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Recommended Citation

Stinson, D. W. (2013). An English only fountain: A response to Tamsin Meaney's critique of English privilege in mathematics education research. In M. Berger, K. Brodie, V. Frith, & K. le Roux (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 7th International Mathematics Education and Society Conference (MES7, Vol. 1, pp. 85–88)*. Cape Town, South Africa: MES7.

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AN ENGLISH ONLY FOUNTAIN: A RESPONSE TO TAMSIN MEANEY’S CRITIQUE OF ENGLISH PRIVILEGE IN MATHEMATICS EDUCATION RESEARCH

David W. Stinson

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Tamsin Meaney (2013) writes in the introduction to her essay “The Privileging of English in Mathematics Education Research, Just a Necessary Evil?” that her purpose is to explore the ways that representation of mathematics education research (or knowledge) is increasingly constrained by the specific regulation of “English Only.” She contends that we (i.e., members of the international mathematics education community) have adopted, perhaps without critical analysis, English Only as a necessary condition of working as members of a larger community who wish to cross national borders. But is it really a necessary condition or “are we colluding not just in our own oppression... but in that of others whose voices are reduced or removed when they are forced to use English?” Meaney believes that for some her argument might seem to be provocative while to others it might seem to be paranoid. Nevertheless, what Meaney highlights could be called the *language diversity in knowledge production and dissemination paradox*: we simultaneously advocate for cultural diversity all the while we exclude language diversity, specifically, in regards to knowledge production and dissemination.

Table 1: ENGLISH ONLY Mathematics Education Research

Journals	Conferences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eurasia Journal of Mathematics Science and Technology Education • For the Learning of Mathematics • International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education • Journal for Research in Mathematics Education • Journal of Mathematical Behavior • Journal of Mathematics Teacher Education • Research in Mathematics Education • ZDM – The International Journal on Mathematics Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Congress on Mathematical Education (ICME) • International Group for the Psychology of Mathematics Education (PME) • Mathematics Education and Society International Conference (MES) • National Council of Teachers of Mathematics Research Pre-session • North American Chapter of the International Group for the Psychology of Mathematics Education (PME-NA)

For instance, Table 1 provides a list of the “international?” journals[1] and conferences that require English Only submissions – so much for internationalism. If one juxtaposes her or his emotional responses (or lack thereof) to Table 1 with her or

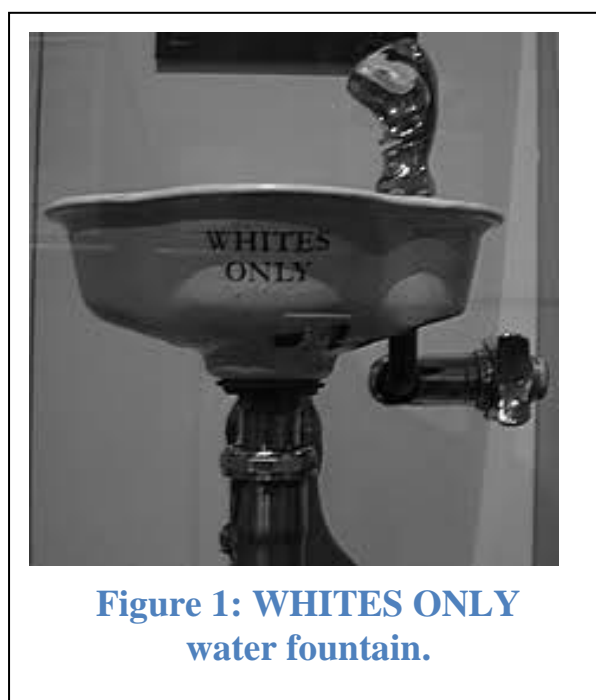
his emotional responses (hopefully) to Figure 1, she or he, I believe, is able to get Meaney's argument. That is to say, most (if not all) of us understand that the "WHITES ONLY" water fountain is an egregious injustice that delivers a resounding message of exclusion and marginalisation (such water fountains were commonly found in the Jim Crow South United States and Apartheid South Africa). And, in turn, most (all?) of us would strongly declare that such exclusionary and marginalising practices are unjust and would hopefully work toward eradicating such injustices. But why do we not react in like fashion to the unjust exclusion and marginalisation of the "ENGLISH ONLY" manuscript and proposal submission process? Why no emotional response to Table 1? Is it true, as Meaney suggests, that too many (most?) of us have accepted the oppression of English Only as a necessary component or evil of working as academics across national borders?

Meaney's essay, I believe, is not intended so much to answer the question *Why English Only?* but more so to get us to ask the question and to begin to think of ways that we might work ourselves out of the language diversity paradox. She structures her argument by first establishing the exclusionary problem as a reality. Next, she provides some explanations of why English speaking mathematics educators, in particular, (too often?) have become "blind to language issues." And she concludes with some possible ways forward.

