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A Study of the Perceptions of Racial Equity in One Early Childhood Education Program

A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

Dawn Mendonca Meskil

December 2016

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Keywords: Racial Equity, Segregation, Achievement Gap, Early Childhood Education

ABSTRACT

A Study of the Perceptions of Racial Equity in One Early Childhood Education Program

by

Dawn Mendonca Meskil

Although public education in the United States has had remarkable growth and improvement since its beginning, significant inadequacies concerning racial equity continue to cast a shadow on the system. Despite desegregation efforts and specific attention to providing integrated school settings there has been little progress in establishing educational justice. The purpose of this case study was to uncover perceptions about racial inequity within Asheville City Schools as well as potential facilitators of equity. A qualitative case study using 10 guiding research questions was conducted to evaluate the perceptions of parents as well as educators at Asheville City Schools Preschool regarding racial inequities and potential facilitators of equity. Transcripts from a Racial Equity Photovoice Project were used to identify perceptions of the presence and the impact of racial inequity as well as assets of, barriers to, and potential facilitators of equity. Findings indicate parents and educators agree that barriers of racial equity include elements of negative societal influences, antiquated educational policies and procedures, inapt curricula and instruction, external systems that perpetuate biases, meager funding structures and poor home-school connections. Further, findings indicate parents and educators agree that diverse student bodies and faculties, culturally and social-emotionally relevant curricula and instruction, positive relationships between educators and children, and authentic 2-way communication are potential facilitators of racial equity. Overarching themes incorporate concerns related to resources, mandates, personal narratives, and relationships. This research adds to the literature related to racial equity and has implications for practice as well as future research.

DEDICATION

The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of beauty is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, but indifference between life and death.

– Elie Wiesel, 1986

I am beyond privileged to have such remarkable people influencing my life each and every day. You have each shaped who I am more than you know. To these loves I am eternally grateful...

Marcus, for your wholehearted and never-ending belief in me,

Simone, for devotedly and patiently serving as my inspiration and hope,

Mom, for instilling in me an eternal and deep sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of others,

Dad, for imparting in me the importance of always doing my best and doing better next time,

Sue and Al, for your unwavering support and encouragement, and

LaKisha, DeAndre, LaPorshia, and ZaQuantae, for teaching me about the realities of indifference and for showing me what love, art, faith, and life really are.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Racial equity has long been a challenge in the United States resulting in school districts with any racial diversity, and the schools within them, often struggling to truly serve all children well. Williams and Jackson (2010) and the Children’s Defense Fund (2012) noted that frequently minority groups consistently underperform across almost all measures of success, including academic measures, and minority students continue to be underrepresented in advanced programs and overrepresented in discipline data, special education enrollment, and dropout rates. Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, and Belway (2015) confirmed continued discipline inequities and citing ongoing issues of inequity. The United States Department of Education proposed a rule in March 2016 that would require states to identify racial imbalances in special education and to appropriately address any concerns as discovered (Assistance to States for the Education of Children With Disabilities, 2016). Moreover, the National Center for Education Statistics (2016) reported that black students were substantially more likely to attend high poverty schools than white students, and they continue to have a higher dropout rate despite overall decreases for both groups.

In 2000 North Carolina specifically targeted resources toward rectifying statewide educational disparities, yet the achievement gap actually grew in some content areas between 2000 and 2010. Williams and Jackson (2010) found that despite this commitment, the gap had not improved and minority children continued to miss out on the achievement realized by their peers. Wagner (2015) similarly found that in North Carolina issues of inequity continue to be widespread and exemplified within schools. Further, the gaps in achievement felt by

marginalized students are not only persistent they are also linked to a host of underlying influences (Bell, 2015). Uncovering and understanding the roots of inequity may be an effective way to begin establishing systems that are truly designed to serve all with equity. Creating equitable teaching and learning environments requires educators and parents to dig deeper into the underpinnings of racial inequities by identifying barriers as well as strengths in meeting the educational needs of all children.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this case study is to uncover perceptions about racial inequity within Asheville City Schools as well as potential facilitators of equity. While functioning under a desegregation order dating back to 1970, Asheville City Schools struggles with a sizeable achievement gap (Associated Press, 1991). The school district currently operates one preschool campus, five elementary schools, one middle school, and two high schools in an urban setting. The Youth Justice Project (2016) recently published Racial Equity Report Cards for each school district in North Carolina. According to the Asheville City Schools Report Card the district served 4,295 students in 2015-2016 with 61.2% of students being white while 22.8% were black. Asheville City Schools had the largest achievement gap in North Carolina between white and black students on end-of-grade exams in grades 3-8 as well as high school end-of-course exams. Further, in 2014-2015 black students accounted for 73.1% of short-term suspensions resulting in the largest disproportion (percent of population versus percent of suspensions) in the state. As of 2016 all elementary schools currently qualify for Title I services. The recently updated 2015-2020 district strategic plan supports a vision of “learn, discover and thrive” by focusing improvement efforts on early childhood, academic achievement, and whole child development (Asheville City Schools, n.d.).

In Asheville City Schools white children, no matter income, outperform all other subgroups and black children are the lowest achieving group. The district's achievement gap between black and white students has remained consistent and in some cases grown wider over the past decade. Data from the 2015 school year revealed that there is a 20% difference in grade 3 math achievement and a 30% difference in grade 3 reading achievement on state tests between black and white students (North Carolina Department of Instruction, n.d.).

Research Questions

Engaging parents and educators in efforts to understand the roots of inequity may be an effective way to establish educational systems that are designed to serve all students. The researcher seeks to understand the persistence of racial inequities in education, particularly in Asheville City Schools. Underlying this core inquiry, the following research questions guided this study:

RQ 1 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about the presence of racial inequity?

RQ 2 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about the presence of racial inequity?

RQ 3 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about the impact of racial inequity?

RQ 4 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about the impact of racial inequality?

RQ 5 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about assets that support racial equity?

RQ 6 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about assets that support racial equity?

RQ 7 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about barriers to racial equity?

RQ 8 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about barriers to racial equity?

RQ 9 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about facilitators of racial equity?

RQ 10 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about facilitators of racial equity?

Significance of the Study

Racial inequity is common and harmful in educational settings. The inequities are not only systemic issues they are also personal and emotional issues, particularly when associated with a child's education. For instance, in North Carolina 68.7% of white elementary and middle grade students scored at grade level or better in 2014-2015 while 37.3% of black students did the same (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, n.d.). Some theories point to issues beyond the classroom, such as poverty and genetics as the foundation of the gap. In response, Kirp (2010) noted that evidence has mounted, including overwhelming successes, in support of efforts that include concentrated and specific responsiveness to students, parent support, and the continuity of reading and math strategies that are developmentally appropriate. Educators and parents are often unaware of how they might personally contribute to issues of inequity and both groups are often wary of sharing or knowing how to share their perspectives (McMahon, 2007). The researcher investigated educator and parent perceptions regarding inequities in education as well as potential facilitators of equity.

Definition of Terms

The following working definitions were assumed in the completion of this study:

1. *Achievement Gap*: Gaps in achievement arise when one cohort of students (grouped by race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.) performs better than another cohort and the difference in

performance for the two cohorts is substantial (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Further, achievement gaps are characterized by sustained imbalances in learning outcomes and educational achievement (Great Schools Partnership, 2013).

2. *Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC)*: Data regarding civil rights concerns and public education have been collected by the U.S. Department of Education since 1968 using the CRDC. Previously the CRDC was conducted as the Elementary and Secondary School Survey. Collected information includes enrollment and educational offerings and supports, often disaggregated by demographics such as race, gender, language and disability. Ultimately, the CRDC serves as a strategy for ensuring civil rights statutes are properly adhered to (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, n.d.).
3. *Family Engagement*: Family partnerships with schools, and educators, that is characterized by strengths-focused, regular, and mutual interactions. Authentic family engagement is believed to be integral in strengthening student learning as well as family satisfaction (Halgunseth & Peterson, 2009).
4. *Inequity*: Disparity in educational accomplishment, scores and outcomes due to biased or discriminatory practices, policies, programs or contexts are applied (Great Schools Partnership, 2013).
5. *Parent engagement*: When parents and educators work in tandem to support and enhance the learning, development, and health of children. Ensuring effective parent engagement in schools is the collective responsibility of schools and the community. Meaningful outreach, as well as parents who actively support educational efforts across settings, is key to effective parent engagement. Further, authentic parent engagement is noted as a protective factor positively correlated with improved behavior, enhanced academic performance, and more

positive interpersonal skills as well as fewer risky health behaviors (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016).

6. *Photovoice*: "... a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique. As a practice based in the production of knowledge, photovoice has three main goals: (1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers." (Wang, 1997, p. 369)
7. *Racial Equity*: A state of balance attained when race is no longer statistically predictive of how likely an individual will experience success. Equity is only one aspect of racial justice, resulting in the inclusion of efforts to mitigate the root causes of inequities, not simply their existence (Center for Assessment and Policy Development as cited in America Healing, n.d.).
8. *Structural White Privilege*: "A system of white domination that creates and maintains belief systems that make current racial advantages and disadvantages seem normal. The system includes powerful incentives for maintaining white privilege and its consequences, and powerful negative consequences for trying to interrupt white privilege or reduce its consequences in meaningful ways. The system includes internal and external manifestations at the individual, interpersonal, cultural and institutional levels." (Racial Equity Tools, n.d.)
9. *Student Achievement*: A student's scores on assessments, to include state tests or other appropriate measures of learning, provided they are rigorous and similar across classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).
10. *Student Engagement*: The level of "attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion" that students exhibit when they are learning or being taught, which reaches to the degree of

motivation they have to grow and progress in their learning. It is believed that learning is enhanced when one is “inquisitive, interested, or inspired,” and that learning is impeded by boredom, a lack of passion, or generally being disconnected (Great Schools Partnership, 2013). Schlechty (as cited by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1995) noted that engaged students exude an attraction to their work, persistence despite challenges and barriers, and a clear joy in their achievements.

11. *Student Outcomes*: “Student outcomes are the actual results that students either achieve or fail to achieve during their education or later on in life.” (Great Schools Partnership, 2013).

12. *White Privilege*: “Refers to the unquestioned and unearned set of advantages, entitlements, benefits and choices bestowed on people solely because they are white. Generally white people who experience such privilege do so without being conscious of it.” (McIntosh, 1988)

Limitations and Delimitations

Given the nature of the topic and the use of open, voluntary dialogue during the photovoice sessions the presence and strength of individual opinions and perceptions may be limiting. Biases in this study include the use of a small sample of convenience as well as self-selected participation in the photovoice project and in this research study. Further, the study analyzed transcripts from a short time span (four consecutive weekly sessions) resulting in a snapshot of data. It is not likely that the findings can be generalized to a larger population given these limitations.

The researcher strictly used transcripts from photovoice sessions, giving very little control over the data gleaned. Participation in the photovoice project, and therefore this study, was only offered to Asheville City Schools Preschool educators and parents, further limiting the reach of the findings. While the participants had a connection to the school, the dialogue is

reflective of experiences and perceptions beyond this school and this district. At the time the project and this subsequent study occurred, the researcher served at the Director of Asheville City Schools Preschool. To mitigate the impact of this dual role, the researcher did not attend the photovoice sessions and ensured the transcripts were deidentified prior to analysis to assure complete confidentiality to the participants.

Overview of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study, the purpose and significance of the study, research questions, definitions of relevant terms, and the research's limitations and delimitations. Chapter 2 incorporates a review of the literature that explored the historical trends in racial equity, dating back to segregation, as well as state and local context of racial inequities, achievement gaps, and intervention strategies. Issues such as academic achievement, discipline, relationships, engagement, and education policies and practices are explored. Chapter 3 chronicles the methodology implemented to complete the study. Chapter 4 reveals the findings of the qualitative analysis. Chapter 5 offers the summary of findings, conclusions, and recommendations for practice and further research that emerged from this study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Issues of inequity persist in education, and while research and intervention efforts have focused heavily on uncovering and correcting the barriers to equity, overall little lasting progress has been observed (Children's Defense Fund, 2007; Eckes & Butler, 2014). Responsibility reaches to the times of accepted segregation, sanctioned inequity, and beyond. While legal efforts were implemented to force change, and seemed to garner some success, that shift has been notably negated with the legal system stepping aside as school districts are granted unitary status and are no longer required to actively address segregation (Clotfelter, Vigdor, & Ladd, 2006). Once unitary status was granted it appears that, in contradiction to the noted progress of equity efforts, the underlying drivers of segregation and inequity are still present to a greater extent than hoped. Desegregation is only the beginning of the equity dialogue. Once desegregated, districts must address the challenge of meeting the educational needs of a diverse population, ensuring success for all (Jennings, 2012).

School Desegregation

Historical Impact

Vigdor and Ludwig (2007) noted that school segregation saw a noteworthy decline for about 30 years after the 1954 Brown decision. During the mid 1980s the decline seemed to fade towards inaction while at the same time gaps in test scores between white and black students also saw comparatively limited progress. The association between these two shifts, given the coincidental timing, seems evident. Vigdor and Ludwig indicated that research indicates that this correlation is slightly significant. In addition, residential patterns seem peripheral, other than as

they may impact school segregation. Overwhelming their evidence supports school desegregation practices, despite community segregation, as an effective means to improve academic achievement for all students with the understanding that integrated settings positively impact efforts to address achievement gaps.

The landmark Brown decision resulted in court orders to desegregate school districts across the country. Eventually the Supreme Court determined that desegregation orders were never intended to be lasting requirements (*Board of Education v. Dowell*, 1991) but rather were intended to require districts to create structures and plans for enduring integration (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Eckes & Butler, 2014; Minow, 2010). Given this decision over 200 school districts, mostly in the south, have been released from legal requirements to ensure desegregation. Concerns about the lack of court involvement include lapses towards resegregation. Findings suggest that over time released school districts trend back towards patterns of segregation particularly when the surrounding community continues to struggle with segregated housing patterns (Reardon, Grewal, Kalogrides, & Greenberg, 2012).

Conversely, if desegregation plans support patterns that foster school integration and integrated neighborhoods or if districts are required to continue integrative practices after oversight is removed, then progress tends to remain intact (Clotfelter et al., 2006). Understanding the lasting impact of the Brown decision must take into consideration the true effects of desegregation court orders and the effects of lifting the orders with attention to the community context. Clotfelter et al. (2006) noted that as court oversight continues to be removed, there seems to be a steady rise in resegregation as most communities and school districts have not created long-term, comprehensive plans and committed to continuing to honor efforts towards integration.

To demonstrate the extensive impact of seemingly simple court decisions, Fischbach, Rhee, and Cacace (2008) investigated the “pivot point” in relation to the shift from legally required race-related desegregation policies in school systems to the disallowance of the same policies on a voluntary basis. Essentially the courts support race-related policies when related to legal divide but not when implemented to address societal segregation. This shift often happens when school systems are released from desegregation orders and given unitary status, meaning that in the court’s eyes the school system has effectively removed any barriers to segregative policies and practices. The shift from implementing successful and legally required policies to not being permitted to continue the same policies is often abrupt and leaves districts without options for addressing segregative practices that impact enrollment but are outside of their jurisdiction (e.g., residential segregation). Fischbach et al. (2008) concluded while school segregation may not have been the court’s intent when granting unitary status, districts are often left without options to continue ensuring equitable opportunities and diversity to all students. These legal decisions may seem typical but often have unintended consequences, at the least leaving districts in an awkward position as they attempt to maintain the stability of the impact of the previously court ordered policies.

Given the evolving legal decisions the impact of segregation, desegregation, and resegregation continues to be of interest as it relates to student outcomes. Considering the impact of racial structure in light of other extenuating segregation factors is necessary as educational equity is evaluated. Two common concerns are the impact of “white flight” (e.g., when white families move away) and other housing patterns that create homogeneous neighborhoods, both of which essentially negate the purpose of educational desegregation efforts (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2009). Frankenberg’s (2009) research suggested that the more segregated students are,

the more adverse the impact is on the minority group. Moreover, the adversity seemed to more deeply affect minority students, in particular black students who are higher achievers. Hanushek et al. (2009) also found that while other factors are at play, it appears that peer influence is a consideration unique to black students in segregated settings. This peer influence may, over time, impact educator expectations for all black students negating outcomes for the entire group. Considering the issues of residential segregation, these findings support alternative districting options, such as magnet schools, rather than the traditional neighborhood districting strategies.

Social science research is a vital element in understanding community context when determining whether or not to lift a desegregation order and in judging the legalities of systems of school assignment based on race as districts work to implement plans that support ongoing integration (Armor & Duck O'Neill, 2010). Segregation is not strictly an education issue; schools are charged with providing an integrated and equal education yet communities often do not represent these same expectations. Frankel and Volij (2011) established that while black students fare better educationally in less segregated systems school assignment is far less reliant on ethnicity from the 1987-1988 school years to the 2007-2008 school years. Further, Frankel and Volji demonstrated that segregation between school districts within cities explains one third of the total public school segregation.

Ultimately, segregation has a lasting negative impact into adulthood for most black children with lower earnings and more health concerns noted when school segregation was a factor. On the other hand, integrated settings tend to reveal more positive outcomes socially as well as academically for all children, but namely minority students. Often issues of stereotypes are counteracted while social interactions are improved. Issues of segregation should be far more

improved in the 60 years since the Brown decision, with evidence still reflecting positive outcomes for all in desegregated environments (Eckes & Butler, 2014).

Segregation in North Carolina

Two large school districts, Wake County and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools, have implemented court ordered desegregation plans, making adjustments as needed over time. Williams and Houck (2013) examine each district's efforts from a historical perspective as well as with consideration of student outcomes. Evaluation factors include local and federal funding, transportation expenditures, extent of segregation, and academic achievement. Both districts adjusted their desegregation plans to controlled choice plans with Charlotte-Mecklenburg making the transition in 2002 and Wake transitioning in 2010. This effectively moved both districts from considering race and/or socioeconomic status (SES) to policies that support neighborhood schools. Williams and Houck noted that while per pupil expenditures of both districts was relatively the same, resegregation is seen in Charlotte-Mecklenburg following the removal of the court order in 2002. Further, the still relatively integrated Wake students tended to see higher academic achievement despite variations in SES across both counties. With Wake beginning to implement a similar neighborhood school assignment plan, there was concern student outcomes may suffer a similar decline as noted in Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

Segregation in Asheville City Schools

While desegregation attempts began in 1961, Asheville City Schools was issued a desegregation order and began addressing the issue in 1970. Historically, the district implemented a neighborhood schools plan that allowed children to attend school in their residential areas. Due to a substantiated grievance, a second court order was issued in 1988 (Frankel & Forbes, 2014).

The desegregation efforts include a magnet school model of enrollment, using school themes to theoretically allow families to choose the campus that best meets the needs of their children. The idea is that choice, along with enrollment and assignment policies, would balance schools racially. The district remains under court order to implement plans to desegregate schools. While all elementary schools are more diverse than ever (the district only has one middle and one high school), concerns of equitable practices persisted through the 2014-2015 school year. Under the leadership of Superintendent Pamela Baldwin, the district developed and began implementing a strategic plan that specifically addresses equity with action steps outlined through 2020 (Asheville City Schools, n.d.).

Racial Equity

There is little doubt that school segregation is directly linked to historical racial inequities that persist for students today. Efforts to formally address segregation in schools date back to the 1960s and progress has not been as restorative of equity as hoped; some schools are more segregated today than before (Christopher 2013; Eckes & Butler, 2014). For instance, 38% of black students and 43% of Latino students attend "intensely segregated minority schools" where 90% or more of the student body is minority (Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012). Additional evidence suggested that several charter schools are more racially segregated (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011).

At a minimum, the combination of more recent judicial decision shifts and the growing diversity of the United States are contributing factors to the current segregation issues. A broad set of stakeholders including legal and legislative players, school systems, and community members are tasked with the duty to embrace and learn from the research based evidence that

captures the essence of school segregation, its impact on students, with consideration to the diversity of today's general public (Dorsey, 2013).

Inequities

In a recount of the work of the Kellogg Foundation to achieve a mandate to serve all children, Christopher (2013) solidified the philanthropic organization's commitment to racial equity while at the same time highlighting the ongoing failure of the United States to meet the needs of minority children with the same gusto that white children benefit from. Christopher further noted that the United States has one of the largest income gaps and excessive levels of racial and economic residential segregation in the world. Some of the Foundation's own efforts are noted as being generally effective yet still failing to meet the needs of minority children. This finding serves as a catalyst to increase awareness and, with reflective purpose, change systems level practices. Further, Edelman (2008) noted that research detached from race and context will not bring about successful change. Edelman concluded that collaborative efforts that consider race, gender, and context are imperative to ensuring black boys, specifically, have access to meaningful and constructive educational opportunities.

A 2007 report from the Children's Defense Fund challenged everyone to become part of the solution of racial equity rather than continuing the current status quo of adding to the problem. Inconsistencies related to race are present in all key systems influencing children's life prospects including health care accessibility, low quality or lacking early learning experiences, longevity of foster care placements, and schools with inappropriate discipline policies that ultimately send more children into detention and prison. The authors of this report aim to leverage the responsibility that adults bear through personal actions for the poor outcomes of any child, noting that the United States does not offer equal opportunity nor does the country respect

and safeguard children equally. It is evident that issues of race and poverty generate a threatening environment for a child in this country.

Rouse and Fantuzzo (2009) found that there are many factors including poverty, family stress, and maltreatment that are not only directly linked to poor behavior and academic skills but that these factors also fall outside of the reach of educational systems. Rouse and Fantuzzo's research found that academic success is directly impacted by key risk factors, and that the type of risk factors children are exposed to make a difference. Further, maltreatment and homelessness seem to have the greatest negative impact on a child's success as these risks often involve other risk factors as well. With these findings, it is clear that significant partnerships with public agencies focused on the influences outside of school are key for preschool and early grade educators to develop and use. These partnerships can build on several federal mandates designed to ensure these risk factors are mitigated. For instance, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act includes mandates that ease some of the barriers and hardships related to educational success (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2015).

Walsemann and Bell (2010) found that while school segregation continues to cause distress in efforts towards equity, a complementary concern is segregation within schools. Integrated schools can perpetuate the effects of segregation by creating systems and processes that isolate students. Schools have a great deal of influence on the social and financial future of students, which is alarming when taken into consideration with the typical alignment of school resources along race and class lines. Tracking, a practice that assigns courses based on achievement is an example of how segregation within a school might occur. Walsemann and Bell further noted that as children are tracked into certain academic paths, their academic

opportunities are not only limited, but also their access to higher quality instruction is often thwarted as the best educators and resources are often targeted at those in higher level courses. The ultimate impacts of such segregative practices within a school are often just as detrimental as more broad forms of educational segregation, including impacts on health outcomes for students. Students faced with segregated learning environments within a school are not only more likely to exhibit lower self-efficacy but also more risky health behaviors (Eckes & Butler, 2014).

The confirmation that segregation created issues of lower self-esteem in minority children was an advocacy concern and ultimately a driving force in the initial efforts to desegregate schools. Issues of self-esteem for minority children were a foundational motive for the Brown decision that ended *de jure* school segregation (Agirdag, Houtte, & Van Avermaet, 2012; Eckes & Butler, 2014). For Agirdag et al. attention was not only focused on the self-esteem of students but also on the potential mitigating effects of positive relationships between educators and students; their finding suggest that quality relationships between educators and children are linked to improved educational spur and performance.

White Privilege

“My skin color was an asset for any move I was educated to want to make” (McIntosh, 1989, p. 3). As a white woman, McIntosh (1989) began her work in women’s studies, expanding her focus to an effort to address white privilege as she began to realize that by denying their evident advantage men were protecting themselves and perpetuating unequal treatment for women. She determined that much of the oppression from men was unconscious and trained and at the systems level rather than individual acts. These same factors are notably present when considering white privilege and the seemingly unaware white population. After listing 26

examples of the routine privileges white people encounter, McIntosh noted the discomfort that comes with acknowledging such unfairness in daily life. She further noted the underwhelming label of privilege and moved towards an understanding of the unfair power dynamic these assumed advantages offer, creating a dominant race. The imperative task is to not only see that race and racism affect everyone but to also use this unearned privilege to eliminate the unjust sway and power enjoyed by the white majority. Adding to McIntosh's (1989) suggestions, Noguera (2001) investigated the racial and educational considerations used in policy development and practice when addressing achievement gaps in well-resourced school systems. Trends revealed a historical reliance on the educational policies established to address the disparities. The case is made that bureaucratic factors not only inhibit progress but that political policies are needed in addition to educational efforts.

Structural white privilege refers to the system that supports a dominant group, white people, allowing for the maintenance of belief structures regarding racial inequities to a level of normalcy. There is a robust impetus to maintain this inequitable status quo and strong consequences if significant attempts to disrupt the system supporting white privilege are presented. This maintenance and ramification are seen at all levels of interaction, including individually and are present both internally and externally (McIntosh, 1988).

Providing an example from within the structures of education, in a limited qualitative study McMahon (2007) explored perceptions of white administrators regarding what it means to be white, social justice, and efforts to combat racism particularly in schools that were racially marginalized. While the sample was small and the findings not generalizable, the results indicated that white administrators struggle to acknowledge and address issues of race and social justice and are prone to viewing the issues and solutions at a broader level rather than as an

individual responsibility. Further noted is that all of the study participants were credentialed by higher education school administration programs yet seemed overwhelmingly unaware of the principles of social justice, equity, and racism. McMahon recommended future transformative efforts should not only focus on supporting individual administrators in addressing these issues in their schools with an informed and intentional approach but also on evaluating and improving higher education and school district professional development programs related to racial disparities and social justice and strategies to overcome established inequities. Further, McMahon suggested the use of a more political approach might allow a shift from the status quo of a white system to more equitable approaches to education.

Academic Achievement Gaps

Academic achievement gap concerns grow from school segregation concerns and persistent inequities. Even when schools are not segregated, gaps in achievement between white students and black students, as well as other minority groups, are common and often overwhelming. In their pioneering study Coleman et al. (1966) not only identified the notion of an achievement gap between black and white children, they also acknowledged that home environment plays a pivotal part in understanding a student's educational outcomes. Since 1970, when the first national educational progress report was published, evidence continues to mount that black children have been stricken by 40 years of unrelieved achievement gaps (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2009).

