University of North Carolina Asheville
Journal of Undergraduate Research
Asheville, North Carolina
December 2020

Interrogating Educational Inequities: An Analysis of White Perceptions of the Opportunity Gap in Asheville, NC

Lauren Simms
Anthropology and Sociology
The University of North Carolina Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, NC 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Megan Underhill

Abstract

An expanding body of literature demonstrates that Asheville suffers from the largest opportunity gap in North Carolina[14]. The opportunity gap acknowledges the inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities resulting in different achievement outcomes[6]. A combination of factors including, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and community wealth contribute to or perpetuates lower educational attainment as a result of the complex systems which operate in society and the classroom[6]. Utilizing the language of "opportunity gap" as opposed to the "achievement gap" works to address the systemic barriers which perpetuate lower educational outcomes rather than the achievement of the individual. The concentration of socially and economically disadvantaged students in segregated neighborhoods results in attending a segregated school system and contributes to the growing opportunity gap in the United States[15]. This research is grounded in theory which discusses white habitus, the socialization process of residential and social segregation of whites from Blacks[2] and opportunity hoarding, an action which asserts that group behaviors result in restricting some individuals' or groups' access to desirable goods, services, or privileges[18]. The purpose of this study is to evaluate white parents' perceptions of the opportunity gap in Asheville and identify the unconscious contributions to educational inequities. This study uses primary data collection and analysis using qualitative interview collection. Prior research shows evidence that white students fare better than their Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) peers in the context of academic attainment both during traditional school enrollment and the shift to online learning as a result of COVID-19. Findings conclude that white parents in Asheville exhibit socially and residentially segregated behavior despite the desire to expose their children to diversity and possess minimal knowledge of the presence of the opportunity gap which disproportionately affects Black students. In addition, this paper makes recommendations that leaders could draw on to address the inequities within the Asheville school system.

1. Introduction

The opportunity gap is defined as the ways in which race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, community wealth and a variety of other factors contributes to or perpetuates lower educational achievement or attainment and refers to the inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities[5]. While the achievement gap is defined as "any significant and persistent disparity in academic performance or educational attainment between different groups of students, such as white students and minorities, for example, or students from higher-income and lower-income households[15]." The presence of the opportunity gap can be linked to affluent communities who hoard resources, and therefore opportunities, as a consequence of the persistence of residential and social segregation. This paper addresses historical practices of inequities which perpetuate disparities in access to wealth and residential segregation. Therefore, the literature seeks to engage with existing sociological literature that identifies a link between white opportunity hoarding and white habitus and their impact on access to resources.

The term "white habitus," presented by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Embrick is defined as the socialization process of residential and social segregation of whites from Blacks. White habitus results in the limited development

of meaningful relationships with Black people and other people of color[2]. Findings display the tendency for whites to report a preference for an interracial lifestyle despite exhibiting segregated behavior by residing in segregated neighborhoods and lacking interracial relationships[2]. The existence of segregated neighborhoods has historically hurt communities of color due to the impact of discriminatory housing policies related to education access[15]. Affluent communities are able to allocate funds toward school systems while neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty do not possess the same ability to monetarily contribute to their children's education. As a result, there is disproportionate access to quality education due to racially and economically segregated neighborhoods.

Asheville suffers from a growing opportunity gap, arguably produced by white habitus and a variety of factors emerging from race and class inequalities. Asheville has the fifth-largest achievement gap in the United States[14] and limited research examines the processes by which white racial socialization contributes to these inequities. This paper illustrates the process by which white parents "choose" a school for their children, ultimately choosing segregated neighborhoods. Furthermore, this research addresses their perception of their contributions to educational inequities and the opportunity gap.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Housing and Wealth Disparities

The discussion surrounding educational inequities cannot occur absent of conversations on segregated schools and neighborhoods. Richard Rothstein argues that education policy is constrained by housing policy[15]. To desegregate schools, both low-income and affluent neighborhoods are required to desegregate[15]. Historically, policies such as the New Deal, the G.I. Bill, and federally funded public housing policies are responsible for the perpetuation of racially segregated housing. Of particular note, while white veterans obtained access to affordable housing in suburban neighborhoods, post World War II, Black veterans and families were pushed to urban areas, suffering from predatory loans and spatial mismatch as a result of jobs following white families to the suburbs. Additionally, redlining policies legally allowed banks to refuse loans to Black families in both white and Black neighborhoods, directly leading to the deterioration of predominantly Black neighborhoods[15]. Moreover, the level of resources available to schools are a direct reflection of neighborhood wealth, meaning "good" neighborhoods with higher property values correlates to well-funded schools and neighborhoods—ie. neighborhoods of color have been depreciated in value by federal policy and thus translates to underfunded school systems. According to Rothstein, state and local governments maintained separate and lower salary schedules for Black public employees through the 1960's, stating that the government played a direct role in depressing the income levels of African Americans below the income levels of comparable whites[15]. As a result, this contributes to the inability of Black Americans to accumulate wealth and move to equity appreciating white suburbs[15]. According to scholars Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, "*wealth* is the total extent, at a given moment, of an individual's accumulated assets and access to resources, and it refers to the net value of assets (e.g., ownership of stocks, money in the bank, real estate, business ownership, etc.) less debt held at one time[12]." White wealth is 13 times that of Black wealth[7].

