

CALLING FOR CRITICAL INTERROGATIONS OF WHITE SUPREMACY AND SETTLER COLONIALISM IN MATHEMATICS EDUCATION RESEARCH

GETTING IN “GOOD TROUBLE, NECESSARY TROUBLE”¹

*CHAMADO PARA INTERROGAÇÕES CRÍTICAS DA SUPREMACIA BRANCA E DO
COLONIALISMO DOS COLONOS NA PESQUISA EM EDUCAÇÃO MATEMÁTICA*

Ficar em "problemas bons, problemas necessários"

*LLAMADO A CUESTIONAMIENTOS CRÍTICOS DE LA SUPREMACÍA BLANCA Y EL
COLONIALISMO DE COLONOS EN LA INVESTIGACIÓN DE LA EDUCACIÓN
MATEMÁTICA:*

Meterse en “problemas buenos, problemas necesarios”

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, we contextualize a call for strengthening equity and social justice research in mathematics education by inserting the mathematics education enterprise into two world events of 2020: the global COVID-19 pandemic and the global resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. We do so to underscore how white colonialism is forever present everywhere in structures and institutions around the globe, including those of the mathematics education enterprise. We briefly describe the logics of white supremacy and settler colonialism and then combined them into a compounding scheme of colonizing white supremacist logics. Next, we feature recent USA-based mathematics education research to illustrate some different possibilities when equity and social justice research is indeed strengthened through critical interrogations of white supremacy and settler colonialism. We conclude the essay with a justification for getting in good trouble, necessary trouble.

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Keywords: mathematics education. settler colonialism. white supremacy.

RESUMO

Neste ensaio, contextualizamos um apelo para o fortalecimento da pesquisa de equidade e justiça social na educação matemática, inserindo o empreendimento da educação matemática em dois eventos mundiais de 2020: a pandemia global de COVID-19 e o ressurgimento global do movimento Black Lives Matter. Fazemos isso para enfatizar como o colonialismo branco está sempre presente em todas as estruturas e instituições ao redor do mundo, incluindo aquelas do empreendimento de educação matemática. Descrevemos brevemente as lógicas da supremacia branca e do colonialismo dos colonos e, em seguida, as combinamos em um esquema composto de colonizar as lógicas da supremacia branca. Em seguida, apresentamos pesquisas recentes em educação matemática nos EUA para ilustrar algumas possibilidades diferentes quando a pesquisa sobre equidade e justiça social é de fato fortalecida por meio de interrogações críticas sobre a supremacia branca e o colonialismo dos colonos. Concluimos o ensaio com uma justificativa para nos metermos em problemas bons, problemas necessários.

Palavras-chave: educação matemática. colonialismo colonizador. supremacia branca.

RESUMEN

En este ensayo, contextualizamos un llamado para fortalecer la investigación sobre equidad y justicia social en la educación matemática al incorporar la empresa de educación matemática en dos eventos mundiales de 2020: la pandemia mundial de COVID-19 y el resurgimiento mundial del movimiento Black Lives Matter. Hacemos esto para subrayar cómo el colonialismo blanco está siempre presente en todas partes en las estructuras e instituciones de todo el mundo, incluidas las de la empresa de educación matemática. Describimos brevemente las lógicas de la supremacía blanca y el colonialismo de colonos y luego las combinamos en un esquema compuesto de lógicas colonizadoras de supremacía blanca. Aquí, presentamos una investigación reciente sobre educación matemática basada en los EE. UU. para ilustrar algunas posibilidades diferentes cuando la investigación sobre equidad y justicia social se fortalece a través de la interrogación crítica de la supremacía blanca y el colonialismo de los colonos. Concluimos el ensayo con una justificación para meterse en buenos problemas, problemas necesarios.

Palabras clave: educación matemática. colonialismo de colonos. supremacía blanca.

