



Supporting High-Achieving Students of Color by Understanding and Reducing "Racial Opportunity Costs"



Equity Spotlight Podcast Series

Ms. Courtney Mauldin and Dr. Terah Venzant Chambers, MAP Center Equity Fellow – Indiana

TRANSCRIPTION

Center Announcer: Welcome to the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center Equity Spotlight Podcast Series. This podcast series will feature the Center's Equity Fellows, national scholars from North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio who are working to advance equitable practices within school systems.

Each episode will focus on a topic relevant to ensuring equitable access and participation and quality education for historically marginalized students specifically in the areas of race, sex, national origin, and religion, and at the intersection of socioeconomic status.

Ms. Mauldin:

My name is Courtney Mauldin, and I'm here today with Dr. Terah Chambers, and we'll be discussing her work on supporting high-achieving students of Color by reducing Racial Opportunity Costs. Dr. Chambers, could you give us a bit of your...just your background and your areas of interest and research?

Dr. Venzant-Chambers

Sure, so I'm an associate professor of K-12 educational leadership at Michigan State University, but my research interests really align with post-*Brown* decision, K-12 educational policy, and urban educational leadership. I'm also very invested in issues of social justice and equity, and a lot of my research takes a qualitative approach.

Ms. Mauldin:

Wonderful. So today we'll be discussing how to best support high-achieving students of Color, but we'll specifically look at Dr. Chambers'...her framework of reducing Racial Opportunity Cost to understand how we can actually do that. So Dr. Chambers, would you just provide an overview of the Racial Opportunity Cost framework, and also just where this term came from, its genesis and a little bit of historical background.

Dr. Venzant-Chambers

Yeah, no of course. So I had mentioned that, you know, a lot of my research has this historical lens, it's deeply steeped in this historical perspective. The way I see it, a lot of our contemporary educational issues, especially those things that relate to students of Color, are so

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very connected to the desegregation era and the *Brown* decision specifically. So in most of the research that I do I retain this perspective.

On the one hand, you know, obviously the *Brown* decision was good- -it ended segregation. But there were a lot of ways that we didn't address the systemic or structural issues related to the treatment of students of Color, which has led to compounding issues related to tracking, disciplinary issues, disproportionate gifted and special education placement, all kinds of things related to how students of Color are treated in schools. And this Racial Opportunity Cost work stems from that same, kind of, historical approach. So, you know, I was very interested in the treatment of students of Color with respect to tracking, right, and I was doing work research around the treatment of students of Color, but I kept coming back to this issue of how students, the high-achieving student in particular, were navigating these school environments, and kind of the cost that they were incurring as a result.

So this led to the project, the Racial Opportunity Cost project, which involved 18 African American and Latinx students. They are high-achieving. And I was interested in hearing more about the cost that they incurred working to achieve academic success in these racialized dominant norm spaces. But I'm particularly interested in looking at what's happening at the school or institutional level that's influencing these students of Color, and how they respond to this environment.

So in the model, I have these institutional factors, or school factors, which I'll talk about probably in a little bit, and then how they influence the individual student. But then there are also two other aspects to the model. One is intersectional factors. I'm obviously very focused on the racialized implications, but there are other aspects to the students' identities that matter very much: gender, their sexual orientation, gender identity, you know, all of these things, language. And so that's kind of taken into account with this idea of intersectional factors, and how all of those different identities play a role in how students experience the school environment. And then on the other side I have what I call capacity factors. And these are things that are external to the school but influence a student's capacity to successfully navigate the school environment. So one could be the support of family and friends, could be mentoring

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programs, could be internal factors like resilience. Those all come into play with these capacity factors. So that's kind of, you know, in a nutshell what the Racial Opportunity Cost framework looks like.

Ms. Mauldin Ok, great. So you use this term that I think educators, and even myself, are curious about knowing how you define it. So how do you define the term “racialized dominant norm space?” And alongside that question, how do students of Color exist within this type of space?

