What Racial Opportunity Costs (ROC) Means for Black Lives in Schools

Equity Spotlight Podcast Series

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TRANSCRIPTION

Center Announcer: Welcome to the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center *Equity Spotlight Podcast*. 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.

Terah: Thank you for joining us. I am Terah Venzant Chambers, Professor of Educational Administration, and Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the College of Education at Michigan State University. And I'm also an Equity Fellow with the Great Lakes Equity Center. Previously, Dr. Courtney Mauldin, who's also on the line here, and I recorded a podcast about my research on Racial Opportunity Costs, or the costs of academic success for high achieving Black and Latinx students. You can find that podcast on the GLEC website. Today, we're expanding on that previous work by hearing from a panel of professors, parents and students about their experience with Racial Opportunity Costs. So we're also interested in understanding how this work is relevant in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. Our time is short, so I'm gonna dive right in.

Terah: So, my panelists today include a group of women who I consider near and dear to my heart. First, we have Dr. Courtney Mauldin an Assistant Professor at Syracuse University and former teacher in Tennessee. Next, we have Dr. Lolita Tabron, an Assistant Professor at the University of Denver and mother of two smart, confident girls. We're also joined by Jessica Brooks, a graduate of Carleton College, and my former student from way back in the day. We're not going to talk about how far back. Jessica has an MBA and she is an Operations Manager for a major

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international retailer. And then last, but certainly not least, we have two high school students Reagan and Sue, who are poised to take this world by storm. I'm so honored that they are making time to add their perspective to the mix.

Terah: Okay, so just a quick recap of the Racial Opportunity Cost framework for those who might not be familiar. Racial Opportunity Cost is a framework that can be utilized to identify the costs that high-achieving students of Color incur when they navigate white normed schools. In the research paper, the project that led to this work, that my research team and I have interviewed high achieving African American and Latinx students and their experience in K- 12, and college contexts. We were interested in learning more about the costs that they incurred, as they work to achieve academic success and these racialized dominant normed spaces.

Terah: In the schools these students attended, there were often expectations for how quote unquote, “smart students” were supposed to dress, how they should speak, or how they should behave. Despite what our intentions might be, we often conflate objective notions of success with subjective ones like how a student appears or speaks. So, one important contribution of this work is to look at the practices and policies at the school level that contribute to the Racial Opportunity Cost that students experienced. So, I'm going to stop there, because I know we're going to get into more of the nuance with all of this as the conversation unfolds. And actually, we'll start with a question for Courtney. So Courtney, in this era of continued racial unrest, how do you see Racial Opportunity Costin relation to Black student lives mattering in schools?

Courtney: Yeah, so thank you for having me Terah. I would say that coming from the elementary context in particular, I think about how Racial Opportunity Cost really speaks to what I think I witnessed a lot of my students and their parents have to

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navigate, particularly the parents. Thinking about while we were a pretty diverse school and spoke, I mean, diverse in terms of we had 30 languages represented and all of these cultures. There were also some costs that I knew that students did incur. For example, the fact that all of the teachers didn't look anything like them with the exception of maybe me, and one other. And this is a school with 1600 students, right. And so we had multiple grade levels per grade and just thinking about the realities that students weren't going to see themselves reflected.

Courtney: And I think that a lot of times, what I also saw as a trend was kind of seeing how international fairs and things like that would happen and celebrate, you know, quote, unquote, "culture." But there was nothing to necessarily celebrate or affirm Blackness, for a lot of students. So, it left a lot of my kids wanting to be other. And not other in terms of just white, but other in terms of something else, so that they could equally feel special. And I think that that was really hard to see. And so, seeing that firsthand makes me think about why we have to affirm that their lives matter in multiple ways in the classroom. And at that level, but also at a school level, and the district has to be taking some lead on that too, and thinking about costs that students are going to incur from elementary on up.

Terah: I think that's really important, Courtney. Thank you for sharing that perspective. So, I want to shift to Lolita to pick up from a parent perspective. So how does Racial Opportunity Cost shape your choices as both a mother and a professor who knows all of the statistical data on systemic racism, and other forms of oppression, in schools and policies? How do you make sense of all of this?

