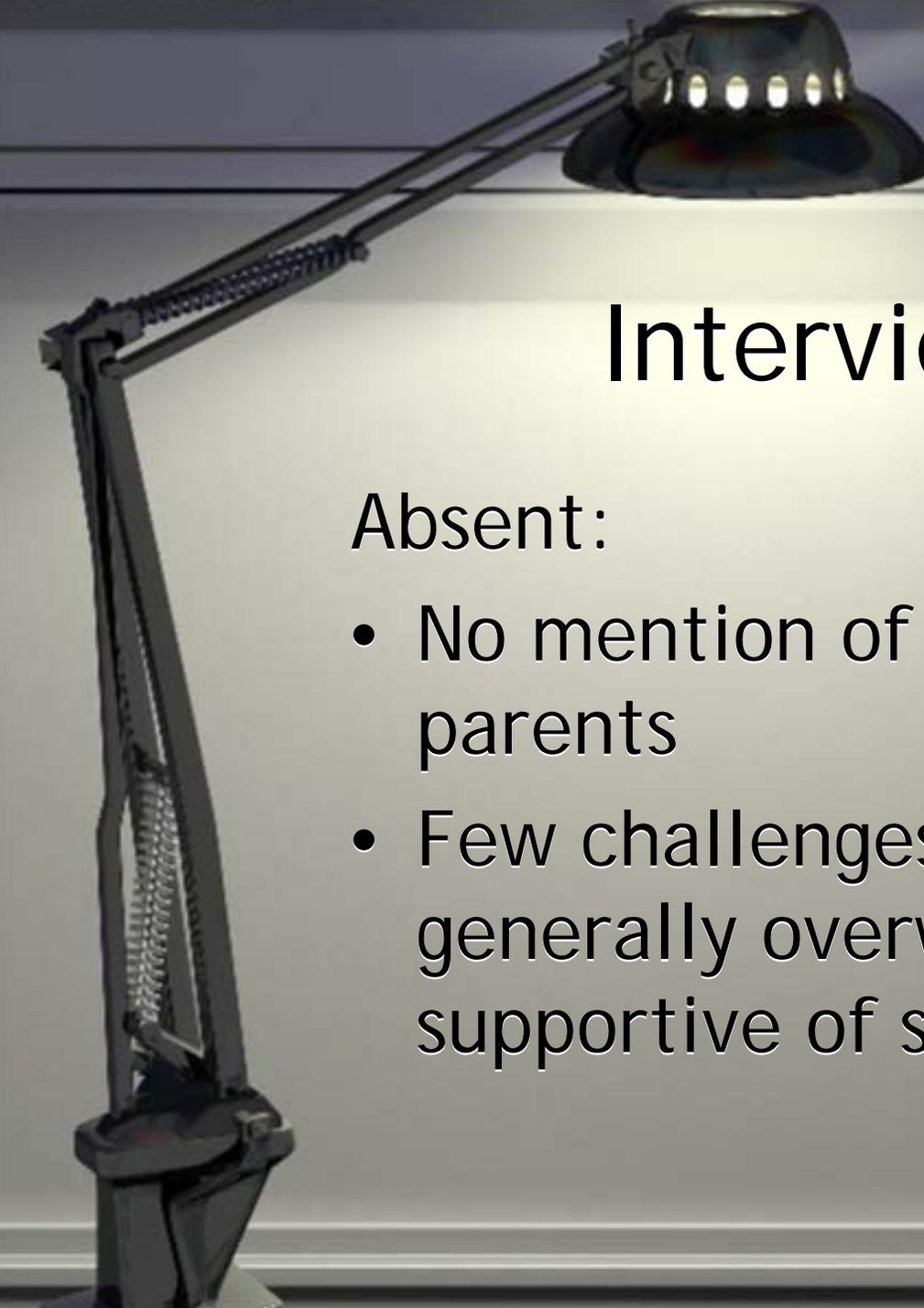
Themes from interviews

2. Challenges with colleagues (41)
3. Challenges with administrators (29)
4. Problems with other's lack of cultural understanding (all 12 mentioned this)
5. Challenges involving students (2 mentioned prejudice from students, most found their efforts to support students frustrated by colleagues)



Interview themes

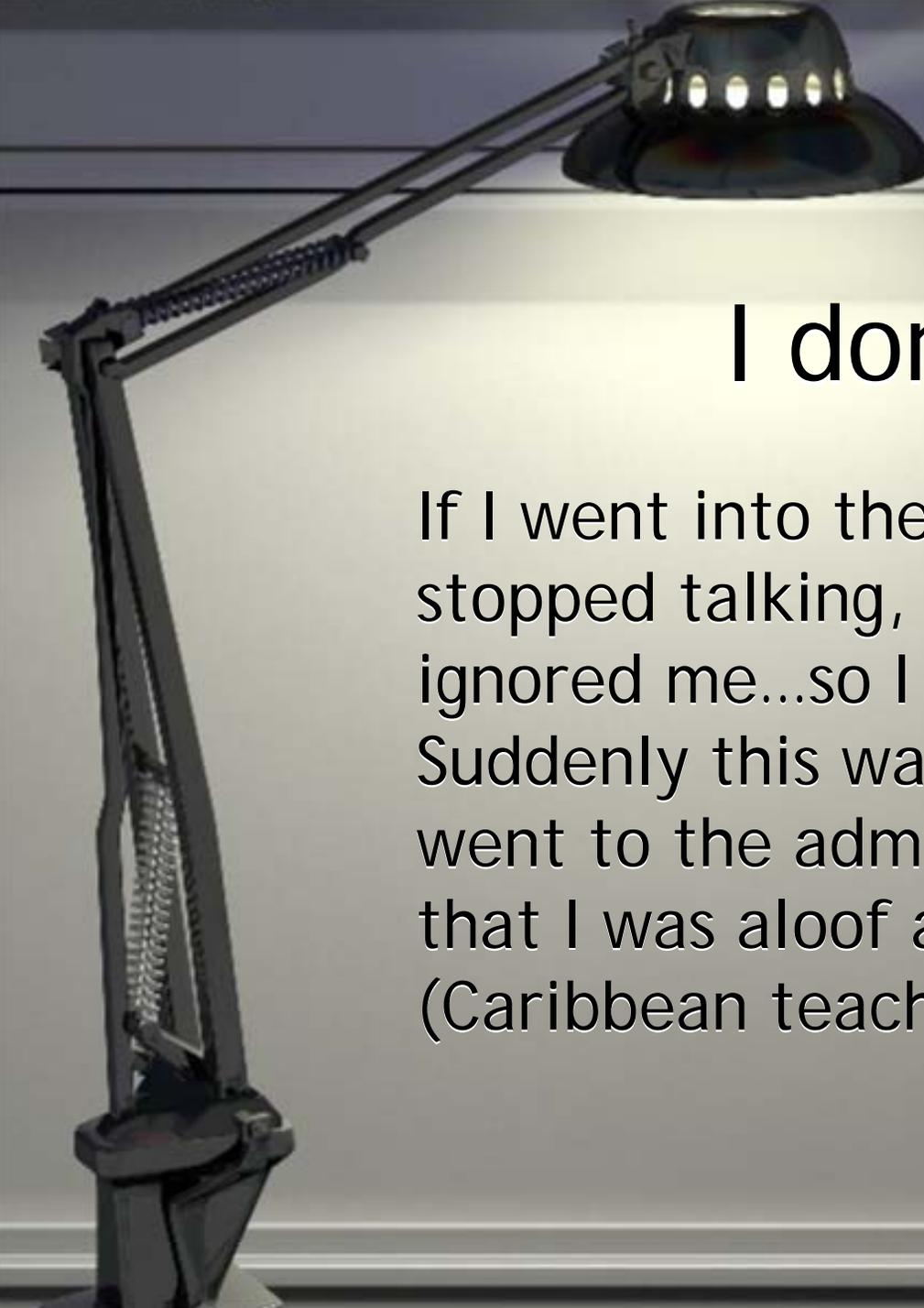
6. Teaching orientations: student advocacy, social justice agenda, reduction of prejudice/stereotype agenda, support of own and other oppressed groups, some frustration with curriculum



Interview themes

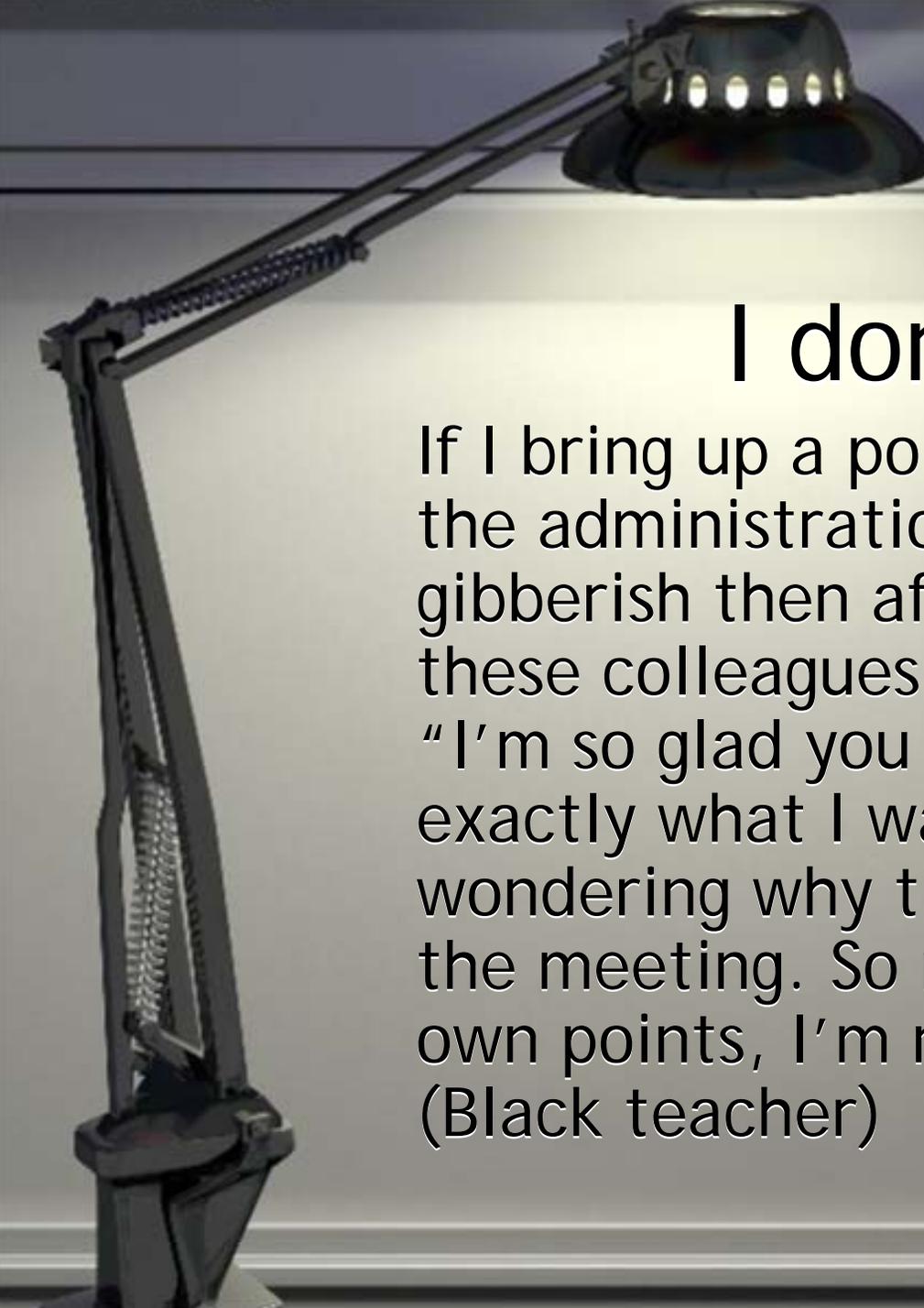
Absent:

- No mention of challenges with parents
- Few challenges with students, generally overwhelmingly supportive of students



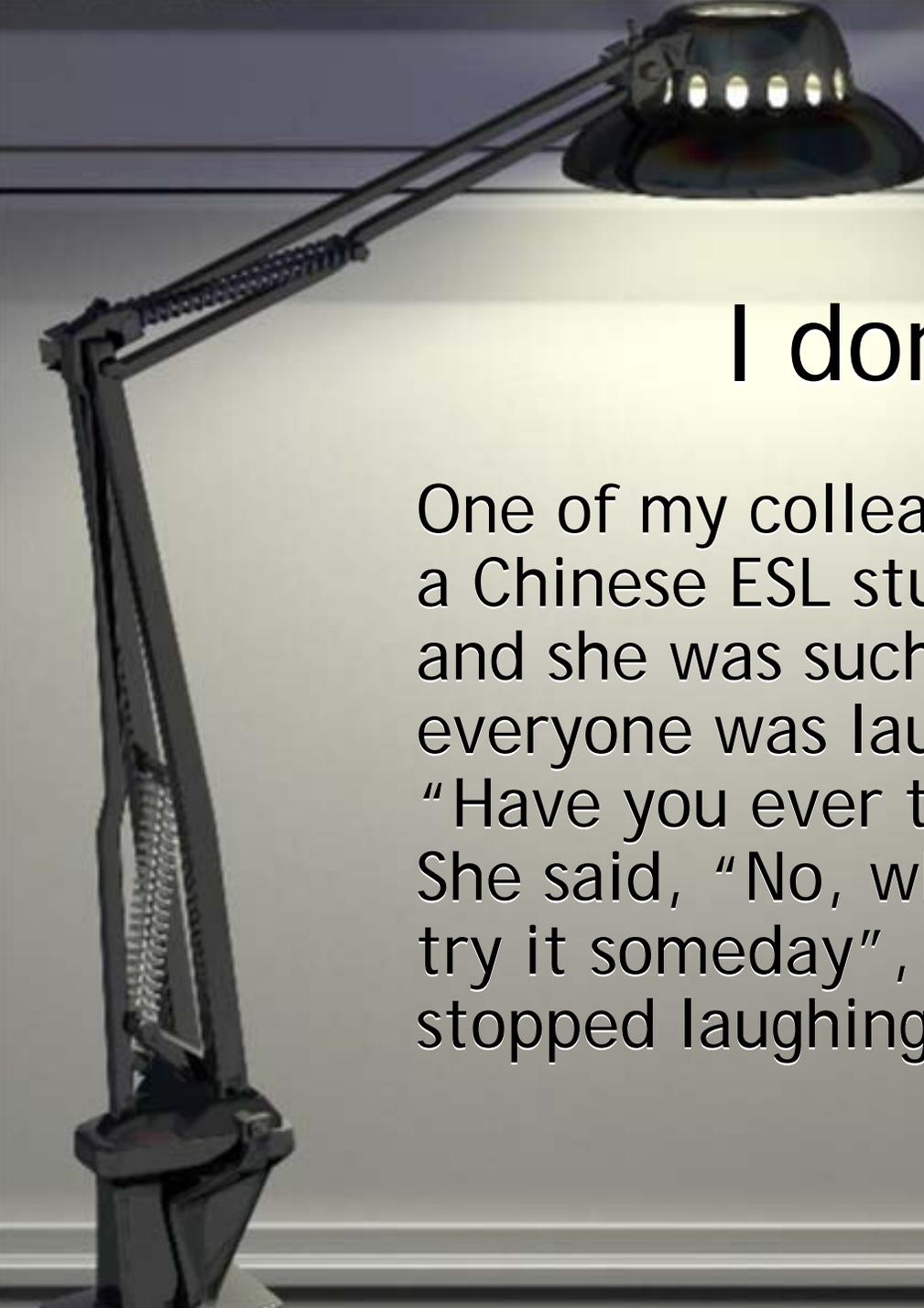
I don't fit in

If I went into the staff room everyone stopped talking, if I said hello they ignored me...so I decided to stop trying. Suddenly this was a problem; people went to the administration to complain that I was aloof and unfriendly.
(Caribbean teacher)



