

## EDITORIAL

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# ILLUMINATING URBAN EXCELLENCE: A MOVEMENT OF CHANGE WITHIN MATHEMATICS EDUCATION

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Over a year ago my colleagues and I embarked on an uncharted quest to “open up” within the mathematics education community a scholarly space that could honor—not marginalize—the professional work in the domain we characterized as *urban*. We sought to open up a space in mathematics education that would honor and enrich the work in this domain which had become central to our endeavors as reformers. Admittedly, with only one tenured professor in our group of six, the catalyst for this risky endeavor laid in our own frustrations within the academy to gain access to, and collectively synthesize, the complexities of mathematics reform taking place in urban schools. Our initial “conversational” surveys of the landscape of mathematics education discourse in the fall of 2007 (e.g., “top-tier” mathematics education journals and research conference offerings) revealed a suspicious absence of urban scholarship. In addition, access to existing voices outside of the *community* has been significantly restricted with limited access to the ERIC database, the proliferation of pay-to-read scholarship, and narrowly defined notions of what counts as “scientific” research. After months of painstaking deliberation, our efforts culminated in the launching of this journal, the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* (JUME), on January 15, 2008 with a national call for manuscripts and our home webpage: <http://education.gsu.edu/JUME>. The following mission statement heralds this initiative:

*To foster a transformative global academic space in mathematics that embraces critical research, emancipatory pedagogy, and scholarship of engagement in urban communities.*

As we met to frame the components of this statement, several tensions surfaced, centering around three crucial questions that I wish to discuss: (1) How should we define “urban” in mathematics education? (2) How should we orient ourselves

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toward work in the urban domain? and (3) How should we give “voice” to the complex dynamics of change within the urban domain?

### **When We Say Urban**

While engaging in our discussion around what happens in the urban domain, we found ourselves often at odds as to how to define the domain. In one sense, it was obvious that urban is used to define a particular geographical space, for example “Metro Atlanta.” Yet, geography alone was not enough to draw attention to the various complexities regarding the racial and ethnic makeup of schools and communities, degree of economic hardships, and neighborhood and community traditions. By default, many educators forgo delineating these complexities, focusing only on specific groups within urban schools and communities. In this negligent manner, the term urban is often relegated to an umbrella term used indiscriminately to denote African American, Hispanic, immigrant, or low-income students. Furthermore, given that mathematics “achievement gaps” are popularly depicted in terms of race, ethnicity, and/or income, the term urban is often utilized as an all encompassing *deficit* term. Not wanting to continue the status quo exercised in practice, we settled on the following definition of the urban domain, which will no doubt undergo extensive, ongoing reflection and refinement:

Here, the view of the urban domain extends beyond the geographical context, into the lives of people within the multitude of cultural, social, and political spaces in which mathematics teaching and learning takes place.

With this definition, we set a standard that *all* scholarship, which has the urban domain as its primary focus, should give a *thorough* accounting of the complexities of cultural, social, and political elements through which mathematics teaching and learning and mathematics education reform is experienced.

### **Excellence as a Frame of Reference**

The focus of JUME is aligned with a counter-trend of equity-focused organizations (e.g., Benjamin Banneker Association’s *National Leadership Summit on the Mathematics Education Excellence of Black Children*) to replace the standard practice of “gap-gazing” as a catalyst for action with what we call “illuminating excellence.” Why do this? Certainly, this is not to ignore the strained efforts of educators working to meet yearly NCLB progress goals, counter budgets cut-backs, and develop and implement new mathematics standards for teaching and content quality. These concerns are not to be ignored. We are aware that within

Georgia there is growing concern that the implementation of new standards in mathematics has contributed to an alarming numbers of students who have not passed recent standardized tests in mathematics at the upper elementary and middle grades (Georgia Department of Education, 2008; Strepp, 2008a, 2008b).

We were equally concerned about the invisibility of exemplary teachers and administrative practice facilitating mathematics success like the kind we encounter in our everyday duties. An example of this kind of scholarship that positions excellence as a *starting point* from which to examine urban mathematics reform is Gutiérrez's (2000) "Urban Youth in Mathematics: Unpacking the Success of One Math Department." We have all borne witness to the underutilized, hidden wisdom found in some of our partner schools and classrooms. While this wisdom of teaching, curriculum management, culturally relevant pedagogy, collaboration, and local action has provided powerful counter narratives to the diatribe on urban achievement in mathematics, exclusion of such narratives in mainstream mathematics education journals relegates them to largely "asystemic" to the community of mathematics education reformers.

The reporting of excellence within the urban domain has been suspiciously underreported in top-tier mathematics education journals. The existence of this work outside of the espoused canons of mathematics education literature is cause for significant concern (see, e.g., Gutiérrez, 2000). For one, it calls into question whether mathematics educators consider the urban domain as relevant engagement (i.e., beyond a sample size comparison), or, even more ominous, whether our "major" scholarship is relevant for truly reforming urban practice.

The latter question of relevance for practice, interestingly enough, was the primary agenda topic at a Research Agenda conference hosted by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in Hyacinth, Maryland. The conference gathered 60 to 70 national representatives from the research community for the primary purpose of developing an agenda for research that could be used to inform practice to a greater extent than is currently seen. In lay terms, researchers pondered the relevance of current research to practice as we asked: Do practitioners not use our work? The notion of relevance is an important standard for the professional lives of mathematics educators. Without such a notion, there is little real *community* to speak of beyond the ivory towers of academia.

### **Urban Change as a Movement of People**

We choose *solidarity* as an important focus for the work of mathematics education reformers. In that, another decision was made to honor the way in which urban groups *move* amidst the aforementioned complexities of urban mathematics reform. A commitment to excellence meant broadening a definition of mathematics reform to include the social movement of people. The prevailing

view of reform in mathematics posits that true change vis-a-vis improvement in learning experiences is accomplished by increasing the content and pedagogical-content knowledge of practicing teachers. Less attention is given to the racialized, cultural, and political experiences within the urban domain that influence people to move urban practice. The prevailing view essentially sidesteps any critical analysis of race, culture, and/or policy constraints that have been documented by a substantial number of equity researchers in mathematics education (albeit, seldom in mainstream mathematics education journals).

Social aspects of human development have been largely ignored in mathematics education research. Although we are taught that the discipline lies at the nexus of social change (along with changes in psychology and mathematics), this change is most often articulated in terms of shifts in government ideologies (e.g., Sputnik) and economic trends (e.g., “mathematically literate workers”). Mathematics reform has scarcely been defined in terms of “ground up” movements of people. Little is documented about the local actions of school and community families to “right” the inequities espoused in mathematics reform. Social movements of equity such as the civil rights movements for gender and racial equality have been scarcely emphasized as critical to mathematics reform success. Capturing the excellence of local groups as they author change has the potential to connect mathematics education scholarship to the very communities it intends to serve. What this look likes as a base of scholarship remains to be seen, but in JUME we open this space.

The articles in this inaugural issue range in nature in the ways in which the scholars tackle the questions we, ourselves, have struggled through; in that, they extend the very definition and context of urban, challenge racist conventions of urban schooling, and offer insights for finding excellent practice. We trust that you will be challenged as you join us on this journey in which old questions are explored (differently) and new questions formulated. This space is open and freely accessible to all who have as their primary interest the illumination of urban excellence.

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