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EDITORIAL

Resisting Erasure: Community-Centered Scholarship in Urban Mathematics Education Amid DEI Defunding

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In the sweltering heat of a Houston summer, the once-bustling community center stood unusually quiet. For over a decade, its classrooms had been filled with the sounds of curiosity, students collaborating on algebra-driven robotics challenges, exploring probability through local traffic simulations, and mapping racial disparities in housing through statistical models. This was the hub of the Urban STEM Futures Camp, a federally funded initiative designed to teach mathematics and cultivate critical consciousness among Black and Latinx youth.
But this summer, the camp did not return.

The Department of Education's discretionary funds, once earmarked for programs advancing equity and inclusion in STEM education, were swept away by a policy shift that reclassified Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts as "nonessential." Despite robust outcomes, such as improved mathematics achievement scores, increased confidence in STEM identity, and sustained enrollment in advanced mathematics, the program's DEI framing made it a target.

"Their reasoning was clear," said Dr. Monique Ellis, the lead coordinator of the camp. "If our curriculum included race, it was political. If it engaged students' lived experiences, it was radical. If it worked, it had to go." The loss extended beyond numbers on a budget sheet. Malik, a rising ninth grader who once described math as "not for people like me," had found his voice through this program. He was slated to lead a peer-tutoring group this summer. Instead, he spent the break working part-time, wondering why a program that finally made him feel seen was deemed expendable.

This fictional story is not unique, nor is it far-fetched, because urban mathematics initiatives grounded in equity are being defunded or dissolved across the nation, thus relegating culturally responsive pedagogy to the margins. What remains is a cautionary tale: when equity is stripped from mathematics education, the cost is not just opportunity; rather, it is community.

Statement of the Problem

The recent political backlash against DEI initiatives has triggered a deliberate dismantling of structures that have supported equity-driven innovation in mathematics education. This is not a symbolic or rhetorical shift but a policy-level assault with measurable and devastating consequences. Across the country, state and federal agencies are quietly but forcefully erasing DEI language from grant guidelines, freezing funding for community-rooted STEM programs, and pressuring institutions to retreat from race-conscious research agendas. What was once championed as essential for addressing structural inequities in mathematics learning is now framed as politically subversive.

The extent of this rollback is both staggering and strategic. In April 2025, the National Science Foundation (NSF) canceled over 1,100 research awards (Vasquez, 2025). More than 400 of these belonged to the Directorate for STEM Education, an agency division responsible for supporting innovative and inclusive science and math teaching. Particularly alarming was the termination of 213 projects in the Division of Research on Learning, which has historically funded K–12 STEM initiatives aimed at underrepresented populations (Scire, 2025). This disruption is not isolated. The National Institutes of Health (NIH), another critical funding body, has reportedly terminated at least 678 research projects explicitly tied to DEI efforts (Unglesbee, 2025). These decisions have stripped over $2.4 billion from research infrastructure, including $1.1 billion in revoked funding and an additional $1.3 billion in active projects halted midstream. The implications are clear: more than 1,000 STEM-related grants have been erased in direct response to DEI related political mandates.

Urban mathematics educators and researchers are already feeling the adverse effects. Research that foregrounds culturally responsive pedagogy, racial equity, or student identity development is increasingly deemed suspect. Proposals that once celebrated the richness of ethnomathematical traditions or explored systemic racial disparities in advanced math tracking are now scrutinized as ideologically biased. Equity scholars, particularly those of color and those embedded in community-based work, must choose between vacating the focus of their research or risking exclusion from essential funding streams. At the same time, trusted community partners, who have long served as co-designers and co-researchers in these projects, are being removed from decision-making tables. The communities that DEI research sought to elevate are, once again, being marginalized under the guise of objectivity.

This moment demands clarity: the defunding and de-legitimization of DEIaligned research is not neutral, it is a calculated move to strip mathematics education of its sociopolitical context and render race, identity, and justice invisible. It marks an attempt to reassert a colorblind paradigm that ignores the historical and ongoing inequities that shape students' mathematical experiences. Without strategic resistance, through rigorous synthesis research, community-centered scholarship,

and values-driven coalitions, this backlash threatens to undermine decades of progress toward a more just and inclusive vision for urban mathematics education.