A 2007 Children's Defense Fund report described achievement data placing over 80% of black and Latino children, and 60% of white children below grade level for reading in grade 4. This, coupled with high dropout rates for black and Latino teens is indicative of the state of equity in achievement. Further, just fewer than 600,000 black males are serving prison sentences

while fewer than 40,000 black men secure a bachelor's degree each year. These trends were supported by a subsequent Children's Defense Fund report in 2012. According to the National Center of Education Statistics (2016), while graduation rates are improving for black students there is still great disparity. For the 2013-2014 school year, 87% of white students graduate on time, while only 73% of black students graduated on time and with a regular diploma. Despite graduating with a regular diploma and on time black children are still more likely to be unemployed and are less likely to go to college with a full-time commitment (Children's Defense Fund, 2007; Children's Defense Fund, 2012).

Often studies of the achievement gap focus on the negative behaviors and social risk factors associated with minority boys. Society's focus on the negative has led to a prevalence of discriminatory practices, particularly in education. Harris (2008) negated the assumption that upward social mobility is achievable for all through education and that blacks are making the choice to not participate. With improved achievement measures and access to data, it is much easier to identify strengths and improvement needs within the education system. The most striking weakness is the achievement gap, noted on almost all measures, for black males. With evidence of success pointing to implementation science rather than the reform programs alone, it seems evident that customizing for communities, and personalizing for students within the community, is required for equity to become reality (Kirp, 2010). This notion of attending to implementation implies that the school and the classroom offer a great deal of opportunity even when not considering the out-of-school situation or race related factors. Kirp also noted that potential efforts include reduced class size, meaningful and high quality home visits, fostering a growth mindset, and partnering with mentors.

Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, and Chen (2012) use an approach to studying race related achievement gaps, particularly for black boys, that not only considers developmental characteristics of young children but also unique situational factors such as context and time. Home and school are the most influential contexts for most young children (Huston & Bentley, 2010). Further, protective factors, including aspects of student engagement, can serve to mitigate risk when cultivated rather than ignored. Fantuzzo et al. recognized that a deficit-based approach dominates the research lens regarding achievement gaps and often misses the opportunity to learn about the resilience of those navigating the downside of segregation. Huston and Bentley further established that for black boys lower achievement is often coupled with risk experiences. Knowing that a child's development builds on previous experiences, the more exposure to risk factors, at home or at school, the more potential for a gap in achievement. Paramount to their approach, they intentionally used an inquiry approach to best result in findings that could translate to real action and change (Jackson & Moore, 2008).

Building on Fantuzzo et al.'s (2012) risk identification and subsequent research findings, Anderson (2012) proposed that there is also a need for a more detailed understanding of social risk. Of note are the different socialization experiences that shape the lives of children that often differ as other risk factors and race are added to the equation. These social differences further impact achievement potential when they do or do not fit with the dominant social patterns of schools particularly when challenges arise. Further, Barton and Coley (2010) identified 16 life factors that, when negated, are paralleled in academic achievement gaps: parent participation, student mobility, birth weight, lead poisoning, hunger and nutrition, reading to young children, television watching, parent availability, summer gain or loss, the rigor of the school curriculum,

teacher preparation, teacher experience, teacher turnover, class size, technology-assisted instruction, and school safety.

The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) is a sample of over 20,000 children entering kindergarten in 1998 and tracked through fifth grade. Using data from this study Fryer and Levitt (2006) examined academic achievement through third grade with an eye towards the gaps that emerge over time. After establishing that black students perform worse than white students over time, even in the same settings, they specifically tried to determine if the shift in skills emphasized was significant in the growing gap. While an answer to this question was not clear, the findings suggested that, even if lagging, black students might be on the same path as their white counterparts. The concern remains that as the skills get harder the lag will be more difficult to overcome.

Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reflect that with regards to math and reading assessments white and Asian students substantially outperform black and Hispanic students. Further, according to the High School Transcript Study (HSTS), black students are taking high-level courses in math and science at much lower rates than their Asian and white peers (Aud & KewalRamani, 2010). The combination of lower achievement and lack of access to higher level course material creates the perfect storm for an ongoing gap in achievement.

Magnuson and Duncan (2006) studied existing findings on the family origins of the ethnic and racial differences in test scores to determine how much of the achievement gap may be a result of the differences in childhood socioeconomic conditions. The investigation reveals that socioeconomic status alone only accounts for a small influence on the black–white achievement gap, even when considering the tests used and the group tested. Referencing the

gaps evident in the ECLS-K the speculation centers on the longstanding racial inequalities in the United States that have established contrasting socioeconomic situations. Further, as previously mentioned, it appears that in addition to these financial disparities, there are likely other related factors impacting the achievement gap such as parental mental health, family health, and developmental needs of the children which may reduce family resources by limiting parents' employment. In addition to differences in family income, disparities in family structure and education levels also seem to have a negative effect on the achievement of black students, particularly in the early years. Magnuson and Duncan questioned the best approach to corrective policy: focus on the relative or the absolute achievement of children, designing interventions accordingly. Considerations to other school readiness factors such as social skills, challenging behavior, and student engagement, are likely just as important to attend to and grow. In addition, and even more within control of schools is the potential teaching practices and expectations, and testing practices, and the variance seen for black children versus white children. Further interest in rectifying the historical achievement will wisely focus on developmental needs, familial considerations, and educational practices for all children rather than surface issues related to socioeconomic status.

Yeung and Pfeiffer (2009) found that the achievement gap for black and white children is evident prior to the start of formal education and the gap increased as children aged. Also using the data from the ECLS-K (Fryer & Levitt, 2006) demonstrated that differences in home and school environments are a large part of the explanation for early achievement gaps but that rationale fades as children proceed through grade levels. This notion that the achievement gap may be impacted differently by various factors depending on the developmental level of the child is relevant to uncovering root causes effectively. It appears that home environment may have a

more influential impact as the gap begins. The gap continues to widen with age, and with many more influencing factors involved, as children progress through school. Further, Yeung and Pfeiffer (2009) noted that earlier test performance is progressively indicative of future performance. These findings suggest that attending to family needs and potential risks when children are young may be effective in mitigating the achievement gap. Focusing on early math and literacy exposure at home as well as strong efforts to engage parents are more effective than later interventions (Heckman, 2006; Yeung & Pfeiffer, 2009). In addition, easing the hardships of poverty and positively influencing family expectations regarding child development and future education may have some tangible impact on alleviating gap issues. Based on the results of this study, Yeung and Pfeiffer advocate for differentiation of strategies depending on the age of the child, with a developmental and family focus being of utmost importance in the younger years.

In a search to uncover the factors that ensure the best possible outcomes for all children over time Early et al. (2013) investigated how prekindergarten students spend their time. Findings revealed that many of the practices believed to be effective are based on theory and practice rather than empirical research. Based on the observations children spend most of their time in free choice, educator directed, or daily routine activities. While this is commonly accepted as appropriate in the early childhood education field an understanding of what makes each experience high quality as well as what the best amount of time is for each has been unclear. Findings from this study revealed that more often than not children are engaged in non learning activities and this increases for groups that are poorer and from minority backgrounds. Further, results indicated that educator led activities were more often directed rather than scaffolded. While both methods have value scaffolding is a more meaningful and child-centered

approach to teaching. Ultimately, classrooms with more familial wealth and more often white were more engaging and rich in experiences.

Jennings (2012) evaluated the history of education reform including shortcomings and potential action towards improvement. Jennings noted three different reform efforts that have been paramount in the last half century: equity focused improvement, school choice, and standards centered change. Each has had an impact but not to the level or in the direction hoped and intended. Equity efforts are limited by funding structures and because their ultimate intent was not to improve education overall but rather to give access to all. School choice has seen little result mostly because alternatives to traditional public school do not typically result in better academic achievement; yet it continues to garner support from pleased parents. Finally, an effort was made to improve what students are taught but over time this standards focus took on an element of liability that overwhelmed the movement with an unpopular test-based accountability culture.

The U.S. Education Department (n.d.) shared the most recent Civil Rights Data Collection including data from almost all school districts in the 2013-2014 school year. The data reveal striking evidence that disparity continues to be widespread in public education. The analysis uncovered the fact that black students, at all grade levels, are suspended four times more often than white students and law enforcement is involved with black students, often with a school referral, twice as often as with white students. Further, the data show that secondary schools with more minority enrollment are not offering higher level courses (e.g., calculus, physics, chemistry, and algebra II) at the same rate primarily white schools do (Blad, 2016).

Achievement Gaps in North Carolina

North Carolina ranks 39th out of 50 in terms of the poverty rate, according to the Center for American Progress which considers 15 indicators including housing, unemployment, and income equity (Jarvis 2016). This ranking is likely linked to a trend in school achievement in North Carolina, particularly the growing black-white gap. Data from the 2015 school year revealed that there is a 20% difference in grade 3 math achievement and a 30% difference in grade 3 reading achievement on state tests between black and white students (North Carolina Department of Instruction, n.d).

Davis, Bhatt, and Schwarz (2015) further reported after the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was enacted in 2002 segregation increased, despite controlling for other related factors, with pronounced impact seem in districts with pre-existing accountability policies. This link between accountability and increased segregation is of interest given the historical advocacy for racial equity in education, "The notion that accountability may be undermining these efforts with subsequent attempts to improve achievement and further reduce racial disparities represents a compelling and noteworthy paradox in the quest for educational equity and opportunity" (Davis et al., 2015, p. 239). While the accountability movement seems to have had a positive impact on achievement, it also seems the impact on the achievement gap has been less than positive (Hanushek & Raymond 2005). In North Carolina Clotfelter et al. (2004) further found that accountability policies were linked to an increase in educator turnover particularly in low performing schools. In addition, as parents are faced with school choice Wells et al. (2009) found that parents tend to lean toward schools with excellent academic reputations per accountability measures rather than toward diverse populations. This further exacerbates the issues of segregation and equality. For example, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District in North

Carolina saw an increase in school segregation when released from a federal desegregation order. This decision allowed for choice, rather than diversity, to drive school enrollment and taken with the state's accountability policies and reporting, led better-resourced white families to move to better performing schools (Figlio & Lucas, 2004; Hess & Petrilli, 2006; Wells et al. 2009). Further, after receiving unitary status the district's school assignment policy has been linked as a cause to an increase in segregation based on socioeconomic status (Mickelson, Smith, & Southworth, 2009), drops in academic performance for black and white children (Mickelson, 2003), the movement of effective educators serving white children (Jackson, 2009), and a noticeable rise in crimes attributed to nonwhite males (Billings, Deming, & Rockoff, 2014). Despite segregation due to the unitary status and resulting policy changes the achievement gap between white and black students in the district has not changed (Vigdor, 2011).

Subsequent research revealed that desegregation under court order had a positive impact on the graduation rate of black students (Johnson, 2011). On the same note the achievement gap worsened after court involvement ceased (Hanushek et al., 2009). Ultimately, while the court decision may not have been segregatory in nature, it is certainly associated with negative outcomes along racial lines.

Boger (2002) predicted the impact of three education policy shifts in North Carolina, referring to the trifecta as the 'perfect storm' in the North Carolina Law Review. The end of desegregation orders, the implementation of accountability based on test scores, and unbalanced school resource allocation have created more inequities in education rather than alleviating the achievement gap. While not intentionally linked, the shift away from desegregation was coupled with accountability measures that were designed to set high expectations, develop a path to meet those expectations, track performance, use incentives and provide more local control. "The

theory assumed that, once unshackled from centralized bureaucratic constraints and given freedom to innovate in response to perceived local student needs, educational “managers” would employ ingenuity and initiative to tailor education services so as to achieve high goals” (p. 15). This, along with fiscal battles over how to disburse education funding, has upended the efforts to desegregate. Prior to these legal edits North Carolina was a southern state that had made great progress in desegregation, proving to be a model for the country. While much of the desegregation backslide can be seen in legislative policy, Boger noted that all three of these stormy elements were also impacted by legal decisions.

Bifulco and Ladd (2007) further explore North Carolina’s regression in desegregation by evaluating the impact of charter schools as part of the school choice movement. The long-lived debate about whether school choice options lead to segregation (e.g., families with more means are more able to take advantage) or whether it is an equally available opportunity that could address the achievement gap (e.g., all families have choice and therefore parents of black students in low performing schools may select a better performing charter school). The impact of charter schools is ultimately determined by the quality of programming and the choices parents make. The results of Bifulco and Ladd’s (2007) study indicated that North Carolina’s charter school system has led to further isolation for black students as well as poor students and is correlated with an increase in the achievement gap. Of note is the corresponding preference for black families to also choose segregated charter schools when making the choice. Bifulco and Ladd added that speculative reasoning might assume that these segregated schools may serve needs that are unmet in integrated settings which warrants attention.

In response to the state’s achievement gap, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction pledged to reduce the achievement gap by 2010, resulting in a Commission dedicated

to the cause. In revisiting the state's commitment 10 years later Williams and Jackson (2010) find that the charge essentially went unanswered. Potential root causes and possible solutions were identified, but nothing came of this early work. Despite having 10 years to address the gap, minority students still perform substantially lower than their counterparts and they have higher suspension, expulsion, and dropout rates coupled with lower rates of enrollment in advanced and gifted courses. Not only has a gap of 30+ points been maintained in third through eighth grades, and continuing in secondary grades, it also grew on two National Assessment of Education Progress measures. Williams and Jackson (2010) concluded that while the initial start to this effort was encouraging, the prioritization faded quickly, "... a rising tide will lift all boats, but it takes additional intervention to change the relationship between vessels." (p. 9)

At the end of their study in 2010 Davis et al. (2015) found that: segregation is increasing rather than decreasing, NCLB may have had an impact on this increase, even more so in states that had already implemented accountability policies. North Carolina has clearly felt the impact of accountability policies and NCLB, resulting in increased school segregation and inequitable educational opportunities. According to a statewide survey of over 600 educators in North Carolina (including educators from Asheville) completed by the Advancement Project (2012) the collective feedback reflects that "the state's focus on high-stakes testing as the means of accountability for students, teachers, and schools has been ineffective, counterproductive, and has created an incentive structure which denies North Carolina's young people the quality education they deserve" (p. 2). Further, almost half of those surveyed felt that the focus on testing and testing preparations served as a catalyst for disruptive behaviors, lower educator empathy (e.g., tolerance) and made students more likely to drop out of school.

Clotfelter et al. (2013) provided an analysis of the racial and financial diversity in the North Carolina public education system as of 2011-2012. The study finds while racial segregation was increasing in 2005-2006 it has since leveled off and declined in three of the largest counties. Further, districts that have adopted policies to ensure integrated schools (e.g., busing for economic balance) have had more success in maintaining balanced schools than districts using more choice-based approaches (e.g., Charlotte-Mecklenburg). The choice movement has also negatively impacted racial balance in charter schools which has ultimately negatively impacted the statewide racial balance, with public schools seeing more racially balanced schools. Economic imbalance actually continues to grow and outweighs racial imbalance in lower and middle grades across the state. Finally, schools with a high level of racial or socioeconomic imbalance struggle to recruit educators with strong qualifications. “Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that North Carolina faces continued challenges in its efforts to ensure that every student has access to a high quality public education.” (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vidgor, 2013, p. 3)

Using his own research, Balfanz (2014) shared evidence that of the almost 13,000 secondary schools in the country, most black males are not graduating from only about 660 of these schools. North Carolina has one of the highest rates of schools failing to graduate black males. Further, when diving deeper into the research, each of these schools is serving between 50 and 100 black males in ninth grade. And, evidence shows that often the likelihood of dropping out can be identified in sixth grade when consider attendance rates, academic performance, and behavior data. With this information we know where the problem lies and we have an opportunity to target interventions at the heart of it.

Liebowitz and Page (2014) evaluated the effects of school policy on housing choices using the experiences of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district. Driven by the existing literature about the negative impact of school and neighborhood segregation, they investigated the impact of a judicial decision on the housing choices of families with school age children. Their findings suggested that white families made the decision to move to areas with more white residents much more frequently after the court gave the district unitary status. Working from Clotfelter (2004), the authors speculated that the higher socioeconomic status enjoyed by more white families allowed a greater responsiveness to the revised district policies regarding school assignment with residential moves more of an option regarding school assignment. While the court did not have authority to address the impact of family choice and financial trends, the decision nonetheless created the opportunity for white families to resegregate. While under the desegregation order, the school district adopted a set of policies promoting diverse schools developed by John Finger of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In 1997, a parent sued the district after his daughter was not granted enrollment at her magnet school of choice based on her non minority status that ultimately led to the 2001 decision to grant the district unitary status.

One effort to address the achievement gap in North Carolina includes a focus on early learning programs. Pruette (2016) made the case for high quality early learning by noting a savings of \$16 for every one dollar spent, a rate supported by several longitudinal studies. Further, high quality programs that not only target children at risk but also extend to the third grade have the strongest impact and mitigate fadeout. Knowing that achievement gaps start early and are often stable by third grade, investment in early learning is a key strategy in addressing the achievement gap. North Carolina is currently investing in prekindergarten programming as

well as a formative assessment tool that embeds best practice expectations and extends from kindergarten through third grade (K-3 North Carolina Assessment Think Tank, 2013). Pruette (2016) reported that components of a high quality prekindergarten to third grade continuum include: effective teaching educators and leaders, high-quality teaching, assessments that are meaningful, social and emotional supports, families and communities that are authentically engaged, and alignment with other grades as well as within each specific grade.

Achievement Gaps in Asheville City Schools

Asheville City Schools (ACS) is 1 of 15 city school districts in North Carolina (NC). The school board is appointed by city council with only two other appointed boards statewide. ACS is also the beneficiary of a local “school tax”, which was set during the Great Depression to support public education and the district receives an additional local sales tax allocation.

Asheville City Schools ranked fourth among all NC public school districts for average local per pupil expenditure, largely due to the local supplemental tax and the local sales tax distribution (Asheville City Schools, 2014).

The five elementary schools are themed magnet schools that offer families a choice of schools as an effort to comply with the current court ordered desegregation plan. In addition to the five elementary schools ACS offers a standalone preschool campus, one middle school and two high schools serving approximately 4,300 students in an urban setting with membership increasing by nearly 17% from 2010 to 2013. In 2014 approximately 40% of the student body was from a minority group, making ACS one of the most diverse districts in the western part of the state. Just over 25% of the overall student body was black while nearly 60% of the student body is white. Approximately 7% of students identified as multi-racial, Hispanic students made up 7% of students and American Indian or Asian students made up about 1% of the student

population. All elementary schools qualified for Title I services with 46% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch (Asheville City Schools, 2014). Further, according to census estimates for 2014, 21% of families with children are living below the poverty level in Asheville, a rate slightly higher than the state average (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Asheville City School district's achievement between black and white students has consistently grown wider over the past decade. Recent data show that there is at least a 60% difference in grade 3 reading and math achievement on state tests between black and white students (Forbes, 2014). Further, "in Asheville 18 percent of the black population is in public housing, compared to a 3% average statewide." (Forbes, 2014) The recently updated 2015-2020 strategic plan for the district supports children through a vision to "learn, discover and thrive" by focusing on early childhood, academic achievement and whole child development (Asheville City Schools, n.d.).

Student outcomes span the continuum of achievement. In 2012-13 ACS students had the third highest district SAT scores in NC, with participation rate of 73%. The district regularly performs above state and national scores on the SAT. ACS also boasts a dropout rate below 3% and a graduation rate of over 80%. These figures are unfortunately shadowed by a staggering achievement gap between white and black students in third through eighth grade reading and math. In 2012-2013 ACS had an achievement gap of 54.5% while the NC gap was 29.3%. This gap coupled with state-wide challenges that include cuts to education funding, low educator salary funding, and cost of living increases (including increases to the state health insurance program) has made serving all children with equity as challenging as it is imperative (Asheville City Schools, 2014).

The district supports a preschool program as part of the district's efforts towards racial equity and ensuring all children are offered the benefits of high quality early learning experiences. The district blends funding from Head Start, the North Carolina Prekindergarten Program, Exceptional Children's services, Title I, child care subsidy, tuition, and local funds to ensure balanced, high quality classrooms. As of the 2015-2016 school year the preschool serves 162 children ages 2-5 with nine classrooms located at a stand-alone campus and one classroom located at Hall Fletcher Elementary School, the most diverse and disadvantaged school in the district. Two other elementary schools began offering preschool classrooms in the 2016-2017 school year as a strategy for extending early learning opportunities across the district and to begin to build home-school connections with families even earlier (Baldwin, 2016).

Engagement and Achievement Gaps

In a study including Asheville City Schools parents Howard (2015) found that most study participants felt they either had no influence or that their impact was only specific to their child. Most did not link this lack of impact to their lack of involvement with the exception of those who took on leadership responsibilities. Further, while parents noted that school communication was not lacking, they also offered that the communication typically centered on their child's behavior or academic issues. Also of note is that parents overwhelmingly reported that they sensed that the culture of school is aligned with a white culture, placing them out of the school culture. In addition, parents felt that those who were able to frequently be present at school were more likely to have strong relationships with school educators. Howard further noted that opportunities to foster true engagement with black parents include educator-initiated family partnership efforts, changing event times to allow more participation, and genuinely acknowledging cultural differences.

The process of student disengagement from school warrants just as much attention as the risk and protective factors known to be important in and out of school. For instance, in the early years poor attendance may be signaling a parent's lack of engagement which, in turn, often influences a student's engagement in school. Easing negative engagement trends in the early years may be a strategy to improving achievement gaps. Rouse, Fantuzzo, and LeBoeuf (2011) used a cumulative risk score based on six risk factors (child maltreatment, maternal education at birth, homeless shelter stay, prenatal care, preterm/low birth weight, and lead exposure). Existing research using these same factors reveals that academic achievement drops as the number of risk factors present increases. Once three or more risks were present student outcomes leveled out.

Compared to having no risk experiences, black boys who experienced one, two, or three or more risks demonstrated significantly lower reading and mathematics achievement. The most detrimental effect on achievement was seen for black boys with three or more risks. These results also align with prior research examining the effects of multiple risks on academic achievement for children (Lanza, Rhoades, Nix, & Greenberg, 2010; Rouse et al., 2011). (as cited in Fantuzzo et al., 2012, p. 573)

Without doubt, the accumulation of adverse childhood experiences not only disproportionately affects black boys but they also serve as barriers to interventions designed out of context (e.g., nationwide programs such as Early Head Start). To truly reduce the negative effects of multiple risk factors an authentic understanding and response to the unique experiences of affected children is necessary so that programming can accurately target their educational needs and academic growth. Further study findings supported the notion that higher levels of student engagement result in better math and reading scores even in the presence of some risk factors (Fantuzzo et al., 2012). McWayne (2012) noted that Fatuzzo et al. (2012) made a scientifically compelling argument in support of gaps in achievement as well as risks for black and white students. This research indicated that engagement at both the student and the family level is a key factor in weakening the link between risk and future achievement.

With attention to the vulnerability black boys face in school and a goal of finding ways to improve literacy outcomes, Matthews, Kizzie, Rowley, and Cortina (2010) analyzed gaps in achievement with the specific goal of improving learning-related skills at school and in life. Building on the knowledge that self-regulation and self-directed learning skills help students succeed, the authors aimed to uncover how black boys can be supported in engaged and maximized learning. The term “learning-related skills” references a set of skills: “task persistence, learning independence, flexible thinking, organization, and attention control that facilitate active and efficient learning” (as cited in Matthews et al., 2010, p. 759) Using learning-related skills achievement gaps in literacy, as well as the lack of a gap, were examined in elementary grades with attention to race and gender. Educators were asked to rate learning-related skills, externalizing challenging behaviors, and social skills over time. Employing growth curve analyses, a gap in literacy achievement was confirmed for blacks as well as boys, beginning in kindergarten and increasing over time. The study further confirmed that there was a higher rate of challenging behaviors and inferior social-emotional skills noted for black boys that is often coupled with a low socioeconomic status and lower levels of literacy at home. The presence of learning-related skills, or lack of, did account for a significant portion of both the gender and race gaps.

Taylor (2012) focused on ensuring black girls remain in the conversation about student achievement, particularly because their needs are just as significant as boys, yet they are excluded from the majority of the research. When there are achievement differences noted, it is important to uncover the root of the differences. Taylor noted that evidence from the research base consistently revealed that white boys fare much better than black boys and speculation focuses on the historically established risk that is often reality for black boys. While black girls

are often faced with similar risk factors, it appears that gender may have protective qualities for females. Taylor's findings suggested that girls demonstrate less reactivity and externalizing than boys and they exhibit more learning-focused and better social skills that may not only add positive learning engagement from the child but also add more positive family engagement to their repertoire of protective influences. Further noted, is that high educational engagement with the student diminishes the adverse impact of risk factors. As Fantuzzo et al. (2012) found, policies impacting engagement practices are malleable and within control of decision makers.

Kenigsberg, Winston, Gibson, and Brady (2016) added research supporting the notion that social networks are important and that the perception of a supportive social network are linked to children's impressions of support from their caregivers. When black caregivers feel supported their children feel supported. Further, their study revealed that even when under stress and experiencing stress-related side effects caregivers are effective assuming their networks are supportive. When the latter is not true issues arise. Their findings suggested that ensuring strong support networks for families is key for young children, particularly social networks. Beyond social connections, supports targeted at the adult needs in the home may enhance efforts directed at young children. Finally, even under stress, many black parents are clearly able to support their children when they are supported themselves.

Understandably, attendance is often assumed to be an important factor in school achievement. Gottfried (2009) contributed supporting research to the assumption that attendance impacts school performance for both elementary and middle grade students, specifically related to grade point average and outcomes on standardized tests. Using longitudinal data from one school district in an urban setting Gottfried found that not only is attendance important in a given school year it also has collective impact over time and particularly in the early grades.

Civil Rights Data Collection efforts offered data used by the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.) to conduct an inaugural investigation of attendance in almost all public schools, finding that 13% of students missed 15 or more days of school during the 2013-2014 school year. On the same note, educators across the country missed 10 days or more of school for non school related reasons, revealing that attendance is not just an engagement issues for students. This level of absence equates to 34 of the largest school districts in the nation closing for 3 full weeks during the school year (Blad, 2016).

Using data from a 2010 longitudinal study that linked school readiness at kindergarten to academic success later in school Applied Survey Research (2011) investigated how attendance in kindergarten and first grade are related to outcomes in third grade as well as the impact school readiness may have in relation to attendance and outcomes. The findings of this follow-up data review revealed that chronic absenteeism decreased by third grade, schools with better performance ratings had better attendance, and children from low-income families were absent more often. Further, children with no risks related to attendance in the early grades had much better academic outcomes in third grade, with chronic absenteeism in early grades linked to the poorest third grade outcomes. Further, findings indicated that entering kindergarten with solid school readiness skills is compromised by chronic absenteeism in the early grades. While the sample size for this study was small, limiting the findings, there is a clear association between the impact of attendance and of school readiness which offers opportunity for collaborative interventions.

