

Seattle schools propose race-centric “ethnomathematics” curriculum

Kayla Costa, Nancy Hanover
6 December 2019

School district leaders in Seattle, Washington recently released a proposal to incorporate ethnic studies in the mathematics curriculum at all levels from kindergarten through grade 12. This initiative is part of an ongoing redesign of the district’s entire core subject curricula based on identity politics. The plan will be reviewed and voted on by the school board before the next academic year.

Published by an Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee (ESAC), the new math curriculum is based on four major themes. These do not include, as one might think, numerical literacy, logic and problem-solving, or reasoning by analogy. Instead, the framework for K-12 will be Origins, Identity, and Agency, identified as “the ways in which we view ourselves as mathematicians”; Power and Oppression, based on the “disenfranchisement” of “people and communities of color”; History of Resistance and Liberation, the “stories, places and people who helped liberate people and communities of color using math, engineering and technology”; and Reflection and Action, urging young people to identify “mathematicians of color” and empower “their identities as mathematicians.”

The Ethnic Studies Task Force was created by the school district in 2017, following efforts by the NAACP, the Seattle Education Association (SEA), and Black Lives Matter at School. The latter was created by Jesse Hagopian, at the time a member of the (now defunct) pseudo-left International Socialist Organization, who headed the first Ethnic Studies class in Seattle’s Garfield High School. The ESAC was created this year as a state body under the Superintendent of Public Instruction to guide the building of ethnic studies programs statewide. Seattle’s ethnic studies curriculum will be opened for all districts to offer as elective classes and is expected to influence similar efforts nationally.

Hagopian is also the leader of the Social Equity Educators (SEE), a union caucus that promotes identity politics. As such, he provided critical assistance to the SEA in pushing through contract betrayals in 2018 and 2019, isolating teachers’ struggles in hundreds of districts across the state. These sellout contracts resulted in budget cuts and layoffs and left roughly 253 out of 295 Washington state school districts facing budget shortfalls this school year. But the union and SEE nevertheless touted the agreement’s use of a “racial equity” lens, because joint committees from the administration and unions would oversee hiring and firing based on racial quotas and “diversity” training.

Seattle is not the only location where social justice rhetoric is being deployed to implement austerity. The Chicago Teachers Union has just adopted a sellout agreement following an 11-day strike, which similarly uses “racial equity” language while accepting school closures, inadequately staffed classrooms and poverty wages.

Is math oppressive?

At the center of the proposal is the conception that math is oppressive and racist and must be “rehumanized.” The Seattle plan claims, “Mathematical theory and application is rooted in the ancient histories of people and empires of color.” But as “Western mathematics” is considered the only legitimate “mathematical identity,” therefore, “people and communities of color” are “disenfranchised” and their historical contributions “erased.”

According to the framework’s target questions, students should learn to explain how math “dictates economic oppression and is used to marginalize people of color.” Seattle Public Schools Ethnic Studies Program Manager Tracy Castro-Gill, an outspoken proponent of the assertion that “math is ethnic studies,” provides examples that include the Tuskegee Experiment, eugenics, the disenfranchisement of black voters and the “War on Drugs.”

As these references inadvertently indicate, it is not math that oppresses, but capitalism. Castro-Gill and the Democrats pushing “ethnomathematics” are primarily concerned that young people do not reach the incendiary conclusion that it is economic class, not race, which constitutes the dividing line between oppressor and oppressed.

The Seattle initiative reprises the attempts in the late 1990s to promote Ebonics, the idea that black students should be taught in their “genetically rooted” language rather than standard English. Proponents now use the term African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and say their efforts arise from the “cultural distinctions” of African American youth.

Meanwhile, the practical import of such race-based policies has been to cover up for Democratic politicians imposing vicious budget cuts on schools. Ebonics was embraced by the Oakland, California schools immediately after it carried through a vicious strike-breaking effort against teachers seeking to defend public education. For its part, AAVE has been promoted under the guise of equity to lower the requirements for entry into college-level classes and reduce the number of students in remedial-level courses. These efforts aim to push students through to graduation and purely statistical “success” by lowering the standards.

In the early 2000s, such efforts were repackaged under the “social justice” rubric, gaining a following among educators, including among the National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics (NCSM) and Mathematics for ALL (TODOS). No doubt there exist many well-meaning teachers who mistakenly associate these initiatives with opposition to standardized testing and tracking, and as a means to engage their students with real-world examples under increasingly dire social conditions. Such individuals, however, would be missing the political point.

Underlying “social justice” and race-based initiatives is the explicit acceptance of the capitalist profit system, a failing system that is systematically destroying public education while condemning increasing millions to poverty. The claim of “social justice” proponents that academic problems stem from racial or cultural insensitivity deliberately refuses to challenge the mantra from Democrats and Republicans that “there is no money” for education. In fact, it serves the ruling class

agenda of blaming educators, and often their skin color, for the problems of their students, rather than lack of funding.

These ethnic-based policies, which typically cost next to nothing, are then touted as substantial reforms by Democratic politicians and their fake “socialist” acolytes. The ruling elites have embraced this policy as an inexpensive means to cover up for the real problem—decades of starving public schools and the growth of horrific social inequality. The unions, which long ago abandoned the fight for adequate wages and benefits, have signed on, claiming race-based policies are “victories” for “brown and black children.”

Above all, the promotion of race and racial divisions is used to undermine the class struggle. Race-based studies take their place in a long line of pro-capitalist initiatives, including affirmative action, which cynically use the suffering of minority workers and youth to pit sections of the working class against each other in a race to the bottom.

