

Chapter 13

Do the Math: There's an Opportunity Gap for Black Students

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this chapter is to address the opportunity gap in math education experiences of Black students in the United States. While some Americans may have thought that racism and inequity were issues of the past, a recent racial reckoning throughout the nation has opened many people's eyes to educational deficits in the Black community. By unpacking the definition and concepts surrounding the "opportunity gap," this chapter identifies three main overlapping branches that exemplify Black students' struggles: inadequate educational resources, inequitable economics, and underperforming quality of instruction. The COVID-19 pandemic has made these disparities more publicly clear and has exacerbated the pain these tenets of the opportunity gap cause. Black students' math achievement has lagged due to the opportunity gap, but math can play an important role in helping to end these disparities.

INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this chapter is to make it clear that there continues to be an opportunity gap for Black students in the United States (US) and that the Covid-19 pandemic has made it more transparent to the public. Such an opportunity gap has been especially evident in the field of mathematics. This chapter aims to identify three interrelated branches of the opportunity gap: resources, economics, and quality of education. Each of these areas have historically been a point of contention in the US for Black Americans. And while there may be a misnomer that racial inequity is a concept of the past, a modern-day pandemic and cultural racial reckoning has pulled back the curtain to show how inequity is

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still prevalent in the US today. Insights from the Covid-19 pandemic allow for a more action-oriented approach to addressing the opportunity gap. This chapter leaves the reader with insights about how these three areas of the opportunity gap could be addressed. A major theme threaded throughout the chapter is the role that math, as a discipline, has played in exemplifying the opportunity gap, and the integral role it can play in helping to close the opportunity gap. This chapter identifies understandings from before the pandemic but focuses greatly on the pandemic (2020-2022). Ideas presented in this chapter have the power to have great implications and positive impacts for the future as outlined at the end of the chapter. Teachers, educator-preparation professionals, administrators, and educational researchers will all benefit from the ideas presented in this chapter.

BACKGROUND

From *Brown v. Board of Education* yielding legislative change to deem that racial segregation of school is unconstitutional, to the “Little Rock Nine” and Ruby Bridges facing violence and hatred as they crossed racial lines to attend White schools, it is hard to think of the fight for racial equity without considering education. Throughout history, schools have been a microcosm reflecting the racial inequities that the nation more broadly faces within other domains of life. Educational equity in the US has gained renewed attention in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the most recent period of racial reckoning with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. While these sentiments are palpable today in 2022 US, a history of racial oppression has made the most recent call-to-action inevitable. Even though over time the US has made remarkable gains regarding racial equity, math achievement disparities are still a stark example of how far the nation must go.

This chapter is divided into six main sections with the first being this introduction. This introduction will explore the climate and inequities felt by the US amid the Covid-19 pandemic. The subsequent section defines the opportunity gap and explores the three main components as mentioned earlier. The phrase “opportunity gap” is explained as a more appropriate depiction of the lived experiences of Black students rather than “achievement gap” (Pitre, 2014). The third section delves into how the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the inequities described and the fourth section discusses how these three main areas of the opportunity gap should be urgently addressed and the role math can play in that. This chapter ends with a section that includes a succinct list of recommendations for authentic change to close the math opportunity gap for Black students in the US, another section addressing areas of future research, and a conclusion.

Racial Climate and Current Inequities

In the wake of murders like those of George Floyd and Brionna Taylor in the summer of 2020, the US underwent a racial reckoning that is still being felt today as we near 2022. The Black Lives Matter movement and the widespread call to defund the police overtook news headlines. Racial tensions in the US were high on a day-to-day basis all throughout life. Politics charged arguments from both sides, like the rise of the Blue Lives Matter movement, in support of police officers, from mainly conservative groups and companies, local and national, were releasing formal statements of valuing racial equity and inclusion. Countless books about how to be anti-racist and address biases began flying from bookshelves.

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