



TODOS: MATHEMATICS FOR ALL

The mission of *TODOS: Mathematics for ALL* is to advocate for equity and high-quality mathematics education for all students — in particular, Latina/o students.

The Mo(ve)ment to Prioritize Antiracist Mathematics: Planning for This and Every School Year

"There are only two choices: racist or antiracist."

- Ibram X. Kendi

Our Current Mo(ve)ment

Dubbed "crisis teaching," "distance learning," "emergency instruction," we have come to know the last few months of the 2019 to 2020 school year by many names. The current health pandemic has brought new equity considerations to the fore, such as lack of access to online learning, challenges to teaching multilingual/EL students online, and the sudden halt of services usually provided by individual education plans. However, it has most successfully brought entrenched inequities that existed prior to the school closures into sharp focus. Wealthy families were more prepared and more protected under shelter-in-place orders, while low-income families, mostly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), continue to risk their lives as essential workers whose jobs cannot be completed from home¹. Without access to necessary services provided through schools, some parents of students with IEPs saw their child's education suddenly halt, while teachers of these students dealt with the pain of the sudden loss of in-person connections with their students. The mental and physical burden of the COVID-19 pandemic has landed on the communities who were most in need of resources prior to the pandemic.

We began writing our position statement in response to concerns about the lack of attention to equity considerations that we saw as schools prepared for long-term closures. However, we found we could not respond to the current health pandemic of COVID-19 without also considering its predecessor: racism (Kendi, 2020). As we write this statement, hoping to reflect and prepare for the next school year, we are in pain and angered by the continued racial violence,

¹ In this paper we use Black, Indigenous, and People of Color or BIPOC, which helps reframe racism from a black-white binary to include acknowledging native-invisibility and anti-blackness as key tenets of white supremacy. For more on this term, see <https://www.thebipocproject.org/>

the murder of Black and brown people by police, and the continued state-sanctioned violence against protesters. We are mathematics educators. We cannot look away or claim a privileged stance because we might prefer to believe mathematics is a culturally or politically neutral subject². All levels of teaching mathematics are imbued with the same racism and violence that permeates all schooling. To quote our TODOS President Linda Fulmore, in [her message from June 2, 2020](#), "We can no longer believe that a focus on curriculum, instruction, and assessment alone will be enough to prepare our children for survival in the world. We need antiracist conversations for ourselves and for our children."

In light of reverberations through the education world due to the myriad of issues spurred on by the twin pandemics of racism and COVID-19, we reassert our guiding principles and pledge ourselves anew to social justice in mathematics education. Our position is to prioritize antiracist mathematics education for all students as we prepare to return to school this fall and the years to come. An antiracist position in mathematics education is a pledge to dismantle systems and structures that maintain racism within teaching and learning mathematics from challenging belief systems that perpetuate microaggressions to disrupting the role mathematics classes play in pushing students out of schooling. We pledge to more thoroughly develop and lead the way with frameworks for antiracist mathematics classrooms.

Recommitting to Our Essential Actions

In 2016, TODOS [authored a joint position statement with NCSM](#) in which we outlined the meaning of and need for a commitment to social justice in mathematics education. At the time, we could not have foreseen the crisis brought on by the current pandemic and the concurrent civic action around our country's deep racial wounds. While the former's large-scale dangers necessitate distance and isolation, the individual and moral tragedy of the latter implore immediate and collective action. In the sections below, we revisit our 4 Essential Actions and filter them through our current moment to guide as schools prepare for the 2020-2021 school year.

1. Eliminating deficit views of mathematics learning

Following school closure due to COVID-19, we have noted a resurgence of deficit views of students when they are described as "behind" or "unable to catch up since they missed so much school." We believe this description of students is harmful. It frames students as individually responsible for a loss of learning and detracts from the broader issues of students and families surviving through a pandemic. Mathematics learning is a messy web of interconnected concepts.

