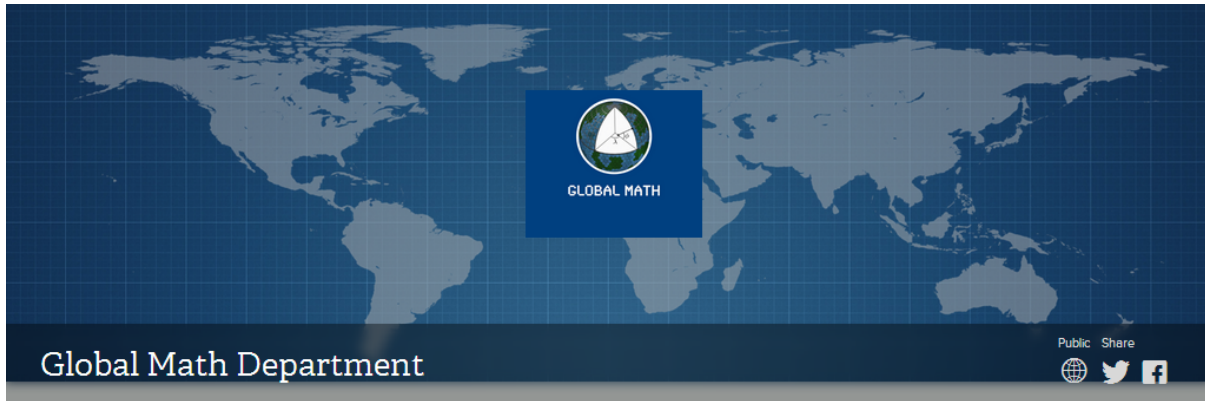


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#GMDWrites

Dear Global Math Department Community,

I submit this writing as part of a larger dissertation proposal that I'm still muddling through. It's a bit long - please bear with me. As a former classroom teacher who left a few years ago for graduate school, I am attempting to continue critically and thoughtfully reflect on this year and what it illuminates for going back to school in fall 2021. In particular, I hope to focus some of the discussion on the moral panic of 'learning loss' as US society continues to feel the unprecedented toll of pandemic teaching and what conversations we can and should be having before another school year begins.

We are all so tired. I know I am.

I offer this piece as a means to reflect and process collectively. I welcome your thoughts on the twitter thread when this is posted.

Each fix falls short precisely because it fails to acknowledge how these struggles are direct consequences of justice. (Love, 2020, p. 13)

I am a product of the American educational system. I am also an immigrant who has known no other bonds of kinship than the ones made here, in the United States. A person whose parents left their home country of Pakistan and immigrated to Chicago searching for a better life. I have only known my birthplace of Karachi traced with small fingers over an old, out-of-date map. In this American educational system, I have learned how to do the following:

- Read
- (but never question who I was being asked to read)
- Write
- (but only write about what I've been asked to read)
- Compute
- (but only using certain strategies and procedures)
- Analyze
- (but never too deeply)

I was not taught to question why the system I grew up in continued to produce the same results for certain citizens, for certain bodies. Instead, the consumption of a

steady diet of American individualism and moxie, exceptionalism and carefully cultivated pride did not allow me to interrogate many aspects I should have questioned a lot sooner. I did not wonder why most of my peers in my AP classes were white or Asian. I did not ask my undergraduate professors why the texts and readings at the University of Chicago were majority canonically Western, white, and male. It was not until my Master's coursework, in preparing to become a mathematics teacher, that I finally immersed myself in beginning to critically think about a diverse, complex world and my place in it.

As a newly minted public school teacher in New York City, my students completed my education that I had been lacking - through them, I learned how systems were not superfluous ideas that operate on an unseeable abstract level, but that they have very real, very pronounced impacts on the day to day lives of the most vulnerable amongst us.

As their math teacher, I was tasked to get scores up to whatever high-stakes assessment was in vogue that year. An example of this was teaching Regents Geometry, Algebra 1, and Algebra 2 in my *second year* of teaching because there were simply not enough math teachers to teach these standalone sections. I was required to submit lesson plans that impacted students' futures but ignored students' lived present realities. I made things worse, not better. I knew something was wrong but I did not have the words to describe their wrongness. And so, I relied on my intuition to help students who came from different cultural backgrounds than me. At the core of this was believing fundamentally that they were brilliant and possessed an inalienable right to learning, creativity, and joy in exploring mathematics.

