Simply Marvelous (3.15.2023)

We have a gem in our congregation, someone who played a big part in getting elementary school-age kids to shift their narrative of math from "ugh" to "wow" and from "I can't" to "I can". Once upon a time, there were parents who wanted a math presence in their community so their children would be more successful with math schoolwork and homework. They conferred with Asheville City Schools' Parent Engagement Coordinator—our own Marta Alcalá. She invited Dr. Samuel Kaplan of UNC Asheville's Department of Math to present strategies for achieving the goal. In collaboration with parents, they started a math tutoring program in the community room of Pisgah View Apartments public housing.

Using a "drop-in" model from UNC Asheville, each week undergraduate tutors put up a sign saying, "Free Help with Math". When they first began, just two to five kids showed up each week, and they stayed just long enough to complete their homework. The numbers were disappointing given the enthusiasm parents had demonstrated initially.

Applying a racial equity lens and lived experience as a BIPOC person, Marta knew that the words "Free Help with Math" might work for university students seeking support, but for Black and brown children the phrase hit in a very different way. The language "Free Help with Math" only reinforced in the children the narrative in public schools that Black and Brown children with certain home addresses are the reason for the school system's persistent "education achievement gap". That choice of language was keeping the children away.

Together, Marta, Dr. Kaplan, tutors, and parents brainstormed ways to entice these young students to celebrate math, community, and leadership. Make it a Club! A Math Club! How about a MARVELOUS MATH CLUB?! Instead of tutors and adult volunteers, there would be MATH CHAMPIONS. Instead of students, there would be MATH LEADERS. As Marta and Dr. Kaplan wrote in "Moja; an Interdisciplinary Journal of Africana Studies":

> When we started Marvelous Math Club, our intention, in addition to supporting math education, was to transform narratives around race, academic success, identity, and cultural awareness. While our efforts were not a direct response to the seminal work of Dr. Ladson-Billings on teaching Black children, we were influenced by the same questions of authenticity, culturally responsive ways of engaging, and moving away from systems of hierarchy and power that perpetuate a narrative of Black children as the "problem" in schools (Ladson-Billings, 2009). We also began to consciously address the narratives of who does math, who is good at math, and where math learning takes place. Marvelous Math Club became a healthy partnership of math and psychology with a racial equity lens.

The Marvelous Math Club approach has been a big success in terms of numbers of attendees, attitudes toward math and learning, and achievement in the classroom. Themes of leadership and personal development in community undergird the sessions, which always end with a Sharing Circle for Math Leaders (students) to tell one by one how they demonstrated leadership that day. Applause and celebration of each individual end the club session. Afterwards, Math Champions (tutors and other adults) reflect on what went well and possible areas of growth.

Thanks to Marta, Dr. Kaplan, and the Pisgah View families for developing this creative and joyous example of math support through collaboration and a racial equity lens. What is happening is simply marvelous!

(More on the collaboration between Asheville Housing Authority, University of North Carolina Asheville, and Asheville City Schools at http://libjournals.unca.edu/moja/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/MOJA21-v2i1-Williams-Kaplan.pdf. Includes transcript of a typical session of Marvelous Math Club and suggestions for shifting to "Asset- and Justice-Based Thinking, Practices, and Language", which grew out a deep partnership with the Math Leaders and families at Pisgah View Apartments.)