

# Not for Distribution

## Chapter 14

### **A Racial Opportunity Cost Analysis of Charter Schools and Parental Involvement**

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#### **Introduction**

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional the racial segregation permeating America's schools. The landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision initiated the domino effect that would strike down a variety of discriminatory legislation, but despite the Court's decision to desegregate, implementing the decision was difficult.<sup>1</sup> The Court's decision was too broad, resulting in gaping loopholes that savvy whites, intent on preserving their way of life, exploited. The *Brown* decision specifically targeted school segregation, and while this was a significant step toward equity, structures such as racial residential segregation, employment discrimination, school resource disparities, and a host of other interconnected concerns went unaddressed. Some argue that not sufficiently addressing these issues impeded the desegregation process. As a result of our inability to fully address these educational issues "millions of black children [have not experienced] the decision's promise of equal educational opportunity."<sup>2</sup> Today, the evidence of this oversight remains visible, and black and brown students unequivocally experience subpar education in publicly funded schools—the very essence of what the *Brown* Court sought to address.

Sixty years after the *Brown* ruling, we examine the current situation for students of color in public schools and offer a contemporary analysis of

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the challenges they face. We utilize a racial opportunity cost (ROC) frame (defined later) to examine the relationship between students of color and their school environment—and the costs to students of color and their families as a result of navigating this landscape. Specifically, we use this framework to examine two timely educational issues: school choice and parental involvement. We begin with a brief overview of the theoretical framework used in our analysis, ROC. We then offer separate analyses of school choice and parental involvement research using this framework. Finally, drawing from the arguments presented in this chapter, we provide implications for future research, policy, and practice.

## Racial Opportunity Cost (ROC)

Opportunity cost is a traditional economic term used to reflect inherent trade-offs in the decision-making process where making one decision (e.g., having cake) necessarily precludes another (e.g., eating the cake). Venzant Chambers and her colleagues used the term “racial opportunity cost” as a way to understand the relationship between the school environment and students of color and their ability to attain academic success.<sup>3</sup> As a theoretical framework, ROC can be used to examine the impact on students of color resulting from navigating the racialized school norms permeating their school culture. Figure 14.1 depicts this relationship between the school, at the institutional level, and the individual student.

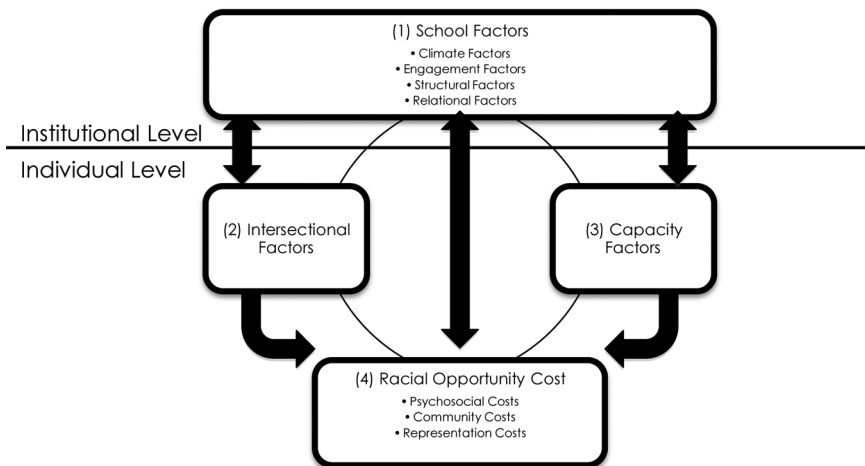


FIGURE 14.1 Racial Opportunity Cost<sup>4</sup>

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The cycle begins at the top of Figure 14.1 with School Factors, at the Institutional Level. School Factors encompass all aspects of a school's culture. Specific School Factors that emerged from previous research include, Climate Factors (e.g., the norms and culture governing of the school), Engagement Factors (e.g., the sense of belonging and community), Structural Factors (e.g., within-school stratification), and Relational Factors (e.g., personnel engaging in open dialogue concerning issues of race). The arrows are meaningful in that they show the direction of the various influences. Thus, School Factors directly impact individual students. And individual students and the ROC they experience can have an influence on overall school culture. In addition, there are other aspects of an individual student's identity that may also play a role in their ROC. These additional factors include Intersectional Factors, which account for factors outside of race that contribute to the experiences of students in school (e.g., gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status). The other component included is Capacity Factors, which account for an individual student's resilience in a situation.<sup>5</sup>

This ROC framework is built from interdisciplinary research that separates the *objective* measures of academic success, such as grades or test score performance, from the *subjective* markers with which they may be conflated, including dressing, speaking, or behaving in a particular manner. These expectations begin at the earliest stages of schooling, as Beth Hatt discussed in her work in an ethnographic study of a kindergarten classroom, where she found that “smartness signified not only a cultural practice of social control but a process of ascribing social power defined along lines of class and race.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, while this construction of academic success in racialized school environments has been taken up in previous research, ROC acts as a vessel to collate this work and then also to understand the impact on students of color as a result of pursuing academic success in this context.