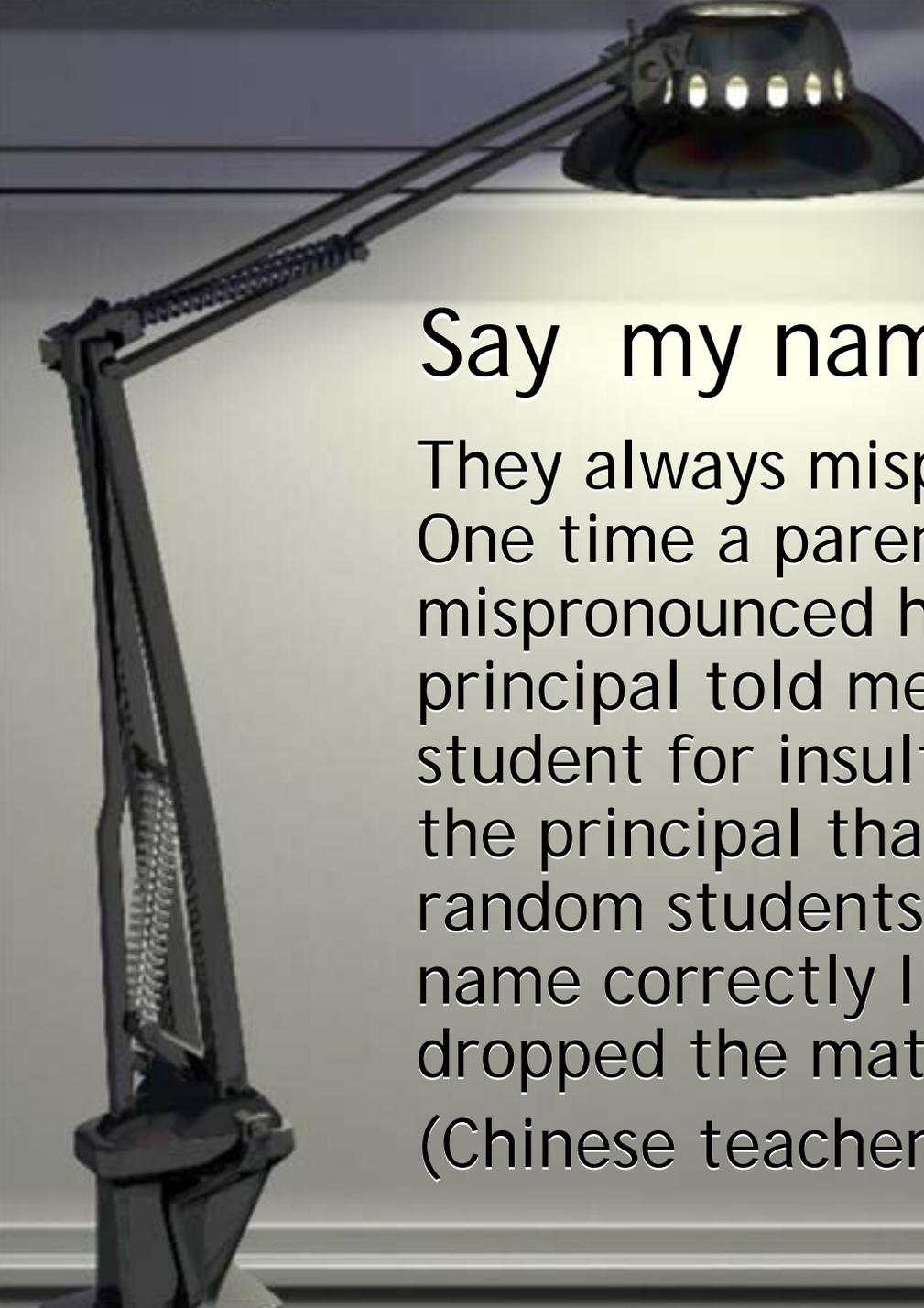
I don't fit in

If I bring up a point at a staff meeting, the administration treats it like it was gibberish then after the meeting all these colleagues come up to me and say "I'm so glad you brought that up. That's exactly what I was thinking" and I'm wondering why they never back me up in the meeting. So now I say, "Make your own points, I'm not speaking for you."
(Black teacher)



I don't fit in

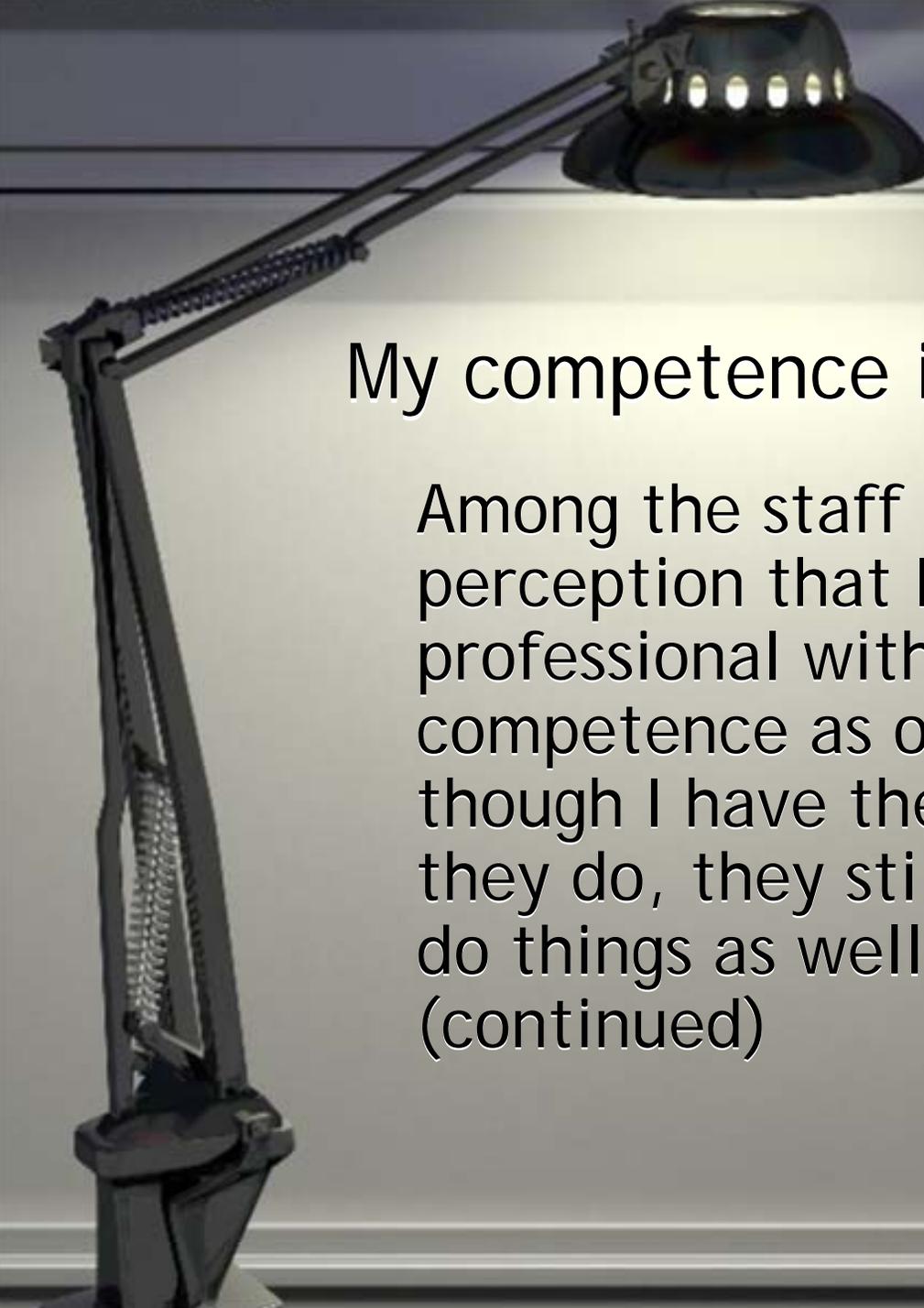
One of my colleagues was making fun of a Chinese ESL student's pronunciation and she was such a good mimic, everyone was laughing. I said to her, "Have you ever tried learning Chinese". She said, "No, why?". "I think you should try it someday", I replied. They all stopped laughing. (Chinese teacher)



Say my name, say my name

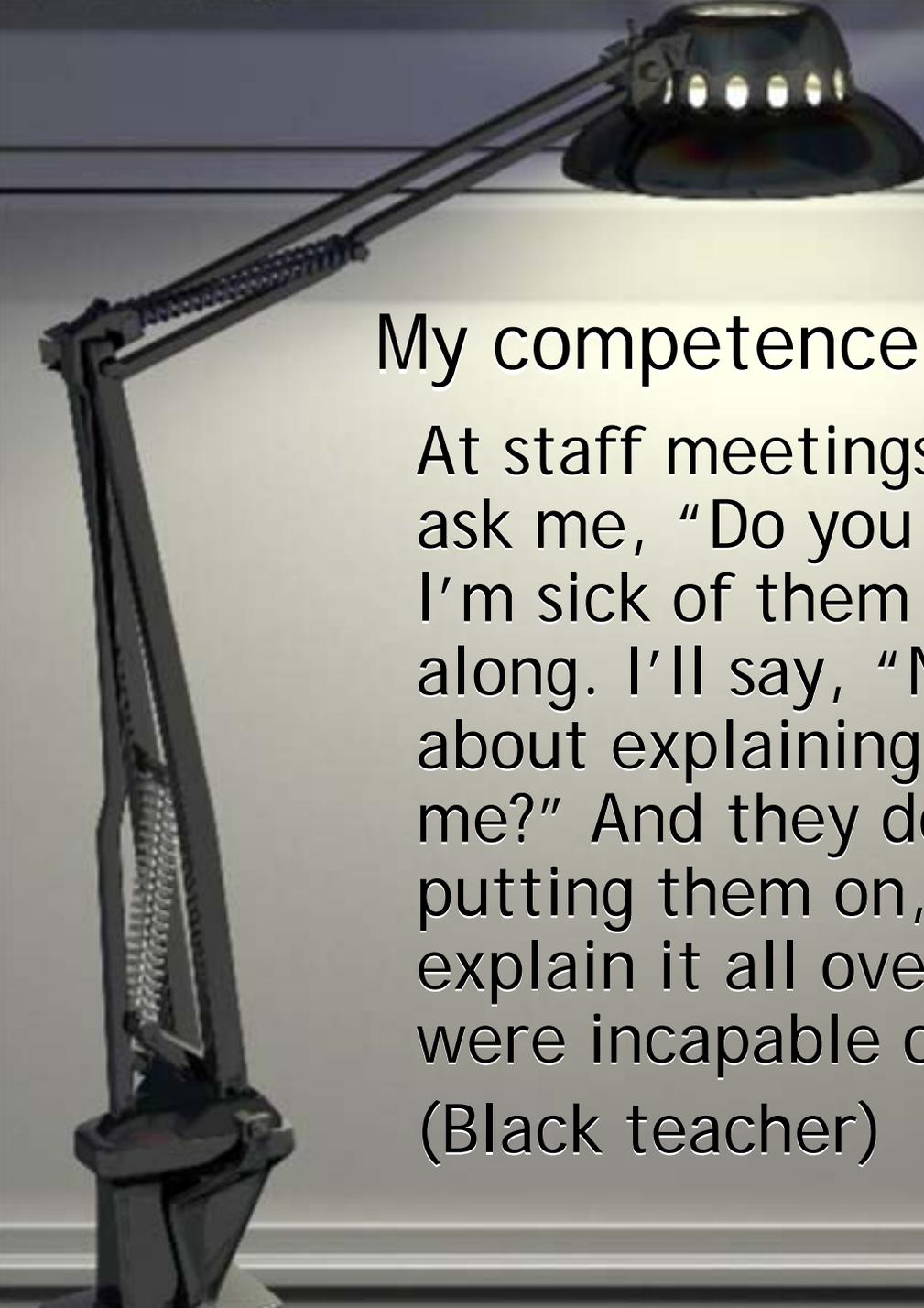
They always mispronounce my name. One time a parent complained that I mispronounced her son's name so the principal told me to apologize to the student for insulting him. I suggested to the principal that he should choose 20 random students and if 2 could say my name correctly I would apologize. He dropped the matter.

