"Look at us as family & not just numbers"

Community Members Refute Dehumanizing Mathematical Discourse During Potential School-Closure Discussions

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Abstract

We examine the civic engagement of three individuals from the Brass Bell Elementary School community who are facing the potential closure of their school by the district. In a community meeting with district personnel, a teacher, student, and Spanish-speaking parent challenge the district's dehumanizing use of mathematics in their presentation. The community members are actively resisting the school's closure and their opposition to the district's mathematical model of equality (Tate et al., 1993) highlights the strategies they use to contest the erasure of their humanity. Their actions also challenge the myth that mathematics is purely objective and neutral. This paper explores the contestation strategies employed by these community members in response to the district's presentation.

Sunny Field Independent School District & School Closures

On December 15, 2022, the Sunny Field Independent School District[1] (SF ISD) administration announced and presented to the school board eight proposals for redrawing SF ISD elementary school attendance zones. Seven of the eight proposals included the closure of at least two schools (60-to-70% of the student population is Latinx[2]). To gather feedback, SF ISD personnel organized community meetings at each of the six schools listed for possible closures. At these meetings, the administration personnel presented their rationale for school closure and their plans' details. We focus on the community meeting held at Brass Bell Elementary as an instance of community member resistance and contestation, demanding (re)humanization after being numerically represented in a way antithetical to the humanity they see in their community.

Johnson[3] characterizes school closures as auguring both a civic and social death. In the United States, school closures historically and contemporarily impact communities of color in contrast to white communities.[4] In the public political sphere, quantitative measures have long been used to provide a mirage of logic and objectivity to mathematical models and characterizations of phenomena.[5][6][7] Mathematics, therefore, plays a significant role in policy discourses. Policy decision-making uses the power of the myth of mathematics as neutral and objective to provide a language of legitimacy to laws, policies, and regulations. Tate et al. spoke about this concept in relation to *Brown v Board of Education*, as a "mathematical solution for a sociocultural problem".[8] Regarding Brown v Board, Tate et al. argue the courts constructed a solution of equality where desegregation was flattened to a numbers game of moving Black students into white schools. As if all those movements are the same (equality). If it was a model of equity, then further considerations of the

social aspects of Black children's well-being, for example, would have been considered. But the mathematical model of equality applied after Brown v Board dehumanized Black children and only thought of them as numbers. In general, these constructed mathematical models of equality dehumanize by flattening minoritized populations to solely mathematical terms.[9] For example, Gómez Marchant et al. demonstrated how a group of white parents leveraged the myth of mathematics as neutral and objective to bolster their arguments for new attendance boundaries.[10] Through their public comments, the white parents flattened the issue of rezoning an apartment complex with a high number of South Asian students to be one of balancing school enrollments. As white parent Joy commented, "That this [rezoning] has anything to do with race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status just simply isn't true. This is a logistical numbers problem".[11] Joy and the other white parents constructed a mathematical model of equality that excluded racial and linguistic variables in considering rezoning. The use of mathematical discourses in these dehumanizing ways has become normalized. Community contestation and disruption of these dehumanizing discourses are relevant to shaping policy conversations.

Accordingly, we seek a richer understanding of mathematics within the tapestry of political discourses. In this paper, we share a part of a larger research project focusing on analyzing mathematical discourses by community members, district personnel, and policymakers about potential school closures. Here we center the voices of three community members (a teacher, a student, and a Spanish-speaking parent) and how they refuted the dehumanizing mathematical model of equality as put forward by the district personnel. Each community member's act of resistance was specific to the quantification and measures (i.e., inclusion variables) selected by the district personnel. The guiding research question is: What mathematical and racial discourses are used by school district personnel and community members during discussions of possible school closures?