COVID-19, the Black Lives Matter Movement, and the Mathematics Education Enterprise

The global COVID-19 pandemic of March 2020 and the global resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement of May 2020 squarely (re)positioned discussions on “race,” racism, and white supremacy as galvanizing debates of contention in many villages, towns, and cities around the globe. Opposing political parties and community groups in many corners of the Western world and beyond latched on to the COVID-19 crisis and the fight for Black, Indigenous, and people of color lives either to advance antiracism and cultural pluralism ideals or to radicalize xenophobic and ultranationalist principles. These clashing reactions were evident in the different neoliberal policies anchored in white colonialism (e.g., racism, anti-Blackness, patriarchy, classism, ableism, etc.) enacted in response to the pandemic. The virus itself did not discriminate based on race, class, or country. Yet around the globe and throughout every country, COVID-19 appeared to target vulnerable and marginalized communities: those in poverty, immigrants, the undocumented, people of color, Indigenous peoples, and those dis/abled.

Like the global pandemic and consequential intensifying global inequality, the violent and devastating effects of white colonialism on Black communities, communities across the diaspora, and communities of color became ever so evident in 9 minutes and 44 seconds as video footage of the May 2020 murder of an unarmed, 46-year-old Black man, George Floyd, by a Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA police officer circled the globe on social media. This condemnable murder reignited the BLM movement that began 8 years earlier in the United States as an activist response to the February 2012 shooting death of an unarmed, 17-year-old African American male high school student, Trayvon Martin. The response in May 2020 to the video footage of the heinous crime extended the BLM protest marches for racial equity and social change from city streets in the United States to city streets throughout the Commonwealth, the European Union, and the South American and African continents and beyond.

The structures and institutions of the mathematics education enterprise (i.e., its structural and ideological entrenched systems) have not escaped the disproportionality and inequitable hardwiring effects of white colonialism. If mathematics education is viewed as the teaching and learning of a collection of disembodied systems and objects that exist outside of social systems, then characterizing mathematics education as racist and grounded in white colonialism, seems farfetched. But if mathematics education is considered as a part of social systems, such as educational systems, and exists through human interaction, enacted through policies, and measured through social apparatuses shaped by history and context, such as standardized tests, then mathematics education can be seen as a hegemonic racial project of cultural colonization entangled with and in social systems of white supremacy (Martin, 2009, 2013, 2019).

The mathematics education enterprise as “a racialized space, an instantiation of White institutional space” (Martin, 2013, p. 328), we argue, is designed to maintain a global system of white colonialism inside and outside the field of mathematics. Within the mathematics education research community, how often do researchers speak boldly for justice yet continue to inflict racial violence on lives and minds through the perpetuation of racial scripts that not only hide the brilliance, competence, and agency of children and youth of color but also perpetuate suffering (Gholson & Wilkes, 2017; Martin et al., 2017)? Across the world, racial scripts divide, sort, and stratify along a caste hierarchy placing whites at the top and all others at the bottom (Wilkerson, 2020).

Through racial listings and orderings forever present throughout socio-historical, -political, and -cultural discourses, hierarchies are formed and maintained, and groups are divided and positioned against one another. Discourses however are not mere words that might be heard or read but rather discursive practices that systematically form the possibilities and impossibilities of knowledge discourses, producing and reproducing régimes of truth (Foucault, 1969/1972). In other words, discourses and discursive practices are not merely ways of organizing what people say and do but rather ways of organizing actual people and their systems, creating in turn “truths” about mathematics teaching and learning (Stinson & Walshaw, 2017). These discursive hierarchical truths enacted within the mathematics education enterprise, for example, intensify the “‘gap-gazing’ fetish” (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 357) of the so-named achievement gap to normalize children and youth of color at the bottom of an achievement pyramid (Gholson & Wilkes, 2017); reify mathematics as the purview of white males (Stinson, 2013) to perpetuate a singular image in the invention of the mathematician (Hottinger, 2016); and solidify a system of curricular tracking to maintain the capitalist necessity of stratifying children and youth of color and of the working class in segregated, low-level classrooms (Battey, 2013). Discursive hierarchical truths in the end maintain mathematics as an instrument of exclusion and social stratification in which Black, Indigenous, and other students of color are subjected to erasure, oppression, and dehumanization (Martin, 2019; Martin et al., 2017). Disrupting and displacing these hierarchies necessitate collective and iterative endeavors in critically questioning discourses and discursive practices that reify exclusion by positioning whiteness as normative, (re)producing white supremacy and settler colonialism.