Lolita: Great question. So when I think about Racial Opportunity Costs, I think about pay now or pay later, which takes me back to my k-12 experience. My parents worked hard and sacrificed greatly to make sure my sisters and I could attend good

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schools. For them, at that time, a good school was a well-resourced school, and all that typically accompanies a well-funded school—excellent teachers' leadership, expansive curriculum, high test scores, positive academic, academic reputation, etc. But we know from the research that you typically find schools that are well funded and resourced where? In predominantly white communities, and predominately white schools, and these schools, I had access to great resources, but it came at a cost. That cost was that I did not receive a curriculum or pedagogy that was culturally responsive. I sat in classes where my teachers questioned my presence and ability. I didn't see culturally and linguistically diverse leadership.

Lolita: What I realized now reflecting back was that I was accessing state of the art resources all children deserve. But I was also grappling with racism, and picking up a weight and burden that I had to prove myself in my excellence. And when I did, so I was tokenized. So comparatively, take my husband who attended a predominantly Black school in Gary, not well funded or resource rich, but rich in other ways—rich in pride, culture, affirmation, high expectations, Black excellence. Rich in the intangibles, something you would never know, or assume, looking at traditional metrics.

Lolita: So fast forward, we both attend the same college, he fails behind some of the coursework because he lacks material access. But it was nothing he wasn't able to learn and overcome. As for me, I started coursework in stride. But what I lost in k-12, I'm still fighting to get back to this day as a Professor, that is freedom. And it's a release of this burden of proof and proving accumulated from years of offenses from my k-12 educators. And frankly, what continues today in academic spaces. So you tell me who fared better? I guess you could say, we both did because we're both college educated professionals. However, I wonder if I would have made different choices, or how my path might have been different if I wasn't

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always on the defense, or having to prove my value? He paid then, I'm still paying now.

Lolita: So for my two little girls, I don't define the quality of a school solely by test scores, or the popular data dashboards out there. Frankly, traditional metrics like test scores, graduation rates, or any other state data measure doesn't capture the conversations you have to have with teachers or principals, when your child comes home from school, trying to process what they just experienced. So when I look at schools, my metrics for school quality are different. I look at and I look for knowledge and respect for the community that the school is a part of, and what is your investment in it? I look for their capacity to help nurture my baby spirits while in their care. Successful schooling to me is when I send my daughters to school whole, they should come back that way, not broken, not questioning. I want them and the school to understand the value of who they are and what they bring to those spaces. My children, like other children are value adds. So these outside entities need to start listening more to the parents, they need to listen to the communities, particularly the most vulnerable, the students. It's time to get with it.

Terah: I'm just really overwhelmed with what you just had to say Lolita. I certainly, you know, resonate with that as a parent myself. So thank you for sharing such a powerful perspective. Um, let me pick this up with Jessica, I think you can shed some really important light on this topic too. I want to ask you to reflect on your past experiences as a student. I know that you had a particular experience moving away from your family when you were relatively young, to live with a host family, and attended a different school out of state. Looking back on that experience, how do you think this impacted your experiences with respect to this Racial Opportunity Cost term frame?

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Jessica: Yes, I reflect on it more and more. I think the older I get, I reflect on the differences that I see and who I am today and the people that I grew up with. So, I left home when I was 12 years old, for A Better Chance, that's the name of the program, but also for a better chance to go to college. And I moved into a house with 14 other girls across the country, in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. And coming from a predominantly Black community, and landing predominantly Black and poor community—poor and working class, and landing in one of the wealthiest and whitest suburbs in America, to go to high school.

Jessica: I think that had a sort of trauma that goes with it. And I think that was the first, I suppose cost if you may, to, to pursuing higher education and pursuing adequate access to information really, but going to that high school, and being kind of shocked by, by things that I didn't quite understand, and learning what it meant to be the only person of Color and how the assumption was that if you were a person of Color, and you were not in the ABC program, and you ended up at Eden Prairie high school through some sort of busing situation in Minneapolis—you were immediately put into special education classes. And regardless of how intelligent you are, you are immediately put into special ed classes.

Jessica: And if you were an ABC scholar, then it was like, “Oh, well, they're smart enough to be in regular classes.” And you had to work even harder to get into AP classes and whatnot. So even in Eden Prairie high school, there was some trade-offs, and some and almost feeling like you had to choose between the little bit of community that you had, and what you were pursuing. And I remember, my senior year in high school, another person of Color approached me because I, or I should say, BIPOC, I suppose. But another person approached me who had been in my step team, so I launched a step team in high school just to bring some sort of culture and something that I connected to. And they thought that I was a teacher. So they

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saw my calculus book, and they're like, wait a minute, you're in calculus? And I'm like, Well, yeah. And then this whole time, we thought you were a teacher, because you're so serious, you don't talk to anybody, and you don't do anything. But it was because I had to choose, like, I had to choose what I was going to do. And I chose to just focus on trying to study and get the best grades that I could to get out of there, and then get into college.