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Spatial Analysis

We bring a *critical race spatial perspective*[12,13] to current research on policy as a practice of power.[14,15] Critical race theory forefronts the endemic racism in our everyday ways of being in the world. A critical race spatial perspective builds on the foundational tenets of critical race theory in education[16,17] to highlight how social spaces are racialized and provide "an explanatory framework and methodological approach that accounts for the role of race, racism, and white supremacy in examining geographic and social spaces".[18] Building on Du Bois'[19] conceptualization of the color-line, Solórzano and Vélez describe the importance of the color-line to understand the "way space comes to be defined and experienced as the conceived and constructed reality of a racist society".[20] For school districts, attendance zones are demarcated spaces constructed to control the racial make-up of a school's student population. A school board's power to change attendance zones through school closures and thereby the racial makeup of the student body means that community conversations about these demarcations are also *racialized discourses*.[21] Soja's[22] description of "thoughts about space" or "how materialized space is conceptualized, imagined, or represented in various ways" further drives home the equivalence between attendance zones and everyday racism. A critical race spatial perspective highlights how color-lines are maintained for the benefit of those with whiteness.[23]

When we refer to whiteness, we follow Orozco Marín's conceptualization:[24]

> Importante mencionar que cuando digo blanco no me refiero necesariamente a una cuestión exclusivamente fenotípica, sino que blanco es a que el sujeto no está racializado—a que pueda vivir una vida sin tener siendo persona antes de ser una persona racializada. Entonces sabemos muy bien que la niña, niño, el joven afrocolombiano, por ejemplo, siempre va a ser negro antes de un niño; para la escuala y para la sociedad.[25]

While Orzoco Marin's example is about racialization, the same ideas can be recontextualized for other oppressive systems and their intersections. Whiteness is about the privileges of being seen, acknowledged, recognized, and treated like a person—first (e.g., one is poor before a person; a wheelchair user before a person; bipolar before a person; immigrant before a person).

Policy as a Practice of Power

Levinson et al. argued, "the way to unpack policy is to see it as a kind of social practice, specifically, a practice of power". Policy constructs reality, determines what behaviors are appropriate, and constitutes conventions of resource allocations.[26] From a critical race theory perspective, these policy practices maintain white supremacy. Even those policies and laws meant to perform progressive ideas (e.g., *Brown v Board of Education*) are through time weakened by court cases because their original acceptance was to the benefit of white people.[27] Gillborn argued policy is an act of white supremacy. Being able to influence policymakers is an act of privilege and power. In other words, those with whiteness are more influential in policy decision-making. For our project, therefore, our perspective is that policy is an act of (white) power. Likewise, traditionally recognized forms of civic engagement are most often associated with participation in white-dominated spaces of power such as electoral politics or community forums like school board meetings,[28] leading to what some have called a "civic empowerment gap"[29] wherein civic engagement comes to be seen as a predominantly white activity.[30]

Mathematics plays an important role in policy decision-making processes because quantitative measures of sociocultural issues provide a sense of objectiveness to the phenomenon that policy, laws, and regulations look to resolve or in their distribution of resources. Espeland and Sauder argue the power of quantifying complex social issues is in the false sense of objectivity they provide.[VI]

> [Quantitative measures] have the patina of objectivity: stripped of rhetoric and emotion, they show what is 'really going on.' Even more, they can reduce vast amounts of information to a figure that is easy to understand, a simplicity that intimates that there is nothing to hide, and indeed that nothing can be hidden. [31]

Mathematics is leveraged to justify claims of legitimacy and scientific truth. As Woolf argued, "once a new discipline has developed a mathematical discourse, it has almost immediately laid claim, at least in the language of its most enthusiastic disciples, to the significant status—science!"[32] Therefore, in policy discourses, mathematics is a language of power. Mathematical ways of reasoning and knowing

become necessary for civic engagement. Particularly when the policy as a practice of (white) power dehumanizes through the construction of mathematical models of equality.

Methods

For the larger project, we follow Bejarano et al.'s critical ethnography "to understand and prioritize local conceptions of local realities".[33] Capturing the public comments made at the community meetings organized by SF ISD is one way to gather how the community members are interpreting the mathematical data provided by the district as a representation of their local reality.

