CHAPTER 1

Confronting the Lies I Tell Myself

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When I started teaching, I was a white middle-class woman teaching black children in a low-income black community, and I had very limited experiences and authentic relationships with black women, men, and children (an embarrassing fact to admit). This was also true of my authentic relationships with people who had grown up with fewer financial resources than my family had.

During a dismissal time in my first year of teaching, I let some of my female students touch and braid my hair. They told me how beautiful it was and that I should never cut it. When a parent pulled me aside and told me I needed to stop because I was reifying messages of whiteness, especially of white hair, as beauty, my response was, "I didn't even realize! I am so sorry!"

Contrast my response to a different situation my first year. During winter break, I began planning a fraction unit for my fourth graders, and a knot folded in my stomach when I realized I did not fully understand the meaning of fractions and their operations. I knew this was unacceptable. The knot was there because I was scared of the repercussions my ignorance would have on my students. Therefore, I read multiple books, applied for and attended professional development, and talked to colleagues to fill in my knowledge gaps so that my students would have access to high-quality instruction.

In the first scenario, someone else had to point out a way in which I was unprepared to serve my students. My reaction was to abdicate responsibility. This was based in an untruth: that I was actually the victim, a victim of ignorance and lack of exposure, rather than an irresponsible woman in a position of power over young children who are constantly messaged by media and people like me that their appearance is somehow less than mine. In the second scenario, I demonstrated a high sense of agency. I identified a gap in my readiness to teach my students, determined that filling this gap was within my control, and did so. Why did I treat these two events so differently?

Making a Commitment to Access and Equity

The two vignettes illustrate the complex relationship between beliefs about access and equity in mathematics. The second scenario demonstrated a productive belief found in *Principles to Actions: Ensuring Mathematical Success for All* (NCTM 2014). Berlin's certainty that her knowledge of mathematics would have an impact on her students' chances of success was rooted in the belief that her students' mathematical abilities were a "function of opportunity, experience, and effort—not of innate intelligence" and that mathematics teaching and learning "cultivate mathematics abilities" (NCTM 2014, p. 63). This productive belief positioned Berlin as a reflective teacher to examine whether her knowledge of mathematics content and pedagogy provided opportunities for her students to experience mathematics learning in meaningful ways.

In contrast, the first vignette demonstrated that holding only some (but not all) productive beliefs about access and equity is not enough for our students. The parent who informed Berlin of the implied messages and the potential impact of letting children play with her hair served as a community and cultural informant. This parent raised Berlin's awareness of how her whiteness can affect black children's worldview. Berlin's initial comfort with her lack of knowledge and experiences about her students' contextual and cultural backgrounds revealed an unproductive belief: "Mathematics learning is independent of students' culture, conditions, and language, and teachers do not need to consider any of these factors to be effective" (p. 63). Being knowledgeable about the culture conditions and contexts of communities provides opportunities for teachers to access sources of funds of knowledge to incorporate into their teaching. In this context, funds of knowledge is an approach to validate what families do outside school and to recognize them as intellectual and educational resources to support teaching and learning (Moll et al. 1992). Parents not only act as advocates for their children but also create opportunities for their children to learn mathematics in everyday,

contextual realistic situations. Students bring into the mathematics classroom unique familial, cultural, and experiential backgrounds that serve as funds of knowledge. Teachers can seek out community resources (such as the parent in the vignette that begins this chapter) to support mathematics teaching and learning.

Positioning beliefs as productive and unproductive is a framework for unpacking actions and practices that affect access and equity. Beliefs for access and equity often are separated into two silos, one focusing on curriculum and instruction and one focusing on identity. These silos can provide different lenses for examining access and equity. Berlin stated, "In my early years of teaching I focused on achieving access and equity solely through curriculum and instruction, because it was more comfortable to debate the merits of pedagogical approaches to teaching fractions, or to analyze the quality of differentiation in my classroom, than it was to unpack my identity and assess its impact on my students." Unpacking one's identity in relation to the students and the community they serve requires teachers to seek and develop cultural and community knowledge and to develop critical and supportive allies. Both types of work, unpacking curriculum and instruction and unpacking identities, are necessary for access and equity in mathematics teaching and learning.

