The Way It Was Done

Considering Race in Classroom Placement

Joy Howard

Abstract

Based on data from an ethnographic study of teachers, the author applies analytical tools from critical race theory to make sense of how teachers made decisions about classroom placement in an elementary school in the U.S. South. The article is organized around the questions, In what ways did teachers in this study make sense of race in classroom placement decisions? What implications might this have for teachers and teacher education? Findings are organized and analyzed in three sections: the melting pot framework; legit, mixed, and others; and everybody needs to be put in a box. The author provides specific recommendations for making race-visible classroom placement decisions and shares implications for the role of teacher education in preparing teachers to make race-visible decisions.

Introduction

Placing students into homerooms is a process that happens every year at every elementary school. While some practitioner and scholarly literature exists

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about methods for classroom placement (Burns & Mason, 2002; Henderson, 2011; Hopkins, 2006), surprisingly little is written about this process. The significance of considering race in this process is missing from research literature. In response to this research gap, I draw from findings based on a 14-month critical ethnographic study of Lincoln Elementary in the U.S. South, where I explored how teachers made sense of race in their daily work.

The call for this work is underscored by one particular teacher. Mrs. Carlotta[1] (an African American first-grade teacher in her early 50s) explained her perspective on classroom placement. "I didn't like the way it was being done, but I was told by the team leader that 'that's the way it was being done.' Once again, they're not sensitive to race." The way it was being done meant that Lincoln Elementary teachers evenly divided students into homerooms by race. This process began in response to the direction of the school principal, who told teachers to "consider race" as they created homerooms for the following school year. Building on Mrs. Carlotta's critique, I call for an exploration of what it might mean to consider race in homeroom placement decisions for the purpose of equity.

Teacher education is well positioned to improve "the way things are done." Several teacher education scholars have called for teacher education programs to take seriously the charge to equip teachers with the skills and dispositions necessary to teach in racially diverse schools (Milner, 2018; Sleeter, 2016). Accordingly, I assert that one aspect of better preparing teachers is to equip them with necessary skills to make race-visible decisions in their daily work. To demonstrate a shared phenomenon among teachers, I explore the questions, In what ways did Lincoln Elementary teachers makes sense of race in classroom placement decisions? What implications might this have for teachers and teacher education? I draw on concepts rooted in critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate 2006)—color blindness (Castagno, 2008), monoracism (Harris, 2016), and nonessentializing identities (Berry, 2012)—to analyze the discourse and process of classroom placement at Lincoln Elementary. I highlight both dangers and potentially generative strategies for considering race in classroom placement processes and name implications for teachers and teacher educators.

Situating the Study

Considering Race: Teachers and Teacher Education

Teachers are critical actors in addressing inequity in schools. It is essential that they are prepared to take up this role. Research has revealed numerous and persistent racialized disparities that impact various outcomes in education, such as accessibility to programs (Ford & King, 2014), the whiteness of teaching (Picower, 2009; Yoon, 2012), ability grouping and tracking (Oaks, Wells, & Datnow, 1997), and discipline practices (Milner, 2018). Clearly addressing teacher beliefs and practices

is an ongoing need (Buchanan, 2015). Critical researchers (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Lewis, 2010; Pollock, 2005; Sleeter, 2016) have shown that teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and understandings about race and racism inform their educational decision-making. Therefore how students are organized in schools is certainly influenced by how teachers make sense of the meaning and significance of race. Teacher preparation and training must play an important role in preparing teachers for considering race in common decisions in the teaching profession (Milner, 2018).

Unfortunately, "race is grossly under-theorized in teacher education" (Milner, Pearman, & McGee, 2013, p. 339). Scholars have called for the need to address the whiteness of teacher preparation and in P–12 teaching, specifically the ability to discuss race and engage in culturally responsive and culturally sustaining education (Matias, 2016; Paris & Alim, 2017; Sleeter, 2016). Relatedly, Yoon (2012) described what she calls whiteness-at-work among predominately white teachers, that is, the "discursive strategies that create paradoxes among teachers' beliefs, intentions and actions" (p. 587). These discursive strategies disable race talk, thereby "the ability of educators to unlearn habits that impede the practice of just and equitable education" (p. 588). Altogether, this research points to the need for teacher education to better prepare teachers not only to talk about race and racism but to be prepared to make decisions in their everyday lives as teachers who support equity in schools.