## Racial Opportunity Cost and School Choice

A current alternative to the challenging plight of traditional public school systems is to allow families to “choose” where their child attends school. The effectiveness of school choice as a remedy to the ills and inequalities of public education, however, is questionable. The term “school choice” encompasses many different arrangements, including inter-district choice, intra-district choice, magnet schools, and voucher programs. However, the most popular form of school choice in use in public schools today is the

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charter school. The premise of school choice is that families are extended more freedom and flexibility to choose the best educational opportunities for their children beyond their assigned neighborhood school and that this competition will also result in an increase in the quality of traditional public schools.

Contrary to what many initially predicted, most of the students who attend charter schools are also students of color. Given that this population has been historically underserved in U.S. schools, how they fare in charter schools is of particular concern. In fact, in 2012, the Center for Education Reform found that 50 percent of all charter school students are “at risk” and over 60 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch.<sup>7</sup> However, although the population of the schools has increased in diversity, charter schools, particularly those that serve significant numbers of these predominantly minority, high-poverty schools, have not necessarily addressed the underlying institutional-level concerns that often result in high ROC for students of color.

## Racial Opportunity Cost and Charter Schools

Charter schools commenced with two schools in 1991 and have dramatically risen to over 6,400 today.<sup>8</sup> Today, most charter schools share three common characteristics: (1) They are free, public, and accountable to the public (at least theoretically); (2) they do not impose residential requirements; and (3) they are privately managed by an organization that has a charter or contract with an authorizer.<sup>9</sup> From there, however, the similarities end. The laws that govern the structure and operation of charter schools vary greatly from state to state. For example, charters can range from new start-ups and conversions to campus program charters and college or university charters.

This flexibility is a feature of charter schools, which are given the autonomy to implement policies and create structures that seemingly maximize academic achievement and student motivation without interference from a local board of education. However, some argue that this flexibility comes with a significant downside in that this unrestricted freedom allows some charters to fly under the accountability radar and claim academic gains that may not exist. For example, a 2009 CREDO study of nearly three-quarters of U.S. public schools examined students’ reading and math scores, finding that more than a third of these students would have fared better academically had they remained in their local public school. Less than 20 percent

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of the sample schools posted student math scores that surpassed the local traditional public school—for nearly half of the schools, any gains were negligible.<sup>10</sup> These statistics are both alarming and concerning, especially considering that families of color choose to attend charter schools because they think charters have higher academic expectations and will provide a more rigorous and student-centered curriculum than would their local neighborhood school.

Charters have not lived up to expectations in other respects, as well. Many scholars have argued that charter schools have not actually provided more options with respect to educational options for families of color. Discussing this issue in greater detail, Kristen Buras also questioned the merits of school choice when referring to the Tomorrow School Reforms that were instituted in New Zealand in the early 1990s. Buras noted that because “schools had more applications than spaces, they drafted an ‘enrollment scheme’ to spell out the criteria [they] would use for selecting students.”<sup>11</sup> Hence, in these types of situations, “choice” is an illusion.

On the other hand, more prestigious charter schools with large proportions of more affluent, white students were given the opportunity to choose which students they accepted. Many charter schools in the United States employ similar enrollment practices and have drawn criticism from parents, activists, and public school advocates nationwide. Although parents in the United States do have the choice to send their child to allegedly advantaged charter schools, there is growing evidence that black students still confront discrimination and cultural domination in those spaces.

