

EDITORIAL

Danger: Ghetto Ahead?

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I love attending conferences! I enjoy research, writing, and teaching, but there is something electric about stepping away from the obligations of home, being in the conference environment, meeting with old and new colleagues, sharing my work, and learning from others. As an assistant professor, I am in the midst of the joy and stress of building a scholarly identity; balancing my responsibilities for research, teaching, and service; and navigating both the politics of my institution and of mathematics education as a discipline. Sometimes conference connections reveal that the challenges that I face are not unique to my experience or my institution; sometimes the revelation is that someone across the country or around the world has already found a way to address those challenges. Academic work can be isolating; conferences help to build and sustain the vital connections that contribute to our knowledge bases and to our support systems.

Conference organizers often use special interest groups to facilitate collaboration among attendees. The annual meetings for both the Association of Mathematics Teacher Educators (AMTE) and the North American Chapter of the International Group for the Psychology of Mathematics Education (PME-NA), for example, have begun to incorporate diverse strands and working groups including some targeted toward equity in mathematics education. These equity sessions and strands serve a two-fold purpose. Primarily, they place issues of equity and access at the center of empirical and conceptual conversations. Secondly, they become a reunion of sorts for equity-minded mathematics educators and allow us to come together in the name of forming and sustaining an equity agenda in mathematics education.

I attended the AMTE annual meeting for the first time this year. AMTE has much to offer mathematics educators; I recommend attending if you have not done so. This year, AMTE's Equity Task Force debuted the Learn & Reflect Equity Strand, which included a day of focused sessions, a set of reflection questions, and a debriefing period. The Learn & Reflect Equity Strand appears to operate differently from the PME-NA equity working group with which I was more familiar. The former is an organizational strand for submitted sessions and papers with a culminating open debriefing session. The PME-NA equity working group

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meets three times during the conference to address on an issue, set of issues, or project of interest. It is not attached to submitted conference papers. My intention was to participate in the Learn & Reflect Equity Strand for the entire day as I do with the PME-NA equity working group. However, as is customary with academic conferences, I had to make choices about the sessions I would attend, which meant that I was not able to attend all sessions of interest due to scheduling conflicts.

Before I continue, please allow me to state without question that, although AMTE is the site of this vignette, my comments here are not about AMTE as an organization or a conference. I am also not addressing any particular presenter or participant. All of the sessions I attended were rich and generated different questions. This experience was a catalyst that caused me to “rethink my rethinking” (Stinson, 2004, p. xx), a process that continues even as I record my thoughts in this editorial.

I enjoyed and gleaned much from the sessions that I attended within and outside of the Learn & Reflect Equity Strand. While each presenter skillfully offered her or his expertise, there were several moments when I questioned what was said or unsaid: the deficit-oriented language used to discuss Black and Brown children and pre-service teachers; the term “urban” used as proxy for poor and Black or Brown; and the absence of cultural relevance in conversations about structuring teacher preparation programs, courses, and field experiences. I also observed that I did not recognize any equity-minded colleagues in the session audiences who might also notice these infractions. I dismissed their absence, remembering that the Learn & Reflect Equity Strand’s sessions were occurring at the same time. Later that evening, however, I began to think about the number of sessions that ran that day and the number of opportunities to address the types of issues that I saw in the ones I attended. My reflection brought me to a question: As a community of mathematics educators who ascribe to equity agendas, are we missing opportunities to advance these agendas when we choose to engage within the community while the prevailing discourses continue around us? This question is not easily answered. Of course it is important for mathematics educators interested in equity to have time together. These conferences offer an excellent opportunity for us to share and strategize. But what happens while we are talking? Is there a way for us to take advantage of our time together while also engaging with the larger community to participate in a cross-pollination of ideas across the landscape of mathematics education?

Although I tend to find labels constraining, I will identify myself as an equity-minded urban mathematics educator, and I will address a collective “we” with the assumption that the majority of my readers will be people who are also equity-minded. As such, I have assumed certain responsibilities within the mathematics education community. Those responsibilities include advocating for quality math-

ematics experiences for all children and holding the mathematics education community accountable for its rhetorical and actual treatment of historically marginalized people. My experience at AMTE prompted me to consider what it means to take on these responsibilities in the larger mathematics education arena. It also caused me to turn attention toward *JUME* and special issues of journals such as the *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education* (*JRME*; Gutiérrez, 2013) and the *Journal of Mathematics Teacher Education* (*JMTE*; Strutchens, 2012) as spaces set aside to address issues related to equity in mathematics education.

I appreciate the community of scholars that I meet during equity-focused conference sessions and in the pages of *JUME* and other journals. These spaces refresh and inspire me and provide hope in an era of mathematics education scholarship during which challenges to the status quo are deemed unwelcome or irrelevant and are often dismissed under the banner “Where’s the math?”¹ One can understand how, facing such a response, mathematics educators who make such challenges find comfort and camaraderie in spaces designed to embrace such approaches. There are obvious benefits to these spaces, but we also sacrifice a measure of opportunity to plant seeds of consideration for equity in other spaces. In the following section, I consider further the questions generated from my experience at the conference and how we can use these spaces both to build strength together and to use our collectivity to address larger discourses in mathematics education in strategic ways.