Historical Overview of DEI in Mathematics Education

DEI efforts significantly reshape mathematics education, particularly for students from historically marginalized backgrounds in urban and under-resourced communities. Since the late 20th century, various educators, activists, and researchers have worked to dismantle traditional deficit narratives associated with these communities. These initiatives actively challenge tracking systems and aim to reframe mathematics as a means of liberation and civic empowerment (Boaler, 2002). A paradigm shift in pedagogy has emerged from these efforts, promoting an inclusive framework that centers on student identity, teacher positionality, and culturally sustaining approaches to learning (Valero & Wedege, 2009).

A landmark initiative in this movement is The Algebra Project, founded in the 1980s by civil rights activist Robert P. Moses. This project asserts that access to high-quality algebra instruction is a civil right and pioneers community-centered pedagogies that treat mathematics as a language of empowerment (Moses & Cobb, 2001). The project is notable for placing Black students and their families at the forefront of its operational design, emphasizing strategies such as peer-led instruction and culturally relevant contexts. The Algebra Project fosters leadership skills alongside numerical comprehension by employing a community organizing model, engaging students in meaningful learning experiences that resonate with their cultural backgrounds (Fonger, 2024).

In addition to The Algebra Project, several other influential programs embody the principles of DEI in mathematics education. For example, Equity Quantified in Participation (EQUIP) leverages analytics and real-time feedback mechanisms to identify and disrupt participation inequities in mathematics classrooms. Similarly, the organization TODOS: Mathematics for ALL focuses on advocating for both equity and excellence in mathematics education, particularly for Latinx students (Hennessey et al., 2011). Furthermore, Mathematically Connected Communities (MC^2) supports equity-focused professional development initiatives and instructional reforms targeting underserved school districts (Morales et al., 2017). These programs highlight the critical importance of adopting frameworks that prioritize equity and intersectionality in mathematics instruction.

The enduring impact of DEI programs has notably influenced educational policy agendas, funding mechanisms, and research questions aimed at closing opportunity gaps (Valero & Wedege, 2009). However, recent trends indicate a rollback of DEI initiatives, which poses a significant threat to the progress achieved in equitable mathematics learning. The potential reversion of this momentum risks undermining both the pedagogical innovations developed over decades and the community partnerships that serve as the backbone of these programs. Continued advocacy and research are needed to uphold the principles of equity and inclusion that have become so integral to the positive transformation of mathematics education.

Purpose

The present editorial aims to reimagine a sustainable and justice-centered future for urban mathematics education in light of the defunding of DEI initiatives. Rather than retreating from equity-driven inquiry, the field must innovate by deepening its roots in community engagement, leveraging the power of synthesis research such as systematic reviews and meta-analyses, and cultivating self-sustaining partnerships that transcend dependence on federal funding. In doing so, scholars, educators, and community stakeholders can co-construct new research and practice models that center urban youth's lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and mathematical brilliance. The present editorial offers a critique of the current political moment and a vision for advancing our collective efforts through grounded, collaborative, and enduring strategies.

Problematizing the Defunding of DEI

The defunding of DEI initiatives in mathematics education represents more than a bureaucratic shift; it constitutes a calculated action with profound implications for research, pedagogical practices, and community empowerment (Jansen, 2023). One of the immediate adverse effects is the marginalization of race-conscious inquiry, where investigations into the influences of race, ethnicity, and culture on access to mathematical learning become increasingly considered "political," thereby leading to their exclusion from funding opportunities, publication venues, and institutional support (Rittberg et al., 2020). This delegitimization contributes to the perception that race is an external variable within STEM fields, rather than a fundamental organizing principle of educational opportunities (Martin, 2019). Consequently, this suppression predominantly impacts scholars and students of color, who are often those deeply engaged in DEI-centered research and advocacy.

As funding for these initiatives dwindles, critical support structures, including mentorship pipelines and research opportunities, disintegrate, leaving junior faculty with untenable choices as they navigate their paths toward tenure. Professors whose research agendas emphasize racial justice must grapple with the dilemma of either diluting their commitments to institutional standards or facing professional ostracism (Dotson, 2012). Furthermore, students lose invaluable opportunities to see their cultural and linguistic identities reflected in curricula and the practices valued in educational settings (Jansen, 2023). This situation negatively affects academic publishing and discourse, whereby editorial boards and peer reviewers become hesitant to endorse works that explicitly name racism or colonial legacies in mathematics education due to fears of political scrutiny (Shah & Coles, 2020). Thus, even scholars willing to pursue equity-focused research may be confronted with diminished avenues for disseminating their findings, leading to a constricted intellectual landscape (Smalls, 2018).

