

EDITORIAL

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In my previous editorial, published a year ago, I drew attention to the collection of letters on ‘research problems in mathematics education’ that appeared in volume 4 of this journal. The various contributions were responses to a request from FLM’s founding editor, David Wheeler, for suggestions of “specific problems whose solution would be likely to advance substantially our knowledge about mathematics education” (FLM 4(1), p. 40). In the letter Wheeler sent with his request, he explicitly refers to Hilbert’s 23 problems in mathematics, presented in 1900, as his inspiration.

Most of the responses published by Wheeler took the request at face value, supplying, with explanation, a good number of different research problems. One or two correspondents were more recalcitrant. W. M. Brookes, in particular, was quite provocative. He wrote:

I don’t think I believe in problems in the abstract, and certainly object to comparing “mathematics education” to mathematics in the Hilbert sense. For me the word “education” implies a political stance. [...] the phrase “mathematics education”, when we invented it in the early sixties, was a convenient slogan. It slipped neatly between the operational words “teaching” and “learning”. [...] I do not believe that we should fall victim to the transcendality [*sic*] of the words. It is bad enough for the word “mathematics” to be accepted as describing something which easily crosses national and linguistic boundaries. [...] All this amounts to a personal refusal to believe in a generalised object called “mathematics education”. (FLM 4(3), pp. 28-29)

Brookes’ remarks help to situate and critique the other responses and prompt me to highlight three points.

First, the reference to the origins of the term “mathematics education” is a reminder that in 1984, mathematics education was a relatively young field. Now that mathematics education is more established, it is perhaps too easy to take the object of the field as self-evident. We are all busy researching “mathematics education,” going to conferences on research in “mathematics education” and writing in jour-

nals of research on “mathematics education”, so “mathematics education” must be something, mustn’t it? Well, what, in fact, is “mathematics education”?

Second, Brookes’ comment about the political nature of education, leads to some observations about the various responses published in volume 4. Most striking to me, particularly in the light of what has appeared in FLM in more recent years, is that problems of a socio-political nature are almost entirely absent. The only significant attempt to raise such problems came from Jere Confrey (one of only, I think, four women to respond). She wrote: “We need to do some cross-racial, cross-sexual, cross-class, and cross-cultural studies of the learning of mathematics” and “the study of women and mathematics must enter the classroom”. This is a call to which contributors to FLM have responded over the years, although I’m not sure if this is because we are more aware of socio-political issues, or because we are now more able to tackle them for some reason, or because theoretical developments have made such issues more apparent. Are we more politically aware? And if so, has our conception of “mathematics education” changed accordingly?

Finally, Brookes is keenly aware of the way the words we use to talk about mathematics, education, and research shapes what we think about them. This is an issue that has become much more widely discussed in recent years, as mathematics education grapples with the linguistic turn of the wider social sciences. This issue of FLM begins with two responses to my editorial of a year ago, by Anna Sfard and Ole Skovsmose. Their letters reflect this linguistic turn in different ways, as well as a greater attention to socio-political issues, and serve to illustrate how the field has changed (I dare not write ‘progressed’) since 1984. Their letters also serve to open this issue; much of what they discuss can be seen exemplified in the articles that follow. I will leave you to read their letters and deduce the nature of the changes that have occurred.

Additional contributions or responses to any of this writing, or to anything else that appears in this issue, are encouraged and can be submitted to editor@flm-journal.org.