While the list of productive and unproductive beliefs in *Principles to Actions* (NCTM 2014) can help us interrogate our beliefs about students, it can also help us evaluate our beliefs about ourselves as educators. Such self-examination is crucial if we want our productive beliefs about students to affect their experience of mathematics. To make mathematics instruction accessible and equitable, we educators need to believe both that we are capable of making necessary changes and that it is our responsibility to do so. For example, to switch from the unproductive belief that students' experience of mathematics is divorced from their broader identities to the productive belief that "effective mathematics instruction leverages students' culture, conditions, and language to support and enhance mathematics learning" (NCTM 2014, p. 63), Berlin needed to believe that she could and should change her pedagogical practices. This chapter focuses on one strategy that Berlin used to maintain her sense of agency as an educator: the process of naming lies she accepted about her students or herself and the structures she put into place to resist these lies.

Advancing Access and Equity: Berlin's Voice

I lie, regularly. On rare occasions, I tell the lies you learn not to tell when you are little—the kind where you know something happened, but you tell a different story about it to other people, often to avoid some type of consequence. Far more often, however, I find myself engaging in a different and, I think, more dangerous

type of lie. These are stories I whisper to myself in spaces of uncertainty as a method of self-preservation; I use them to avoid deeply uncomfortable truths about myself and other (almost always white) people I love or as a way to avoid doing work that I know will be very hard, work that I might not know how to complete successfully. These lies leak from my personal rationalizations to the narratives that I provide others about my experiences. In telling these lies to others, I build a community of allies that can uphold the image I want to paint of myself (most often an image of me as both savior and martyr). Therefore, instead of working toward equity as I espouse to, in these stories I maintain the status quo, which upholds white supremacy. In opposition to these lies are truths: I am the adult responsible for the experiences my students receive in my classroom, and it is my responsibility to make sure that these experiences promote access and equity.

In this chapter, I describe the lies that I find myself most frequently telling as a way to falsely limit my agency (and therefore responsibility). After each lie, I share a truth that stands in opposition to it as well as strategies that I use to change my behavior. This list is not exhaustive. It is designed to reflect the equal importance of content, pedagogy, and culture in the classroom. As you will see, it is also extremely reflective of my position as a white middle-class female educator who teaches black children.

Regardless of whether you find my lies similar to your own, the process of naming our lies is one that I recommend to all teachers for multiple reasons. First, by making ourselves name lies, we force ourselves to interrogate our actions and the narratives that we use to represent them. Second, by naming our lies, we are more likely to notice them in our behavior and in the behavior of others, often others that we love and respect. Third, in using the word *lie*, we force ourselves to acknowledge the willful deceit of ourselves and others as well as the harmful consequences of our behavior. Fourth, when we publicly name our lies, we can hold ourselves (and others) accountable. We can ask others to hold us accountable. The more we identify our own problematic behavior, the more we can work toward mitigating damage we have done and changing our future behavior.

Lie 1: I'm so sorry. I didn't even know/think about . . . (Implied: How could I have known that?)

Truth: I have the skills to learn about my students, their families, and their cultural backgrounds. It is my responsibility to acknowledge how much I don't know about those different from myself, and constantly work to fill in my knowledge and experience gaps.

This first lie often comes out of my mouth as a faux apology when I engage in an act of racial aggression toward my coworkers, my students, or their families. The vignettes at the beginning of this chapter demonstrate that despite the parallel problems I faced, I viewed my lack of knowledge and experience with cultures other than the one in which I grew up as different from my lack of knowledge of mathematics. Although I immediately sought ways to develop my knowledge of mathematics content and pedagogy, when faced with my lack of understanding of my students and their backgrounds, I believed that I was only a product of my experiences and that I could not be expected to be accountable for things that I did not know. A variety of factors contributed to my lack of knowledge, experience, and relationships, including the college I chose to attend, the classes I chose to enroll in there, the people I chose to be friends with at every level of schooling, the types of media I chose to consume, the places where I chose to hang out, and so on. What I want to make clear is that my ignorance was not by chance. It was the result of choices that I (and people I love and respect, such as my parents, but mostly I myself) made.

Strangely, this truth holds great hope. Once we acknowledge that our ignorance is of our own making, a series of choices rather than something that happened to us, we realize that there were alternative paths we could have taken and we can set a new course for the future. We can focus on gaining the knowledge and skills we need in order to move toward the productive belief that "effective mathematics instruction leverages students' culture, conditions, and language to support and enhance mathematics learning" (NCTM 2014, p. 63).

We can fill this gap in several ways. One is through reading. In my case, I chose books to help me learn new perspectives in the same way that I selected books to help me understand fractions. I have expanded my viewpoint about current and historical events by reading authors of color as well as authors who live in or are from communities similar to those of my students. Through reading, I find tremendous gaps in my knowledge of history as well as immense bias in the history that I thought I knew. Reading has also helped open my eyes to things I did not know to look at, such as the historic connotations of the differences in skin color and hair texture between my students and the way these influenced dynamics in our classroom.

