

## EDITORIAL

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# I, Too, Am America! Teaching Mathematics for Empowerment

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This special issue of the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* includes articles that affirm the cultural and American identity of those who experience “othering” in America’s K–12 public schools and in society at large. The theme “I, too, am America! Teaching mathematics for empowerment” was inspired by Langston Hughes’ poem “I, Too” (1925/1994, p. 46):

*I, too, sing America.*

*I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.*

*Tomorrow,  
I’ll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody’ll dare  
Say to me,  
“Eat in the kitchen,”  
Then.*

*Besides,  
They’ll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed—*

*I, too, am America.*

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Through his creative works, Langston Hughes continues to inspire an imperfect nation to acknowledge and own its shameful past and to embrace the beauty and brilliance of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people, who are and have always been an essential part of the U.S. fabric.

This special issue provides a scholarly platform for the contributing authors to also address the current social and political climate, especially as it relates to mathematics education (e.g., discipline, behavior, adultification of Black children, ability grouping/tracking, lack of access to advanced mathematics courses, etc.). Since the call for papers was issued in September 2019, the United States leads the world in COVID-19 infections and reported deaths related to the worldwide pandemic. According to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Research Center (n.d.), 26.2 million cases and 441,300 deaths related to COVID-19 were reported in the United States as of January 31, 2021. COVID-19 has had a staggering and immeasurable impact on communities of color for the past year, creating racial and economic disparities in terms of education (Nelson, 2020), employment (Williams, 2020), and healthcare, specifically in terms of access to a COVID-19 vaccine (Johnson et al., 2021).

Moreover, there has also been racial reckoning after the horrific deaths of George Floyd and Brianna Taylor in Spring 2020. In the aftermath, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests engulfed the nation, with solidarity marches taking place across the globe. As a result of their struggle against racism, BLM was nominated by Norwegian Parliament member Petter Eide for the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize (Goillandeu & Elassar, 2021). BLM protests, which have been mainly peaceful, have led to a movement that not only brought international attention to police brutality in the United States but also helped to galvanize voter registration among young people and people of color in the 2020 U.S. presidential election (Alter, 2020). As a result of major grassroot efforts, Senator Kamala Harris was elected as the first woman and person of color to become vice president of the United States, offering hope to young girls and children of color that their dreams can become reality. It is with these historical precedents and dilemmas in mind that this special issue of the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* emerges.

### **Miseducation and Historically Excluded Students**

There is a long history of miseducation for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, who have been historically excluded in the United States. Schooling has become increasingly focused on standards, and policymakers have become obsessed with teacher accountability and standardized testing to the extent that talent and creativity have been stifled (Tate, 2019). Comparing students' academic performance

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without accounting for inequities in schools and districts and maintaining a ranking system where it is preferable to be highly ranked has caused tremendous harm to children, especially Black children. The foundation of the measurement enterprise was designed with a deficit lens around a set of racist and dehumanizing ideals to “prove” Black children were less intelligent than White children (Ogbu, 2003). Despite efforts over the last 15–20 years to move beyond the racist foundation of IQ testing, the breadcrumbs and residual effects of this faulty foundation visibly exist in current testing regimes and contribute to poor performance on these tests in school (Rosales, 2018). These measurement tools were never designed to identify or measure the strengths and brilliance of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous children. While Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students in some communities perform well on standardized tests, these tests were developed and normed for White students, who continue to perform quite well because the tests were designed with them in mind. As a result, too many Black, Latinx, and Indigenous children in vulnerable communities continue to receive instruction that is typically steeped in remediation, especially in mathematics (Martin et al., 2019).

Carter G. Woodson (1933/1990) clearly articulated in *The Mis-Education of the Negro* how the U.S. educational system failed to educate Black children. He advocated for more rigorous mathematics, as well as other rigorous subject matter options, to ensure that Black children received a quality education rather than the cultural assimilation that was taking place that worked to erase Black cultural connections and positive Black identities in schools (Tate, 1995; Woodson, 1933/1990). More than 66 years after the decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), mathematics education for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous children continues to be inadequate. Black students are often isolated and marginalized in mathematics classrooms and experience dehumanizing learning experiences regardless of their economic status, academic proficiency, or academic potential (Leonard, 2019; Martin, 2000; Ogbu, 2003).

The frameworks, theories, and research paradigms that perpetuate hegemonic practices are remnants of a colonizing mindset and at best are incomplete and at worst are deliberately oppressive in ways that leverage Whiteness to protect structural oppression and systemic racism in schools and society at large (Martin et al., 2019). Thus, miseducation continues in mathematics, and the other science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields more broadly, for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students. To address this dilemma, we advocate for a paradigmatic shift in teacher education to improve learning among historically excluded and oppressed students in the 21st century. Specifically, we argue for radical pedagogical change, including culturally specific (Leonard, 2019), liberatory (Martin et al., 2019), and communal learning paradigms (Coleman et al., 2017), which have been shown to broaden participation among students of color in mathematics and STEM (Leonard et al., in press).

