

Editorial

Bridging the Ditch

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In the last issue of this journal Ken Clements noted that, in about 1982, MERGA changed its "A" from Australia to Australasia in order to encourage New Zealanders to join. For many years afterwards, those New Zealanders who "crossed the ditch" seemed to prefer the annual conferences of the Mathematical Association of Victoria. But the 1990s saw the internationalisation of MERGA, with not only increasing numbers of New Zealanders participating in its conferences but also a number of members from the South Pacific and South East Asia—thus further stretching the meaning of "Australasia." What has changed? What are the consequences of the change?

As far as New Zealand is concerned (and this is written from a New Zealand point of view), the main thing that changed was the development of a local group of mathematics educators in the tertiary sector who were interested in research. It was the 1984 ICME in Adelaide which started New Zealanders thinking about travelling overseas for work purposes. However, by 1990, there were only two people appointed to mathematics education positions in universities: Gordon Knight at Massey and Andy Begg at Waikato. Gordon held the only PhD in the subject in the country. There were several mathematics educators in Colleges of Education; but, being primary employed to teach, they neither had time allowed for research nor were they required to undertake such activities. There was a developing interest amongst university mathematicians in the educational side of their subject, but none designated themselves in this way.

Over the next five years, several aspects of the New Zealand educational scene changed dramatically: Government funding of research became contestable, and College of Education staff were encouraged to undertake such work—although funding and time for research in colleges and polytechnics remained minimal. A new curriculum document highlighted the role research had to play in teachers' lives, and the process of writing it involved a large team of people who became interested in such issues. The Mathematics Education Unit was established at Auckland University, followed by appointments at Massey University and Victoria University. Several mathematicians publicly accepted the "mathematics education" label and filled such roles on government committees. And many people became enrolled in Masters and PhD studies in the subject. By 1995, the mathematics education community with an interest in research numbered about 50, and mathematics education courses were available at five of our seven universities.

It was natural for this emerging group to look towards the established community in Australia for inspiration and help in the early stages, and later for

academic support and mutual benefit. By the mid-1990s, MERGA had really become the Mathematics Education Research Group of *Australasia* and the 1997 New Zealand conference was a natural outcome.

However it is not only the history which is of interest here. There are consequences of this development, and it is instructive to reflect on these—not only to identify further opportunities and areas for development but also to see what might have been and, if necessary, to revisit some of the decisions which have been made (in some cases, by default).

For example, the merging of the two communities has meant that the New Zealand community does not have an identity of its own. This is a situation which has been debated on several occasions. The weight of opinion in this country tends to the view that MERGA fulfils our mathematics education academic research needs; and that we are better off on the national scene joining with teachers as part of the New Zealand Association of Mathematics Teachers, with mathematicians as part of the New Zealand Mathematics Colloquium, and with general educational researchers through the New Zealand Association for Research in Education.

A consequence here is that national issues might be ignored. The recent messages on the MERGA e-mail list about national events in Australia seem to indicate that the international nature of the organisation has not inhibited such activity in that country. But is it possible that New Zealand members feel inhibited from raising their concerns? As a comparison, would Sydney members feel easy about raising issues relating only to their city? One hopes so, but it would be easy to see how such a specific group might feel it was not the appropriate forum. In fact there is an e-mail network in New Zealand, although it is not used often. Perhaps it would be useful for Australians (as well as for other MERGA members outside New Zealand) if we conducted our national debates on the MERGA list?

Cost is another issue, of course—as those from the Northern Territory and Western Australia know already, and the rest understood after 1997. However, even that must be seen in perspective. For most of the New Zealand community, the cost of getting to Sydney or Melbourne is about the same as travelling the length of New Zealand; so regular meetings with colleagues are bound to be expensive. That is one of the down-sides of living on an island.

What, however, are the academic consequences of this international exchange? A particular strength of the New Zealand scene is the mathematics education of Maori: the development of Maori-language mathematics teaching and learning; the separate Maori mathematics curriculum; a group of Maori qualified in mathematics education who have travelled to ICMEs and have a wide perspective on their particular problems; and solid research going beyond achievement statistics to investigating the factors involved. When this gets taken to MERGA, the practical developments come face to face with more theoretical approaches. So the New Zealand contingent benefit by having frameworks and language to discuss the problem, and Australians benefit by having a practical model from which to approach the situation with Aboriginal mathematics education. I wonder what other examples there are?

It does seem, surprisingly, that the opportunity for joint work has not yet been explored fully. Some tentative ventures have been tried, but why are there no major projects? The systems are not that different, the communication is good, and the funding bodies are crying out for collaborative proposals. New Zealand, as a research site, has one important thing going for it: It is small enough for any significant project to make a difference on a wide scale. This "crucible effect" is the cause of various weird and wonderful political experiments—why can it not be used more productively for well-considered educational ventures derived from the joint expertise of MERGA? The Australian site could then complement such research by testing the generality of the results obtained. So, instead of reading in the pages of the *Mathematics Education Research Journal* reports of similar but separate studies conducted in the two countries, it would be good to read of joint studies conducted by an international team of researchers.

MERGA and this *Journal* are not just an annual gathering and a collection of pages. They represent the activities of an academic community. It is a community which has not yet realised all its international potential.