Another way to address this gap is to learn, from multiple perspectives, the history of the community in which you work. When I did this, I discovered a history of white faces like mine systematically robbing the neighborhood where I worked of its resources. They shut down the factories that provided jobs, abandoned these factories so they became designated hazardous waste sites, left the housing market when black families moved in, cut the neighborhood off from

the rest of the city with an interstate highway (it was bounded on the other sides by river and swamps), largely ignored schools that were woefully underpreparing children because their children did not attend them, made the choice to pull out grocery stores because they were not as profitable as they were in other sections of the city, and ruled to put major waste repository sites adjacent to the school I worked in. Learning this history, as well as the broader history I spoke of in the preceding paragraph, helped me begin to unpack what my identity as a white woman might mean to my students and their families. I began to develop (and continue to do so) eyes to see the way my whiteness affects every single aspect of my life, though it was most noticeable to my untrained eye at my job. My whiteness signaled that I was not only an outsider but also a member of the powerful elite who, to protect their position in the social hierarchy, consistently abused and ignored women, men, and children in our city and in our nation who looked like my students and their families. My whiteness meant that if something ever went wrong in my classroom, my version of the story is the one that would have been told and protected. This is not to say that I now know everything about either the history and culture of the students and families I worked with or my own white skin. It is to say that my evolving understanding of the weight of my identity led to a new level of intentionality about my interactions with students and their families.

The history of the community in which you work and the effect that aspects of your identity have on your students and their families might look very different from what I have described. However, if we do not make this type of work a habit, we almost surely will not develop socially, emotionally, and academically safe spaces for mathematics teaching and learning.

> ***Lie 2:*** It's not an ideal outcome but I did the best I could, given the circumstances . . .
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> ***Truth:*** All students can and want to learn. If students are not developing socially, emotionally, or cognitively, I am responsible for figuring out why that is and making it happen.

I use this lie when I do not want to accept responsibility for my students' outcomes. I try to avoid this responsibility for a couple of reasons. First, it is uncomfortable; it means that I have to acknowledge my shortcomings in the classroom. Second, it means that I am going to have to do a lot of work, first to learn about ways to improve my practice, and second to actually implement the improvements. Below I discuss four areas I examine when I am trying to pinpoint the ways in which I am and am not providing the "differentiated supports (e.g., time, instruction, curricular materials, programs) necessary to ensure that

all students are mathematically successful" (NCTM 2014, p. 63). They are not groundbreaking or glamorous suggestions, but I list them because, although many of us would like to think our classroom is a safe, exciting, caring, and efficient place, there is often room for improvement.

The first method I suggest to combat the lie of "I did my best" is to record your lessons and watch them. I have found that regularly recording myself and watching the videos is extremely helpful in identifying room for improvement. When I look at videos for issues related to classroom management, I see obvious signals, such as behavior that is so disruptive that it prevents students from learning; but subtle parts of management erode the quality of learning in our classrooms, too. On video it was easy to see when I overlooked students who were not disruptive but were not engaged, either. It was also easy to see when a lack of quality routines and procedures resulted in wasted instructional time. Video allowed me to examine the frequency, length, tone, and content of my interactions, helping me see if the story I told myself of what happened during my mathematics block matched what I saw on the video.

Second, examine who is doing the cognitive work in your room and at what level they are working. Student work was one of the most helpful ways I held myself accountable to the productive belief that "all students are capable of making sense of and persevering in solving challenging mathematics problems and should be expected to do so" (NCTM 2014, p. 64). In my early years in the classroom, I prided myself on the differentiated small-group instruction that I enacted. But each day, when I examined student work, I had to confront the fact that only certain groups succeeded with their work and ask myself what I had done to cause that outcome. I began to notice that I had a tendency to give some students work that was not appropriate to their readiness level (e.g., multiplication word problems that required the same visual and written explanation as those given to their peers, but that had smaller numbers to allow these students to use concrete objects to model the action first) but was instead flat-out easier (e.g., rather than having to provide a representation or justify their answer, they just had to write the answer to naked number problems). Again, I found videoing my classroom to be a useful practice. In watching myself on video, I noticed that I accepted different levels of depth in written and oral responses from different students. Video revealed that, with some groups, I ensured that students were doing almost all the cognitive work. It also revealed, however, that I would sometimes feed answers to struggling students to save time or so they could feel success.