## Equity in Mathematics Education

We recognize that there are many definitions and conceptions of the term *equity*, even as it relates to mathematics teaching and learning. We even acknowledge that our own understanding and thinking about equity continues to evolve, leading us to offer more precise and nuanced descriptions and definitions of equity. As such, our current conception of equity is anchored to the pillars of access, achievement, identity, and power (Gutiérrez, 2012), with deliberate connections to social justice as defined by the National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics and TODOS: Mathematics for ALL in the following joint statement:

The National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics (NCSM) and TODOS: Mathematics for ALL (TODOS) ratify social justice as a key priority in the access to, engagement with, and advancement in mathematics education for our country's youth. A social justice stance requires a systemic approach that includes fair and equitable teaching practices, high expectations for all students, access to rich, rigorous, and relevant mathematics, and strong family/community relationships to promote positive mathematics learning and achievement. Equally important, a social justice stance interrogates and challenges the roles power, privilege, and oppression play in the current unjust system of mathematics education—and in society as a whole. (n.d., p. 1)

In response to this statement, we see work on equity in mathematics education as being asset-based, assuming and affirming the brilliance of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students and also leveraging their ideas, interests, skills, and perspectives in mathematics classrooms in ways that support them learning rigorous mathematics and developing a positive mathematics identity (Aguirre et al., 2013; Celedón-Pattichis, 2018; Martin, 2000).

The featured articles in this issue of the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* address equity in mathematics education from multiple perspectives (i.e., anti-racism, critical pedagogy, social justice pedagogy, liberation). Cunningham's article, "*We made the math!*: Black parents as a guide for supporting Black children's mathematical identities," highlights the richness of the experiential knowledge that Black parents possess in helping their children develop mathematics identity while also explaining what it means to be Black in mathematics classrooms and in America more broadly. In a qualitative study, Cunningham recruited eight Black parents to examine how they supported their children's mathematical identities. Parents used multiple approaches that included affirmation (i.e., building confidence), pragmatism (i.e., mathematics' usefulness), aspiration (i.e., Black role models), and race-consciousness (i.e., uplift) to support their children's identity development in mathematics. Downing and McCoy's article, "Exploring mathematics of the sociopolitical through culturally relevant pedagogy in a college algebra course at a Historically Black College/University," examines the intersection of culturally relevant, anti-racist, and social justice pedagogy in a college algebra course that took place at a Historically

Black College/University. Qualitative data were collected on eight student participants who responded to anti-racist and social justice topics that ranged from the deaths of unarmed Black men by police to whether or not to raise the minimum wage. Thus, critical mathematics literacy (Frankenstein, 2012) was used as the basis to apply social justice issues to college students' day-to-day lives (McGee, 2016). The final featured article by Yeh et al., "Radical love as praxis: Ethnic studies and teaching mathematics for collective liberation," examines love as an epistemological force and how love can be used to make sense of the confounding contradictory situations that scholars of color in mathematics education often confront. In the current political climate, one reaction to dissatisfaction with political outcomes and disaffection with the electoral process was the violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. On the contrary, violence is never the answer to conflict. Yeh et al. contends that love not only liberates but becomes a pretext to emancipate others (Freire, 1968/2000). Thus, mathematics educators from historically excluded backgrounds must help the educational community to reframe how they see Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students. ALL of the feature articles call us to do just that. In retrospect, we offer our own set of imaginings to make this point salient with three vignettes.

### *Black Boy Joy*

Shortly after our call for papers, an ABC news story of a little boy named Aayan went viral (Muir, 2019). This poignant news story featured three-year-old Aayan and his parents, Alissa and Elfa. They taught Aayan from the time he was born that he is smart, blessed, and can be anything he wants to be. The news report also featured an earlier video taken by his parents when Aayan first learned this mantra as a one-year-old. He did not quite have all of the words, but Aayan clearly embodied the saying. Watching the video of this young, three-year-old child, with beautiful mocha skin and shiny, curly black hair, walking with his mom on his way to school with his backpack on, fruit in hand, saying his daily mantra is a beautiful example of a powerful morning routine for this young Black family. Each day he repeated:

**"I am smart. I am blessed. I can do ANYTHING!"**

Imagine Aayan, dearly loved and full of confidence and hope, walking into a typical elementary school. What types of experiences is he likely to have? Will Aayan's teachers see him as smart, blessed, and capable of doing (learning) anything? What will they say to Aayan? Will the classroom be structured in a way to demonstrate his smartness? What tasks will the teacher assign for students, including Aayan, to work on? Will these tasks leverage his interests and strengths? Will they challenge him, thus helping him to truly see that he is capable of learning anything? How is behavior handled in Aayan's classroom? Will his teacher see him as someone who needs to be controlled, creating an environment where each of his actions are tightly

policed and monitored with significant sanctions for non-compliance? Will Aayan leave school each day with positive examples to share with his parents of how he was smart, how he was blessed, and the things he did each day or will he end up believing that he is only smart, blessed, and capable at home with his loving parents because of an oppressive school system?

