University of North Carolina Asheville
Journal of Undergraduate Research
Asheville, North Carolina
May 2022

Six Ways for Students to Enact Community Change Through a Racial Equity Ambassador Program

[1]Braden Ball, [2]Michael Fortini, [2]Caroline Roberts, and [2]Kat Stulpin
[1]Political Science and [2]Psychology
University of North Carolina Asheville
Asheville, North Carolina

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Carla Hung

Abstract

It is well documented that students' race is a significant predictor of educational outcomes. As a result of this disproportionality, some school districts have opted to create racial equity programs designed to address this issue. In doing so, racial equity programs seek to educate, support, and prepare students to address racial disproportionality within their communities. The researchers collaborated with Asheville High School's Racial Equity Ambassador (REAP) program to analyze the program's ability to impact its participating students. Specifically, investigating this program's capacity to change participating students' perception of their ability to address racial inequity within their environment. The purpose of this research, using a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) framework, was to actively collaborate with Asheville City Schools Foundation's (ACSF) REAP program to construct research methods that reflect the needs of the school community. Utilizing previous scholarly literature on racial equity and the knowledge and first-hand experiences of racial inequities from ACSF leaders, the overarching research goals, as well as philosophies and preferred methods, took shape. The researchers implemented surveys and interviews that gauged the Racial Equity Ambassadors' attitudes towards various school-level issues at both the beginning and end of the academic year. The literature review shows that the culture of school communities can affect academic outcomes[11]. With this in mind, the researchers wanted to see how the REAP students' mission to positively change the community culture might relate back to their connectedness to their school community. This change was captured by specifically measuring the student's perception through different mediums. The researchers argue that student participation in racial equity programs increases the student's perception of their capacity to enact social change within their environment.

1. Introduction

There has been a lack of appropriate responses to racial inequalities and achievement gaps in the public school system from federal and state legislators, especially within the last decade. In the 2018-2019 school year, Asheville, North Carolina had the largest opportunity gap (where social factors contributed to lower success rates among minorities in areas like education, career attainment, etc.) between black and white students in the entire state, with "white ACS (Asheville City Schools) elementary and middle school students scoring around 60 points higher than their black classmates on reading and math state assessments[13]." On top of that, according to "The Geography of Racial/Ethnic Test Score Gap," Asheville City Schools has the fifth-largest achievement gap in the nation[15]. In the 2020-2021 school year, the gap between scores decreased by 7%. However, both black and white students' overall scores dropped. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a decrease in scores is not entirely surprising, though this small decrease in the achievement gap goes to show how important community support is to a student's learning and overall educational experience. Student perception is a similar concern in tandem; as feeling supported and bonded to one's school is shown to be an important factor to one's academic success[11]

Whether or not the decrease in the opportunity gap reflects the attempts to address the issue, there is a constant and prolonged need for racial equity within public schools. The self-evident benefits of education are lost on those lacking

passable understanding of the curricula. This is reflected by black students in Asheville who have disproportionately lower test scores[13]. It's in the community's own interest to collectively work towards racial equity progress within public schools and empower its constituent citizens. Asheville City Schools Foundation developed REAP amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in the fall of 2020. This program seeks to have student participants engage with Asheville City School teachers using methods and philosophies of their own design[2], providing students an outlet to advocate for and represent both themselves and their peers. The skills and key concepts of the program act to develop self-advocacy through the dissemination of the self-created objectives from the students, furthering the teacher's understanding of equity as to create an even more inclusive and understanding environment. Students themselves created the base "Asheville Six" philosophies that guide the program's initiatives, and also make up a constituent group within the program that tackles different aspects of the teacher education process. One might then inquire, what substantive impact do high school level racial equity initiatives have on their participants, teachers, and wider educational community? As stated before, our intention as researchers lies in using perception as a metric to understand this question further, based on the assumption that understanding this will be of relevance to our community partners who have a greater capacity to enact ways of creating positive change for their community. For example, by altering the REAP program's day-to-day operation, or by recommending changes in the activities of the REAP administrators.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Disproportionate Treatment of Youth

