

# Co-Learning About Racism in AASD High Schools

*Racial injustices from the perspective of students and staff*

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## INTRODUCTION

We are team CEO's and the main focus of our study was to support teachers and students by giving them opportunities to be in classes that properly educate them about racism to help teacher-student relationships become healthier. By researching what schools are currently doing to raise awareness and continuing to learn about what resources are still needed and what we can do to help obtain those resources, we are actively working toward our goal through research, survey creation, and document analysis.

## BACKGROUND

### **What is a Critical Participatory Action Research Project?**

Critical participatory action research (CPAR) is a form of critical, collective inquiry that provides youth and adults with opportunities to identify concerns that impact their lives, gather and analyze data about these issues, and take collective action to create more just communities (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2019; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mirra, Garcia & Morrell, 2016). Described by Michelle Fine & Maria Torre (2019) as "research rooted in politics, power, participation, and a deep appreciation of knowledge, created in conditions of oppression and mobilized for social action," CPAR projects are grounded in the teachings of popular education, democratic participation, and critical/feminist theories. Coming together around a common concern, CPAR researchers strive to name and explore the different

ways in which positionality, context, and power impact their findings. There is a growing body of evidence that schools, community-based organizations, educators, and adolescents themselves are nurtured by and benefit from this form of inquiry.

### **How does CARES Fox Cities utilize CPAR?**

CARES Fox Cities is a non-profit organization located in Appleton, WI. CARES stands for Community-based Advocacy and Research for Equity in Schools. Our organization is a network of students, caregivers, educators, and community members who work together to understand and redress systemic inequities in our schools. A core component of CARES work, and evident in the work completed during this student research institute, is the idea that those individuals closest to issues or opportunities in our society should have a primary seat at the table to make changes. In the case of the studies completed in July of 2023, we employed Black, Indigenous, and Multilingual Students of Color to study a topic around equity in schooling that matters to them.

We engage in the work using Participatory Action Research projects which begin by forming a team, learning about a common issue or idea, and culminate by generating actionable solutions that impact our community. Projects are designed in partnership with those experiencing that inequity, elevating and validating their lived experiences. An additional integral function of the nonprofit is our partnership with the AASD leadership team, who has committed to funding and implementing the findings and recommendations that evolve from our research projects.

### **What did we want to learn?**

Our focus was to learn more about how to support teachers and students by giving them opportunities to be in classes that properly educate them about racism. We want to help teacher-student relationships become healthier by researching what schools are currently doing to raise awareness and continuing to learn about what resources are still needed.

Our guiding research question was: What tools or resources are teachers using to promote equity and cultural diversity in the classrooms?

## **Starting research information**

No matter how educators identify or how long they have been teaching, it's critical they reflect on their ability to discuss race, racial (in)equality, and racism - past and present - with students and colleagues being able to talk about their cultural experiences and think about teachers and other students as well. Our district is working to address racism in the classroom and schools by teaching about anti-racism, which is actively resisting and dismantling actions and systems that oppress students of color. The district has been working with teachers and administrators to address systemic racism with direct instruction and an informed curriculum in a few different ways:

- Teaching anti-racist lessons
  - Direct discussions about racism and its effects
  - Teaching students how to be anti-racist
- Incorporating anti-racist principles into curricula
  - Seeking out educational resources that address racism
  - Implementing content that acknowledges its role in history, and its current impact on society

These are just a few of the many different things schools are working on, while others offer affinity spaces, book clubs such as Valley New School that reads about social prejudices and social issues currently going on and takes a stand against it, or having an international club like Appleton West to learn about different ethnicities and cultures. Our goal is to find out what culturally inclusive practices more of our schools could participate in to promote a culturally inclusive educational environment.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To determine the main focus goal for our study, we all worked together to figure out what we wanted our main focus to be for this research institute, and we figured that schools need more opportunities to get further education about racism and raise awareness about how to Co-Learn about it together.

We wrote and reviewed questions for both students and teachers and started creating questions that could help us better understand the students' experience in high school regarding prejudices. We also created questions

for educators in AASD schools that focused on their college education and other opportunities they were given to help them address racism and prejudices throughout their professional journey.

We created two separate surveys; first, we decided what research method we wanted to use; during that process, we found out that surveys were the most efficient way to collect data for our research goal. Then we separated the questions into a survey for students and then another survey for AASD educators.

On Thursday, July 20th, we sent out the surveys to students and educators and we collected the data that we received on Friday, July 21st. We reviewed data as a team and came together to group the similarities and differences in our data to create the themes.

To determine statistics and draw conclusions, we compared our data and combined similar answers. We found out that there is an imbalance between students and teachers/educators feeling accepted in their school setting vs. how many of them feel like they cannot be themselves, perceiving that their race, religion, or sexual orientation is welcome in their school.

## **RESEARCHER REFLECTIONS**

**Rachel** - "I joined this research team because I thought it would be a good opportunity to meet more people who have the same social justice interests and passion as me. This topic is important to me because my school lacks diversity and has a hard time respecting others (e.g., pronouns). I also thought this would allow me and other students to have our voices heard and respected instead of being hushed by adults, staff, and administrators around us."

**Adriane** - "The reason why I joined this research team is because I wanted to have something to do during the summer and have new experiences. I chose to focus on Co-learning About Racism so I could gain knowledge about how educators and schools could integrate learning about minorities and other cultures into education. I am appreciative of the fact that I have been gifted a glimpse into Appleton schools and see just how little schools in our

community actually advocate for POC. What I want to share is how we can make learning about minorities and advocating for them a crucial part of education.”