These wonderings are not only for Aayan and his parents but for the millions of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous children who attend public schools every day in this country. Do public schools function to build on the knowledge and confidence that young students of color bring with them to schools? These questions are not commonly asked in this manner, but they are worth considering. The second vignette is food for thought in terms of moving from teaching mathematics in traditional ways and *re-imagining* how mathematics can be taught for social justice and empowerment.

### *Black Girl Magic*

Kadijah is an 11-year-old African American girl who lives in the suburbs of a major city and attends a middle school with an International Baccalaureate designation. There is no formal dress code, and the rapport between administrators, teachers, and students is generally one of mutual respect and appreciation. The demographic makeup of the school is quite diverse, and many students speak multiple languages. As such, the school actively works against tracking; instead, heterogeneous grouping is used for all subjects except mathematics. Mathematics courses (e.g., Algebra I, Geometry, etc.) are credit-bearing courses that offer students specific curriculum. According to many in the community, it is an excellent school.

The following example is drawn from a seventh-grade Algebra I classroom. A group of students (two White boys [Brad and Josh], one White girl [Becky], and one Black girl [Kadijah]) were clustered together working on an algebraic project. Kadijah is the only Black girl in the class and one of only two Black students among the 27 students in the class. On day two, Kadijah was expressing her frustrations about the peers in her group during a discussion with her mom after school. Her mom suggested that instead of being silenced or tattling, Kadijah should use a louder voice the next time her ideas were ignored and that action would prompt the curiosity of the teacher who would come to investigate. When the teacher investigates, then the teacher could intervene and hold the students accountable for listening to the ideas of all of the members of their group (as the project directs). On day three, Kadijah's ideas were once again ignored, so she used a louder tone and, in fact, the teacher did rotate over to investigate. As she arrived, the teacher asked Kadijah what was going on. Kadijah started to explain, and as she was talking, Brad also started to talk and was talking over her and giving a different explanation. The teacher responded by asking Kadijah to stop talking because she could not hear what Brad was saying. Kadijah responded by reminding the teacher that she specifically asked for HER

explanation because she was the one who was using the loud tone. The teacher shifted and instead asked Brad to stop talking so she could hear Kadijah's explanation. The situation was resolved by the teacher reminding the students that they were obligated to listen and use the ideas of all of the members of the group for the project.

When Kadijah's mom picked her up from school, she told her what happened in class. Her group learned to listen to her ideas, and as a team they were successful. She was hopeful that her group interactions would be different in the future. Although Kadijah's mom reacted with enthusiasm and remarked that she was very proud of her daughter for having the courage to stand up for herself and handle the situation with grace and respect, she was silently heartbroken that her daughter had to face the same battles that she faced as the only Black girl in advanced mathematics classes some 30 years ago when she was in middle school. She wondered if things will ever change. Nevertheless, Kadijah had voiced her own empowering mantra:

**“I am the living embodiment of Black Girl Magic.”**

Schools could be transformed if teachers saw their work as identifying and contributing to the development of the brilliance that Black students bring to school with them. How might classrooms be structured? Would the classroom include a behavior chart that provides a public display of the teachers' interpretations of children's behavior or a public display of consequences for disengagement? Would students have tables or desks? Would they be grouped together to foster collaboration or separately because individual performance for ranking purposes is highly valued? What types of tasks would students be given? What would be the role of the teacher? What pedagogical skills are needed to make these changes? What feedback needs to be given to students about their academic performance? What strengths and resources from students' lived experiences should be leveraged or erased in the classroom? What does it take to be seen as smart and valuable? The third vignette provides an example of how students used mathematics to show their value to society.

#### *Using Mathematics to Understand the World and Fight for Justice*

On February 14, 2018, a former student using an automatic weapon (AR-15) opened fire at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Three teachers and 14 students, who ranged from ages 14 to 18, were killed in the deadliest high school shooting in U.S. history. Seven of the students who were killed were only 14 years old. Seventeen more people were injured, many of whom were severely injured by protecting the safety of their fellow classmates. In the wake of this horrific event that traumatized the entire community and frightened students, teachers, and parents across the country, the survivors sought to find a productive response. They later recounted talking with their teachers to find ways to productively use their rage and fear.