Context

SF ISD is located in central Texas in the United States. Texas has a long history of discriminatory policies, regulations, and laws against Latiné populations, particularly using education for assimilation and erasure (see San Guadalupe, 1990). These historical storylines are ever present as the communities being targeted by the possible school closure are all Title I (at least 40% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch) and a high percentage of Latiné student population.

Data Collected

For the larger project, at least one research team member attended and audio-recorded five of the six community meetings. We also worked with a group of parents representing the six schools proposed to close to organize against the district's proposed plans. For this paper, we selected the Brass Bell community meeting for analytic focus.

Data Analysis

Based on our field notes and transcripts, we identified three public comments at the Brass Bell community meeting specifically resisting the district's mathematical model of equality.[34] These came from a parent, a teacher, and a student who each contested the mathematics used to describe the community. We spotlight these discursive moves as acts of resistance to shed light on how they contested a mathematical model of equality that flattened their community. They demanded more than a mathematical solution to the sociocultural issue.

SF ISD Administration's Mathematical Model of Equality

At the beginning of the community meeting, the administration personnel shared their rationale for why the district needed to consider closing schools. The personnel presented a lack of growth in the area, the age of the facilities, and the efficiency of the building as the inclusion criteria for school closure (Fig. 1); establishing a mathematical model of equality for determining school closures. Each of these facets was shown as quantified data giving the patina of objectivity[35] in the administration's decision-making. The district personnel also began the construction of a crisis by emphasizing the consequences if no decision was made. The power of constructing and adopting limited mathematical models and the quantification

Figure 1: Slide shown at community meeting showing consequences of not closing school

of human phenomena maintains and perpetuates white dominance.[36] Mathematical models of equality flatten or describe the processes through which complex phenomena lived in a 3-dimensional world become a 2-dimensional mathematical model.[37] Here, the district personnel, through the selection of specific inclusion variables—growth, facilities, and efficiency—constructed a mathematical model of equality, flattening the complexity of the school and neighborhood to three variables while excluding others (e.g., race, class).

Growth was represented in two ways. The first was through a table from a third-party demographer's report (Fig. 2). The personnel pointed to the yellow,

District Housing Overview by Elementary Zone

Elementary	Annual Starts	Quarter Starts	Annual Closings	Quarter Closings	Under Construction	Inventory	Vacant Dev. Lots	Futures
BA	35	8	136	75	10	18	74	0
BR	0	0	67	25	0	0	16	383
C	7	0	29	6	4	11	0	0
CA	74	0	209	36	38	39	8	4,940
CO	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
D	20	6	3	2	28	30	50	154
DE	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
DES	122	79	248	44	97	102	161	1,352
H	265	31	213	115	195	225	45	942
HI	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
M	189	14	384	140	128	111	373	840
MU	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	114
NO	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
PA	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P	37	37	0	0	37	37	287	1,290
R	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Brass Bell	2	0	19	4	2	2	0	121
RO	26	4	97	33	11	12	1	0
S	0	0	36	10	0	0	0	287
T	12	12	0	0	12	12	26	0
W	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
WI	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	52
GRAND TOTAL	789	191	1,441	490	562	599	1,041	10,475