I begin with the quote from Dr. Love above because I recognize that my ever growing consciousness mandates that I critically and carefully attempt to understand how demanding justice in education cannot happen without attending to the interlocking constellations of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy (bell hooks, 1989). As we close out an intensely draining and grief-filled academic year for students and teachers alike, I am paying close attention to how these same systems in 2021 continue to devalue and dehumanize children and teachers of color, in particular.

The moral panic of 'learning loss' is another repackaged instantiation of the 'achievement gap' - where Black and Brown students are measured against white and Asian students and positioned as lacking and needing further 'remediation'. This is deficit thinking and explicitly ignores the structural and systemic barriers that are

reified in the United States public education system - what critical education scholars have termed the [opportunity gap](#). I am not stating here that learning loss has not occurred. However, I am wondering about the sole emphasis on what students have supposedly lost - not what they have gained, what they have lived through, and what supports they might need in the following school year, pedagogically, socio-emotionally, and otherwise.

Black education scholars such as [Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings](#) have pushed back against this narrative for a while now. She cites Stanley Cohen's work where he defines *moral panic* as:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons that emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnosis and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the subject of the paddock passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and Collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself (Cohen, 1972, p. 9)

In her 2006 paper *'From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools'*, Dr. Ladson-Billings names other forms of debt yet to be repaid.

They are:

- Historical debt
- Economic debt
- Sociopolitical debt
- Moral debt

The aforementioned debts have been minimized, ignored, or [gaslit by denying that they ever happened in the first place](#). The pandemic has unveiled this somewhat, but the discourse and pressure around returning in the fall of 2021 to 'catch up' and to attend exclusively to the contrived moral panic around 'learning loss' is already rearing its head.

Several Spoke Critically of Standardized Curriculum.

On one hand, I do feel that I have experienced a learning loss this year. However, on the other hand, I do not, because who can really determine that? The article states “relatively simple, common-sense solutions can help students get back up to speed.” My question becomes, who is to determine what “up to speed” looks like? Adults who went to school over a decade ago and had a normal experience? Categorizing students based on information that is deemed by society as “important to know” will not help anyone in the future. Adults in charge must understand that the future that they have always been preparing us, students, to take over and lead is ever-changing. Preparing us to face what the future may have in store does not require us to adapt to master a standardized curriculum. Instead, the curriculum being taught needs to adapt to the current times. This past year we have gained knowledge about real-world issues and their everlasting effects. How can anything being taught in outdated textbooks ever compare to the real-world experiences we as students have gained in 2020-2021? So to answer the question, in short, I do not believe

Taia, Chicago from NYTimes article: [What Students Are Saying About 'Learning Loss' During the Pandemic](#)

In a year where so many possibilities could have been explored and reimaged, so many people running these systems doubled down on what has already been failing.



*Tweet from @chrisbuttimer who writes: Favorite quote from a teacher interview so far: quote you want to talk about learning loss?! Bureaucrats at the state and District levels lost the opportunity to learn from students, families, and teachers this year. That's the *real* 'learning loss'. Me, listening: [shows gif of a man reacting in pleased surprise.]*

I want to name here explicitly how the heavy emphasis on learning loss is a revelatory example of how race, gender, class, and ability have simultaneously been hyper-present in public education in the United States but also hyper-invisibilized. Below, I offer two telling examples of how privilege and systemic barriers afford or deny children from learning on equitable terms under the pandemic:

- **Creation of Pandemic Learning Pods**

The New York Times

OPINION

The Latest in School Segregation: Private Pandemic 'Pods'

If they become the norm, less privileged kids will suffer.

July 22, 2020



Screenshot of NYTimes Opinion article: *The Latest in School Segregation: Private Pandemic 'Pods'*.

From the NYtimes Opinion section, a social and emotional learning specialist in Atlanta Public Schools, Clara Totenberg Green, wrote about her concerns with respect to the creation of learning pods by white parents in July of 2020:

This segregation will only intensify if learning pods become the norm. When people choose members of their pod, they will choose people they know and trust. In a country where [75 percent of white people](#) report that the network of people with whom they discuss important matters is “entirely white, with no minority presence,” it is not a leap to predict that learning pods will mirror the deeply racially segregated lives of most Americans.

