

EDITORIAL

A Call for *Critical Reads* of “Trouble” Texts that Inform Urban Mathematics Education

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Each of us has a moral obligation to stand up, speak up and speak out. When you see something that is not right, you must say something. You must do something. . . Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble.

– John Lewis, “Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation”

Echoing the decade-long mission of the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* (*JUME*) as restated in Dr. Robert M. Capraro’s (2019) editorial, the journal’s purpose is to “foster discourse among a community of scholars to catalyze and transform the global academic space in mathematics education into one that embraces critical research, emancipatory pedagogy, and scholarship of engagement in urban communities” (p. 1). As *JUME* readers and potential contributors, the new *Critical Reads* section expands on *JUME*’s previous *Book Review* section (see Jett, 2015) and provides an extended, scholarly space to highlight critical texts (e.g., books, research articles, short stories, social media posts, poetry, play/film scripts) in order to push conversations in the field that offer an empowering and transformative vision for urban mathematics education.

As the section’s editor and an active scholar with *JUME* since my early doctoral days, I am well aware of how the journal has inspired the field of urban mathematics education for over a decade by offering a “revolutionary spirit” of critical mathematics education knowledge dissemination (Stinson, 2018, p. 2). I anticipate that the *Critical Reads* section will continue the legacy of *JUME* honoring—not marginalizing—the professional work central to urban scholarship. This new section serves as another outlet within *JUME* where scholars can recognize foundational and newly published works that can be described as necessary reads for keeping current in the field of urban mathematics education. Whether the texts inspire new understandings, motivate the interrogation and dismantling of systemic inequities, or catalyze social justice advocacy, the *Critical Reads* section opens possibilities for readers to learn of (and revisit) new and old texts focused on “illuminating urban excellence” (Matthews, 2008, p. 1).

In this section editorial, I invite you to learn about the *Critical Reads* section, including its purpose and expectations for those wishing to contribute. Although the section is open to both new and seasoned scholars in writing critical reviews, I also pose questions to urge all scholars to get in “good trouble” with the ways they engage in critical reading and reflection in the urban context. These questions serve to not only strengthen professional practice but also raise collective awareness that catalyzes newfound conceptualizations and emancipatory actions focused on improving mathematics education in urban communities.

Writing for the *Critical Reads* Section of *JUME*

Critical readers and writers should “take themselves in hand and become agents of curiosity, become investigators, become subjects in an ongoing process of quest for the revelation of the ‘why’ of things and facts” (Freire, 1992/1994, p. 105). The purpose of the *Critical Reads* section of *JUME* is to create a scholarly space to reflect on texts that challenge the status quo, reconceptualize beliefs and practices, and/or respond to new problems and new possibilities in urban mathematics education. Authors interested in contributing to this section are encouraged to thoughtfully reflect on texts that explore the complexities of mathematics education in urban contexts. These texts should have the potential to introduce new critical perspectives or reflect on foundational pieces that elicit provocative conversations that disrupt societal norms and inspire new ways of thinking. Furthermore, the emphasis on the variety of texts from various mediums invites interdisciplinary works that are often overlooked yet beneficial in advancing our knowledge of urban mathematics education, promoting discussion and controversy, and shaping high quality research of the urban domain.

Submissions for the *Critical Reads* section should be approximately 1,500–2,500 words, inclusive of references, appendices, footnotes, tables, and figures, and create a public dialogue in which the author(s) of the referenced text or others might be invited to respond to your critical review. Outside of the length constraints, the structure of your submission is open to interpretation, as it should reflect your objective for writing as well as your writing style. Although a suggested template could guide you to focus your attention on targeted areas of “typical” review feedback (e.g., relevance, rigor, quality of writing, implications), I recognize that templates can also be restrictive and discourage creative liberties that reflect how you personally respond to the text. Thus, I encourage you to select a well-organized structure that promotes meaning making crucial to your (and others’) ongoing professional growth that accounts for the complexities (e.g., social, cultural, political) of urban mathematics education reform.

To guide the process of writing your critical review, I recommend referencing the work of Wallace and Wray’s (2016) critical synopsis questions:

1. Why am I reading this?
2. What are the authors trying to achieve in writing this?
3. What are the authors claiming that is relevant to my work?
4. How convincing are these claims, and why?
5. In conclusion, what use can I make of this? (p. 42)

These questions elicit critique and challenge you to look beyond the surface of the text and peel back its many layers. Asking these questions will not only shift your perspective as a reader but will also offer you more insight into the text, which will help you develop your stance, adopt a reaction, and provide critical feedback to inform others. Additionally, it is equally, if not more, important to know how to interweave your response into a critical summary that invites reflection from the author of the text as well as the audience (see Cannon & Myers, 2016; Hamilton, 2015; Martin, 2015; Meyer, 2016).