The authors argue in *Between a “ROC” and a School Place* that people of color may feel tension between societal expectations and their own racial community norms and that this tension mirrors the “double consciousness” idea DuBois addressed over a century ago.<sup>12</sup> DuBois defined double consciousness as the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”<sup>13</sup>

The phenomenon of double consciousness is useful in examining a popular practice in a New Orleans charter school. Educational historian and researcher Diane Ravitch described a rather disturbing practice in one predominantly Black New Orleans charter school. In an article on an educational blog entitled “Charters In New Orleans Explain Why Students Must ‘Walk the Line,’” Ravitch described how “many charters in New Orleans tape a line in their hallways and insist that students must walk on the correct side of the line and failure to do so would result in unnecessarily harsh

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punishments.”<sup>14</sup> She went on to say that critics of the policy believe that it prepared students for prison, not college. In one case, a student’s disability made it difficult to walk, but even he was not exempt from following suit. Supporters of this policy claimed that it “save[d] time and [taught] automatic obedience to small rules, which later translate[d] into unquestioning obedience to rules and authority, preparing students to succeed in life.”<sup>15</sup>

Critics charge that the proponents of such policies in charter schools assume that children of color have not been taught discipline and are prone to challenge authority. These assumptions and the resultant policies are not only riddled with deficit thinking but also support the idea that schools are complicit in coagulating and reviving the existing social and economic norms of society.<sup>16</sup> Policies like these can have a devastating psychological effect on students of color and their ability to perform academically. The ROCs that students pay in these environments is significant.

Another source of concern in charter schools is the curriculum. Parents and students frequently have little input in the curriculum, student and family handbooks, cultural blueprints, discipline policies, and uniform policies. The experiences and values of students and parents are essentially ignored. Yet, as mentioned earlier, students must still abide by the rules or face “unnecessarily harsh penalties.”<sup>17</sup> The ROCs for students of color tend to be both punitive and cumulative, because they are punished for not conforming to normative rules of the larger white society, while their culture and heritage is denied or devalued.

The lived experiences, ways of knowing, learning, and thinking, may have to be recalibrated in charter schools in order for greater numbers of students of color to be academically successful in these schools. Given the current educational policy era, a thorough investigation of the ROC framework and the price that students of color pay every day throughout their educational journey is warranted.

## Racial Opportunity Cost and Parental Involvement

Just as ROC offers us a way to see how educational environments impact the academic success of students of color, the concept can also be applied to how educational environments foster or discourage parental involvement for families of color. Studies have found that *parental involvement*, defined as active participation in children’s education, greatly impacts children’s academic achievement, with parental expectations serving as a predictor of academic attainment. When the school engages parents, parents

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can become viable partners in their child's education. If they are included, informed, and welcomed by the school, parents are more likely to participate, thereby reducing the distance between school and home that results in a higher ROC of academic success. However, schools have not traditionally welcomed all parents equally.

Race, class, culture, and language shape parental participation in public schools, individually and collectively. Parental involvement, however, is not viewed in the same way across racial, cultural, and economic lines. The involvement and concerns of affluent parents, for example, are often seen as an asset, while input and priorities of low-income parents are viewed as a liability and often marginalized. Low-income parents are frequently seen as the cause of their children's low achievement. To make matters worse, many low-income parents experience a culture-school divide. Several factors account for this divide. All too often schools do not value the cultural background of poor families. Language barriers, unequal opportunities to participate meaningfully, past negative school experiences, and prohibitive work schedules that are not accommodated in the way schools have structured their parent involvement programs all contribute to a disconnect between parents and schools. Further, treating all parents as the same "obscures the importance of tackling the nature and consequences of structural racism"<sup>18</sup> and a failure to recognize ethnic diversity may increase involvement gaps between parents who are involved and those who are not.

Researchers on Latino parental involvement in schools, for example, have found that traditional methods of parental involvement are generally not adequate for engaging Latino parents with specific cultural and linguistic needs. Gerardo López, Jay Scribner, and Kanya Mahitivanichcha observed that most approaches to parental involvement rely on a cultural deficit approach that emphasizes traditional forms of parental involvement without considering the ways in which the nature of parental involvement may vary across groups. Further, parents who are marginalized in schools because of racial, class, and cultural differences may, in turn, be perceived as not caring about their children's education.