Despite many discouraging realities, there are encouraging indicators for the potential for change. Specifically, while many teachers feel underprepared and confused by race talk, the majority of teachers recognize that race plays an important role in education (Delale-O'Connor, Alvarez, Murray, & Milner, 2017). This implies that the desire to learn is present among most teachers. In a recent study, 86% of teachers recognized that talking about race is important, yet only 55% of teachers felt prepared to do so (Milner, 2018). If indeed teachers recognize the need to talk about and make sense of race in schools, yet they do not have the skill set to do so, the field of teacher education must make strides to identify how race matters in teacher work and how to adequately prepare teachers for complex everyday decisions within the profession.

Research About Classroom Placement

In previous studies about student grouping and classroom placement, racial analyses have been peripheral or excluded. Studies on classroom composition have focused on its impact on instruction (Hattie, 2002), parental involvement (Benner & Ni, 2015), academic achievement (Bellin, Dunge, & Gunzenhauser, 2010; Gottfried, 2012; Henderson, 2011), students' academic self-concept (Belfi, Goos, De Fraine, & Van Damme, 2012), and behavior (Cappella, Kim, Neal, & Jackson, 2013). These studies supported that student grouping affects academic and social outcomes, yet no available studies center a racial analysis of classroom placement processes.

Despite the decentering of race, there are a few important insights about class-

room placement for this article. Burns and Mason (1995) examined how principals considered students' abilities and work styles in the process of forming classes. Later, Burns and Mason (2002) examined how ability was used in creating classroom compositions. These studies pointed to the significance of classroom compositions at the elementary level and provided helpful terminology for aspects of the process itself. Drawing from these studies, two related terms are important: (a) *classroom composition*, or who is grouped together in classrooms, and (b) *student placement*, where individual students experience teaching and learning. Based on these terms, I use the term *classroom placement* to signify both where individual students are placed and how they are grouped together.

Theoretical Framing

In my analysis of data related to classroom placement at Lincoln Elementary, I draw on several concepts from critical race theory (CRT) in education. CRT as a theoretical framework emerged from legal studies (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). Scholars in education began using CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006) to center race in educational research and emphasize aspects of society, institutions, schools, and classrooms that perpetuate racial inequality. Undergirding CRT are key tenets that explain racism as a social reality in the United States, aim to dismantle white supremacy, critique color blindness and liberalism, and emphasize intersectional identities and experiential knowledge (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). Two key understandings are essential here. First, while race is a biological myth, race and racism are endemic social realities in the United States. Still, as Leonardo (2013) noted, "there is neither a concerted effort nor an agreement to define this driving concept [of race in CRT]" (p. 28). Nevertheless, there is consensus among CRT scholars that the social realities of race (as a social construct) affect the lived experiences of individuals and groups at personal, institutional, and systemic levels (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Second, regarding racial integration and desegregation, the work of CRT scholar Derrick Bell is paramount. Bell critiqued long-term implications of the racial desegregation of schools resulting from *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). Bell highlighted the words of Robert L. Carter, a member of the legal team who won the case. Carter (as cited in Bell, 1983) lamented that that team had "neither sought nor received any guidance from professional educators as to what equal education might connote in terms of their educational responsibilities" (p. 295). With this caution in mind, I analyze what it might mean for teachers to (still) "consider race" in our educational responsibilities. In this way, I view race-visible classroom placement decisions as connected to the larger goal of equal education.

I utilize three tools of analysis from emergent critical race scholarship to explore how teachers made sense of race in classroom placement decisions: color blindness, monoracism, and nonessentialized identities. I briefly describe each below. For the sake of clarity, these concepts were not identified at the entry point of

the larger study. Rather, these concepts helped explain the ways in which teachers talked about, responded to, and enacted their understandings of race and racism in the classroom placement process. These tools also offer important insights for equity-oriented race-visible decisions.

