

Strong is the Silence: Challenging Interlocking Systems of Privilege and Oppression in Mathematics Teacher Education

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In this essay, the authors provide a rationale for the need to break the silence of privilege and oppression in mathematics education. They begin by providing a brief rationale from their personal and professional perspectives, which includes background about planning and executing the Privilege and Oppression in the Mathematics Preparation of Mathematics Teachers Educators (PrOMPTE) conference, which motivated this special issue of the Journal of Urban Mathematics Education. The authors then move into a (more typical) literature-based rationale for a focus on exploring and engaging with systems of privilege and oppression in relationship to themselves as mathematics teacher educators and in the preparation of new mathematics teacher educators.

KEYWORDS: mathematics education, privilege and oppression, mathematics teacher educators

Mathematics teacher educators (MTEs) are often hesitant (or shy) about disrupting (or breaking) the silence that has taken a strong hold of the inequitable systems of privilege and oppression (e.g., racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism) within which we operate. In particular, although MTEs have begun to talk about these issues in relation to the preparation of mathematics teach-

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ers (MTs) and mathematics teaching, we rarely talk *explicitly* about them with respect to *our own* preparation as MTEs and our work in preparing *future MTEs*. A fruitful conceptual exploration might be to consider the ways in which identifying, confronting, and transgressing systems of privilege and oppression with MTs may be similar to or different from the work we do ourselves as MTEs and our work with future MTEs with respect to these systems. Such examinations can help MTEs to further specify and conceptualize research agendas, frameworks, approaches, and strategies for taking action toward equitable systems within the programs in which we work (i.e., preparing future MTEs and future MTs). Our hypothesis is that concentrated attention to thoughtful discussion and action related to identifying, understanding, and confronting the interlocking systems¹ of privilege and oppression can improve mathematics teacher education and, ulti-

¹ By “interlocking systems,” we mean that the oppression of some people does not exist without systems supporting the unearned privilege of other people. For example, *racism* does not exist without systems supporting White privilege. That is, “racism is understood to be widespread and ingrained in society, rather than manifested only in the actions of a few ‘irrational’ people” and, “through this perspective, racism is perceived as an entity that affects everyone in society, benefiting some and victimizing others” (S. Marx, 2006, p. 5).

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mately, will impact MTs' and students' learning experiences in mathematics classrooms, especially students who have been historically underserved in schools.

We believe that we need to break this silence and provide venues in which to plan and take thoughtful action in relationship to systems of privilege and oppression, develop strategies for working on these systems amongst ourselves and with our graduate and undergraduate students, and invite others into such conversations. In this essay, we provide a rationale for the need to break this silence. We begin by providing a brief rationale from our personal and professional perspectives, which includes background about the planning and executing of the Privilege and Oppression in the Mathematics Preparation of Mathematics Teachers Educators (PrOMPTE²) conference, which motivated this special issue of the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education (JUME)*. We then move into a (more typical) literature-based rationale for a focus on exploring and engaging with systems of privilege and oppression in relationship to ourselves as MTEs and in the preparation of new MTEs.

Breaking the Silence

Our Story(ies)

This essay denotes, in many ways, the beginning of a discussion that we recently began amongst some mathematics education faculty in Teacher Education at Michigan State University (MSU) and M. Lynn Breyfogle at Bucknell University. Although we have each had interests in various aspects of equity in our scholarship and work with prospective and practicing teachers, prior to summer 2012 we had not come together to talk about this common commitment. An internal grant we proposed to MSU's new Collaborative Research in Educational Assessment and Teaching Environments for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (CREATE for STEM) Institute provided a context in which to begin these conversations. We decided to focus the proposal on breaking the silence related to systems of privilege and oppression with respect to MTEs and met to talk about our rationale for this work and for a focus on MTEs.

In our first meeting to discuss the issues put forth here, we shared examples related to the ways in which we have struggled with issues of privilege and oppression as MTEs. Our discussion was the first instance in which we collectively began to disrupt the silence by recalling tensions that occur for us in our work as

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.