In this brief written reaction to Meaney's essay, my explicit purpose is to provoke an emotional response with the juxtaposition of the two visuals (Table 1 and Figure 1).

However, while intentionally aiming for an emotional response, it is important to note that I am not suggesting that the injustices of Jim Crow and Apartheid were (are) one in the same nor that the injustices of English Only is somehow equivalent to the injustices of Jim Crow or Apartheid. But rather to note, borrowing from the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and Civil Rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963/1998): "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (p. 189).

In this context, the visual of the water fountain is apropos as it is in keeping with the often-used Western metaphor: *Drinking from the fountain of knowledge*. And it is in the limiting of knowledge that Meaney directs her focus as she refuses to simplify the reasons behind and consequences of English Only. Theoretically, she pulls from Bernstein and Apple to couch her argument in the larger discourse of neoliberalism.



Lipman (2011), in her recent book *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City*, describes neoliberalism as

an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere. Neoliberals champion privatization of social goods and withdrawal of government from provision for social welfare on the premise that competitive markets are more effective and efficient. Neoliberalism is not just “out there” as a set of policies and explicit ideologies. It has developed as a new social imaginary, a common sense about how we think about society and our place in it. (p. 6)

Lipman’s (2011) extended description of neoliberalism, I believe, frames Meaney’s argument well. English Only has evidently become an uncritical common sense way of thinking about mathematics education knowledge production and dissemination. In many ways, policies and ideologies of neoliberalism have made ways out of the diversity language paradox of mathematics education appear to be somehow impossible. But are they, really?

Meaney notes that the mathematics education conference Commission Internationale pour l’Etude et l’Amélioration de l’Enseignement des Mathématiques (Commission for the Study and Improvement of Mathematics Teaching) (CIEAM; see <http://www.cieam.org/?q=node/12>) includes presentations in both French and English. Similarly, one of the three non-English language journals included in the European Reference Index for the Humanities, *Revista Latinoamericana de Investigación en Matemática Educativa – Relime* (see <http://www.clame.org.mx/relime/relimee.html>), accepts and publishes manuscripts in Spanish, Portuguese, English, and French. These are just two examples of how it is indeed possible to find a way out of the language diversity paradox.

A PERSONAL CLOSING THOUGHT...

Elsewhere (Stinson, 2010), I wrote an editorial about my extraordinary experience at the Sixth International Mathematics Education and Society Conference (MES 6) held in Berlin, German during the spring of 2010. Below is an excerpt from that editorial:

I must admit, however, that after the first agora (i.e., business meeting) of MES 6, I began to focus on the “structure” of MES 6 rather than its people. In so doing, I became somewhat disenchanted with the conference, given that I perceived some aspects of the structure of the agora to be too similar to the structures found in education conferences in the United States; structures that are designed (most often?) to maintain rather than transform the status quo. ...

Unfortunately, and in too many ways, I believe that even for members of ghettos it is difficult to think the unthought (cf. Foucault, 1969/1972) in our individual and

collective attempts to construct spaces that might be more ethical and just. In that, members of ghettos, like members of dominant groups, have been so discursively constituted within the multiplicities of unethical and unjust sociocultural and sociohistorical structures and discourses (cf. Foucault, 1969/1972) that we often – unintentionally, I suppose – duplicate the very structures and discourses that positioned us as members of ghettos in the first place. I include this brief, but important, critique of MES 6 to make clear that it was not without its flaws. (pp.34).

The specific disenchantment noted in the excerpt was in regards to what I perceived to be the silencing of a discussion about how language diversity might be embraced both at the conference and within the pages of the conference proceedings. I – a monolingual, English speaking mathematics educator – proposed the question. It was most disheartening when I perceived the very brief discussion (and somewhat negative reactions in general) to be more about why the status quo of English Only should be maintained rather than about how we might work ourselves out of the language diversity paradox. Here at MES 7, I am most hopeful that Meaney’s critical, provocative, and timely essay will be the beginning of a thoughtful and fruitful discussion among members of what I believe to be one of the most thoughtful groups of mathematics educators in the world.

NOTES

1. The mathematics education journals listed are included in the European Reference Index for the Humanities (ERIH) and/or Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). It is important to note that the ERIH included three non-English mathematics education journals: *La matematica e la sua didattica*, *Nordisk matematikdidaktikk / Nordic Studies in Mathematics Education*, and *Revista Latinoamericana de Investigación en Matemática Educativa – Relime*; the SSCI listed only English language journals. For more information about ERIH, see <http://www.esf.org/research-areas/humanities/erih-european-reference-index-for-the-humanities.html>; for more information about SSCI, see <http://science.thomsonreuters.com/cgi-bin/jrnlst/jlresults.cgi?PC=SS&SC=HA>.

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