*Does NOT include age-restricted communities

Highest activity in the category

Second highest activity in the category

Third highest activity in the category

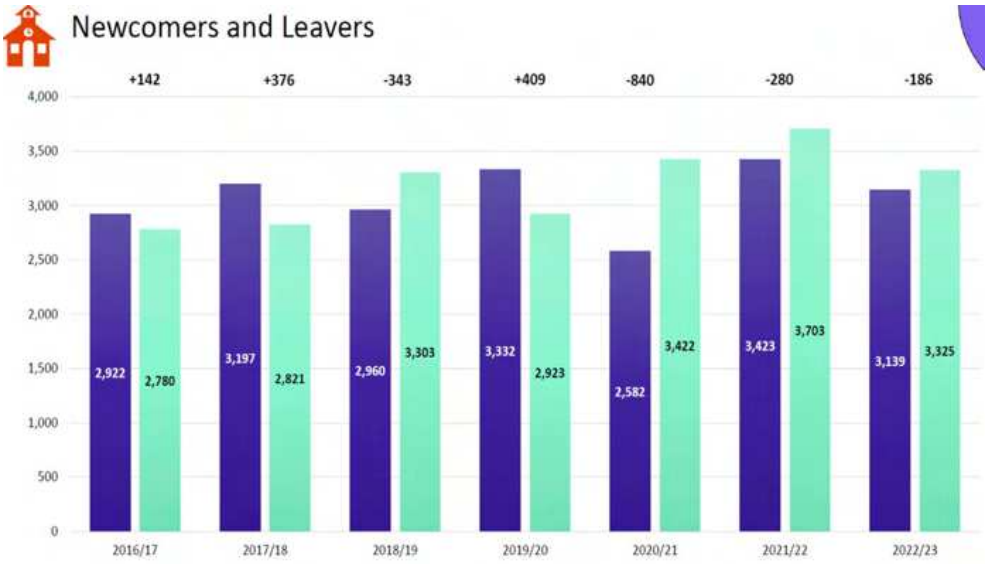

Figure 3: Slide with Newcomers and Leavers of SF ISD by School Year

green, and red highlights as those having the first, second, and third highest level of "activity" (housing and land development and construction) by elementary zones. Neither how these numbers were determined nor the differences between them were explained. The presenter summarized the intended message for the audience, "Overall what this is showing you is that a lot of the activities are happening in the northeast side of the district." The presenter then showed another graph (Fig. 3) demonstrating the number of newcomers and leavers of SF ISD by year. This was to emphasize how charter schools and the pandemic diminished enrollment in the district. "We see for the last three years that this trend continues to increase where students are not coming to the district but they are actually leaving." These quantitative reports provide a warrant for action because of the need to avoid the consequences of not closing one or more schools: a) the need for another bond (financial measure) to expand schools; b) students displaced into portables (non-permanent structures disconnected from the main facility used as classrooms) or to other schools; c) overextended staff.

Continuing to justify the inclusion criteria used for their mathematical model of equality, the administration displayed a table (Fig. 4) with the name of the school (and schools the students would attend if Brass Bell closed) with the year opened and the academic rating received from the Texas Education Agency. Implicitly these were to represent the facilities variable. The presenters briefly described the columns: "All those campuses are rated B. And the year in which they were built is also in this chart. The age of these buildings range from 1982 to 2012. That is the years they are constructed." The administration personnel then moved on. They did not include any information about updates to the buildings.

The final set of tables emphasized the efficiency of each school—the last inclusion variable described by the district (Fig. 5). There was no explanation of how efficiency percentages were calculated. The efficiency rate was only described as "the percentage of students that could be in those buildings." The chart shows how closing Brass Bell would achieve the objective of increasing the efficiency of the other schools. Upon further investigation, we determined the efficiency percentage represents the number of students enrolled or predicted to be enrolled divided by

the architectural capacity of the school. The district's discourse of efficiency only reflected the efficiency of the building's physical use, not the learning environment or other social characteristics of the space. The excluded variables in the mathematical model of equality flattened the community to merely bodies taking space in a building.