To illustrate the privileges afforded to white Americans through inequitable housing policy, Levittown, a Long Island suburban development built with federal financing and was restricted to whites, is a prime example of accruing white wealth. The houses in this neighborhood were sold for $7,000 in 1947— about two and a half times the national median family income— and they would now sell for around $400,000, roughly six times the national median family income. The purchase of these homes and the ability to gain generational wealth as equity is passed down and has been a primary reason for parents to afford sending their high school graduates to college[15]. The denial of access to mortgages and the ability to accumulate wealth via home equity has advantaged white Americans in significant ways which the Black community has not had access to. We see this perpetuated today as these urban neighborhoods are geographically isolated from white suburbs which isolates low income families and families of color from attending predominantly middle class schools[15]. Rothstein argues that narrowing the achievement gap will require housing desegregation and policies like voiding exclusionary zoning, introducing scattered low to moderate income housing in affluent suburbs and ending federal subsidies for communities that fail to reverse policies that led to racial exclusion[15]. The integration of neighborhoods will allow for historically disadvantaged communities of color to benefit from the heavily funded school systems afforded to white students. Research supports the idea that integrating disadvantaged Black students into schools predominantly enrolled by privileged students can narrow the Black-white achievement gap[15] and additional arguments suggest hiring teachers who are representative of students of color and engage in culturally responsive teaching can work to close this gap.[6, 17] Furthermore, elementary and secondary school

curricula typically ignores or works to misstate this history described in this section and is recommended that the education curriculum be reformed. Rothstein posits that:

> For the public and policymakers, re-learning our racial history is a necessary step because remembering this history is the foundation for an understanding that aggressive policies to desegregate metropolitan areas are not only desirable, but a constitutional obligation. Without fulfilling this obligation, substantially narrowing the achievement gap, or opening equal educational opportunity to African Americans, will remain a distant and unreachable goal[15].

This miseducation of the historical factors that contribute to lower educational achievement fails to recognize gaps in achievement as a consequence of systemic racism. To discuss the presence of the opportunity gap, it is imperative that we look toward housing and wealth inequalities that have persisted and therefore contribute to the opportunity gap. The next section will illustrate what the opportunity gap looks like in Asheville and will be followed by a variety of factors that perpetuate this inequality.

2.2 The Opportunity Gap

The body of literature discussing the opportunity gap, specifically in Asheville, NC is expanding. Scholar Summer Carrol frames this gap as the *opportunities* students have to learn and the quality of teaching service they receive[3]. As illustrated in the previous section, Gloria Ladson-Billings argues that "the United States has denied Black Americans historical, economic, socio-political, and other opportunities that have resulted in a persistent achievement gap[3]." The opportunity gap acknowledges that disparities in educational opportunities are a result of systemic barriers which lead to differential achievement outcomes[6]. Tiece Ruffin discusses the implications of the opportunity gap in Asheville on the Black community and other marginalized groups. Ruffin points to the 1887 school referendum where Black Asheville provided the necessary vote to sustain tax-supported public schools for both Black and white students which persists as segregated and unequal[17]. Asheville houses deeply ingrained inequities that contribute to lower educational achievement and attainment particularly for Black children[17]. According to the 2018-2019 data revealed in the Racial Equity Report Card by the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, Asheville City Schools indicated 78% of Black students are not proficient and are below grade level, in comparison to 17% of white children who are not proficient in English Language Arts/Reading Performance[17]. Ruffin acknowledges that while standardized testing is not a reliable measure for the true ability of all students, these test scores are foundational for determining course placement, grade promotion, and identification as academically or intellectually gifted. As a result, low test scores can negatively impact a students' overall academic opportunities[17]. To reiterate, Asheville has been exposed as having the fifth largest achievement gap nationwide and the largest racial achievement gap between Black and white students statewide in North Carolina's 115 school districts[17]. With the knowledge of the effects of opportunity deficits, scholars outline a variety of contributing factors which present themselves in the Asheville school system including funding inequity, the myth of meritocracy, and deficit perspectives.

Gloria Ladson-Billings defines the achievement gap as the reference to disparities in standardized test scores between Black and white, Latinx and white, and recent immigrant status and white students[8]. Ladson-Billings posits that we look at the "education debt" that has resulted from foregoing school resources that should have been invested primarily in low income students' education. Although the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) reversed the legal segregation of public schools, African Americans still feel the effects of the long period of legal apartheid where they received "cast-off textbooks and materials from white schools[8]." Framing academic attainment as an achievement gap implies that education outcomes are a result of individual work ethic rather than "inequitable, racist and sexist structures" that lead to perceived achievement gaps[11]. Milner argues that achievement gap explanations can frame white students as the norm and constructed as intellectually and academically superior to others, resulting in conceptualizing students of color from a deficit perspective[11]. Deficit mindsets breed low expectations and consequently may avoid facilitating rigorous learning opportunities for students of color. In regards to the wealth disparities addressed in the previous section, unearned opportunities passed from one generation to the next are often interpreted by educators as merit-based success and neglect to observe the class and socioeconomic privilege that has historically benefited white Americans. Educators can fail to recognize the institutional structures that prevent opportunity and success, perpetuating the myth of meritocracy[11]. If the argument of meritocracy were accurate, positions would be awarded on the basis of merit. However, research indicates that the greater a family's income, the more likely their children are to attend college. Thus, Milner posits that meritocracy is a myth because it

maintains if an individual works hard they will be able to achieve the "American dream" or definitions of success while rejecting institutionalized and systemic barriers[11].