Color blindness. A key tenet of CRT is the challenge to dominant ideology, including claims to race neutrality. An ahistorical view of race and racism in the United States, or *color blindness*, actively erases the ways in which race has always played a significant role in structuring our society (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Vaught, 2011). While it is important to keep in mind that color blindness neither begins nor ends in schools, teacher work is affected by color blindness in profound ways. I draw specifically from two educational researchers who looked at manifestations of color blindness in teacher work. First, Pollock (2005) explained *colormuteness* as a tool of color blindness that denies race and racism. Colormuteness perpetuates our failure "to describe accurately the complex dynamics of our existing inequities" and chooses "not to analyze inequities at all" (p. 144). Second, Castagno's (2008) work with teachers revealed that color blindness is used strategically by teachers and deeply rooted in ideologies that are not easy to face. She explained, "Allegiance to colorblindness, equality, and meritocracy means that race can't possibly matter—if race and racism existed and held some significance in students' lives, then either our schools are not really colorblind, equal, and meritocratic, or teachers aren't" (p. 324).

Monoracism. Recently, Harris (2016) explained *monoracism* as a paradigm that assumes humans can be divided into discrete racial categories as a means to privilege the white race.[2] In discussions about classroom placement, monoracism was prevalent among teachers who were perplexed by what it might mean to consider race when it came to multiracial students. Furthermore, teachers were challenged to move beyond what Berry (2014) called *binary thinking*—Black/white racial categories. This is a common trend among educators that must be disrupted among teachers and by teacher educators. The monoracial lens obfuscates important parts of students' identities, such as multiracial, cultural, national, and linguistic identities (Chang, 2015; Howard, 2018b; Winn-Tutwiler, 2016).

Nonessentialized identities. Following the lead of critical race feminism (e.g., Berry, 2014; Berry & Stovall, 2013), it is crucial to understand identity within social and historical structures. This requires a framework that makes space for *nonessentializing identities*, an understanding of identity as complex and multidimensional based on social, cultural, and historical influences that cannot be reduced or essentialized to just one characteristic (i.e., only race, only gender). Berry (as cited in Jupp, Berry, & Lensmire, 2016) emphasized that "'identities are intertwined and interconnected, functioning simultaneously' along multiple dimensions, and [they] argue [that diverse] identities provide both problematics and potentials that can address issues of equity and equality" (p. 4). Correspondingly, I note the challenge

of acknowledging both the danger of our tendency to essentialize student identities and the necessity of grappling with what it might mean to trouble essentializing identities as part of making classroom placement decisions.

Methods

The present analysis of data represents a *critical incident*, a situation that epitomizes a particular practice or structure (Angelides, 2001). During my 14-month critical ethnography at Lincoln Elementary (2011–2012), I focused on how race matters in teacher work. The role of race in classroom placement was one finding from the overall study (see Howard, 2018a, 2018c). Throughout the study, I observed and participated in everyday interactions as a part of the community of teachers (Carspecken, 1996; Madison, 2007; Spradley, 2016). Data used in the present analysis include (a) field notes from informal conversations, teacher meetings, and staff meetings; (b) seven interviews with lifelong community members; (c) two focus groups with five teacher participants to discuss emerging themes (i.e., student placement); (d) artifacts (i.e., student forms, district reports); and (e) a series of three semistructured interviews (15 total) with five teacher participants selected through a combined typical and criterion sampling. The following teachers are mentioned by name: Mrs. Carlotta[3] (an African American first-grade teacher in her early 50s), Ms. Smith (a white third-grade lead teacher in her early 30s), and Mr. Jackson (an African American intermediate teacher in his mid-20s).