The Journal Article Reporting Standards (JARS) for Race, Ethnicity, and Culture framework challenges researchers to acknowledge systemic issues when

interpreting and justifying their inquiries explicitly. Utilizing the JARS as a guiding framework reinforces the importance of contextualizing research within sociohistorical power systems by acknowledging racism and colonialism as potent influences (Chronaki, 2019). However, when research agendas must adhere to a "neutral" stance to secure funding, it engenders the erasure of the very communities that structural inequalities most adversely affect. Consequently, by eliminating DEI discourse from funding and review processes, the academy not only stifles methodological innovation but also neglects the ethical imperative to illuminate the entrenched systems that perpetuate educational injustices.

At the heart of these anti-DEI policies lies a form of epistemic violence that propagates a "return to neutrality" narrative that denies the complexities of power, identity, and history within mathematics education. This framing posits that objectivity is impinged upon by racial analysis, while conveniently overlooking the historical privileging of white, Western norms disguised as universal truths (Heleta, 2016). Ultimately, this inculcation of neutrality maintains hegemonic structures, dismissing alternative knowledge systems as biased or unscientific. If unaddressed, the consequences of this rollback will significantly narrow the scope of inquiry permissible in mathematics education and jeopardize the communities these initiatives aspire to uplift. Hence, justice-oriented scholarship must resist this detrimental trend by reaffirming commitments to transparency, accountability, and cultural specificity, particularly amidst waning institutional support.

Filling the Gap with Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses

In an era characterized by restricted funding and heightened scrutiny, systematic reviews and meta-analyses emerge as robust research mechanisms to consolidate, preserve, and enhance equity-focused research within mathematics education. These synthesis methodologies empower scholars to compile findings from diverse studies, providing a defensible and methodologically rigorous foundation to validate the significance of DEI-centered work. When conducted with careful intention and transparency, systematic reviews can generate policy-relevant evidence bases that uphold the contributions of racial justice frameworks in mathematics education (Vithal et al., 2024).

Systematic reviews enable researchers to systematically organize and analyze the full spectrum of knowledge generated under DEI frameworks, thereby highlighting patterns in effective interventions, illuminating persistent knowledge gaps, and offering evidence-informed recommendations for practice and policy. Likewise, meta-analyses serve a critical function by calculating effect sizes across studies, illustrating statistically significant relationships between culturally responsive teaching practices and improved outcomes for minoritized learners. These research tools provide a formidable defense against critiques that (Rhodes, 2017) label DEI research as anecdotal, fragmented, or lacking rigor (Gesing et al., 2024).

To harness the full potential of systematic reviews and meta-analyses, researchers should adhere to established synthesis reporting standards to ensure transparency, methodological rigor, and contextual sensitivity (Tong et al., 2012). Common systematic review standards stress the importance of statistical clarity, advocating for the inclusion of effect sizes, confidence intervals, and heterogeneity indices while further disaggregating findings by race, class, and language background whenever feasible (Teranishi et al., 2020; Young et al., 2025). Such detail is vital to uncover population-level disparities and to showcase where equity-focused interventions have had tangible impacts (Valoyes-Chávez & Darragh, 2022).

On the other hand, systematic review standards emphasize the interpretive depth of qualitative syntheses, necessitating explicit cultural contextualization, clear articulation of researcher positionality, and rigorous incorporation of community knowledge as a vital source of insight (Lockwood et al., 2015). Synthesizing findings from critical ethnographies, participatory action research, and narrative studies can reveal how mathematics learning is informed by lived experiences, institutional power dynamics, and acts of resistance (Matiti, 2024).

As funding bodies retreat from prioritizing DEI initiatives, synthesis research becomes a vital instrument for safeguarding the intellectual contributions of equity scholars while supporting their promotion and tenure trajectories (Vithal et al., 2024). Such efforts can be pursued with minimal reliance on external funding by leveraging collaborative networks, student research teams, and open-access resources (Kayingo et al., 2022). The field must prioritize syntheses that directly address race, class, language, gender, and identity dimensions within mathematics education. These studies preserve valuable knowledge and broaden its influence, thus enabling urban educators, policymakers, and scholars to continue advocating for equity through evidence, even amid resource constraints. By doing so, we sustain the radical imagination that DEI work embodies while creating an enduring archive of resistance against potential political backlash.

Enfranchising Communities as Co-Creators of Knowledge

At the core of equity-centered mathematics education is a transformative concept: that communities and particularly those historically marginalized must be seen not merely as subjects of research but as co-creators of knowledge. In the context of diminishing funding for DEI initiatives, it is essential to reaffirm this commitment by centering the voices, assets, and epistemologies of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and immigrant communities within urban mathematics education. Scholars are urged to include positionality statements that articulate how relationships with communities shape the research process. This involves recognizing the ways in which cultural identities, institutional power dynamics, and prior interactions inform all stages of research, from formulating research questions to disseminating results.