Additionally, there is a prominent funding equity problem which research demonstrates. For example, Chicago public schools spend about $8,482 annually per student, while nearby Highland Park spends around $17,291 per student. The Chicago public schools have an 87% Black and Latinx population while Highland Park has a 90% white population[8]. This trend extends across cities like Philadelphia and New York City. Although correlation does not prove causation, and cannot conclude that schools are poorly funded because Black and Latinx students are enrolled, research proves that funding rises with the rise in white students[8]. As exemplified by the factors above, the deficits in opportunities are impacted by lack of resources, teaching which lacks cultural responsiveness and is perpetuated by stereotypes which lead to lower academic achievement. The presence of a racial achievement gap is not a product of individual intellectual capabilities but the presence of institutionalized barriers experienced by students of color.

2.3 Residential Segregation in Practice

The detrimental consequences of America's residential apartheid for marginalized groups has been well documented in literature that refers to the significance of whites' social and residential segregation. The social and political implications of the white habitus are significant and successful in fostering homogeneity in white interactions who lead fundamentally segregated lives[2]. The practice of residential segregation is followed by segregated schools which empirical data defines as being damaging to the educational outcomes specifically for Black students. Racial residential segregation remains a significant stratifying force which creates vastly unequal neighborhoods where white residents enjoy neighborhoods with more socioeconomic resources than marginalized groups, particularly African American and Hispanic residents[13]. According to Owens, research on neighborhood effects reveals "growing up in an impoverished neighborhood reduces educational performance and attainment[13]." However, despite the prominence of leading socially and residentially segregated lives, research suggests that parents desire to expose their children to diversity and seek to enroll their children in schools which foster a "diverse" environment. Megan Underhill defines "exposure to diversity" as an implicit racial socialization practice where white parents actively seek to expose their children to diversity[19]. Underhill found that parents' efforts presented themselves in the form of trips to multiracial parks, enrollment in multiracial schools, or residence in multiracial neighborhoods[19]. Underhill argues that white parents' efforts to expose their children to diversity is informed by a "diversity ideology" wherein racial diversity is frequently, but not always framed as a positive social dynamic that enriches their family's white life, and a middle-class desire to craft a high-status white child via distinction oriented parenting practices[19]. Like Underhill's study, this research also found respondents to value diversity and make active efforts to expose their children to diverse spaces, particularly through school. Additionally, parents' decisions about the neighborhoods in which they will reside and raise a family or enroll their children in school, fundamentally shapes the social context in which children develop an understanding of race[19]. What complicates this literature is despite the desire of white parents to expose their children to diversity, they still live in segregated neighborhoods and attend segregated schools which are ultimately contributing to the opportunity gap in Asheville. The ability to "choose" a neighborhood is largely dictated by financial resources wherein parents possess the ability to choose a school based on the neighborhood they live in. The more affluent the neighborhood, the greater the allocation of resources toward schools, offering financially advantaged children—who are predominantly white—access to better funded and resourced schools, leading to greater opportunity. Although whites who possess the desire to expose their children to diversity may reside in multiracial neighborhoods, research shows that middle-class whites tend to leave diverse neighborhoods when children become elementary school aged and move to whiter, more affluent communities, presumably for better schools.[4, 13, 19]

A research study conducted by Kristie J. Rowley and Shelby M. McNeill tested whether early exposure to racial/ethnic diversity in neighborhoods and schools is associated with living in more racially diverse neighborhoods later in life. Perpetuation theory posits that early exposure to diversity would increase the likelihood of participating in diverse settings later in life due to decreasing fear and anxiety that might otherwise be associated with interracial interactions[16]. Their findings concluded that white graduates attending racially and ethnically diverse schools reported positive changes in interracial perceptions. Furthermore, literature demonstrates that "exposure to and perpetuation of interracial contact is associated with important attitudinal, social, educational and economic outcomes. These outcomes include reduced fear, prejudice, and distrust of people who are a different race or ethnicity, avoiding the juvenile and criminal justice systems and greater educational and occupational attainment[16]." Authors conclude, "diversity efforts would be best accomplished through coordinated efforts that include fair housing policies, metropolitan or country-wide school desegregation plans, broader transportation options, and improved social safety nets[16]." This study lends itself to literature that describes the benefits of exposing children to diversity which will lead to generational desegregation and ultimately contribute to positive educational outcomes for both white and BIPOC

students. However, residential segregation persists and is only one of the institutions that seeks reform to create equitable access to education.