(Chinese teacher)



My competence is always questioned

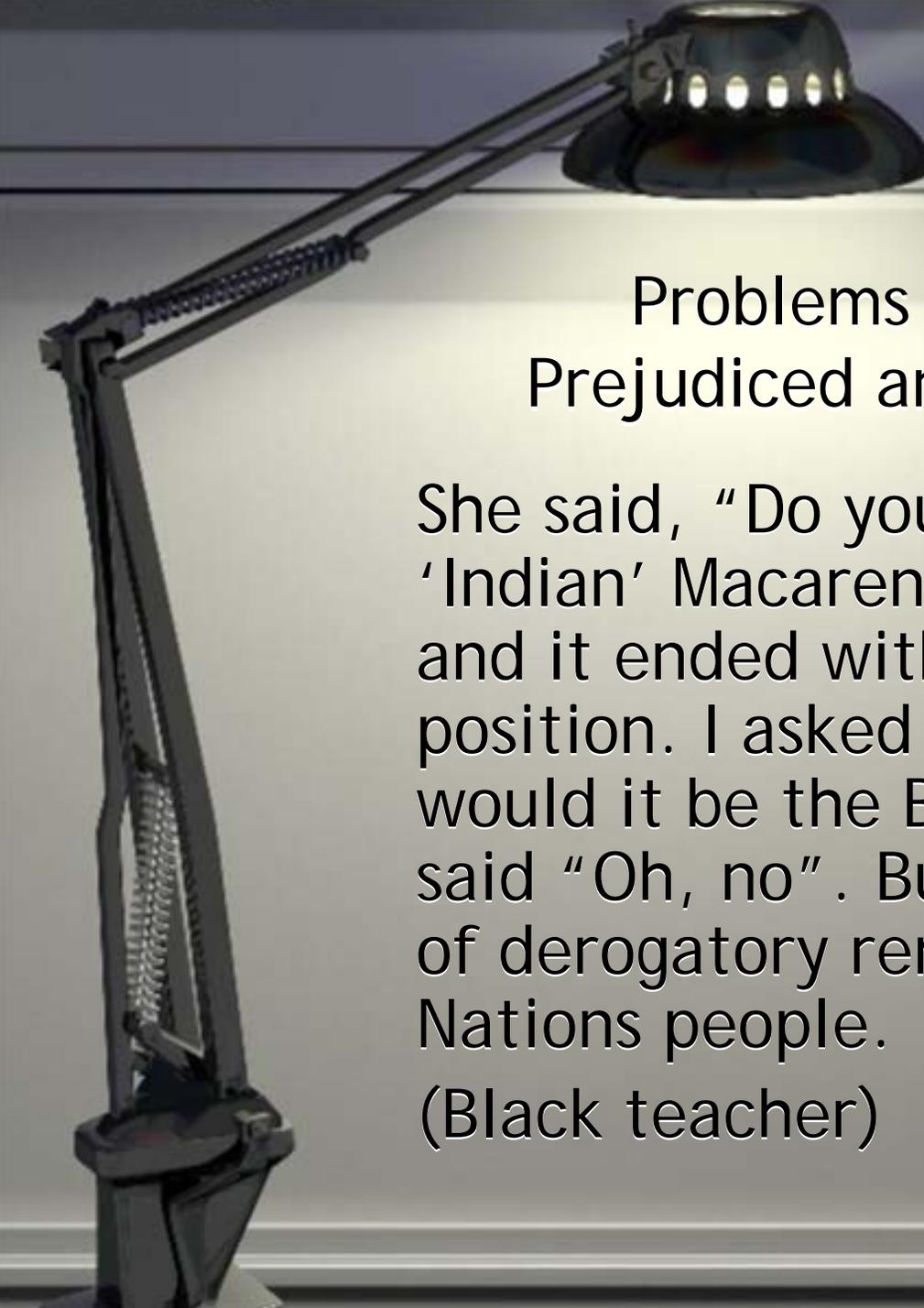
Among the staff members there is this perception that I am not viewed as a professional with the same level of competence as other colleagues. Even though I have the same qualifications as they do, they still think I don't and can't do things as well as they can.
(continued)



My competence is always questioned

At staff meetings someone will invariably ask me, "Do you understand this?" and I'm sick of them asking so I just play along. I'll say, "No I really don't. How about explaining it in 'simple' terms for me?" And they don't get that I'm just putting them on, that it's a joke, so they explain it all over again to me as if I were incapable of understanding.

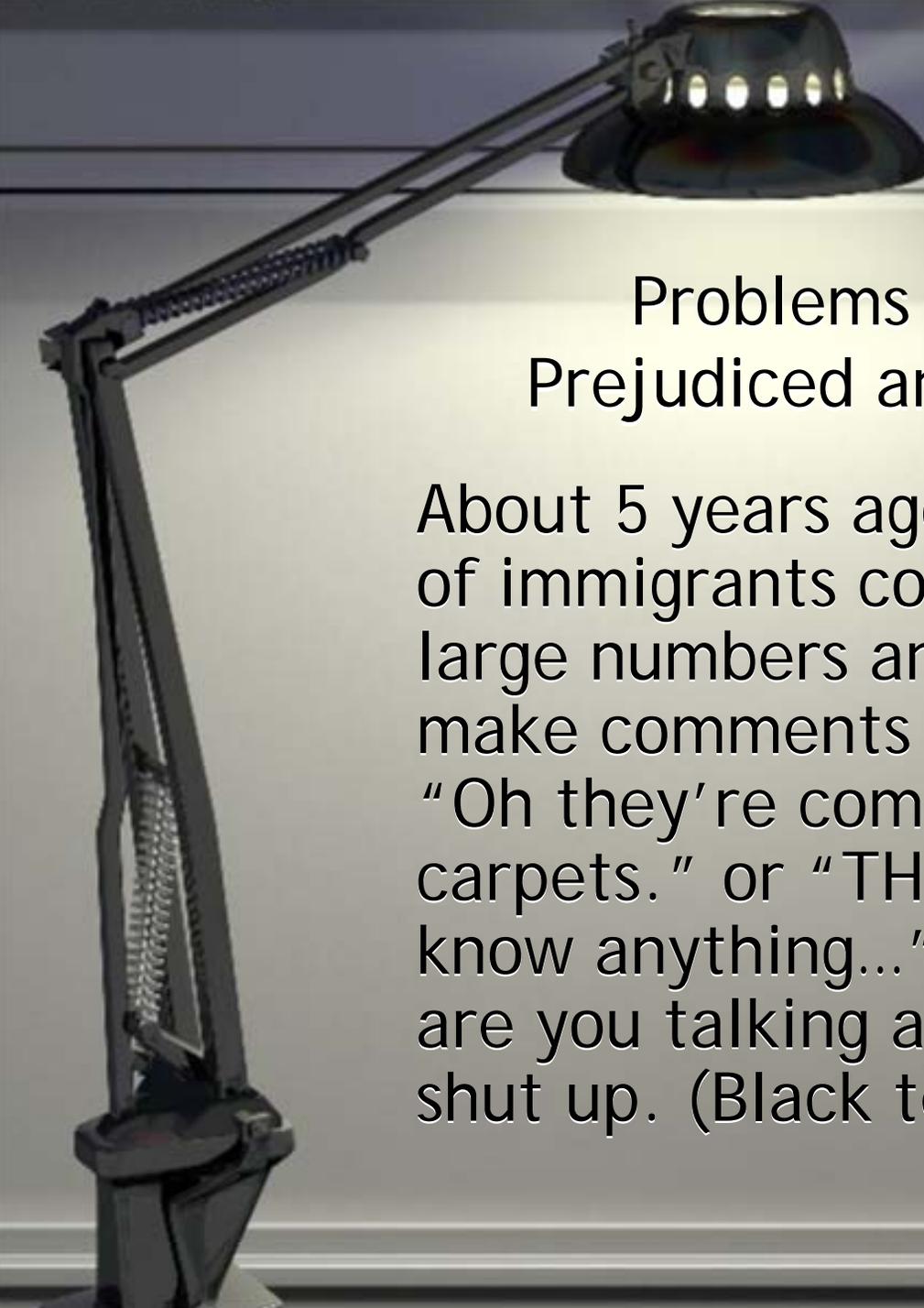
(Black teacher)



Problems with colleagues
Prejudiced and racist comments

She said, "Do you know how to do the 'Indian' Macarena?" She demonstrated and it ended with a police search position. I asked her, "If I weren't here, would it be the Black Macarena?" She said "Oh, no". But I heard her make lots of derogatory remarks against First Nations people.

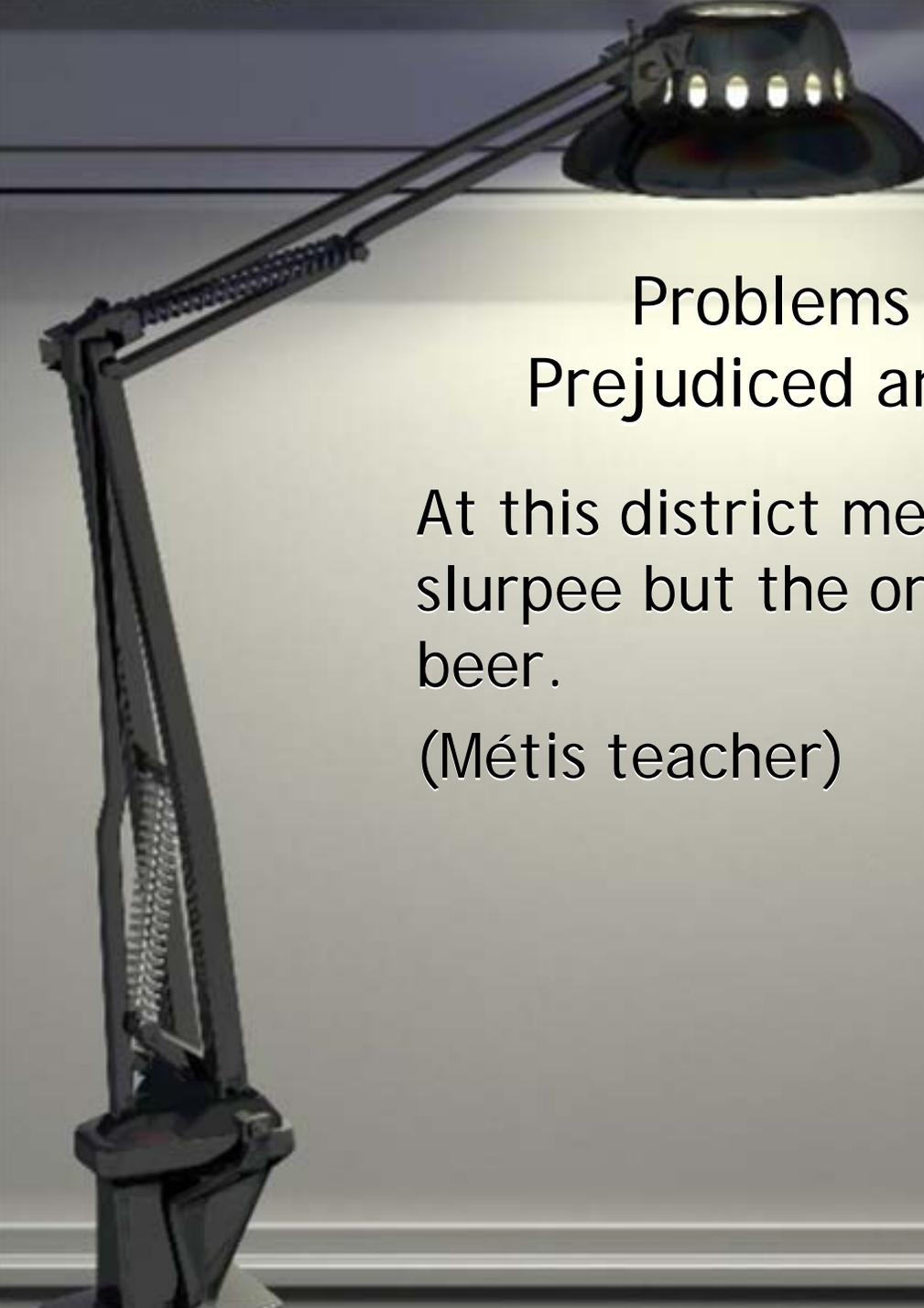
(Black teacher)



Problems with colleagues

Prejudiced and racist comments

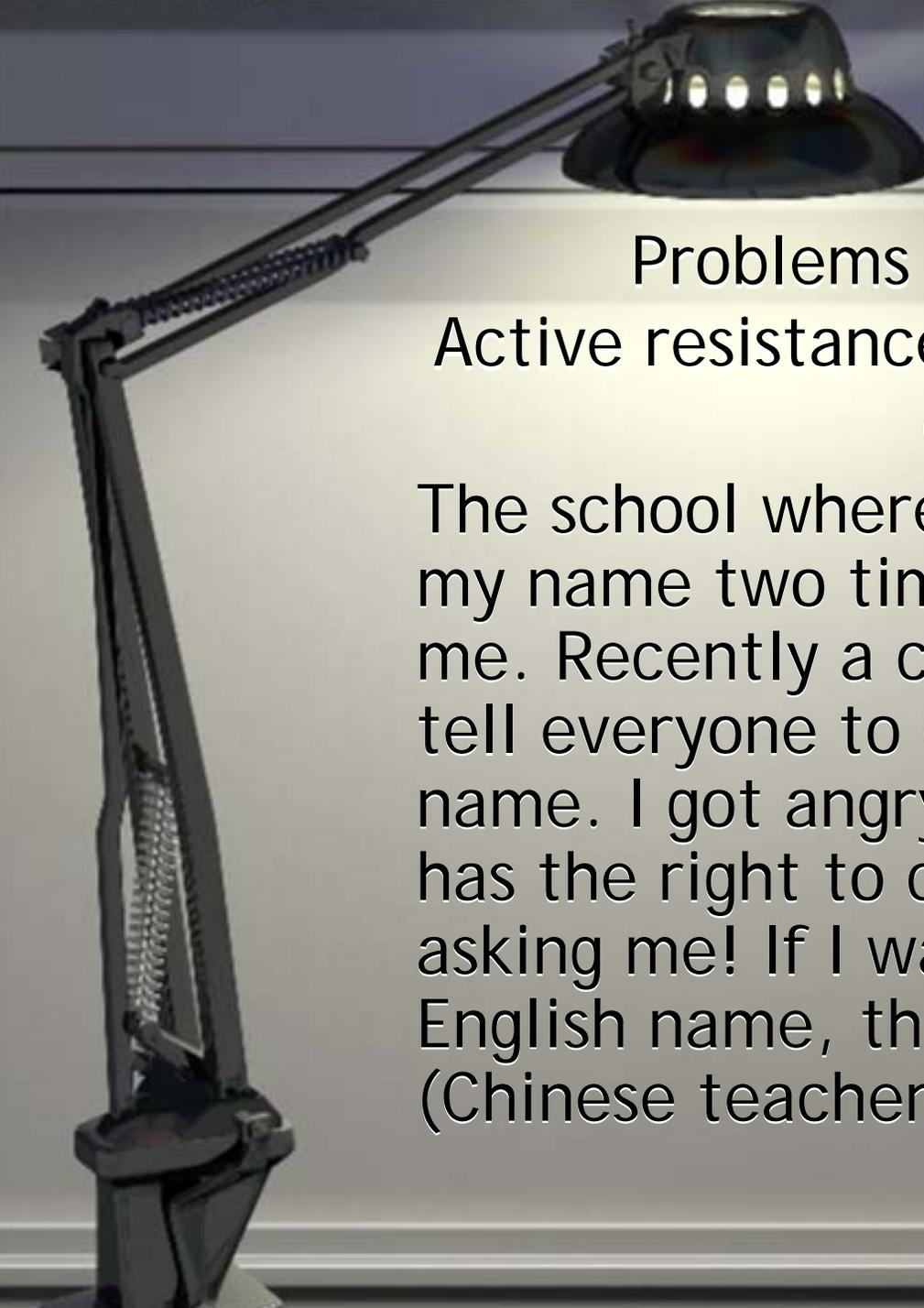
About 5 years ago, we had a new group of immigrants come to our school in large numbers and the teachers would make comments in the staff room like, "Oh they're coming in on their magic carpets." or "THOSE kids, THEY don't know anything..." and when I said, "What are you talking about?" they would just shut up. (Black teacher)



Problems with colleagues
Prejudiced and racist comments

At this district meeting, I asked for a slurpee but the organizer offered me a beer.