Achievement gaps have been the focus of many research studies over the past few decades[11,15,19]. Gregory et. al starts their examination of the achievement gap by analyzing how punishment is implemented within the school system. Researchers found that school suspensions had a significant correlation with students academic performance and their bonds to the school[11]. The researchers state, "students who are less bonded to school may be more likely to turn to lawbreaking activities and become less likely to experience academic success"[11]. This raises interest not only in the risks that it poses for the community in failing to resolve this issue, but also because it closely relates to student perception about said community environment. The basis of the school suspensions were not narrowed down to any select variables and in fact, there are "multiple and interacting variables that appear to contribute to racial and ethnic disparities in discipline[11]." This research continues to leave the door open to other potential interventions that might help reduce the suspension gap, ones that could potentially "increase teacher and administration awareness of the potential for bias when issuing referrals for discipline?"[11].

Conger et al. found that pre-high school characteristics were important predictors of students' success in their high school years[6]. The study stresses that 8th grade achievement is of huge importance to a student's high school performance[6]. This suggests racial equity programs could have great potential for positive change in the school community when applied at the middle school level. Introducing strong themes of racial equity programs for middle school students can enable them to practice and apply these values at a young age and promote future success.

A study by Skiba et al. looked closely at variables affecting racial and ethnic disparity and found that school-level variables, like the principal's perspective on discipline, appeared to have a strong correlation to a school's disparity in discipline and achievement gaps[20]. More broadly, the school environment and the administration's opinions on discipline and suspensions have a large effect on how well students perform academically and how often they receive out-of-school expulsions. This major finding could indicate that schools with racial equity programs, a school-level variable, might find less disproportionality within achievement and discipline gaps. The possibility for further extensions of research to examine the perspective of school administration and its relation to racial equity discussions within the student population is emergent here.

2.2 Racial Equity Training

Understanding "racial equity training" as a concept and how it has evolved over time lends itself to further contextualizing and giving constructive feedback to ACSF about the Racial Equity Ambassador Program. Originally, research on racial equity oriented education was largely conducted through the lens of "multicultural training," which sought to address values and perspectives of culturally diverse peoples. Over the years, it has been further fleshed out and has evolved into racial equity training, which seeks to explicitly address racial inequities through adopting a

framework similar to that of multicultural training. However, not much research has been done on racial equity training specifically, which provides grounds for contemporary researchers and community members to explore.

Prior research has indicated that if a student perceives they have extensive levels of multicultural training, they will be more likely to feel multiculturally competent[7]. This finding suggests that students do believe that multicultural training has an impact on influencing external societal factors. However, it does not accurately show if the training itself is actually working. This is where our research intervenes and adds to the current literature by analyzing the extent to which participation in racial equity programs prepares students to truly address social inequities via educational outreach.

One key thing to note is that surveys are not necessarily the only way to look at the effects of multicultural training. Prior work has suggested that individuals could reflectively identify a catalyst incident that allowed them to become fully aware of the concept of racial equity[5]. One major drawback of previous survey-based research is that surveys do not tend to measure a participant's actual implementation of racial equity training within their own lives. A more recent body of research has sought to address this problem. Abramovitz & Blitz have studied ordinary people who have undergone extensive racial equity training in order to establish whether or not participants' reported having increased involvement in and understanding of racial equity concepts in both their personal and work lives[1]. Their findings suggest that participants' of racial equity initiatives perceived that they were actively seeking to address inequity within their day-to-day lives.