2. Methodology

This study uses primary data collection and analysis using qualitative interview collection. Interviews for this research were conducted in Asheville (pop. 92,000), a liberal leaning city located in Western North Carolina. The racial composition of Asheville is represented as 83.01% white and 11.69% Black[1]. This drastic disproportion of racial groups makes Asheville a notable location to study race-related topics. In-depth interviewing was conducted with seven white parents, predominantly identifying as middle to middle-upper class with one participant outlying as a working class single mother. Interviews were administered face-to-face or via Zoom video call using a semi-structured interview approach. Additional data was collected and analyzed from independent research with Megan R. Underhill through qualitative interviews with white Asheville parents. Some of this data was applicable to this project and draws on five particular participants who discuss topics of interest in this paper.

The sampling strategy utilized was snowball sampling where three potential participants were contacted who are white parents in Asheville and were asked to extend the details of this project to their social networks who also meet the requirements for inclusion. The required attributes for interviewees were to be white and have school aged children. Informants then inquired via email or phone to gain further information on the study and to arrange interviews. Data collection seeks to reach saturation although for the purpose of this research and the minimal number of participants, saturation may only occur as a continuance of this project.

After obtaining IRB approval, participants were informed of their freedom to agree or decline to participate in this research project and all the possible benefits and risks of participation were explained to them before providing their informed consent to participate. Parents who agreed to participate in this study were interviewed at a location of their choice. Interviews typically occurred on Zoom with several participants opting to be interviewed outside or in their home. Interviews lasted on average forty-five to sixty minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Interview questions focused on child's school enrollment, socialization networks, pandemic impact on education and school and educational inequalities specifically related to the opportunity gap. To establish rapport with participants, the opening questions focused on low impact questions such as where their child attends school and how they came to be enrolled at this particular institution. Questions also addressed topics that might be considered uncomfortable for the demographic being interviewed including topics of race and inequality. The researcher's positionality as an interviewer was likely to be read as similar to the participants because the race of respondents reflects the researcher and the high concentration of female participants reflects the author's gender as well. These perceived similarities likely guided participants to comfortability especially when addressing difficult or uncomfortable questions.

Interviews were analyzed using grounded theory approach, a systematic, inductive approach to qualitative research that suggests researchers extrapolate conceptual relationships from the data rather than formulate testable hypotheses from existing theory. To carefully handle the data, interviews were uploaded, transcribed and coded shortly after the interviews were conducted.

3. Findings

The findings of this study suggest that although parents desire to expose children to diversity, their families live segregated lives via the neighborhoods they have chosen to reside in and social networks they participate in, demonstrating white habitus, the cultural milieu which whites inhabit. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu who defines habitus as, "not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principles of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes," Bonilla-Silva and Embrick utilize this concept to explain how it shapes actors' perceptions through routinization without distinct calculation[2]. Further, Bonilla-Silva and Embrick extend Bourdieu's class inspired notion of habitus to race. They describe the social and political implications of the white habitus to be as significant as the racial universe in which whites navigate daily, which fosters a high degree of homogeneity of racial views[2]. Although parents in this study position themselves as well intentioned, they make unconscious decisions which ultimately hurt groups of color. The contributions of white habitus, opportunity hoarding and concerted cultivation on educational inequities maintain the current structures which oppress and disadvantage marginalized groups but are not the sole actors in perpetuating deficits in opportunities.

Instead, as a result of leading socially segregated lives, parents contribute to the opportunity gap through neighborhood and school choice and through their expenditure of surplus financial resources, time and social capital toward offering their children opportunities that socioeconomically disadvantaged families do not have access to. In addition, alongside the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, parents have reported the ability to work from home, afford nannies, take their children out of public school to homeschool, and supplement their children's education with their time and academic resources. These financial privileges place affluent students at an advantage for succeeding in their academic career and as a result, some scholars anticipate that the opportunity gap will widen with the shift to online learning[10]. Overall, the participants of this study were either vaguely aware of, or were not knowledgeable of the impact of the opportunity gap on students of color nor of the ways their own choices contribute to it.

3.1 Exposure to Diversity via School "Choice"

All seven participants in this study reported that they value diversity, and that to facilitate access to experiences of diversity for their children, parents explicitly sought to enroll their children in the public school system. The most frequently reported reason for the desire for children to attend public schools was grounded in seeking to expose children to economic, social, and [racial] diversity. For these Asheville parents, public school offered a component outside of academics: "when you're sending your kid to school, you're thinking about all the academic stuff, but that's not all life. How our public schools are a reflection of our society, and that's super important for your kid to learn and to be a part of and not just looking from the outside." This section addresses the narratives of white parents who exhibited a similar pattern in how they navigated choosing a school for their children and the motivations behind this choice. Parents either researched the ratings of Asheville City Schools or asked their social networks to communicate their experience in schools before choosing a neighborhood to purchase a home in or school to enroll their kids in. As illustrated by prior research, white Americans have disproportionate access to wealth and thus contribute to the financial resources that afford whites the privilege of "choosing" a neighborhood. Participants acknowledged proximity to schools and access to busing to be defining factors in choice. However, these affluent families possessed the financial resources to situate themselves in close proximity to the schools labeled as "good." Lastly, participants looked to public schools to facilitate diversity for their children, despite the majority of respondents' kids attending predominantly white schools and explained, "there was an interesting phenomenon of the schools, there were two schools in our general neighborhood that were considered more desirable and they were both more white."