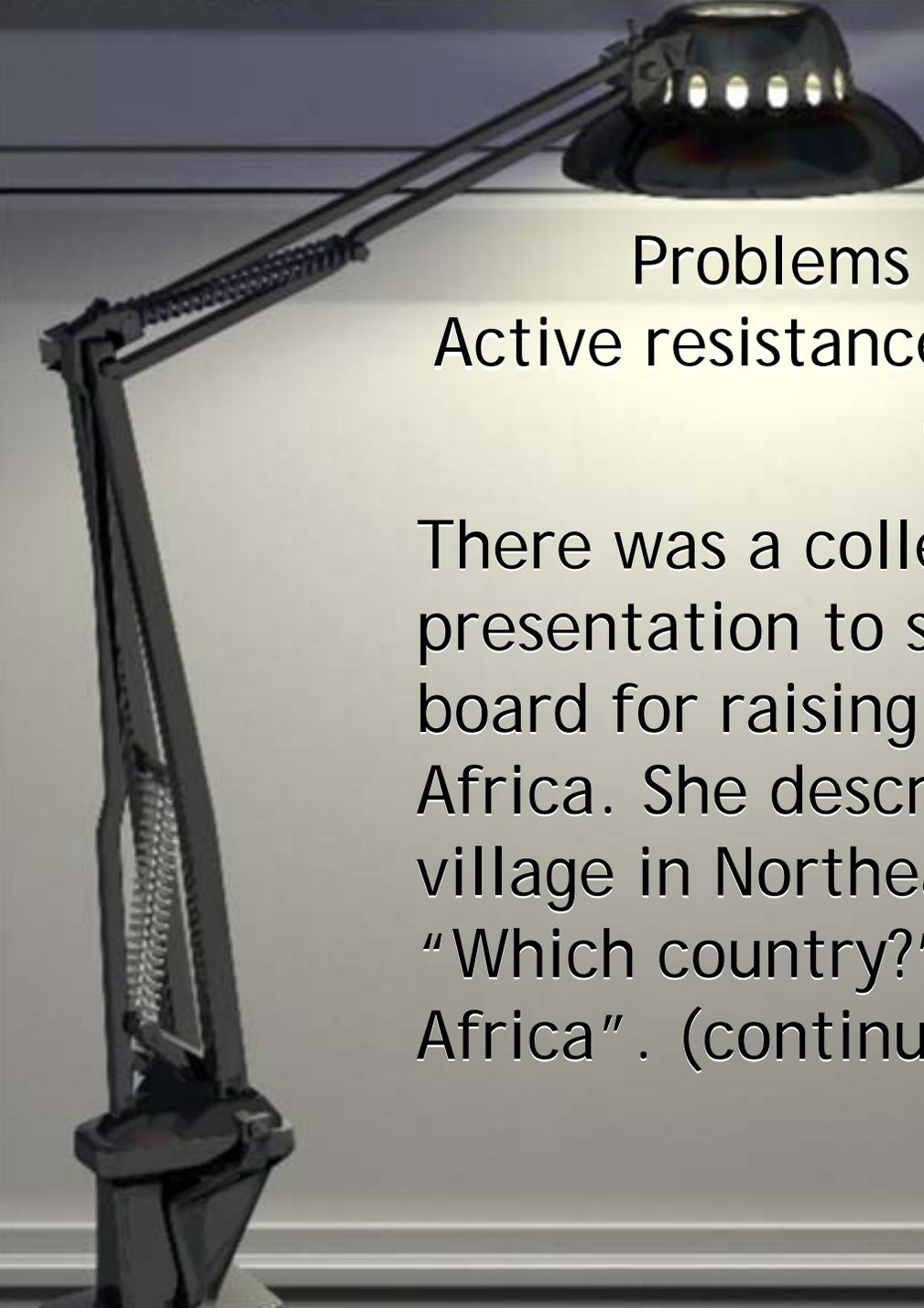
(Métis teacher)



Problems with colleagues

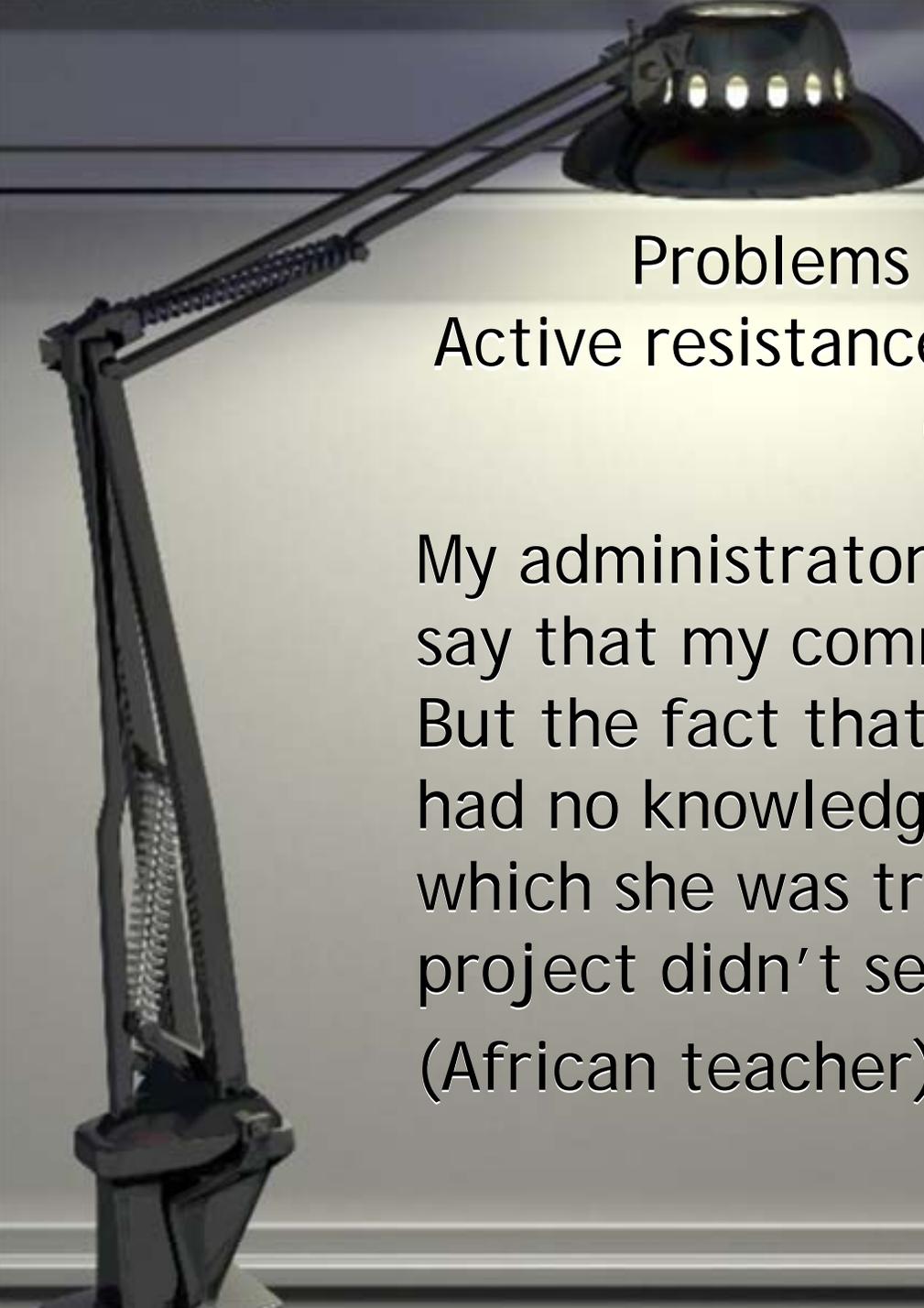
Active resistance to know/learn about others

The school where I work, people changed my name two times without ever asking me. Recently a colleague said she would tell everyone to call me by my Chinese name. I got angry and told her, "No one has the right to change my name without asking me! If I want to be called by my English name, that is my decision!"
(Chinese teacher)



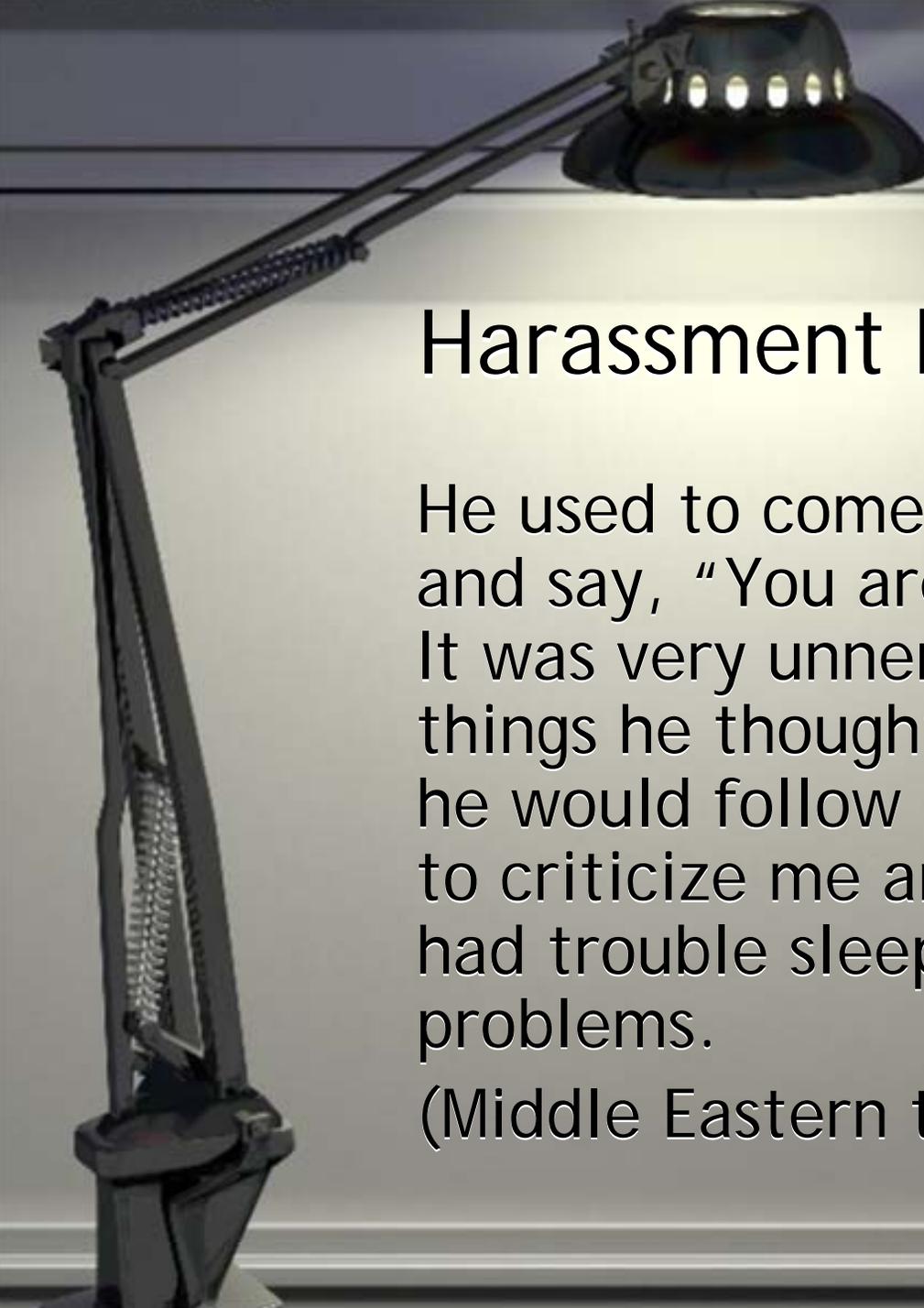
Problems with colleagues
Active resistance to know/learn about
others

There was a colleague who did a presentation to staff to get everyone on board for raising funds for a project in Africa. She described it as “a small village in Northeast Africa”. I asked, “Which country?” She said, “Oh, South Africa”. (continued)