Another contributing factor may be traditional methods intended to engage parents. These efforts from schools are often well intentioned but can often be planned from an egocentric perspective, inadvertently alienating families who may prefer to engage differently. Further,

Carter (2015) noted that educator bias may result in student engagement strategies grounded in a deficit model rather than a strengths-based perspective. If this is the case, family engagement is limited and influenced rather than realistic and authentic.

Strategies to Address Achievement Gaps

Kirp (2010) noted that as we learn about the makings of the achievement gap we also attain knowledge about how the gap can be effectively alleviated. For instance, there is support for individualized assistance for children, relevant family involvement in the school and curriculum, and developmentally appropriate approaches to growing literacy and math skills. These strategies, implemented effectively, are shown to be successful in helping to close the achievement gap and improve the lives of students. Kirp posited that the most important factor in favorable academic strategies is the value placed on sustained individual regard and awareness towards each student, which seems to benefit all, but black boys even more so. Rather than standalone interventions, more fluid approaches that adjust as children develop seem most effective. In reality, these types of successful approaches are underfunded and therefore not widespread, limiting their effectiveness for addressing the achievement gap. Kirp also reported that further evidence reveals that attention to the way students think about themselves and their abilities is just as important as effective educational approaches. A child's ability to assess his or her own potential is no doubt grounded in his or her own beliefs and ideas about intelligence.

Education Policies and Practices

Kozol (2005) highlighted implementation concerns as he investigated the decline in the quality of education provided to minorities. As he explored classrooms he noted his distaste for a particular curriculum design model because of its seemingly rigid intent. What he later learned

was that the model was less of an issue than the implementation, “It struck me as a way of locking-down a child’s capability for thinking rather than an aperture to understanding” (p. 328). Working with educators and parents in a participatory manner may enlighten all to such flaws and potential solutions.

Gutman (2006) analyzed the effect of the goal mindset of parents and students and the assumed goal structures of the classroom and self-efficacy in math as children transition to high school. Using survey data and interviews from 50 black children and their families from a low-income area Gutman found that students who accepted more ability-growth goals in high school math were more likely to develop strong self-efficacy and ultimately performed better than their peers. Further, those who assumed classroom goals were more about improved ability rather than performance had more positive self-efficacy outcomes. Finally, children whose parents adopted a more of a mastery, rather than performance stance had better grades. This study indicates that a mastery orientation towards academic goals may be more beneficial than a performance orientation.

As Kozol (2005) noted, one factor impacting the achievement gap is the proper implementation of instructional strategies, curriculum, the educational environment, and other interventions. Brown (2012) investigated the accountability behind student success in higher education, particularly whether the student carried the entire burden as traditionally assumed. With practitioner responsibility in mind, Brown (2012) found that “Institutions that fail to examine existing practices, policies, and structures that affect the outcomes of students from racial-ethnic backgrounds contribute to the equity gap in outcomes” (p. 158).

Jennings (2012) noted that current reform efforts must be courageous and must center on the necessities of teaching and learning: quality instruction, quality curriculum and adequate

funding measures. Efforts towards change must not be top-down or forced from the outside; rather a focus on teaching and learning must be fully infused across all levels of education, including educator preparation. Jennings noted that human resources, namely educator quality, training, and pay, are the biggest barriers to improved student outcomes. Further, funding structures in general are in need of repair, as higher income districts tend to have higher per pupil spending perpetuating inequities with no hope for change. Finally, family motivation is a key element to student success and when it cannot be nurtured then schools need to offset this missing link.

Grierson and Gallagher (2009) examined the implementation of a literacy program and related educator practices. The participating educators received support from a demonstration initiative that the researchers found to have positively impacted the literacy program's effects on student achievement. Primary grade educators observed in a demonstration classroom, selected for the educator's model practices three times for specific purposes: environmental design, literacy teaching methods, and assessment and subsequent planning. The observing educators reported that they found this method of professional learning to be most effective, with educator modeling of effective practices providing the necessary insight to confidently implement similar strategies. Further, the educators reported a strong sense of peer support with the demonstration educator through debriefing sessions and mentoring. The structure of the project also seemed influential. The connectedness of the observation schedule, focus, preparation, and follow-up created a sense of possibility and self-efficacy in the observing educators. Finally, Grierson and Gallagher found that the educators appreciated a cohort of fellow observers for discussion and reflective purposes not only immediately following the observation but also once they returned

to their own schools. All reported feeling as if the project was so helpful that it should have continued past the planned timeline.

Using class sizes in North Carolina, Hansen (2013) examined how to make the most of educators who make a real difference. Using longitudinal state data from fourth through eighth grades a modest leaning towards enrolling more students in the classes of effective educators is noted. Despite this inclination, the top 25% of educators only serve about 25% of students. While North Carolina seems to consider educator performance as class size is determined this effort is limited. The relevance of educator assignment appears to gain importance as children enter the intermediate years, particularly eighth grade. The results of investigating class assignment with regards to educator quality revealed that essentially slight adjustments in the way that class assignments occur may lead to notable improvements in learning. The amount of improvement seems to increase in the higher grades. “Intensively reallocating eighth-grade students—so that the most effective educators have up to twelve more pupils than the average classroom—may produce gains equivalent to adding roughly two-and-a-half extra weeks of school” (Hansen, 2013, p. 6). While the results of this study reflected improved academic achievement for those students lucky enough to be assigned to an effective educator, disparity in access to effective educators persist. Not only are disadvantaged students less likely to be placed with an effective educator, there are often fewer opportunities given the general educator shortage in high-poverty areas. Ultimately, it is promising to consider educator assignment and class size, along with other strategies rather than in isolation, when aiming to improve student achievement. In this case a smaller class size may not always be better.

Blad (2016) reported that inconsistencies in discipline practices start prior to formal education in preschool. In 2013-2014 black children are doled 47% of preschool suspension

while only making up 19% of the U.S. preschool enrollment population. Recently, the Wake County school board addressed issues related to suspensions and expulsions, adjusting policies to give principals more flexibility to keep students in school when safety concerns are minimal (Hui, 2016). The move is in response to current research demonstrating that out-of-school time is detrimental and the change is ultimately designed to keep kids in school. Blad contended that regardless of intent, a concern remains that students will simply be placed in alternative programs, limiting their due process rights and manipulating school system data. Procedural support will ensure this policy is implemented with children in mind first and foremost.

Zaslow et al. (2016) released evidence that in preschool high quality instruction and interaction between educators and children matter to a great extent. This study revealed that high quality instruction was particularly successful in improved literacy and math outcomes. Further, the longer children were enrolled in a consistently high quality program, the better their outcomes in language, literacy and math. These findings support increased attention to the quality indicators that matter most, particularly interactions and instruction in early childhood education settings.

One effort to address these concerns is the FirstSchool project from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Ritchie & Gutmann, 2014). This effort aims to close the achievement gap by improving early learning experiences for children in prekindergarten through third grade. The data driven process includes a review of how children are engaged, the type of instruction, and the content that is provided every minute of the day. Using this data, in an informed effort educators are supported in shifting practices to ensure experiences provided are best meeting the needs of all children served. The goal is to provide a school and classroom culture of caring, competence, and excellence for all resulting in a decreased achievement gap.

The North Carolina School Superintendents Association (NCSSA) (2015) released a guide outlining six objectives and strategic imperatives for North Carolina's public education system. Based on the performance of schools statewide as well as current evidence-based practices and North Carolina's falling national status the NCSSA was compelled to acknowledge shortcomings by developing goals that clearly address underlying issues. With a focus of ensuring all students graduate prepared for life, the guide leverages a need to ensure assessment systems are appropriate and balanced to reflect not only achievement but also growth. In addition, ensuring teaching and learning practices are of the highest quality and provided by the top performing educators is paramount to statewide improvement. A focus on the future includes full support of digital learning efforts as well as developing a strong education workforce. Finally, appropriate funding is key. North Carolina is currently ranked 46th in the nation for public education funding and NCSSA strives to rank 25th by 2025.

Relationships

Findings from Ewing and Taylor (2012) are linked to educator preparation and practice. To begin, their findings suggested that there is empirical support for ongoing consideration to the significant role of the educator-student relationship as an important factor related to a child's adaptive behavior during the early years of education; this relationship can be a risk factor or a protective factor depending on the quality of interactions and support. Of importance is the educator's awareness of potentially poor relationships, particularly with boys, and efforts to improve the relationship. Findings suggest that for girls, close relationships can strengthen behavior related skills but that caution should be taken to not develop too much dependence, which can be counterproductive. Finally, as long as educator-student relationships are positive and supportive, a racial or ethnic match between the two is of less significance.

Hughes and Kwok (2007) found that black students and their families are less likely to have relationships with educators that are supportive and focused on positive outcomes for the child. To improve educator-student relationships there are several proven successful strategies. Ewing and Taylor (2012) highlighted the idea of intentionally ensuring several positive individual interactions so that when a negative interaction does occur there is a positive relationship in place already (Pianta, 1999). These supportive relationships are seen more often in truly desegregated settings where student expectations are high and interactions are genuinely caring. When students feel valued and have meaningful relationships with educators, they typically perform better and exhibit improved attitudes of self-worth. A positive relationship seems to diminish the harmful effects of segregation, current or historical. Ensuring a strong background in current child development research as well as an understanding of the importance of positive, supportive relationships with children is imperative. Further, the impact of not having a positive relationship not only negates the benefits noted it also seems to further perpetuates other detrimental aspects of segregation (Agirdag et al., 2012).

Swick and Williams (2006) provided a review of Urie Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological perspective as it provides assistance for understanding how to help families dealing with stress. While helping families is an admirable goal to be effective it must be evidence-based and responsive to the family's needs and rights to self-determination. Bronfenbrenner is clear to warn against doing harm, including avoiding detrimental practices such as unprofessional boundaries and typecasting or labeling families. Using Bronfenbrenner's systems model Swick and Williams recommended creating caring approaches that develop in partnership with families that respond to stressors with family insight, facts about the stressors, and empowerment to use the supports designed. To do this families must be supported in creating their own caring systems, in being

empowered in their larger systems, in developing appropriate responses to stressors, and through reflection and program advocacy.

The Trauma Resource Institute (2016) offers a model for supporting resiliency in the face of trauma that has been successful in helping individuals by focusing on the development of skills that help alleviate natural stress responses resulting in a return to a state of balance internally and externally. The underpinning of the Community Resiliency Model (CRM) is that it empowers individuals to support themselves and therefore be more able to use the same skills to support the community around them. Success has been noted with those facing all types of trauma related to socioeconomic struggles, ethnic and racial disparities, and natural catastrophes as well as man-made disasters. Research is growing in support of this model, as it seems to create a more adaptive, compassionate, and effective response in individuals as well as communities (Citron & Miller-Karas, 2013). Many school systems are beginning to adopt this model to support educators themselves as well as to better understand and support the need for resiliency in many children, particularly those who are marginalized. Asheville City Schools has begun implementing this model in several schools with plans to roll out a system-wide approach.

Ewing and Taylor (2009) provided evidence to support the implication that differences in the quality of educator-student relationships are key to school success, particularly in the early years. Further, when there is conflict, and even dependency, a poorer child outcome is predictable. These results indicated that there were no differences in gender regarding conflict, but that boys were identified more often as having more challenging behaviors and less academic ability. With regards to race, the results indicate that when there is a match between educator and child educators reported relationships were more positive but the findings did not support this information; a match did not seem to mitigate negative relationships.

In an effort to identify and support quality teaching and learning from birth to 12th grade, Teachstone (2014) developed an empirically supported classroom observation tool to support educators and schools in continuous improvement efforts. Based on the assumption that early learning is essential to success, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) supports the development of how to provide quality early learning experiences. CLASS hones in on specific dimensions of experiences for the children in a classroom. Key to the tool is a focus on quality educator-child interactions as well as high-quality teaching strategies. Observation results are intended to support educators in developing the strongest practices within the dynamics and resources of the classroom. Findings suggest that classrooms with the highest quality interactions, as assessed using CLASS, result in the best child outcomes for all children.

Modry-Mandell, Gamble, and Taylor (2007) studied the emotional support provided by a child's family and in particular relationships with siblings as factors impacting a child's adaptive, or nonadaptive, behavior in school. Findings suggested that positive and supportive relationships with siblings negated challenging behaviors and positively impacted school readiness more than any other family-related emotional factor. A complimentary suggestion to temper the potential social incongruencies is to engage elders or mentors from the communities of those who are disenfranchised in school, often black males. The idea is to not only mediate the relationships but to also serve as a support for academics. When these connections between home communities and school are made students may be more willing to make the often socially awkward leap towards school success (Anderson, 2012).

Child Development and Early Interventions

Early interventions with young children are often touted as the silver bullet for addressing the achievement gap before children enter school. Vogel et al. (2010) provided evidence that while comprehensive federal early childhood programs such as Early Head Start provide positive effects related to alleviating the achievement gap, these outcomes fade by the fifth grade. The only effect that reflected a lasting impact was with regards to social and emotional development at age 5. There was also indication that some subgroups saw greater positive outcomes earlier and therefore the impact lasted longer. For instance, black children had more positive outcomes related to receptive language and social emotional development, and their families demonstrated greater improvements in parenting skills. The children in this subgroup had more significant impacts at the fifth grade mark. Further, the Early Head Start program seemed to have even stronger effects for families who participated in the home-based program option particularly related to social and emotional development and approaches to learning when they entered kindergarten. Their families also demonstrated lasting impacts with regards to family wellbeing and mental health and economic self-sufficiency. These findings suggested that a focus on children with the greatest risk is imperative but may also be one reason impact fades. A further consideration is the alignment of a high quality early learning program to the shift in programming and expectations in elementary grades.

Matthews et al. (2010) further supported the notion that high quality teaching practices include a keen awareness of child development, including the need to positively emphasize learning related skills and ensure meaningful educator-child relationships that support emotional development as well as the development of skills needed for strong academic performance.

Yeung and Pfeiffer's (2009) findings that achievement gaps are evident even prior to traditional schooling prompted the authors to advocate for differentiation of strategies depending on the age of the child, with a developmental and family focus being of utmost importance in the younger years. Bowman and Ray (2012) highlighted the significance of and trouble with differentiating between children who exhibit typical development but have lacked exposure to school readiness opportunities and children with true delays in development. The implication of this differentiation, despite the learning difficulties both conditions present, is that serving the children in each situation requires distinctly different approaches, educationally and fiscally.

As Matthews et al. (2010) noted, the presence of learning related skills accounts for a significant portion of both the gender and race gaps. It seems a shift in focus from curbing behavior to a more supportive approach of facilitating the development of these skills in all children, particularly black males as related to literacy development, would be most beneficial. Matthews et al. assert that educators are well poised to do this work.

Practices to shift the entrenched approach to behavior management and discipline are available. Hemmeter, Fox, Snyder, and Algina (2014) highlighted the use of the Pyramid Model to support the development of social-emotional skills and to address challenging behaviors in early learners. This model is focused on promoting the development of strong social and emotional skills, using preemptive strategies, and implementing appropriate interventions when needed, based on empirically supported research. Hemmeter et al. (2014) found that when educators implement Pyramid Model practices with professional development and coaching support their practices were enhanced and child outcomes improved.

Blad (2016) reported that the most recent iteration of national education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), might serve as a catalyst for change in how minority children are

served and treated. With the new expectations set forth in ESAA, states are required to develop accountability efforts that focus on more than just performance on tests and graduation numbers, to include areas of quality and support. Replacing the No Child Left Behind Act, ESSA offers opportunity for districts and states to identify and target technical assistance towards schools with a need to improve the engagement of teachers, to reduce extreme habitual absenteeism, or to improve a less than desirable school climate (Blad, 2016).

Photovoice

Photovoice is an engagement method designed to offer people the opportunity to recognize, represent, and improve their relationships and surroundings using photographs and dialogue (Wang, 1997). To counteract a negative engagement trend the photovoice process is intended to give appropriate power to disenfranchised groups. Further, the photovoice process is a participatory action effort that is rooted in feminist theory and is marked by collaboration. Participatory action efforts are reputable for being ethically strong, particularly when studying disenfranchised groups (Patton, 2015). Allowing the participants to design the process and control the trajectory of this photovoice project was meant to be empowering and meaningful given the historical and particularly emotional topic of racial equity in education. According to Wang and Burris (1997), “photovoice is a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique” (p. 369). Moreover, with learning as the goal, photovoice methodology has three consistent objectives: “(1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers” (p. 369). This technique is often used in public health to support disenfranchised groups in advocating for better care.

More social service fields have adopted the model as it truly empowers groups to demonstrate, speak about, and advocate for their own needs in appropriate forums using a compelling approach (photographs and accompanying stories). Brennan Ramirez, Baker, and Metzler (2008) focused on projects addressing issues of health equity. Through the use of photovoice the Poder es Salud (Power for Health) project addressed issues of racial inequity by identifying priorities and developing partnerships. The findings indicated that participating groups may differ in perspective but by building trust they were able to share in the development of solutions. For example, photovoice has been used by to support immigrants in positively affecting public policy in St. Jamestown, Canada. The project ultimately led to the development of improved services and overall well being. Haque and Eng (2011) noted, “the results indicate *Photovoice* can be used to generate dialogue on community concerns and priorities and promote community action” (p. 16). The photovoice approach appears to be a viable avenue for spurring dialogue and subsequent action regarding racial equity in education.

Chapter Summary

History, as well as current trends, shows that racial inequity is an undeniable and unacceptable obstacle in education (Children’s Defense Fund, 2012). The needs are so personal and entrenched that traditional change methods are not typically effective. Evidence suggests that policy changes, relationship building, quality teaching practices, and authentic engagement with parents and the community are effective in alleviating barriers to high achievement outcomes for all children.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to uncover perceptions of racial inequities and potential facilitators of equity within Asheville City Schools. Asheville City Schools, still under a desegregation order, struggles with a staggering achievement gap. The school district currently operates one preschool campus, five elementary schools, one middle school and two high schools in an urban setting. The Youth Justice Project (2016) reports that Asheville City Schools served nearly 4,300 students in 2015-2016 with 61.2% of students being white while 22.8% were black. In 2014-2015 black students accounted for 73.1% of short-term suspensions resulting in the largest discipline disparity in the state. Asheville City Schools also had the largest achievement gap in North Carolina between white and black students on end-of-grade exams in grades 3-8 as well as high school end-of-course exams. Further, the recently updated 2015-2020 strategic plan for the district supports a vision of “learn, discover and thrive” by focusing on early childhood, academic achievement and whole child development (Asheville City Schools, n.d.). A qualitative study is best to explore the complexity of racial inequities and the potential for equity. Such a historical and sensitive issue requires exploration of specific facets rather than generalizability.

In this inquiry the researcher used transcripts from a 2016 Asheville City Schools Preschool photovoice project focusing on racial equity. The researcher examined race and the impact of inequities on young school children by identifying perceptions and themes from educators and parents who voluntarily participated in facilitated group conversations, dialogue,

and planning of action by using self-taken photographs to represent their viewpoints. The use of a participatory activity, photovoice, with an eye towards impact is a novel approach to creating a safe space to share and grow towards equity in education.

A case study design is useful when the central purpose of a study is to understand what people have experienced in a particular context. The idea is to employ the participants to focus the analysis (Patton, 2015). Through the use of photovoice, participant-taken photographs were used to guide facilitated group discussions regarding racial equity between preschool educators and parents. The researcher used transcripts from the group sessions. All transcripts were deidentified and reviewed by participants prior to use in this research. Themes of strengths, barriers and solutions were identified through careful analysis of the transcripts from group sessions.

Research Questions

This research focuses on the enduring issue of racial inequity in education. While much can be enumerated regarding inequities and performance gaps, the resulting quantitative data has done little to positively impact achievement and close gaps. Qualitative research may serve to better determine potential starting points by uncovering awareness and recognition of inequities. Further, the inclusion of an empowered parent perspective could strengthen the findings. As Carter (2015) noted, “We have professional literature reminding us that when families are involved in their children’s schools, children are more likely to succeed. But parents will often tell you that the tone embedded in the call for parent involvement is frequently off-putting, rather than inspiring parents to bring their funds of knowledge to help shape their child’s education” (p. 35). The researcher aims to use a distinct approach to respectfully and authentically engage parents.

Understanding parent and educator perceptions about the presence of racial inequity may be important in identifying potential remedies. Knowing how these perceptions align and vary are key in identifying potential strengths as well as room for growth regarding racial equity. Further, exploring perceptions about the impact of racial inequity is also imperative. Recognizing the impact of racial equity (and inequities) is important to progress; analyzing these perceptions will provide information to guide potential intervention planning. Next, understanding the perceptions of preschool parents and educators about assets that support racial equity is imperative. An awareness of what educators and parents see as strengths regarding racial equity is key to understanding what is working and what can be built upon. In addition, understanding the perceptions of parents and educators about barriers to racial equity is just as important. Understanding the perceived barriers can support the understanding of strengths as well as inform possible next steps. Finally, understanding the perceptions of parents and educators about potential facilitators for improving racial equity will assist with linking strengths, needs, and strategies for improvement that are meaningful, in context, and more likely to be successful. Engaging parents and educators in efforts to understand the roots of inequity may be an effective way to establish educational efforts that are designed to serve all students. The researcher seeks to understand the persistence of racial inequities in education, particularly in Asheville City Schools. Essential to this guiding inquiry, the following research questions guided this study:

RQ 1 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about the presence of racial inequity?

RQ 2 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about the presence of racial inequity?

RQ 3 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about the impact of racial inequity?

RQ 4 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about the impact of racial inequality?

RQ 5 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about assets that support racial equity?

RQ 6 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about assets that support racial equity?

RQ 7 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about barriers to racial equity?

RQ 8 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about barriers to racial equity?

RQ 9 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about facilitators of racial equity?

RQ 10 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about facilitators of racial equity?

Researcher's Role

When conducting qualitative inquiry, the researcher serves as the tool. The personal influences that draw a researcher to the topic not only drive the interest in the topic they also shape the approach to analysis as well as the integrity of the findings (Patton, 2015). In this study, my role as a researcher was to analyze prepared, deidentified transcripts that have been reviewed by photovoice participants prior to offering consent to participate in the study and prior to my receipt of the transcripts for research purposes. As the director of Asheville City Schools Preschool, the photovoice project had my support, but I intentionally did not attend the photovoice sessions to ensure my role as an administrator as well as my role as the researcher to mitigate any impact on the comfort level of participants. As the researcher, my role was to code, analyze and make sense of the dialogue recorded in the transcripts with a purpose of identifying themes, perceptions, and potential action towards equity (Xu & Storr, 2012).

Participants

Using a form of maximum variation sampling, the participants for this qualitative study were self-selected educators and parents of enrolled children who chose to participate in a photovoice project using the lens of racial equity (Patton, 2015). In early winter 2016 the photovoice planning group began recruiting educators and parents from Asheville City Schools Preschool. An orientation was held on March 10 and four sessions were convened beginning March 17 and ending by April 14. Participants were encouraged to take part in all sessions but were not excluded if a session was missed. There were 17 total participants, including 8 parents, 8 educators (3 of whom also served as facilitators) and 1 participant who served as a parent, educator, and facilitator.

Given the nature of the photovoice project, specifically the vulnerability required, it is important that participants were fully aware of the personal and emotional risks involved in allowing the use of group transcripts despite deidentification. The photovoice project planners asked educators and parents to explore issues of racial inequity in two heterogeneous groups, and then share between groups, in an attempt to ensure balanced and authentic dialogue. Each participant is considered a key informant of his or her group (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). Each small group size was limited (six to nine participants) to ensure the comfortable and safe environment for dialogue, which is essential to photovoice methodology. Those serving as strictly session planners and transcriptionists are not considered participants.

Data Collection Methods

The data for this study were collected directly from transcripts of the Racial Equity photovoice group sessions. Each of the four sessions centered on a specific prompt, typically aimed at a problem per photovoice protocol, to focus the related photo taking and dialogue. The

whole group agreed upon each prompt the week prior to the related session with the first question being determined at the orientation event. During the sessions participants used self-taken photographs to facilitate discussion regarding the previously agreed upon prompt. The first session also included an icebreaker prompt. While the whole group began and ended the sessions together, they typically split into smaller groups for the majority of the dialogue. The racial equity photovoice prompts were as follows:

- Session 1 Ice Breaker (whole group): What is your first memory of being aware of race or differences?
- Session 1 Prompt (small groups): What is your story, what is our history regarding this conversation about race, racial equity, and how it affects children, our kids, and the school system?
- Session 2 Prompt (whole group): How do adults talk-teach about race with kids?
- Session 3 Prompt (small groups): What are the barriers to closing the achievement gap?
- Session 4 Prompt (small groups): What do children need to succeed and thrive, particularly children who are at risk of falling into the achievement gap?

Participants reviewed the transcripts as part of the photovoice project to ensure accuracy through a form of member checking and an analysis process that includes participants (Carlson, 2010). The transcripts were deidentified in a way that protects the identity of participants through the use of unique and anonymous identifiers instead of real names or initials. Further, participation was voluntary and the extent to which participants contributed to the conversation and allowed their comments in the transcripts was self-determined. In addition, initial and

ongoing facilitation honored the photovoice methodology regarding prompts and questioning to guide the conversation without influencing the outcomes.

Given the participatory nature of photovoice and the outreach to populations that may be considered vulnerable, potential ethical issues are attention worthy. To address many of the comfort issues that may arise, the photovoice participants were given control over the direction of the dialogue, the sharing of their photographs, and the actions taken as a result of their work. Further, participation was voluntary and much of the design of the project was guided by participant preference and feedback throughout the project (Photovoice, 2009).

Data Analysis Methods

Inductive analysis was used to integrate the information to identify themes from the group sessions. Transcribed data were organized and the information was coded to describe, categorize and develop patterns. Coding included participants' thinking about racial equity, including relationships and social structures. To properly analyze the raw, unexamined transcripts a coding strategy was developed. Coding focused on participants' perspectives as well as participants' thinking about people, systems, and practices. Coding was developed through the first review of the data, which generated preliminary codes, and the system was refined during each stage of review. After an initial cursory coding process, transcribed data were manually and systematically categorized using the research questions for organization of findings. Finally, themes or categories were developed by grouping codes together (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). Themes and patterns were categorized using the schema developed based on the purpose of this study. The data were used to develop generalizations about the group's insight into racial inequity and potential paths to equity. The analysis results illuminate strengths and barriers regarding racial inequity as well as potential facilitators of equity in education (Trochim, 2006).

