

## EDITORIAL

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# Identity Crisis: The Public Stories of Mathematics Educators

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Each time that I am asked what it is that I do, I respond with the obligatory: “I am a professor of mathematics education at Brand X University.” To which, and overwhelmingly so, the counter-response involves two juxtaposed statements. The first is usually something like: “Wow, you must be a genius” (an assertion one should never deny in good company), and the second, usually more ominous, is: “I was never any good at mathematics.” Reflecting on these two public statements one can sense that (a) our work perception is unwittingly attached to the privileged intellectual status that those who are successful in mathematics enjoy; and (b) we simultaneously inherit the legacy of deeply imbedded frustrations with the discipline mathematics, which most people in the public domain have also come to acknowledge. So even as we in the urban domain, and as editors of this journal, seek out a discourse agenda that addresses urban complexities, challenges, and excellence, we are simultaneously constrained by fearful, polarizing reactions to what people believe we do.

In nearly 20 years as a mathematics and mathematics education teacher and professor at the middle school, high school, and college levels in Bermuda, and several states in the Midwest and Southern United States, I have witnessed this scenario repeatedly being played out in my public conversations. Notwithstanding, similar stories have been recounted by many of my students and colleagues who reside in the urban domain. Many a student of mathematics education can summarize the very dynamic history of our field as a nexus of forces in psychology, mathematics, and society. But outside of our community, mathematics educators often live in obscurity relative to the public work that we really do—our public story. In light of the potential impact of the work of the recent national panel under President Bush and the outcomes of stimulus-funded work in the urban do-

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main, I often worry that the present condition of our public story is akin to an identity crisis.

This crisis was made none more clearly to me than when I returned home to Bermuda to join more directly in education reform after 10 years in the United States. In my activities, collaborating with schools and districts, conducting and publishing research on Bermudian education, speaking to parent and teacher groups, leading out locally and nationally through the Benjamin Banneker Association and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (the *world's largest mathematics education organization*, emphasis added), in a country as affluently modern as mine, I found myself for the first time in a long time needing to explain (no justify) the depth and breadth of my experiences, talents, and ideas. My story had been effective for navigating the mathematics education world in which I resided, but was found wanting as it related to the realities of people I knew best.

I saw this disconnect firsthand during the last summer course I taught at the university entitled: "Public Narrative and the Empowered Urban Mathematics Educator." The course was the last of a series of three courses that I had taught over the last three years where my students and I had sought to better understand our mission in the public domain. As a course model in this last course, we drew on the inspiring leadership framework of the Harvard professor Marshall Ganz, called Public Narrative. According to Ganz (2008), public narrative is the leadership art that centers around central questions founded in the penultimate leadership story of Moses: *Who am I; What am I called to do; Who are these people; and What are we called to do, together*. Succinctly, it is our story of self, us, and now. For the transformative leader, leadership involves framing a new and different public narrative built around (a) the story of my values, my challenges, and my life, [self]; (b) the challenges that *we* have seen and face *together*, [us]; and (c) *our* mission in what *we* can accomplish together, [now]. Ganz correctly and refreshingly argues that leadership involves moving people to achieve purpose in perplexing times and that this process uses narrative to appeal to the head (logic), the heart (emotions), and the hands (action).

A most famous student of Ganz, now President Obama, recently captured the attention of the world with such an application of public narrative (recall stories of his mother and grandmother, and the mission of *Yes We Can*). Yet, as skillful as Obama accomplishes this narrative process, I must admit it appears to be an uneasy challenge for mathematics educators. In our first session of the summer course, I asked each of my 15 graduate students of mathematics education who were taking the course to simply introduce themselves and tell a little bit about themselves—that is, tell their story. It wasn't soon thereafter—as I had suspected—that the conversations progressed into venting about the kinds of frustrations and disconnect we were experiencing as we work as mathematics educators. In essence, I had asked them to share their story of self. Now, why had our con-

versations gone in this direction, becoming so uninspiring, in this meeting of progressive educators with impressive credentials? As we continued in the course, deliberately probing, refining, and retelling our stories to unveil more of our values and personal challenges in and around the discipline of mathematics education, the nature of our stories changed. I later learned that several students had overcome extreme personal hardships including health, expectation, and financial challenges.

As the sessions progressed and we unveiled our “true” inspiring selves, we realized in reflection that our earlier stories—of frustration with gaps and administration—seemed to pale in comparison. The stark contrast rests with how we tell our public stories but points even more urgently to several challenges to our community. For starters, we must begin to redefine mathematics education as a movement of people’s stories—not merely content and curriculum. It is, however, far easier to describe the developments in our discipline’s journey as matters of change in curriculum and content (e.g., back-to-basics, new math, etc.) and political and technological challenges in society (e.g., Sputnik, cold war, calculators, Japan’s auto dominance, etc.). Our history is less attached to social movements that stem from the stories of people, such as the civil rights movements for racial and gender equality, to name just two. As much as I have found myself in the company of “equity” researchers, even much of our work in mathematics education has focused on technical gaps in achievement through curriculum changes, increasing content knowledge, and/or adding to the strategy repertoire of teachers. These efforts have been important, but public narrative suggests, and as my original lead in indicates, that there is a public emotive element which we must draw upon in the framing of our public selves that is important for leadership. Yet, no program in mathematics education I have come across does so.

Our discipline is famously framed around problematic premises: what *some* have said they know about human learning, the domain of *framed* mathematics, and *certain* developments in society. Each of these premises point to an eclectic nature of human knowledge-building and community. Each involves conversations with people to some degree or the other. Hence, the opportunity to define a more people-centric mathematics education is our greatest challenge. It, however, will require us to tell our public story in the face of very perplexing times in urban education. So we must first open up spaces inside our undergraduate and graduate programs, our conferences, our meetings, symposia, and the like. That is, we must begin to connect the dots of our individual stories to, first, inspire ourselves. Quite frankly, we suffer from storytelling confidence. Our stories can connect, but as we discussed in the summer course, we will have to be deliberate about (a) our intentions to do so, (b) what we choose—or choice points—to share, (c) what the moral will be, and (d) our audience. We can share how we overcame personal chal-

lenges in learning and experiencing mathematics to now take up its reform mission.

Secondly, I offer that we must focus very deliberately on our outward manifestations of our collective public self. We must allow stories of self to occupy prominent focus in structuring our research publications, professional development initiatives, reports, public meetings, and in general our public conversations. This focus connects us to people, but too often it has been reserved only for the “confessions” of qualitative researchers, banished to hastily framed sections called “Role of the Researcher,” “Limitations,” or “Appendix.”

In this issue of the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education*, you will see in several of the articles a very determined attempt on the part of scholars and editors to illuminate public stories to engage others in the urban domain by sharing their public story as a central focus of reporting their work. We hope it is a sign of things to come.

### References

- Gantz, M. (2008). What is public narrative? Retrieved July 22, 2009, from: <http://www.cuac.org/documents/WhatIsPublicNarrative08.pdf>