Defining White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism

The terms *white supremacy* and *settler colonialism* are both contested and contentious concepts and analytic frames found throughout the humanities and social science literature (e.g., Mills, 1997; Veracini, 2013). Nevertheless, social geographers Bonds and Inwood (2016), pulling from a wide range of research and scholarship found in a variety of intellectual fields, succinctly defined and outlined the differences between the analytic frames white privilege and white supremacy and (post) colonialism and settler colonialism. One key aspect of their definitions is the positioning of both white supremacy and settler colonialism in historicized rather than historical contexts—historicized contexts locate the frames in the here and now rather than the past.

To move beyond white privilege, Bonds and Inwood (2016) identified racism and white privilege as mere symptoms and white supremacy as the disease. White supremacy succinctly defined, according to Bonds and Inwood, “is the presumed superiority of white racial identities ... in support of the cultural, political, and economic domination of non-white groups” (pp. 719–720). White supremacy, therefore, “is the *defining logic* of both racism and privilege as they are culturally and materially produced” (p. 720, emphasis in original). Through a historicized understanding, white supremacy then is no longer only located in historical pasts or nationalist extremist groups but rather “reveals its stubborn endurance and the ways its every-day logics are reproduced through spectacular and mundane violences that reaffirm empire and the economic, social, cultural, and political power of white racial identities” (p. 721).

The acknowledgment of the enduring violences of the empire and the economic, social, cultural, and political power of white supremacy is what distinguishes settler colonialism from colonialism (Bonds & Inwood, 2016). Settler colonialism is positioned in the here and now, a permanent and “unfolding project [that] involves the interplay between the removal of First Peoples from the land and the creation of labor systems and infrastructures that make the land productive” (p. 721). Settler colonialism, then, as a historicized process, like white supremacy, is no longer only located in historical pasts or conquering empires. But rather, settler colonialism is a forever present everywhere dialectic that “drives the socio-spatial logics of contemporary settler colonial nationalism and identity and is not only central to the production of white supremacist discourses, but the very materiality of whiteness itself” (pp. 721–722).

Together, the sum of the logics of both white supremacy and settler colonialism is greater than its parts, compounding into a colonizing white supremacist disease that is culpable in nearly every local, regional, national, and global act, large and small, of dehumanization. This compounded disease, we contend, has seeped into nearly every structure and institution (some more so than others) of human making around the globe. As such, this disease explains, in part (in no particular order): the brutalizing violences of racism, the enduring inequalities of patriarchy, the proliferating policies of immigrant criminalization, the multiplying injustices of corporate globalization, the contradicting justifications of religious intolerance, the mounting imbalances of criminal justice, the unending pathologizing of the LGTBQIA2S+² community, the mortifying rationing of healthcare, the restricting access of adequately funded schools, the solidifying prejudices of academic tracking, the intensifying dangers of unrestrained militarization, the accelerating infringements of governance, the escalating usages of English only, the limiting acknowledgements of dis/abilities, the accumulating incidences of hunger and homelessness, the perpetuating persistence of unemployment and underemployment, and on and on. The numbers, 6,500,000 human deaths and counting—disaggregated by country, race, ethnicity, class, disability, and gender—and 9 minutes and 44 seconds, are clearly illustrative of the far-reaching brutal power of colonizing white supremacist logics around the globe: in these instances, establishing which human lives matter—an ultimate act of dehumanization.

² LGTBQIA2S+ is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual, two-spirited, plus the countless other affirming ways in which people choose to self-identify.

