

COMMENTARY

The Collective Black and *Principles to Actions*¹

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For years I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of society, a little change here, a little change there. Now I feel quite differently. I think you've got to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values.²

– Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Good morning. I want to begin by thanking the organizers of this plenary session for extending me an invitation to participate. This time of year is especially busy and being able to break away to discuss important issues with colleagues from across the country is certainly appreciated. In that spirit, let me say that it is my pleasure to share the podium with Deborah, Dan, and Steve.

By show of hands, how many people have had a chance to read *Principles to Actions: Ensuring Mathematics Success for All* (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics [NCTM], 2014)? If you have not read it, I encourage you to do so. I believe there are many take-aways worthy of further discussion and analysis. In terms of my own take-aways, there are five that I would like to focus on.

First, it is clear to me that *Principles to Actions* is a political document. It advances particular views and visions of mathematics teaching and learning. These views are so strongly worded that other possibilities and visions are pretty much ruled out. In fact, the word “non-negotiable” is used in relation to the recommendations. The political nature of the document is confirmed on the copyright page where it reads: “*Principles to Actions: Ensuring Mathematics Success for All* is an official position of the National Council of Mathematics Teachers as approved by the NCTM Board of Directors, February 2014” (p. ii). So, it is not just a book, it is an official position.

My second take-away is that despite the strong tone of the document, the actual content of *Principles to Actions* will be familiar to most of you if you have read

¹ This commentary is a revised version of remarks made at the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics Research Conference plenary session “Turning the Common Core into Reality in Every Math Classroom,” delivered on April 15, 2015 in Boston, MA. (Other invited panelists included Deborah Loewenberg Ball, Dan Meyer, and Steven Leinwand.)

² See Vincent Harding’s 2008 book *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero*, page 98.

previous documents published by NCTM, including the 1989 *Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics*, the 2000 *Principles and Standard for School Mathematics*, the 2006 *Curriculum Focal Points for Prekindergarten Through Grade 8 Mathematics: A Quest for Coherence*, and *Focus in High School Mathematics: Reasoning and Sense Making*, published in 2009. Beyond these documents, one can also recognize the influence of the National Research Council's *Adding it Up: Helping Children Learn Mathematics* published in 2001 and two publications from the Conference Board of Mathematical Sciences, *The Mathematical Education of Teachers I* and *II*, published in 2001 and 2012, respectively. As a result, much of what is contained in *Principles to Actions* is not new.

What might appear to be new is the merging of high-leverage practices and essential teaching skills into a set of eight “Mathematics Teaching Practices” in the same vein as the eight Standards for Mathematical Practice found in the Common Core State Standards Initiative.³ These mathematics teaching practices include things like: (a) establishing mathematics goals to focus learning; (b) implementing tasks that promote reasoning and problem solving; (c) posing purposeful questions; (d) supporting productive struggle in learning mathematics; and (e) eliciting and using evidence of student thinking. Again, nothing new here. Some would say that these practices just represent aspects of good teaching.

A third, slightly more problematic, take-away for me is that *Principles to Actions* reflects a deep and unequivocal commitment to the Common Core by NCTM even as it seems that elements of the Common Core movement are starting to unravel (see, e.g., Kirp, 2014; Ravitch, n.d.). This unequivocal support can be found early in the document where there is a partial restatement of NCTM's position statement on the Common Core.⁴ I think it is worth repeating here:

The widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics presents an unprecedented opportunity for systemic improvement in mathematics education in the United States. The Common Core State Standards offer a foundation for the development of more rigorous, focused, and coherent mathematics curricula, instruction, and assessments that promote conceptual understanding and reasoning as well as skill fluency. This foundation will help to ensure that all students are ready for college and the workplace when they graduate from high school and that they are prepared to take their place as productive, full participants in society. (p. 4)

The fourth take-away, reflected in the Common Core position statement and the essential elements of *Principles to Actions* is the continued focus on equity and the rhetoric of “Mathematics for All” (Martin, 2003, 2011) that was expressed in the 1989 and 2000 *Standards* documents. The concerns for equity expressed in

³ See <http://www.corestandards.org/Math/Practice/>.

⁴ See <http://www.nctm.org/ccssmposition/>.