Contestation of the Administration's Mathematical Model of Equality

Campus	Capacity	Year Built	Academic Rating
Brass Bell	750	1993	B
C	850	1998	B
N	600	1986	B
P	650	1982	B
R	850	2012	B

Figure 4: Table from Slide with Capacity, Year Built, and Academic Rating

Efficiency	CAP	22-23 %	23-24 %	24-25 %	25-26 %	26-27 %	27-28 %
Brass Bell	750	53	0	0	0	0	0
C	850	59	56	78	82	81	82
N	600	64	71	79	80	82	84
P	650	70	69	92	88	87	88
R	850	60	66	63	65	64	65

Figure 5: Efficency Rates for Brass Belle and Schools Accepting Students in Proposed Plan

Marissa, who read as white, was the ninth speaker during the public comment section of the meeting. She was the first to explicitly call out the district's mathematical model of equality as insufficient and dehumanizing, stating, "I know you provided us with money numbers, business statistics, but I don't think you humanized us."[38] Her strategy for contestation was to share alternative measures, describing Brass Bell through more humanizing chosen terms. In offering alternative quantifications of Brass Bell Elementary's community to be included in the district's mathematical model of equality, Marissa argued numbers with numbers.

> Hi my name is [Marissa] and I'm a 5th grade teacher here at [Brass Bell]....I know you provided us with money numbers, business statistics, but I don't think you humanized us... So I'm going to provide some more stats about our school that will show why we should stay open. Number one, we've had over the years many community partnerships with companies such as GM, Dell, National Instruments. We're the only campus in the district to have a campus food pantry, a clothing closet, and a school supply closet. [Audience applause].... Last year on our—a survey from teachers we had a 100% staff voting in support of our principal.... We have spent almost 7000 dollars on the garden outside to use as an outdoor learning space and to use for science learning and community events. We have also received five distinctions from STAAR scores....Very low staff turnover. That is not the case at other schools that are in the area.... These are things that you have not highlighted in this presentation that other communities will know why we should remain open. I think those should be included in the bigger picture as your job working for the district. (S9–Marissa, Brass Bell Community Meeting).

Marissa rebuts the mathematical model of equality by providing statistics and other data about the school to (re)humanize the community after the dehumanizing mathematical representation. She emphasized quantifiable but also qualitative aspects reflecting the humanity of Brass Bell such as partnerships developed, the community garden, and their food pantry. In these efforts, she highlights the outreach to the local, mostly minoritized community. Marissa argued that the mathematical model of equality required other inclusion criteria (e.g., investment into community, staff satisfaction).

The 16th speaker, Jarrett (read as Latinx), was the first student to provide a public comment. In his comment, Jarrett shared how the school had been a formative space for him, and to warrant the academic value of Brass Bell, he mentioned how he is currently taking all Pre-AP classes in middle school. This was interpreted as a rebuttal to the use of Brass Bell's "B" academic rating as part of the facility inclusion variable justifying Brass Bell's potential closure in the district's model. Jarrett effectively attaches his humanity to the academic rating, working to (re) humanize the measure.

> I have three siblings. And my older brother and me have already gone to this school....And when I came to this school, this school really helped me. And now in 6th grade, I am in Pre-AP, all classes. [audience applause]....And like all of y'all, I am really sad it is being considered to close down because there is going to be a lot of sad

> moments. And they should really take into consideration and look at us as family and not just numbers. (S16–Jarrett, Brass Bell Community Meeting)

Jarrett's contestation strategy was to illustrate the civic and social death of closing the school. He emphasized his and the community's emotional stakes—absent in the district's mathematical model. Jarrett exhorts the district to consider the emotional consequences of dehumanizing discourse and (re)humanize through acknowledgment of familial relations.[39]

The 22nd speaker, Mikel, was a Spanish-speaking parent who read as Latinx. Mikel countered the district's mathematical model of equality by emphasizing the cold nature of the numbers shown. His form of contestation was to contrast the warmth and love Brass Bell has shown his family and son, in particular, to the cold numbers of the mathematical model of equality presented by the administration.