**Marcela** - “I became a researcher because I thought I could do something useful and relevant during the summer. I also wanted to learn more about something I feel passionate about, social justice. During our time together, we worked hard to create a research project that can improve racism and discrimination in AASD so all students of color can have their voices heard and receive more opportunities in their schools.”

**Nevaeh** - “I signed up for the Student Research Institute to try something new because social injustice is important to me. Though it's not really talked about as much as it should be, it's important to try and do something about it. It has been a journey but I'm proud of all the hard work we have done over the past 3 weeks. One thing I would like to share with you about the work that we have done is that there are a lot of schools in the AASD that are lacking diversity in their curriculums, so this research and the work we have put in will hopefully shed some light on the lack of diversity in our schools.”

**Misty** - “After participating in my last research group at my school during the school year, I thought it would be amazing to do this research in the summer. This topic is important to me because I want more people to learn about co-learning with racism, as it's not really talked about and how it works. I'm proud of the process that me and my teammates have made throughout these 3 weeks of researching our work and I would be more than happy to share how we made it through those 3 weeks. I want to share the steps and process we took, what we did to be successful in our research, and how we did that.”

**Espoire** - “I wanted to gain more knowledge and different ideas in life, so I agreed to be a part of the research team, especially because of a good teacher, Miss Hilary Haskell, who has been motivating and inspiring me to insert myself into the teamwork. The topic is important, I think, because it is going to change the community. I am proud of participating in and growing up with an education, like the research work and learning about the ways to prevent racism and discrimination of people in the community, especially for educators and students.

## **FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH**

Our findings were based on four different themes, which are; acceptance, prejudice, educators' education, and relationships.

In terms of acceptance, some educators and students reported that they felt that their schools were accepting of them, but what we discovered through our research was that most respondents attended predominantly White schools. Some students mentioned that they felt supported in high school because many of their teachers had helped them. Others mentioned that they received emotional support from friends and family instead. A few participants said that they always felt welcome at school. Those who reported feeling accepted in their schools said that their schools had fundraisers, groups, activities, and events that brought students and staff together to look at different cultures. Participants who reported not feeling accepted were a part of the BI-POC community, neurodivergent, disabled, part of the LGBTQ+ community or immigrants. Some participants suggested that teachers should be aware of perceptions of students that may not share the same values as them in terms of racial differences, gender, and economic status, among others.

Regarding prejudice, in our study, at least 8 participants did not experience prejudice and discrimination and 10 people did experience prejudice such as discrimination. Students who experienced discrimination were usually a part of the bi-poc community or other minorities based on their religion, race, social class, or sexual orientation. Nine out of 12 educators said that they were comfortable with addressing microaggressions even though it can be uncomfortable and do it in a non-threatening way. The last 3 educators reported feeling uncomfortable or not sure what their comfort level would be in responding to micro-aggressions. Some participants mentioned that they believed all people carry with them some form of prejudice, often completely unaware of how words and actions affect others around them.

With education, two out of twelve educators reported that they received further education in classes that were dedicated to learning about race and racism. Out of those two, there were classes in their master's program and undergraduate program. One also reported that they were unconvinced that

the majority of the courses were dedicated to learning about race and racism. In response to another question that was asked in the survey, 10 educators reported being open to discussing with their colleagues how to avoid prejudices.

With regards to relationships, 13 people said that they had a good, healthy relationship and good support from their friends, educators, and family. 6 other people said they felt as if their relationship with their educators wasn't good. Most of the information that we received said that racism was normalized in their families and wasn't talked about in school or at home. Some also reported that they received very little to no emotional support, and those who reported receiving some support said that it wasn't really sufficient enough.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

As a student research team, we recommend that the school district promotes open discussions between educators and students about what the students need from their educators and what educators need from their students; to be successful together.

We recommend that the school district creates more avenues/resources for addressing issues like prejudice/discrimination within our schools by inviting BIPOC/LGBTQ+ speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds to share their experiences with both staff and students.

From our staff participants' responses, we have learned that schools are not fully utilizing resources provided by the district's Diversity and Inclusion Department. As a student research team, we recommend they offer regular training opportunities on topics of diversity and inclusion to building staff, educators, and administrators.

We recommend district employees begin normalizing coaching students around discriminatory matters such as microaggressions, exclusionary historical contexts, beliefs, and practices in the schools to promote an equitable and welcoming school culture. Additionally, we recommend the district leadership team implement hiring practices that will increase the diversity among teaching and administrative staff.



Another consideration would be to strictly implement policies that protect students and educators from discrimination to increase a sense of welcome and belonging for all students and staff in our school district.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

This research project has been a great learning opportunity for all of us as high school students. It has allowed us to share our school experiences and suggest recommendations for improvement. As a team, we worked together to reach our goal of continuously raising awareness about racism and discrimination. We focused on how educators and students must work together to create a safe and welcoming school environment. As students, we brought insight into our school experiences with discrimination and racism, whether we experienced it ourselves or watched it happen to others around us.

This has been a great way to spend part of our summertime. We looked forward to getting back together every morning to continue sharing ideas in a fun-filled environment. Some members have also been inspired to continue this journey and become professional researchers that will contribute to addressing the inequitable school practices in our schools.

## **APPENDIX**

1. Link to survey questions for educators -

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1paXbFT8ye4z3nb2Bnx\\_ipAuKgrPdP3GIBHRcUdTz26Q/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1paXbFT8ye4z3nb2Bnx_ipAuKgrPdP3GIBHRcUdTz26Q/edit?usp=sharing)

2. Link to survey questions for students -

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1oTdfi-OwL2ImH2VFy1Y4ugN3IVs8TndOuy7hVknY3k/edit>