MTEs. Here are some of our examples (some of which have also been reported in the literature):

- *How do I unpack my own privilege and what it does for the ways we interact and engage with things like readings for the course?*
- *As a White teacher educator, I often find that White prospective teachers tend to just agree with me. How do I get them to engage more deeply with these issues? (See also Gillespie, Ashbaugh, & DeFoire, 2002.)*
- *What can I do when my students resist my talk about race because they think I have an “agenda”?* (See also Aguirre, 2009.)
- *An issue I have run into is that MTs want to jump in to “solve the problem.” That is, they want to be in charge of the solution rather than working carefully in partnership on solutions. What can I do to get them to sit with these issues and tackle them thoughtfully? How can I help them understand that potentially fast, careless, and well-intentioned contributions can lead to perpetuating imperialism?*
- *There is such a lack of comfortableness with talking about issues of privilege. I’m not sure how to tackle that sometimes. For example, in one class a prospective teacher said something about a child and her parents not caring and other prospective teachers in the class pushed back, sometimes in good ways but at other times in potentially damaging ways. How do I get those good ways to happen more often?*
- *As a White MTE, I’m unsure how to handle it when discussing these issues in settings where there are students from many different racial backgrounds. For example, what do I do when a student of color voices some of the meta-narratives that indicate that outcomes are all about hard work and do not relate to things like race?*

As can be seen from how we engaged our voices to begin to break the silence, even when university faculty have been engaging in work related to equity, we do not have answers for the many dilemmas that we confront in this work. We talked about how these kinds of stories and experiences impacted our work with doctoral students, too, as we prepared them to be MTEs.

We also began to talk about our identities and experiences in order to better understand one another and ourselves. In particular, we talked about how these identities related to our memberships in “target” or “non-target” groups (Batts,

2002), based on whether a particular identity has been historically marginalized or not. For example, Latina, woman, dis-abled, gay, and child would all be target groups as compared to White, man, able-bodied, straight, and adult. Additionally, we recognized that the more non-target identity groups one belongs to, the better the odds are for positive life outcomes, due, in part, to unearned privileges. We have also come to talk about systems of privilege and oppression as acting on at least four levels: the personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural (Batts, 1998, 2002; Harro, 2000a, 2000b). The four levels have helped us to think about generating examples of how these systems might be instantiated, for example, in one's beliefs, people's interactions, institutional policies, and in our cultural images and stereotypes associated with different identity groups.

After these initial discussions, we were left with many questions. For example: How might we better structure these conversations? What knowledge of systems of privilege and oppression is reasonable for new teachers and MTEs to take with them into settings where there are multiple narratives about these systems? What are some reasonable action strategies for actually addressing these broader systems that prospective teachers and MTEs can take with them when they leave our institution? We wanted to take these questions and others to a broader group of MTEs to explore.

We were fortunate to receive the internal grant, which enabled us to host a small conference in Michigan in October 2012. About 40 MTEs participated, representing about 25 different institutions across the United States. We chose to focus the conference on racism and classism as simultaneous systems that oppress some people while granting privileges to others. We selected these two systems to be illustrative of issues to consider when working on interlocking systems of privilege and oppression, more generally. The conference was dually structured to focus on *reflection* on our identities and systems of privilege and oppression and on *actions* we might take as MTEs. The sessions examined the histories and dynamics unique to racism and classism as well as how these systems intersect and reinforce each other in the context of mathematics education.