Jessica: And of course, I think that the experiences I had there, which I can't even begin to unpack from being used as a prop in a, in a history, teachers' recreation of the integration of schools in Arkansas to, you know needing to explain what gang life was, even though I was not in a gang, and then getting to college and realizing that this was college in a time in which it was fun to have Crips and Blood parties, right? Like we're going to dress up like what we think gangsters are. And I was better prepared to cope with that than I think my peers who ended up at Carleton through yet another program that was geared toward inner city, students of Color, low-income students coming to the college as a cohort. And that having already had four years of I guess that trauma of going to a predominantly white high school and realizing that you do have to jump higher, run faster, work harder. And that's still sometimes not enough.

Terah: Oh, I wish you know, sometimes podcasts are great, but in this situation, I wish people could see the faces of the panelists right now as we're hearing you share your story. Jessica, thank you so much. So our time is coming to a close, but I'm saving my secret weapon for last. I think everything that we've discussed helps provide nuance to the Racial Opportunity Cost frame. But I'm curious what current high school students have to say about the Racial Opportunity Cost framework, especially in this current context of racial injustice and anti-Black racism. So we want to close hearing from two young people who are actually navigating this time

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as students in high school. So Ray and Sue, we'd like you to share what you think about youth working together during this time. What do you think is your role? What about non-Black youth in schools who are also invested in racial justice work? What are your thoughts on all of this?

Sue: Um, I think right now, especially during this time, and it's really important to make sure that our POCs are connecting with each other, talking to each other, creating support within a group, trying to do whatever that we can. Like, for example, me and Ray, um, have a few friends of Color, mostly girls, and we are thinking of putting like a book club together, where we will talk about social justice and racial justice, everything that we can do like that. Um, and I think that our role right now is... I mean.

Ray: Have a voice, yeah, make sure that we're heard because I feel like, as kids even, um, we're overlooked just by adults in general. Especially, our school being primarily white, with primarily white teachers except for my mom that's the only Black teacher in the school. I feel like, we're very overlooked. And we have a Black Student Union.

Sue: It's not strong.

Ray: It's not very strong and it's not great. And it needs some help. Um, and I just feel like it's overlooked. And we need to have more of a voice.

Sue: And I think in the classrooms, POC I mean, as POC we know, a lot more information than we get in textbooks. So I think, if we're in class, not being afraid to speak our voice and say, well, you're missing this or you're missing that, because there's so much more that we know that is put in our books. Our books are very

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much whitewashed. I mean, you look at the authors, they're white, right? All of them.

Ray: It's kind of sad, because like, and like the kids in our school, they're pretty white. I'm just going to be honest. And, um, they don't know a lot, because they hear what they hear from schools. They don't know. And that's a very how she said, a very white example of it. And so they are, it's like, they aren't hearing all of history from a non-biased perspective, you know?

Sue: Yeah. And then lastly, I think, for non-Black folk who want to get involved in racial justice—really really educating yourself, reading—looking at TikToks, even.

Ray: They're so much information.

Sue: And talking to your friends of Color, I feel like between young, white folks and POC folk, it can be uncomfortable but--

Ray: Not being scared to talk about it.

Sue: But pushing yourself there is only going to show that you want to learn and that you're there to support and that you want to be there to educate yourself.

Terah: Absolutely, I think that's demonstrating exactly why I wanted to have you all go last, so you could get us together. And I just really want to thank all of you for sharing your perspectives. Today, when I originally conceived of this Racial Opportunity Cost framing, I couldn't have anticipated how much people would resonate with this idea. Um, I think the stories that you will have shared—it really helped fill in some gaps and fill out…flesh out the framework and give it life. And

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so I really want to thank you all for sharing your time tonight. I want to thank the Great Lakes Equity Center for supporting this work. And I want to send a particular thank you of all you know all of the panelists, but particularly to Courtney, who has been working behind the scenes and has really been instrumental in these GLEC products. So I appreciate you so much. Okay, dear listeners, thank you for joining us today. Make sure to check out the wealth of resources offered through the Great Lakes Equity Center. Thank you and good night.

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