The objectivity of mathematical knowledge

The origin of the term ethnomathematics is attributed to Brazilian postmodernist Ubiratan D’Ambrosio (1932-). It emphasizes “power relationships” and cultural relativism, downplaying “objective knowledge.”

Richard C. Brown’s volume, “Are Science and Mathematics Socially Constructed?” provides insight into the philosophical basis of ethnomathematics. He writes that “postmodern science” “is characterized by a belief that science is a socially constructed, ‘situated,’ historical product whose theories are generated by contextual factors such as class interest, ideology, or laboratory politics rather than nature. Moreover, instead of being a glorious and progressive achievement of the Western world since the seventeenth century it has been a deeply flawed enterprise which has degraded the environment, oppressed women, minorities, the Third World, and is presently a tool of corporate capitalism and the military industrial complex...”

“Scientific theories are not ‘caused’ by nature. Instead, they constitute nature. So-called ‘scientific facts’ do not correspond to mind-independent properties of the universe, but merely represent the biases of scientists. And since these biases inevitably reflect class, gender, race, or other sociopolitical factors so does what we call ‘nature.’ It follows that vaunted ‘objectivity’ of science is an illusion. Science is an ideology like any other. At best it may have some pragmatic or technological value, but there is no epistemological reason for it to be preferred over ‘other ways of knowing’ such as religion and myth.”

A read through the Seattle framework demonstrates it fully subscribes to this entirely retrograde theory. “Authoritative knowers” (like “diviners”) and “cultures without written expression” are presented as equal, or even more important, than “Western” culture which has “appropriated” previous systems of knowledge. There is no objective reality which is knowable, only biases.

The framework encourages this anti-scientific perspective, asking, “Who is to say what is true?” and “How can our stories be valued as data points?” It encourages students to explore “how math has been used in systems of power and oppression.” Castro-Gill makes the claim that because state-sponsored racism has utilized numbers, that mathematics is racist. This is absurd.

As Karl Marx famously wrote, distinguishing philosophical materialism from religious or idealist views, “The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth—i.e., the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking **in practice** [emphasis added].”

The development of mathematics has been central to the development of scientific knowledge, which has allowed humankind, through a collective and collaborative effort, to achieve a closer and closer approximation to the laws of nature and the objective world. Its objectivity and truthfulness have been proven by mankind’s historical practice, not by “stories.”

Modern math has been integral to our exploration of the universe, the development of advanced computing techniques including artificial intelligence, and mastering the intricacies of gene-editing and robotic surgery, to name a few such accomplishments. For good reason, mathematics is considered man’s universal language.

Tossing all this aside, the Seattle board proponents recklessly dismiss the history of mankind’s progress and the knowability of the world. They propose that the only way students can learn about math is through an individual’s personal relationship with the subject based on their racial, ethnic, or national identity. Students are encouraged to think about their specific background, relate their background to math from “their community.” Romanticizing previous “unwritten cultures” and promoting a philosophical postmodernist, relativist approach to mathematics constitutes an attack on truth, science and human progress. It is the disintegration of thought into the morass of idealist reaction.

Decrying “cultural appropriation,” postmodernism turns its back on the strides in technique and technology that have created the material conditions for ending poverty, addressing climate change and refounding society on a new, socialist and egalitarian basis. Young people should not be subjected to this pessimistic, unscientific and reactionary hogwash.

Further implications of the Seattle proposal

Promoting such concepts as the “oppressive” nature of math instead of real knowledge and skills is a terrible disservice to students and teachers alike. It is especially destructive to those young people who can ill-afford tutors or supplemental studies to make up later in life for academic deficiencies.

It has been demonstrated time and time again that test scores and graduation rates correlate to socioeconomic status. Students living in poverty struggle with math, as they do all academics, not because the curriculum is “white,” but because they are being cycled through a broken public education system with out-of-date textbooks, lack of enrichments and stressed-out, underpaid teachers.

The attempt to insert identity politics into the K-12 general curriculum has nothing to do with making math more accessible, increasing graduation rates among minority youth, or encouraging an examination of the long and fascinating history of mathematical inquiry across cultures. Identity politics aims to divide the working class and divert attention away from the real causes of academic problems in schools—the unremitting assault on school budgets, lack of staffing, and the growth of social inequality under capitalism and its two political parties.

In particular, the Democratic Party, which largely supports these measures, aims to mask its role in the evisceration of the public education system by claiming the “real problem” is insufficient attention to individual “identities.”

The purveyors of ethnic studies constitute an upper-middle-class layer that aims to personally capitalize on lucrative positions, the sale of curricula, speaking tours, etc. And the number of such opportunities is growing. Robert Q. Berry III, the president of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, noted, “Seattle is definitely on the forefront with this ... we hope we can move forward ... deepening students’ connection with identity and agency.” Vermont, Oregon and California, are likewise creating K-12 materials that “prioritize the experiences of

communities of color,” reported the *Seattle Times*.

Most critically, the renewed push to racialize education expresses the bourgeoisie’s fear of the class struggle—not least of all among teachers and youth. The majority of young people now identify as “socialist,” and growing numbers are participating in social struggles against budget cuts, climate change and gun violence, as well as in defense of striking teachers . Under these conditions, the ruling elite is pushing divisive racial politics. Among the most-funded efforts is the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project, being distributed to schools across the US.

There can be no serious improvement to educational opportunity for any section of society without the abolition of the capitalist profit system. The billions of dollars necessary to provide up-to-date, high quality education for all are currently sitting in the bank accounts of a tiny oligarchy or being squandered in ever-growing wars for global hegemony. It is high time that the scourges of racism, exploitation, social inequality and war are abolished by the revolutionary action of the international working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact