

EDITORIAL

The Decision: Do We Really Want Urban Students to Achieve in Mathematics?

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The date of July 7, 2010 will forever be etched into the memory of National Basketball Association (NBA) fans. This date was the day that millions of sports fans around the world watched the highly anticipated 1-hour television special entitled *The Decision*, focused on which team LeBron James would select for the next phase of his career. When he uttered the words, “I’m going to take my talents to South Beach,” the landscape of the NBA changed. Reflecting on this monumental moment almost 10 years later, I was proud of his ability to *make a decision* to join his colleagues/friends and pursue the ultimate prize of an NBA championship (of course, he has won 3 championships after making this decision). While this scholarly venue is not the best space to debate whether he made the *right* decision, the important item to consider is the fact that he made a decision.

As we, the new editorial team of the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education (JUME)*, enter a new era with this scholarly journal, I’m honored to write this editorial to set a vision of the urgency for the work that needs to be addressed specifically in *urban* mathematics education. This editorial will challenge each of us to consider if and how we are going to maximize our positions within the Academy to improve the mathematical identity and agency of urban students. I want to be crystal clear that anytime I note the terms urban students, urban education, or urban environments, I am focusing on the broader population of urban students that are the aim of the mission of this journal. Because urban spaces have evolved through gentrification and other social changes, contributors to this journal have exciting opportunities to influence the mathematical identity and agency that focuses not only on race but also gender, English Language Learners, and disability within the urban context of schooling.

Based on my years of scholarly contributions, I do provide specific reference to Black and Brown students to raise our sense of urgency, because these are the students that have been the most underserved in key areas (Landsman & Lewis, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017; Toldson & Lewis, 2012) such as, but not limited to, the following: (1) a lack of financial resources to fully support their schooling experience; (2) increased likelihood to have either unqualified and/or

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underqualified mathematics teachers; (3) limited access to higher-level mathematics classes (i.e., Calculus,); and (4) a digital divide in technological and internet access in the school, home, and community that has ultimately led to underachievement and decreased access to college and career opportunities (Toldson & Lewis, 2012). For those of us who have found entry into the “ivory tower” better known as the Academy (with all the rights and privileges of our positions), we must also make a *decision* about whether our work will lead to positive effects in mathematics learning in urban settings or if we are seeking just to add to our curriculum vitae for promotion within the Academy—that is a question about your legacy!

When we ultimately decided to take our talents to the Academy to pursue scholarly investigations that would make a positive difference in mathematics education, did we have urban students in mind? For those that have scholarly research agendas focused on Black and Brown students, did we make a conscious decision about addressing their mathematical identity and agency in these educational environments? Remember, our answers to these questions have direct implications on the lives of these students, their career opportunities, and even national security. Given that we have made this *decision* to influence research, policy, and practice, we must collectively make sure we are not just focused on being comfortable in the Academy. Although higher education is known for bestowing many lofty titles and positions, we, the editors, are looking for contributions to *JUME* that truly “move the needle” for all urban students.

A Reminder – Urban Education has Reached Your Neighborhood

As you consider the decision you have made and/or will make regarding your research, I want to challenge you to look into your own neighborhood, at its schools and school districts, to see why your work is needed now more than ever before. Milner (2012) has eloquently noted the evolving typology of urban education (i.e., urban intensive, urban emergent, and urban characteristics). Within this context, urban mathematics education is not serving students well, as can be inferred from the mathematics achievement of Black and Brown students across major urban centers in the United States (see Table 1).

Table 1 illustrates the mathematics academic proficiency at Grade 4 and Grade 8 on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center of Education Statistics, 2017). At each of these grade levels, we see the four major categories of *below basic*, *at basic*, *at proficient*, and *at advanced*, which highlight mathematics achievement in urban mathematics education at these grade levels. Instead of “gap-gazing” (Gutiérrez, 2008; Young, Young, & Capraro, 2018), we must take a deeper look at what is occurring in *urban* (Tate, 2008) mathematics education in classrooms across the United States (Martin & Larnell, 2013; Stinson, 2014). Table 1 clearly documents the urgency in urban mathematics education in these major urban centers,

with Detroit leading the way with 97% of Black students in Grade 4 and 95% of Hispanic students in Grade 8 not reaching proficiency in mathematics—this documents the urgency of the work that is needed to increase the mathematical identity and agency of not only Black and Brown students in urban contexts but also all urban students. Although these may be the data on urban centers, the same trends hold true for the neighborhood near you. Taken holistically, I have a question to pose: What type of *decision* do we need to make to maximize our positions in order to make a positive difference for urban students in their mathematics identity and agency?

Table 1
 Percentage of Black and Hispanic Students at Each Achievement Level on NAEP Assessments at Grade 4 and Grade 8 Mathematics in 2017 for Selected Public Urban School Districts

Urban District	Race	Grade 4				Grade 8			
		Below Basic	At Basic	At Proficient	At Advanced	Below Basic	At Basic	At Proficient	At Advanced
Atlanta	Black	42	44	13	1	60	30	9	1
	Hispanic	35	46	18	*	53	28	15	5
Baltimore	Black	52	37	10	*	65	28	7	1
	Hispanic	38	44	17	1	56	27	13	3
Boston	Black	33	47	19	1	52	32	13	2
	Hispanic	30	48	20	3	45	35	16	4
Charlotte	Black	27	45	26	3	43	32	20	5
	Hispanic	20	44	31	4	38	37	19	5
Chicago	Black	38	43	17	2	53	36	9	2
	Hispanic	27	46	24	3	36	38	21	5
Dallas	Black	35	46	18	-	57	31	12	1
	Hispanic	20	47	29	4	45	36	16	3
Detroit	Black	73	23	3	*	53	40	7	-
	Hispanic	64	30	6	*	74	21	4	1
Washington, DC	Black	43	38	16	2	64	27	8	1
	Hispanic	30	42	23	5	50	32	13	5
Los Angeles	Black	47	36	16	1	62	26	10	2
	Hispanic	45	42	12	1	53	34	11	1
Miami	Black	17	53	27	4	57	34	8	1
	Hispanic	11	44	39	6	36	38	20	5

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2017 Mathematics Assessment.

- = not enough students to equal 1 percent

* = did not meet NAEP sample requirements

** = Urban Center is defined as 1,000 or more residents per square mile

Maximizing the Research Potential of *JUME*

One critical area we must pursue if we are going to make positive change is to maximize the research potential of *JUME*. Because *JUME* is a scholarly refereed journal with a “mission to foster a transformative global academic space in mathematics that embraces critical research, emancipatory pedagogy, and scholarship of

engagement in urban communities,” we must submit our highest quality empirical research for consideration. If we send less than our best, we demonstrate to the scholarly community that we, the producers and consumers of research in *JUME*, are not fulfilling the mission of this journal. We must view *JUME* as a clearinghouse of high-quality research pertaining to improving mathematical identity and agency for urban students. We know the issues in urban environments have been well documented over the last 50 years; however, we are seeking contributions that fulfill our mission.

Conclusion

In closing, I must say that I am excited about the possibilities that *JUME* can provide via research. I must remind us that this scholarly journal will only be as great as we allow it to be. Now is the time for us to carry the torch to make sure we adequately address the *urban* context in our work in mathematics education.

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