Trustworthiness and Credibility

To ensure trustworthiness or credibility of the data, the transcripts were reviewed by a group of trained photovoice facilitators and the trends and themes identified by the group were reviewed with the participants for further clarification and confirmation (Shenton, 2004). McMillian and Shumacher (2010) outline the factual soundness, or trustworthiness, of qualitative research by focusing on interpretations that have a strong and shared meaning between the researcher and the participants. Credibility refers to the consistency of the data and findings in terms of representativeness as well as for reconstructability by others (Patton, 2015). To increase both trustworthiness and credibility this study made use of transcripts that were recorded, transcribed, and then reviewed by participants. Participant review rendered the transcripts credible as well as dependable, while recording ensured the data are confirmable (Patton, 2015; Trochim, 2006c). Credibility was also ensured by clearly outlining the methodology and steps taken specific to this research using the IRB approved informed consent form. This allows readers to assess the quality of the study while allowing for replication to the extent possible. Further, the use of verbatim accounts and language strengthened the alignment of participant and researcher perspective. Finally, discrepancies in the data were actively sought to strengthen the overall findings (McMillian & Shumacher, 2010).

Ethical Considerations

At the time the project and subsequent study occurred, the researcher served at the Director of Asheville City Schools Preschool. To mitigate the impact of this dual role, the researcher did not attend the photovoice sessions and she ensured the transcripts were deidentified prior to analysis to assure complete confidentiality to the participants. Approval for this research was received from the Asheville City Schools Superintendent as well as the

Institutional Review Board, both of which have full knowledge of the project and my dual role. As noted, confidentiality concerns have been addressed through deidentification of the transcripts and, in addition, participants had the opportunity to review the deidentified transcripts prior to my access as a researcher. Participation in this research was completely voluntary, with photovoice participants being offered an informed consent process to opt in or out of the study. No one opted out resulting in the use of full transcripts. Common issues in qualitative research such as intrusiveness, privacy, vulnerability, and potential harm have been diminished through the use of an informed consent process implemented after the completion of the photovoice project, which included participant review of transcripts prior to my access. Finally, in my review of the transcripts a bias may exist towards assumptions to confirm my own perceptions. Every attempt was made to keep the bias in check through a rigorous and thorough coding and classification process (Patton, 2015).

Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 defined the methodology and approach for this study. The logic and grounds for using a case study technique to design the inquiry was noted. A case study design was selected as method to understand the experiences of parents and educators with regards to racial inequities and to ensure their viewpoints focused the analysis. Using a core question as a guide the inquiry research questions were presented and outlined. The researcher's role was defined including potential biases and the researcher's role as the research tool. Participant sampling as well as participant characteristics were explained. Seventeen total participants, including eight parents, eight educators, and one participant who served as a parent, educator, and facilitator provided consent and participated in the study. Data collection methods that involved the use of deidentified transcripts from photovoice sessions were described. Procedures for analyzing the

data were shared including the use of coding to inductively illuminate perceptions and themes of racial inequity as well as potential facilitators of equity. Issues related to trustworthiness and credibility were identified in addition to strategies to ensure both are present and strong in the findings. And finally, ethical considerations were outlined including the steps taken to ensure ethical practices throughout the study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this case study is to uncover perceptions about racial inequity within Asheville City Schools as well as potential facilitators of equity. While functioning under a desegregation order dating back to 1970, Asheville City Schools struggles with a sizeable achievement gap between black and white students (Associated Press, 1991). Racially, 61.2% of the student body is white while 22.8% is black (Youth Justice Project, 2016). Ten underpinning questions informed the overarching goal of understanding the persistence of racial inequities in education.

By participating in semi-structured group dialogue as part of the photovoice project, study participants described their experiences with racial inequities in education. Parents and educators discussed their own experiences with issues of racial equity from personal as well as professional viewpoints. Further, perceived experiences of their children and students were also detailed. Potential barriers to and facilitators of racial equity were highlighted based on the participants' collective experiences and perspectives. The analyses and research findings of the deidentified transcripts for the group sessions are presented in Chapter 4.

Trustworthiness and credibility were derived from the use of transcripts that were recorded, transcribed, and inspected by participants. Participant review ensured the transcripts are credible as well as dependable, while recording ensured the data are confirmable (Patton, 2015; Trochim, 2006c). Credibility was also achieved by clearly outlining the methodology and steps taken specific to this research using the IRB approved informed consent form. Further, the

use of verbatim accounts and language strengthened the alignment of participant and researcher perspectives. As noted, discrepancies in the data were actively sought to strengthen the overall findings (McMillian & Shumacher, 2010). Finally, qualitative data from the transcripts were coded according to research concepts and emergent themes.

The four semi-structured group sessions occurring during March and April, 2016 generated the data used in interpreting and analyzing the perceptions of racial inequity as well as potential facilitators of equity among parents and educators. As part of the photovoice project all participants received a typed copy of the transcripts and were encouraged to thoroughly review the recorded accounts resulting in increased credibility for the study. This process of member checking was embedded in the photovoice project to ensure ongoing dialogue was based in accurate accounts. The process of member checking encouraged the participants to review their responses as well as the facilitator's interpretations and transcriptions of their dialogue. A total of seventeen participants received role-specific identifying codes that varied from transcript to transcript as the group size and make-up varied for each session. For instance, sessions one, three, and four started and ended as whole group conversation, while the specific question and photos for the week were conducted in smaller groups. Session two was conducted entirely as a whole group to gauge participant preference as well as quality of dialogue. Further, all participants were not able to participate in all four sessions.

Description of Participants

Using a form of maximum variation sampling the participants for this qualitative study were self-selected educators and parents of enrolled children who chose to participate in a photovoice project using the lens of racial equity (Patton, 2015). In early winter 2016 the photovoice planning group began recruiting educators and parents from Asheville City Schools

Preschool. The group of 17 voluntary participants was made up of adults who were parents or educators at Asheville City Schools Preschool during the project. While the dialogue often vacillated between professional and personal experiences, eight were identified as parents and eight were identified as educators. In addition, one participant, who was involved as a parent in a previous photovoice project, served as a facilitator in addition to her roles as a parent and an educator; her comments were delineated based on the role she appeared to assume for each contribution to the dialogue. Using the IRB approved informed consent form all participants agreed to participate in the study. Facilitators also provided consent using the IRB approved form as their comments and contributions may be influential in the research findings. Efforts were made to limit this impact to only those facilitators with dual or multiple roles in each session (e.g., facilitator, parent, educator, etc.).

Analysis of Data

The researcher sought to identify and improve the understanding of the persistence of racial inequities in education, particularly in Asheville City Schools. Transcripts from a racial equity photovoice project conducted at Asheville City Schools Preschool in the spring of 2016 were used to answer the following questions. The balance of this chapter consists of the perceptions of parents and educators as captured through group session transcripts regarding racial equity and including potential facilitators of future equity.

Research Question 1 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about the presence of racial inequity?

Evidence of the perceptions of parents regarding the presence of racial inequity was present in all sessions but most prevalent in the first and third discussions. Dialogue and conversation related to the presence of racial inequity spanned several aspects of education

systems as well as experiences outside of school. From parenting concerns to programmatic requirements to a sense of awareness, parents highlighted key elements of racial inequity throughout the all of the photovoice sessions. Reflecting on parenting concerns one parent shared,

It's a lot to be a parent, a brown parent of biracial children, sometimes people watch, make different judgments, different comments ever since my children were little and but the thing that has always struck me is that those children were created out of love it had nothing to do with anything else.

Further, referencing a photograph of a phrase often said to a group member's biracial children, one parent noted,

The fact that "what are you, what are you, what are you" is written as many times as it is it feels like it was something that really resonated. I know you said [directed to the other group member] that's something that the children were asked a lot. I feel that speaks volumes. I imagine that if I was being asked that question, if I wrote it five times, it would be something that really stuck in my head, that I'm really concentrating on. That speaks to me that they are experiencing some type of feeling when they are being asked that particular question.

In response, a parent whose children are biracial shared,

Yeah, it so hard to teach your kids how to identify when you have no experience to base it on. I mean it's really a struggle that I cry about a lot. I'm like how do you even explain that. I've been told by people that I consider my friends and family that when your kids grow up they are going to be black. They're black; they're not anything else. They're black. That is what people will see them as, that is what they will identify as when they get older and I don't understand it.

Advancing this thread of discourse and referencing issues of awareness, one parent of foster and adopted children of diverse racial backgrounds shared,

... my 8 year old was bullied at school by four white boys. She's mixed African American and white, and instead of the principal calling the boys to the office, she got called to the office and they asked her what she did to instigate. Now, if that was a little white girl being bullied by four black boys, would that still be the same situation? I'm constantly thinking about that, and before it would have never occurred to me.

Another parent responded, “See that’s why we need to step into each other’s shoes... because if she was white she probably wouldn’t have and you wouldn’t have those feelings you have now.”

Adding a layer to the dialogue about the presence of racial inequity, one parent shared an experience of a biracial friend who was forced to choose a race but not permitted to choose white when making the choice. Another parent interjected to offer that while she understood the need for the United States government guidelines, she does not like being forced to choose a race, noting that as an American it should not matter. Yet another parent spoke up to share,

It does remind of my experience of working at the [local program], because that was a question I had to ask every single parent, mostly mothers that I worked with and it was always, like it was always uncomfortable. But at the same time for every single grant, for the county we had to say we were serving a diverse population. And like our whole mission was to be eliminating racism but we still had to ask those questions, fill out the form but at the same time there’s accountability there too because if we weren’t asking those questions or not answering them at all whoever was in the position of granting the services would maybe just grant the services to people who looked like them. So in a way there’s some accountability there, it’s just unfortunate that it ends up feeling hurtful in the moment.

One parent questioned why defining race is necessary and speculated about the divisiveness, rather than inclusiveness, of such policies, further adding that children can process a lot on their own. In response another parent reflected,

I wonder if you have to check the box? Because of our history as a nation we are looking back and I mean historically black people have never had the same experiences, they’ve never been, like they are catching up, right? You know, you can use the same water fountains, and the same bathroom but it was not very long ago that they couldn’t; and so even now, look at the earnings potential, black people don’t make the same money for the same job that white people do. Checking the box is just one way of saying who I am and where I am coming from and maybe I haven’t had the same opportunity. Or maybe I have had extra opportunities because of the color of my skin. So I guess.... Because it is so layered there just has not been enough time or enough resources or enough chance for black people to catch up to even just our economic standpoint.

The conversation continued with examples from various group members reflecting as parents or relaying accounts from other parents. Some had struggled with being forced to select “white” for

a child who is biracial or Latino while other parents shared experiences of being encouraged to mark “black” to get access to certain benefits early on, but having concerns about the future potential consequences of being labeled black.

Shifting this conversation thread to diversity in education one parent shared,

I just think the achievement gap is just like a microcosm for our whole society, and so everything that is going like, I’m sorry, wrong in our school system is um kinda, um, you know exemplified once we get out on our own, so I think all of it has to do with, I don’t know, I don’t know why it exists? There is just so much of our society that is feeling this way...

Continuing to reflect on issues of inequity specifically in education one parent responded to another by offering,

I feel you touched on that when you stated a moment ago the diversity and education and where it actually leads. I feel like that is almost a parody, as people, as we just sat here and went around this room, and several people that I communicate with on a regular basis, I would have never even known weren’t around people of other cultures and if as adults we can do that outside the education system where does the education of a teacher come into play?

She added a story shared with her about a teacher who paired her only two ‘brown’ students intentionally and to the detriment of the students. The students became difficult to manage, were moved to another room, and excelled in this different environment. The parent finished her anecdote with,

It’s only a matter of the teacher who now has no brown students in her classroom whatsoever. And so when I see that and I hear her, what you said that’s almost, that’s exactly what it is how do you allow diversity, how do you know that the educators are also trained in diversity?

Further, during a conversation about self-segregation in children at school, one parent shared, “I think that’s why kids sit together because they necessarily don’t have a sense of autonomy yet? But sitting together provides that security.” Referring to historical segregation practices and referencing photographs she had taken of the school and a locked fence, a parent added,

...It reminded me of a separate and not equal. That's why I took a picture of that. And that's the only reason I took the picture. The fence, the lock that symbolizes to me, like coloreds out, I took a picture of the water fountain, where is the water fountain, because everyone knows what that symbolizes.

Moving on to parent engagement and involvement opportunities at an elementary school, another parent vented,

I can't be at the PTO meetings and things like that because the money that my family needs right now requires me to do more work so, my voice in that room is not heard. Because I can't be there, my voice when the parents are meeting in the classrooms isn't always heard unless they are doing it after hours because I can be there, and I feel like there's an um... the percentages that are displayed up there [referring to district achievement data], more than likely, those parents voices aren't being heard because they aren't at the meetings for whatever reasons. I would love to see the breakdown of what money has to do with this, how many of those children, how many of those black children that weren't, didn't meet the standards, what their poverty rate was or what their income was in comparison... I did go to one PTO meeting and I'm sitting in there and I was like, cuz they were feeding, I was like I can't go, I didn't feed my kid, yeah I gotta go, and they were like we have pizza, and I was like oh man... (laughing) I was like, now we're in it... but I'm sitting in there and as I'm sitting in there, I was like oh my goodness, I am sitting here, I've been here for 30 minutes and you guys are still talking about solar panels, I could care less about that, (laughing) I could be at home sweeping my floor, getting my kid ready for bed, reading a book or something... I feel like there is a complete disconnect of what I need as a parent and what the school is supplying. Or what would be most helpful for me or my family or the community that this directly affects, that the school system isn't providing.

Continuing to reference the state of education equity a participant, who is a parent and an educator, referred to a photograph she took of a broken egg adding,

I think that resembles the school system. A lot of things we have going right but then I feel like there is a lot of pieces that are missing... ummmm like the plate, a lot of people... I think that when the decisions that are being made maybe there aren't all the parties sitting down to hear it and I think a lot of the parties that it directly affects or is established to help isn't at the table to say what would even be best to help them. So, I think that is why we have so many pieces that seem to be falling down because... so many things going right but there are so many pieces that aren't included to put this egg back together.

Responding to a different photograph she shared with the group she continued,

I picked this picture because I feel like children are hungry to learn but I don't feel like we always bring to the table what they want to eat. So I think sometimes you have to look at how we present things and make sure we are giving it to them on their level because all children do want to learn, they do want to be successful... they are not getting it because the language of what we are selling to them is not how they are receiving it. They are not paying attention to it; they are missing this mark, because what we are presenting isn't what they want to eat.

In the same vein, the historical suspension rate of black students and the impact of suspension and school experience on the current black parent cohort was a focus of conversation with a parent noting,

Whenever I talk to my daughter's teacher, I feel like a kid again, you know if she's done something wrong, I feel like I'm being punished. So it's just like, there's a connection there and from memories from childhood and how we felt about school. So, I don't know, I feel like, I heard this story about some African American folks who were up in black schools when schools were segregated and just how powerful that was to have black teachers and be surrounded by community at school and how powerful that was... that kinda speaks to the importance of community involvement, parent involvement, and you know having teachers that parents can connect with.

Further speaking about issues of color and differing treatment at school, another parent offered,

I had something really disappointing happen: my daughter came home one day and she told me that she is brown; her teacher told her she was brown. Ok, ok, and I'm not really thinking about it but she came home and found a picture of herself when she was a baby and she was really pale; and she told me that she was white and I told her no you are not, and she found the picture and showed it to me. As a parent I was kind of disappointed I was like why is someone teaching that to my child? Just let it be, let her just experience and so she now has an awareness and as a parent I just don't know how to navigate that. Do I try? And then also I don't want to condition her based on my experience; I want her to have her own experience...

Yet another parent commented that she was given "uncomfortable" feedback about her daughter's behavior in a class in which she was in the racial minority. Another parent chimed in,

They are going to learn that one group is special and that one is not, they are going to learn that all the little implicit things, to fear this to hate that, you know, not to love, I just think they can process a lot without us projecting a whole war experience on them. I just don't think they need to live that.

In response, a parent added, “Right, but they are already interacting within this society who has this history of racial and has things set up in a certain way and because of our history, I don’t know...” A parent also serving as a group facilitator questioned,

Some of it just comes at you when you are not looking. You are on your journey and you are feeling love, I’ve got the love and I love everybody, I love what you did, then somebody goes, “I hate you!” What do you do with that? Love yourself and pick up the pieces and how do you equip your children so if somebody says that they don’t crumble? But they still keep trucking. Cuz it’s gonna, not that I want it to happen, but at some point they are come to a point where somebody says something or it becomes challenging, and maybe the difference they may have becomes present. It may be their race, their gender, whatever so how do you empower them so they keep trying despite what they are going to go against? And still acknowledge the fact that it still exists because our history does give us power, like our history is important, that shows where we came from that shows, for me, yes there is a lot of hurt in it, but I am like man look at what they did! That’s power in that, that unity that came from it and moved to what we have become today. Look at that unity and that impact, yes some of it was brutal, was painful and all that but, look at what took place for us to be here today, us sitting here at this table having this conversation is what I think should be acknowledged and should be aware of.

In another conversation this same parent, referencing a photo of a chess board, shared,

The reality of it is that sometimes it seems like it’s just a black and white world and I’m teaching him how to make the best moves so that he can achieve. It’s like I’m protecting him, he’s the king and I got to make sure I get all the pawns in place so that he doesn’t get captured, so that he doesn’t fall by the wayside...

Mentioning the presence and availability of children’s movies and books with diverse characters, one parent shared, “We figure we are pretty open-minded and progressive and we figured that we had a pretty wide picture but found we did not.” She found her own collection was surprisingly lacking in diversity despite her initial perception. Referencing children’s awareness of race and inequity, particularly when choosing white over black, one parent lamented,

I'm kinda curious. Is this how our children experience this or is this our perception of what they are experiencing? Are we asking them these questions? Because they could just appreciate it. You know children are into beauty appreciation, what if that is what they find beautiful and is there a judgment there. And I am just curious, is this how they are experiencing it and are we asking those questions? ... I'm just curious as to see if this is just conditioning as we're experiencing it or as a child. Just ask them I think that would help to bring a lot of closure and take a lot of the curiosity out of it and lot of the judgment.

A parent of biracial children also shared,

One of my little girls has natural hair and it's been relatively easy to take care of, it's not super easy but relatively easy. The other is awful, it's hard as a white person, I mean this is what is do with my hair, it's lucky to get brushed every day. Like this is like maintenance, and it's hard to deal as a white person I had no idea what a big deal hair was to the African American community. I tried to let her have natural hair and I got called out in public, in Target, by an African American lady who was like you cannot let her walk around like that. So what did that mean to her to have that happen, so we are all trying to teach and come across that cultural divide.

Finally, one parent shared a photo of a billboard recently installed in a predominantly white and affluent area of Asheville while a similar billboard with a different message was installed in a less affluent and more diverse area,

The sign when you get off the interstate right here... it says 'Skip the drama, get your GED'. The sign in North Asheville two blocks from Jones says 'Skip the drama get your High School diploma'. I think it reflects a really, everything we are talking about here, just the attitude... like it's so frustrating, every day I drive past those signs and I'm like it's not fair.

Parent participants seem to agree that racial inequity continues to be present in their lives and in the lives of their children. Shared experiences range from direct interactions to more subtle displays of a system that is racially imbalanced. Examples of experiences of black and biracial children in school raise particular alarm for parents regarding current inequities.

Research Question 2 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about the presence of racial inequality?

Throughout the photovoice sessions educators shared similar perceptions as parents with regards to the presence of racial inequity. In several cases the educators shared accounts from their own experiences growing up or as children or shared their children's experiences, as they understood them, with reflection on current educator practices. In some cases the dialogue centered on the present-day state of education. Educators appear to have the same perception as parents: racial inequity continues to have an undeniable presence in education.

Adding to the dialogue about children self-segregating, one educator shared about a book called *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, noting that this national experience seems to be the result of the need to create a comfort zone and to feel safe and secure. Another educator added, "It changes by age too, I've taught infants and toddlers through preschool. Infants and toddlers they play together... they're clueless and then once you move into preschool the divides begin by boys and girls and they divide by race."

Moving up the age continuum, when a question about whether the kindergarten curriculum teaches about getting along, one educator with experience in primary grades shared,

The way we present it... I feel like we just take the top of the cake, we just take the top off, we didn't go deep into it and we read a couple of books about this one and our reference was with eggs. You know how eggs come in every shape, color, and we cracked them open and looked at how they are all the same. They are all the same, we even cooked some to see if they taste different and they don't (laughing). We read books about different African American people then we do magic carpet rides to different regions of the world, we learned about China, and right now we are in Africa... That's how we embraced it by traveling to the different places and we didn't dabble into the harsh realities of it, not just yet. They are 5 and 6. That's a lot to chew, everyone has their own home life that they are already chewing on and I don't want to put too much in their mouth at one time. So we haven't dabbled into that yet, or not at all, we aren't going there.

In reviewing district achievement data per the group's request one educator reflected, "looking at that data can be confusing but generally points to a discrepancy in the school experience for children, that is connected to race for whatever reason we don't know." A group facilitator added,

It might not be exactly the same kind of rates and percentages but it is the norm I would say, most school systems have those kinds of discrepancies. If you took a school system in Raleigh, or a school system in Virginia, in California in other places, they all to some extent represent that kind of disparity in suspension and retentions and also grade level...

During the conversation about district data, another educator who served as a transcriptionist was invited by the group to add to the dialogue. She shared that while at a secondary school the day before and she noticed,

... Of the children that were sitting in the office who were sent down with referrals, it was very clear to me that there is a major divide on what's going on with children in the district and in the schools as far as discipline and um where that gap is. There is, I think there is a huge gap between the races within the district. And in speaking with the social worker, you know there is a lot that needs to be addressed... You have all these children who maybe in advanced classes, honors maybe more time, and money and investment needs to be in those kids that are struggling, to find out why, to find out, you know, what are the needs, um maybe some more in-depth family work, um and I think a good thing is that the district is getting out in the community, I think it needs to be a constant, um... It takes a long time to develop trust and relationships with families and um... taking the time and really just listening sometimes is what I think needs to happen.

A facilitator and former educator helped frame some of the data discussion by offering,

It is important to remember too, we opt to try to provide a free public resource to ALL children whereas many other countries they don't give that same option so they're very quickly tracking and saying you go into this trade work and they will support that or if you can't get to school you don't get school so in a way we are harshest on ourselves because we are attempting to do it for everybody but that does not give you an excuse.

Further, during a conversation about parent involvement and engagement, one educator reflected,

You know from a teacher's perspective too, you have to be conscious all the time of what you say to parents. You can't just give them all the negative things that happened like, welcome to the classroom, here's all the negative stuff that happened today. Like you don't want to do that to them, lots of things happen over an eight hour day at school you know, like you can't just, you need to front load, give them this is a good thing that happened, this is a positive thing that happened, we did this, we learned about this today. There were some problems with this but we're going to work on it and these are the strategies we're going to use to address these things I mean you can't just be like negative because parents don't want to hear that I'm sure. I mean you don't want to come in and hear your child had a terrible day and that all you hear after you haven't seen your kid all day long. Like as a teacher you need to be cognizant of what you're saying to families.

She later added,

How likely would parents be to come in the classroom and be involved if all they hear is negative from the teacher? Like bringing it back to what I was talking about and the picture, I mean would you like to be involved in a classroom where you didn't feel like your child was appreciated for who they are?

In a conversation with a parent about children's perceptions versus adult perceptions, one educator reflected on how children receive messages,

I had a similar conversation with my daughter last night about a pop music video and had to spell out for her this is what that movement references, this is what that lyric references and her eye just got wide. You know she's 11 and she never thought of that and I felt bad being the one to explain it but at the same time she was taking in that this was normal and not making that connection to the way that things are sexualized.

In a different session, but related conversation about messages and perception, one educator revealed a photograph of a phrase, "What are you?" written several times. She found the question hurtful, sharing that it was said many times to her or to her children who are biracial. She went on to share,

...Which means, to me anyway, that they are less than human if you have to ask what they are (crying). That's why you're such a good athlete. You only got into all those colleges because you're mixed. I knew you were too cool to just be white. There aren't enough good black men to go around, how dare you marry one.

Other participants responded with dialogue and questions, to which this educator added,

I think I wrote it so many times because I saw them struggle with how to answer it. And their answers were constantly changing throughout the years... And then I had one daughter who refused to answer it at all. And then when she became a teenager said I'm white. And then, I mean just throughout the years I saw them struggle with how to answer that question and I never really thought about it. I did the micro aggression training last year, and I asked somebody at my table why is that so hurtful because it was not my experience. I didn't really understand why it was such a struggle.

Referring to a photograph of a clock one educator reflected on another aspect of the burdens adults may inadvertently put on children. She offered,

So, I really like this picture because I feel like it encompasses a lot of different categories that ultimately affect our children. Like our children feel when we feel like when we don't have enough time. They feel when their teachers don't have enough time. They feel the pressure that we unknowingly supply to them and they're on a time basis too.

Finally, one educator reflected with the group by sharing a personal perspective on her professional role in education,

There is a quote I like to live by "We're all a part of the problem. We're all a part of the solution." So I feel that reflection of me being a barrier just in the fact that I fit into a mold that is a cog in a system and at the same time I'm trying to break through that system. So I see both that juxtaposition so that me personally... barrier and possible solution."

Educators seem to recognize the historical impact of inequity as well as the current presence of disparity. Experiences ranged from personal encounters to reflections on communication with parents from their perspective as educators. The need to be explicit with children about issues of race seems to require balance with simply embracing individual differences as well as simply teaching love and acceptance.

Research Question 3 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about the impact of racial inequity?

Parents and educators who participated in this photovoice project seem to share perceptions that the presence of racial inequity is apparent. As the sessions continued to offer opportunity for dialogue and conversation, the transcripts also provide evidence of perceptions of related to impact of racial inequity. To symbolize the impact racial inequity has had on her personally, one parent shared a photograph of her car trunk as a representation of how she feels,

So my car represents me because there is always some form I am supposed to fit into but on the inside I feel like my trunk, everything is just jammed in... that kind of encompasses my day, that there is this form I am supposed to fit into but that's the reality on the inside, everything is just jumbled up, it just looks good on the outside.

Referencing a self-described symbolic photograph of the school's locked playground a parent added,

Being denied certain stuff, other people may not see, cuz the big picture is... it's there for safety! It's locking the fence, the kids, it's there for safety... someone else may feel locked out, maybe families don't get along feeling locked out, the job you want you might not be able to get, you could feel locked out.

Further, another parent noted, "... and then it's also about your perception of it. It depends on what side of the fence you are on. You know." A fourth parent added,

And so I am asking myself how would it feel different how would it feel less locked but yet still safe? Know what I mean? And that's not the image before us. What would make it feel that way? I don't have the answer to that yet, but that's kinda what's surfacing for me.