Problems with colleagues
Active resistance to know/learn about
others

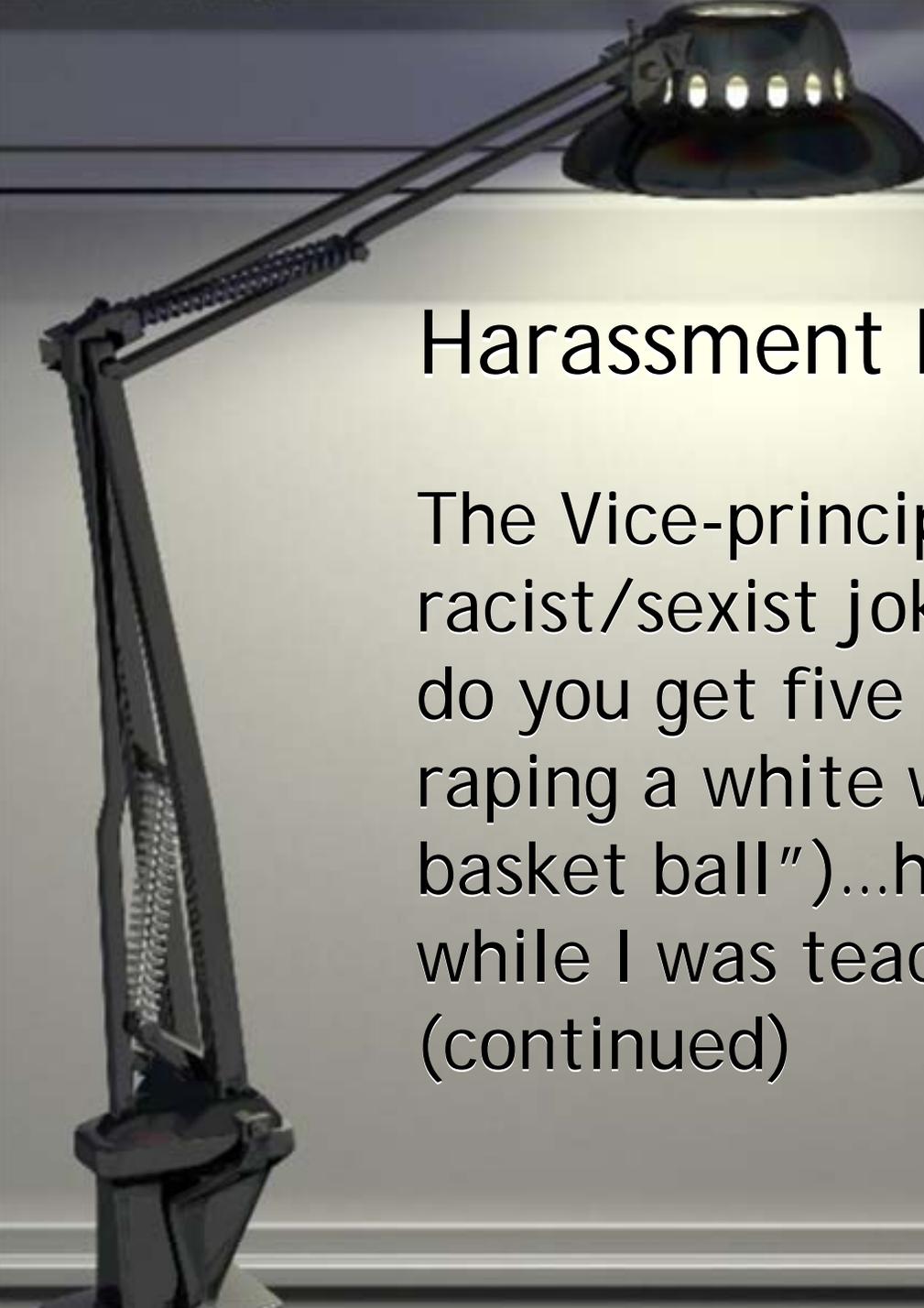
My administrator took me aside later to say that my comment was “out of line”. But the fact that this other colleague had no knowledge of the country in which she was trying to promote a project didn’t seem problematic to him.
(African teacher)



Harassment by administrators

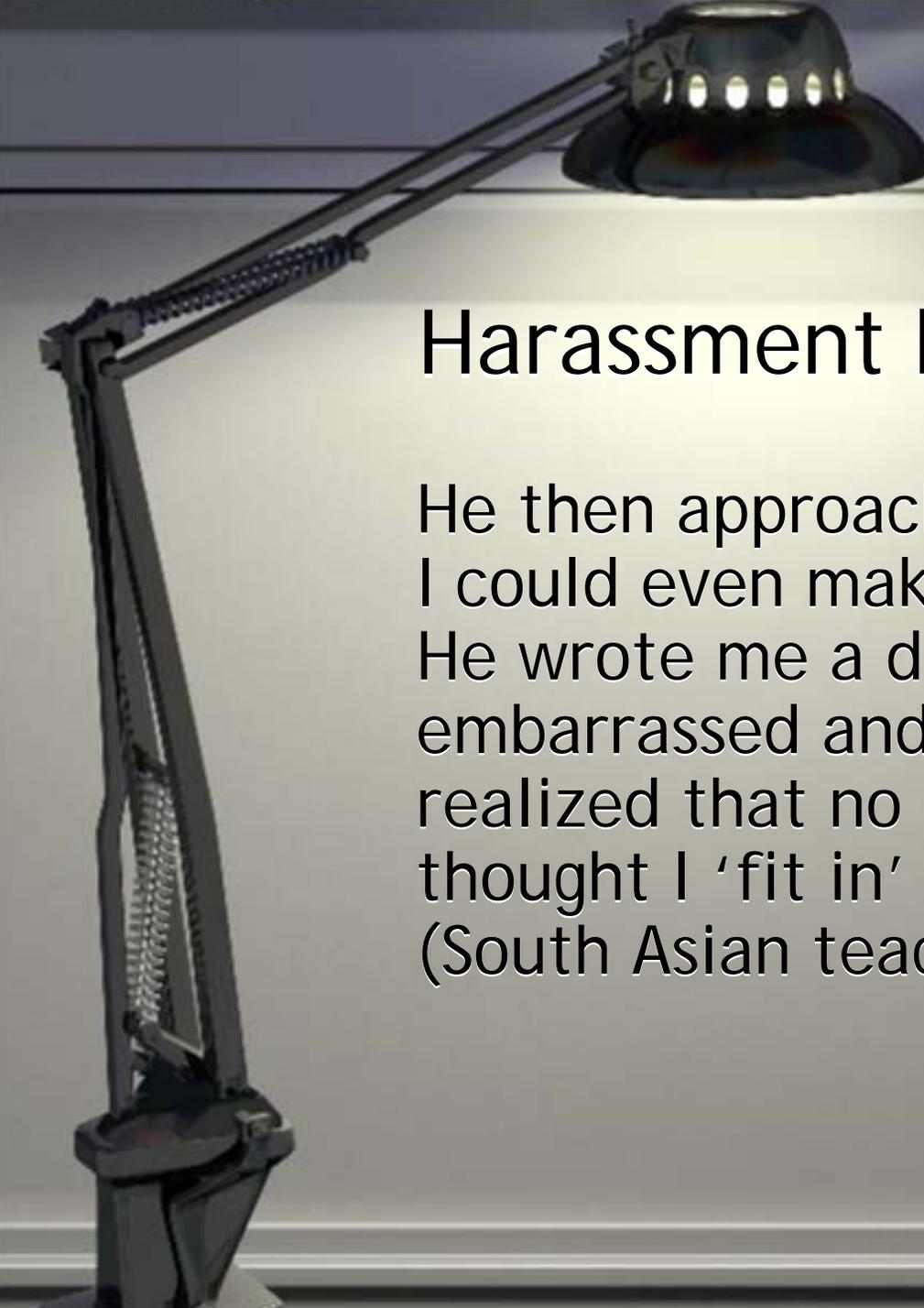
He used to come into my class everyday and say, "You are lucky to have a job". It was very unnerving. He had these things he thought I should be doing and he would follow me into the washroom to criticize me and tell me what to do. I had trouble sleeping and I had anxiety problems.

(Middle Eastern teacher)



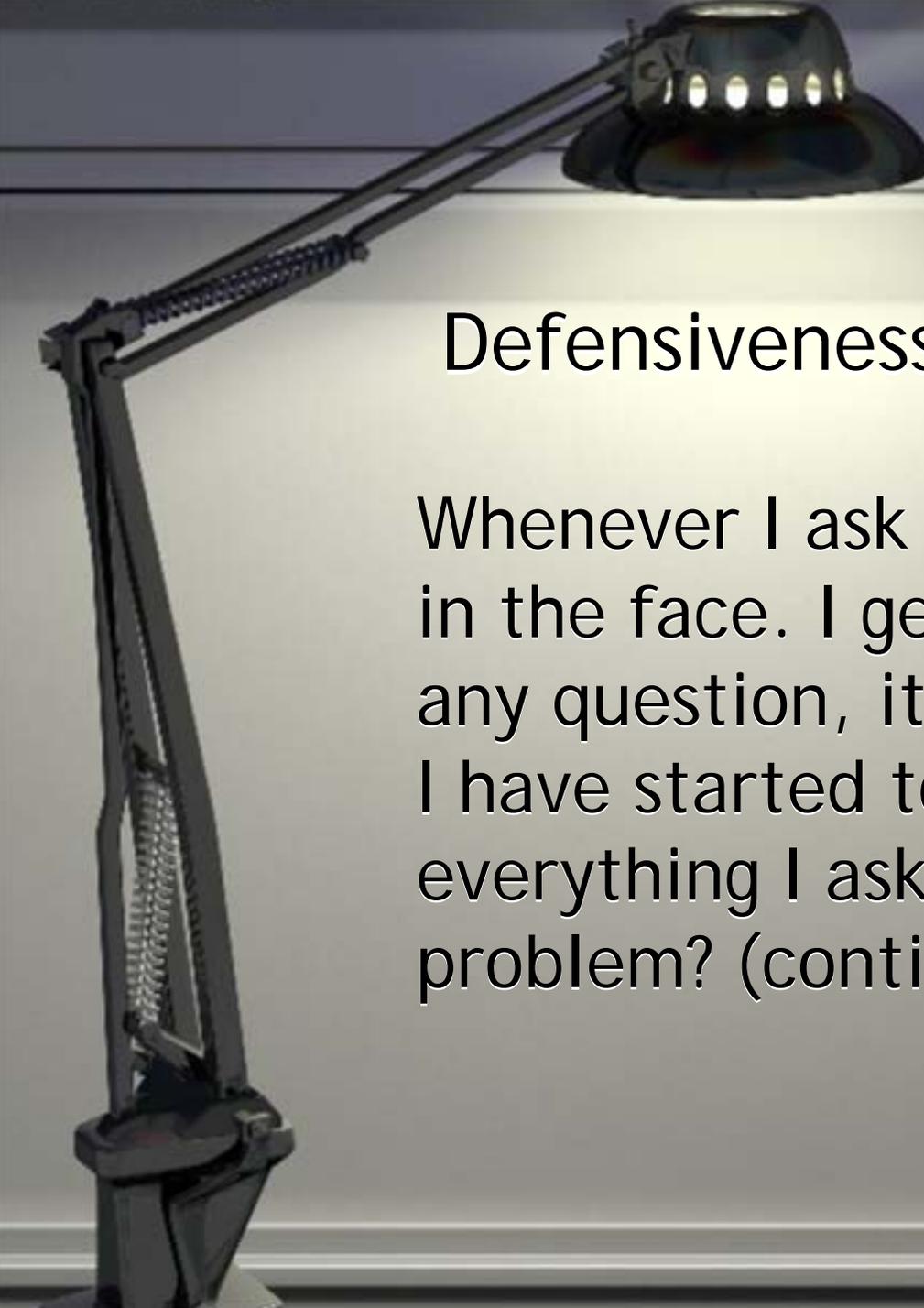
Harassment by administrators

The Vice-principal told me a racist/sexist joke (specifically, "How do you get five black men to stop raping a white woman? Throw a basket ball")...he whispered it to me while I was teaching a class.
(continued)



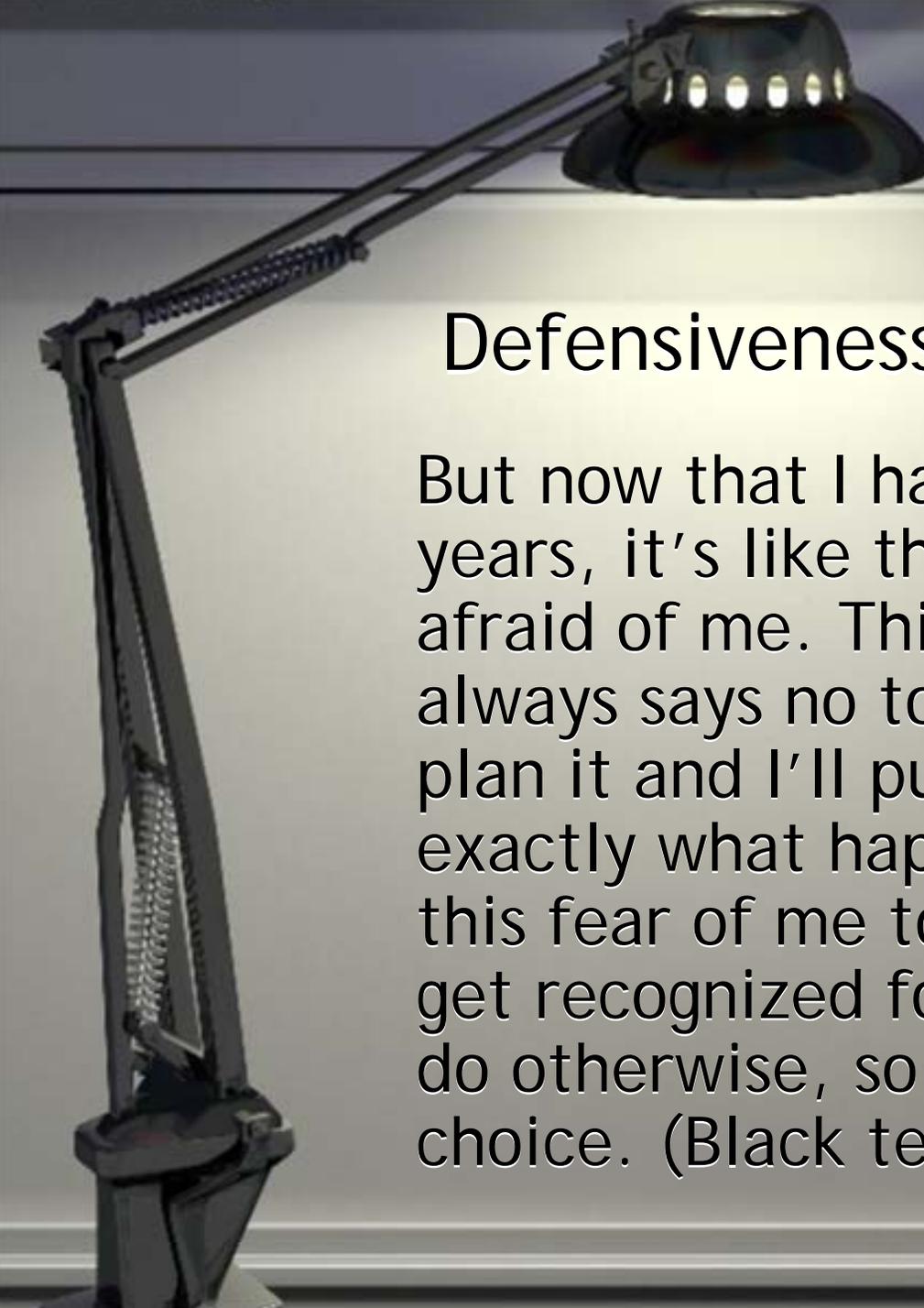
Harassment by administrators

He then approached my principal before I could even make a move or complain. He wrote me a detailed apology. I was embarrassed and hurt. It was then that I realized that no matter how much I thought I 'fit in' with the staff...I didn't!
(South Asian teacher)