Brooke, a mom of two whose daughter attends kindergarten described school as the main place to facilitate exposure to diversity because "being in this area is definitely not, we're not getting that." Like other parents, Brooke chose this neighborhood after checking the ratings of local schools and learning her kids would be in the district of a "decent" school. The notions of Asheville lacking a diverse experience and explicitly choosing residential locations for access to "good" schools presented themselves to be themes among this group of white parents who have all identified their neighborhoods as being predominantly white, with an exception to one single mother who lives in a rural area with no neighbors. A self identified, upper-middle class white couple revealed that they really want their daughter to experience public schools. For this upper-middle class dad Steven, exposing his children to diversity is important to him because he too attended public schools and had friends who weren't the same as him. Steven described his school to be socially and economically diverse and he wants his kids to experience kids who are "different from them." For his wife Rebecca, she feels fortunate to have grown up with diversity for portions of her life where she attended schools where she was "definitely the minority" in those settings. She expressed wanting her daughter to have that experience too. Rebecca explained, "I think public schools are where you're probably gonna get the most diversity here." Her husband agreed, "especially in Asheville." Steven and Rebecca chose their neighborhood for the location in North Asheville "and for the schools" they would have access to. Their daughter attends Isaac Dickson Elementary, the school ranked first out of the seven Asheville City Schools (ACS) magnet system and has a higher percentage of white students. Parents concerningly noted that "Asheville has very separated groups" and find it difficult for their kids to actually have relationships with "people who are different from them." Although some parents expressed that they did not want to force interracial relationships for their children, several parents explicitly pointed to the value of having playdates or going to classmate's houses whose family dynamics and identities differ from their own. For example, one mom revealed, "I have a [white] friend who just adopted two Black boys, so trying to do playdates with them. I hate to say that, like we try to do playdates with them just because they're Black but I'm grateful that we can show her kids that look different." This comment exemplifies the deep desire of white parents for their children to experience multiracial relationships yet participants rarely expanded on why this was valuable.

These affluent white parents verbally expressed the misfortune of the reality that their children may not have the opportunity to engage with people of different socioeconomic backgrounds and races aside from what they hope to benefit from in public schools. This is exemplified by Noah, an upper class dad who enrolled his children in Claxton

Elementary which he described as having more students from public housing, title one students and students on the lunch program. This elementary school is located in a historically Black neighborhood but Noah defines this North Asheville neighborhood—which his family lives in—as not being "totally gentrified yet" and "predominantly white, and affluent." As an outcome of the decision to move to a segregated neighborhood, his children are mainly exposed to diversity through school but recently pulled them out to homeschool as a response to the online education that he did not perceive to be comparable to the combination of homeschooling as well as the extra expense of online classes his children are now engaging with. Sending his children to public school was important, he explained.

> Elementary school being the last time your kids might be in such intimate contact with groups that they may not see again, for the rest of their life, you know, they get tracked into gifted [programs] and go to college and go somewhere else. And they may never, they may never have a beer with these people, they may never share a meal with a different socio economic strata in their life. And that's pitiful, and how do you care about other people if you've never made a connection, and it's just a tough thing about this country, it's so easy to be in your own bubble and really not feel other people.

As evidenced by the comment above, it was common for parents to describe this eagerness for their affluent children to associate with people situated outside of their social networks that persisted as "lily-white" and "affluent" due to their residential and social segregation.

Notably, one upper-class parent in particular "definitely" values diversity. Her children are exposed to diversity in their "predominantly white, upper-middle or upper" class private school, yet have a homogenous friend group that reflects their racial identity. When asked how she facilitates this value of diversity she explained, "we do a lot of volunteering, do volunteer work with diverse organizations, we have a lot of conversations. We travel a lot, um, outside of our comfort zone." This perspective intrinsically communicates that in order to come into contact with diverse groups of people, they must volunteer their time and financial resources. This family additionally financially contributes to a local organization that supports children of color to specifically close the opportunity gap. However, unlike the other parents in this study, Nicole reveals a colorblind racial socialization perspective. As she explained, "we talk a lot about how people are all the same inside, and however on the outside, and perhaps in the ways that they live are very different and diverse." Despite recognizing that there are racial inequalities in education as evidenced by this parent's financial contribution to supporting students of color, inequitable access to education is not perceived as a race issue. The parents of this study rarely acknowledge the systemic barriers to educational attainment.

This research frames the desire to experience groups who do not reflect their identity as white consumption of diversity, which as Underhill posits, "exposure to diversity consists of parents' active effort to broker racial contact for their children, either through direct interpersonal contact, including travel to diverse locales or enrollment in a multiracial school[19]." Further, Underhill describes white consumption of diversity as serving an instrumental purpose to cultivate white individuals as distinctive[19]. According to Bonilla-Silva and Embrick, whites do not interpret their isolation from Black people as a problem because they do not interpret this as a racial phenomenon[2]. Thus, "whites' extreme racial isolation from Blacks does not provide a fertile soil upon which primary interracial associations can flourish regardless of Blacks' level of assimilation. Therefore, whites' abstract support for interracial associations with Blacks is not likely to lead to significant increases in their personal associations with Blacks[2]." The strategy white parents employ to expose their children to diversity via public schools during their formative years will reproduce white habitus despite their efforts because as demonstrated by the respondents of this study, they continue to inhabit a segregated social milieu.