Reflecting on the conversation about government required checkboxes and being forced to choose and identify a race one parent offered her thoughts,

... As adults, who's making the rules? Who is saying you need to tell that you have a brown kid and you have a white kid? And why is it necessary? Who's making the rules? Because then it ends up becoming everyone having an awareness and diversity but then there is no inclusion. It's like more walls, you have to worry about your hair now, make sure your hair is done, make sure you don't say certain words, because then we start to be conditioning, conditioning, do this, do this and they basically never have their own identity because then it's all lost and they just live in fear, we just need love, unconditional love, if we could just teach children just love and just change the world, but in process for ourselves.

Reflecting on her longtime foster daughter's experience of being referred to the principal's office after a clash with white boys another parent added,

My little girl is still being called to the principal's office and the principal already having these preconceived opinions of her without even calling. The subconscious preconceived thoughts about her that have nothing to do with her and how she is raised and how she, and what we teach does not necessarily have to do with how she is treated in the world.

Moreover, a parent shared her approach to parenting that seems to be an attempt to acknowledge and mitigate the impact of racial inequities,

We teach our children about similarities and differences of people and acceptance and sometimes a celebration of both. I emphasize that not everyone experiences the world in the same way. We try to create awareness around race, people's perceptions of folks that seem different from them and stereotypes. We could talk more in depth with our ten-year-old about race than our five-year-old; it can be heartbreaking for me as a parent when I have to break it to them that the world isn't as loving as it could be... I feel that our world is becoming more and more challenging and their exposure to hard and sometimes intense situations is happening earlier and earlier.

A parent participating as a facilitator added her own approach to parenting in a way that also seems to recognize and weaken the impact of racial equity,

It's about exposure, exposing him to a lot of different things. And just letting him pick from there and then make sure we have that culture at home that he knows he is African American, I'm proud to be African American that my mom does love me and she expects me to do X, Y, Z when she's not around and that I know there is a rim that I operate around in school but I am still around that rim of my mom and I need to be sure I am doing what I am supposed to do and just having that, making sure I fill him with love and hope that the world receives him the way I send him out.

Referring to a photograph of money and a clock, another parent shared her thoughts on the impact of racial inequity as it stems from the education system,

The money [and time] also kinda does it for me too, but that can just be a personal thing... There is the whole thing of I'm sitting in survival mode and I've got pressure coming down on me and that is just toxic, frankly. So you've got the big picture scenario of what are we putting on these families expecting and you've got families going help! It's just, it's not working! And that seems like it is coming from all this testing, all these standards and all that, there is the state level and then there is the Federal level, which is just a little much.

Finally, a parent who is also an educator brought the group's attention to the historical impact racial inequity may have on children and their families,

... Because maybe the parent fell in this 70% that was suspended from school so every time you call they are like, "oh lord what did he do" or they feel this disconnect if the teacher is talking to them in a way that their not seeing them as an equal. Technically a teacher, we're co-parenting we're both in this together to help this one child but in the conversation if like your child did this you need to be doing this at home, you need to be doing that at home, then I'm feeling belittled and I'm gonna be either I'm gonna come back and say no what you need to do... Or I'm just not going to say anything I'm not going to take it because I am feeling like I'm on the defense from the beginning. Just because of my prior experience with school, maybe I was that kid that did not make it to graduation so every time I get a call I am fearful or maybe every time they get a call it's something bad. So I think it's more apprehensive so I'm not gonna participate so maybe it's the switching from um the title of teacher to maybe thinking of it on the aspect of co-parenting and thinking about how you would want your spouse or whoever to talk to you in reference to the children.

For parent participants the impact of racial inequity seems evident not only from a lasting historical perspective but also in current interactions and personal experiences. The impact of racial inequity was noted in subtle ways as well as more overt actions. The key messages from parents are related to a need for an increased intentional awareness regarding the impact of underlying as well as evident inequities.

Research Question 4 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about the impact of racial inequity?

Educators seemed to agree that racial inequity has an undeniable impact on the education system as well as the children served. While an appreciation for the attention to inequities was shared, there was still much concern over the current state of education for black children. In reflecting on her time as a beginning educator, one participant noted an experience that exposed her to the impact of racial inequity in education,

It reminds me when I did student teaching in a fifth grade classroom and I was a student teacher being the only white person in the room at the school. It was my student teaching lesson to do the history before the civil war, in a fifth grade classroom and it was so hard, there was a lot of stuff with the names of the different states and contracts and stuff, but just the kids had no idea anything that had happened during the civil war. I realized I have no idea how to have that conversation as their student teacher. It goes from K-fifth grade and I don't know the expectations of what kids should know about that in school to really change, but as parents it's really hard to know when to have that conversation... you don't want to put worries in your child's head that they don't have already, but at the same time those worries are going to come from somewhere and how can you practice having those conversations all along so it doesn't blindside you.

Another educator also serving as a facilitator prompted the group to consider the realities of the school district's recent focus on racial equity and the potential positive and negative effect of that work,

Asheville City Schools is looking at racial equity work because of the line of thought that if you can clearly identify where you're not meeting expectations or succeeding then you know how to target your time and effort. I'm remembering for, I've been with the school about eight or nine years and we use to do a lot of teacher training about working with students in poverty and it's only been in the last maybe two years or so, Asheville City Schools has recently started talking about the achievement gap in terms of race, and I imagine there had been a reluctance to identify disparities in achievement among the races because there is overlap with poverty and we don't want to create self-fulfilling prophecies but at the same time if we don't try to have an honest conversation about where the school system is not doing well enough for all of our children... the danger is when you make generalizations like all children of the same race are like this, all children with disabilities need this.... So we have to be really, really careful about that.

Further, one parent wondered about the transformative efforts made by a particular elementary school to engage the community and parents, and whether or not those efforts seemed to have a positive impact on the achievement gap. In response, an educator reflected on her own experiences working with different schools,

Maybe it's like going back to what a parent said at a previous meeting about asking the community what they want, cuz maybe that's why they're not coming in just because they would never ask. We would provide services that they didn't necessarily need or want because they still have an achievement gap at [school].

Educators seemed to share a conviction that the achievement gap in Asheville City Schools is an issue. From teacher background and knowledge to district efforts to school-based initiatives, there was agreement that impact is evident at many levels and often seems interlaced with poverty. While efforts are being made to engage the community, one educator seemed to recognize that these efforts have not had a positive impact on the achievement gap.

Research Question 5 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about assets that support racial equity?

During most sessions parents identified assets that currently support efforts towards racial equity through their conversations. For instance, one parent lightheartedly but in all seriousness noted that a place that brings people together is McDonalds. As she laughed at this notion she noted the ability to share in humor, which involves a relationship, as a way to support understanding each other's differences,

I find that's something that unifies us a people (laughs). [Parent] and I have a lot of race conversations. I mean I didn't grow up around any Hispanic people and [she] is limited in her African-American and sometimes white interactions too and like we are often teasing each other about certain things. It's different when you haven't grown up around it... certain people. Everybody does things differently and stereotypes it's true and funny sorta when you talk about them with each other. I mean like sometimes I mean they can be hurtful but they can also be amusing.

While this parent referenced a particular restaurant, her comments lend themselves to an understanding that even the seemingly most irrelevant connection can unite us. Another parent noted, “I think sometimes humor can really open us up though. And let our guard down a little so that we can actually look at ourselves so I think in some ways it can be really helpful,” while a third chimed in supportively with “that’s when culture comes into play.” Another parent added to the relationships and humor conversation by sharing,

We definitely talk about race and um differences because my husband and I look very different and that’s very apparent, there are major differences between us. I think the bicultural piece plays into her understanding about that. Her and her dad are always joking about how they are like high-fiving each other, they are from Kenya; I’m from Tennessee (laughing). I think she is developing this other identity. She’s got this other piece that’s cool and that’s really exciting for her. You know a thing that has bothered me and I don’t really know how to deal with it except through humor, but she told me she wished she had straight hair, and I’m like you are 5 years old, everyone tells her how cool her hair is, it’s like the main focus of a lot of the attention she gets. It’s just like AHHHHH I don’t know! Besides just saying I love your hair it’s great!

Referring to photographs taken as part of the photovoice project another parent shared aspects of what she looked for when choosing a preschool for her children,

I took a few pictures of Asheville City Preschool because of the attracting factor of bringing my child here was the diversity so there’s the puppets, dolls, and the building and there’s the kitchen area they have like they do their best to represent the whole population, you know.

Continuing to discuss aspects of schools that are key to feeling comfortable one parent shared,

What I appreciate when I walk into a class with my children is seeing them interacting, playing, engaging is the word that I want, engaging themselves with other children as well as teachers. I like to see them not only, um, when the kids are showing out, you know addressing those issues but actually sitting and seeing you nurture or being able to connect with my child or my child connect with someone in the classroom over an activity is the most powerful thing as a parent when you walk in the room, because it makes you feel like this is a classroom where your child is included. Because this teacher is taking the time out to show your child specifically something, or encouraging, um, interaction between other students to come to allow, to actually allow something to come out of it. Cuz I love to see my child when he sits at a table and he is playing with maybe a white boy here and there is a black boy here all building together, so many times in this school, and it’s something I cannot ask for, I can’t ask for more.

Further adding to the dialogue about early learning strategies that seem effective for young children and possibly assets in supporting racial equity,

I love this routine that they do in [child's] classroom in the morning. They do a morning feelings check in and they get to put, they kinda break it down into four feelings and the child puts their picture next to the emotion and I just think it's sweet, it's honoring the whole child um I think if... I definitely notice a shift when I also treat her this way. She listens a lot better, you know there's an access point when children feel grounded, even if they're grounded in their sadness or grounded in their anger. You know at least we are honoring where they are at and I just think it's really sweet and it might be something that is missing from other grades or classrooms.

One strategy mentioned by several participants was the use of books, literature, and other resources to introduce race related concepts to children. Referencing the books and dolls she selects for her children one parent noted,

I just try to choose the ones [books] that he can relate to a little bit and it's good for him to learn things like that from stories... I just feel that by teaching our kids differently we can make a change in how you know people relate to each other. It's good to think that all these things we are doing is going to make a difference in their lives and their children's lives.

Another parent added,

The power that literature has in helping us to understand another culture or to express what that culture might be about with our, to our children even though we may not even know it ourselves. So it seems like there is a bit of a learning experience that we have all been able to capture by simply um having access to literature...

Yet another parent noted the importance of books and added the benefits of parent support and education when offered appropriately,

I think that my kids like books and encouraging them to read has helped them a lot in school and I think that it doesn't have to be a parent necessarily but if there is a teacher or somebody who reaches out and encourages the kids to do things like reading at home or even just talks to the parent at home about it like during the home visit... I think that that home visit thing is just a piece of paper checking off what they have to do, I know that [child's] teacher last year waived it for me cuz she thought I was busy and I was like okay I'll sign right here but I mean what if that had been, if I needed her to really come to my house and see something or help me with something.

Communication also seemed to resonate with parents as an important factor in caring for their children when consider a racial equity lens. Using a photograph of a Skype session with family, one parent added a personal strategy for staying connected and mitigating the potential impact of racial inequities,

One of the ways, not the only way, that we connect and learn about race and history is through keeping in contact with all our family that we have throughout the United States of America... it allows me to open up the conversation because they have questions sometimes about why this is done this way or why are they eating with that or why is it ok for her to say something like that when I can't say it, so certain words that mean things differently. So it has definitely opened up the conversation.

One parent shared a strategy she uses to ensure conversations with her young children are open and that feelings about people's differences are explored,

I teach my children um to change the conversation a lot, for us it is not a choice as much but to bring the conversation up and then explore their feelings and then try to help them understand people are different. I do try to simply, if we come across it to address it then. So when we are in the store and my son screams out 'MOM I'M TURNING BROWN LIKE YOU!' (laughing) all the way from across the store, to walk up to him and say you've always been brown you just happen to be a lighter brown and I just happen to be a darker brown and that conversation, I try to address it as it arises, because it does come up. My children are exposed to a lot of races so I find it interesting that those things still pop up. But I also remember being five and being inquisitive so.

One parent also noted that parent-educator communication is important to her, "It's imperative that I communicate with my children's teachers every single week if not every day. So not in a negative way but in a positive way." Communication was also noted as important by another parent, "When I get the opportunity to come in the morning, it's rare but I actually like to walk them in and spend a few minutes talking to their teacher." Referencing a related photograph of this parent and her children an educator seconded this comment by adding,

Just the fact that she taking the time to get down there with them and touch the materials and talk to them about the materials... Interacting with them and trying to engage them in their learning which is super important from a teacher's perspective that she's interested in her children's learning.

Another parent noted the importance of parent involvement in the classroom and how these efforts can add to the diversity in the lives of children,

And parents can help... when my son was really touched by when [another parent] brought in some clothes to show and we talked about that for a long time, [child's] mom brought in all these cool clothes to show us, and I was like that's really great, and you know that's one thing I really like, about this center, that they do um, encourage parents to come in the classroom and that they can share things like that with the kids, that is probably something he had never seen before until you showed it to him. So that made a difference to me.

The benefits of quality home visiting support was also mentioned by another parent, "I've experienced my education with my kids because we have the home visits from the early childhood educator who taught me so much about how to even how to communicate with babies, and children and how to help them learn from an early age." Finally, one parent referenced the photovoice project itself as an asset in building a sense of racial equity for her children,

I don't want them growing up thinking 'oh I'm a black boy therefore I have to do this or any other thing.' I don't want them thinking that, because I don't want to even start that because it's not how I feel and I don't think that and we don't know their potential even now. So this project has just enlightened me to help me understand that why it's important that you teach your children that they're loved period and that they can be loved and they can achieve things no matter who they are, no matter what their background is. But as far as having an experience where it was negative, I never felt like it was racially motivated with my children.

Parent participants seemed to agree on several assets that support racial equity. First and foremost, authentic and welcoming relationships with educators are fundamental. In addition, communication that is open and two-way is imperative to support equity in schools. Finally, instructional approaches that support social-emotional development and resources, such as books, that offer inclusive and diverse connections are important to families of early learners when looking for an equitable environment.

Research Question 6 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about assets that support racial equity?

Educators agree with parents that appropriate resources are key to creating equitable environments. In addition, parent-educator communication and authentic relationships are vital to mitigating racial inequities from an early age. This seems particularly important to educators when they are not of the same race as the parents or children they serve. One educator noted,

I don't have a family yet; I don't have those kinds of experiences. But I do have six years here working with a very diverse population of children and um I think it's always been, I wanted to kind of represent the weight that is on me because it is hard to come from it with a respectful and understanding perspective without actually having experiences with a diverse population of children. Like I don't have those experiences in my life...

Further recognizing the importance of relationships, including home visits as mentioned by parents, another educator noted,

And one thing that I think is unique about the preschool is that we have a lot of contact with parents. And so if a difficult situation were to arise in my classroom I might call a parent and say how would you like me to handle this and get some perspective that way. But the older the kids get in the school system the less teachers feel that they can communicate with parents whether it's a matter of time because they have 40 students or 140 students, which is legitimate or rather its developmentally appropriate for parents to be pulling back and letting students handle issues themselves, whatever the issue might be there is less and less communication and if we don't keep communicating it's not gonna, we're not gonna make inroads...

An important aspect of authentic relationships includes ensuring parents feel welcome and comfortable when engaging with schools. One educator summed this up with parent agreement,

Well there are very simple things one is to make sure that families are represented. No two families look the same, you can make all kinds of assumptions but you don't know what families are like and so by having family boards, family pictures and things like that, it actually shows children that families are different kinds of things.

One educator also noted that the children in her class pleasantly surprised her by self-selecting to sit with a diverse group,

We were talking a little bit last week about the children selecting to be with each other, this is just a meal time and seating is random and all the tables look different. Which caught my eye and even though they were self-selecting they didn't necessarily do what we thought they would've done. Girls and boys chose to sit together and black kids and white kids are sitting together and there's a table of all girls that was the only table that you could look at and say this is a table of like going to like but all the others were mixed and they choose this. I thought that was interesting.

Reflecting on one of her photographs this same educator also echoed the sentiments of parents by noting the importance of literature in establishing a sense of racial equity,

... I think that the literature is so important, the book on the bottom, *Something Beautiful*, is one from my own collection and was a favorite of my children that I brought into school that is now a favorite of school. So I always try and I think that you and I talked about this at the beginning of the year, I always try to make sure that that shelf represents everything that is in our community and our school, is a real community and more so that they have an idea of what is and what could be.

Another educator offered, "... the way that we try to make kids aware of races and the differences. The dolls, the books are all ways to make them aware of people's differences. The puppets..." as a testament to what educators are doing to support racial equity.

Finally, one educator shared a photograph she took of a phone sitting on top of teaching resources. Her intent seems to be to emphasize the importance of relationships as the foundation to education,

As teachers we want to be involved in your lives as well and I feel like that might be a little different as, you know, children go through school, elementary school, middle and then high school, because some of those teachers have more than 18 students in their class. Most of them do have more than 18 in their class and they may not have the contact forms that we have at preschool that tell them about specific dietary needs, specific people that we can contact. So I feel like we have a lot of information about these children, about where they come from, and their families and the important people in their lives. So this kind of represents some of the ways that we try to contact parents, with the phone, with text messaging and just putting that before, I put them on top, of the

ECERs book and the Teaching Strategies book because it comes first to us and it really does help improve our relationship with the children and their ability to learn and they know that we have that foundation with the family, that we feel comfortable talking to them one-on-one and we feel comfortable that if anything happens that we need to talk about we feel comfortable...

To ensure genuine partnerships educators note the importance of relationships including well-implemented home visits and understanding the importance of meaningful family communication. This group also agreed with parents when assessing the importance of appropriate instructional priorities and resources. Of note, was the attention paid to racial differences between educators and children including an understanding of the importance of an intentional awareness of how differences might impact educational equity with an effort towards ensuring differences do not result in a negative impact.

Research Question 7 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about barriers to racial equity?

True to the intent of the photovoice process, each group session focused on a problem related to racial equity and the district's achievement gap to focus the photo taking as well as the dialogue. Throughout all four sessions individual accounts of issues and concerns resulted in the identification of several barriers to equity. The influence of society on how children see race and racial attributes and how they value their own race as well as others was of interest. Specifically, the societal and marketing messages targeted at children were of concern, with a parent noting,

The Barbie aisle has maybe two Barbie's of color at this point. Um, so that's just representative about how our culture is capitalist type commercialized culture is teaching kids about race and you know it irks me on a lot of levels just like the gender implications of it and the racial implications of it too. It's just so wrong on so many levels. I have a hard time with it. And my little girl wants that, she would love to get her hands on the Barbies and I am actively fighting it every day and it just feels like such a hard issue, you know I don't want to fight with it and I don't want to feel militant against it um but at the same time I can't...

Another parent added, "... you can't say shame on you for picking what you like, you know what I mean but also um so it's like there's some honoring of where they're at but also trying to introduce ideas that are unfamiliar." Yet another parent contributed,

It's not just what we teach our children about race it's all the things that society is going to teach them and that's a perfect example too because it's, we can do our best but there's still things that are just inherently they come across and they're in everyday life.

This parent went on to share,

I watched this Good Morning America thing or something where they had all the children to choose the baby doll that they found most attractive and even the African American girls choose the white doll. And it's like so sad, like where are they learning that? Why do they feel that way?

In a later conversation about hair, beads in hair, judgment, and acculturation she added, "I feel like those divides are only placed because our society places them."

Shifting to influences closer to home, one parent shared her thoughts about influences from within a community, "I can't speak for every person of color but I think that as a black woman it is culturally something that we experience often and you were talking about success being encouraged, it's not encouraged, it becomes a source of ridicule." An educator questioned, "If it's not encouraged is it by adults or by other kids?" The parent responded,

It varies. I can't speak for every single household but like you talked about poverty and parents could be just too busy to focus on that and when their child goes out into the community, they don't receive encouragement there either and creates a sense of feeling different and who wants to be different when you are already different because of your race.

Continuing to ponder family influences, another parent noted her concerns about the current work schedules of many parents and how having time can be a barrier to supporting her children,

One thing I feel like has been a barrier to me being a parent and getting the time that I need. Well, this isn't making sense, is time, I feel like I am constantly working um and don't have enough time with my daughter, so I get that is a reality for um... most working parents and that feels like an issue, so um and it kind of overlaps with many other things.

Further, several parents shared experiences with struggles related to racial identity and comments made by other people. These experiences can have a negative effect on a child's social-emotional development often resulting in a negative impact on academic performance.

One parent noted that as a parent of children who are biracial it is difficult to distinguish comments from others as typical or not,

I've had a lot of strange experiences having biracial children that I never grew up with. And that's been very confusing to me because I don't have any other parenting experience to base it on and so I don't know if the questions people typically ask me are the questions that people generally ask or if they are just specific to me.

She further questioned, "How do you teach them to identify with something when they are technically everything?" Another parent shared a recollection of being racially mislabeled and how she felt she had to answer,

I have had people confuse me with Cherokee. Especially when I wore my hair long and braided, it's been a couple of years; we were in some store, the same thing. This white guy he was like hey you are so pretty are you Cherokee and just because I didn't want to face, because a lot of people are racist, because it's the race issue and all that and I just go with the flow and I just would say something and all that and that guy was like are you Cherokee and I was like yeah and he was like yeah cause you look really pretty and your long hair.

A parent responded, "so you changed your entire culture so you wouldn't have to deal with that?" At a later point in the dialogue, another parent of a biracial child shared the disconnect she feels given their lack of family connection,

This is a picture my daughter drew. Sometimes her images help to summarize things, and that is kinda my world right now so, it is very representative and I really like how she uses the hair to represent each one of us. Dad's dreadlocks, she is there in the middle and that's me on the left. It actually fits what I was trying to make some deeper meaning to bring to the group. But it kinda fits, we don't have much family support, my husband is from Kenya, his family is all there. My mom got early onset Alzheimer's and we are kinda like missing any kind of family connection or support and so we are kinda just floating and that's kinda how it feels.

Another barrier to equity that was of concern to the parents participating in the photovoice project is the level of diversity training teachers receive was also a topic of interest to the group throughout the four sessions. This issue seemed relevant not only to racial equity in general but also specifically to suspension rates. In reference to the inclusion and exclusion practices at the preschool level and then in grade school and on one parent stated, "It seems like until we get past preschool and then we get suspended. Apparently, according to this the state is like, um who's teaching the teachers?" Another parent shared,

I don't know how or what already exists, but looking at bias – educators looking at where they are: bias, white privilege, community, all of that. I don't know how much time is dedicated to that, but... creating that awareness and creating that space to look at it. And it's hard because you're looking at—it's a mirror, you are looking at yourself, and you've got to be honest with yourself."

In a later conversation a parent noted, "It's hard not to think about to our previous discussion about racial stereotyping, lack of diversity training education for teachers so that hopefully those stereotypes are minimized but I have a feeling that those projections are on certain students from teachers." An educator continued the dialogue, "Some teachers can't hold those feelings back unfortunately. If they've had a bad experience with a kid one time, they'll like label that child oh he's a bad kid some teachers can't let go of that idea." Another parent questioned, "And so do you think that it affects the achievement gap?" The educator replied,

I feel that a lot of children who get to school without this type of experience they're emotional and the way that they deal with social emotional issue in kindergarten is that they have charts, with the children's names and pictures on them and when they come in the door they're on like the good level and then if they do something wrong they move to another level so it's like they are immediately being judged when they walk in the door, instead of being how do you feel let me relate to you on a personal level. Like being judged.

A parent summed up the conversation with, "Like good or bad as opposed to the problem."

Later in the dialogue the group also visited the topic of suspension from a parent's point of view,

Well that's a barrier for, you know people that are at risk or maybe that would be a deterrent for the kids that kinda get in trouble you get suspended, you still got this work to do you know hold you accountable and that could be a deterrent at some point.

Another parent added, "What it ends up being is I'm coming back I was barely crawling before but now I'm not even crawling I'm just going to lay on the floor." An educator chimed in with, "And the behaviors are going to escalate even more."

Dialogue also focused on various school policies that could be prohibitive to school success for some children. One parent mentioned concerns about language barriers noting the difficulties faced by families who do not speak English as a primary language. Another parent expressed concerns about programs that pull children out of their regular education setting and then create an uncomfortable situation for the child to return to a group or an activity that has continued on without him or her (e.g., exceptional children's services). Because black children are often overrepresented in these types of programs, the effects seem to create equity issues. Further, responding to a photograph a parent shared to reflect the lack of public transit, one early educator added,

We have a drop off time between 8 and 9 but we have parents who have to take public transportation here so then at the very minimum a basis for conversation about why they can't be there on time and hope that the teacher is educated enough get it, you use public transportation that's fine but that doesn't always happen so already the child is late to school, not because the parent because the public transportation doesn't allow them to get to school on time and that could happen from preschool all the way up to high school depending on what kind of transportation you are taking to school.

Another parent noted that her concern was about the funding priorities for education,

It just kinda feels like it all comes down to money. You know there is policy makers in Raleigh making these decisions and in Washington are there any real life teachers at the table, I don't know. Maybe we can pay teachers a lot more money so they there can be more teachers in the classroom so that there is more time to do one on one with kids, to have phone calls with parents, to go away for a day to do more professional development, have more money for summer care, summer school and after school and Pre-K, I don't know. I think we need a lot more money in education...

Furthering the discourse about funding priorities, one parent expressed concerns over teacher pay and the impact it might have on the classroom environment,

... I am wondering if money as it affects the teachers, because I hear the teachers aren't paid very well and I wonder if they're in survival mode as well. Because they're being evaluated by the parent, by the teacher by the school system, and I wonder how that plays out with their interaction with the children as well. Cuz if you have a student loan to pay, and you have your supervisor, the superintendent, then evaluating you then you are still in survival mode so I wonder how that plays out in their world as well.

Another parent who is also an educator with experience in the preschool setting as well as the primary grades shared her concerns regarding learning expectations,

I'm all about the Preschool world. I miss that because the Preschool allowed the children to grow. First off they meet the children where they are at and they allow them to explore their environment and just kinda coheres them into what we need or introduce things in a way they don't even know they are learning it, cuz we're singing these numbers, they don't even realize, they think that's the new song by counting to 20, they don't know hey you know what, that's what we need you to do in order, you know what I'm saying? I feel like some of the curriculum is really dull, one of them is Foundations and me and my son were talking about snap words and he said mama add Foundations to that, and I was like what?? And he is like, cuz snap words are like: it, the words you don't necessarily sound out, you just know to look at them and know them. I asked him why would you do that, and he said because Foundations is not fun it is a trick word it is not fun. I was like ooohhhhh, oh boy you are going to be doing Foundations 'til third grade, you better get over it! But that's another thing, maybe it's how we present it or I just don't know.