Principles to Actions, like earlier documents, make note of the need to ensure mathematics success for all students with particular expressions of concern for African American, Latin@, Indigenous,⁵ and poor students; that is, those who have been the least well served by school-based mathematics education. This is a 26-year-old message, couched in a 400-year-old quest for equity in the United States. In fact, as I read *Principles to Actions*, it seemed that the emphasis on equity and mathematics success for all was repeated on every other page. The repetitive nature of this commitment certainly got me thinking.

On one hand, it might be reasonable to applaud NCTM's persistent message on issues of equity and Mathematics for All. On the other hand, the inequitable outcomes that are the focus of NCTM's 26-year lament have also happened on their institutional watch and in the context of all previous recommendations. So, taking the latter response as my cue, I am going to say that perhaps it is time to take a more critical look at NCTM's equity-oriented message and politics. I understand this could be a risky move. I may be in violation of the adage: Don't bite the hand that is feeding you.

My final take-away from *Principles to Actions* focuses on NCTM's framing of the obstacles that could hinder their vision for mathematics teaching and learning. These obstacles are framed in terms of unproductive beliefs on the part of stakeholders. I want to push on this framing and raise some specific points of concern about the equity and Mathematics for All messages relative to *Principles to Actions* and to NCTM as an organization.

As I noted, *Principles to Actions* is a political document. It is also true that NCTM is a political organization. It speaks for and to particular audiences for political purposes. It advances social and political agendas and attempts to shape the prevailing social order, particularly in the realm of education. On the copyright page of *Principles to Actions*, there is a statement that reads in part: "The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics is *the public voice of mathematics education*" (p. ii, emphasis added).

In reading *Principles to Actions* as a political document and thinking more deeply about NCTM's equity advocacy, several questions emerged for me. The first set of questions that I considered is: Who is this document written for? Who are the primary audiences? Beyond any surface level considerations and possibilities, who is this document *really* written for?

The second set of questions is: What are the underlying appeals that are being made to these primary audiences? What are the politics associated with these appeals?

⁵ The original text of the plenary used the term *Native American*; I change that term here to reflect the pre-invasion and pre-colonial identities of people from Indigenous Nations. In fact, the remaining terms in this list are social constructions and reflect their use in the racialized social system of the United States. My use of these terms also reflects their use in *Principles to Actions*.

Based on the answers to the first two sets of questions, my final question asks: Moving forward, what stance will I take toward NCTM and its professed commitment of ensuring equitable mathematics learning of the highest quality for all students?

Let me take up the questions in the order that I raised them. Who is this document written for? Who are the primary audiences? The obvious response is that NCTM is targeting mathematics teachers, mathematics education researchers, and mathematics education policy makers. In terms of demographics, we know that each of these spaces—practice, research, and policy—is predominantly White. For example, about 85% of the U.S. teaching force is White (Feistritzer, Griffin, & Lin-najarvi, 2011). We also know that the research and policy domains are also characterized by a largely White demographic. In my research, I refer to mathematics education and research contexts as White institutional spaces (see, e.g., Martin, 2008, 2011, 2013). Moreover, I am going to estimate that the membership of NCTM—encompassing teachers, researchers, and others—is about 90% White. Based on sheer numbers alone, NCTM is a White organization and the primary audiences for *Principles to Actions* are largely White audiences.

My second set of questions asks: What are the underlying appeals that are being made in *Principles to Actions*? What are the politics associated with these appeals? I claim that the underlying appeals are to White rationality, White sensibilities, and White benevolence. These appeals are not specific to *Principles to Actions*. The history of the United States is littered with examples of equity-oriented policies that have had to appeal to White rationality and benevolence.

The appeals that are implicit in *Principles to Actions* also include a form of interest convergence. Interest convergence refers to the fact that gains for minority groups coincide with White self-interests and materialize at times when some type of breakthrough for minority groups is needed, usually for the sake of world appearances or the imperatives of international competition (see, e.g., Bell, 1980). Converging interests in *Principles to Actions* take this form: Engage in mathematics education via the teaching practices and essential elements outlined here and all students will benefit, not just those identified as White, but also those identified as African American, Latin@, Indigenous, and poor (i.e., *the collective Black*).⁶