Calling for Critical Interrogations of White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism

While an increasing number of researchers in the international mathematics education community over the past two decades have drawn attention to the inequities and injustices embedded in the mathematics education enterprise, when material structures and institutions are not explicitly addressed and dismantled, inequities and injustices can often stay intact. In that, even amidst these ongoing efforts, the enduring stability of white supremacy and settler colonialism can unintentionally be reproduced and reified. We therefore ask the international mathematics education research community to consider a far-reaching question: *can the mathematics education enterprise be liberated from its forever present everywhere colonializing white supremacist logics?* Uniquely different from other questions of equity and social justice, this question aims to pry loose equity and social justice research from “White rationality, White sensibilities, and White benevolence” (Martin, 2015, p. 20) that has seeped into much of the existent research and reform efforts. It asks all members of the largely white international research community to take a critical look inward rather than always affixing the gaze outward. This question is not about erroneously (re)centering whiteness but rather about critically examining the discourses and discursive practices of colonializing white supremacist logics embedded throughout the mathematics education enterprise. Such an examination prompts a different set of questions to think with (Bové, 1995): How did these discourses and discursive practices come into existence? How are these discourses and discursive practices reproduced and regulated? How are these discourses and discursive practices reified even with and in much of the current research and reform efforts to make mathematics teaching and learning equitable and just? How might these discourses and discursive practices affect classrooms, schools, communities, students, teachers, and parents and community members? How might these discourses and discursive practices be disrupted, deconstructed, and displaced? All in all, how might the mathematics education enterprise escape the disproportionality and inequitable discourses and discursive practices of colonizing white supremacist logics?

Thinking with these questions when conceiving, planning, conducting, and writing up equity and social justice centered research, we argue, requires incorporating explicit critical interrogations of colonizing white supremacist logics as an essential element throughout the entire research process. Such interrogations add another layer to the research plan, requiring researchers and research teams to think, rethink, and then, re-rethink some more about how the topics, purposes, frameworks, methods, and findings of their research project might (or might not) reproduce or reify colonizing white supremacist logics of mathematics and mathematics teaching and learning. The absence of such critical interrogations does not make a research project “bad,” just dangerous; and being dangerous just means there is more work to do (Foucault, 1983/1997). In other words, not adding a layer of explicit critical interrogations of colonizing white supremacist logics to the research plan (i.e., not doing the more) results in research that is incomplete and dangerously opened to the possibilities of reproducing and reifying rather than deconstructing and displacing colonizing white supremacist logics. While adding a layer of explicit critical interrogations (i.e., doing the more) brings different possibilities in the name of equity and social justice, for example: different ways to characterize mathematics (Gutiérrez, 2017a), different directions to turn toward (Martin, 2019), different frameworks to envision (Battey & Leyva, 2016), and different pedagogical paradigms to explore (Davis, 2018).

Rochelle Gutiérrez (2017a), in her article “Living Mathematx: Towards a Vision for the Future,” presented not only a different way to characterize mathematics but also a different term: mathematx. Proposed as a new vision for practicing mathematics, mathematx disrupts, deconstructs, and displaces the restrictive and inadequate Western defining principles of mathematics. Located at the intersection of “ethnomathematics (including Western mathematics), postcolonial theory, aesthetics, biology, and Indigenous knowledge” (p. 2), mathematx aims to open the door for different lenses for viewing and relating with the universe and others. In doing so, it opens an opportunity to learn how different approaches—mathematics or mathematx—“make im/possible certain forms of knowing the world, recognizing that all of these forms are provisional, local, and legitimate” (p. 26). Mathematx, as a different way of practicing, allows the asking of new questions that move past previous notions of Western mathematics or other mathematics, mathematics as oppressing or liberating, mathematics as

discovered or invented, toward “a radical reimagination of mathematics, a version that embraces the body, emotions, and harmony” (p. 15).

Danny Martin (2019), in his article “Equity, Inclusion, and Antiracism in Mathematics Education,” turned toward a different direction of equity and social justice research: a turn toward antiracism. This turn brings into sharp relief that reform efforts in mathematics education in the name of equity for Black children and youth have been “a delusion rooted in the fictions of white imaginaries and characterized at best by incremental changes that do little to threaten the maintenance of racial hierarchies and white supremacy inside or outside of mathematics education” (p. 471). Through race-critical analyses that highlight socio-historical and -political structures and discourses that maintain white supremacy and Black dehumanization, Martin documented how reform efforts in the name of equity and social justice have been inadequate. In the end, Martin conceded that fixing the mathematics education enterprise in the name of Black liberation is unrealistic given decades of evidence of failed reform efforts. He argued that liberation-seeking Black people need to recognize that mainstream mathematics education cannot be fixed and that “the current system of mathematics education must be replaced by a new system that allows Black people to flourish in their humanity, free from antiracism” (p. 473).