- **The Racial Digital Divide**



Tweet from @kdeleon. Aug 28, 2020. Text: Two students sit outside at Taco Bell to use Wi-Fi so they can 'go to school' online. This is California, home to Silicon Valley... But where the digital divide is as deep as ever. Where 40% of all Latinos don't have internet access. This generation deserves better. Image shows two students with faces covered working on tablets while two Taco Bell employees crouch down towards them.

In Chicago, for example, [as reported by Kate Chappell of WTTW news](#), 'approximately 110,000 Chicago children under the age of 18 don't have access to broadband. The issue disproportionately affects Chicago's low income families and people of color.'

What do you notice and what do you wonder from the above two examples? What might you predict will be the domino effect of these realities for the next school year?

As administrators, teachers, and families wrap up this challenging academic year, I want to acknowledge the heavy weight of grief, sheer exhaustion, and numbness that so many people involved in the work of learning and teaching have experienced this year. I am hoping that if you are one of these educators, you give yourself space to pour into you rather than continue to leak the heartbreak of this year. Please give yourself grace and a break for the extraordinary heavy lifting you've been doing all

year. You are seen and appreciated. I hope that you can see and appreciate yourself.

And if and when you have given yourself that space, I hope that you can start having conversations like the one posted by [@heymrsbond](#), a teacher in Fort Worth, TX, on twitter or elsewhere. She [writes](#):



Tweet from @heymrsbond. June 8, 2022. Text: Is anyone else terrified about next year? We're going to be in packed classrooms with students who have experienced a significant amount of trauma over the last year. Am I being negative? It feels like a storm is coming and most are not adequately preparing. Subtweet links @AlexSVenet's book on Equity-Centered Trauma-Informed Education.

Some questions I am thinking about:

1. After having some space and time to process this year, what conversations do teachers, administrators, and policymakers NEED to be having before Fall 2021 about the upcoming school year?
2. What do we need to start paying attention to instead beyond the discourse of 'learning loss'?
3. What cracks have been revealed in your school? What is being done about it, if anything?
4. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something. What is something each person involved in preparing for back to school in Fall 2021 can start anticipating and organizing around?

5. What is the plan for addressing the socioemotional and trauma needs of students? If the answer is teachers alone, many of whom report being burnt-out or on the breaking point already, then there are some serious long-term concerns about an accelerated revolving door of trained teaching professionals leaving the school-building.
6. What is the plan for supporting teachers and their unmet needs from the 20-21 year?
7. How do we center the humanity of BIPOC children in the fall of 2021?

An article from KQED makes the case for why attending to these questions (and more) is so important: [Why Helping Grieving Students Heal Matters So Much by Kara Newhouse](#). In particular, this quote resonates:

Stress caused by loss of a loved one or even the loss of daily routines can trigger a hormone called cortisol, Cantor explained. When stress is chronic, cortisol can do long-term harm to bodily systems, **including those associated with learning**. But Cantor said that another hormone, oxytocin, can have a countering effect on the same systems.

And what triggers oxytocin?

Human relationships. In particular, relationships that are full of love, trust, attachment and safety. That's why, Cantor said, educational settings that put connection at the center are the most successful.

Children should be seen, loved, and taught with respect and compassion in their schools.

Full stop.

What conversations need to begin sooner rather than later in order for this vision to be realized? What is preventing them (currently) from happening? I believe that both questions are in conversation with each other. To answer one demands that the other be answered as well.

In heartfelt solidarity,

~ Sara

A Call to Action: How Will YOU Push for Liberation in Mathematics?

– Brandie E. Waid ([@MathTeach_BEW](#))

Content Warning: Gun Violence; Murder; Violence against Trans, Queer, and BIPOC Communities

For many folx, June 12th of this year came and went as just another day. For me, as a queer Latina originally from Florida, this date was a time of grief and reflection. On this day five years ago, 49 beautiful souls—almost all queer and Latinx—were lost to a senseless act of hate and violence in the [Pulse nightclub shooting](#). I spent this day reflecting on the violent acts, both small and large, that queer folx continue to experience in the United States every single day. In relation to large scale acts of violence, this year has been particularly difficult, especially for trans folx in our country, as evidenced by the [100+ anti-trans bills](#) that have been proposed across state legislatures and the record number of [transgender and gender non-conforming folx](#) (almost all Black and/or Latinx) that have been murdered since Jan 1, 2021.