Not all participants experience the interlocking systems of privilege and oppression in the same ways, of course. Our identities occur at the moving intersections of various categories. In fact, as Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) contends, teachers (and we would add MTEs) are both products of and culprits within an inequitable set of systems. Core to these sessions was the assumption that we can become as passionate about dismantling the systems from which some unjustly benefit as we are about eradicating the systems that oppress us. The conference sessions sought to provide multiple contexts in which people challenged themselves and each other to ask deeply and continually: *Now that we see, what are we going to do about it?*

The experiential sessions and activities were led by facilitators from Allies for Change³ and allowed us to reflect on systems of privilege and oppression, both personally and in the context of our work as MTEs. We negotiated norms for having difficult conversations, for example, we agreed not to freeze each other in time and to consider both the intent and the impact of things we said and did. These kinds of conversations are personal and emotional, and learning to talk about interlocking systems of racism and classism in ways that break the silence involves a long-term process and vulnerability. They also require generosity, forgiveness, and support. We envisioned action in these sessions by doing things like practicing strategies for interrupting oppression, drawing on scenarios that participants had experienced in their mathematics methods courses that were similar to the ones we shared previously. The action-oriented sessions were structured to support taking action in concrete and specified ways by focusing on particular products and action plans to be accomplished. For example, this *JUME* special issue, other co-authored publications and an edited book, conference presentation proposals, and grant proposals were discussed, conceptualized, and worked on in small groups.

A Literature-Based Rationale

Our literature-based rationale for the need to break the silence is primarily based on three important points:

1. Although an increasing percentage of school children in the United States are children of color, poor, and from homes where family members speak languages other than English—all potential sources of privilege and oppression—MTs and MTEs remain fairly homogeneous along these demographic lines (Hollins & Guzman, 2005).
2. Although the literature on preparing teachers in the United States to work in diverse classrooms, schools, and communities has recently been growing, there is a paucity of work on preparing MTEs to facilitate this kind of work. This work includes not only preparing graduate students to be new MTEs but also examining the work currently conducted by practicing MTEs themselves (see McLeman, Vomvoridi-Ivanovic, & Chval, 2012, for initial work examining the practice of MTEs).

³ Allies for Change is a nationally recognized network of educators who share a passion for social justice and a commitment to creating and sustaining life-giving ally relationships and communities (see www.alliesforchange.org).

3. Although the growing literature on equity in mathematics education has been framed in various ways to address issues of *oppression* and (sometimes) emancipation (e.g., Battey, 2013; Gutiérrez, 2007; Gutstein, 2006), we think that anti-oppression activism also requires confronting the *privilege* granted by institutions and society through addressing *interlocking systems of privilege and oppression* in order for our mathematics education community to thoughtfully avoid replicating imperialism (i.e., enabling the powerful to act and speak on behalf of the oppressed).

Below, we discuss, in turn, more about each of these points.

Diverse schools and relatively homogeneous teaching populations. A reality in mathematics education is that the teaching population in public schools and universities in the United States is fairly homogeneous in terms of race, class, and language facility (i.e., White, middle class, and English monolingual). For example, nearly 90% of teachers in the United States are White (National Center for Education Information, 2005). Available statistics about students in pre-K–12 classrooms, however, indicate that the students are much more racially, economically, and linguistically diverse than the teaching population. Nationally, for example, 43% of students enrolled in public schools are students of color (Fry, 2007). Scholars have argued that these differences have serious implications for teaching and learning (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gay, 2010; Larson & Ovando, 2001).

Consider the issue of racial difference, for example. It is typical for White teachers to claim to be “color-blind” and treat all students the same (Bell, 2002). This color-blindness, however, masks the inequities created by race, class, and power (Johnson, 2002). Without explicit attention to racial identity development in all MTs and MTEs, it is possible that White teachers, albeit unintentionally, could negatively impact the performance of students of color and undermine multicultural practices and policies (Lawrence & Bunche, 1996). Research also suggests the following patterns of White people (including teachers) confronting race and equity issues: White elementary teachers are often ill-informed about racial inequality (King, 1991) and claim a color-blind approach (Sleeter, 1992); if confronted with inequity, they feel blamed for injustices and can act defensively toward information on issues of social inequality and White privilege (Gillespie, Ashbaugh, & DeFoire, 2002); tend to approach issues of inequality from a personal perspective rather than as societal, systemic, and institutional manifestations (McIntosh, 1989; McIntyre, 1997); and want to be told what to do in a multicultural classroom, how to teach “others” rather than to explore the impact of their attitudes on multicultural teaching effectiveness (Cooney & Akintude, 1999). As