As you begin to reflect on what drew you into the piece, consider who else may be interested in reading the text and why the text is worth reading. When you introduce the text, you may want to say more about the author and, as an extension of that, describe the context of the text. Consider making a statement about the motivation behind the text to not only set a scene but also determine whether the purpose was fulfilled. It may also be advantageous to describe the structure of the text. For instance, how is the book organized and what is the purpose of the book's structure? To support your claims, you should reference the author's arguments, finding that balance between restating the shared information and explaining why the text should be of interest to *JUME* readers. It may be helpful to consider how the text can be used as a resource among other works to reframe a vision for empowering and advancing urban mathematics education.

In your evaluation of the text, you may want to assess if the author appropriately communicated the key takeaways and if their claims were warranted. You can do this by going beyond the surface and challenging the structural and political boundaries of the text. You may also want to reference your own expertise on the content or highlight how the key takeaways disrupted or aligned to your own experiences, beliefs, and values. Thus, do not forget to say more about yourself and your positionality in relation to the work you are reviewing. Consider how the text inspired your work moving forward and how it can similarly inspire others. Therefore, a critical review, yet flexible in nature, must inform the readers about the text and clearly communicate what you as a reviewer want to convey.

Connecting a Critical Review to Urban Mathematics Education

Another major point of emphasis for authors submitting to the *Critical Reads* section is to ensure the critical review is thoroughly connected to urban mathematics

education. The text under critique may not classify itself in the urban or mathematics education domain; however, your positioning of the text should clearly be associated. Before I begin to offer my recommendation for such positioning, I find it necessary to address what topics and themes may elicit provocative conversations that disrupt societal norms and inspire new ways of thinking (or rethinking) about urban mathematics education. For authors of *JUME* and the field at large to be critical in productive ways that push boundaries and advance new breakthroughs that illuminate urban excellence often overlooked by mainstream discourses, efforts must be made to define (or redefine) the essence of “urban” or “urbanicity” in teaching and learning mathematics (Matthews, 2008; Tate, 2008; Walker, 2012).

Welsh and Swain (2020) address this very idea of problematizing what constitutes “urban” education, which is often viewed as a socially constructed and disputed concept with no common definition (Buendía, 2011; Milner, 2012; Schaffer et al., 2018). In their research to conceptualize the nuances of urban education, Welsh and Swain (2020) explored how urban can be defined in terms of six categories: geographical location, enrollment size, student demographic composition, school resources (e.g., pupil-teacher ratios, instructional expenditures), discrepancies in educational inequities, and social/economic context (e.g., poverty, unemployment, housing, family structure). These categories not only challenge traditional ways of conceptualizing urban education in terms of location, size, and population (Buendía, 2011; Schaffer et al., 2018) but also blur the geographical/place boundaries by illuminating the crossroads of other social, oft-neglected, issues (e.g., segregation, systemic institutional failures, racial and environmental inequities, economic and resource gaps) that impact research and policy initiatives in education.

When urban education is described as a dynamic, multifaceted concept, we begin to include schools that encompass their own “urban characteristic” in suburban and rural areas that experience challenges (e.g., increases in English language learners, access to technology) shared with those in large cities and metropolitan areas (Milner, 2012; Tatum & Muhammad, 2012). As noted by Welsh and Swain (2020), “urban can be defined as a continuum of conditions dependent on the characteristics, challenges, and context” (p. 97); thus, schools with such conditions should not be overlooked because they lack the scale and scope of other classified “urban” schools.

A further look into the described conditions of urbanicity calls attention to the educational inequities as well as the sociohistorical, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic hardships faced by traditionally underserved communities (Leonardo & Hunter, 2007). Historically, urban communities have been (and continue to be) shaped by discrimination and systems of oppression (Kohli et al., 2017). Such challenges have led to socioeconomic segregation (e.g., Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRL) vs non-FRL, Latinx/Black-White) in school districts, student underperformance in educational outcomes, and deficit perspectives/stereotypes by those in (and seeking) the teaching profession (Gadsden & Dixon-Román, 2017; Jacobs, 2015).

Urban has become common nomenclature to describe race and class (Milner, 2012) and is often used to label impoverished and uneducated inner city Black and Latinx children (Buendía, 2011; Jacobs, 2015). To challenge the deficit-oriented language and perspectives rooted in such definitions of urban, counternarratives must be shared to disrupt deficit discourses and assumptions (e.g., shortcomings, limitations), debunk common stereotypes, and highlight students' assets (e.g., social, cultural, linguistic) in urban schools and communities (Buendía & Ares, 2006; Popkewitz, 1998; Schaffer et al., 2018). For instance, Welsh and Swain (2020) described urban schools in terms of the following: "There are safe, academically successful, and desirable urban schools. Urban is success as well as failure" (p. 95). Likewise, Milner (2012) stated: "Not all urban districts and the people in them are 'bad.' There is a rich array of excellence, intellect, and talent among the people in urban environments" (p. 558).