⁶ I borrow the term *the collective Black* from Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2002, 2004), who proposes:

that the bi-racial order typical of the United States, which was the exception in the world-racial system, is evolving into a complex and loosely organized tri-racial stratification system. ... Specifically, I argue the emerging tri-racial system will be comprised of 'whites' at the top, an intermediary group of 'honorary whites' similar to the coloureds in South Africa during the formal apartheid (Fredrickson 1981), and a nonwhite group or the 'collective black' at the bottom. ... I hypothesize that the white group will include 'traditional' whites, new 'white' immigrants and, in the near future, totally assimilated white Latinos...lighter-skinned multiracials (Rockquemore and Brunson 2002), and other sub-groups; the intermediate racial group or honorary whites will comprise most light-skinned Latinos (e.g., most Cubans and segments of the Mexican and Puerto

The unspoken, hidden reality in *Principles to Actions* is that potential benefits to the collective Black are metered by Whites and White design and are contingent on parallel benefits to Whites. *Principles to Actions could never have been written to focus solely on gains for the collective Black*. This statement is true because most systems and institutions in our society, including mathematics education, are not set up to serve the collective Black. The hard truth is that the outcomes and inequities lamented over in *Principles to Actions* and previous documents are precisely the outcomes that our educational system is designed to produce. Equity-oriented slogans, statements about idealized outcomes, and tweaks to teaching or curricular practices within this system do not change this fact.

A more honest framing of mathematics reform and policy would speak to the fact that school-based mathematics education for the collective Black is placed largely in the hands of Whites or in the hands of non-Whites who are often positioned to preserve White interests. This recipe is a familiar one. We have seen it, for example, in missionary-oriented efforts from decades ago. Today, we see it in efforts like Teach for America. My late colleague William Watkins (2001) wrote a book titled *The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America, 1865–1954*. This book reminds us that negative outcomes for the collective Black relative to White interests are not really problems but actually support larger social and political agendas.

My own view is that this form of education, one that is rooted in appeals to White rationality and White benevolence, is a colonizing form of education, not a liberating education or an education characterized by equitable access to opportunity. For example, framing mathematics education solely in service to college and career readiness, for example, glosses over the commodification of students as future workers in favor of their participation in a system that has long oppressed many of them. *Principles to Actions* says little about critical mathematical literacy to understand and change that system. These calls also bypass the limited capacity of higher education to serve the students it currently tries to serve. Increased access, which I strongly support, is still likely to result in greater selectivity, bias, and backlash against the collective Black, in many cases to maintain White interests. As some of you know, early resistance to Algebra for All, for example, was rooted in such a backlash, stemming from the interest-preserving concerns of White middle- and upper-class parents. More recently, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan noted how resistance to the Common Core overlaps with White interests. He stated that some of the opposition to the Common Core State Standards has come from “white suburban moms who—all of a sudden—their child isn’t as brilliant as they

Rican communities), Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, Asian Indians, Chinese Americans, Filipinos, and most Middle Eastern Americans; and, finally, that the collective black group will include blacks, dark-skinned Latinos, Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians. (Bonilla-Silva, 2004, pp. 932–933)

thought they were, and their school isn't quite as good as they thought they were" (Strauss, 2013).

Wrapping up, I want to say that despite the fact that NCTM is a political organization and produces political documents like *Principles to Actions*, I would argue that the organization and document do not go far enough in arguing for a decolonizing form of mathematics education. Instead, it is rooted in an implicit benevolent appeal and the provision of accommodations that will allow African American, Latin@, Indigenous, and poor students to enjoy contingent benefits of the system that is not set up for them or by them.

According to revolutionary and philosopher Frantz Fanon (see, e.g., 1965), a minimum outcome of decolonization, including a decolonized education, is that the last shall become first. According to Fanon, the process of decolonization should have such a violent character that it completely dismantles existing systems of oppression. Requests or negotiations for White benevolence would have no place in a decolonizing (re)form of mathematics education.

So, reframing my final question posed earlier, I am left to ask: Does this document represent, symbolically and in spirit, the kind of disruptive violence to the status quo that can move the last to first? Can it truly help in improving the collective conditions—not isolated examples of success—of African American, Latin@, Indigenous, and poor students? By success, I do not mean slow growth and incremental gains. I predict when the dust settles on Common Core, we will move on to some other reform and there will, once again, be statements about the need for equity and mathematics for all.

With respect to NCTM, I invite you to consider the question: Is NCTM the kind of organization that is capable of facilitating the kind of violent reform necessary to change the conditions of African American, Latin@, Indigenous, and poor students in mathematics education?

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