Another system that I found helpful for interrogating the equitability of my interactions with students was to keep a two-pocket folder for mathematics

conferences in my classroom. In the left pocket were sheets of paper, each with a student's name on it and a space where I could take notes. Whenever I observed or conferenced with a student, I moved that student's sheet from the left pocket to the right pocket. Once I had moved all the sheets to the right, I began the cycle again. What was shocking to me was how frequently I wanted to grab for sheets that I had already moved to the right (signaling I had recently conferenced with that student) and how many students I might have overlooked without the accountability system as a reminder. In short, left unchecked, I had several tendencies that would have exacerbated inequity in my room.

Third, ask yourself about the extent to which you actually scaffold high expectations. It is one thing to say, "I want my children to have rich mathematical discussions in peer groups," another thing to plan for it, and yet another thing to execute what sometimes feels like trivial steps toward the final outcome. If I wanted to see any particular behavior in my classroom, I carefully broke down, executed an incremental rollout, and checked for mastery of subskills before asking students for the full behavior. For example, when I wanted my students to critique the mathematical arguments of others, I first had them practice agreeing, disagreeing, and citing evidence to support their claims with general, not mathematical statements (e.g., The sky is pink). This exercise focused my students' cognitive efforts on the complex discussion skills I wanted them to build, rather than splitting their efforts between new discussion skills and new mathematical ideas. Only when my students proved that they were fluent with pinpointing precisely what they agreed or disagreed with, and could support their critique with evidence, did we begin to apply these skills to engage with new mathematical content.

Most often when I noticed students were not engaging in something the way I hoped, I had rushed some stage of the process above. Some of the behaviors I planned to foster among students included the following: resolving conflicts with other students; using self-regulation strategies when frustrated; documenting and sharing solution strategies; accessing and using tools in the classroom (e.g., manipulatives, anchor charts, supplies); working in groups with other students; and transitioning between different classroom areas. They are not the only behaviors I planned to address in my classroom, but I highlight social, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes in the list above to underscore that these all factor into successful mathematics instruction and that we educators have the ability to influence each of them.

This process of carefully breaking down and planning for productive engagement also applies to teaching and learning mathematics content. For a host of systemic reasons (some that I mentioned earlier in this chapter), my students often came to me behind grade level. According to pretests, most of my third

graders entered with a late kindergarten to early first grade proficiency with mathematics. This was largely an exposure problem, and it meant there was a great deal of content that they needed filled in.

I worked in a district with a strict pacing guide, common assessments, and a mandated scripted curriculum. I had a coach who observed me, met with me to debrief my observations and lesson plans, and planned monthly meetings for all the teachers in my grade level across the district, during which we analyzed data from common assessments. The district resources were aligned to a pacing guide for an on-grade-level third grader. These resources would have wasted valuable time when every second with my students needed to be focused on covering the most essential elements of three years' worth of instruction—in one year. Although a part of me wanted to say, "I was told to do this so I have to do the best with what I have been given," in reality this was not true. Following the district pacing guide and using the district lesson plans, while significantly more convenient, would not be in the best interest of my students.

There were many ways I could have chosen to take responsibility for the mathematics my students learned that year. Ultimately, I decided to carefully break down, prioritize, and remap the content I covered based on the foundational skills my students needed to master third-grade content, the content of future grades, and the mathematics they would encounter in daily life. I planned my own long-term plan, unit plans, and daily lessons, and created my own assessments. I had difficult conversations with administrators at my school and district about why I was not following the district's guides and plans. I list my processes here, not so that they may be replicated, but to show that there are often more factors that contribute to our students' mathematical success within our influence than we would like to acknowledge. To reiterate the truth of "I am responsible," we are not victims of our students' content readiness. If students are not succeeding in mathematics, we need to examine their foundation, find the gaps, and fill them in.

> ***Lie 3:*** We can only expect so much, given their home situation . . .
>
> ***Truth:*** All families are invested in the success of their child. It is your responsibility to build a partnership with families and guardians in service of student success.

Authentic relationships take time and effort. Unsurprisingly then, my colleagues and I consoled ourselves with the above lie when we wanted an immediate or easy fix to a problem we were having with a student. I sometimes felt myself buy into this lie as early as the first day of school. Every year when parents would meet me for the first time, I would watch their faces fall. Some of them would

say things like, "You? You're my child's teacher?" in a voice that suggested what they were really asking was, "What did we do to deserve this?" During my first few years in the classroom, this reaction offended me. I wanted to shoot back a copy of my résumé so these parents could see my track record with students at our school, the student achievement data, and video footage that showed I had performed in the top percentage of my district each year I taught. Embedded in my anger was the idea that somehow, because someone had allowed me to claim a position of power over their child, I deserved instant loyalty, trust, and, if I was really being honest with myself, compliance with my vision for the year.