². For a more in-depth discussion on the cultural and political aspects of mathematics see our TODOS blog on ethnomathematics: https://www.todos-math.org/index.php?option=com_dailyplanetblog&view=entry&year=2019&month=05&day=22&id=11:ethnomathematics-mathematics-de-todos

So we assert that instead of being distracted by framing students as lacking skills, we use the fall to start anew from an asset-based perspective. We urge policymakers, school district administrators, teachers, curriculum developers, and software developers to avoid playing into the fear-inciting discourses of students falling behind and ranking them by perceived ability.

To take it a step further, in this moment we must rethink what counts as valid mathematical knowledge. Bettina Love (2019) describes schools as sites of pain and violence for Black and brown students, which she calls *dark suffering*: “To understand schools as sites of dark suffering is to understand how antidarkness works in the day-to-day lives of both dark and White children” (p. 15). We are complicit in dark suffering in our mathematics classroom in many ways. Ignoring racism, making excuses for why we aren't expecting some students to be good at mathematics, and treating BIPOC children as devoid of knowledge that is valuable for learning mathematics are examples of complicity. If we truly believe that we are moving towards assets-based views of students, we must expand our understanding of what it means to be good at mathematics, make space for alternative ways of knowing and doing mathematics based in the community, and acknowledge the brilliance, both in mathematics and beyond, of BIPOC in our classrooms. We must be explicitly antiracist.

2. Eradicating mathematics as a gatekeeper

Teachers have long lamented the variability of skills students bring to the classroom, which reinforced a narrative that what is most important is what students do not know versus what they do. We have noted genuine concern from teachers who are worried that due to the interrupted education caused by schools shutting down that their most vulnerable students are not ready to learn new concepts or advance to particular mathematics classes (e.g., do not know their math facts, are not ready for calculus). However, we reassert a position that we have held for quite some time, which is that systems that sort students on perceptions of "mathematical readiness" contain hidden racial and ability biases. There is a difference between assessment systems designed to provide teachers with information on how to work from students' understanding of new mathematical ideas, and assessment systems used to sort students based on perceived readiness. The latter has no place in mathematics education.

We have to break from the notion that learning mathematics must be a linear and procedural endeavor mastered through rote practice and memorization. Instead, we must recognize and emphasize that interconnected concepts lead to stronger foundations in mathematics and stronger personal and mathematical identities.

Leadership can prioritize supporting teachers to draw on the knowledge of students to develop key mathematical ideas. Some of the powerful schemas students bring to understanding school mathematics are not from school but from their lived experiences, which can serve as anchors into formal school mathematics (Gonzalez, Andrade, Civil & Moll, 2001).

Similar to our argument about eliminating deficit views of students through assets-based perspectives, we again assert that the gatekeeping nature of mathematics must be eradicated. We see progress towards this when schools are detracked, when college-credit earning courses such as AP and IB are open to all high school students who choose to enroll, and when prerequisite courses are no longer required for undergraduate students to access college-level mathematics courses.

3. Engaging the sociopolitical turn of mathematics education

Instead of shying away from the political nature of mathematics and mathematics education, we instead assert a need to understand their dynamic, political, historical, relational, and cultural interplay (Gutiérrez, 2013). We committed ourselves to this understanding of the sociopolitical turn in mathematics education in our 2016 statement; however, we revisit it through a foundation of antiracism now. We cannot say teaching mathematics in an antiracist classroom is too much to expect of ourselves. The protests in the streets are a call to engage the sociopolitical turn in all aspects of education, including mathematics. We must stay committed to the role that mathematics teaching and learning plays in our current Black Lives Matter mo(ve)ment and an antiracist society.

In part, we call on leaders in mathematics education to rethink collective action. We have to reimagine the role of parents working with teachers and school systems. We have to reimagine how our organizations work with and in school districts. In many ways, the current pandemic has opened up the space for new collaborations. As parents, teachers, and researchers, we have witnessed the deep commitment of parents to their children's education during this crisis as well as before. This is our moment to bring families and schools to new levels of collaboration by explicitly including parents in policy decisions as well as teaching mathematics.

