TACKLING RACIAL INEQUALITY THROUGH SCHOOL CULTURE

As they have throughout their history, schools continue to struggle to achieve equity and excellence for students of color. Qualitative research by Michigan State University Associate Professor Terah Venzant Chambers and Washington State University Assistant Professor Kristin Shawn Huggins examines the social interactions of students of color with their teachers, administrators and classmates at high schools around the United States. The stories students share shed light on how school cultures and practices around addressing issues of race can impact the sense of belonging, inclusion, and identity of these students. Additionally, the findings of this study can help school leaders understand the importance of school culture in supporting academic success for students of color.

RACIAL OPPORTUNITY COST AND SCHOOL CULTURE

Through this research, the authors explore the interplay between school culture and racial opportunity cost (ROC), a concept outlined in some of their previous research. As an economics principle, opportunity cost refers to the options that people must give up when they make choices. ROC adapts this definition to a social and cultural context and refers to the price that students of color must pay in their pursuit of academic success. Schools have a long history of privileging dominant White middle-class norms regarding school success, often devaluing the cultural viewpoints of communities of color. ROC occurs when students of color experience internal and external conflict when their pursuit of academic success means moving further away from the norms and values of their community.

In order to examine how these dynamics play out in the lives of students, researchers interviewed 18 high-achieving students of color at two elite private colleges about their experiences in high school and college. Venzant Chambers and Huggins used ROC as a frame to analyze the data, paying close attention to the ways that school culture either helped or hindered student academic success. They found five interrelated school factors that both help and hurt ROC. These school factors include:

- centrality of norms and values
- the influence of school community and belonging
- the importance of conversations about race and racism
- the role of tracking and within-school segregation
- the influences of teachers and school personnel

Furthermore, the researchers argue that these school factors are mutually reinforcing, meaning that if a school is unable to achieve success with one factor, achieving success with others will be even harder. By identifying these five factors and how they reinforce each other, this research demonstrates the daily trade-offs that many high-achieving students of color must make in order to be academically successful in their schools.

WHAT IT MEANS TO YOU

The findings of this study suggest that leaders in school buildings and districts must work harder to support the identities and social needs of all students, especially students of color. School leaders play a vital role in creating supportive, whole school cultures that foster student engagement and academic achievement. Specifically, the authors recommend that school leaders work to alleviate ROC by directly addressing the five factors mentioned...
above. Leaders should critically evaluate their school’s role in perpetuating ROC and consider how they can create school environments that are open, inclusive, and committed to directly addressing issues of race. This process of reflection should be used to shape school policies and practices that support the social and academic success of students of color.

District leaders also have a valuable role to play by choosing and directing school leaders who can create school cultures that ensure student success. Additionally, they can implement district-wide policies that promote acceptance and inclusion across schools. All students, regardless of background, stand to benefit from open and welcoming school communities.

READ THE ARTICLE


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