The Good, the Bad, and the Dangerous

Equity strands, working groups, and specialized journals are important for building community and for sharing such work with others. However, while we sit in targeted sessions with like-minded colleagues, the conference continues around us. While we enjoy a well-executed special journal issue on equity, the journal continues with little consideration for equity or affiliated issues in its pages (Martin, 2003; Parks & Schmeichel, 2012). In addition to our collaborative work, we also have a responsibility to address the larger discourse in mathematics education that largely ignores or mishandles issues of equity.² Without our voices, the status quo continues unchecked. It is not our purpose to be necessarily adver-

¹ For discussions of acceptability and inclusivity in mathematics education, see Battista (2010); Confrey (2010); Heid (2010); Martin (2003); Martin, Gholson, and Leonard (2010); and Parks and Schmeichel (2012).

² References to my perceptions of our responsibilities to engage with the mainstream of mathematics education do not absolve those in the mainstream from responsibilities to engage with us. It seems, however, that such engagement is most likely to occur only if we bring the questions to them.

serial, but rather to introduce questions, assert objections, and respond to the sometimes inadequate ways in which the mathematics education community talks about, represents, and engages with populations that it has historically ignored or maligned.

So what is the issue? Foucault (1983) beckons us to soberly consider our actions: “My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do” (pp. 231–232). Here, Foucault’s use of danger should not induce fear, but rather inspire action. He is calling us to be vigilant and to guard against complacency. Considering these words in the context of equity-oriented spaces in mathematics education gives me pause. I have begun to wonder if the proliferation of spaces amenable to mathematics educators whose work lies on the margins of the field is helpful (good), harmful (bad), or potentially both (dangerous). In other words, what does it mean to consider these spaces as dangerous rather than simply good (opportunities to share in a targeted and welcoming space) or bad (opportunities that isolate equity-oriented scholars from mainstream conversations)?

Taking Foucault’s (1983) lead, I problematize equity-specific spaces by considering the political ramifications of their existence. Consider the possible perspectives of those who grant such requests. Could it be that providing special journal issues or conference strands is a means to continue marginalizing equity work? Perhaps granting our requests could be considered a win-win scenario in which we get what we want and the establishment gets to continue without material change and with the opportunity to say that the forum is open and inclusive. Is it possible that the segregation of space allows those who are unwilling or unable to engage equity discussions to be as comfortable as we are because there are few voices of question or dissent? Does the segregation in the name of creating progressive space reify the very marginalization that these spaces purport to address? As I have discussed my concerns with others, the response that I receive (and a sentiment that I often share) is that we enjoy being able to talk “equity talk” without having to justify or explain our positions; we enjoy having forums where we can submit our written work without worrying about having to address the often-dismissive “Where’s the math?” question (Heid, 2010). I, too, am grateful for these opportunities, but I have to ask of this community the same question that I ask myself: Have I (we) become complacent in my (our) segregation?

These questions pull me toward the process of ghettoization as a means to describe what could be happening to/in the equity community.³ Skovsmose and Penteadó (2011) characterize ghettos in the mathematics classroom as spaces

³ Spatial limitations preclude me from exploring these ideas fully in this editorial. Here, I intend to introduce my questions and current thinking. I will expound in future work.

that “emerge through complex processes of differentiation, where lack of prestige, poverty and stigmatization turns into general discourses, which in turn coagulate as ghetto-walls...which obstruct exchanges of meaning” (pp. 87–88). They argue that ghettos form “when differentiation turns into an us–them formulation, and labeling turns into a stigmatization” (p. 87). Thus, the purpose of equity-oriented mathematics education becomes clear: “An education for equity and quality must try to act against all processes, social and educational, which make part of the formation of ghettos in the classroom” (p. 87). Extending Skovsmose and Penteadó’s argument beyond the classroom to mathematics education in a broader sense, there seems to exist the same us–them formulation that the authors observed in classrooms (I am guilty of using it here). Our lack of recognition within the larger mathematics education conversation has caused us to seek formal spaces that, if we are not careful, could be enclosed by semi-permeable “ghetto-walls.” I wonder if, as a community, we are in danger of creating—or allowing others to create for us—equity ghettos in mathematics education where opportunity for camaraderie and mutual engagement can lead to self-marginalization.

A Charge to Keep

More seasoned scholars have fought to create forums like these focal conference strands, journal special issues, and *JUME* to provide an outlet for scholars whose work is neither well-received by nor well-represented in mainstream venues. As a junior scholar, it is a privilege to take advantage of these hard-won opportunities, but I also recognize the need to continue the work that our forebears have begun to move issues of equity and access into the larger mathematics education conversation. I urge us not to be satisfied with the mere existence of such spaces. We must keep before us our goals to pursue quality and equitable mathematics education experiences for all children and avoid the construction of ghetto-walls around us. One generation of mathematics educators has fought to create spaces where our work can be represented; what is the next generation’s fight?

One of the many positive outcomes from the spaces I have identified is the revelation that there is a growing mass of equity-oriented mathematics educators. I charge all of us to think about how we can use this critical mass and these spaces strategically. One strategy could be to attend sessions in pairs or triads and to raise at least one question in each session related to issues of equity. We could also leverage social media to create opportunities for connection outside of conferences. These opportunities could help to combat the isolation that we may feel in our home institutions and to encourage collaborative and collective action. Conference meetings, then, can be opportunities to touch base regarding sustained efforts and to debrief about what we hear in the larger community and how the group and use its expertise to affect dominant discourses.

We are in a moment in mathematics education in which there are more opportunities for equity work than ever before. I am proud of the advances that have been made, but there is still work to be done and I love the mathematics education community and the children, teachers, and communities that I serve too much to be satisfied with what we have. My charge to you, scholar-friends, is to consider with me how we might take the opportunities that we have been given and use them strategically to achieve our primary goals. I invite you to contact me so that we can think, plan, and act together.

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