To analyze data, I coded the entire data set first using descriptive coding (i.e., "placement") and InVivo coding—the exact words of participants (Saldaña, 2009). Student placement emerged as a salient theme. In other words, race was described in conjunction with the physical location of teachers and/or students. Several examples of student placement were present in the data, including gifted and talented placement (Howard, 2018b), lessons about human enslavement (Howard, 2018a), and homeroom placement. To better understand homeroom placement, I conducted an additional round of focused coding (Saldaña, 2009), where I reviewed all data related to teacher conversations about (interviews and focus groups) and processes of (observations of grade-level meetings, artifacts) classroom placement. I organized these data into categories, noting word choices, silences, instructions, stated racial reasoning/logic, strategies, and positions (verbal/physical) as teachers explained or demonstrated how they "consider race." I organized findings into three themes based on focused coding: (a) a melting pot framework; (b) legit, mixed, and others; and (c) everybody needs to be put in a box.

Positionality

As a teacher-researcher who had known and worked with many of the teachers for 4 years prior to beginning the study, I was a friend and colleague to most teach-

ers at Lincoln Elementary. As a white teacher-researcher in an interracial family (Black and white), my identity, marriage, and children were read by teachers and administrators in disparate ways that I have taken up critically elsewhere (Howard, Thompson, Nash, & Rodriguez, 2016). My racial identity informed questions, relationships, and conversations about race that were unique. I was able to observe conversations and interactions and to check in with teachers in ways that were decidedly different from an outside researcher with limited access to the behind-the-scenes work of teachers. In reflecting on my own blind spots and limitations, my analysis is tempered by warnings that white researchers must be mindful not to perpetuate inferential racism or racial assumptions that are legitimated when expressed without critical examination (Blaisdell, 2015; Milner, 2007). I have been attentive to ongoing reflexivity in my interpretation of the classroom placement process and my positionality as a researcher in this school (Howard et al., 2016).

This positionality is not without complication, since my relationship with these teachers is dynamic and sustained. One example of my unique positionality involved my first observation of a classroom placement meeting. As I entered the room for another purpose, a teacher exclaimed, "Oh, Joy, you are the perfect person for this conversation. We don't know what to do with some of these kids . . . like this kid, she's mixed but she's light skinned. . . . What would you say she is? What are your kids?" This example demonstrates how I was simultaneously positioned as a race expert, an outsider to the process, and an insider in the conversation. Because of my sustained relationship with teachers, when the initial process was complete, I was able to ask follow-up questions to clarify teachers' reasons for particular decisions. My sustained relationships with these teachers also allowed me to see that while these teachers cared for individual students, justice-oriented and race-visible decision-making was not the norm. My intent is not to demonize any educator in the study but rather to reveal the ways in which the behind-the-scenes process of classroom placement could move beyond the status quo.

The Place of Race at Lincoln Elementary

The geographical setting of Lincoln[4] in the U.S. South is significant. Scholars have suggested that studying race in the U.S. South is particularly important (Morris & Monroe, 2009). Delaney (2002) referred to *the place that race makes*—and by design, Lincoln had been historically constructed as a predominately white town. Based on my review of historical documents about Lincoln (Artifacts A) and interviews of lifelong community members (Interviews 1–3), Lincoln Elementary was a school literally built on white-owned property. Only white children were enrolled until 1969. White dominance in this school space was no accident, demonstrated by a history of sharecropping, racial segregation, and a local Ku Klux Klan chapter.

Both the town and the school remained predominately white (90%) throughout the 20th century. Racial diversity increased dramatically in Lincoln between 2000

and 2012. In 12 years, the percentage of white students at the school dropped from about 90% to 75%, the Black student population increased from 10% to 14%, the Hispanic student population grew from less than 1% to 8%, students from the "other" category now represented 3%, and students who spoke a language other than English at home (majority Spanish) went from 0.1% to 8%. This new population of students created what several educators and community members described as a "new conversation*"* about Lincoln Elementary "becoming a multicultural school." Teachers expressed varying levels of awareness about Lincoln's racial history.

The teaching staff was primarily white (96%). Teachers and community members reported that there had only been "one or two Black teachers" from year to year since desegregation in 1969. Most teachers took what Pollock (2005) described as a *colormute* approach to race: a failure "to describe accurately the complex dynamics of our existing inequities" and a consistent choice "not to analyze inequities at all" (p. 144). Analyzing the racial dynamics of Lincoln, Mrs. Carlotta (African American first-grade teacher) explained that "race relations at Lincoln Elementary are failing to progress" and were actually "going backwards" (Interview 9). It is within the colormute place of Lincoln Elementary that teachers were asked to "consider race" in the process of classroom placement.