Despite these findings, research on racial equity within the education system specifically has been somewhat limited. Whereas desegregation was once praised due to its propensity for providing students of color with access to quality education, the commodification of knowledge through neoliberal educational reforms has since substantially influenced the resulting quality of education itself [8]. An emerging literature on racial equity oriented counternarratives and critical policy analysis has highlighted how the discursive nature of neoliberal educational reforms opposes equal educational opportunities[21]. With district schools being replaced by charter schools and privatized companies providing (for-profit) trainings, school resources, and even standardized tests for students, neoliberal educational reforms tend to treat education as an investment in human capital, as opposed to a social right. This supposed logic of the free market tends to pit students against other students, and as such, the field of education itself becomes plagued by an air of competition that is typified by neoliberalism itself.

While certain school systems have sought to address these concerns, utilizing methods like representative bureaucracy (which diversifies the school-level administrative structure to be more representative of the student body) and co-creation of teaching and learning (which equalizes power relations between teacher and student) to facilitate better racial equity outcomes within schools, neoliberal educational reforms have placed significant barriers on schools' abilities to enact meaningful change at the aggregate level[4,16]. In acknowledging this trend, many scholars and community leaders have instead opted to institute community-driven approaches towards racial equity within the school system[12,17]. Nonprofit, community-based organizations, such as Asheville City Schools Foundation, have emerged to bridge the gap between school districts and the communities they seek to serve, providing much needed support for students themselves[18].

Through adopting an intermediary approach towards addressing racial equity within school systems, nonprofits like ACSF are well positioned to provide for both students and staff in fostering a more equitable community. Previous research has suggested that racial equity-informed strategies within schools serve to promote positive student-teacher interactions, ultimately resulting in school environments that are more understanding and supportive [14]. This is a crucial aspect of achieving racial equity within school systems, as improving school connectedness has shown to decrease peer victimization, as well as student depression and anxiety[9].

2.3 Community Considerations

One final point to consider stems from the implication of our results, and constitutes a community consideration for the Asheville area. How are the families and organizations that form the society surrounding a school system impacted by these changes in their constituent parts? Bifulco et al.[2] studied school choice programs in Durham, NC. After analyzing data concerning families' free choice to move their child's attendance to any school in the county, researchers found a tendency for both black and white parents to marginally increase the segregation of their local school system by "choosing racially isolated environments." It seems that even when implementing systemic freedoms, racial equity can still be a community concern. Without implementing proactive strategies seeking to address inequity within school systems, disparate outcomes centered around race are reified. Goldring et al.[10] tackle this concern regarding school segregation by highlighting testimonies of community participants in magnet schools within the St. Louis and Cincinnati areas. As with the free-choice programs seen in Durham, communities shift around

their childrens' school attendance. Beyond educational outcomes, many community members extolled the level of integration and diversity that magnet schools provide, while also recognizing the cost of putting greater distance between families by moving out of their district, and the greater financial and social demands placed on the collective due to these programs.

Looking beyond school segregation, a study by Lauren Simms focuses on segregation within the Asheville community and states, "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[19]." Simms discusses how despite the social and residential segregation in Asheville, white families and parents seek a diverse school experience for their children[19]. The findings from her study are as follows, "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[19]." Simms finds these educational inequities in Asheville, NC to be a result of non-awareness of the issue from the white population. This indicates that a racial equity program, which brings awareness and education to this topic, is a great solution to actively involve and educate the white population in Asheville on the issue.

This literature highlights the precarious balance that schooling programs walk in the pursuit of racial equity initiatives and increases our awareness as community-based researchers of the often unforeseen rippling outward effects that future researchers should strive to take into consideration. These ideas are just part of the makeup of opportunity and achievement gaps that plague the Asheville City School system, and the primary motivating factor for the inception of programs like REAP.