> Buenas noches mi nombre es [Mikel]. Tengo un niño en quinto grado….llegamos a esta comunidad hace cinco años. Llegamos con miedos, con dudas, pero [Brass Bell] los tomó con una gran sorpresa y un gran amor por la—para nuestra comunidad. Y ahora con mi hijo grande amamos mucho más que nada [Brass Bell] porque hemos visto el cambio en su personalidad, en su estudios porque ha sido apoyado grandemente….Usted nos están enseñando números fríos en sus presentaciones, como eficiencias, como porcentajes, como capacidades, pero no los están enseñando el impacto emocional en nuestros hijos….Por favor no comuniquen números fríos. No cometan errores de los países donde venimos donde se deshumanicen a los niños. Llegamos a este país con ese—con esa promesa dónde los amamos y queremos que siga hace y no cometan los mismos errores. (S22–Mikel, Brass Bell Community Meeting)[40]

Mikel rejects the efficiency, percentages, and capacity inclusion variables used by the district. He does not argue numbers with numbers but instead stresses the support and love received from the school and variables absent from the district's presentation of their decision-making. He also, like Jarrett, stresses the stakes involved with students' emotional well-being. He pleads to those in power to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do, an action Bell[41] argued never worked for the civil rights movement—there must be a potential benefit to white people, an interest convergence, for civil rights laws, policies, and court cases to pass.[42] Finally, Mikel warns the district personnel how these actions were similar to those from his country, which dehumanizes children and begs the district not to make the same mistakes. Mikel attempts here to show the violence inherent in the district's mathematical modeling.

Conclusion

Mudry warned, "one particular result of numeration is its exploitation of numbers, statistics, and measurement to valorize and legitimate inferential and qualitative experiences". [43] Marissa, Jarrett, and Mikel recognized how the district's presentation of their community did not capture the humanity of their experience. In this paper, we reported on the contestation strategies of three community members

against their community being flattened down to mathematical terms by the district. Each of them rejected the mathematics used and offered other measures and considerations to (re)humanize their community during the school closure debate. The mathematics chosen by the district to render their decision-making processes to close the school failed to capture who they are, nor the emotional dimensions of the stakes involved. The mathematical model of equality shown by the district was insufficient and highlighted the erasure of key characteristics of the community the speakers wanted to be considered. The community demonstrated its own power against the acts of (white) power involved in policy making. They challenged mathematics as the language of legitimacy by refuting the mathematical model of equality proposed by the district. This contestation in civic engagement is relevant to how policy conversations are shaped within spaces requiring high degrees of privilege to participate. The three community members exemplified three forms of contestation that set a foundation for future explorations in disrupting whiteness in policy spaces.

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Acknowledgments: This paper is based on work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. #2313609. Opinions, findings, and conclusions in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funding agency.

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Notes

1. All names used are pseudonyms.

2.We recognize Latinx/é/a/o is not a universal nor static label. These are deeply personal political choices by individuals. We use Latinx to be more inclusive of nonbinary and gender fluid individuals who may identify with any or a combination of the 33 countries in Latin America.

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25.*ARPJ Editorial Team's translation:It is important to mention that when I say white I am not necessarily referring to an exclusively phenotypic matter, but white is because the subject is not racialized—that he can live a life without having to be a person before being a racialized person. So we know very well that the girl, the boy, the Afro-Colombian youth, for example, will always be black before a boy; for the school and for society.*

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40. *ARPJ Editorial Team's translation: Good evening my name is [Mikel]. I have a fifth grader...we came to this community five years ago. We came in with fears, with doubts, but [Brass Bell] took them with a great surprise and a great love for the—for our community. And now with my older son we love [Brass Bell] much more than anything because we have seen the change in his personality, in his studies because he has been greatly supported...You are teaching us cold numbers in your presentations, like efficiencies, like percentages, like abilities, but they are not teaching them the emotional impact on our children....Please do not communicate cold numbers. Do not commit the mistakes of the countries where we come from where children are dehumanized. We came to this country with that—with that promise where we love them and we want them to continue and not make the same mistakes. (S22–Mikel, Brass Bell Community Meeting)*

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