

It's a world of laughter, a world of tears;  
It's a world of hopes and a world of fears;  
There's so much that we share that it's time we're aware  
It's a small world after all.

The children's song *It's a Small World* seems somewhat prophetic of events in mathematics education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With advances in transportation, communication, and technology the world is shrinking, and many of our international colleagues are merely a plane ride, phone call, fax, or e-mail away. But closer connections among the international community can lead to both hopes and fears.

### *It's a world of hopes*

Our hope is that through increased contact with international colleagues, we will come to understand and appreciate what is unique and what is similar about our situations and that this understanding will promote the improvement of mathematics education for all people. The Mathematics Education Department at the University of Georgia provides a good example of what can happen when links to the international mathematics education community are nurtured and developed. We are fortunate to have a steady flow of international students studying in our doctoral program and a consistent stream of international visitors. We try to capitalize on opportunities for these individuals to share their experience and expertise with the local mathematics education community. In addition, we have many faculty who travel to international conferences and who visit institutions in other countries for extended periods of time. Increasingly, we are seeing our doctoral students travel internationally to attend conferences.

### *It's a world of fears*

Sharing across international contexts leads inevitably to comparisons of our similarities and differences. In these days of international economic, political, military, and educational comparisons, it is easy to forget that we have more learn than to fear from each other. There is much to be gained from international comparisons such as the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), but often the general public sees only a final ranking of countries, which does more to generate fear than understanding. Mathematics educators must work to ensure that the public (including preservice and inservice teachers) understands that the final rankings from TIMSS represent only one source of information about mathematics teaching and learning in each country. Concurrently, we must strive to put

information that presents a balanced view of mathematics education in the hands of the public.

### *There's so much that we share*

The articles in this issue of *The Mathematics Educator* do much to advance the cause of international understanding in mathematics education. I would like to point to four areas in which we might strive to expand our international connections.

First, those who write about mathematics education for an international audience have an obligation to explain the structure of their educational system for naïve readers. Matters such as the age students enter school, the age to which schooling is mandatory, the existence of tracking systems in schools, the type of teacher preparation that is offered, and the general place of education in the society need to be clearly articulated so that readers can place information in an appropriate context.

Second, we need to ensure that the full range of mathematics educators has access to international visitors and international documents. These must not be the purview of only faculty and doctoral students. Preservice teachers and practicing teachers, in particular, need to be included in the international dialogue. Those who have entrée into the international community need to find ways to share this access with others.

Third, written documents, such as journal articles or conference papers that are not in one's native language are often difficult to access. With advances in technology, we are on the verge of being able to reliably translate important work in mathematics education into multiple languages to give access to a wider audience. When this software is perfected, journal editors, conference directors, and publishing companies should give serious consideration to how to take advantage of these capabilities.

Fourth, we must not forget that many of our international colleagues, particularly classroom teachers, do not yet have access to e-mail or the Internet. As we move toward a paperless system where conference announcements, calls for manuscripts, and other professional activities are announced via e-mail or the world wide web, we must go out of our way to include our colleagues who still rely on paper copies. Advances in technology have led, in some cases, to collapsed timelines because of the speed with which information can be communicated. We must be sure that we are not excluding colleagues who cannot access information rapidly and colleagues who live in places where mail service is slow or unreliable.

As we work with our international colleagues to share our hopes and fears and to learn from both our similarities and our differences, may we realize that it is a small world after all.

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