3. Methodology

By adopting a Community-Based Participatory Research framework, the researchers worked directly with Asheville City Schools Foundation to explore and address their concerns regarding the impact of their Racial Equity Ambassador Program. Out of a desire to highlight the REAP participants' unique voices and experiences, the researchers and Asheville City Schools Foundation developed a mixed-methods approach to analyze the racial equity ambassadors' feelings and beliefs on a wide range of issues. One survey was designed and administered twice attempting to gauge REAP participants' attitudes on a variety of school-level issues that are largely influenced by the REAP Program's "Asheville Six Strategies," inspired by The Equity Collaborative's "Students' Six Strategies." The resulting strategies utilized in the survey are as follows; Visibility, Individuality, Connecting to Student's Lives, Connecting to Future Selves, Addressing Race & Racism, and Connecting to Student's Cultures[2]. These strategies not only inform how students are educated in the discussion of racial equity issues, but exist as suggestions for their students to propagate throughout their school communities. The CBPR perspective guided our methodology by informing the survey questions that were meant to measure the learning outcomes of all of the strategies that REAP plans to teach the participants. Two group interviews with REAP participants were also conducted with the intention to hear the student's own perspective and learn specific details about their involvement in the program.

3.1 Procedure

The pre-test survey was initially administered during the first REAP meeting of the year, prior to receiving any training through the program (2021-2022). Students were given the option to take the survey at this event, however the survey was open for two weeks following the opening session and continued to receive responses.

The post-test survey was then administered at the second-to-last REAP meeting of the same academic year, and was open for two weeks before responses were cut off. It took place after students' had received extensive training, educational, and community engagement related opportunities through participation in the program. Distribution of this survey was intended to gauge differences in student responses prior to and post having experienced the program.

Qualitative data was also collected via group-based semi-structured discussion led by the researchers at this second-to-last REAP meeting, using a set of questions created with collaborative input from the community partner, Asheville City Schools Foundation. Students were encouraged to comment on varying facets of the REAP program and the impact of the program's community involvement in pursuit of equitable educational outcomes. Researchers utilized audio recording devices to record the group's discussions for later transcription, at which point participants' identities were anonymized and the recordings were deleted.

3.2 Participants

Members of the REAP program were invited to participate in the survey. Twenty two out of thirty five REAP participants, grades 9-12, chose to complete the first survey. 63.6% of participants indicated it was their first year participating. 36.4% of the participants indicated it was their second year participating in the program. Nine out of thirty five REAP participants, grades 9-12, participated in the second, post-test survey. 44.4% of participants in the post-test survey were first year program participants, and 55.6% were second year participants. Two groups of nine racial equity ambassadors each participated in the semi-structured interviews.

3.3 Analysis

Our Likert-type scale was converted into a numeric scale, with "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5). Using this data we were able to run Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation tests to discover whether two variables had a significant relationship with one-another. We explored a number of different relationships between these variables in order to better understand any common feelings held by the Racial Equity Ambassadors, particularly with respect to their feelings of comfort and support in comparison to other external factors. Finally, we conducted Mann-Whitney *U* tests between pre-test and post-test survey results to assess any differences in student responses after having gone through the REAP program.

4. Results

4.1 Spearman's ρ Tests

Table 1. Extracurricular Involvement

Extracurricular Involvement	Community Engagement	Sports	None
Instructor Presentation	0.5434**	-0.4149*	-0.2594
Peer Presentation	0.6278**	-0.1170	-0.4618**

Table 2. Barriers to Success

Barriers to Success	Instructor Presentation	Peer Presentation	Instructor Support	Peer Support
Staff Problems	0.0412	-0.0075	-0.4790**	-0.3211
Peer Problems	-0.1805	-0.0647	0.0359	-0.1589

Table 3. School Inclusivity

School Inclusivity	Informed	Student Leader	Instructor Presentation
Essential	0.5904***	0.4744**	0.2421
Participate	0.0889	0.5658***	0.5070**

Table 4. Participation in REAP

Participation in REAP	Instructor Presentation	Peer Presentation
Year	0.1846	0.4178*

*Note: $p < 0.1$ *, $p < 0.05$ **, $p < 0.01$ ****

4.2 Pre-test Results

Looking at the correlation tests conducted in table 1, students who participate in community engagement oriented extracurricular activities seem to feel more comfortable presenting in front of both their peers and their instructors. It appears that students who participate in sports seem to feel less comfortable presenting in front of their instructors (statistically significant, though only at $\alpha=0.1$), as well as their peers, though this relationship is not significant. We also find that students who participate in no other extracurricular clubs/programs feel less comfortable presenting in front of their peers. Also, instructor presentations maintain a weak negative correlation which is not significant. This may be due to the influx of first-year REAP participants not having been able to develop meaningful peer relationships yet at Asheville High School. We predict that this dynamic will become less pronounced as students spend more time interacting with their peers, and that this would be reflected in subsequent surveys.