The first planned outcome was a protest that became known as “March for Our Lives.” Students used social media to coordinate with other students, raise funds, and share their message and vision of a productive response to this tragedy. They successfully raised millions of dollars to support the march, which was held on March 24, 2018, a mere five weeks after the deadly shooting. Well designed and well coordinated, the only speakers at the event were school-age children from all grade levels. In a brilliant and powerful manner, in front of 800,000 people along with tens of millions of people around the world watching the televised event, these students used mathematics to craft their arguments. Mathematics was used to help them make sense of what happened, to communicate their outrage at the injustice, and demand changes that would make their schools and communities safer. For example, the students argued that in their state there were  $X$  number of people but  $X$  number of registered guns. One of the most powerful examples were the price tags they created and affixed to themselves showing \$1.05. The tag read, “Politicians like Marco Rubio receive millions from the NRA. Don’t put a price on us.”

Attendees of the march used these tags and posters to demonstrate their support for the movement against gun violence in schools (see Figure 1). These students used mathematics to better understand the problem they were facing and to craft an example about how to express their outrage. The students argued that the lives of their friends were worth more than \$1.05. In fact, these students demonstrated untapped value and immeasurable potential. They are our future teachers, clergy, business leaders, engineers, doctors, lawyers, and politicians. What mathematics should we teach and how should we teach it to support students in re-imagining our country as a place where Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students can exhibit all of their brilliance and all of their humanity? How can we help them fight for justice and create a better country that lives up to its ideals?



*Figure 1.* A tag used by students, such as Naima Goffney (age 12, right), while marching for justice at the March for Our Lives protest in Washington, D.C. Photographs courtesy of Imani Goffney. For more information of the march, see <https://marchforourlives.com/chapter/mfol-washington-dc/>

## Conclusion

The foregoing three vignettes help to frame the theme for the featured articles in this special issue: I, too, am America! Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students deserve to be heard and to have high-quality mathematics instruction, which has been identified as the key to success (Martin et al., 2010). Teachers can use data from COVID-19, the electoral process, unemployment, and wage disparity to help students understand the problems and dilemmas they face, but more importantly how to use their individual and collective voices to read and “right” the world with mathematics (Berry et al., 2020; Gutstein, 2006).

We encourage readers to fully engage with the featured articles beyond the usual scholarly practice of reading and citing the works in scholarly contributions. We encourage readers to utilize the featured articles and the special issue as a platform to transform mathematics education in Educator Preparation Programs. We must fully prepare future mathematics teachers to meet the needs of all of our nation’s students and expand curricular offerings in K–12 schools to advanced-level mathematics classes that welcome and fully embrace Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students into a classroom environment where equity is not an “add-on” but the new normal in the learning process. It is our hope that this special issue serves as a scholarly contribution that facilitates change far beyond the walls of academia and penetrates the hallways and classrooms of schools and communities across the United States and abroad.

We conclude this special issue by acknowledging our children face an uncertain future that has been exacerbated by two pandemics—racism and COVID-19, but there is hope. As notable scholar, Dr. Eddie Glaude, reminded us by quoting James Baldwin during an interview on *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* (Amira et al., 2020), “Hope is invented every day.” Glaude (2020) argued in his latest book, *Begin Again*, that Baldwin insisted that we be true to ourselves—that we tell the truth about our history as a nation so that we can free ourselves from the past and imagine how we might live together differently in the future. Leveraging this idea, the principle could be applied in mathematics education. Can we be courageous enough to tell the truth about the whitewashing and oppressive history of the discipline of mathematics? Can we acknowledge that mathematics educators and researchers have not always challenged racist and oppressive practices? If so, then we, too, can free ourselves to not only imagine but to build a world that is anti-racist and just. Though we may have been bruised and battered by social injustice, racial and educational inequality, and COVID-19, as poet laureate Amanda Gorman proclaimed on January 20, 2021, in the excerpt below, we, as Americans, are an unfinished work in progress (Gorman, 2021, pp. 11–13):

*When day comes, we ask ourselves where can we find light in this never-ending shade?*

*The loss we carry, a sea we must wade.*

*We've braved the belly of the beast.*

*We've learned that quiet isn't always peace,  
and the norms and notions of what 'just' is isn't always justice.*

*And yet, the dawn is ours before we knew it.*

*Somehow we do it.*

*Somehow we've weathered and witnessed a nation that isn't broken,  
but simply unfinished.*

~

*We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover.*

*In every known nook of our nation, in every corner called our country,  
our people, diverse and beautiful, will emerge, battered and beautiful.*

*When day comes, we step out of the shade, aflame and unafraid.*

*The new dawn blooms as we free it.*

*For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it.*

*If only we're brave enough to be it.*

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