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## RESPONSE COMMENTARY*

# A Critical Dialogue: Continuing the Conversation about "The Collective Black and *Principles to Actions*"

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In a previous volume (Vol. 8, No. 1) of the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* (*JUME*), Professor Danny Bernard Martin, in his commentary "The Collective Black and *Principles to Actions*" (Martin, 2015), provided a thoughtful and direct critique of the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) and its latest policy document *Principles to Actions: Ensuring Mathematical Success for All* (NCTM, 2014). In the following issue of *JUME* (Vol. 8, No. 2), members of the NCTM leadership responded with an open call for engagement with the issues raised by Professor Martin (see Briars, Larson, Strutchens, & Barnes, 2015). As a teacher on special assignment for mathematics in a high-poverty school district, as a critical educator, and as a human being, the issues raised in Professor Martin's commentary are of both personal and professional importance to me. I have struggled in thinking through how I might engage in contributing to this ongoing dialogue: What is the purpose of my response? How might I express my views and concerns while also acknowledging that I don't have answers to his hard questions? What is my role as a White, male educator in getting involved (or not) in the remaking of mathematics and mathematics education, which Professor Martin describes as "White institutional spaces" (Martin, 2015, p. 20)? Still, I am compelled to respond, even if imperfectly.

There are reasons to appreciate the contents of *Principles to Actions*. As noted by Martin (2015), it outlines what many would recognize as aspects of good teaching practices. The document has been helpful in my work with teachers and it is useful to have an organization like NCTM speak openly about the need for instructional

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***EDITOR'S NOTE:** In the Spring/Summer 2015 issue (Vol. 8, No. 1) *JUME* published, as a Commentary, Dr. Danny Bernard Martin's invited plenary address delivered at the NCTM Research Conference April 2015 in Boston, Massachusetts (Martin, 2015). In the Fall/Winter 2015 issue (Vol. 8, No. 2), *JUME* published a Response Commentary, authored by Drs. Diane J. Briars, Matt Larson, Marilyn E. Strutchens, and David Barnes (Briars et al., 2015). The Response Commentary here continues this important discussion; we invited others to *keep things going while they are still stirring* (see "Contributing a Commentary to *JUME: Keeping Things Going While They Are Still Stirring*").

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change. Yet, as Martin points out, these practices are not new and there has been little progress toward erasing inequitable outcomes in the context of these (and previous) recommendations. It raises questions for me: Why is that? Why does NCTM not openly acknowledge that? How might the framing and policies of mathematics education actually be causing these problems?

Most of my concern is with respect to what NCTM is silent about and/or about the unspoken messages of their current framing and policies. Some of those concerns are:

- "Equity" is framed almost exclusively in the dominant terms of access and achievement. As Gutiérrez (2009) has written, "access and achievement can be thought of as the dominant axis, preparing students to participate economically and privileging a status quo" (p. 6). The dominant axis measures how well students can "play the game called mathematics" (p. 6). By contrast, her critical axis attends to issues of identity and power, and "ensures that students' frames of reference and resources are acknowledged in ways that help build critical citizens so that they may change the game" (p. 6). I know that NCTM is aware of these critical perspectives, as the research is included in the reference section of *Principles to Actions*. Why don't these issues feature more prominently in the framing of equity and in the recommendations for practice?

- In the opening of *Principles to Actions*, there is a section titled "Progress and Challenge." In it, progress and challenges are referenced in terms of dominant measures—NAEP scores, PISA scores, ACT/SAT scores, AP course taking patterns, "college and career readiness," and "readiness for college mathematics" (NCTM, 2014). How we choose to report progress and challenge reveals something about our educational goals, yet those goals are not clearly stated. Broader, or different, educational aims—perhaps including aims such as self-actualization, critical consciousness, intellectual autonomy, strengthening community, anti-bias education—would likely lead to a different set of measures. What does NCTM take to be the goals of education?

- NCTM's participation in the "Mathematics for All" (or, "With Math I Can") narrative continues to perpetuate the notion that dominant mathematics is synonymous with power and intelligence; and, by contrast, that those not having been "bestowed this gift" through a dominant mathematics education are mathematically lacking and/or powerless (Lawler, 2005; Martin, 2003). It is worth asking: What or whose mathematics are we talking about? What or whose interests does it serve? An alternative framing might recognize that "All People are Mathematical." Such a position would refute

the ontological status of mathematics; make explicit attempts to include multiple ways of being mathematically smart; recognize the mathematical activity of various individuals and (sub-)cultures; and resist measuring people against a predetermined, dominant mathematics.

- In addition to its positive impacts, mathematics can and has caused harm and oppression both in education and in society (D'Ambrosio, 1990; Skovsmose, 1994). Educationally, mathematics has played a role as a gatekeeper, resulted in intellectual trauma, and been used as a tool for the preservation of White privilege (e.g., through the justification of tracking). In society, mathematics has been used to further capitalistic priorities, support the development of harmful machinery and weaponry, and preserve or exacerbate systemic racism. Why is NCTM virtually silent about the role of mathematics as an instrument of oppression? What policies and practices might be recommended if they wholeheartedly supported a mathematics education that sought to improve the world?

- What is crowded out of schools by a bloated Eurocentric (Joseph, 1997) mathematics curriculum? What questions and inquiries are "sanctioned" by the current standards and purposes of mathematics education? What opportunities are there for all students to see themselves in their educational experiences through mathematics? These are not issues I have seen NCTM take up in *Principles to Actions*, or otherwise.

- Situating school (mathematics) in our historical and cultural context might be helpful in understanding the educational experiences of students who are marginalized by society. Schooling and education operate in a racist, classist, patriarchal society. At least, we must acknowledge how education functions in that societal context and, at best, we must wrestle with how education actually functions to *replicate* that social order. How might NCTM recognize the ways that racism manifests itself structurally in schools and interpersonally in classrooms? What recommendations, practices, or policies might help combat the racist, sexist, and classist (and others) issues?

My hope in writing this Response Commentary is to keep the critical dialogue going and to provide a practitioner's perspective and support to the issues raised by Professor Martin. These are not merely theoretical issues. There are implications for the ways these policies, framings, and professional recommendations impact our work with children. As practitioners, we have been charged with moving from "principles to actions," but what are we to do if the institutional principles guiding the project of mathematics education result in harmful educational practices or lead to an education that preserves the status quo? We are forced to carve out a creative space

for ethical practice when our institutional equity slogans are misaligned with the educational hopes of marginalized children and families. I am abhorred and increasingly frustrated with the way this misalignment often results in locating the problem with the individual student or, worse, with the generalized racial or socioeconomic group we take that student to identify with or belong to.

The aforementioned bulleted points are by no means meant as an exhaustive list, but reflecting on them has assisted me to think through some of the ways NCTM is currently silent about significant issues as well as how their current framing of issues might be problematic. I realize that the questions raised here are not new (see, e.g., Freire, 1970; Martin, 2003) and I am disheartened that these critical issues have yet to be taken up with serious consideration. I am hopeful that now is the time. Finally, I wonder: Is NCTM only willing to produce recommendations that are palatable to dominant (White) interests in mathematics education? I think this is Professor Martin's central critique.

I am thankful for Professor Martin's courageous voice in continuing to raise these important issues, for NCTM's opening themselves to critical analysis, and for *JUME*'s hosting of this important dialogue. I hope that NCTM will embrace these and other issues with genuine interest and action and that all of us as educators will critically interrogate our own complicity.

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