Utilizing a reflexive approach to positionality becomes a powerful strategy for empowering communities, clarifying whose knowledge is valued, and ensuring

that it emerges through authentic collaboration rather than exploitative extraction. Urban mathematics education must be re-envisioned through a strengths-based paradigm, drawing on frameworks such as community cultural wealth, which identifies navigational, linguistic, familial, aspirational, resistant, and social capital as vital resources that students and families contribute to learning environments. Adopting a cultural wealth orientation allows educators to reject deficit-based stereotypes (e.g., "at-risk," "underprepared") and recognize that mathematical sensemaking is embedded in community practices, be it through budgeting strategies, spatial reasoning in everyday movement, or collective problem-solving traditions.

To actualize this vision, scholars should invest in community-led research models like Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). These methodologies empower stakeholders as co-investigators, allowing them to define problems, collect data, analyze findings, and advocate for solutions (Raygoza, 2016). For instance, PAR initiatives in urban contexts have produced redesigned curricula that engage students with local issues, such as mapping food deserts using geometric concepts. At the same time, YPAR projects have enabled students to investigate racialized patterns in mathematics tracking, leading schools to adopt more equitable placement policies.

Moreover, this shift in approach necessitates a reconfiguration of funding relationships. Scholars should pursue grant opportunities that foster collaboration as opposed to treating communities as passive beneficiaries. This collaborative model includes: co-authoring proposals with community organizations, public schools, and local parent groups; ensuring joint decision-making regarding the allocation of resources; and establishing sustainable infrastructures, such as family math nights or community STEM libraries, that endure beyond the duration of grant funding. These practices align with broader equity commitments and bolster sustainability in a climate where institutional support for DEI is threatened. Ultimately, engaging in research with communities, rather than on them, holds the potential to transform both mathematics education and the systemic structures that underpin it, reinforcing the notion that community-driven knowledge creation is instrumental to achieving equity in educational contexts.

Summary of Key Takeaways

In this editorial, we reflect on the dismantling of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives in mathematics education as both a political and structural crisis. We begin with the story of the Urban STEM Futures Camp, which, despite transforming the lives of Black and Latinx youth, was defunded under shifting policies that labeled equity-centered programs as "nonessential." This loss is not hypothetical; it mirrors national trends where billions of dollars in federal funding for DEI-aligned research and programming have been revoked.

We situate this moment within a broader historical arc. Programs such as The Algebra Project, EQUIP, TODOS, and Mathematically Connected

Communities demonstrate how equity-focused mathematics education has challenged deficit narratives, nurtured culturally sustaining pedagogies, and positioned mathematics as a pathway to liberation. Yet, today, such work is increasingly deemed "political" and stripped of support. Scholars of color, community partners, and students are left vulnerable as equity-driven research is delegitimized and excluded from funding streams.

Rather than retreat, we argue that the field must reimagine a justice-centered future. This includes leveraging systematic reviews and meta-analyses to preserve the rigor and visibility of DEI research, centering communities as co-creators of knowledge through participatory methodologies, and cultivating sustainable partnerships that are not wholly dependent on federal funding. In this way, we can resist the erasure of equity and continue building an enduring archive of resistance, hope, and innovation in mathematics education.

Conclusion

The dismantling of DEI initiatives in mathematics education is not merely a funding issue, it is a struggle over the very soul of our field. When equity is stripped away, what remains is not neutral mathematics but a system that quietly reproduces the same racial and social hierarchies it claims to transcend. We refuse to accept this erasure as inevitable. The brilliance of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and immigrant students has always illuminated what mathematics can become when it is taught as liberation rather than exclusion.

Our task now is clear: we must resist retreat and instead imagine boldly. We can preserve the intellectual legacy of equity work through systematic reviews and meta-analyses. We can ensure that knowledge is co-created rather than extracted through community partnerships. Through coalitions of educators, researchers, and families, we can sustain justice-centered mathematics education even in the face of political backlash.

The stakes are too high to remain silent. If we surrender to the false promise of neutrality, we risk consigning another generation of students to invisibility. But if we hold fast to equity, justice, and community as the foundations of our work, we can continue to transform mathematics education into a practice of possibility and power. This is not simply about protecting programs; it is about protecting futures. And those futures are worth every act of resistance we can muster.

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