Dan Battey and Luis Leyva (2016), in their article “A Framework for Understanding Whiteness in Mathematics,” envisioned a different developing framework “to support mathematics education scholars in general, and White scholars specifically, in examining the racist internal structure of mathematics education” (p. 50). They began building their framework by clarifying the nuances among the terms white supremacy, white privilege, whiteness, and racism. They defined whiteness as “the ideology that maintains White supremacy.... the fictive ideology from which racism is established” (pp. 50–51). The goal of the framework offered therefore “is not merely to name White privilege in mathematics education but rather to document the institutional ways in which White supremacy in mathematics education acts to reproduce subordination and advantage” (p. 51). All in all, Battey and Leyva intended the framework to de-silence race and destabilize the racial neutrality of whiteness in the mathematics education enterprise. They suggested that Moore’s critical analysis of law education pertains equally to mathematics education: “Deconstructing the white institutional space will require that we discard this constraining white frame and center the experiences and voices of students of color in the project of identifying and eliminating the structural remnants of our white racist past” (W. L. Moore, as cited in Battey & Leyva, p. 163).

Julius Davis (2018) in his article “Redefining Black Students’ Success and High Achievement in Mathematics Education: Toward a Liberatory Paradigm,” suggested a different pedagogical paradigm of liberation for Black students. Davis began his justification for a shift toward a liberatory paradigm by critiquing the Eurocentric paradigm that pervades mathematics education and that aligns Black students’ success and high achievement with the interests and standard of whiteness. This standard of whiteness, according to Davis, “is a form of property that dictates acceptable norms, behaviors, cultural practices, status, reputation, achievements, and performance in mathematics spaces and society. It also includes the exclusion of Black community” (p. 70). Grounding a paradigm of liberation “in a diasporic view of Black history in mathematics, culture, values, and interests” (p. 71), Davis necessarily redefined success and high achievement in mathematics. In his closing defense of a liberatory paradigm, Davis argued that the Eurocentric paradigm must be abandoned because it does not focus on the collective achievement of Black students. He noted: “the focus on liberation for Black people in society has always been about the collective, not the individual. The same must be true for mathematics education” (p. 76).

Evidently, critical interrogations of colonizing white supremacist logics provide different possibilities for the mathematics education enterprise. There are other instances in recent literature that demonstrate how the researchers or research teams thought, rethought, and then, re-rethought some more in a move toward critical interrogations of white supremacy and/or settler colonialism. For example, Harper, Maher, and Jung (2021), in their article “Whiteness as a Stumbling Block in Learning to Teach Mathematics for Social Justice,” employed Battey and Leyva’s (2016) framework for understanding

whiteness to uncover how two early-career, white women teachers either disrupted or perpetuated white supremacy in their implementation of social justice mathematics lessons. Wells (2018), in his article “Understanding Issues Associated with Tracking Students in Mathematics Education,” rooted tracking in “capitalist explorations and settler colonialism” to demonstrate how tracking in mathematics education “creates cultures of academic apartheid” (p. 68). And Nishi (2021), in her article “White Hoarders: A Portrait of Whiteness and Resource Allocation in College Algebra,” combined tenants of critical whiteness studies, settler colonialism, and critical race theory to illustrate how “whiteness-at-work in college algebra yielded a certain entitlement by white students to classroom resources” (p. 1179). In the mathematics education literature, it is encouraging to see possibly the makings of a new trend, a different way forward for equity and social justice research in mathematics education. Although dangerous, a simple Google Scholar search (English language only; conducted January 2023) of the terms “white supremacy” and “mathematics education” returned only 21 results between 1980 and 1999 but nearly 1,400 between 2000 and 2022. Similarly for the terms “settler colonialism” and “mathematics education,” that search returned zero results between 1980 and 1999 but nearly 300 results between 2000 and 2022.

