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Forward-Thinking Orientations for Mathematics Education

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

- v *Anisha Clarke, Teachers College, Columbia University*
Nasriah Morrison, Teachers College, Columbia University

ARTICLES

- 1 **Building Thinking Classrooms: A Conversation with Dr. Peter Liljedahl**
Peter Liljedahl, Simon Fraser University
Anisha Clarke, Teachers College, Columbia University
Nasriah Morrison, Teachers College, Columbia University
- 9 **Multiplication by Sunlight: How Can a Geometric Definition be Realized in a Physical Tool?**
Justin K. Dimmel, School of Learning and Teaching, University of Maine
Eric A. Pandiscio, School of Learning and Teaching, University of Maine
Camden G. Bock, School of Learning and Teaching, University of Maine
- 17 **Modeling as Story-Building and Storytelling: Redesigning Algebra with Adolescent Girls of Color**
Kara Louise Imm, Hunter College, The City University of New York
- 31 **Gerrymandering in the High School Geometry Classroom**
Kate Belin, Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School
Courtney Ferrell, Bronx Theatre High School
- 43 **Hyper-Acceleration of Algebra I: Diminishing Opportunities to Learn in Secondary Mathematics**
Terrie M. Galanti, University of North Florida
Toya Jones Frank, George Mason University
Courtney K. Baker, George Mason University

Continued on next page

TABLE OF CONTENTS

(Continued)

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

- 51 Humanity and Practicality during the Emergency Conversion to Online Learning**
Christopher R. H. Hanusa, Queens College, City University of New York
- 53 COVID and the Importance of Casual Interactions in Mathematics Classrooms**
Sian Zelbo, J.D., Ph.D., The Brearley School, Stern College for Women, Yeshiva University
- 55 Meeting the Social-Emotional Needs of My Students During the Pandemic Through the Use of Activity Lists**
Michelle Longhitano, Teachers College, Columbia University
- 57 A Digital Touch to Teaching and Learning Mathematics**
Bryan Nevarez, Queens College, City University of New York
- 59 Navigating the Pandemic through Interdisciplinary Collaborations**
Estefania Hereira, Flushing International High School
- 61 Meeting Students Where They Are: A Schoolteacher’s Brief Account of Teaching in the Pandemic**
Brian Darrow, Jr., Teachers College, Columbia University

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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Meeting Students Where They Are: A Schoolteacher's Brief Account of Teaching in the Pandemic

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On March 12, 2020, minutes before the end of the day, the principal made the announcement. The students cheered throughout the school as the news came through the intercom. That afternoon, we all left behind what would become known as “how school used to be.”

For mathematics teachers, this meant redefining practice in a discipline where many pedagogical principles are built upon tangibles, such as pencil and paper, and in-person, in-the-moment discourse. Mathematics education, therefore, is particularly vulnerable to many of the challenges associated with teaching students at a distance. Although my colleagues and I continue to overcome these challenges to produce high-quality mathematical experiences for our students, we have consistently struggled to engage them. I have always been able to generate engagement through leveraging the genuine, positive relationships that I have with my students. This year, however, both developing these relationships and leveraging them was more difficult than ever.

I realized early in the year that school was the least of many of my students' worries. They were facing overwhelming, life-altering circumstances in their personal lives. Many teachers I know attempted to maintain the same standards of rigor and integrity as they have in previous years. I respected their approach to make the school experience as familiar as possible to students, and I observed many of them respond positively to this practice. However, based upon what I was seeing with my

students, I knew I had to scale back many of the expectations and standards that I have required in the past. I had to focus instead on meeting each student where they were both academically and personally. More than ever before, I had to extend my efforts beyond the school day to negotiate work completion; make exceptions; create alternative assessments and assignments; and establish and maintain contact with students and their families. Although my hard work, flexibility, and generosity were often taken advantage of, my attempt to put compassion and empathy first was not made in vain. Students and their families have consistently reported to me that this approach enabled me to reach students who were in danger of personal crisis and nearing complete academic foreclosure. These conversations consistently reminded me that my efforts, and the efforts of my colleagues, were inextricably linked to my students' quality of life.

In reflecting on this year, I realized that there was no relative degree of success. Particular value judgments of teacher effectiveness and traditional metrics of student performance do not suffice. From my perspective, what matters is that the teachers invested more of themselves in their work this year than ever before. I am personally overwhelmed by how admirably and dutifully my colleagues and I responded to the challenges we faced this year. To me, our work this year serves as a symbol of our resilience and commitment to our calling.