Taylor and Kitchen (2008) stated, “it is well-documented that teachers hold lower expectations for students of color and those from poor families than they do for White middle class students (Ferguson, 1998; Grant, 1989; Knapp & Woolvertson, 1995; Zeichner, 1996)” (p. 112). Scholars have argued, in fact, that these lower expectations are not unique to White teachers. As Bell (2002) pointed out:

Though teachers of color are less likely than their white peers to deny the existence of racism or to cling to dominant ideology about color blindness and dramatic social progress (L. Bell, 2003; A. Thompson, 1998), they may benefit from an opportunity to discuss and analyze their own experiences with racism in the broader society (Bennett, 2002), the ways that racism is internalized by members of subordinated groups, and issues of collusion and horizontal oppression among different groups of color (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997). (p. 236)

Given the current underachievement in mathematics of many students of color and students who live in poverty, we need to collectively and individually, in thought and action, implicitly and explicitly stop the silence and address these issues in the mathematics education community, particularly among MTEs.

Focusing also on mathematics teacher educators to create systems of equitable work. Recent literature that considers how this fairly homogeneous teaching population works with students who are racially, economically, and linguistically different from them highlights the increasing attention to *teachers and teaching in pre-K–12 public schools*. Yet, in order to create systems of equitable work, it is imperative that these issues be explored and considered in relationship to *MTEs*.

In the Conference Board of Mathematical Sciences report on *U.S. Doctorates in Mathematics Education*, the following five “needs” were identified for the preparation of Ph.D. students in mathematics education:

1. To learn about diversity/equity in all of their coursework and to develop national leaders in this area;
2. To learn “core knowledge” and have common experiences related to diversity/equity issues across institutions within doctoral programs in mathematics education;
3. To have professional experiences in a diversity of settings;
4. To develop an appreciation of diversity/equity issues even if diversity/equity is not central in the research they undertake; and
5. To develop an appreciation of theoretical frameworks related to diversity/equity and have knowledge of the research that has been undertaken that relates to diversity/equity in mathematics education (Taylor & Kitchen, 2008, pp. 112–114).

Each of these needs is important and requires careful consideration in order to prepare MTEs to understand how to move beyond a “missionary or cannibal” ap-

proach (e.g., Martin, 2007) and to understand what thoughtful collaboration to dismantle systems of privilege and oppression might look like. When MTEs and MTs have not critically examined their own place in the interlocking systems of privilege and oppression, they can bring a deficit model and exhibit behaviors that are patronizing because they view this work through a lens of charity rather than justice. In fact, even when MTEs have begun to explore the complexity of some of these ideas, there is always more work to be done. We emphasize that this work must be an ongoing process to do well.

Understanding oppression and privilege as interlocking systems. Equity research has become a growing line of research in the past two decades in mathematics education. In particular, the early and prevalent line of equity work focused on the “achievement gap” and access issues. There have been debates, however, about whether this is an overly limited or even an opposing way to consider issues of equity. In education research more generally, Ladson-Billings (2006) suggested that the achievement gap be re-named the “education debt.” By choosing to reframe the issue, she argued, the focus can shift from being only about individual student’s achievement on narrow standardized tests to also considering historical and systemic issues in the institution of schooling. As policy researchers have argued, how problems are framed shapes responses made by policy makers and mathematics educators (Choppin, Wagner, & Herbel-Eisenmann, 2011). If, for example, we also focused on the “education debt” rather than just the “achievement gap,” the manner in which changes are made would need to be different. For instance, we might examine and change policies and programs that support students and partner with communities to change schooling, rather than doing things like add test preparation to our curriculum. Thus, the ways in which these issues are framed have ramifications for how students and families experience these realities. To broaden mathematics education’s view of equity, for example, Gutiérrez (2007) offered a framework for equity that included achievement and access issues (which she calls the “dominant axis”) but pushed mathematics educators to consider issues of identity and power (which she called the “critical axis” of equity work).