Moving now to table 2, there is an overall lack of significance for most of the relationships tested. The only test that appears to maintain validity is between “staff problems” and “instructor support”, as there is a clear negative correlation between students who report having problems with staff and students who feel supported by their teachers. Beyond this relationship, all other tests do not exhibit a moderate or strong relationship and are not statistically significant. With regards to students’ feelings of support, students who report having problems with their peers do seem to feel less supported by their peers overall, however the lack of significance may suggest that these students do not feel that individual problems with isolated peers has a substantial effect on their overall feelings of support from their peers. Similarly, students reporting experiencing problems with their peers and their instructors does not seem to substantially influence their level of comfort when presenting to either groups. This again may be due to a similar phenomenon as predicted with regards to peer support, being that students who report having problems with individual staff and peers do not myopically treat this as an overall inhibiting factor in their ability to comfortably conduct presentations in front of their peers and instructors more generally.

Table 3 then presents significance for most of the relationships tested. There is a clear, highly significant relationship between students' feelings of essentiality within the school and students' perception of being informed on school community issues. We can see a moderate relationship between students who report that they participate often in class and students who feel comfortable presenting to their instructors. While this may not necessarily be a surprising discovery, it provides useful context which serves to benefit the other relationships tested as well. Similar to the “Essential”/”Informed” test, table 3 also reveals another highly significant relationship between students who participate often in class and students who identify as “student leaders.” In fact, “student leaders” also feel more essential within their school environment as well. This juxtaposition between the other relationships tested is useful when considering which students feel comfortable presenting in front of their teachers.

Finally, table 4 reveals partial support for the claim that student participation in the REAP program improves student comfort when presenting in class, as students who are reentering the REAP program for the second year do feel more comfortable presenting to their *peers* (only significant at $\alpha = 0.1$). This relationship is much weaker and not significant between students reentering the program and their comfort in presenting to their teachers. This echoes the concerns found in table 1, where students who participate in no extracurricular activities felt less comfortable presenting to their peers (albeit in an inverse relationship). By-and-large, this finding suggests that the REAP program is equipping students with the confidence and skills necessary to conduct presentations for others.

4.3 Post-test Results

As described in section 3.2, our post-test survey garnered substantially less participants than our pre-test survey. This significantly impacted the quality of our statistical analysis. Despite this drawback, our post-test survey analysis revealed two key findings. Mann-Whitney *U* tests were conducted between pre-test and post-test survey groups in order to assess any significant differences in the racial equity ambassadors' responses.

When the racial equity ambassadors were asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement "I am a student leader," post-test results indicated that REAP participants identified more so with this label after having gone through the program (Pre-test: $N_1 = 21$, mean = 3.95, median = 4) (Post-test: $N_2 = 9$, mean = 4.44, median = 4). A Mann-Whitney *U* test revealed that this difference was statistically significant (at $\alpha = 0.1$), with $z = -1.703$ and $p = 0.0886$. This finding suggests that the REAP program does indeed help to foster student leaders.

Also, when asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement "I am supported by my teachers," post-test results again indicate that the racial equity ambassadors do indeed feel more supported after having gone through the program (Pre-test: $N_1 = 21$, mean = 3.90, median = 4) (Post-test: $N_2 = 8$ mean = 4.5, median = 4.5). A Mann-Whitney *U* test revealed that this difference was statistically significant (at $\alpha = 0.05$), with $z = -2.396$ and $p = 0.0166$. This finding then suggests that the REAP program does also contribute to bettering relationships between students and teachers.