This parent later shared her thoughts about race as well as teaching strategies and parent involvement,

Asheville would have to be more racial friendly. Asheville is not per say, racial friendly and I think across the board for Asheville the resources that are here are limited compared to what other counties have. And, well not in this area, we're probably rich compared to counties in this area but like if you go over to Mecklenburg and the resources that they have, their school system already has like their mental health, you've got this, we've got you this avenue, as where here, I feel like we have sections you might qualify for this group but wait, she doesn't qualify for this. Or wait you're over here, there is a complete disconnect that we're not serving the whole population cuz I think that there is no parent that doesn't love their child, but they may not know how to show their child that they love them. Not everybody that has a baby knows that it is important to look into your baby's eyes and talk to them. Not every parent knows that you can't spoil an infant. They need that, they need to be embraced and they need that and not every parent knows how to plan so therefore we're having children that really didn't stand a chance from the beginning and their coming into a school system that doesn't really support their needs, so they're kicked even further back, because there's something, they're coming to us at five if you haven't been properly, got eye contact, if you haven't been fed properly, if they haven't nurtured you by the time you come to us at five we're already in the rears. We're already behind, but they're telling us we have to get you here, so you're already coming in on a negative because your mommy didn't know. And it's not that she didn't love you she just didn't know.

So, I think the bigger issue is that we have to address these parents and the school system has so many disconnects... I work here, my son goes to [another school], my niece is in [a different school], they are all learning how to read differently. Like there is different tactics, then I'm like I need a conference, I don't know what words you are using apparently they ain't what I'm using cuz he's telling me I'm wrong. So, like there is no uniformity because yes we all do Foundations in our core curriculum but each teacher does a different method that even though I'm an active parent, I don't even know what they are doing. So you are expecting for these parents to go home, **THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT WE'RE DOING!** If they're not coming in so like I think it starts from birth and I think it starts engaging our parents and letting us know what they are doing. Putting it into words I can understand, don't send me home that jargon of CCC3, you know what I am saying. Don't send me that, because I don't know what that is but give it to me in a way that I can understand it so I can apply it. Because, like I said I don't think there's any parent that did does not or love their child, they may just not know.

In response to an educator recommendation to mandate parental involvement, one parent added,

In a way they understand, you gotta make it fun you gotta make it colorful so that it is simple enough where they can go reduplicate it because you can sit in here and talk about parenting all day, do not spank your children, and you know what I am saying, or different aspects of if it is not presented in a way they can use it then, I'm just sitting here occupying space just cuz you want me to be here.

While contemplating what white parents may do differently, some parents discussed homework with one parent noting, “Homework. I am a stay at home parent, I’ve got hours every afternoon to sit with my kids and do homework.” Another parent chimed in,

That’s what I am jealous of, I’m not, I work here, I have to work a second job and then when I get him back, if he went to his Nana’s house he’s watched TV since the time I left him there... she’s not signing the log, she tells me you handle that on your end, I got him, he will be bathed, he will be fed, and you pick him up and take him back.

Another parent pushed the issue, “But then if you are going to do homework he’s going to be up late so he’s sleep deprived so then...” and the parent responded, “ I’ll put him to sleep and we’ll do it in the morning and he cries through it. But then if you don’t, then you get a note sent home...” An educator followed up with, “...you keep asking what are the white parents doing, buddy up with one, you know?”

The lack of diversity among teachers at this school as well as across the region and the teaching field was also brought to the group’s attention by a parent. She asked another parent, who is an educator as well, about this concern,

You are clearly in a minority among all these white teachers, so how do you, how would you expect or propose to get more black teachers in the field? I mean that’s a bigger question, but like it’s huge and its not just here, it’s everywhere. You guys are alone and there, it’s not typical of the population and there are so few black teachers but there are a lot of black kids, so...

The parent responded,

It’s not a lucrative business... You can’t come here and work here and make your ends meet. Like, you have to have some other means because it is not a living wage, it’s not... so, in order to encourage more people to come and put forth the grunt work, just as African Americans you, we’re already at a stand point to where we have to work twice as hard anyway, so then I’m going into a business where I’m not only going to have to work twice as hard, but then I’m going to have to pick up a third job, it’s hard and it’s a challenge. It’s like, it’s not presented on a level cuz even now, I’m going back to school to be a teacher, they are like... YOU WANT TO TEACH??!!!!?? Have you looked into occupational therapy? Make more money! You’re gonna work forever, because it’s not a lucrative business and it’s known you are going to have to work hard! It’s known across

the board that teachers don't stop when they clock out, this is what you take home, this is time that you pull away from your family and not everyone that wants to make that sacrifice especially when it's a business that coming in as a minority that you are already going to be coming in with a different standpoint or a different persona so you gonna have to fight against the stereotypes that come from being in you position plus the low income plus you're gonna have to work another job and then if you have a family, not everyone wants that challenge.

Using a photograph taken by a participant, a later conversation between parents continued to bring attention to teacher pay and budget priorities,

Teachers are getting paid less, I see a lot of money put into testing, which is a lot of money, you know it's all this, all these... If that's our current currency and we're trying to show where our priorities are, that needs to shift. Create a nurturing environment to create a want to come and teach, to create a want a place where it's not about you gotta pass this test, we gotta get you here, blah blah blah, it's... and actually this picture captures that, it's this moment where there is community together sitting down reading together and it doesn't have that feeling... you know so I feel like I'm not sure, I don't know any of the budget breakdown of what goes to what prioritizing where we put our funds. And what can Asheville City do? You know, in their little bubble, what are they mandated to do on a Federal and State level, you know I don't know all those details but it would be pretty amazing for a school system to look at that and be like you know... we may have to give this test but really this is what, if this is really our goal, we're trying to bridge this achievement gap it doesn't line up with these tests, well maybe we've done these tests but like what is it and you know, focus on that.

Further, the importance of strong relationships as a support for positive educational outcomes as well as racial equity was mentioned several times. This notion includes relationships between educators and children, educators and parents, and parents and children. Ensuring the needed levels of support can be difficult even when intentions are good. Reflecting on a photograph she shared one parent expressed her concerns,

The biggest barrier is not having the ability or the time or sometimes the knowledge or feeling comfortable to come in that room and to bring yourself to the school and actually involve yourself in your children's education. So that's what I feel is lacking, the involvement in parenting in education. However, I feel like that is for all children and not specifically for one race of children despite what the statistics say. Um because I don't think anyone can succeed if you don't have somebody to make sure that you are there doing what you are supposed to so um, that's why this is so important to me. That's why I wanted to make sure that I was actually in the classroom when I took the picture with the kids, because I do come up here every day and I don't get the ability I work, I'm a

single parent and I do work full time and there is a major barrier for me to even come to things like this so trying to find ways to become involved in my children's education is one of the biggest barriers and I feel like is a major barrier.

Another parent added similar sentiments,

I realize that that comes with some privilege, like my husband supports me financially so that I can be a stay at home mom half of the time and work half of the time but if I was a single mom and had to work full time I wouldn't always have that choice and so I like if I feel sad that I don't get enough of this kind of time, because I'm working so much and doing my other jobs, there's probably parents who feel even more sad than I do because they get even less time than I do and that speaks to me to like a whole system of problems, you know like societal, the school system, blah blah that we could get into...

Parents also previously mentioned the potential issues of past school experiences and the impact negative experiences can have on a parent's willingness or comfort in engaging with schools. While this may be the case in some instances, there is a need to be mindful of how current interactions may be inviting or may be off putting to parents. One parent shared,

I agree too with what everybody said about being comfortable, there have been a lot of times, especially this school year that I have not felt comfortable coming into school. Like I have just not been made to feel welcome and I'm like the only person who ever even does it and I'm like 'why would you not want me to come when I'm like the only person who comes' and it's like but I don't know it's just I think it would help if parents felt more welcome at the school and maybe if they saw other parents sometimes too, maybe if there was more reaching out to the parents, inviting them to things.

This parent as well as one other continued on to share how they often do not feel included and listened to by educators. When a facilitator inquired as to whether these concerns seemed race related both clarified that while they did not like certain things at the school they did not feel there was a racial motivation. Despite the lack of racial concerns, it is relevant to note the discomfort these families have experienced in their efforts to be involved in their children's educational experiences. One parent gave an example of how she feels sometimes,

... A breakdown in the communication so therefore when I would call to address, she sent me a letter home, your son did this, I'm one of those parents who's going to follow up. I want to know what he did, what all happened and what I can do to fix it because kids sometimes can do that and break things... so that was where that started. The fact that when I called her, I called three times, four times, I came into the classroom and I was not addressed, I was not communicated with. There was no time for that and when the teacher and I, now the relationship is completely different. I think she had to understand who I was. That it wasn't just my kid she was taking care of, because I trust you not only with him but I'm entrusting you with his mind. So you gotta communicate with me here. If he's doing something in that classroom that you feel is disrupting his learning or the learning of another child, or if something is happening or even if nothing is happening you have to be able to say something first. Somebody has to be the one to say something first.

Another parent added a divergent perspective on the ups and downs of educator and parent communication specifically noting negative interaction styles of some parents,

Actually they'd come up here ranting, they'd come up here raving, cussing, causing incident... never come back to the school again because now they have shown their behind inside the school. That's the kind of stuff that I see, and that's not even me involving my child, but I witness it all the time. When it comes to these teachers in these hallways and some of the stuff they've had to deal with, I've witnessed it. I don't know if their situation was the same as mine but I can definitely see that as a reason that they don't come back.

Shifting the conversation, one parent referring to a black male teacher who has a perceived productive style of classroom management and parent relationships added,

Also it's some people look at it differently, when somebody who can possibly relate to them is coming to them with something or somebody that they feel has absolutely no clue about their life whatsoever. I mean I even in an environment of being a single parent and sometimes I feel like I'm just going to blow them off. They don't know my life. Like I mean sometimes I feel like that, like well say what you want to but you've never walked in my shoes.

Another parent mentioned the efforts some schools are making that may actually feel negative to some families,

I'm thinking about my kids are at [school], and they had one day this year that was African American parent involvement day. I don't know if they added all the schools or whatever, it was kinda at a weird time so I imagine it was kinda hard for those who work to get there, and I didn't go, obviously so I don't know how the turnout was so one thing that they did but it also kinda seemed like the attitude top down didn't quite match doesn't overall quite match this one day they had and I wonder what follow-up they are doing to that cuz it sounds like a great idea of like yeah, let's get African American parents involved...

Another parent added, "It could be negative." The parent responded,

It sounds negative to me. I don't know, it was an interesting theory to me especially at [school] where their, I don't know for sure but I think they have a much lower African American population. I mean my kid's got two other black kids in her class and my son has one black boy in his class.

A parent then connected a perspective from another school, "[school] has about the same ratio, well it might be more populated outside of kindergarten, but just peek in that kindergarten, it doesn't seem to be that many minorities, it seems like there is two African American in each class..." Another parent responded with, "Aren't they supposed to be racially balancing classrooms?"

Parent participants identified many barriers to racial equity during their photovoice sessions. From the indirect and direct messages children receive from others about race and expectations to the struggles of racial identity many of the barriers are from outside the realm of the education system. Parent concerns about their lack of time to participate as well as feeling supported by educators and authentically involved in the school were also noted as relevant barriers. Financial means to support adequate pay for educators, diversity trainings, and access to diverse and responsive materials was another barrier that resonated with this group. Finally, antiquated or racially insensitive policies regarding issues such as suspension, homework, and curriculum and instruction planning were noted as significant barriers to racial equity.

Research Question 8 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about barriers to racial equity?

The dialogue contributions of educators participating in this photovoice project reflected many of the same sentiments as parents with regarding barriers to equity. In some cases educators expressed experiences from their own lives and as parents while responding from a professional perspective in other cases. While educators expressed concerns about the requirements placed on teachers they also shared concerns regarding teacher practices and beliefs that teachers have an obligation to educate all students.

To begin, educators noted struggles with racial identity and relationships as a potential barrier. Similar to the parent concerns related to racial identity struggles, one educator shared her perspective of experiences faced by her daughter who is biracial,

...Because she is much fairer skinned than my older daughter and she's like people see me they think I'm white so I'm just gonna say I'm white. And it is definitely easier and she's right up front about that. Um, but it just, there's part of it breaks my heart. It's like then what is she gonna do when she's out with her cousin or out with her father or out with, like how does she how does that connect or disconnect her from those people that she loves and that are in her life. Yeah so that sorta breaks my heart.

Along with this concern, the educator later shared her observations of child interactions at school,

There are some hurtful things that get said where you know that children are repeating things they have heard. They may not understand them and that's sometimes much harder to navigate because you can't negate a child's home life and their environment. But you might need to say 'in this place we ...' because there are sometimes different rules at home and school and that doesn't necessarily make them right or make them wrong it's just different and so that is sometimes hard to navigate you do sometimes have to say "at school we whatever. I had a situation in the sandbox where a girl came and asked "can I play" and knowing full well that I was listening the other kids said sure, you can play but you need a shovel. So she left to go get a shovel and while she was gone they said 'when she comes back let's leave because we only play with brown-skinned girls.' And I was like how am I...and so I said 'at school we play with everybody.'

In a later conversation this same educator noted her experiences teaching at a different grade level including her concerns that teacher practice may be an issue at play in the lack of equity,

Well, I taught at the alternative school and 90% of the kids I had were African – American. And most of them were male. And I can tell you for sure that that is not reflective of the kinds of students that are struggling in this district that is reflective of teacher styles.

Also addressing teacher practices with a photograph, one educator expressed concerns of how race is sometimes taught at the surface level,

And in the next one what it is was a black piece of paper, a white piece of paper and a beige piece of paper because that is what the reality sometimes seems like. The outcome is you are either black or white or you're other and in the classroom I feel like I am taught to teach shades, we don't teach race. I teach shades. Oh that's a nice crayon, you are cappuccino, you're apricot, I teach shades, we don't really dabble into race, its shades based on Crayola or what we define but as this world is black, white, other.

Adding to a later conversation, one educator reflected,

Well if you're looking at a problem I actually like [parent's] picture of the movies and your picture of the Barbie's have the same message. Her children chose those movies but they represent almost all white characters but that is potentially because there are very few movies out there where they cast African American children as lead characters. Same as the Barbie, if you go to buy a Barbie you can only buy what's on the shelf.

Reflecting on the diversity of the field of education, one educator noted,

I do think that it's a very large barrier that the teaching staff doesn't represent the population that we serve... everybody, I feel, should be able to look up from their seat and be able to see either in their peers or in their teacher someone that they can relate to. It creates nurturing and multiple opportunities for parents to speak with teachers that they are comfortable with and I think that it's hard to do that recruiting, I understand the challenges behind that, but if that, if the achievement gap is really something that we are looking at then we have to look at how do we attract teachers even though the pay is crappy. Could we have subsidized housing for teachers who are willing to come and work here?

One concern of educators included the use of required state assessments as well as the use of scripted curriculum,

There is enough research in early childhood to say that the best way to teach young children is through child interest, take what they love what they are interested in and take that to embed your academic curriculum. The research is very clear on that, however we've now imposed on teachers in early childhood, we have taken away the ability to where they are what they are interested in and I think that makes the achievement gap even greater.

Reflecting on a conversation with a colleague another educator added concerns about the lack of social-emotional teaching at the elementary level,

... She said that she tried to teach the elementary schools about creating a safe place how to teach children how to deal with those emotions. They won't use those strategies and I feel like if the elementary schools would use some of those things then those children social skills and their emotional needs and by the time they get to middle and high school those suspension rates would go down because they could handle those feelings in an approved way. I feel like just the education for teachers in higher grades don't understand that the foundation for the social emotional stuff needs to continue after preschool and it's not just our job.

Further addressing the need for appropriate approaches to social-emotional support and behavior management in light of the need to provide an educational setting one educator shared,

... But being that teacher you have one, you have twenty children trying to learn and that one that just stands up and says you know what, 'F everybody', so what do you do? Do you stop and hold on twenty, I've got to go over here or do you say I'm writing you up you have to go... cuz, this is what you face on a daily basis even though on our level it's a lot different. The Preschool does not suspend, they do not send home, we just work it out somehow in our classroom but you have more staff in our classrooms than any other building. There's three people in the classroom we have here where is that is not the case everywhere.

Another added,

... A real stressor when you are in the classroom is feeling like you have the resources and skills and support to managing challenging situations whether it's challenging specifically challenging behaviors, but any kind of challenging situation and so it makes me think how can we help teachers to become more skilled in handling behaviors that may create discipline situations because we do go into survival mode, all of us do, If a child is disrespecting you or refusing to follow your instructions or if a fight is starting in the classroom...

Speaking of suspension concerns another educator countered with,

Can I just say something about suspension? Look at... Oh my god that reading percentage but you know the one that caught me was not the reading one but the suspension because if you're fanny is not in the classroom you can't learn to read. So those teachers are taking away the opportunity from those kids to learn to read...70%!!

Tying the curriculum conversation to the social-emotional needs expressed one educator offered,

...In teacher's defense, I'm just going to be devil's advocate, this is what happens when your schedule is determined for you and you have to spend 90 minutes on reading and 30 minutes on Foundations and you have to spend one day every other week assessing so that you actually can't one day every other week, you're actually marking boxes and so teachers get removed from the personal, which is actually the way to close the achievement gap.

In somewhat of a contradiction to the thinking one educator added a personal experience regarding her own daughter's academic needs and the school system's obligation to provide a strong academic program,

My daughter was failing math in middle school and got invited to participate in an after school math tutoring program to which I sent her kicking and screaming and then was asked to pay for and I said over my dead body am I paying you to teach my child something that you suppose to be teaching her during the school day. And if you can't figure out how to teach her during the school day and you have to do after school that's on you and so I refused to pay and she still went and nobody dared to say anything about it but there's the whole thing of money that underlies this and certain kids need more touches, how are we going to make that happen? And if it's related to money, I've had kids show up not reading at 16 and who didn't have an IEP! How did they get through the system without being identified with a learning disability? Because it's a long process...

In addition to the concerns within a school or system, there are external factors impacting a child's ability to access educational offerings. Another educator added,

I don't think we can have a discussion about achievement gap just talking about in terms of grade because if we don't talk about it in terms of poverty we are missing out. There is tons of data out there that shows that kids who come from a lower socioeconomic class that come directly to kindergarten are already behind that's not only a racial issue but an economic issue.

With regards to a lack of early learning opportunities, another educator added, "It seems that a majority of kids of color haven't had a preschool experience before kindergarten and so that they

are missing out on an opportunity not only to experience classrooms in general and what that means...” Reflecting on her own experiences as a working mother one educator noted how difficult it can be to be involved as a parent,

I remember as a parent how hard it was to go to parent teacher conferences because they were always during the day and I was always doing my own parent teacher conferences and it was really hard to find a time, and many parents work and teachers don't want to be there after 5 and I understand that and it's hard, one of the hard questions.

Further addressing the difficulty parents may have in connecting with schools, one educator who is also a parent of a young Asheville City Schools student noted,

I feel like the population that we are serving, there is a general fear of coming in a school whether it be from past experiences or they know that at some point it's going to be some type of negativity that they are just not ready to hear or approach or they just don't go in. I got parents now that I say, school is still in don't wait go over to that school and tour it, I'm like the nagger, I'm like, Did you go?? What did you see? Oh, I didn't go yet, when you gonna go? I see you in your pajamas; I know you're not working today, whatcha going to do?

The pressures felt by teachers adds to the disconnect between parents and schools. One educator, noting the feeling that drop-off and pick-up times can be limiting with concurrent teacher duties, adding to the stress of building strong relationships,

I think the biggest barrier between the whole communication aspect and the relationship aspect in the classroom itself between teachers and parents is the fact that we don't have time to talk... so we can't talk to them like we would love to talk to them and hear about the stuff that they need to tell us, and you know talk about you know plans for the future and like everything you want to talk to a parent about and uh and at pick up it's the same thing. You're getting off work and you have to rush here to get your kids and then we have to move on and clean up the room because our pick up time is 5:30.

Finally, as a representation of the school system a parent shared a photograph of a placenta,

I think this relates to them because one this represents birth and the nutrients they are receiving I think that because they have had so many difficult components that this could bring up the components of parent involvement cuz I think even here, even though we do an excellent job of trying to bring parents in but, we don't always get all the parents of the minority children, even here. Even with our sending home flyers with the child's picture on it but I don't know, how do you feel about that? Like how does it affects or what does this speaks about the community here and the achievement gap that we have in our classroom... this reminds me of the challenging children and how we're just not we're not... Well not necessarily the challenging children because challenges don't have racial barriers but how. The ones that... not that I'm even categorizing maybe I'm saying it wrong, but looking at the ones that we have parental disconnect here and how is it going to carry over later and they're gonna be the ones that fall off or fall victim to this achievement gap.

Educators agreed with parents regarding the barriers to racial equity. From racial identity struggles to teacher practices to the diversity of teachers to concerns about the impact of poverty and access to support services it is clear that there are many intertwined barriers to racial equity. Further, the educator dialogue about what is most important in school (academics, curriculum, assessment, social-emotional support, etc.) is representative of a larger dialogue about the same struggles in education, specifically related to equity. The seemingly dueling priorities can leave educators in an awkward bind. Stakeholders, including educators, argue against curriculum and assessment, question instructional skills, and at the same time suggest a child who is not performing at expectation likely needed exceptional children's' services. This seems to imply the lack of academic development was the result of a need of the child rather than a lack of appropriate curriculum implementation or instructional practices. It appears there is a menu of targets that can be selected when pointing to what is wrong in education.

Research Question 9 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about facilitators of racial equity?

Despite the clear presence of racial inequity in their own lives as well as the lives of their children, parents participating in the photovoice project were committed to uncovering

facilitators of racial equity. The possibilities were broad yet focused on exactly what parents felt could create a more equitable learning environment for their children. Suggestions ranged from changes at the system level to adjustments within the classroom to attention to the home-school relationship. To begin, while reflecting on a photograph of children's hands layered cohesively on top of a teacher's hand, one parent contemplated the possibilities,

How do you take that and make it a positive society of people who are all contributing? How do you take that many, when I see it, I see all those many hands all together, technically supporting one another so how do you create that environment? Is that a possibility to have an environment where we can all support each other?

One parent noted what strengths she already sees, wondering how to grow and duplicate these efforts,

I think about places, like here, that is what I value so much about the Preschool there are all kinds of students from all walks of life and they make it work. You have this place where everyone is valued and I love that and I think that's where it's about finding places whether it's schools, communities where you find that where everyone is valued and you share that. Because there are a lot of places where I don't feel it is that way. I applaud what the school is doing and I hope we can find those communities where those are the ground rules, that's just a given, this is a given what we come in with. It would be nice to make it ideal. And unfortunately we are not there.

Reflecting on her experiences as a parent as well as the importance of a collaborative effort between parents and educators moving forward one parent shared,

So now I'm always second-guessing if they get in trouble: I have two white boys, and two black girls so their experience in the same school is not the same. So, things like this are really good we are coming to the table and we are talking about it so how do we take this to get there... you know.

During a dialogue with other parents one parent wondered what it might be like to have systems that not only allow a more authentic stakeholder voice but are also grounded in an appreciation for one another,

As a parent you know I am just thinking if we I think we have evolved where the people that are being affected I just think that they could make their own decision and the powers that be don't have to make all the decisions for us. You know, or for them just let it be, just let things happen because I think if we start teaching them just to love, I am brown, mama, I am brown, mama I'm brown, I mean are you kidding me? You know at some point I just want you to be you, I just want you to be love, I just want you to love everybody, quit talking about the color, the color, the color.

A parent seconded this notion adding, "This word appreciation keeps coming up... Appreciating differences also kinda like honoring your own self, your own truths but also appreciating other's differences and cultures." Another parent questioned, "But what about the history? If you don't know your history, you are doomed to repeat it! Isn't it going to come back on you? If you don't know, like how to combat it, you know what I mean?" In response, the parent posed, "But our history that we have suffered, do we really want this generation to really experience it, because it is going to be an emotional level because they are not going to see that like the physical pain but do we really want another generation to go through this?" With support from other parents, a third parent offered, "If only they could all come together to play without any adult interaction."

The conversation about appreciation later turned to ensuring nurturing environments. One parent shared her thoughts about school settings and a potential shift in approach and resources,

I think about the story, I think it was a culture in Africa where if somebody does something really wrong then immediately everybody goes around that person and starts talking about all the good things about them, and just starts really nurturing them and I'm just wondering about using that as a metaphor of like what is it when we have students or children that have challenges, how can we be that nurturing group, you know? And I wonder, you talked about this child waiting in the office for hours [referring to dialogue about the number of behavior referrals at the middle school], are schools too big, do we need more resources, do we need more teachers at all levels, where we are asking them to basically do crowd control for 24-30 kids in a room? We really need that nurturing environment and right now we are running on a skeleton structure and we're having to say this is what you need to perform instead of being like where are you? Where are you, and start there and we are all going to grow together. And actually for the first time seems doable in my mind cuz it has been so overwhelming to me. But that, if you put the money, the resources into it and you really embrace a value like that that seems very doable but it's a value statement... On the school's part.

Adding to the shifts schools could make to offer more equitable opportunities, a group of parents discussed parent participation and feeling invited and welcomed with a spirit of cooperation from educators. One parent noted,

I guess like if I had all the time in the world the other barrier might just be like the explicit invitations, like we do get that sometimes, like with the unit kick off things so that's like four times a year... so that is for very specific invitations to be here for a program and this thing was a very explicit invitation and then at the beginning of the year there was like an open ended, if you have any skills or anything that you want to share with the kids at any time throughout the school year feel free and that was really open ended. Um which I actually eventually did...

Another parent added,

I think that the more explicit invitations like [parent] said, like actually saying you know we'd really like to have to you here, the kids would enjoy it. Little so and so likes it when you come in to play every once in a while. Is there a time that works best for you? Is there a time where we could fit you in? Because that's a problem that I've had here too. Here I am trying to do this and they're acting like would you hurry the heck up and get out of here like I'm like sometimes they might could say is there may be on this day if this is what works for you... It would be nice and not to feel like you know you're being a nuisance to them.

Continuing the conversation about parent involvement, education, and support several parents offered support for targeting this aspect of education as a means of increasing equity.

After an educator mentioned parent involvement as a strategy, one parent responded, "We need to target that 200%." Others chimed in with "parent education" and "parent support." The parent continued with, "Yes... Parent education but it's got to be presented in a way that they can understand it... support, education, love." Another parent added her curiosity related to the idea of parent involvement,

... So since it's established with this achievement gap, I mean what are white parents doing I mean we just need to put the secret out there. What are they doing that black families are not? I mean, at some point we have to call a spade a spade. What are they doing? You know, since we're in this...

