Georgia State University
ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

Middle-Secondary Education and Instructional Technology Faculty Publications

Department of Middle-Secondary Education and Instructional Technology

2013

Conversations about Privilege and Oppression in Mathematics Education

David W. Stinson
Georgia State University, dstinson@gsu.edu

Joi A. Spencer

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/msit_facpub

Part of the Elementary and Middle and Secondary Education Administration Commons, Instructional Media Design Commons, Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons, and the Secondary Education and Teaching Commons

Recommended Citation
Stinson, D. W. & Spencer, J. A. (2013). Conversations about privilege and oppression in mathematics education. *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education,* 6(1), 1–5.

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Middle-Secondary Education and Instructional Technology at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Middle-Secondary Education and Instructional Technology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.

Journal of Urban Mathematics Education
July 2013, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 1–5
©JUME. http://education.gsu.edu/JUME

GUEST EDITORIAL

Conversations About Privilege and Oppression in Mathematics Education

David W. Stinson
Georgia State University

Joi A. Spencer
University of San Diego

> …I think the African American community is also not naïve in understanding that, statistically, somebody like Trayvon Martin was statistically more likely to be shot by a peer than he was by somebody else. So folks understand the challenges that exist for African American boys. But they get frustrated, I think, if they feel that there's no context for it and that context is being denied. And that all contributes I think to a sense that if a white male teen was involved in the same kind of scenario, that, from top to bottom, both the outcome and the aftermath might have been different.
>
> …Now, the question for me at least, and I think for a lot of folks, is where do we take this? How do we learn some lessons from this and move in a positive direction?
>
> I think it's going to be important for all of us to do some soul-searching. …[I]n families and churches and workplaces, there's the possibility that people are a little bit more honest, and at least you ask yourself your own questions about, am I wringing as much bias out of myself as I can? Am I judging people as much as I can, based on not the color of their skin, but the content of their character? That would, I think, be an appropriate exercise in the wake of this tragedy.
>
> …And so we have to be vigilant and we have to work on these issues. And those of us in authority should be doing everything we can to encourage the better angels of our nature.
>
> – Barack Hussein Obama II • 44th President of the United States of America

The purposefully selected quotes (above) from President Obama's remarks on Trayvon Martin delivered in the White House Press Briefing Room on July 19, 2013[1] effectively frame the intended spirit of this *JUME* special issue (co-guest edited with Joi Spencer). The special issue was conceived of in October 2012 as we

[1] For President Obama's complete "Remarks by the President on Trayvon Martin," see http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/19/remarks-president-trayvon-martin.

DAVID W. STINSON is an associate professor of mathematics education in the Department of Middle and Secondary Education in the College of Education, at Georgia State University, P.O. Box 3978, Atlanta, GA, 30303; e-mail: dstinson@gsu.edu. His research interests include exploring socio-cultural, -historical, and -political aspects of mathematics and mathematics teaching and learning from a critical postmodern theoretical (and methodological) perspective. He is a co-founder and current editor-in- chief of the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education*.

JOI A. SPENCER is an associate professor of mathematics education in the Department of Learning and Teaching in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences, at the University of San Diego, 5998 Alcala Park, San Diego, CA 92110; e-mail: joi.spencer@sandiego.edu. Her research examines African American student mathematics identities and the mathematics instructional practices of those who teach Black students.

(David and Joi), along with approximately 40 other mathematics educators from approximately 25 universities, attended the Privilege and Oppression in the Mathematics Preparation of Teacher Educators (PrOMPTE[2]) conference held in Battle Creek, Michigan. Mathematics educators from Michigan State University (Beth Herbel-Eisenmann, Tonya Bartell, Kristen Bieda, Sandra Crespo, Higinio Dominguez, and Corey Drake) and Bucknell University (M. Lynn Breyfogle) convened the conference. The electronic-mail invitation to the conference stated:

> We would like to invite you to participate in a small conference titled *Privilege and Oppression in the Mathematics Preparation of Teacher Educators* (PrOMPTE), where we will engage in conversations about systems of privilege and oppression (e.g., racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism) in our work as mathematics teacher educators (MTEs). Although MTEs have begun to talk about these issues in relation to the preparation of mathematics teachers (MTs) and mathematics teaching, we rarely talk about them with respect to our own preparation and the preparation of future MTEs. Our hypothesis is that concentrated attention to thoughtful discussion and action related to identifying, understanding, and confronting systems of privilege and oppression can improve our work as MTEs and, ultimately, will impact MTs' and students' learning experiences in mathematics classrooms, especially students who have been historically underserved in schools. This conference will provide a venue in which to plan and take thoughtful action. By "thoughtful action," we mean action that can allow us to change our own interactions related to systems of privilege and oppression, develop strategies for working on these systems amongst ourselves and with our graduate and undergraduate students, and enable us to invite others into such conversations.
>
> (B. Herbel-Eisenmann, personal communication, August 8, 2012)