The next section examines the outcomes of parents' tactics to expose their children to diversity which they describe to be the observations their kids make in these multiracial spaces.

3.2 "There are no Black kids in the Academically and Intellectually Gifted Program"

As a result of exposing children to diversity via schools, several parents voiced the concern or experience of their children bringing home assumptions of Black students specifically. When responding to these comments, parents worried that engaging in these discussions might communicate preset notions or misconceptions that may negatively depict Black students. Emily's six year old daughter observed that she always worked with Black students when she volunteered in the classroom. Although her daughter did not address this in racialized terms, she asked why she was always working with these particular students. Emily believes that as a result of these observations, she may start making connections, especially if she sees a pattern in her school experience of particular [Black] students being

pulled out to do extra work. Similar experiences were depicted by children's observations such as noticing Black kids "have to get breakfast at school" or that "Black kids get screamed at in school all the time." Moreover, their children will point out that there are no Black kids in the Academically and Intellectually Gifted (AIG) program. In response to these observations, parents will urge their kids to ask questions like, "are there smart Black kids in your school?" or "why do you think they're in detention" in hopes of not leading them to make negative conclusions about this specific demographic.

Furthermore, parents grapple with the interest in exposing their children to diversity but feel that a consequence of these interactions is that they may confirm stereotypes about Black students. To exemplify this experience, a mom explained, "when you go to a school and most of the Black children are not achieving, then you decide Black people aren't smart. Or, that most of them are in poverty, you decide Black people are poor. While that is true in her experience, that is not the truth." A component of white parents' interactions with the public school system in Asheville is a negative perception of stereotypes as a result of the lack of access to opportunities experienced by marginalized students.

3.3 Perceptions of the Opportunity Gap

Despite the inconsistencies in parents' value of diversity but demonstration of residentially and socially segregated behavior, all respondents deemed the United States to be characterized by educational inequality with an outlier of one participant who opted to omit an answer. Overall, parents identified this inequality to be present as a result of the lack of resources and opportunities—specifically for marginalized groups—and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities who respondents identified as being people of color. Although parents could point out that students of color disproportionately experience educational inequities, all but two parents in this study reported that they were unfamiliar with the opportunity gap and could not provide a definition. This majority response is modeled by a mom who answered, "no. [uncomfortable laugh] I'm ashamed to say." Contrastingly, Noah explained, "I know that um, minority students' test scores are lower. I know there's lower attendance in the minority population. And lower graduation rates and things like that." In addition to this comment, another parent defined the opportunity gap as,

> Well, definitely that there is a correlation with race, and income level, and opportunity, which then impacts educational outcome. If you are living in an impoverished environment, your opportunities to access things that might give you background knowledge [are sparse]. Opportunities that kids have when there's access to money can create an achievement gap, and then unfortunately, there seems to be a high correlation between poverty and the Black race in our country, and therefore that impoverished environment can affect educational opportunities and achievement. However, in Asheville City, they have teased out children in poverty and race, and found out there is even a gap even between white children in poverty and black children in poverty.

There is an overwhelming perception that financial resources and familial support are the main barriers for students' achievement in school. Rarely, do these parents point to systemic barriers and racial inequalities to explain the opportunity gap. Parents will explain that if you have a stressful home life then you neglect to do the work you need to be doing and maybe if you live with a relative some days and mom on the other days so you have limited access to school or "then, it may be if you're trying to figure out where your food is coming from, maybe doing your homework, getting to school isn't a huge priority." For other parents, lack of access to opportunities is a product of whether or not parents are able to afford their children with resources for additional support. Most parents communicate being able to do this through financial resources and the privilege of staying home full time. They explain, "where [low income parents'] time and effort is spent supporting their family financially, they can't contribute additional time in catching their kids up or even just reading to them. As a whole, home life makes a difference in children's success at school." The emphasis placed on familial contributions to lower academic achievement neglects to hold institutions accountable for their role in disadvantaging communities of color. Brooke, similarly to a small proportion of participants, believes that maybe her family does contribute to the opportunity gap just by nature of being able to purchase a home and essentially choose the neighborhood based on what school they want their children to attend.

Asheville is a notable location to research the opportunity gap because of the magnet system set up for Asheville City Schools. Parents located within the city limits can "choose" which school their children attends through a lottery system, presumably removing unequal access to opportunities. Emily values that kids who are considered to be low income can attend the same school as her affluent daughter and can receive the same resources. What the findings of this research concludes is that students in low income neighborhoods don't have access to the "better" rated schools. The schools with the highest ratings like Isaac Dickson are situated in proximity to white and affluent neighborhoods

while schools with lower overall scores such as Hall Fletcher are closer to socioeconomically disadvantaged and Black neighborhoods in Asheville. Although Asheville has a "choice," parents identify transportation as one of the greatest inhibitors to attending these well resourced schools. Respondents exemplify a scenario in which a single working mother who has three kids lives in low income housing and doesn't possess the time or resources to drive her children across town to Isaac Dickson because there is no busing provided for neighborhoods that are situated outside of the surrounding neighborhoods. Therefore, you are confined to going to the school that is in proximity to your home. Consequently, the allocation of funds for Asheville schools that supplies opportunities and resources is not equally distributed across the magnet schools.