Some mathematics educators and teacher educators have recently focused on issues of identity and power, often adopting frames like teaching mathematics for social justice (see the 2009 special issue of the *Journal of Mathematics Teacher Education*, for example; see also the 2013 special issue of the *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*) or that of critical mathematics education. In these perspectives, the goal of education relates to emancipation and dismantling systems of oppression at the interpersonal, institutional, and cultural levels. Gutstein (2006) draws on the work of Paulo Freire to teach students how to read and write the world with mathematics. That is, when he has students use mathe-

matics to analyze social, political, and economic situations that relate to issues of oppression, he teaches them to “read” the world with mathematics; when his students generate and engage in action related to these issues of oppression, he is teaching them to “write” the world with mathematics. In this literature, systems of oppression are explicitly named and critically challenged.

To dismantle systems of oppression, however, we believe that the interlocking system of privilege must also be interrogated. Yet, we find less attention to systems of privilege in mathematics education literature. A couple of exceptions to this in mathematics education include MTEs who have used Whiteness theory to explore aspects of their own identity in mathematics teacher education work (e.g., Gregson, 2013; Gutstein, 2003). More recently, Battey (2013) showed “how color-blind ideology and whiteness produce material stratification through the institution of mathematics education” (p. 332) by analyzing national data sets to locate mathematics education within a broader racial context. His findings demonstrate the long-term economic advantages to Whites due to differential access to mathematics as totaling hundreds of billions of dollars. If we look beyond mathematics education literature, however, systems of privilege are regularly examined and debated and are considered a valued form of scholarship. For example, there is a growing literature that uses Whiteness theory to understand how prospective teachers work in diverse schools (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 1995; 2000; McIntyre, 1997; Paley, 1979). Using a mathematical analogy, we see privilege and oppression as complementary sets that must both be considered together to weaken the silence built around such an interlocking system.

Understanding and acknowledging privilege is not enough. In our identification of the problem, we stated that MTEs are often silent about systems of privilege and oppression. Yet, it is imperative that we:

- Deepen awareness of how oppression, privilege and power are at work in all relationships and organizations;
- Invite people with privilege to recognize and unlearn the habits and practices that protect their privilege;
- Nurture collaborative action and authentic relationships across differences of race, age, gender, dis/abilities, class, and sexual identity;
- Equip organizations—in this case, academic programs—to recognize, and then take action to decrease the disparity between their current practices and their inclusive ideals; and

- Encourage MTEs to explore and deepen their resources for social change and to connect our resources and the resources of MTs and students.

Concluding Thoughts

It is time to break the silence. It is time to consider MTEs' knowledge and practice—their preparation and their research agendas, frameworks, approaches, and strategies for action toward equity in relation to the interlocking systems of privilege and oppression within which they (we) operate. One way to address the goals set forth here may be to engage MTEs in both thoughtful reflection and action related to identifying, understanding, and confronting systems of privilege and oppression. The experience of people working together on issues of race and class can be profound and transformative and can result in deep and spreading changes in scholarship, teaching, and programmatic work that creates widening effects (Apol, 2011; Apol & Herbel-Eisenmann, 2012). The work that began at the PrOMPTE conference further illustrates how profound and transformative it can be for MTEs to reflect and take action.

As we move forward, we hope to expand the number of participating scholars in mathematics education engaged in identifying, understanding, and confronting systems of privilege and oppression both within and beyond mathematics education by engaging in further discussions. We see this *JUME* special issue as one expansion and look forward to others. We encourage readers to use the essays of this special issue to engage their colleagues in contemplating the ideas put forth and hope they inspire further reflection and action.

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