Dr. Venzant-Chambers Yeah I get that question a lot, because it sounds scary—“racialized dominant norm space,” right? But really what I mean is that there are all kinds of ways that we expect smart students to arrive at school, right? And so there are objective measures of success, we could say test scores or grades, to the degree that we could agree that those are objective. But certainly more objective than other things, like how a student talks or behaves. Those are subjective measures. The problem is that we conflate the two, and so we think that smart students dress a particular way, speak a particular way, behave a particular way, and those are the expectations that we put on all students. And they are racially coded, in the sense that those expectations are aligned with typically white, middle-class expectations around speech, behavior, dress, those kinds of things. So that's what I mean by racialized dominant norm spaces.

Ms. Mauldin Ok. Ok, that's very helpful. So what are some of the costs that you've identified for high-achieving students of Color in schools, and how do these manifest?

Dr. Venzant-Chambers Yeah that's a great question. So, across the study, all of the students reported feeling some amount of Racial Opportunity Cost. Some more than others, right, but all could kind of identify with the idea of it. So, in the analysis, the cost fell into three primary categories: psychosocial costs, community costs, and representation costs. So, psychosocial costs are things like students feeling very isolated and alone, questioning whether they were smart enough to be in the

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high-track classes, you know, kind of questioning their racial identity and whether they had a space there. Those are the psychosocial costs.

The community costs are feeling disconnected from their racial community. Sometimes it was their family, sometimes the larger racial community, but the sense that moving closer to aligning with these school norms--these white middle-class expectations--sometimes made them move further away from their racial community. And the expectations from, you know, from their home.

And their representation costs has two kind of aspects to it. On the one hand, it's this feeling of obligation of representing for other African American or Latinx students in high-track classes, like 'so I'm taking this AP calculus class, and I don't do well, well then they're not gonna let anyone else...no other Black students try to take this class, right?' So feeling that extra burden. Another aspect of it was this kind of hyper-scrutiny, or a heightened sense of being on display, of having every move kind of criticized.

An example I use is one of the students, Makayla, said that one day she dropped a pencil, she dropped something, and she was like, "oh, it ain't broke." And then this conversation that ensued were her classmates were, like, mocking her basically, like "oh is it broken?" and she kept saying "oh it ain't broke." And then it wasn't until afterwards, that she didn't realize they were laughing at her. She realized that they were making fun of her for using Ebonics. And so from that point, when she was always making sure that she spoke properly, again what does properly mean? But that kind of hyper-scrutinized sense of being on display. So those are three categories of Racial Opportunity Cost.

Ms. Mauldin Okay. So you shared a lot of detail about the representational cost and psychosocial cost. I'm also interested...could you give an example how the community cost would manifest in the classroom?

Dr. Venzant-Chambers Yeah, yeah, no, that's a good question. It's a little bit harder to understand. But part of it is about the research design, too, because, you know, these were high-achieving students. We made the decision to focus on college students who were in their first and

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second year of college at these two private elite colleges. And so these students were talking about their high school experiences primarily, but also about...a little bit about their college experiences. But a lot of them talked about the...these costs in terms of connections to family, starting in high school, but becoming exacerbated when they went to college. So, you know, one student talked about...we were talking about code-switching, right, being able to talk and move from one language to, like, to another, and how for him he wasn't able to code switch. He wasn't able to, you know, move back into the kind of language norms of his community. So when he would go home, even though he felt very isolated at his college campus, when he would go home, you know his, he... there was an example where a family member was like, "where are you from?"...alright, not a family member, someone in the community said, "where are you from?" And he was like, "Well, I'm from here." But he wasn't recognized as being from there because he didn't speak the way the people in this community speak.

And there was another example with one of the focus groups where the students were talking among themselves about this issue, and how it's devastating because they don't realize that they're becoming disconnected from their family until they go away, and then they come back. And when they come back...you know, these two young women were talking about, you know, how devastating it was to feel...to come home and want to be embraced, but instead being kind of hit in the face with this sense of like, 'oh, like I'm really feeling disconnected in ways didn't expect.' So those are the community costs.