This is a dangerous, colonialist mindset. Parents did not owe me anything. They did not have to trust me; they did not have to like me. I was in a tremendous position of power, often with their child for more hours in the day than they were. This was a gift. My students' parents had every right to feel alarmed when they saw me, including for reasons I outlined under the first lie. Further, the city's education system had been failing the community I worked in for so long, and many parents I worked with entered the year with negative associations with schools and teachers. Additionally, the way I taught mathematics was very different from the way most of the parents I worked with had learned it. Given all of this, what is surprising is not that parents were openly nervous that I was their child's teacher; it was that I somehow hoped they would not be.

To counter this mindset, I had to acknowledge that parents were going to need a substantial amount of evidence, sustained over a long period, before they began to feel that I was worthy of being with their child each day. Again, authentic relationships take time and effort. Part of how I attempted to establish trust was through transparency. I wanted parents to feel that they knew what was going on in my classroom at all times. I invited parents to sit with their child in our classroom to see our approach to mathematics. I also called and texted parents regularly. I provided updates on their child's progress in the classroom, snapshots of their child's work, and occasional pictures and video of their child.

This volume of communication proved beneficial in many respects. Building relationships across lines of difference is difficult but especially so when a student is struggling. Because I had frequent contact with parents, communication was less jarring if I needed to express concerns about a student's behavior or growth in our classroom. My concerns could be expressed on an established platform of my knowledge of and belief in their child. As time went on, I found that parents would call or text me about problems they saw at home and ask me for advice, and we would come up with ways I could support the student at school. We were able to become partners enveloping the entirety of the student's day.

In the community in which I worked, parents commonly switched phone numbers or sometimes had no phone. When I first started teaching, I took this as a free pass, one less call to make, one less text to send. I quickly realized, however, that I was losing my most important teammates in supporting my students when I allowed something like a lack of cell service to block our communication. I combated this obstacle in two main ways. First, my students lived in close-knit communities. Everyone was somebody's cousin, biologically or fictive; and many of the families shared child care, groceries, and transportation. To contact someone, typically all I needed to do was ask the student or one of the student's friends for an aunt's or uncle's phone number. I could then ask the aunt or uncle to provide me with the parent's new number or to put me on the telephone with the parent. More commonly, I just walked home with my students, because during my last two years of teaching I was lucky enough to work for a district with dismissal procedures that included walking students home. Although the obstacles you face to communicate effectively with parents and the methods you use to overcome those challenges might look different from the ones that I discuss here, what is similar across teaching contexts is that relationships with parents are not something we are owed, nor we should expect them. Rather, they are something we need to cultivate consciously and creatively in service of student success.

Notably, the more I went to my students' homes, the more the people in the community knew me, and the more I was given access to community information that I could use to support my students. I want to be clear I was not posing as a spy, trying to see what was going on in the homes of my students. What I hope to emphasize is that when we conceptualize our work as a commitment to our students' opportunities and growth, rather than as a place we go to from a certain time in the morning until a certain time in the evening, we expand our influence and become available for authentic and powerful partnerships.

Reflecting and Taking Action

The Access and Equity Principle in *Principles to Actions* states that "all students [should] have access to a high-quality mathematics curriculum, effective teaching and learning, high expectations, and the support and resources needed to maximize their learning potential" (NCTM 2014, p. 59). In this chapter, Berlin showed us how she uses her lies to examine issues of access and equity by unpacking her beliefs and practices in her classroom to empower students to engage in mathematics in productively meaningful ways (see also chapters 7 and 9). In Berlin's truths and lies, we see overlaps with the actions proposed for teachers in the Access and Equity Principle in *Principles to Actions* (NCTM 2014, p. 115).

After you have read this chapter, we hope that you are able to reflect on the lies that you may tell yourself. As you reflect, consider these questions:

- Reflect on Berlin's lies and truths. What are your truths and lies regarding the teaching of mathematics?
- What are the narratives and actions that surround your truths and lies? That is, how do your lies play out in your school, community, and context?
- What are the consequences of your truths and lies regarding students' learning of mathematics?
- How can you build accountability structures to push back on your lies and to move forward your truths?

References

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