4. Elevating the professional learning of mathematics teachers and leaders with a dual focus on mathematics and social justice

It is our position that professionalization of teachers means humanizing them: they are complex, multi-issue people who care deeply about students and who are capable of engaging with deep work to serve their communities. However, teachers are often both systematically denied autonomy over their own instructional decisions and lack resources to ensure powerful learning happens in their classrooms. This form of deprofessionalization of teachers may be why many teachers think that implementing a curriculum is their primary responsibility. This is a reasonable response to a system that evaluates teacher effectiveness by testing student retention of content, rather than students' confidence with the subject, agency development, or relationship with their teacher. We call on all levels of leadership to support teachers as professionals and provide them with the resources to be antiracist mathematics teachers.

We originally asserted a *dual* commitment to mathematics *and social justice*. TODOS has worked to provide increased access to professional development focused on social justice leadership and teaching, as well as made resources available for members and non-members alike (e.g., video recordings of recent sessions of [TODOS Live](#)).

Frequently it is the labor of BIPOC (teachers and parents) that drives the initial professional development around social justice issues, but follow-through is often not prioritized by administrators and district leadership. This could be because some underlying theories of how one learns to teach and how one should teach are not compatible with social justice frameworks or because many leaders of professional development in mathematics are not themselves fluent in the language of antiracism. For example, many mathematics teachers newly open to taking up teaching for social justice are rushing to try curriculum in their classroom where the students look at racialized violence through a mathematical lens (e.g., activities in [Rethinking Mathematics](#) or [High School Mathematics Lessons to Explore, Understand and Respond to Social Injustice](#)). Mathematics lessons that focus on understanding social and racial injustices are an important piece of the broader struggle for justice. However, if we as teachers simply take an activity and implement it in our classrooms without first doing the self-reflective work to understand how we all are impacted by racial trauma, then we may not be able to engage with the lesson in ways that are positively impactful for students. It takes time to do the hard self-reflective work of understanding how we are all impacted by racial trauma and then take steps to heal from it (Menakem, 2014) – time that our communities need mathematics teachers to take.

Preparing for the Unknown: Four Areas to Weave Together in Mathematics Education

Although we do not know what will happen in the months to come in terms of both the COVID-19 pandemic and global racial trauma, TODOS remains committed to social justice for all students. While we cannot solve all the issues in our schooling system, we can understand how mathematics education plays a role in exacerbating or solving those problems. We can accept our responsibilities to acknowledge the disparities, act, and hold ourselves and each other accountable. In a recent panel, teacher Marylin Zuniga captured a lasting sentiment reflective of our twin pandemics: "You have to make sure that your priorities are with the liberation of Black and brown children."³ In our work as mathematics educators, how do we show every day that our priorities lay with the liberation of Black and brown children?

³ Transcribed from Education for Liberation Network's webinar *Repurposing Our Pedagogies*, streamed live on June 2, 2020, retrieved from <https://youtu.be/39A0qBGb7WM>



Picture above: Four Key Areas to Weave Together in Mathematics Education

We have more to say that speaks to the urgency of preparing for distance and hybrid learning this fall. Four key areas appear to us to be most in need of attention as we prepare for mathematics teaching in the coming school year:

- Prioritizing meeting the social and emotional needs of students in mathematics classrooms in light of the historical moment they are living through
- Careful consideration of when and how to assess mathematical knowledge in ways that account for social and emotional needs of students
- Radically restructuring the parent-school relationship to position parents as central to student learning when schools are closed as well as when they re-open
- Access, evaluation, and design of technology for distance and hybrid learning that accounts for differences in internet access across communities, among other considerations

Shortly, TODOS will release four additional commentaries on these key areas for consideration as we prepare for the 2020-2021 school year. We hope the acknowledgments, recommended actions, and accountability steps will inspire *ánima* in all of us doing the necessary work for lasting change.

In Solidarity,

The Leadership of TODOS Mathematics for All

Sources:

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