In general, parents feel a responsibility to close the opportunity gap after discussing the definition and identify volunteering, financial contributions and parental reciprocity to students who need additional support as efforts that can be made on the micro level. White parents think of racial socialization in terms of the ways in which this process will benefit the cultivation of their children and are less likely to address the inequities faced by their children's peers.

4. Discussion

4.1 Concerted Cultivation and Opportunity Hoarding

Annette Lareau argues that parents' child-rearing practices have a profound effect on academic and occupational success for children[9]. Lareau posits that middle-class families utilize a specific strategy called "concerted cultivation" where parents adopt time and money intensive practices to teach them how to interact with the institutions around them. Lareau marks concerted cultivation as, "[the] economic and social resources that are key in shaping child-rearing practices[9]" and "entails an emphasis on children's structured activities, language development and reasoning in the home, and active intervention in schooling[9]." This research project sees this evidenced in middle-upper class participants where parents communicate, enrolling their children in specific activities like Spanish and music class which ultimately works to cultivate a well-rounded, worldly citizen. Lareau argues that parenting strategies are products of class and evidences that low socioeconomic families do not engage with this strategy but conversely desire for their children to survive through the "accomplishment of natural growth." Families of low socioeconomic status do not possess the resources to support their children in extracurricular activities that may enhance children's opportunities, specifically as it relates to building a college-ready resume. Thus, we see how the possession of wealth or financial resources contributes to both enrollment in "good" schools and supplemental extracurriculars that equips children with opportunity and knowledge to navigate institutional structures such as school and occupational arenas.

School choice policies have been identified as a tool that higher income, white parents in both urban and suburban districts use to gain entry into the most desirable schools[18]. Opportunity hoarding, an action which proposes that group behaviors result in restricting some individuals' or groups' access to desirable goods, services, or privileges, is evidenced by the white parents in this study as they identify the expenditure of financial resources, time and social capital to cultivate their children as well as positioned members of society[18]. Consequently, these parents acknowledge that not all parents have access to these resources who they identify as being people of color and people of lower socioeconomic status. What Sattin-Bajaj and Roda found is that parents' anxiety about scarcity of high quality educational options combined with the design of school choice policies facilitated pervasive opportunity hoarding that functions as a collective strategy of class preservation[18]. Scholars have used opportunity hoarding as a framework to explain racial opportunity gaps in school systems and this research points toward the combination of concerted cultivation, opportunity hoarding and white habitus to describe whites' contributions to deficits in educational opportunities.

4.2 Transformative Practice Recommendations

Scholars have identified Black children specifically as being disproportionately impacted by the opportunity gap, resulting in lower educational attainment. These factors listed in the literature also impact other students of color at disproportionate rates compared to white peers. This study contributes to literature that offers recommendations to implement into the classroom and reform systemic barriers to close the opportunity gap. According to Ruffin, a good teacher for Black children understands and implements culturally relevant, culturally responsive, and culturally sustaining teaching practices[17]. Ruffin also posits:

> Critical race theorists in education have called for cultural responsiveness in which culturally responsive pedagogy is "an approach to teaching and learning that addresses the sociopolitical context of white supremacy within education and society over time while simultaneously fostering students' abilities to achieve high levels of academic success and cultural competence." Critical race theorists view cultural responsiveness as the best practice against white racial domination and white supremacy and necessary in teacher preparation programs for teachers to be effective with all children, especially Black, indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC)[17].

Drawing on both Carrol and Ladson-Billings, providing opportunities for progress is one of the strategies for closing the opportunity deficit experienced by Black students[3,8].

In addition, Hinnant-Crawford recommends that school leaders, including principals and other administrators, should become experts in the community wherein they educate themselves of the trauma the community has endured and acknowledge that some of this trauma may have been inflicted by the schools. These leaders are responsible for prioritizing attendance at community events where they sit and listen. They can then facilitate other teachers' learning about the community and students'[6]. Last, *revolutionary love* should be implemented in the classroom to support Black students thriving in school. Carrol describes revolutionary love as "endless dedication, an unyielding belief in the brilliance and potential of every student, and the commitment to stop at nothing to get kids to learn. Applying this whatever-it-takes, revolutionary type of love to close opportunity gaps requires first recognizing the reasons for the persistent achievement gap and then understanding the difference between the achievement gap and the opportunity-to-learn gap[3]." The implementation of these practices works to narrow the opportunity gap and serve as a recommendation for leaders to draw on to address inequities in the Asheville school system.