As part of the "thoughtful action" called for in the invitation and throughout the 3-day conference, the intention of this *JUME* special issue is to invite all mathematics educators (and others) into conversations about systems of privilege and oppression. The request for manuscripts for possible inclusion was sent to all PrOMPTE conference participants. Manuscripts were limited to 3,500 words or less (exclusive of references, tables, figures, etc.), although, longer manuscripts were considered; revised through an open, peer-review process; and accepted in a variety of formats (e.g., narratives, reflections, dialogues, storytelling, critiques, etc.). The scholarly contributions found here, however, should not be read as "research articles" aimed as providing probable "solutions" to the injustices of privilege and oppression in mathematics education. But rather, read as academic essays of invitation to join in scholarly discourse across differences in critically examining privilege and oppression as mathematics educators (i.e., mathematics education researchers, teacher educators, classroom

[2] Privilege and Oppression in the Mathematics Preparation of Teacher Educators (PrOMPTE) conference (funded by CREATE for STEM Institute through the Lappan-Phillips-Fitzgerald CMP 2 Innovation Grant program), Michigan State University, Battle Creek, MI, October 2012. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funding agency.

teachers, and mathematicians). In other words, they are to be read as inclusive continuations or extensions of the critical conversations that were begun at the PrOMPTE conference. Each of the eight essays included, authored or co-authored by 14 conference participants, challenges all those who are concerned with providing a humanizing and empowering (mathematics) education for all children (Bartolomé, 1994; Freire, 1970/2000) to break the deafening sound of silence of privilege and oppression in mathematics education specifically and in schools and society generally.

In the opening essay, "Strong is the Silence: Challenging Interlocking Systems of Privilege and Oppression in Mathematics Teacher Education," Beth Herbel-Eisenmann, Tonya Gau Bartell, M. Lynn Breyfogle, Kristen Bieda, Sandra Crespo, Higinio Dominguez, and Corey Drake, explore the interlocking systems of privilege and oppression in relationship to themselves as mathematics teacher educators and in the preparation of new mathematics teacher educators. Beth and colleagues provide justifications in calling for multiple conversations about privilege and oppression at all levels of mathematics education. They present their justifications from both personal perspectives, sharing their own struggles in engaging in such conversations, and scholarly perspectives, drawing upon the research literature that supports such conversations.

Joel Amidon, in his essay, "Teaching Mathematics as Agape: Responding to Oppression with Unconditional Love," theorizes an ideal relationship between students and mathematics that is functional, communal, critical, and inspirational through teaching mathematics as an act of unconditional love. He begins his theorizing by asking: What do I do from my position of power and privilege as a mathematics teacher, researcher, and teacher educator to interrupt oppression and enable everyone the opportunity and expectation of success in mathematics and in life? This question is a solid beginning—to dismantle privilege and oppression, one must first come to understand it and see how it operates.

In their essay, "'All for One and One for All': Negotiating Solidarity Around Power and Oppression in Mathematics Education," Victoria (Vicki) Hand and Imani Masters Goffney reflect on the tensions inherent in standing with and speaking on behalf of communities. They provide "cautionary tales" in regards to the *intensions* and *impact* of actions as they speak back to the burgeoning group of mathematics education researchers who focus on equity and justice. Vicki and Imani discuss how "equity" researchers might build the research base of equity work in mathematics education. But caution that in an effort to present a unified face to the larger mathematics education community, equity work runs the risk of marginalizing the multiplicity of possible voices within the field.

Tonya Gau Bartell and Kate Johnson provide lists of both privilege and oppression as they begin to unpack the invisible knapsack of privilege in mathematics education research in their essay, "Making Unseen Privilege Visible in Mathematics Education Research." Tonya and Kate take a macro look at the field of mathematics ed-

ucation research, asking mathematics education researchers to assess their own privilege. They warn that a lack of self-examination often leads to paternalistic stances and solutions to the problems of mathematics teaching and learning. Tonya and Kate speak most directly to those whom the field of mathematics education is centered—researchers—calling for researchers to examine their positionality and to consider how the questions they ask might stymie victories for students most in need.