In addition to these large scale acts of violence, most queer folx continue to [report experiencing small scale-acts of violence \(or microaggressions\) on a regular basis](#). These include the use of homophobic and transphobic language in everyday conversations, the expectation to “act straight” or “pass” as cisgender for the comfort of those who do not identify as queer, denials/skepticism of queer folx’s experiences of homophobia and transphobia, the general misunderstandings that persist around what it means to be HIV positive, the belief of many religious folx that queer identity is immoral, the erasure of queer identity in many historical and other contexts, the inability to select the appropriate gender identity and/or sexuality on legal, medical, and other forms, and so on. Sadly, this violence is not new to queer folx, who have seen our humanity debated, stolen, and cut short throughout history. These attitudes persist today, as we saw in February when congress debated the passage of the Equality Act [on the floor of the House of Representatives](#). BIPOC and trans folx within the queer community are especially vulnerable to this violence, even within the queer community itself, where many white, cis queers argue for a “respectable” version of queer identity that excludes BIPOC and trans folx from political priorities and the larger community.

As I reflected on this continued violence against my community, I began to think about the ways in which this violence manifests in mathematics teaching and

learning. As noted by [Dr. Rochelle Gutierrez](#), “violence...is regularly perpetuated (knowingly and unknowingly) against students, teachers, faculty, and members of society through mathematical practices, policies, and structures.” For queer students, this may take a number of forms, some of which are outlined below:

1. Erasure of queer identity in mathematics problems - Positive representations of LGBTQ+ people in curricular materials has been found as linked to greater positive outcomes for LGBTQ+ students in grades K-12, yet only $\frac{1}{3}$ of LGBTQ+ students surveyed for the [2019 National Climate Survey](#) reported seeing *any* LGBTQ+ representation in their school curriculum. Of those that did report being exposed to LGBTQ+ representation only 48.8% reported those LGBTQ+ representations were presented in a *positive manner*. In mathematics, the numbers are even more abysmal, with 0.7% of LGBTQ+ students reporting having seen *any* LGBTQ+ representation in their math classes and of those, only 3.6% reporting the inclusion of *positive* LGBTQ+ representations. As a queer person, this lack of representation feels a little like looking into a mirror that seems to work for other folks, but for some reason isn't showing me my reflection. Because of this, I'm not surprised by the [underrepresentation of queer folks in STEM](#). If you don't see your reflection in a mirror, you're likely to think something is wrong with that mirror and go in search of another one...one that will show that you do, indeed, exist.
2. Overemphasis on efficiency and rigid procedures in mathematics teaching and learning - Growing up as a closeted queer child, I was drawn to mathematics because I thought it was “cut and dry” and “safe.” If I followed the procedures my teacher taught me, I would succeed. These procedures felt more identifiable and easier to follow than the gender roles and heteronormative rules of society, which I often could not identify or understand, and that I seemed to constantly be getting wrong in my youth. This view of mathematics proved detrimental to me as I began to move through my mathematics career. It created within me extreme anxiety about stepping “outside the lines,” and being vulnerable by presenting solution methods or ideas that were in any way creative or novel. This view of mathematics, much like the debilitating threat of someone discovering my queer identity, limited me as a mathematical thinker, often triggering anxiety that was detrimental to my mental and mathematical well-being. It was not until I “came out” that I was able to begin shedding my extreme anxieties in these areas and begin considering creative, non-normative expressions in both my everyday life and in my mathematical thinking. While I cannot speak to the experience of all queer folks, I can imagine that for many of us the rigidity that is often found in mathematics classrooms

can be both appealing and suffocating in a way that intrinsically ties mathematical identity to queer identity.