Ms. Mauldin Thank you. So you've identified the cost risks. What steps can educators take to lessen these costs for students of Color?

Dr. Venzant-Chambers Yeah this is really the heart of the issue, right? And that the purpose of this Racial Opportunity Cost model is actually to focus on and empower folks to reduce the Racial Opportunity Cost. And there are...the good news is that there are lots of things that we can do at the institutional level. And so there are five school factors that emerged from the research. So the first thing is school norms and values: how are we reinforcing students to fit a particular mold of what smartness it supposed to look like, right? And how can we disrupt those expectations...and say...one of my students in the prior

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project talked...and he said, you know, "what's it gonna look like if I pop up in here in my white tee and my Jordans on? Like, they're gonna kick me right out." Well, why does he have that perspective, and where did that, you know...where did that become cultivated, and how can we disrupt it so that students feel like they can be smart in all kinds of different ways?

Ms. Mauldin Right, like an AP student doesn't look one way.

Dr. Venzant-Chambers Yes, exactly. The second school factor is school community and belonging, you know, helping feeling...helping students feel like they belong, in every place in the school. One of the students...a different student talked about, you know, this feeling alienated in a class one day where he was taking a test, and there was a question that had to do with sailing, like with boating. He had never been on a boat in his life, he couldn't even tell me what the question was about, but he just remembered how that question started having him question everything about his, like, being in the class, right? Like, 'Well, I don't know anything about sailing. Am I supposed to know something? No one else is asking a question about what sailing is so they can answer this question, so clearly they all know what sailing is, and I'm the only one, so I don't belong in this class. Maybe I don't belong in these high-track classes.' And it just became like this whole cascading effect of him questioning his ability--all behind one question. And the question wasn't even about sailing; you just needed to know about sailing in order to answer the question.

Ms. Mauldin Right.

Dr. Morton Right, those are...that's just a really simple example, but obviously had a very profound effect on his overall sense of belonging in the school. Very easy for us to be thinking about how do we...how are we setting up situations like that, how can we make sure that they're open, and not alienating to students?

So the third school factor is having conversations about race and racism. One of the things we haven't talked about is how important it is for students to understand all of these issues, right? One of the things that came out of the research, too, was that the students really blamed themselves for their performance, high performance and lack of performance. You know, going back to the tracking work that I was

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doing, and, you know, Lisa Delpit talks about the culture of power and how, you know, like there are all these rules related to the culture of power. One of them being that we need to teach the rules, you know...we have to teach it...we have to tell people about it, so that they can understand the implications and, you know, respond accordingly; same thing here. Like we need to...like, students need to understand what's happening. And I saw the impact of this, even through the study, as we were working with the students overtime, and they were better understanding, you know, of the work that I was doing, but just also the broader work. They were getting fired up about their experiences, and sometimes about how unfair things were, you know, gave them a sense of empowerment, right? And if they would have had that, if they would have had teachers who were willing to have those conversations, you know, could have reduced a lot of anxiety and Racial Opportunity Costs for them along the way. So, unfortunately a lot of those teachers are uncomfortable having these conversations. We just have to push past that discomfort.

The fourth school factor is tracking within school segregation. I talked about this earlier, how a lot of the work that I do is connected to desegregation and the implications that continue to manifest all of these decades later that we haven't dealt with. All these are ways that interfere with academic striving at the classroom level, so disrupting tracking, especially the racialized implications of tracking, is another important aspect that educators can focus on to reduce Racial Opportunity Costs.

And then the last school factor is teachers and school personnel. Like, we are...we play a really important role in helping students feel like they belong, reinforcing open school norms and values. Creating space where we can talk about race and racism. And we need to do that. You know, unfortunately there are also ways that we can exacerbate these things, right, as educators, right? So it's important that we're cognizant every day of the ways that we can support students.

Ms. Mauldin Great. Thank you so much for your time today, Dr. Chambers.

Dr. Morton Yeah!



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Ms. Mauldin We really appreciate this, and we hope that you all can apply this Racial Opportunity Cost framework and its understanding to your own schools.

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