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GUEST EDITORIAL

On the Brilliance of Black Children: A Response to a Clarion Call

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In this special issue of the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* (*JUME*), we believe a new precedent was set in the mentoring and development of mathematics education scholars in which we were fortunate enough to play a role. As three doctoral students from three different institutions, we were given the extraordinary opportunity and unique responsibility to serve as co-editors for the Proceedings of the 2010 Philadelphia and 2011 Atlanta Benjamin Banneker Association (BBA) Conferences under the supervision of the editor-in-chief, Dr. David W. Stinson. Relying on the previous experience of the assistant to editor-in-chief, Erika C. Bullock, we managed the process from the issuing of invitations to the conference speakers to the final round of revisions.

During the editing process we found ourselves continually referencing the clarion call by Dr. Danny B. Martin[1] (Martin, 2011), who urged attendees of the

[1] Unfortunately, Dr. Martin was not able to contribute to this special issue. The PowerPoint slides from his presentation, and those of the other 2011 conference presenters, are available on the Benjamin Banneker Association website (http://www.bannekermath.org).

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2011 BBA Conference to engage in research and argumentation with *the brilliance of Black children* as axiomatic. It was evident in our conversations and interactions with each manuscript that we did not see this call as an exercise in sloganeering; rather, it moved us individually and collectively. In other words, taking the brilliance of Black children as an axiom seriously disrupted our sense of doing the work of mathematics education research related to Black children. We understood this call as a challenge to our work as emerging scholars and, in this immediate case, as editors. Although we acknowledged that editing (i.e., really conceptualizing) with Black brilliance in mind would require modest shifts in our own thinking, we were unprepared for the intense and insidious gravity of our own deficit thinking, given we believed ourselves to be progressive thinkers, promising scholars, and Black nonetheless. In this editorial we assume the responsibility to address some of the major issues that we have wrestled—and continue to wrestle—with as it relates to Black mathematics education research.

Thinking Axiomatically about Black Children

In the talk, "Proofs and Refutations: The Making of Black Children in Mathematics Education," Martin (2011) took a note from Imre Lakatos to describe the production of mathematical knowledge relating to Black children as a series of axioms, conjectures, and counterexamples.[2] According to Martin, there are two lines of argumentation within the process of proof and refutation, about Black children, both of which are equally problematic: (1) "Black children are mathematically illiterate and intellectually inferior to White and Asian children;" and, alternatively, (2) "Black children are brilliant." Both are put forth as conjectures and lead mathematics education scholars to produce knowledge that maintains the racial hierarchy of mathematics ability, wherein Black children are positioned at the bottom. These conjectures also place those who hold opposing views in a position to produce counterexamples that disprove the conjectures, resulting in a stalemate.

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[2] In his presentation, Dr. Martin defined these terms as follows:

> An *axiom* is a logical statement that is assumed to be true. Axioms are not proven or demonstrated, but rather considered to be self-evident. Axioms serve as starting points for deducing and inferring other truths.
>
> A *conjecture* is a proposition that is unproven but is thought to be true and has not been disproven.
>
> A *counterexample* is an exception to a proposed general rule. Counterexamples are used to show that certain conjectures are false.

For example, in the first conjecture, knowledge is produced via examples that focus on the inferiority of Black children's mathematical ability, namely, the throngs of literature describing "achievement gaps" in standardized tests (see, e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Of course, this conjecture places critical scholars who wish to refute such examples in the untenable position of *proving* that Black children are not mathematically illiterate and inferior. In this case, as Martin notes, knowledge production continues to reify notions of deficiency. Contrary to how it may appear, the second conjecture, "Black children are brilliant," does not escape this pitfall. In this case, researchers concentrate their efforts on proving that Black children are brilliant, yet such evidence and examples are simply refuted by a return to the status quo, where de facto constructions of Black children as less than brilliant persist. The only escape from this quagmire is to treat the *brilliance of Black children* not as a conjecture, but as axiomatic—a self-evident, starting point for deducing and inferring other truths. Martin (2011) gives three key points for moving forward:

- We must accept, and insist on, the brilliance of Black children as axiomatic.
- We must avoid the trap of having to prove that Black children are brilliant.
- We must avoid generating arguments, logic models, and counternarratives requiring proof that Black children are not brilliant.