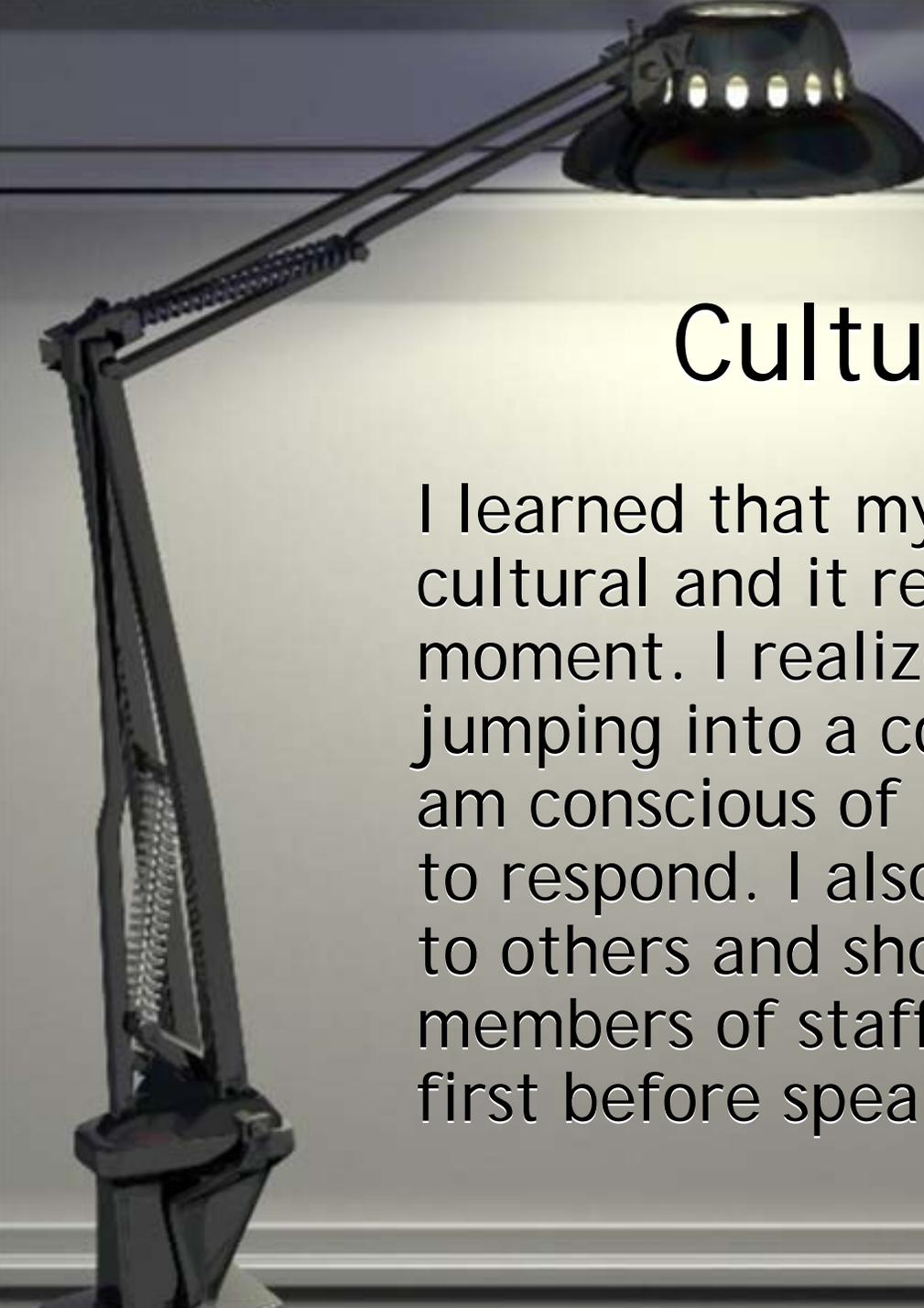
Defensiveness by administrators

Whenever I ask anything, he gets red in the face. I get this whenever I ask any question, it doesn't matter what. I have started to ask myself, why is everything I ask perceived of as a problem? (continued)



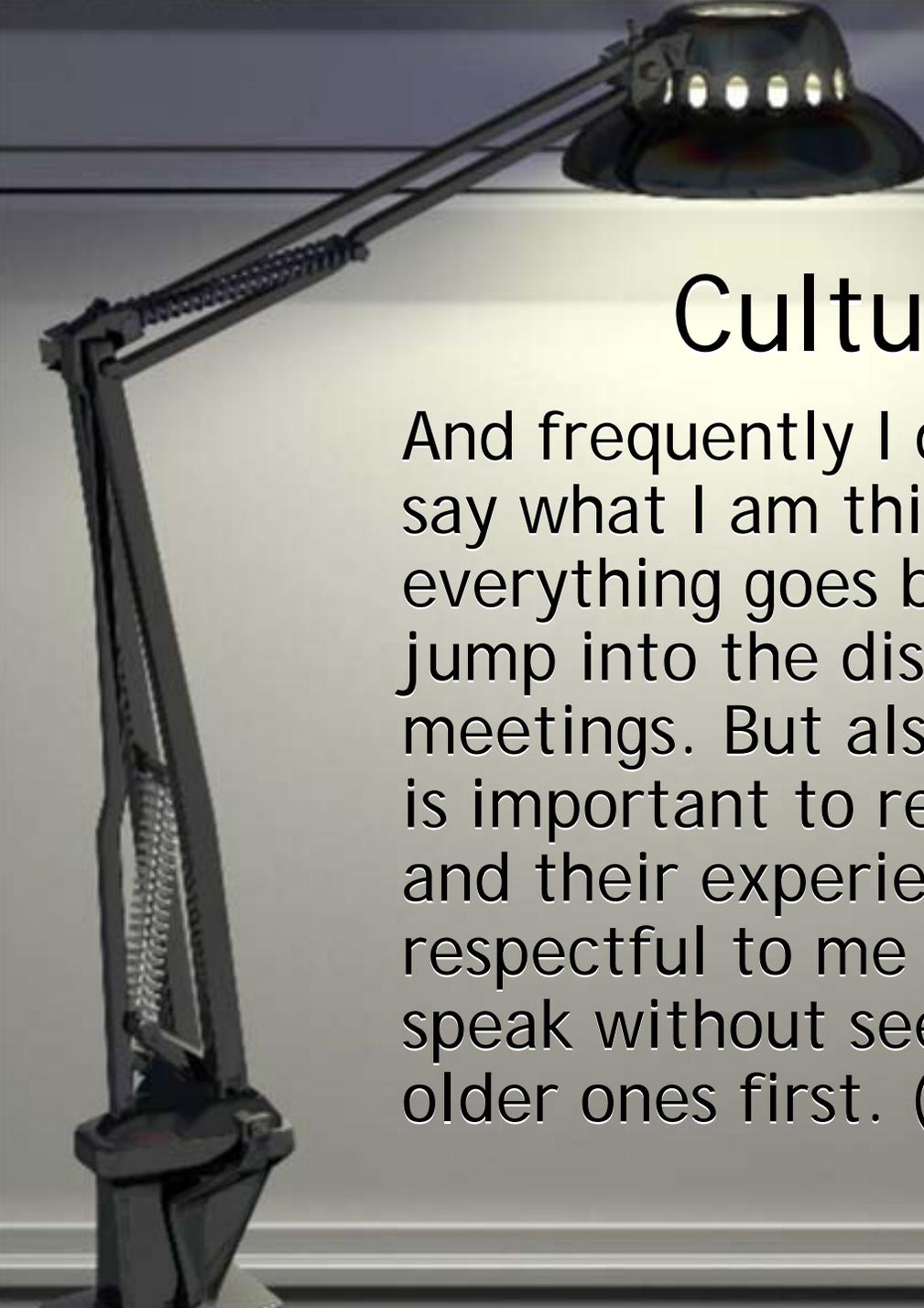
Defensiveness by administrators

But now that I have been there so many years, it's like the administration is afraid of me. This white colleague - he always says no to her - so I said, well you plan it and I'll push it through and that is exactly what happened. I decided to use this fear of me to my advantage. I don't get recognized for who I am and what I do otherwise, so I don't have much of a choice. (Black teacher)



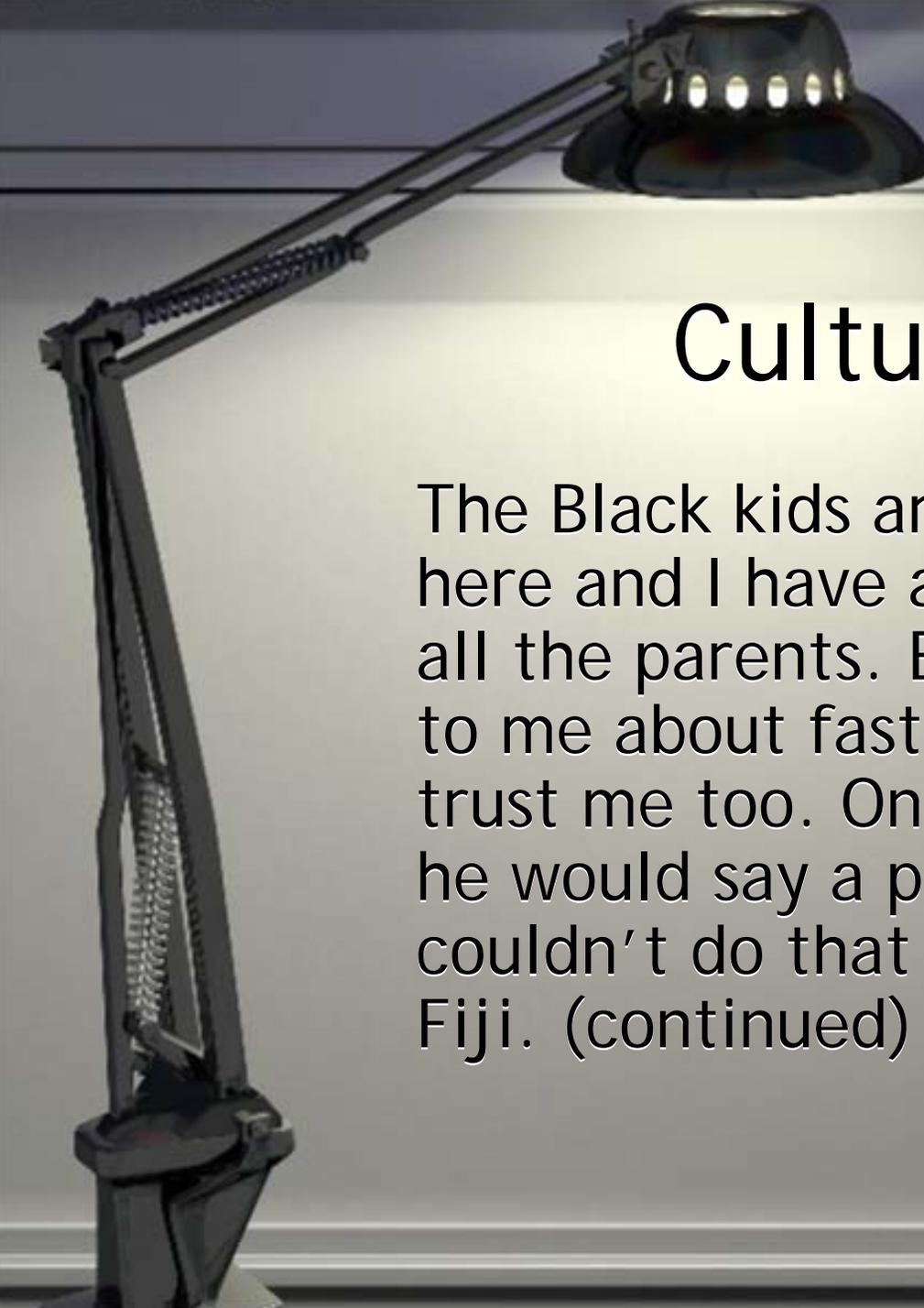
Cultural Issues

I learned that my response time was cultural and it really was an “Ah, ha!” moment. I realized I had difficulty jumping into a conversation because I am conscious of leaving time for people to respond. I also make sure I listen well to others and show respect to senior members of staff by listening to them first before speaking. (continued)