## Racial Opportunity Cost and Families of Color

Establishing environments that open avenues to meaningful participation of parents of students of color has the potential to reduce ROC. Settings that foster a sense of belonging for parents, and those that recognize the

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importance of school agents nurturing trust, have the potential to increase parental engagement and therefore improve students' educational experiences as well. When community needs are recognized and met by schools, students are more likely to experience a reduction in the "conflict both internally and externally when their pursuit of academic success means moving further from the norms and values of their racial community."<sup>19</sup>

However, as schools often view parental involvement as something that happens within school walls, they may undervalue the steps that parents take outside of the school building to foster their children's engagement in school. Latino scholars have addressed this narrow view of parental involvement. Angela Valenzuela found that for Latino families, the concept of "education" includes parents' role of instilling in their children "a sense of moral, social, and personal responsibility [that] serves as the foundation for all other learning."<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, parents value real-world lessons for their children, *consejos* in Latino families that contribute "to their children's education based on their community cultural norms and expectations."<sup>21</sup> If parents turned their educational efforts with their children only toward the norms promoted by schools, their children would miss out on learning from their families' cultural perspectives and aspects, including language and a sense of collectivism.<sup>22</sup>

Parents' expanded notions of education may not manifest themselves as a physical presence in a school building and may be misread by school agents who then may develop negative assumptions regarding whether parents are involved in their children's education at all. When school agents hold negative assumptions of their students' families, it is likely that barriers between home and school will form.

## A Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging and acceptance fosters success. Parents' feel a sense of belonging when their needs and concerns are addressed. Sometimes it is necessary to have candid conversations about race or racial issues because parents' specific needs are often related to their cultural and racial identities. López, Scribner, and Mahitivanichcha found that successfully involving migrant parents requires recognizing their cultural and educational strengths, as well as the economic and structural barriers facing their families. Schools that hold themselves accountable for and aim to meet parental needs above all other involvement considerations are successful in engaging migrant families.



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Yvonne DeGaetano's study on parental participation in an English-language learner program documented how a school was able to lower ROC by promoting belonging and acceptance of its students' families. The program emphasized language strategies to increase bilingualism, and it used "culture as a mediator for learning"<sup>23</sup> as parents grew in knowledge as well as in confidence regarding their understanding of U.S. school functioning and expectations.

DeGaetano found that "for Latino parents . . . emphasis on language and culture was a critical factor in their becoming involved in schools and in schooling" and identified the presence of Latinos working on a parental involvement project who could speak Spanish as a factor in the parental involvement program's success.<sup>24</sup> She further noted that the team facilitating the program worked from the premise that parents had much to offer and came with their own sets of knowledge. As they learned more about how they could engage in their children's formal learning, they became "active as allies in their children's schooling."<sup>25</sup>

In studying local household knowledge and its potential applications to children's schooling, Norma González, Luis C. Moll, Martha Floyd-Tenery, Anna Rivera, Patricia Rendón, Raquel Gonzales, and Cathy Amanti found that when parents' "funds of knowledge" and their "lived experiences [were] . . . validated as a source of knowledge,"<sup>26</sup> social networks in the private sphere were transferred to public arenas, including their children's schools. Furthermore, just as "build[ing] on the language and cultural experience of students"<sup>27</sup> opens learning opportunities, building on parental knowledge increases engagement with families through a sense of community and trust. As in the case of the parental English-language learner program, a respect for family members' knowledge from lived experiences reduced ROC and increased a sense of belonging in a community.

Studies on engagement of families of color, then, offer insight into how school agents may help to positively shape the school experiences of students of color and their families, thereby reducing ROC. Researchers preparing a series of college planning workshops for middle school parents found that for Latino immigrant parents, welcoming aspects, including Spanish-language materials, native language workshop delivery, and the presenter's demeanor, created an environment of trust. As parents became exposed to resources about college in these tailored workshops, they shared the information with their children, their extended families, and their community, and they began planning toward their children's postsecondary opportunities. The series of workshops was successful because, aside from

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addressing the general informational needs of parents, workshop organizers also addressed specific concerns expressed by Latino parents.

Muhammad Khalifa, furthermore, states that “for some communities, school leaders must earn credibility, trust, and establish rapport.”<sup>28</sup> This suggests that schools with populations of parents who have been marginalized by traditional school structures of parental involvement need leaders of the schools their children attend to view their roles as transcending the walls of the school. The study found that a principal who was highly visible in the community and took on a role as a community leader fostered trust and increased rapport between the school and community, in turn changing parents’ relationships with the school and improving children’s academic outcomes. Research has shown that when families who have been traditionally marginalized in schools experience interactions that recognize and respect their cultures and languages, parental engagement increases. When students witness improved relationships between home and school, ROC is reduced through a decreased home–school divide.