We suggest that taking Martin's (2011) axiomatic stance calls into question many aspects of current scholarship. We first felt this need for questioning when discussing the lifeblood of Black mathematics education scholarship—critical race theory (CRT). One of the key tenets of CRT (see Jett, this issue) is the counternarrative (as opposed to the master or dominant narrative), which works to refute hegemonic claims of Black inferiority. Consider that much of the scholarship on Black students in primary, secondary, and college in the last ten years relied on counternarratives generated by "successful" (read: brilliant) Black children, adolescents, and young adults. Despite honorable intentions, these counternarratives—and particularly the focus on successful Black children—reinforced the notion that successful Black children are the exception, not the rule. We certainly have the privilege of retrospection in reviewing this work and we recognize the imminent need at the time to push against the wave of deficit research on Black children in mathematics education of the 1980s and 1990s (which continues today). We also recognize that the BBA Conference marked a moment with potential to pivot towards new forms of argumentation, that is, new axioms on which to build new truths about Black children. Our intent here is not to criticize our predecessors who have advanced the conversation regarding Black children in mathematics by researching success and shining the light of research and teacher education efforts on Black children. To the contrary, we extend our gratitude toward those who have come before us and look toward the future to consider how our

landscape of responsibility is changing as we take this sociopolitical turn in mathematics education and mathematics education research (Gutiérrez, 2010). We do not purport to have answers; we are armed only with questions and an invitation to enter into a constant state of dis-ease by continually reflecting upon the questions: *What do I **really** believe about Black children and their abilities? How does my work reflect those beliefs?* and *Given that Black children are brilliant, how does this affect my research agenda?*

Questioning Prevailing Axioms

Some may suggest that taking an axiomatic stance on Black children's brilliance is more intellectual posturing than substance. Yet, we only need to be reminded of the current axioms on which knowledge about Black children are built to see the need for change. The recent tragedy of Trayvon Martin serves as an unfortunate reminder of the axiom: "Black children are criminals." This position dictates that the very presence of a Black male adolescent is cause for suspicion and presumed criminality—a criminal so heinous, in fact, that his presence poses an imminent threat against which the "victim" must "stand his ground." This axiom of criminality mediates Black children's lived experiences in and out of the school system, as evidenced by the spring release of a U.S. Department of Education study that found Black and Latina/o students are three and a half times more likely to be suspended or expelled than White students (Adams & Robelen, 2012). The axioms that we choose have a material reality and, in Trayvon's case, a deadly reality.

An equally pernicious axiom that remains unspoken, unquestioned, and often undetected is "White children are the standard." Under this axiom, Black children's test scores, behavioral and socioemotional patterns, as well as their dress and speech are subject to comparison of a fictitious, normalized White child. We (you may count yourself among us) have occasionally felt that pang of pride, however momentary, when a class or school of Black children are highlighted on the nightly news with their khaki pants, collared shirts, and blazers and singing in unison. These Black children create the optics of normalization; they appear to "do school" in an idyllic manner that is non-threatening to White middle-class sensibilities and is subconsciously part of our desire to see Black children reflected as valuable and precious in larger society. This moment of pride comes with a cost—a clear subtext—namely, that Black children are only valuable to the extent that they reflect Whiteness. The axiom of White standardization harkens Frantz Fanon's (1967) classic indictment in *Black Skins, White Masks*: "For the black man [and woman] there is only one destiny. And it is [to become] white" (p. 10). Thus, in the realm of mathematics education, the destiny of Black children has been confined to closing a so-called "racial achievement gap." By assuming

White children as our standard, we limit our imagination for generations of Black children to nothing more than what most of us have been taught since childhood: to work twice as hard and to be considered just as good as the average White child. Moreover, maintaining the axiom of White standardization requires that we cede to a set of beliefs that disallow Black children from being standard-bearers, because they are inevitably lacking in some "objective" capacity. Despite obvious problems, the axiom of standardization persists and is repeatedly invoked with every insinuation of an achievement gap. With an axiomatic stance of Black brilliance, we consider achievement gap rhetoric to be a relic of deficit-research with diminishing returns and, thus, should be avoided, particularly, when used in the defense of Black children in mathematics.