5. Conclusion

This research study is socially important for the Asheville population to address systemic issues affecting the community. The demographic of this city is predominantly white, while Black school-aged youth suffer from the fifth largest opportunity gap in the United States. The addition of this study to the growing body of literature that addresses the opportunity gap is imperative for white Asheville parents alongside Asheville City Schools and other figures in positions of power to address the inequities faced by their children's peers. Asheville City has expressed a commitment to equity in their mission statement for the district to "create learning environments that ensure excellence with equity for all students[6]." Evidence demonstrates that these learning environments are not equitable for students of color. To address these barriers, Ashevillians are required to engage in discussion of the white liberalism that can be detrimental to alleviating the oppressions of people of color[6]. Asheville is constructed as a liberal city where it is critical to understand the intersection of liberalism and white supremacy which harms people of color and more specifically Black people. Neglecting to acknowledge whiteness and its benefits—even if unintentional—is a refusal to understand the plight of Asheville's Black community and communities of color[6]. Further research should interrogate whether a larger sample of Asheville participants reflects the perceptions concluded in the findings of this paper. It would be valuable to learn if white parents in Asheville are overall aware of the opportunity gap disproportionately affecting their children's Black counterparts and if this awareness would lead to systemic changes in the Asheville school system. Although this data is not generalizable, this project illuminates the perspectives of middle to upper class white parents and seeks to provide an educational foundation for addressing educational inequities.

6. Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express their appreciation to Dr. Megan Underhill for her continued encouragement and passion. This paper and research would not have been possible without the contribution of her knowledge and support. Many thanks to Dr. Karin Peterson for her constructive feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

7. References

1. Asheville, North Carolina Population 2020. 2020. World Population Review. Retrieved October 2, 2020, from https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/asheville-nc-population.

2. Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo and David G. Embrick. 2007. “Every Place Has a Ghetto...”: The Significance of Whites’ Social and Residential Segregation.” *Symbolic Interaction* 30, 7:323-345.

3. Carrol, Summer. 2020. Closing Opportunity Gaps through Love: Challenges & Opportunities. *Moja, 1*(1), 4 -15.

4. Goyette, Kimberly, John Iceland, and Elliot Weininger. 2014. "Moving for the Kids: Examining the Influence of Children on White Residential Segregation." *City and Community 13*(2): 158-78.

5. Hidden curriculum. 2014. In S. Abbott (Ed.), The glossary of education reform. Retrieved from http://edglossary.org/hidden-curriculum.

6. Hinnant-Crawford, Brandi. N. 2020. Addressing Opportunity Gaps in Asheville City Schools: The Role of Educational Leaders. *Moja, 1*(1), 30-40.

7. Kochhar, Rakesh and Richard Fry. 2014. “Wealth inequality has widened along racial, ethnic lines since end of Great Recession” Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/12/racial-wealth-gaps-great-recession/

8. Ladson-Billings, Gloria. 2006.” From the achievement gap to the education debt: understanding achievement in U.S. Schools.” *Educational Researcher, 35*(7), 3-12. doi: 10.3102/0013189X035007003

9. Lareau, Anette. 2011. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

10. Laster Pirtle, Whitney. N. 2020. “Racial Capitalism: A Fundamental Cause of Novel Coronavirus(COVID-19) Pandemic Inequities in the United States.” *Health, Education and Behavior, 47*(4): 504-508. DOI: 10.1177/1090198120922942

11. Milner IV, H. Richard. 2012. “Beyond a test score: Explaining opportunity gaps in educational practice.” *Journal of Black Studies*, *43*(6), 693-718.

12. Oliver, Melvin L. and Thomas M. Shapiro. 2006. *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality.* New York: Routledge, 2nd Edition.

13. Owens, Ann. 2017. “Racial Residential Segregation of School-Age Children and Adults: The Role of Schooling as a Segregating Force.” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences 3*(2): 63-80.

14. Reardon, Sean.F., Demetra Kalogrides, and Kenneth Shores. 2017. The Geography of Racial/Ethnic Test Score Gaps (CEPA Working Paper No.16-10). Retrieved from Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis: http://cepa.stanford.edu/wp16-10

15. Rothstein, Richard. 2015. “The Racial Achievement Gap, Segregated Schools and Segregated Neighborhoods: A Constitutional Insult.” *Race and Social Problems* 7 :21-30.

16. Rowley, Kristie J. and Shelby M. McNeil. 2017. “Exposure to Schools and Residential Diversity: A New Test of Perpetuation Theory.” *Race and Social Problems* 9 :234-253.

17. Ruffin, Tiece. 2020. “Remove systemic barriers, engage in dynamic reform, and implement systemic solutions: Transformative justice, good teachers, and identity safe classrooms.” *Moja, 1*(1), 16 - 29.

18. Sattin-Bajaj, Carolyn., and Allison Roda. 2020. Opportunity Hoarding in School Choice Contexts: The Role of Policy Design in Promoting Middle-Class Parents’ Exclusionary Behaviors. *Educational Policy, 34*(7), 992–1035. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904818802106

19. Underhill, Megan R. 2018. “Diversity is Important to Me”: White Parents and Exposure-to-diversity Parenting Practices.” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity, 5*(4): 1-14. doi: 10.1177/2332649218790992