5. Discussion

5.1 Negative High School Experience

Based on our interviews with the REAP participants, a common theme present throughout our conversations has been the harmful aspects of high school life. When asked to describe their high school experience in one word, a majority of students chose words typically considered negative. "Tough," "difficult," "exhausting," "stressful," and "tiring" were common sentiments expressed by the students. Our pretest survey of the racial equity ambassadors revealed that 36.4% of them did not feel essential within the inner workings of the school, with 63.6% feeling that they were not adequately informed by faculty and staff about the wider issues facing the school community. When these students were asked about barriers faced while pursuing goals in their school environment, some recounted feeling undervalued and trivialized by their teachers. Others recalled instances of microaggressions and racially charged practices conducted against them by peers and staff alike. All of this to say, students in the REAP program by-and-large consider their high school experience in a negative light.

Despite this shortcoming, the racial equity ambassadors perceive their experience in the REAP program as being largely positive. When asked about their continued participation in the program, many students described seeing positive changes occur as a result of their participation in the program. One student even remarked that they continue to participate because they want to improve Asheville City Schools for future generations of students. This itself is an equity centered response, as these students are actively seeking to improve an inequitable situation which they as a group agree needs improvement. There is also a noticeable lack of any incongruence between students' perception and the driving philosophy of the REAP program, evidence that the current relationship between the two operates satisfactorily.

Beyond material outcomes, some students also pointed towards encouraging internal dialogues and promoting open discussions about racial equity. When asked what aspects of the REAP program are important to the individual student participants, one student replied, "Being able to talk about some things that usually would make other people feel uncomfortable, and having that be normalized." Another student, when asked why they continue to participate in REAP, stated that they enjoyed seeing people understand complicated issues and become more self-aware. This approach towards addressing racial equity is rooted in open dialogue and exchange, further exemplifying how REAP

encourages students to engage with difficult and complex topics in a way that promotes critical thinking and good faith discussion.

Participants of REAP are given a certain level of respect and dignity that is not otherwise offered to them within their traditional schooling experience. The racial equity ambassadors are able to engage and impart knowledge to their own instructors, providing them with a sense of satisfaction and content in knowing that they are contributing to helping foster a more equitable educational environment. To this extent, while the REAP participants often consider their high school experience to be somewhat negative, their engagement with and participation in the REAP program provides them an outlet with which to create positive change in their schools and in their lives, redeeming their otherwise negative high school experiences by fostering encouraging and rewarding experiences as a counterweight.

5.2 REAP Organizational Concerns

When asked what they would like to see change about REAP, a common criticism of the program that the students had was its lack of organization; Speaking to the lack of resources and support provided to Asheville City Schools Foundation by local, state, and federal entities. One student recounts “I have been so confused on what is next and what I'm supposed to be doing.” Despite these organizational concerns, REAP is consistently finding ways to engage with its participants. When asked if the students actively participate in REAP meetings and events, one student responded “I feel like in the scope of all the different clubs I am involved with, REAP is one of the most, I don't like the word demanding because that has a negative connotation, but it's definitely one that requires a lot of participation. And I think what makes REAP so special is every student here wants to participate because we all have a reason for joining REAP. So while there might be a lot of meeting times and time spent communicating about things and setting things up, it's very rewarding and it's very much worth the time spent doing it.”

REAP is placed in a very peculiar position. They do not have sufficient resources to maintain a clear and methodically orchestrated program, yet students still give rave reviews for the content of the program as a whole. They are tasked with operating in a school system that most of their participants view as being negative, and yet the students consistently engage and speak on how rewarding participation in REAP is. Students identify the content of the program as being good, despite the organizational flaws. In other words, the drawbacks of the program do not make it irredeemable - especially considering that the drawbacks are out of the program’s control. To that extent, even when deprived of sufficient resources and support, the REAP program still manages to maintain its importance for the students. This speaks to neoliberal education reforms as not being immutable in terms of student outcomes.

