



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on October 25, 2017

Radical Math Teacher Believes Mathematics Perpetuates “White Privilege”

A math education professor at the University  of Illinois contends that teaching geometry and algebra perpetuates “white privilege.”

Campus Reform reports that Rochelle Gutierrez outlined her outrageous theory in an article for a newly published anthology for math educators entitled *Building Support for Scholarly Practices in Mathematics Methods*. “On many levels, mathematics itself operates as whiteness. Who gets credit for doing and developing mathematics, who is capable in mathematics, and who is seen as part of the mathematical community is generally viewed as white,” she explained. She continued, “School mathematics curricula emphasizing terms like Pythagorean Theorem and PI perpetuate a perception that mathematics was largely developed by Greeks and other Europeans.”

Further, she says mathematics operates with unearned privilege in society, “just like whiteness.” “As researchers, are we more deserving of large grants because we focus on mathematics education and not social studies or English?”

Gutierrez claims that a focus on one’s math skills perpetuates discrimination against minorities, particularly if they do worse than their white competitors. She also claims that there are many people who “have experienced microaggressions from participating in math classrooms ... [where people are] judged by whether they can reason abstractly.”

“Are we really that smart just because we do mathematics?” she posed.

The short answer to this question, much to Gutierrez’s chagrin, may be yes (though Gutierrez’s rash and racist conclusions should raise doubt at to that claim). According to Melissa Libertus, a Johns Hopkins University psychologist, mathematical ability is linked to general intelligence, and mathematical ability is likely an innate skill. A Johns Hopkins [study](#) led by Libertus found that math ability in preschool children is linked to their inborn and primitive “number sense,” called an “Approximate Number System” (ANS).

“Previous studies testing older children left open the possibility that differences in instructional experience is what caused the difference in their number sense; in other words, that some children tested in middle or high school looked like they had better number sense simply because they had had better math instruction,” Libertus said. “Unlike those studies, this one shows that the link between ‘number sense’ and math ability is already present before the beginning of formal math instruction.”

That is not to say that individuals who are not born with this skill cannot develop it. In fact, [research](#) shows that a natural math ability only gets individuals so far and that hard work and good study habits are, in fact, the most important factor in improving math ability.

But rather than simply embracing this revelation and accepting that for some individuals, whether white or non-white, math skills may require more effort, people like Gutierrez would rather label mathematics “racist” and scrap the entire subject, despite its prime importance in society.

“If one is not viewed as mathematical, there will always be a sense of inferiority that can be summoned because the average person won’t necessarily question the role of mathematics in society,” she writes.



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Gutierrez suggests that the way to combat the perpetuation of white privilege through math is for teachers to develop a political knowledge for teaching, which will enable them the ability to determine which learning opportunities work best for their students.

In other words, instead of helping students to grow stronger in areas in which they are weak, educators should teach to the students' strengths. But isn't the objective of education to teach new skills and strengthen those that already exist?

Sadly, the University of Illinois takes no issue with Gutierrez and her clear disdain for the subject she teaches. University of Illinois interim Provost John Wilkin told Fox News that Gutierrez is an admired, oft-published scholar. "As with all of our faculty at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Prof. Gutierrez has the rights of academic freedom necessary to pursue scholarship and research on important subjects and to reach conclusions even if some might disagree with those conclusions," he said.

In fact, Wilkin seemed to agree with Gutierrez's assessment. He added, "The issues around equity and access in education are real — with significant implications to our entire educational system. Exploring challenging pedagogical questions is exactly what faculty in a world-class college of education should be doing."



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