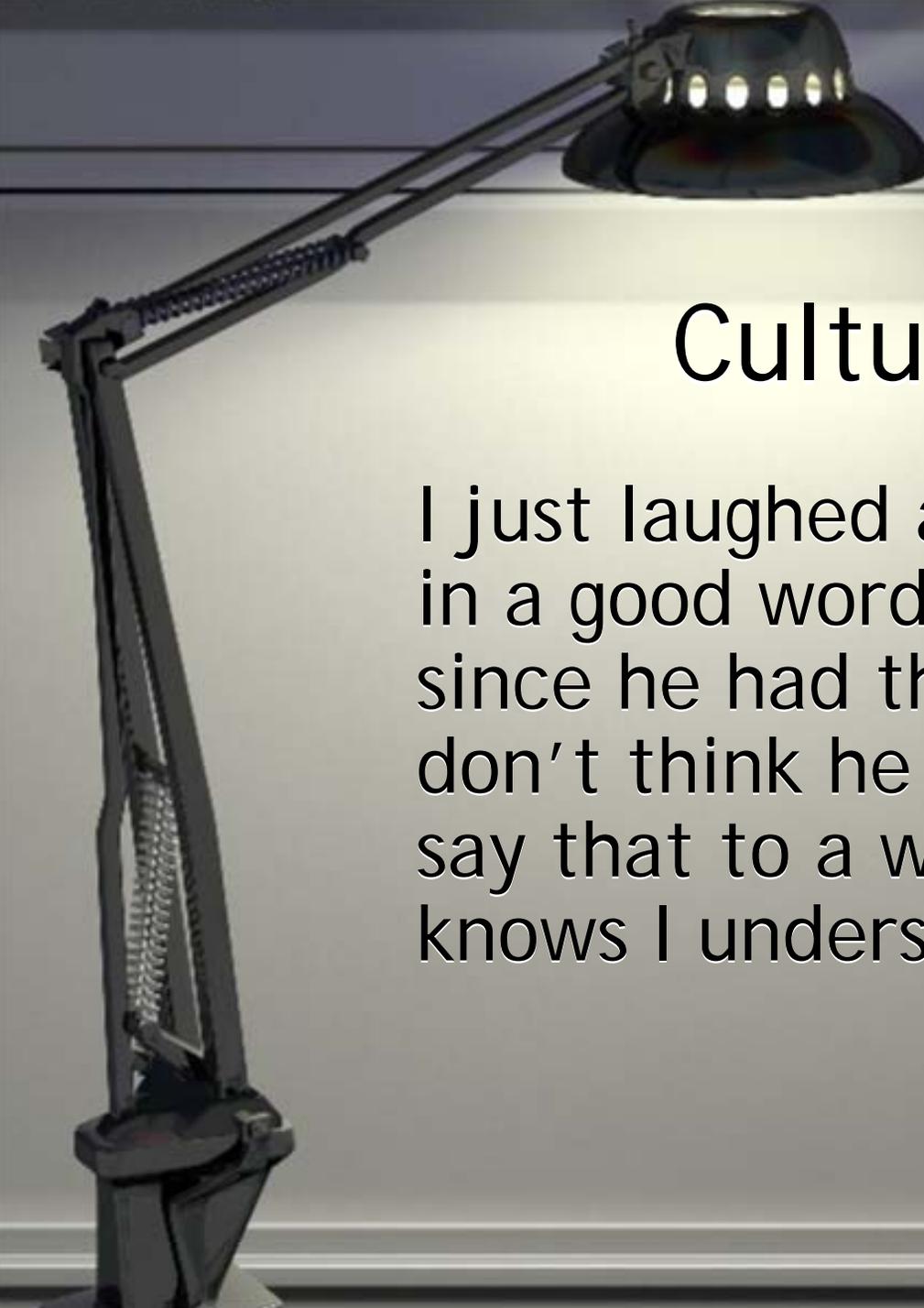
Cultural Issues

And frequently I don't have a chance to say what I am thinking because everything goes by so fast and I can't jump into the discussion at staff meetings. But also it is because I think it is important to respect the older staff and their experience. It doesn't seem respectful to me for young teachers to speak without seeking the advice of the older ones first. (Métis teacher)



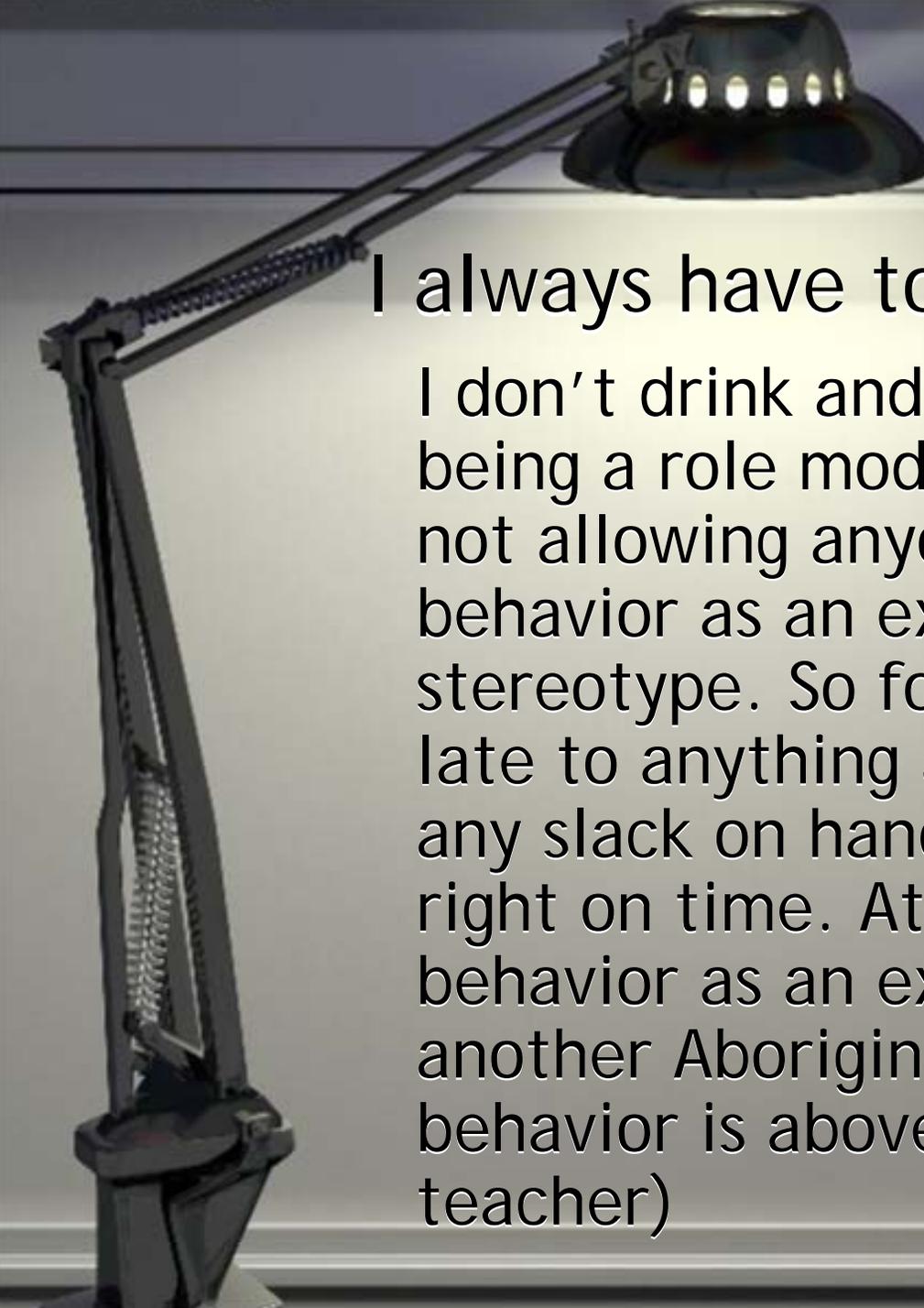
Cultural Issues

The Black kids are really happy that I'm here and I have a good reputation with all the parents. Even the Muslim kids talk to me about fasting and lots of other kids trust me too. One little guy from Fiji said he would say a prayer for me but I couldn't do that because I didn't speak Fiji. (continued)



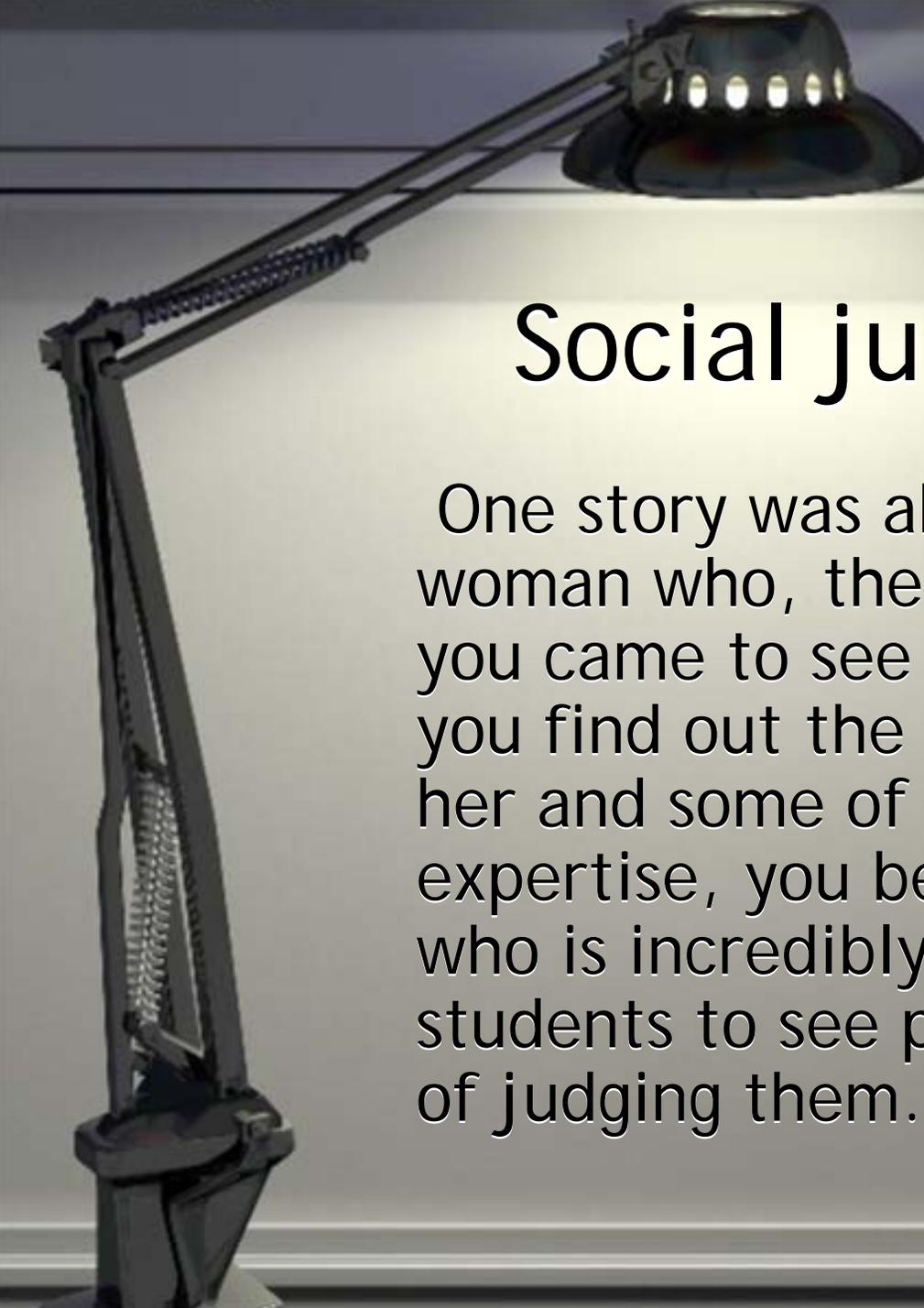
Cultural issues

I just laughed and asked him to put in a good word for me with God since he had the right language. I don't think he would have dared to say that to a white teacher, but he knows I understand. (Black teacher)



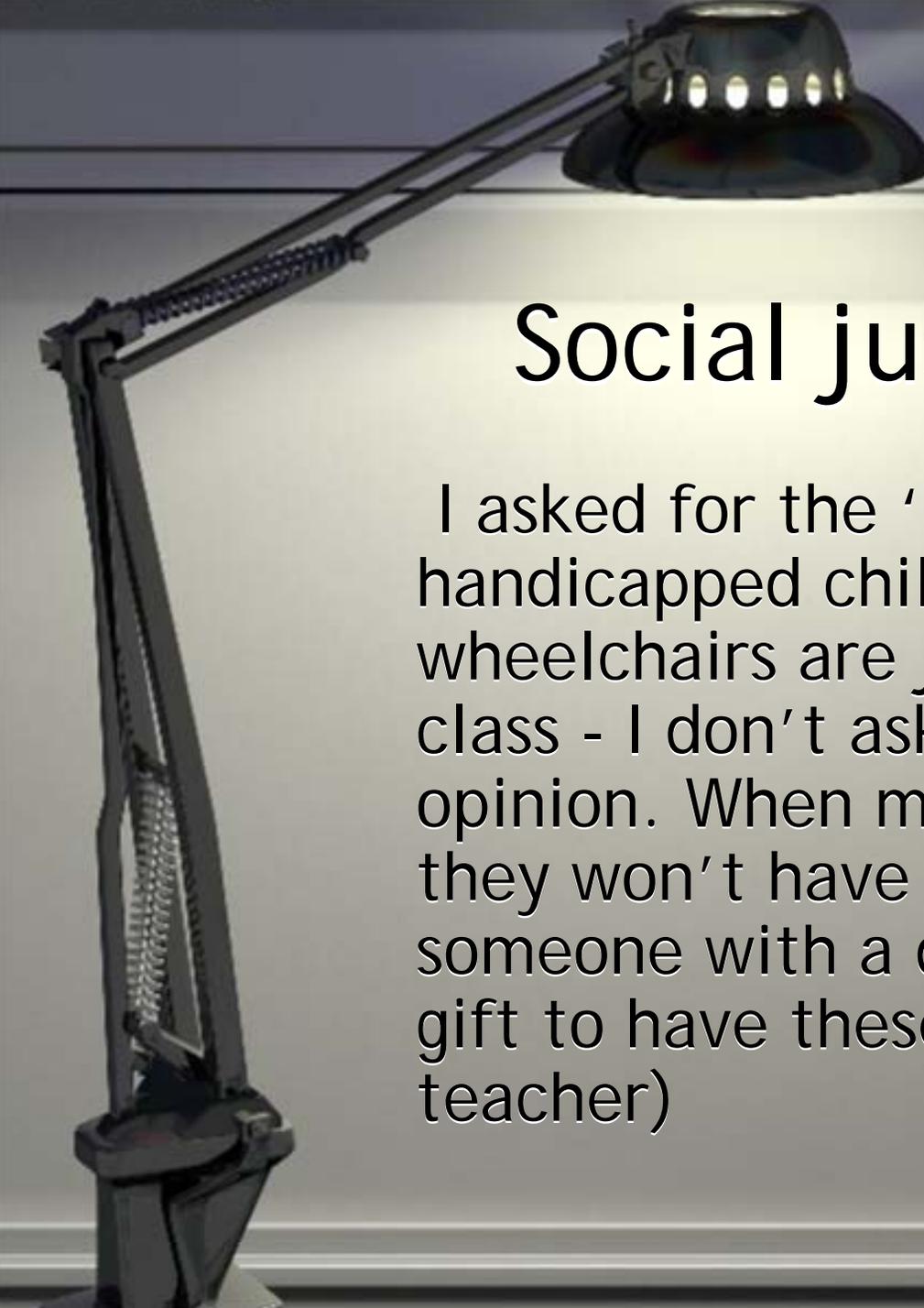
I always have to be above reproach

I don't drink and I'm very conscious of being a role model for my students and not allowing anyone to use any of my behavior as an excuse to uphold a stereotype. So for example I rarely come late to anything and I don't cut myself any slack on handing in forms and things right on time. At least they can't use my behavior as an excuse not to hire another Aboriginal person because My behavior is above reproach. (Métis teacher)