Judit Moschkovich describes principles for equitable mathematics teaching practices for English Language Learners and outlines guidelines for materials to support such practices in her essay, "Principles and Guidelines for Equitable Mathematics Teaching Practices and Materials for English Language Learners." Judit contends that the "language of mathematics" should not be understood merely as a list of vocabulary or technical words with precise meanings, but rather as the multiple communicative competencies necessary for equitable participation in high cognitive demand mathematical tasks. The principles and guidelines she provides stress the importance of creating learning environments that support all students in engaging in rich mathematical activities and discourse.

In their essay, "Advocating for Equitable Mathematics Education: Supporting Novice Teachers in Navigating the Sociopolitical Context of Schools," Craig Willey and Corey Drake present questions that novice mathematics teachers might ask at the personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural levels that hold the potential to disrupt the too often oppressive dominant discourses of mathematics teaching and learning. Given the current out-of-control era of accountability, they argue it is increasingly necessary that teacher educators assist pre- and in-service teachers to develop a critical consciousness about the sociopolitical context of schooling and to assume an activist stance. Craig and Corey propose ways that mathematics educators might assist those with overwhelmingly little power (new teachers) to do the hard work—the work of disrupting privilege and oppression in the mathematics classroom.

Laura McLeman and Joyce Piert share some of their journey, through a back-and-forth professional dialogue, as they seek to make sense of what it might mean to prepare secondary mathematics preservice teachers to teach mathematics for social justice in their essay, "Considering the Social Justice Mathematical Journey of Secondary Mathematics Preservice Teachers." Laura and Joyce's dialogue becomes centered on the question: Should all college-level mathematics courses be taught through a lens of social justice? Their dialogue exposes the kinds of stalemates that too often occur at the collegiate mathematics level. In the midst of their dialogue, Laura and Joyce have an epiphany: in order to help preservice teachers rethink mathematics—and in order for them to rethink mathematics themselves—they realize that they must take a leap (of faith of sorts).

And, in similar style, Anita Wager and Kristin Whyte, in their essay, "Young Children's Mathematics: Whose Home Practices Are Privileged?," share a professional dialogue about the ways in which issues of power and privilege emerge in pre-

school classrooms when teachers endeavor to build on children's home and school mathematical experiences. Throughout the dialogue, Anita and Kristin focus on three questions: What home mathematics practices do pre-K teachers privilege? How does privileging particular practices reinforce or interrupt historical power structures in teacher/parent and teacher/child relationships? Which families and children do teachers privilege and how might that privileging oppress others? They claim that teachers need to have explicit conversations about *what*, *how*, and *who* they privilege and what the consequences of that power to privilege might have in their work with families and children.

We believe that the essays within the pages of this *JUME* special issue (and the extensive scholarship cited throughout) provides ample entry points for critically challenging and productively discomforting conversations about privilege and oppression among colleagues and students (and others) as well as within oneself—a sort of pedagogical tool, if you will. We hope and trust that the conversations begun at the PrOMPTE conference and continued or extended here will be a catalyst for critical soul-searching, asking oneself (and one another): "Am I wringing as much bias out of myself as I can" (Obama, 2013, ¶23)? In what we hope to be collective efforts of "becoming a more perfect union—not a perfect union, but a more perfect union" (Obama, ¶25), we challenge mathematics educators to take up President Obama's charge. In the absence of justice for far too many, mathematics educators, as people of authority, must put ourselves, our positions, our power—our privilege—on the line. Unafraid and unashamed, we must ask questions from the margins, evaluate and re-evaluate our stances, and critique our work for the purpose of justice in our field specifically, and in schools and society generally. The conversations at the PrOMPTE conference and continued or extended here, take the stand that change begins at home. Privilege and oppression is not a figment of "other peoples'" imagination, but holds a great deal of explanatory power related to achievement and success differentials in mathematics in the United States (and throughout the globe). For the tide to change in regard to mathematics opportunities, we, as mathematics educators, must be vigilant in examining and re-examining our work, our commitments, and ourselves. Then, we must do the hard work of making things right—"doing everything we can to encourage the better angels of our nature" (Obama, ¶25).

References

Bartolomé, L. I. (1994). Beyond the methods fetish: Toward a humanizing pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review, 64,* 173–194.

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.; 30th anniv. ed.). New York, NY: Continuum. (Original work published 1970)

Obama, B. H. (2013). Remarks by the President on Trayvon Martin. Retrieved from http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/19/remarks-president-trayvon-martin.