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Rethinking Purposes and Best Practices of Mathematics Education

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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Learning With and From the Community

Marta Civil
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As I thought about what I wanted to communicate in this piece, I realized that for me, doing research has always been about following my passion. As a graduate student, I remember some of my peers in education assuming that I would probably do a quantitative study for my dissertation because of my mathematics background. Yet, the research methods course that spoke to me the most was one on qualitative interviewing. I realized that my passion was listening to students as they explained mathematics, and later on listening to parents (mostly mothers of Mexican origin) as they told me about their and their children's experiences with mathematics. Much of what I see as my responsibility in doing research is listening to the students, the teachers, the parents with whom I am working, and then conveying their stories as accurately as I can in my writing. I do not claim to "give them a voice," because they can and should speak for themselves, but the reality is that often they do not have access to having their stories heard. The most powerful conference presentations for me are those in which some of the mothers I have been working with have shared their perspectives and engaged in dialogue with the audience.

To me doing research is about "hanging out" in the community building trust and rapport; it is about having a genuine interest and a deep belief that we have a lot to learn from the community. It is about designing research studies that allow us to learn about the richness of students', teachers', parents' mathematical knowledge and their cultural ways of thinking and being to then inform our further work. It is about documenting

the brilliancy and creativity of people whose knowledge is often not recognized (in my context, working-class Mexican American communities) and to challenge the deficit discourse that is often used to describe some communities.

How do we approach the research we do with the communities in our work? Personally, I am not a great believer in researcher-designed "interventions." Get to know the community and work collaboratively with them, learn with and from them. I sometimes wonder about "well-designed" studies that check all the boxes from a research point of view: who are they for? Do they mostly perpetuate the cycle of researchers talking to researchers? In what ways does my work directly contribute to the community who has been sharing their time and expertise with me? If what I am doing is mostly to advance my career or to play the game of academia, is it worth it? What are we giving back to the community when we do our research?

The best moments in my work have been when students, teachers, or parents have challenged my ideas. Yes, I am aware of the power differential between researchers and participants, which is why for me it is very important to work towards an authentic two-way dialogue, a real sense of reciprocity. I close this reflection with a quote from a mother that captures much of my approach to research: "[Marta] would never try to make us feel that she knew and we didn't; she was always there working with us so we never felt her having an advantage knowing more than us. She was with us" (Magali, December 2020).