To close, in featuring recent USA-based equity and social justice centered mathematics education research to support a suggested approach of strengthening such research, three probable issues necessitate direct explanations. First, the seven examples offered in the discussion above are from English-only journals (see Meaney, 2013, for a discussion of unintended consequences of the prevalence of English only in mathematics education research). But none of the examples were pulled from the pages of mainstream mathematics education journals. In fact, more than one was rejected through the review process at the *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education* and *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, the two main controlling journals in the field (controversial topics in such journals more times than not continue to be relegated to “special issues”). Two of the seven articles were published in journals outside of mathematics education, which is often the case when a topic is seen as “too progressive”; and three were published in non-mainstream mathematics education journals known for disruptively pushing the field forward: two in the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* and one in the *Philosophy of Mathematics Education Journal*. Given the larger mainstream international mathematics education research community’s unfortunate, over thirty-year history in being all but silent in meaningfully addressing issues of race and racism (Stinson, 2011), hopefully lessons have been learned from the past as mathematics education researchers continue to cross paradigmatic and epistemological boundaries (Tate, 1997) in the name of equity and social justice.

Second, it is tempting to position analyses of colonizing white supremacist logics as only applicable to specific countries or to structures and institutions outside of the mathematics education enterprise. Such positioning, in both cases, would be in error. Valoyes-Chávez and Martin (2016), in their critical analyses of racism both inside and outside the mathematics classroom in the context of Colombia and the United States, respectively, documented how colonizing white supremacist logics have no home country but rather are at home in every country. The omnipresence and persistence of racism, according to Valoyes-Chávez and Martin, “stems from the fact that that the meanings for race and racial categories are created, politically contested, and re-created in any given sociohistorical and geopolitical context as a way to maintain boundaries of difference related to domination and oppression” (p. 363). Given that white supremacy and racism are two sides of the same coin of domination and oppression (Stinson, 2017), together they shape the structures and institutions of human making in nearly any given country, including those of the mathematics education enterprise. Moreover, Subramanian’s (see Stinson, Subramanian, & Yeh, in press) detailed discussion of the conflicts and contradictions of white supremacy and Brahminical supremacy in postcolonial India provides further evidence that colonizing white supremacist logics are indeed at home in any country.

Third, taking a turn toward incorporating critical interrogations of colonizing white supremacist logics throughout the research process is likely to land a researcher in “trouble.” The politically polarizing of the two global events of 2020 noted at the beginning of this essay—the COVID-19 pandemic and the resurgence of the BLM movement—was not achieved in a vacuum. But rather achieved through a

political strategy of entangling the two events in the multiplicity of polarizing events the world over since the beginning of the 21st century that continue to violently deepen socio-political and -cultural divides arising in too many villages, towns, and cities throughout the world. One of these increasingly visible divides is the battle between the “conservative right” and the “progressive left” over the control of knowledge production, validation, and dissemination. Conducting research that incorporates critical interrogations of colonizing white supremacist logics inserts the researcher into the center of this highly politicized battle. Taking a turn toward such interrogations then, in the end, becomes a risk, a risk of getting in trouble.

Closing Question of Good Trouble, Necessary Trouble

The *trouble* here refers to the personal and professional attacks, threats, and harassments that Gutierrez (2017b) and Rubel (Rubel & McCloskey, 2019) experienced on all fronts after their research which explicitly challenges the dominance of colonizing white supremacist logics within the mathematics education enterprise was picked up by members of right-wing extremist organizations and groups and social media and news outlets (e.g., Fox News, 2018; Pullmann, 2018). Nonetheless, building on the late civil and human rights icon and former USA Congressman, John Lewis’s statement, “never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble” (2018), Flint and Toledo (2022) conceptualized a theoretical and methodological framing of “good trouble” that simultaneously draws attention to injustices and searches for new modes of relating to each other and the world. Making good trouble, according to Flint and Toledo, then is a practice of inquiry that critically interrogates cultural and societal norms and traditions “that are often assumed to be natural and immutable, as well as our co-implication within them” (p. 728). So, in the name of equity and social justice, as members of the international mathematics education research community, we must ask: Does there not exist an ethical and moral obligation to unshackle the mathematics education enterprise from its forever present everywhere colonizing white supremacist logics? Does there not exist an ethical and moral obligation to get in good trouble, necessary trouble?

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