When considering urban mathematics teaching and learning, it is also necessary to recognize the contributing factors of out-of-school settings that impact students' learning environments, experiences, and educational outcomes in mathematics. For example, infrastructure, housing, poverty, parental education, and access to transportation, health care, and teacher quality are essential factors that play a role in students' educational experiences and trajectories (Carter & Welner, 2013). Deficiencies in these essential factors coupled with the scarcity of adequate resources (e.g., high-quality teachers, rigorous curriculum, appropriate texts and technology) may limit participation in learning mathematics, especially when available resources do not support students' mathematical, cultural, and linguistic needs. Thus, there is a need to unpack the cultural context of where students live and learn, both in and out of the classroom, to consider what constitutes an effective environment for teaching (Gadsden & Dixon-Román, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2008).

Furthermore, consideration must be made for the development (and redevelopment) of communities where students attend school. Gentrification projects revitalizing cityscapes are often changing the city landscape of communities and public schools at the cost of displacing families who historically inhabited the area (Keels et al., 2013; Kennedy & Leonard, 2001). As families are financially forced to relocate to suburban and rural areas, new urbanism requires us to expand our research beyond traditional ideologies of what constitutes an urban place (e.g., density, geographical locations). This forces the field of urban mathematics education to engage in "interpreting and reinterpreting the definition and conceptualization of urban education amid a confluence of significant changes in demographics as well as economic and social circumstances" (Welsh & Swain, 2020, p. 99).

A growing population of ethnically and racially diverse students rapidly changing the context of urban education also forces reexamination for what signifies "urbanness" to educators, researchers, and policymakers. Additionally, what urban looks like in one context (e.g., the United States) should not be generalized to what (and how) urban is defined across the globe. Although Welsh and Swain (2020) note that

“urban education collapses race (people), place, and space” (p. 94), researchers are challenged to not lose the essence of what constitutes urban in the context of their work. Urban is not monolithic (Jacobs, 2015), so urban needs to be seen as an epicenter of varying racial, linguistic, socioeconomic, and cultural differences that extend both in and out of the classroom.

Thus, authors considering submission to the *Critical Reads* section for publication in *JUME* should connect their critical review to the urban context as follows:

- Problematize the work in terms of place, space, people, and educational processes within new landscapes of urbanicity (see Welsh & Swain, 2020). Recent works (e.g., Jacobs, 2015; Schaffer et al., 2018) have reinforced the significance for urban to be explicitly defined to not only foster a common understanding and language about what is meant by urban but also to guide others in exploring the nuances of urban to provide better support and greater equity for all students. Be sure to state how the author of the referenced text defines urban and how this aligns (or not) with the multifaceted definition of urban in mathematics education (see Martin & Larnell, 2013; Matthews, 2008; Tate, 2008).
- Position yourself within your work in relation to the scope of the referenced text. Use creative liberties to personalize your work by discussing your identity, experiences, and ideologies to strengthen your positionality within the critique. This will assist readers in understanding your perspective; it will also serve as an opportunity to model how others might do the same in reading the referenced text or other texts.
- Consider the contribution of the text you are reviewing in terms of challenging the complexities of mathematics education in urban contexts, including how the text’s ontological and epistemological constructs engage with the field. Furthermore, describe how the text can be used to shape theoretical, conceptual, and empirical work to make sense of urban mathematics education. You may also consider the following questions: What assumptions are made about mathematics in urban schools? What assumptions are made about students doing mathematics in urban schools? And finally, what connections between schools, mathematics, and the community does the text suggest may be supportive or problematic? Be sure to communicate how urban mathematics educators can benefit from reading the referenced text and what might be missing or further explored in other texts.

A Call (And Obligation) to Get in “Good Trouble”

For the last decade, *JUME* has fostered “revolutionary” works in mathematics that have inspired us to engage in critical research, embrace emancipatory pedagogy, and unite in scholarship and advocacy in our urban communities. As we embark on the next decade, let us use the steppingstones that we have traveled on thus far to continue revolutionizing the future of urban mathematics education. The *Critical Reads* section of *JUME* is a scholarly space to engage in critical thinking and creative rethinking that unpacks the concept of urbanicity in ways that may get authors in “trouble” for questioning existing truths concerning learning conditions, students, schools, communities, and mathematics teaching and learning and summarily subjecting these to criticism and discussion. Submissions must reframe teaching and learning mathematics in the urban context to not only shift the discourse but also improve educational experiences and outcomes for historically marginalized students by capitalizing on both foundational and new works from the field. Such an orientation focuses on the mathematical success and excellence in urban spaces while also drawing attention to issues of access, power, race, and identity (Gutiérrez, 2007, 2009; Martin et al., 2017). The need for such a practice is summarized in Martin and Larnell’s (2013) statement:

Urban mathematics education scholars and practitioners must continue to ... generate significations that position urban education not simply as a counternarrative to mainstream ideology but that transform the entire field. ... This transformation is not simply about rearranging power relations and hierarchies inside and outside the field to produce new inequities but about realizing the potential of urban mathematics education to aid in the struggle against inequities. (p. 32)

Thus, it is my hope that the *Critical Reads* section serves as a model for what critical reviews of texts and critical engagement in the broader context of the field can offer to reform urban practice and excellence.

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