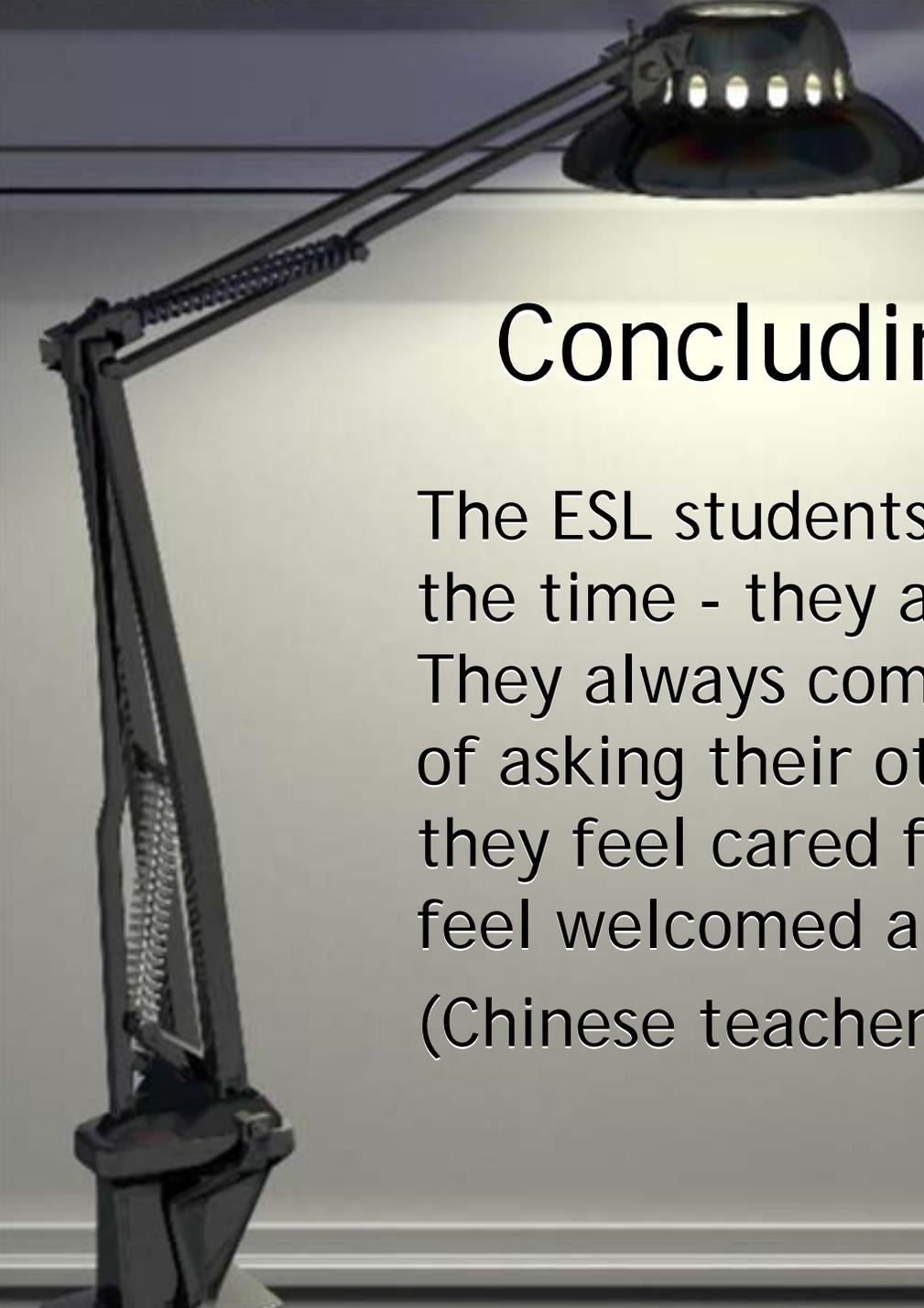
Social justice agenda

One story was about this Aboriginal woman who, the way she was portrayed, you came to see as a bully. Then when you find out the things that happened to her and some of her talents and expertise, you begin to see this woman who is incredibly complex. I want my students to see people like that instead of judging them. (Black teacher)



Social justice agenda

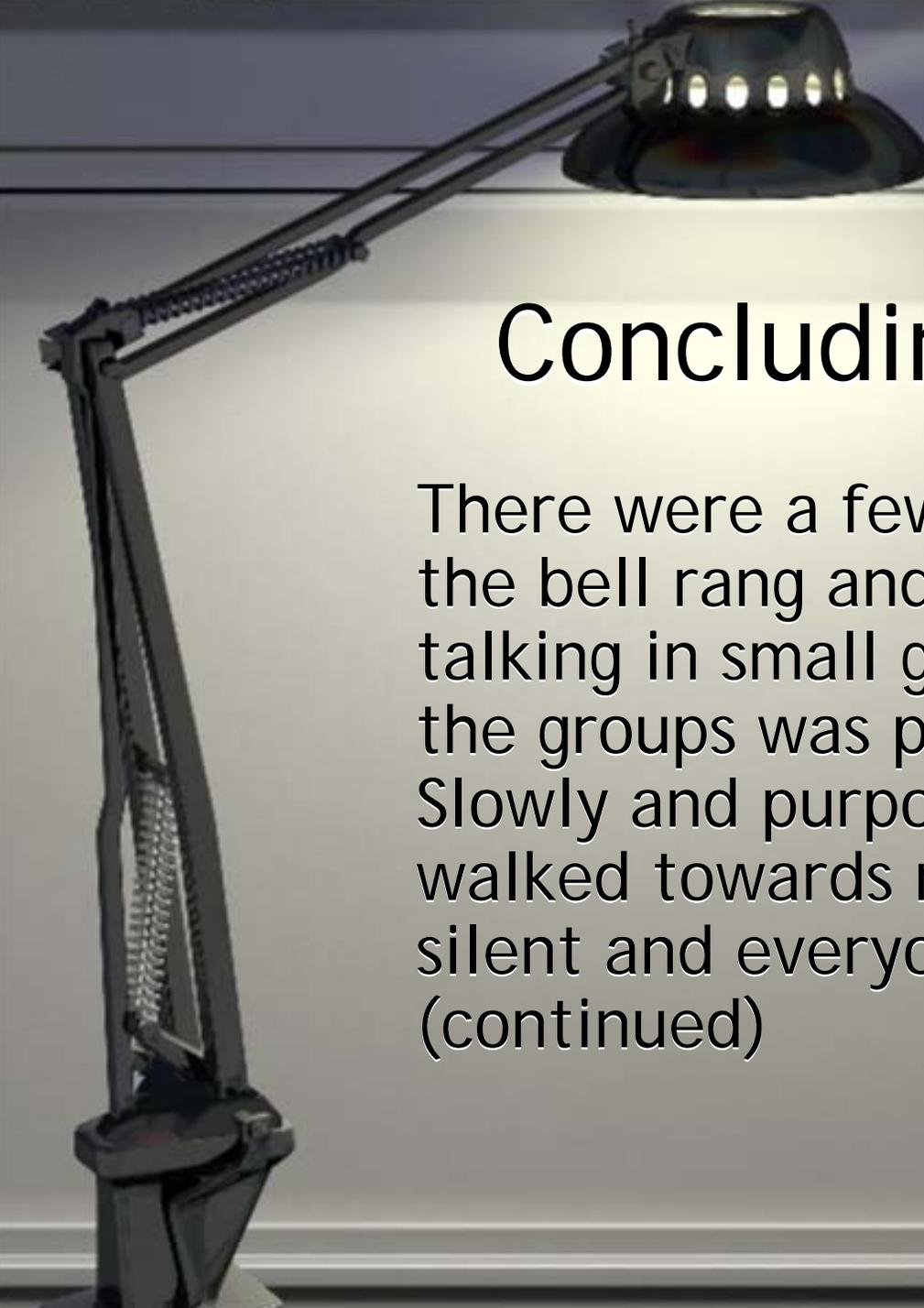
I asked for the 'options' program (for handicapped children). These kids in wheelchairs are just accepted in my class - I don't ask the parents their opinion. When my students are adults, they won't have any trouble relating to someone with a disability. It is such a gift to have these kids in my class. (Black teacher)



Concluding comments

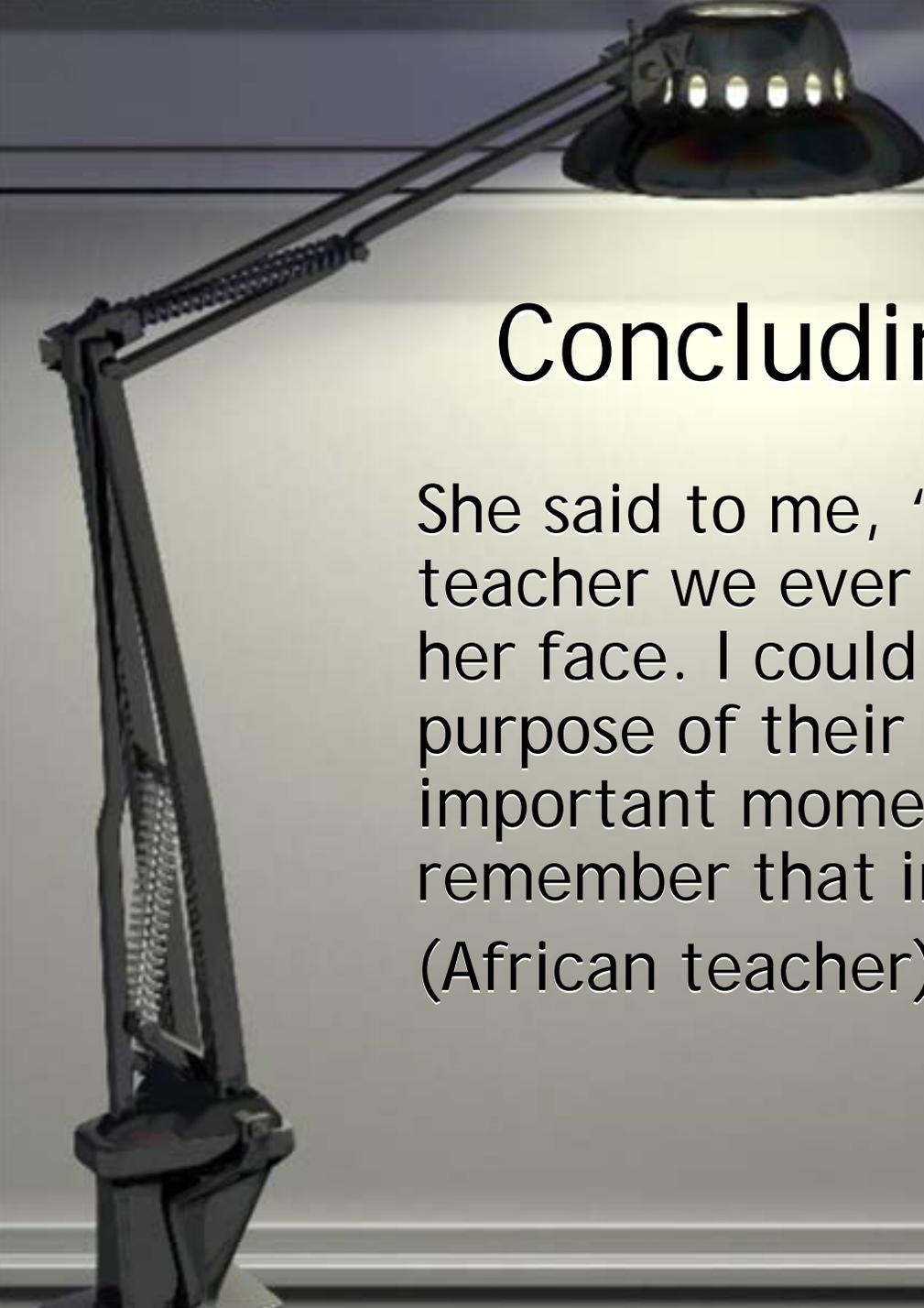
The ESL students stay in my classroom all the time - they are so reluctant to leave. They always come to me for help instead of asking their other teachers. I think they feel cared for and understood. They feel welcomed and included.

(Chinese teacher)



Concluding comments

There were a few minutes left before the bell rang and the students were talking in small groups. I could see one of the groups was planning something. Slowly and purposefully a little Black girl walked towards me. The class went silent and everyone watched.
(continued)



Concluding comments

She said to me, "You are the best teacher we ever had" with such pride in her face. I could see that this was the purpose of their planning. It was an important moment - I think we will all remember that incident.

(African teacher)