An educator responded, “It’s opportunity, it’s opportunity. They have more opportunity because they are Caucasian the opportunity is there, the money is there, the parents are educated, the support is there...” A parent added, “And there is a study that tells you like the amount of literature exposure of the average Caucasian child and the average African American child and then just because of that, the vocabulary is so enhanced here that it is not here like this vocabulary is enhanced to thrive.” Another parent who is also an educator added the importance of strong and supportive relationships between educators and parents,

You got to hit the streets, we gotta go in the homes in order to enhance it, they won’t come to us, go to them. Build that relationship, but make it that they open the door for you. You know what I’m saying? Like, I think it’s, or maybe it’s just from my experience, you know in my classroom like, um my African American parents, they always pull me to the side first, and then the same parent that was cool with me and I can hear them, Oh man she got attitude, she did not say it to me like that. Just because she is instantly on the defense because it’s a different, that connection is not there as where most of my parents, they didn’t go to school with me but most of them know my sister, and so they come and be like... [Parent] look, we ain’t read last night or something like that, or real chill or mellow with it and then they come to [lead teacher]...look we’re doing it. But it’s a completely different to the teacher yeah to the teacher.

After clarifying the different conversations and approaches are representative of interactions parents have with her versus interactions with the lead teacher this educator shared,

Completely different like they instantly on the defense, where when they were with me they were more mellow and this is just what it is and they were more honest with me as where they go automatically on the defense and got their hands up like... well not their hands up but they verbally are expressing themselves in a way that they are on the defense, and if you peek out there their posture says I’m on the defense. Yeah but, that’s not the same impression that I got. I’m always like oh, oh ok... But I guess that relationship has to be built first so that the first time you’re talking to them isn’t in a situation to where they will be on the defense so they don’t feel like their parenting is on the table for judgment.

Noting the importance of family influence on beliefs about racial differences one parent suggested,

But sometimes you can present it differently, or you can say this is what happened but look where we are now and look what you can strive towards. This is what we are striving towards. It's all in how you present it. But yeah, if you go yeah we are going to hate this group because they did this, don't touch that because it's not yours, I think it's all in how you present it and what you do within your household that reflected when they come out.

Continuing on, she shared how she approaches raising her son in light of his unique needs as a black male as well as the current racial equity imbalance,

... I know that is my goal every morning, I like, I am raising an African American boy, you've got to be on it. And as a single parent the statistics say he's gonna do this, you have to make sure that he doesn't and make sure he is this way. I'm always asking his teacher, I know he is young, 'Where is he falling? Where is his range? (laughter) Where is he at? Where we at - is he at the lower end? Where we at?' She will tell you, [parent's name] overreacts or over thinks... I'm not over thinking, I'm just trying to make sure, you've got to let me know the least little thing so I can be sure to catch it up at home. Because I'm trying to raise a man and I've never been a man so I don't know. Maybe I need to adjust what I am doing, even if it's just the littlest things, I'm like ok bump up the bedtime, maybe we need to read a book about gentle hands, I don't want you being a like an adult these things you have to adjust just to be sure you are shaping and molding your child out into what you want them to be. When they get older so they know how to react when these situations come up.

Further, a parent added the potential to be more aware of the impact of the underlying impacts of how children are treated, particularly with respect to equity concerns,

The school system looks at numbers, they look at those statistics but they don't hear your stories about how your child's hair effects, potentially their whole day at school, you know that comment were to happen in the morning at school from somebody, saying... Was it you who had the woman say to you, man you can't have your daughter walk around like that... if that happened the morning of school that is something that never shows up in school system numbers and data and research. I feel we really can do a lot with that.

Labeling of children in school is another aspect of the treatment of children in schools that resonated with the parents as an area warranting attention and improvement. The group felt strongly, with one parent capturing the essence of the dialogue,

So as we talk about um, closing the gap, for children I'm just thinking that somehow we just got to stop the labeling, cuz once you label that, you know, they are below they are going into the process knowing all of those things. So I don't know if there is a way, how we could, do it without coming out with all the data at the end right here [pointing to statistics on the wall]... cuz they know it, every time we get a report card, every time we see published, it's just there and I just think, you know like, Søren Kierkegaard, like he said "Once you label me you negate me."

Continuing on she adds,

"It's just that I think it's a form of mental slavery cuz it's just there, you know, you're still not doing a good job... it keeps showing up and it's even, you're even seeing it now, you're seeing it in the schools. Your job is like when is it ever going to go away and I think the only place that we have freedom is basically in our minds. So I think if we could find a way to... you know have our minds be free and not be worried about all the labels, the not producing the not, you're not showing how they think you are supposed to show up.

Further, labeling and tracking throughout a child's education were further mentioned as areas of inequity needing change,

I don't know what high school is like now, but when I was in high school I just remember kids being pushed into the vocational classes and then other kids getting pushed into you know the college prep classes. And it was very clear, like ok, black kids are going here, poor white kids are going here, oh, well your family is pretty wealthy we are going to encourage you to take those AP classes get college credit while you are in high school.

A parent responded with support for this notion, "Well maybe that's what we need to be presenting to the powers that be, it's just calling it like it is. You know, quit doing all of that stuff..."

Continuing the theme of acceptance and the influence of how children are treated, one parent shared an image of a poem by Dorothy Law Nolte entitled *Children Learn What They Live*. After reading the poem aloud she noted,

So, I just think that we are stakeholders and like I said, if we could just find a way, I mean this is really the forum for it, to present that, like, we've been doing business as usual and we haven't been very successful and we all care about them and love them, you know, and if we could just find a way to just be humble and find a way to listen to them and make sure this is their reality, because presenting all this data is just perpetuating what is happening in the past and it's heart breaking, and... Thank you teachers!

Further speaking to the unprompted premise of acceptance, one parent shared a photo of a recently trimmed tree. She noted that while it felt negative at first, she was able to still see the positive in the situation, which may be a starting place for the advancement of racial equity,

I title this acceptance because you know how they go around the, the um... you know how they cut around the trees well they took out the whole middle of our tree ... and um, so it's acceptance and, I was like well this is a good lesson um and actually it's turned out to be a beautiful thing, because both the kids like to climb up there now more and the neighborhood kids are coming over so it's good, and it is a reminder of what is, accepting of where children are, where they are at, what their needs are, accepting where the system is, um so I thought that was a good word and good practice.

The diversity in the field of education was also mentioned as an area needing change and a potential facilitator of equity. In sharing her concerns, based on what research predicts for black boys, about her son's potential performance, one parent wondered about the lack of diversity amongst educators,

... Changing that is a good place to start. Hiring more diverse people and even speaking different languages, it concerns me that we are like the only industrialized nation that doesn't automatically teach our children a language. I think that just puts them behind from the jump. Like, why aren't we at least teaching them Spanish mandatorily, uh I mean I would like my children to learn from different people and about different things and see different people in their classroom.

One parent shared an idea from other early childhood programs to not only add support in classrooms but to also potentially diversify the adults in each classroom,

There's foster grandmothers, they're given a stipend for volunteering and their all in retirement so it just kinda additional income to either their social security or their retirement um and they go volunteer in the child care there. And it lowers the ratio significantly without costing the child care program a dime...

Finally, speaking to the requirements placed on teachers and children in early grades, one parent who is also an educator reflected on a photograph she shared noting,

This is a picture of some children playing who are in the room and I'm like wait a minute! Where'd the shoes go??? And I said you know that's what we need to do, we need to strip off some of these layers and get back to the basics of letting children explore the way they want to explore their environment and know that there are many layers to it, like there is the sock, and there is the shoe and there's many layers to it that dictate what we do on our level that are outside of our control that I think need to come in and actually see our level so that they can release some of that.

While racial inequities are persistent, parents seemed optimistic about the potential for positive change. Ideas ranged from ensuring diverse student bodies and diverse educators to improving awareness of equity issues particularly with regards to education policies and practices. Parents also seemed to feel strongly that a sensitive teaching approach, nurturing environments and an authentic sense of collaboration between educators and parents are crucial. Ultimately, an appreciation for one another, especially in the face of differences seems to be the foundational step towards equity in the eyes of parent participants.

Research Question 10 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about facilitators of racial equity?

Educators had many of the same thoughts in regards to facilitators of racial equity as the parent participants had. While ideas for improvement were similar educators offered a different perspective. Notions of community, relationships, and educator training and diversity were prevalent. To begin an educator responded to the previously mentioned photograph of stacked hands,

I don't know if it's because I am a teacher but that's the lens I saw this picture through but I saw the teacher's hand on the bottom as the foundation that supports everything else and how critical it is for all children to have that foundation that can hold them up wherever they are and give them the support to be together and to be themselves.

Continuing the support and acceptance dialogue related to this photograph one educator noted,

Navigating the acceptance level for these children is like vital, you know. Sometimes they do have questions like why is her skin brown. Why is she darker than me? And just like those sensitive topics, how do we broach those subjects with these children. And also like just accepting people for who they are regardless of how they look and that's what we do all the time, that's what we live every day. We love our friends we support them regardless of any of that you know.

In further conversation about the importance of connection and strong relationships, one educator noted the importance of educator relationships with families,

Let me tell ya.... home visits, home visits, home visits. There is no better way to empower parents than to sit in their living room and say you are the expert. Tell me what I need to know. When I said that at a strategic team meeting with high school teachers present, I almost got shot. But it's true; teachers like to think they are the experts. Especially content area teachers, because they are already an expert in their content but it's not true they are not an expert in that child and parents really have to be invited into that conversation and they often know lots of keys to their kids that we might never know.

Several educators were in agreement about the importance of home visits to build relationships.

During a conversation one educator noted,

I think a lot of the big points were made and brought up, like bringing the parents on track um of the children who are at risk and present it in a way where they can A, comprehend it and B, see it as important as we are, cuz the 79.5%, it's not like those parents are like yeah I want my kid to fail, or I don't want them to be on target it just may be they don't even know how to approach it or to even begin working on that.

Another educator added,

... Developing a relationship is the key because if you don't have that relationship, I think teachers need to become very familiar with all of their families, knowing who they are, knowing what their needs are. Maybe classrooms need to be smaller and home visits need to happen more regularly you know, even in elementary and middle school and those critical ages, if you are showing that you are just as concerned as the parent, that may...

The first educator noted,

But those home visits have to be presented in a way where they feel welcome... You have to be invited back (laughing) you can't just go into a home and be like hey, he made a 20 on this test...

When one parent questioned what the best way to help parents support their children's academic needs, suggesting a more explicit approach to what children need and what families can do, an educator responded with a different angle on parent needs,

You know some parents they are in crisis, they don't have time to read, and they ignore the paperwork so we know they are not reading at night maybe that is where the school system needs to set up a system so this kid is getting exposed to that many words so then maybe this kid needs a reading buddy within the system somewhere because we already know he's coming in 3,000 words short of our Caucasian children so we need to supplement this so that he can stay on track, but at the same time not limit his play or how can we feed him more words while he is playing? Or just target that, know that. If the statistics say you fall in this... 80% of my African American children are gonna fall below, then that means maybe I need to spend more time there... To try and supplement this gap.

Another educator questioned, "And that would be the responsibility of the school, is what you are saying?" The first educator added,

In conjunction, but I feel like that the parents, when we send it home, the parents, the kids that fall in this 80% that are failing, their parents aren't reading what we send home, for whatever reason, be it crisis, be it illiterate themselves or be it that they are struggling with mental issues, or whatever, whatever their reason is, they are not reading what we send home. So I think that is when whoever, the school social worker, somebody should be going to the door and presenting it in a way they can understand it or that helping them set up a system within their house because if you have multiple siblings, then it couldn't hurt the older siblings to help the younger siblings be reading and things to help them... Meet them where they're at and help them get to where they need to be. But at the same time, make sure that you are covering your bases in the classroom and doing that extra stuff that is needed to be done, or the school system supplies you with the support to get the extra supplies, cuz sometimes you don't have all hands on deck and...

The second educator added, "You know like a buddy system for the parents... The parents that are already involved maybe another parent will see or you just buddy them up."

Endorsing the parents' contributions about the diversity amongst educators, one educator noted,

I think that we have or those that have the power to hire have a [responsibility] to make sure that the staff represents the children that we serve and it sends a powerful message to kids if they come into the classroom and see all one thing and all another thing at home, nobody looks like me and all those things send powerful messages. And that's my picture that we still need to do a lot of work. In this building in particular we only have one male teacher and so many boys really want to connect with male role models and our staff still doesn't reflect our student population but we are working on it. But I just thought that was an important thing that we don't talk enough about and all things are not equal on a resume, some things are more important.

Other educators supported the importance of this shift in educator diversity as well. One educator added the idea of engaging with “community involvement, different sorority, civic groups” to add support and diversity in schools. Another educator spoke to the importance of training for educators,

... That's what I was talking to [facilitator] about. ... Equity training for employees. We did it in Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill City Schools, and it, I mean it let the teachers and we based it off the achievement gap. Now as far as did it change the achievement gap at our school, I don't know, but it did bring some light to some of our white teachers and the way they spoke to our kids, the way they perceived our kids as they came in. It did change, so I just think we need equity like the administrators, all the educators could use equity training, I feel.

Referencing a child's perspective one educator noted, “ I think we will learn from our children... because they are smarter than us and their world looks different than ours did and I think we have to make space for them to have that voice and to learn from them.”

Pointing the conversation to a photograph of a social-emotional resource called “Feeling Buddies” and noting some of the successful strategies used in many of the preschool classrooms that could be duplicated in other classrooms, including the upper grades one educator shared,

...Strategies that we use in the classroom, the breathing thing the buddies, and the how you feel is actually from our feelings check in board and the kids go over there and choose how they feel that way we can immediately address oh you're feeling angry, thank you for telling me that, how can I help you with that? Connections to them so that they know that we care about them; I think that is important in school....on that emotional level that we care about their lives not just....we love them and we wanna know about what's going on.

One educator added the importance of linking with educators in the lower grades, “We need to have a better connection, a better continuity of education a chance for preschool teachers to get together with elementary school teachers and talk about we deal with challenging behaviors...”

Continuing the vertical alignment conversation as a potential facilitator of racial equity one educator added professional learning to the dialogue,

The pie in the sky would be that there’s relevant professional development, not necessarily about race but if we could identify issues that relate to the achievement gap like why do kids get kicked out of classes, self-regulation that has to do with social-emotional learning... if we could have relevant professional development, not separated by oh the preschool teachers go here and the high schoolers go here but vertically aligned there might be hope for skills to be addressed in a similar way all the way through.

Noting an opportunity gap, one educator who is also a parent shared her thoughts as well as her experiences as a parent at a school that regularly offers experiences outside of the classroom. While she seems to appreciate the added opportunities, she also mentions a potential struggle with the cost to families,

...Then it’s like the opportunity... Like the things that they do... you guys have been across states and things... A lot of our children don’t see that... Or like the reality that they usually start off in kindergarten with farm animals, these kids have never been on a farm to experience that but I’m sure not every school has the funding to send the whole class to the farm so that they can see it to make it a reality. It is all about experiences and this school is allowed... at [son’s elementary school], just because [the school] has lucrative funding over there, my son takes a field trip every month sometimes two in a month. I’m like I need to put you all in my budget you need \$10 every month just to keep up with his class, but that’s because that’s what that school is doing...

Educators discussed other ideas particularly related to how increased funding might support some initiatives that could create more equitable learning environments. One person shared the notion of an “extended school day” while another supported “more nurses in the schools.” A second educator added, “But honestly I mean if you’re not healthy, you’re not well, you can’t learn.” An additional recommendation centered on support for behavioral issues,

We have some severe behavioral issues here and sometimes it's not safe for them to be in the classroom they need some time to walk it off and we have to be there to teach the children too but you take this time and go through all the steps and if it doesn't work they need someone, just to have that available would be awesome.

In a thoughtful and seemingly well-received monologue, an educator shared a carefully selected photograph of a placenta as a representation of the education system,

It's a placenta, alright, the theory behind it is that I looked at it in two views, you know when the infant is in the womb, the placenta is what gives it life. And the school system at one point was what gave community life and once you are out of the womb, you no longer have use for it, because the adult gives you life and feeds you and like things like that. I think the school system needs a rebirth, because what was giving life is now sentencing death to a certain population and that's not ok.

But if you look at it, the placenta has so many components, like the placenta's job is to give the baby oxygen, and to give it its nutrients, and it eliminates waste, and I feel like we need to check and balance system that is eliminating waste and the things that we don't need and at the same time give teachers and the children oxygen so that they can breathe and be cool and be resilient like what we, some days in these classrooms we're on a battlefield, you got this one screaming, and that one screaming, and like you, and you're like how did I even make it through.... like what time is it!?!?! Like, because you are just in it and then it's like, some days you are like nobody hears that you need more support in here, this one has this battle, this one has this going on at home, this parent isn't here but doesn't realize what's going on because they don't see it at home.

There is clearly some disconnect but, we see more of the behaviors here because we provide a situation that give them some structure. We are able and they feel safer here so we see more of the behavior, the explosive behaviors here because they know that this is a safe environment, if they explode, we're still going to be here and they know that we love them. But then there's not that system that comes in and says oh, [educator] you did a good job today! You didn't hurt nobody's children, you made it through, like... You did a good job...

... I feel like teachers as a whole, the school system as a whole needs to work on not only how do we detox our children from whatever they experienced at home but how do we detox our teachers so that they come back in the next day, I'm not holding that grudge... you threw that block at me yesterday, don't talk at me today. And so that we aren't bringing that into the next day because that's what I feel like is causing this whole downward cycle. That there isn't this system that is checking and balancing with itself and its not eliminating waste it's just piling up and putting band aids on it or wrapping paper around it but it's still waste. So that's why I took [the photograph]...

In the end, parents and educators seem to agree about what efforts might serve as facilitators to racial equity. Supportive teachers, an accepting approach, educator diversity, and

adequate social-emotional support were all in-classroom strategies that seemed likely to have a positive impact. Further, external supports that help children come to school healthy and ready to learn were noted as potential facilitators. Finally, teacher partnerships through vertical alignment and strong parent support through appropriate home visiting efforts were also seen as imperative to moving towards equity.

Emergent Themes

Several themes were consistently threaded throughout the photovoice group sessions. While weekly prompts evolved the conversations seemed to center on four threads of focus. Four cornerstones of conversation: resources, mandates, personal narratives, and relationships offer an opportunity to target specific next steps, particularly at a structural level.

A need for adequate and responsive resources was an issue related directly to education as well as to meeting basic needs required to access the education system. To begin, parents felt it was hard to find the time to participate and felt pressured to give up valuable personal time to participate in their child's education in ways they did not find meaningful. Parent-teacher organization meetings and homework are two examples of the time spent that parents feel was not usefully committed to their child's growth and development. It was also noted that educators often have limited time to address important issues connected to racial equity (e.g., social-emotional skill development), to development authentic relationships, with parents and to participate in relevant professional learning related to equity. Concerns about access to diverse literature as well as adequate educational resources for general instruction were also shared throughout the sessions. Other resource impacts include access to basic needs such as adequate income, time, health services, and food. The continued link between poverty, lack of access to

basic needs, and racial disparity, while not fully responsible for the achievement gaps, was noted as a central barrier to the educational process.

The rules, requirements, and mandates that surface at the structural or systems level were also consistently mentioned throughout the sessions. Specific to education, parents and educators agreed that assessment requirements, rigid and inappropriate curriculum mandates, and the school or class specific homework expectations were unreasonable and detrimental to racial equity. Additional concerns about the requirements to label children and track them according to those labels were repeatedly noted. Further, education policies that require suspension and expulsion with a broad policy reach seemed to resonate as undeniably damaging to racial equity by limiting access to education. Finally, the continued need to identify race on government forms was a concern that participants seemed to feel forced race to continue to be a barrier while others shared concerns that the need to continue to identify race represents the ongoing disparities.

The notion of personal narrative is meant to broadly capture individual experiences as well as general customs and beliefs while also recognizing the impact of differing social and value systems. The transcripts from the photovoice sessions reflected how these experiences are infused into educational efforts. Group members shared memories from their own childhood or from their children's childhood that were often painful reminders of how their individual perspectives were undervalued and often diminished, specifically in school. Participants shared concerns about the importance of hair and skin color, especially for children who are biracial. These conversations centered on the importance of valuing one another's differences while also noting the discomfort felt when judgment was passed. The groups also shared concerns related to language and terminology specific to certain cultures noting that these aspects can result in alienation, particularly in education, but should be seen as valuable. While concern was

expressed about the inclination to “act black”, this was balanced with the overarching need to “act white” noting the importance of appreciating the worth of each other’s cultural roots. These issues of personal narrative, often negative, are unfortunately often perpetuated in school settings and deserving of attention.

The impact of societal impacts and pressures related to personal narratives were also prevalent throughout the photovoice project. Photographs were used to represent many of these concerns. For instance, a photo of the school’s locked gate served as a reminder of equal access issues while other photos represented the intentional focus on diverse and welcome classrooms. It seems that despite some progress there are perpetual experiences of isolation and separation that underlie the education system. Issues of uninterrupted white privilege were mentioned frequently and seem inherent in our current systems.

The personal narrative theme also extended directly to the children through the lens of their parents’ and educators’ understanding. Both groups often noted the resilience of young children and the importance of intentionally valuing their perspective. Parents debated the need to intentionally introduce issues related to racial inequity or to allow children to make choices based on their own knowledge and inclinations. Finally, there was also a significant fear for boys, particularly black or biracial boys, and concern for the negative learnings children may glean from adults.

The importance of relationships was a major theme that resonated through most conversations. The value of authentic and inclusive relationships within the education system was a clear connection for all group members. While the influence of parents and families was noted the value seemed to be placed more on the connections and disconnects between educators and parents and children. Worries about respect, trust, judgment, and meaningful two-way

communication within the education system were peppered throughout the sessions. Educator mindset was particularly tied to whether or not relationships were authentic, productive, and positive in the long term. Specifically, concerns about potential educator bias, even if unknown, and the likelihood of low expectations for black children was a fear that resonated with many parents. In addition, the relevance of a parent's own experience in the education system was noted to have an impact on the quality of relationships between parents and educators as well as a child's potential perspective about school. Recognition that children seem to begin self-segregating to find comfort in relationships and familiarity highlights the opportunity to address the discomfort felt in desegregated settings. Further, the lack of diversity in the education workforce was noted as a hindrance to the general relationship between schools and families. Finally, the use of humor and suggestions of mentoring and buddy programs were seen as strengths in educational relationships.

These four themes: resources, mandates, personal narratives, and relationships seemed to shape the perspectives of parents and educators who participated in the photovoice project. Each research question has elements of these themes woven throughout the findings. The themes also seem to intertwine and overlap as they are considered in terms of facilitators of racial equity.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this case study is to uncover perceptions about racial inequity within Asheville City Schools as well as potential facilitators of equity. One overarching research question guided this study, which was further informed by 10 underpinning questions. Study participants described their experiences with racial inequities in education by participating in semi-structured group dialogue as part of the photovoice project. Using personal as well as professional insight parents and educators discussed their own experiences with issues of racial

equity by exploring specific photograph and discussion prompts that were developed and agreed upon by the group in an ongoing process. The findings resulted in confirmation of the presence, the impact, the barriers, and potential facilitators to racial equity. Further, four themes: resources, mandates, personal narratives, and relationships were identified.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to uncover perceptions about racial inequity within Asheville City Schools as well as potential facilitators of equity. Racial equity has long been a challenge in the United States producing school districts that struggle to successfully serve all children. Wagner (2015) found inequities to be worse and enduring in North Carolina schools. Recently released data revealed the achievement gap in Asheville City Schools is persistent and one of the worst in the state. The Youth Justice Project (2016) published Racial Equity Report Cards for each school district in North Carolina. According to the Asheville City Schools Report Card the district served 4,295 students in 2015-2016 with 61.2% of students being white while 22.8% were black. In 2014-2015 black students accounted for 73.1% of short-term suspensions resulting in the largest imbalance in the state. Of all North Carolina school districts Asheville City Schools had the largest achievement gap between white and black students on end-of-grade exams in grades 3-8 as well as high school end-of-course exams. Further, this district had the second worst achievement gap between white and black students with regards to the four year graduation rate.

It is clear that racial inequity is widespread and damaging in educational settings. The inequities are not only systemic issues they are also personal and emotional narratives, particularly when associated with a child's education. Questions of inequity persist in education, and while research and intervention efforts have focused heavily on uncovering and correcting the barriers to equity, overall little lasting progress has been observed (Children's Defense Fund, 2007; Eckes & Butler, 2014). In addition, a recent study revealed that early learning educators do

demonstrate implicit bias that may be contributing to negative behavior expectations for black children, specifically boys, as well as a higher rate of suspension and expulsion recommendations (Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavatti, & Shic, 2016). Engaging parents and educators in efforts to understand the roots of inequity served as an effective means of establishing educational efforts that are designed to serve all students.

Leadership is often giving others access to the power they deserve; this study is a careful and deliberate step in that direction. Such sensitive yet imperative issues must be handled with care while still honoring the emotion and the underlying layers of personal awareness; this is the only way to truly uncover the roots of such issues and take real action towards true improvement and growth. Issues of racial equity may continue to exist because this valid dialogue is hard and rare; when it does happen, it seldom leads to fundamental transformation. Care must be taken to ensure solutions to racial inequity are not approached haphazardly. This study strives to offer the opportunity for meaningful change.

Discussion and Conclusions

The researcher sought to understand the persistence of racial inequities in education, particularly in Asheville City Schools. The research confirmed that while racial inequity is an undeniable issue there is hope and potential for real transformation. The following discussion and conclusions are derived from the 10 research questions that served to guide this study.

Research Question 1 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about the presence of racial inequity?

Parent participants consistently noted that racial inequity continues to be present in their lives and in the daily lives of their children. Experiences spanned direct personal interactions as

well as more subtle displays of a system that is racially unjust. Concerns about the ongoing need to identify race officially were shared, with the potential costs and benefits of these requirements weighed. For instance, if a person identified as black the perceptions of others might be compromised while at the same time identifying as black was perceived to possibly give greater access to desired opportunities. Several white parents shared stories involving their biracial, foster, or adopted children that led to their own increased awareness of inequities faced by black children. Parents were particularly attuned to negative school experiences as well as societal messages that perpetuate inequities. For instance while reflecting on discipline concerns a parent noted, “I never saw it that way until I had children who are black and now I am constantly thinking about it... about the privilege that I have that my kids are not necessarily going to have.” Further, parents were personally aware that black children experience more negative interactions with educators than white students.

Black parents also shared an ongoing perception of disconnect based on their inability to participate in parent-teacher organization meetings due to time limitations and general accessibility as well as a lack of connection to the parent-teacher organization priorities. These findings align with Howard’s (2015) findings that black parents in this district felt disconnected from the schools culturally, felt ineffectual, and felt schools missed the target with meaningful and personal communication. In the end, parents agreed that racial inequity is present in the lives of young children particularly in school settings.