A Challenge to the Community

So, what does it mean for the next generation of mathematics education scholars to take an axiomatic stance of Black brilliance? What possibilities does this stance create? What possibilities does it eliminate? Our work is most often a reflection of who we are and what we value. Even methodological approaches that claim little or no influence from researcher subjectivity are unable to avoid the residue of researcher bias. This evidence of our positionality as researchers often not easily seen but becomes evident through careful reflection. As we consider the prevailing axioms about Black children, some of which we discussed above, we must assess our own complicity in the perpetuation and reproduction of these discourses through even those elements of our research that seem insignificant. The way that we select participants, frame interview or research questions, write up our research, solicit grant funding, or even focus on particular students during classroom observations are all influenced by and evidence of the axioms that we choose about teaching, learning, research, and Black children.

Of course, this call to reflective caution is not limited to researchers. To the mathematics educator: how do you talk about Black children in the presence of the young, White, middle-class, and female preservice teachers who overwhelmingly fill your classrooms (Martin, 2009; Walker, 2007)? Do you dismiss subtle statements of deficiency as the comments of an exhausted and over-extended teacher? This call is one for accountability throughout the community of mathematics educators and researchers who are concerned with Black children. We must contemplate our own missteps, gently critique those of our colleagues, and remain open to that critique. We believe that exercising this reflexivity in the development of axiomatic stances is different than merely shifting discourses or reframing the phenomenon of Black children's mathematics education experiences. An axiomatic stance of brilliance transcends the offensive position (e.g., proving Black children are brilliant) and defensive position (e.g., refuting Black children's

illiteracy or inferiority) involved in framing and forecloses on the endless cycle of proving Black children's brilliance. A new axiom of Black brilliance signals a new set of research questions and a new approach to mathematics teacher education that have nothing to do with Black children's achievement, as their ability and potential is no longer in question.

Although treating brilliance as axiomatic may forestall the surge of interview-based research in Black mathematics education (given counternarratives are no longer necessary as proof), new possibilities abound. Research questions can move beyond offensive or defensive positioning to locate and highlight unique characteristics of Black students, teachers, and classrooms. In response to different questions, the axiom of brilliance may encourage the influx of re-discovered methodologies such as microethnography, sociolinguistics, and (critical) discourse analysis that make familiar (and strange) the circuitous rhythms of Black mathematics classrooms and communities. Finally, new questions and rediscovered methodologies will facilitate new modes of data representation and connections to the broader sociopolitical structures in the schools, communities, states, and nation.

Equity in the Face of Brilliance

To conclude, we note that the axiomatic stance of brilliance indexes a new conceptualization of equity research, wherein inequity, disparity, and marginalization are perhaps backdrops, but not foci for our questions and arguments. Equity based on the conjecture of Black brilliance begs for measurement, comparison, and legitimation, whereas an approach to equity based on axioms demands attention and remuneration on principle, not evidence. In other words, we can no longer afford to make equity arguments on evidentiary grounds, we have learned from those before us that no amount of evidence or proof will be sufficient to mandate systemic change—there is no silver study. We believe that forceful moral argumentation is the way forward for systemic change under the axiom of brilliance.

We arrive with these arguments, questions, and conclusions humbly and largely by virtue of the incredible opportunity to serve as editors. For that, we are particularly thankful. As we considered this idea of axiomatic brilliance through editing the manuscripts in this issue and discussing those manuscripts and this editorial, we encountered a crisis of our own assumptions. For three young scholars who embarked upon the doctoral process with hopes of changing the lived experiences of Black children, their teachers, their communities, and their schools, this process of "rethinking [our] rethinking" (Stinson, 2004, p. xx) left us feeling rather uneasy. Despite our discomfort, we persist, knowing (or hoping) that our continual questioning of our own motivations will allow us to remain true to the people and communities that we intend to serve.

Authors' Note

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