

The Math Fairy

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My participation in a Show Me Your Math fair in Perth Andover got me thinking about my role representing the discipline of mathematics. I share these reflections to invite my colleagues to reflect on how they represent the discipline in their various activities in schools and beyond.

After developing the idea of a Show Me Your Math event with Lisa Lunney Borden and leaders of Mi'kmaq communities in Cape Breton, she and I have been promoting such fairs for a decade. At these fairs, children present their projects that describe the mathematics they identify in everyday community practices. At a fair in Perth Andover, I was asked to address the 300 children gathered there. I was called to the PA system while the children sat by their projects. Their ethnomathematics projects described community members' (and the children's own) mathematics in making dream catchers, bannock, dresses, houses, bracelets, and cake, in playing hockey, basketball and computer games, and more. In my comments to the crowd, I had to wing it and I had to be brief. I riffed on an idea that suddenly came to mind...

With flourish I asked, "Are you enjoying the math fair?" "Yes!" enthused the gathering.

Quieter now I said, "I want to tell you about an important letter, which is really a question." I looked at a close-by 9-year-old. "How do you spell fair?"

With a confused expression the child spelled fair, and I asked what happens if you put the letter Y on the end. The child thought for a moment and answered along with a few others, "It spells fairy?"

I leaned into the microphone and with a deep and slow voice said, "Well, I am the math fairy." The students' eyes opened wide with surprise and they wondered if they heard correctly.

"As I said, the letter Y is really a question. 'Why?' When I come around to your projects, I will be very interested in the people who do the math that you are telling

us about. I am going to ask you how the people did the math. I am most interested in why they did those things. Why are they doing that math, and why are they doing it that way? When you look at each other's projects you can ask each other those questions too. And when your parents and community members come look at your projects, you can answer those questions. Why are people doing this math, and why are they doing it this way?" As I wandered among the displays, students called out to me saying, "Come ask me questions." Clearly, the image stuck.

They knew that the math fairy wanted to know about the human, cultural situations of the mathematics in their projects (but they probably didn't think about it in these terms).

I apologized to some children for not wearing my math fairy outfit, and said I might wear it next year. That was a fun thing to say, and it prompted my reflection.

I fantasized the various wild outfits that I could wear as the math fairy. Though I love dressing up, I realized that any costume I might choose would form an image for the children about what mathematics is. Clothing is gendered. Would I wear tights? A tutu? I decided that I should not dress up as the math fairy next year, because I did not want to make choices about gender in mathematics. I wanted mathematics to be gender-neutral, culturally neutral.

Yet the status quo is not neutral. Mathematics is not gender neutral. And it is not culturally neutral.

Indeed, my scholarly work challenges the pervasive idea that mathematics is or can be a-political, un-gendered, or culture free. While I would like to play with the cultural representations of mathematics, I was and am not sure how to do this in a positive way. Meanwhile, as I avoid gender play in mathematics, the status quo only reifies current conceptions of mathematics—an old(ish), white, male math fairy mediates mathematics for the children and the community.

I invite the help of my scholarly community and friends to help me grapple with the challenge of how to play with and challenge gendered stories in the mathematics we mediate.