3. Reinforcement of gender norms in the mathematics classroom; mathematics operating as masculine and white - [As noted by Luis Leyva](#), mathematics is a “White and heteronormatively masculinized space.” The way that students enact (or conceal) their identities in mathematics is heavily influenced by this historical framing of mathematics. The way students and teachers communicate knowledge and what counts as knowledge is traditionally limited by the white, heteronormative, masculine nature of mathematics. These limitations back queer students and students of color into a corner, often limiting the ways in which they may express their humanity in connection with mathematics teaching and learning.
4. Tracking, bullying, and dropout rates of LGBTQ+ youth- We often talk about tracking (or ability grouping) in terms of a gatekeeping measure that keeps BIPOC students from pursuing higher levels of mathematics. This is the case for queer students as well, who are [less likely to successfully complete Algebra II](#) than their non-queer peers. While the reasons that cause this are no doubt complex (and linked to the issues outlined above and below), this is further complicated by the fact that more than 80% of LGBTQ+ students surveyed indicate that they have been harassed, bullied, or assaulted at school within the last year. As a result, LGBTQ+ students are reported as having [higher rates of absenteeism](#) and of [dropping out of school](#), establishing, again, that the school is a violent and exclusionary space for queer youth.
5. Fear of discussing gender and sexuality in mathematics or the view that such topics are irrelevant - Two questions that I’m often asked are “Is it really appropriate to talk about sexuality in schools?” and “Aren’t kids too young to know how they identify?” I’ve responded to these questions in some of my [previous work](#). In my view, both of these questions stem from teachers’ fears - fears about not being knowledgeable enough to talk about LGBTQ+ people and issues and fear of receiving pushback from administrators, parents, and the community. The thing about fear is that when we don’t talk about something because we are afraid to, students notice. It creates a culture in which those topics are taboo, and when the thing you are afraid of talking about is LGBTQ+ identity, it makes *people* taboo and breeds more fear. This sort of fear further perpetuates the general ignorance of folx surrounding LGBTQ+ people, and the violence LGBTQ+ folx are subjected to every day.
6. Lack of (or limited) attention to queer students and their needs in social justice mathematics initiatives - A lot of attention has been given to social justice

mathematics in recent years, yet relatively few lessons or initiatives have focused on the injustices faced by LGBTQ+ people, both presently and historically. For example, out of several of the books I currently own on teaching mathematics for social justice, only one contains lessons (two lessons, to be exact) that acknowledge the existence of LGBTQ+ people, much less focus on LGBTQ+ issues. Similarly, when we look at the social justice goals of our professional organizations, such as NCTM, LGBTQ+ students are never recognized as a vulnerable group worthy of inclusion in our equity and social justice initiatives.

As mathematics educators, we must begin taking active roles in preventing the reproduction of this violence in our mathematics classrooms. How do we do that? In a [blog post](#) I wrote in February, I outlined a few ways that mathematics educators can begin to take action in support of their LGBTQ+ students. In addition to those items, I also believe it is important for us to recognize that we are but single individuals. In order to change the landscape of hate and violence our schools inflict upon LGBTQ+ students, BIPOC students, disabled students, and students from other marginalized groups, we must push for *systemic* change. Pushing for systemic change can come in a multitude of forms, including petitioning your local school and/or district to adopt more inclusive policies and curriculum and writing to your state and local representatives to support laws that protect our students from traditionally marginalized groups and oppose those that cause them harm.

Another means of taking action is to turn to our professional organizations, such as NCTM, NCSM, AERA, and AMTE, and urge them to adopt policies and practices that better support BIPOC, queer, disabled, multilingual, and undocumented educators and students. These organizations often proclaim social justice orientations but continue to be experienced as violent spaces for many queer and BIPOC members. There are a number of ways these organizations can be restructured to live up to their social justice ideals, such as diversifying their Board of Directors and Executive Suites, providing membership and conference scholarships to BIPOC and queer educators, taking a more active approach in seeking out BIPOC and queer folx that do equity work and *paying them for their labor*, and so on.

In addition to adopting internal policies and practices that better support BIPOC, queer, disabled, multilingual, and undocumented educators and students, we can urge these organizations to play a more active role in our political climate. These professional organizations have powerful platforms from which they can condemn

harmful legislation such as the anti-trans laws, voter suppression laws, and critical race theory bans that are sweeping across state legislatures. Each of these laws impacts our students and our schools, as is indicated in [this open letter](#) to NCTM, NCSM, AERA, & AMTE (which you can [sign here!](#)). These organizations must commit to nuanced approaches to resisting these laws and use their immense lobbying power to prevent the passage of harmful legislation. We can and must urge them to do so.

As a queer Latinx mathematics educator, I dream of a day when our most vulnerable students (BIPOC, queer, and the like) see themselves reflected in our mathematics curriculum. I dream of a day in which these students are free to be themselves without fear or consequence, free of the violence inflicted upon them in mathematics classrooms. I dream of a liberated mathematics education, one that sees and celebrates every student for who they are; one that centers joy and humanity. But this dream of mine cannot be realized alone. Each and every one of us must be committed to this work. So my question to each of you is - will you join me?

Acknowledgement: Shout out to my dear friend Arundhati Velamur for all the last minute edits to this piece (and oh so many others in the past)!

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