Research Question 2 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about the presence of racial inequity?

Educators shared the same reality as parents: racial inequities are present, particularly in the education system. This group recounted impactful stories from their own lives and the experiences of their children as well as their professional roles. In some cases the dialogue centered on the current state of education in general. Worries about shallow teaching approaches to race in primary grades as well as concern about self-segregation in young children were emphasized. One educator shared a teaching strategy that seemed to feel superficial to her while at the same time she recognized that young children often have a lot to reconcile between their home and school lives,

What the reality sometimes seems like... is you are either black or white or you're other, and in the classroom I feel like I am taught to teach shades. We don't teach race. I teach shades: "Oh that's a nice crayon—you are cappuccino, you're apricot." I teach shades; we don't really dabble into race, it's shades based on Crayola or what we define. But this world is black, white, other.

Further, racially skewed achievement data and racially disproportionate discipline data in upper grades was an alarming concern for educators. Carter (2015) similarly captured related worries that educator bias might result in engagement efforts rooted in a deficit-based perspective rather than a strengths-based approach.

This group also recognized the historical impact of inequity in addition to the current presence of disparity. An understanding of their own impact on children and families also resonated with educators. They seemed most aware of a need to intentionally approach families with sensitivity as well as being aware of the impact their own pressures might have on children. Ultimately, the need to be explicit with children about racial equity issues seems to need balance with simply embracing and teaching love and acceptance of all.

Research Question 3 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about the impact of racial inequity?

As the photovoice sessions continued to offer opportunity for dialogue and conversation, the transcripts provided support for perceptions of the impact of racial inequity. For parent participants the impact of racial inequity seems evident not only from an enduring historical position but also in day-to-day encounters and firsthand narratives. Parents noted concerns of personal turmoil about fitting into the various cultural expectations as well as pressures that may lead to toxic energy resulting in negative interactions with children. Parents also shared concerns about their struggle to purposely balance the need to teach children about the history of racial inequities with the need to support children in learning about race with acceptance and love. Reflecting on her family's approach to teaching her children about race and related disparities a parent shared, "I feel like I am contributing to the loss of their childhood in some way, innocence lost. At the same time I know it is important to teach our kids about these realities..."

This concern corresponds with Anderson (2012) findings that indicated that there is a need for a deeper understanding of social risk. The varying social experiences that shape the lives of young children often juxtapose as other influences and race are added to the equation. When the culture of schools does not match the socializing differences of the children served, achievement potential is a negatively effected, particularly when there are educational challenges.

Other impact-focused worries for parents extended to perceptions of segregation, feeling and being locked out and oppressive systems and structures. Further, adult influences based in persistent racial expectations were noted as a form of potential conditioning for young children. For instance, the requirement to select a race on government forms, judgments regarding hair and

personal presentation, as well as use of grammar had negative impacts regarding racial equity for this parent group. A key discovery is the need for a heightened and deliberate recognition regarding the impact of underlying inequities as well as conspicuous injustices. The continuing impact of racial inequity was noted in subtle respects as well as more overt actions.

Research Question 4 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about the impact of racial inequality?

Educators agreed that racial inequity has an undeniable impact on the education system as well as the children served, particularly in this school district. While there was a shared appreciation for the current work the district is doing to address racial disparities, there was also frustration that so much effort during the past 10 years has been spent on other factors such as poverty, seemingly to avoid the harder race conversation and ultimately resulting in a lack of progress. One educator reflected,

... If we don't look at who we are serving well and who we are not based on the data then how can we get better at it. And so that's always a tricky thing with labels whether it's children with disabilities or things like that we the rationale for identifying is can we provide the right support as the school system if we're putting systems in place to support children who might not otherwise be getting what they need from the school system...

In support of this notion, Edelman (2008) suggested that research isolated from race and circumstance will not bring about effective transformation regarding racial equity. Edelman further noted that collaborative efforts that consider race, gender, and background are vital to ensuring black children have access to meaningful and constructive educational opportunities. Educators also shared struggles with knowing how and when to introduce children to issues of race and inequity rather than simply protect them from the realities of what they are often exposed to.

While this group expressed a belief that the achievement gap in Asheville City Schools is a real issue, they also shared their own perspectives as educators serving a diverse student body. Issues of concern ranged from educator background and knowledge to flawed district efforts to misguided school-based initiatives. In line with this perspective, Jennings (2012) shared that present-day reform strategies must be audacious and must focus on improved instruction, responsive curriculum and ample funding. Efforts towards change need to occur across all levels of education including educator preparation and pay, as these aspects are crucial to improved student achievement.

Further, there was agreement that the negative impact of racial inequity is evident at many levels and often seems enmeshed in and confused with poverty. Kirp (2010) also noted concerns related to confusing poverty issues with race issues and went on to note several examples of successful shifts despite these concerns. While there are historic efforts to engage the community in addressing inequities, the group acknowledged that these efforts have ultimately not had a lasting positive impact on the achievement gap. Christopher (2013) found similar concerns with the ineffectiveness of the efforts made by the Kellogg Foundation to address racial inequities for children.

Research Question 5 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about assets that support racial equity?

Throughout the duration of the project parents identified assets that currently support efforts towards racial equity. Parents noted simple commonalities that can serve as bridges as well as humor as ways to connect that are not based in race but that can help people be more comfortable with embracing racial differences. The use of humor was mentioned several times as a relationship-based way to truly relate to one another.

Ongoing two-way communication was noted as important in not only staying connected with family members but also in partnering with educators and in supporting peer relationships between children. Home visiting was noted as an opportunity to develop strong relationships between educators and families. With regards to her home visiting experiences one parent shared, "...for me to be a part of their life was what is the only way to change the gap or to change anybody's experience is to have somebody behind them to help them understand that even when you have a bad day you can pick yourself up and go on." Kirp (2010) provided support for high-quality home visiting efforts as an effective strategy for improving racial inequities. Further, meaningful parent involvement opportunities in the classroom as well as within the school were highlighted as key in establishing a sense of inclusion and value for all families. With respect to school environments, ensuring a diverse school population was seen as important to equity efforts.

Clotfelter et al. (2013) found that schools lacking in diversity struggle more to provide an effective education for all. When looking for an equitable learning environment, families cited instructional approaches including culturally relevant books and materials that offer inclusive and diverse connections as important. Parents felt that teaching should intentionally focus on love and acceptance of one another. Finally, explicit social-emotional support and resources, including positive relationships with educators, were noted as fundamental for young children. In support of this notion, Agirdag et al.(2012) found that positive relationships between students and educators led to improved academic motivation and performance.

Research Question 6 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about assets that support racial equity?

Educators agree with parents that suitable resources are available and are key to creating equitable learning opportunities. The importance of appropriate instructional priorities and truly diverse literature and curriculum materials were noted. An attempt to confront these concerns is the FirstSchool project that is an informed effort to address the achievement gap by using context-specific data to encourage educators to shift instructional practices to ensure the educational experiences provided are best meeting the needs of all of the students (Ritchie & Gutmann, 2014).

Further, genuinely respectful parent-educator relationships are paramount to mitigating racial inequities from an early age. To ensure authentic collaboration, educators noted the importance of two-way and ongoing communication, including well-implemented home visits that compliment an assurance that families feel welcomed and valued in schools and classrooms. Educators also placed priority on the attention paid to racial differences between educators and children. This included an appreciation for a conscious recognition of how racial differences impact educational equity with efforts focused on ensuring the impact is positive. Ewing (2012) found that if relationships between students and educators were positive and supportive, racial differences did not matter significantly. In agreement with this finding one educator shared,

... Building the trust and relationships with families is always like the top most priority for me and I don't know what's going on in their lives and I want them to feel like I respect where they're coming from, without having actually ever having walked in their shoes before and so making them feel comfortable working with me is really important.

Encouraging acceptance among children, especially at a young age, was seen as an asset in building racial equity. Ultimately, educators reported that relationships are the foundation of an equitable education system.

Research Question 7 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about barriers to racial equity?

Aligned with the intent of the photovoice technique, every group session focused on a problem related to racial equity and the district's achievement gap. During all four sessions personal accounts precipitated the identification of several barriers to equity. Many of the identified difficulties are from outside of the educational domain yet are ingrained in the day-to-day school experiences of children and families. Related barriers include the indirect and direct messages children receive from others about race-connected expectations as well as the struggles of racial identity in different settings. Parent conversation was often dedicated to the influence of society on children's perception of race and racial attributes and how children value their own race as well as others. Of specific concern were the barriers stemming from societal and marketing messages targeted at young children. Issues of acculturation and a lack of encouragement from within their own communities were also on the minds of parents.

Other obstacles from the parent perspective included worries about not feeling supported in meaningful involvement as well as the lack of time to participate in the school. Carter (2015) noted that when parents are involved and feel welcomed children are more likely to succeed. Parents also cited past and current poor relationships between educators and parents as well as well educators and children as a barrier worth attending to. Financial support for fair educator pay, for professional development specific to diversity, and for access to responsive instructional

resources was a barrier that resonated with this group of parents. In a conversation about grade school suspension rates, one parent shared her thoughts about potential educator a possible link to teacher training,

It makes me think of systematic racism and are the teachers getting diversity trained on a regular basis are they taking classes like the ones that [educator] taking and attending things like that? I mean are they required or is it just the ones that are self-starters and the ones that are more interested in the topic that do it on their own, it should be a requirement.

As noted, North Carolina ranks 46th in the nation for education funding (NCSSA, 2015) and Asheville City Schools has faced detrimental funding cuts specifically impacting educator pay (Asheville City Schools, 2014).

The negative impact of labeling from within the schools, lack of teacher diversity, and misguided efforts to engage parents were also seen as common problems. In addition, parent participants felt key barriers to racial equity in education included outdated and racially unconcerned policies regarding inappropriate achievement expectations, the implementation of “pull out” programs, suspension and expulsion, homework, and curriculum and instruction.

Research Question 8 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about barriers to racial equity?

Using their own personal as well as professional experiences educators reflected many of the same views as parents when discussing barriers to equity. Educators cited a lack of time and overwhelming requirements as barriers to their own effectiveness. While educators shared apprehension about the expectations, they also shared concerns regarding ineffective teacher practices. One educator shared her perception of a past teaching experience,

... I taught at the alternative school and 90% of the kids I had were African –American. And most of them were male. And I can tell you for sure that that is not reflective of the kinds of students that are struggling in this district that is reflective of teacher styles.

Considering the responsibilities of educators Brown (2012) found that failing to assess and change current practices, guidelines, and structures that impact the academic outcomes of minority students outcomes of students is directly linked to contribute to issues of inequity in achievement.

Concerns about the lack of effort put into developing authentic relationships with families as well as a lack of parental ability or willingness to participate were noted. Educators also worried about children simply repeating negative assumptions and behaviors they have heard or seen as well as teaching practices that keep race at a superficial level. Further, the lack of access to high-quality preschool education was seen as a key barrier to equity. Zaslow et al. (2016) provided support that in preschool high quality teaching practices and interactions between educators and children matter to a great extent. When instruction was high quality, literacy and math outcomes saw particularly positive impacts.

Educators went on to identify several barriers to equity including racial identity issues, teacher practices, the lack of teacher diversity, the impact of poverty, and access to support services. It is clear that there are many barriers to racial equity that overlap and negatively influence the path to equity. Further, the educator discourse about educational priorities (academics, curriculum, assessment, social-emotional support, etc.), that sometimes conflicted is characteristic of a broader dialogue regarding effective practices in education.

The array of priorities can leave educators in a quandary of indifference. Stakeholders, including educators, argue against certain aspects of curriculum, instruction, and assessment and often question individual teaching practices. Yet there was also a suggestion the when children do not make progress it is related to the children's abilities rather than a lack of appropriate

curriculum implementation and/or instructional practices. Further, educators noted that the overrepresentation of black males in alternative programs seemed to be a result of poor teaching practices rather than child-specific needs. Blad (2016) found that inconsistencies in discipline practices start prior to formal education in preschool and Losen et al. (2015) confirmed the discipline inequities continue in upper grades. It appears there is a range of conflicting concerns related to educational equity, but agreement that barriers to equity abound.

Research Question 9 - What are the perceptions of parents of young children about facilitators of racial equity?

In light of the acknowledged existence of racial inequity in their own lives as well as the lives of their children parent participants were committed to discovering facilitators for racial equity. The possibilities were extensive yet focused on precisely what parents felt could create a more equitable learning environment for their children. Recommendations ranged from improvements at the system level to shifts within the classroom to attention to the relationships among educators and parents and children. Regarding relationship building one parent who is also an educator noted the importance of authentic school outreach, “You got to hit the streets, we gotta go in the homes in order to enhance it, they won’t come to us, go to them. Build that relationship, but make it that they open the door for you. You know what I’m saying?”

Parents also noted that increasing the availability of high-quality preschool opportunities and moving past programs that label children were of utmost importance to addressing the racial equity gaps. Pruette (2016) backed high-quality early learning opportunities by referencing a savings of \$16 for every one-dollar spent, a rate supported by several reputable studies. With regards to the lack of early learning opportunities, an educator reflected,

... They are missing out on this really critical for all children self-regulation training and that puts them already at a disadvantage and then if you have a teacher who says they

haven't had self regulation training or they're bad, they're disruptive, oh my gosh then you're at double disadvantage.

Further, fully understanding the underlying impacts of racial inequity rather than simply focusing on the data and statistics was a strategy parents thought would help negate inequities.

While racial inequities are unrelenting parents seemed encouraged by the potential for meaningful advancement. Ideas extended from ensuring diverse student bodies, even at young ages, and diversity amongst educators to raising awareness of equity issues specifically related to educational policies and practices. Parents further seemed to strongly agree that nurturing teaching approaches, sensitive environments, and an authentic sense of collaboration between educators and parents are important to combating inequity in education. Hemmeter et al. (2014) suggest the use of the Pyramid Model that focuses on promoting the development of strong social and emotional skills, using preemptive strategies, and implementing appropriate interventions when needed, based on empirically supported research. They found that when educators implement Pyramid Model practices, with professional development and coaching support, their practices were enhanced and child outcomes improved. Photovoice parents also emphasized committed and supportive educators as well as relevant parent education and support as key strategies. The photovoice project was noted as an example of authentically and meaningfully involving parents in improving their child's education. The importance of a strengths-based approach for schools as well as for families was noted as imperative to bridging race gaps. Another idea included partnering with community organizations such as foster grandparents programs to assist with relationship building and nurturing environments. Anderson (2012) provided support for such mentoring programs to also provide a link between home and

school cultures. In the end, a respect for one another, particularly when differences abound, seems to be the underpinning requirement for racial equity in the eyes of parent participants.

Research Question 10 - What are the perceptions of educators of young children about facilitators of racial equity?

Educators equally supported many of the same facilitators of equity shared by parents. While ideas for advancement were comparable, educators offered a distinct perspective to the dialogue. Educators favored ideas of community, relationships, on-topic educator training, and teacher diversity. McMahon (2007) also advocated for transformative efforts that should ensure improved higher education and district professional learning opportunities programs related to racial inequities and social justice, and strategies to alleviate conventional disparities. As noted by parents, an intentional focus on working in tandem with parents to address the academic achievement gap, increasing access to early learning opportunities, and homing in on essential community involvement partnerships were noted as significant strategies to addressing racial inequity.

Parents and educators further seem to agree about what efforts will serve as facilitators to racial equity. Encouraging educators, an accepting approach to teaching and learning, faculty diversity, as well as adequate social-emotional support were all in-classroom strategies that seemed likely to have a positive impact on racial inequities. In addition, outside assistance programs that help children come to school healthy and ready to learn were noted as important equity facilitators. Educator collaboration via grade-level vertical alignment was noted as important. Several educators supported the idea of working together through grade levels with one educator sharing,

... Like the thing with preschool is we develop the whole child, not just the academic aspects, we help their fine motor skills, everything including the social emotional piece and I feel like once they get to those higher grades all those other things just fall to the wayside. And it's really unfortunate because they need to keep working with that child all the way to middle school.

Vogel et al. (2010) provided support for vertical alignment as well, particularly during the early learning years of preschool through third grade. Finally, educators also saw strong parent support through home visiting efforts as crucial to positively affecting equity.

Emergent Themes

The photovoice transcripts shed light on several themes that are evident throughout the group sessions. While participants and facilitators were focused on evolving the discussion each week the conversations included four strands of emphasis. Four bases of dialogue: resources, mandates, personal narratives, and relationships offer an opportunity to target specific efforts towards racial equity.

The prerequisite for sufficient resources was an issue related directly to equity in education (e.g., racially responsive instructional supports) as well as ensuring that basic needs required to access the education system (e.g., food, transportation) are met. Next, the expectations that arise at the structural or systems level were also consistently mentioned throughout the sessions. Incongruent and misaligned requirements seem to hinder the ability to alleviate inequities. Illuminating both themes, one parent summarized her thoughts about the impact of racial inequity as it stems from the education system,

The money [and time] also kinda does it for me too thing... There is the whole thing of I'm sitting in survival mode and I've got pressure coming down on me and that is just toxic, frankly. So you've got the big picture scenario of what are we putting on these families expecting and you've got families going help! It's just, it's not working! And that seems like it is coming from all this testing, all these standards and all that, there is the state level and then there is the Federal level, which is just a little much.

Next, the concept of personal narrative reflects individual experiences as well as general customs and beliefs while also acknowledging the impact of divergent social and value systems. The dialogue from the photovoice sessions captured how these experiences are permeated into educational efforts. The influence of societal impacts and pressures were also predominant throughout the photovoice project. The personal narrative theme also extended directly to the children through the lens of adult perspective and understanding. For instance, one parent educator who is also a parent of a young Asheville City Schools student noted,

I feel like the population that we are serving, there is a general fear of coming in a school whether it be from past experiences or they know that at some point it's going to be some type of negativity that they are just not ready to hear or approach or they just don't go in.

The significance of relationships was a chief premise that resonated through most conversations.

The importance of positive relationships within the education system was a strong link for all participants. Referring to the importance of support and acceptance one educator noted,

Navigating the acceptance level for these children is like vital, you know. Sometimes they do have questions like why is her skin brown. Why is she darker than me? And just like those sensitive topics, how do we broach those subjects with these children. And also like just accepting people for who they are regardless of how they look and that's what we do all the time, that's what we live every day. We love our friends we support them regardless of any of that you know.

Ultimately, a parent summed up the need to be more aware of the underlying impacts of how children are treated, particularly with respect to educational inequities,

The school system looks at numbers, they look at those statistics but they don't hear your stories about how your child's hair effects, potentially their whole day at school, you know that comment were to happen in the morning at school from somebody, saying... Was it you who had the women say to you, man you can't have your daughter walk around like that... if that happened the morning of school that is something that never shows up in school system numbers and data and research. I feel we really can do a lot with that.

Elements of these themes are evidenced throughout the findings.

Implications for Practice

Many recommendations in support of racial equity in education surfaced through the course of conducting this research. Some proposals emerged through literature review as well as the analysis of findings and identification of themes. These recommendations are:

1. It is recommended that policymakers address the historical and present-day impact of policies, mandates, and structures specifically in terms of negative impacts on outcomes for black children.
2. It is recommended that systematic barriers to equity in education, such as funding and labeling of students and families, be alleviated to ensure access to effective education for all children.
3. It is recommended that educators make meaningful adjustments to instructional decisions, resources, and practices when black children are unsuccessful in the current educational setting.
4. It is recommended that educator development is continuous and specifically related to ensuring supportive interactions with students as well as addresses authentic relationship building with children and families.
5. It is recommended that educator development is continuous and explicitly focused on the impact of race and diversity on educational outcomes.
6. It is recommended that effective partnerships be established to categorically relieve external barriers to education while also bridging cultural gaps between schools and communities.
7. It is recommended that all children be assured access to high-quality early learning programs that are vertically aligned and developmentally appropriate practices through a minimum of third grade.

Implications for Additional Research

The purpose of this study was to uncover perceptions about racial inequity within Asheville City Schools as well as potential facilitators of equity. There is a great deal of research available supporting the concept of racial inequity in education as well as citing effective strategies to mitigate these inequities. Given the continued inequities in this district as well as in

the broader education system future study of this issue is necessary. Additional concerns arose throughout the development of this study that merit further inquiry:

1. Additional research is required to examine the continued preservation of structural and systemic educational inequities despite ongoing efforts towards improvement.
2. Additional research is required to examine the barriers to accountability for racial inequities.
3. Additional research is required to examine the impact of educational leadership at all levels with regards to the persistence of inequities.
4. Additional research is required to examine the negative impacts of the resegregation of school districts as well as segregation within schools.
5. Additional research is required to examine the positive influences at all levels of education that have successfully alleviated racial inequities.

Chapter Summary

The overarching purposing of this qualitative case study was to uncover perceptions about racial inequity within Asheville City Schools as well as potential facilitators of equity. De-identified transcripts from a Racial Equity Photovoice Project were used to identify the perceptions of parents as well as of educators. Seventeen participants were involved in the project and all consented to participation in this study. The findings of the study were organized and recounted by 10 research questions as well as emergent themes from the four project discussion sessions. Those findings were reported through the narratives of participants by providing comprehensive evidence through the use of accounts made by participants as captured in the project transcripts. The findings that materialized were reviewed and aligned with the existent literature. Recommendations for practice as well as recommendations for future research were made based on the findings and conclusions.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: SUPERINTENDENT APPROVAL OF STUDY



Asheville City Schools

PO Box 7347 • 85 Mountain Street
Asheville, North Carolina 28802

Learn. Discover. Thrive

February 10, 2016

To Whom It May Concern,

Please accept this letter as my acknowledgement of the Asheville City Schools Preschool Racial Equity PhotoVoice project for the spring semester of 2016. I am pleased to have the addition of a research lense and I believe this addition will strengthen the outcomes of this project. I fully support Dawn Mendonca Meskil's dissertation research involving this project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pamela Baldwin" with a decorative flourish at the end.

Pamela Baldwin, Ed.D.

Superintendent

APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVED INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Research Study: A Study of the Perceptions of Racial Equity in One Early Childhood Education Program

Principal Investigator: Dawn Mendonca Meskil

Principal Investigator's Contact Information:

Dawn Mendonca Meskil

mendoncamesk@goldmail.etsu.edu or 828.280.2890

Organization of Principal Investigator: East Tennessee State University

INFORMED CONSENT

This Informed Consent will explain details about being a participant in a research study. It is important that you read this form carefully and then decide if you wish to voluntarily participate.

A. Purpose:

The purpose of this research study is to uncover educator and parent perceptions about racial equity in an early education setting. You participated in the *Racial Equity PhotoVoice Project* with Asheville City Schools Preschool in March and April 2016. This research study involves using the transcripts from the project to uncover viewpoints, themes, and possible action steps towards racial equity in education.

B. Duration:

At the completion of the *Racial Equity PhotoVoice Project* the de-identified transcripts will be made available for this research study.

C. Procedures:

If you decide to participate in this research study, the transcripts from the *Racial Equity PhotoVoice Project* will be examined for general themes regarding viewpoints and potential action towards racial equity. All identifying information has been removed from the records before being given to the researcher.

Photographs from the *Racial Equity PhotoVoice Project* will not be used for research purposes. A separate consent process will be used before any participant-taken photograph is used as part of the published or presented study materials.

If you decide to participate in the research study, you will be asked to sign this informed consent form to make sure that you understand the purpose of the study.

D. Alternative Procedures/Treatments: If you choose not to participate in this research study your contributions to each session will be removed from transcripts, by the *Racial Equity PhotoVoice Project* facilitation team, prior to use for research purposes.

E. Possible Risks/Discomforts: You may be concerned that information in the records will be identifiable to the researcher. The researcher is only looking for general themes and perceptions, not individual experiences.

APPROVED
By the ETSU IRB

APR 05 2016

By: 
Chair IRB Coordinator

DOCUMENT VERSION EXPIRES

APR 04 2017

Ver. 04/04/2016

Page 1 of 2

ETSU IRB

Participant Initials _____

Title of Research Study: A Study of the Perceptions of Racial Equity in One Early Childhood Education Program

Principal Investigator: Dawn Mendonca Meskil

F. Possible Benefits: There are no direct benefits to participating in this research.

G. Compensation in the Form of Payments to Participant: No payment is being provided.

H. Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this research study is voluntary. **You may choose *not* to participate.** If you choose not to participate, the benefits or treatment to which you are otherwise entitled will not be affected.

I. Contact for Questions: If you have any questions or concerns at any time, you may call Dawn Mendonca Meskil, whose phone number is 828.280.2890 or Virginia Foley, faculty advisor, whose phone number is 423.439.7615. You may also call the Chairperson of the ETSU Institutional Review Board at 423.439.6054 for any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant. If you have any questions or concerns about the research and want to talk to someone independent of the research team or you cannot reach the study staff, you may call an IRB Coordinator at 423.439.6055 or 423.439.6002.

J. Confidentiality: Every attempt will be made to see that your identity is kept confidential for purposes of this research study. A copy of the records from this study will be stored on a flash drive, password protect and kept locked in secure location for at least 5 years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a participant. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, Dawn Mendonca Meskil, her research team, and the ETSU Institutional Review Board will have access to the study records. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as described in this form.

By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understand this Informed Consent Document and that I had the opportunity to have them explained to me verbally. You will be given a signed copy of this informed consent document. I confirm that I have had the opportunity to ask questions and that all my questions have been answered. By signing below, I confirm that I freely and voluntarily choose to take part in this research study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Date

APPROVED
By the ETSU IRB

APR 05 2016

By: 
Chair IRB Coordinator

DOCUMENT VERSION EXPIRES

APR 04 2017

ETSU IRB

Ver. 04/04/2016

Page 2 of 2

Participant Initials _____

VITA

DAWN MENDONCA MESKIL

Education:

Ed. D. Educational Leadership
East Tennessee State University, 2016
Johnson City, Tennessee

MSW Social Work
University of North Carolina, 2004
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

B.S. Birth-Kindergarten Education
Appalachian State University, 1998
Boone, North Carolina

Professional Experience:

Asheville City Schools, 2013 – present
Asheville, North Carolina
Preschool Director

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services,
Children’s Developmental Services Agency, 2012-2013
Asheville, North Carolina
Assistant Director

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services,
Early Intervention Branch, 2008-2012
Raleigh, North Carolina
Regional Consultant

Asheville City Schools, 2002-2008
Asheville, North Carolina
Early Head Start Coordinator

Asheville City Schools, 1998-2002
Asheville, North Carolina
Early Head Start Teacher and Home Visitor