### Implications

The ROCs that black and brown families regularly weather in order to find “success” are often unexplored because the institutionalized expectations, norms, and practices in educational spaces are based on white, middle-class standards. “At issue is not whether a student is actually smart or academically capable, but rather whether their presentation of ‘smart’ and ‘capable’ is judged to be correct.”<sup>29</sup> The perception of being “smart” can also be linked to the “involved” parent. Cultural experiences, language, and family norms and values shape their involvement with schools.<sup>30</sup>

### Norms and Values: Expectations in Charter Schools

This research illuminates the distinct gap between the norms and values of school and those of the families of color they serve. The level of success that students are able to achieve is directly related to their ability to negotiate the challenging terrain within a white normed society. Black and brown students who are viewed as successful within the charter school settings learn to navigate this system and to conform, albeit not without incurring ROC. Alternatively, students who are unwilling to conform are in jeopardy of being viewed as low-achieving, a disciplinary problem, or in need of special learning accommodations. The consequence of labeling students in this

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way in turn perpetuates structures of stratification that may be the result of a system that does not necessarily reflect academic achievement but rather the lack of conformity to racialized academic standards.

To rectify this situation, schools must be willing to respect and better understand the community in which they serve, and to allow that understanding to shape expectations and norms. Norms and values within a school must be flexible in order to support the norms and values of the home environment and acknowledge the value of parental involvement. When this does not happen, marginalized populations are ostracized, potentially causing them to withdraw from actively participating in their children's education. This a common experience for students of color. Consequently, some parents and students of color decide that the ROCs are too great and opt out of success as defined by the school.

## Parental Involvement

Rather than assuming that there is a lack of parental involvement, we should question whether school expectations align with those of parents of color and whether or not the lines of communication are open. Attention should be given to understanding the cultural needs and expectations of families. In order to understand the needs of the African American and Latino communities, schools must hold themselves accountable for understanding the diverse communities that they serve. This may require establishing coalitions and space for discussions on race and culture. Issues that may be of concern to parents include race, limited English experience, and different understandings of parental responsibilities than traditionally expected within the U.S. context. Addressing such issues and concerns head-on can promote a level of communication that will possibly reconcile some of the ROCs. However, not addressing these matters will result in a continued communication gap between school agents and the community, resulting in negative impacts on student achievement. There should also be specific outreach for communities of color based on their expressed needs in order to foster a sense of belonging.

Schools must be deliberate in how they engage with parents and specifically focus on instituting practices that promote a sense of belonging among parents to the school community. As previously stated, parental involvement plays a key role in the academic experiences of children. In order to promote belonging, neutral opportunities for discussion must be better prioritized in order to understand the needs of parents.

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Schools should also consider ways in which they can support empowering parents as educational allies. This could be in the form of parent organizations, focus groups, staff members who can communicate with parents in their native language, and sessions engaging with parents on the U.S. educational system, all in hopes of supporting parental belonging. Another way is to utilize spaces within the community in order to be visible and to show that the school is interested in the community as a whole.

### Conclusion

We started this chapter with a reminder about the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, legislated to address inherent inequities within the public school system. The Jim Crow legislation imposed on American blacks was deeply felt within public schools and was the catalyst that brought forth the monumental court case. Sixty years after *Brown* the problems affecting black youth are exacerbated as the urban public school system is in a state of crisis. From this crisis emerged discourses around redressing public education with privatization and school choice models as leading alternatives. What is not addressed in these discourses of privatization and choice is the impact of the ROC that black and Latina/Latino families and students must consider. At the same time, parents of color are similarly affected by school environments that may not value their ways of being involved in their children's education. In both of the educational issues discussed here in this chapter, school choice and parental involvement, it is clear that understanding the nuances of the school environment in order to lower the ROC incurred by students and families of color is an important first step.

### Notes

1. Baugh 2011.
2. Ibid.
3. Venzant Chambers et al. 2014.
4. Venzant Chambers and Huggins 2014.
5. Ibid.
6. Hatt 2012.
7. Center for Education Reform 2014.
8. Ibid.
9. National Conference of State Legislatures 2014.
10. Miners 2014.
11. Buras and Apple 2005.

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12. Venzant Chambers and Huggins 2014.
13. DuBois 1994.
14. Ravitch 2014.
15. Ibid.
16. Nolan 2011.
17. Venzant Chambers and Huggins 2014.
18. Crozier 2001.
19. De Gaetano 2007.
20. Venzant Chambers, Locke, and Medina in press.
21. Ibid., p. 10.
22. Ibid.
23. De Gaetano 2007, p. 147.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., p. 160.
26. González, Moll, and Amanti 2005.
27. Ibid.
28. Khalifa 2012.
29. Venzant Chambers and Huggins 2014.
30. Baugh 2011.

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