5.3 Social Change

Despite this, the results of the program are mixed. According to interview responses, some teachers internalize the racial equity presentations by the ambassadors, whereas some do not and are resistant to them. Students addressed this saying, “at this point in the Asheville community we aren’t as much facing teachers who are outwardly racist towards their students, but we are facing teachers who have the opinion of ‘Why would I discuss racism in the classroom, that would be bringing it in, that would be inviting it in.’ We have teachers who are so aggressively positive, or non-involved with the issue, that they think they are then absolved from any responsibility of still addressing it which can be really difficult to navigate.” This demonstrates the lack of ability for REAP students to have an open dialogue with their teachers about racial inequity and engage in problem solving together. This finding appears to contradict that which was revealed in section 4.3, where students felt more supported by their teachers after having gone through REAP. However, our findings also suggest that the depth of relationship between REAP participants and their teachers is enhanced *via participation in the program*. In other words, the racial equity ambassadors are able to identify and vocalize criticisms of their teachers *while also* maintaining an optimistic understanding of their overall student-teacher support networks, hinting towards the REAP program’s ability to enact more meaningful school relationships overall.

Teachers have also asked REAP students questions about the Asheville 6 strategies during class, rather than applying the knowledge that the students had already taught them through their yearly presentations. One student remarks, “I would say there's more [teachers] that aren't engaged with students than are. But when they do and they understand that you're in REAP and something comes up that can relate to "visibility" or like "checking for understanding," stuff like that. I have been asked in class to elaborate on stuff, like if a teacher knows I am in REAP, which is good. But I would also appreciate it if teachers know that kind of stuff, because we have been educating them on that.” This reference in itself reflects an in depth understanding of the goals of the program, which bodes well for our assumptions of general student understanding.

6. Conclusion

Our research with Asheville City Schools Foundation has provided fertile ground from which further research may arise. While student opinion is clear on leading the charge for racial equity in Asheville City Schools, there remains a need to study racial equity programs as they relate to and interact directly with Asheville High School teachers, as well as the general student body. Further research may serve well to highlight these voices, as well as examine the role of larger bureaucratic structures in determining student outcomes through a racial equity lens.

While Asheville City Schools Foundation's work largely arises from the gaps left in public schooling as a result of neoliberal practices in education reform, their commitment to the Asheville community is undeniable. Examining their Racial Equity Ambassador Program in particular has provided a newfound respect for ACSF as an organization, and the REAP participants themselves as being promising young community advocates. Though the material outcomes of the program appear to be mixed, its very existence and operation within such an unaccommodating national school environment speaks to the program's strengths, and the student participants who have largely driven the program continue to exemplify the desire for achieving positive social change within an otherwise difficult situation.

7. Acknowledgements

The authors wish to express their appreciation to Nieva Arana, Rebecca Abide, Brandon Whiteside, Copland Rudolph, and others at the Asheville City Schools Foundation for their ongoing support. The authors also thank all the Racial Equity Ambassadors at Asheville High School for participating in our surveys and interviews and providing constructive feedback. Finally, the authors also wish to extend our gratitude to Dr. Carla Hung (University of North Carolina Asheville, Anthropology Dept.) for her words of advice and encouragement throughout our research process.

8. References

1. Abramovitz, M., & Blitz, L. V. (2015). Moving toward racial equity: The undoing racism workshop and organizational change. *Race and Social Problems, 7*(2), 97-110. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12552-015-9147-4
2. Asheville City Schools Foundation. (2021). *Racial Equity Ambassadors Program (REAP)*. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from https://www.acsf.org/equity-ambassador-program.
3. Bifulco, R., Ladd, H., Ross, S. (2007) "Public School Choice and Integration: Evidence from Durham, North Carolina." *Department of Economics Working Paper Series*. https://media.economics.uconn.edu/working/2007-41.pdf
4. Bovill, C. (2020). Co-Creation in Learning and Teaching: The Case for a Whole-Class Approach in Higher Education. *Higher Education*, 79(6): 1023-1037.
5. Coleman, M. N. (2006). Critical incidents in multicultural training: An examination of student experiences. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 34*(3), 168-182. Retrieved from http://0-search.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/scholarly-journals/critical-incidents-multicultural-training/docview/235999525/se-2?accountid=8388.
6. Conger, D., Long, M. C., & Iatarola, P. (2009). Explaining Race, Poverty, and Gender Disparities in Advanced Course-Taking. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 28(4), 555–576. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20685142..
7. Dickson, G. L., & Jepsen, D. A. (2007). Multicultural training experiences as predictors of multicultural competencies: Students' perspectives. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 47*(2), 76-95. Retrieved from http://0-search.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/scholarly-journals/multicultural-training-experiences-as-predictors/docview/201098962/se-2?accountid=8388
8. Diem, S., Young, M. D., & Sampson, C. (2019). Where Critical Policy Meets the Politics of Education: An Introduction. *Educational Policy*, *33*(1), 3–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904818807317

9. Eugene, D. R., Crutchfield, J., & Robinson, E. D. (2021). An Examination of Peer Victimization and Internalizing Problems through a Racial Equity Lens: Does School Connectedness Matter? *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *18*(3), 1085. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18031085
10. Goldring, E., & Smrekar, C. (2000). Magnet Schools and the Pursuit of Racial Balance. Education and Urban Society, 33(1), 17–35. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124500331003
11. Gregory, A., Skiba, R. J., & Noguera, P. A. (2010). The Achievement Gap and the Discipline Gap: Two Sides of the Same Coin? *Educational Researcher*, *39*(1), 59–68. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27764554
12. Green, T. L. Community-Based Equity Audits: : A Practical Approach for Educational Leaders to Support Equitable Community-School Improvements. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 37.
13. Harris, S. (2021). Asheville City Schools sees slight improvement in opportunity gap, low state test scores. *Asheville Citizen Times.* Retrieved November 15, 2021, from https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/2021/10/21/asheville-nc-city-schools-low-test-scores-opportunity-gap/6109176001/
14. Lea III, C. H., McCowan, K. J., Jones, T. M., & Malorni, A. (2021). Adult and student perspectives on racial and ethnic equity-informed school-based strategies. *Psychology in the Schools*, pits.22575. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22575
15. Reardon, S.F., Kalogrides, D., & Shores, K. (2019). The Geography of Racial/Ethnic Test Score Gaps. The American Journal of Sociology, 124(4). https://cepa.stanford.edu/content/geography-racialethnic-test-score-gaps.
16. Rocha, R., & Hawes, D. (2009). Racial Diversity, Representative Bureaucracy, and Equity in Multiracial School Districts. *Social Science Quarterly*, 90(2): 326-344.
17. Sampson, C., Demps, D., & Rodriguez-Martinez, S. (2020). Engaging (or not) in coalition politics: A case study of Black and Latinx community advocacy toward educational equity. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1842346
18. Sampson, C., Overholser, A., & Gatti Schafer, J. (2019). A Critical Paradox: The Politics of an Urban Community-Based Nonprofit In Expanding Educational Opportunities to Underserved Youth. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *18*(2), 210–225. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2019.1611870
19. Simms, Lauren. (2020). Interrogating Educational Inequities: An Analysis of White Perceptions of the Opportunity Gap in Asheville, NC. *The Undergraduate Research Journal*, (393-403).
20. Skiba, R. J., Chung, C.-G., Trachok, M., Baker, T. L., Sheya, A., & Hughes, R. L. (2014). Parsing Disciplinary Disproportionality: Contributions of Infraction, Student, and School Characteristics to Out-of-School Suspension and Expulsion. American Educational Research Journal, 51(4), 640–670. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24546695.
21. Young, M. D., & Diem, S. (Eds.). (2017). *Critical Approaches to Education Policy Analysis: Moving Beyond Tradition* (Vol. 4). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-39643-9