Findings

A Melting Pot Framework

A few weeks before summer, Lincoln Elementary teachers were directed by the principal to sort their current students into homerooms for the 2012–2013 school year and to "consider race" in the process. I observed[5] first-, second-, and third-grade team meetings where teachers placed students into homerooms. During grade-level meetings, each student was represented by an orange one-page student information form that included categories of standardized test scores, gender, a short narrative, and "race" (Artifacts B). Filling in the race line and conceptualizing what it meant to "consider race" was perplexing for the majority of teachers, who questioned and debated approaches to both.

When I asked the principal to explain the logic behind the homeroom-sorting process, he explained that he had asked teachers to "consider race" because there were "so few African Americans at Lincoln Elementary." He continued that "all homerooms should look basically the same" and be "a melting pot." He explained,

> We only have three spaces, Black, white, and other. We just have "other" because there are just as many kids considered "other" here as there are white kids, so I told [the team leaders] to make sure to put at least two African American students in each class, because it's important that they have someone who looks like them. (field notes)

This explanation for creating a "melting pot" set the tone for the process at each grade level.

Teachers were directed to "consider race" in classroom placement without any formal conversation or training about race or racism. During an interview, Mrs. Carlotta described the lack of training and conversation about race, saying,

> I tried to say to [the principal], when he first came I said, "We need to talk about color because the people here are still [racist]." . . . I was asked to give information, and I did. And I guess it went in the trash can because it was never responded to.

Without training or an explanation for how to engage in the process, each grade level sorted student forms into piles representing separate homerooms with slight variations in the procedure. For example, the third-grade team began with "Black males" and ended with "white females," while the second-grade team added ability categories and began with "low, white females" and ended with "high, African American males." Some teachers raised concerns, making statements like "I'm just uncomfortable with this whole thing. I don't want any part of it!"; "I don't know why we have to do this anyway. Why it matters so much"; and "I don't understand why we're sorting them this way" (field notes). Nevertheless, each grade level eventually followed a similar pattern of organizing students into singular racial categories, which was the primary focus in considering classroom placement decisions. Exceptions to this rule were that special considerations were given to students with an Individualized Education Plan and students in the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program. A kindergarten teacher described,

> We made eight stacks and we separated all the minority together and went bam bam (moves hands like dealing cards) and then high kids. Well, first we did high achieving and low, then boys, girls, and minorities, so we tried to evenly disperse those. . . . It was confusing. We tried to even it out. And I think they do it so each class so that each class can have a little bit of, um, what am I thinking of [pause] diversity. (Focus Group 2)

In general, educators did not examine the complexities of race in relation to student placement (the impact on individual students) or classroom compositions (the combination of students and the teachers within the classroom). With acute variation, interviews and conversations with several teachers echoed the reasoning given by the assistant principal for considering race in this process. The objective described by teachers and administrators was to avoid "having a bunch of Black kids in the same room [because] it looks bad." The assistant principal explained that considering race in homeroom placement decisions was "one of those things people never talk about, but it's the way things are done" (field notes). In sum, the melting pot framework meant that teachers were to avoid naming race specifically, but if it became necessary, the intent was to avoid the appearance of racism at the individual, classroom, or school level.

Analysis of a Melting Pot Framework

In the context of Lincoln, a predominately white school, racial lines were drawn in Black and white through a history of institutionalized racism clearly established through school segregation. From its inception, the directive to "consider race" came as a shock to teachers, who were accustomed to a *colormute* approach to race (Pollock, 2005), despite the "new conversation" about the new "multicultural" Lincoln Elementary. Mrs. Carlotta's counternarrative that "we need to talk about color" was "never responded to." Ironically, colormuteness narrated this "new conversation." This lack of race talk is connected to Leonardo's (2013) assertion that "conceptualizing race is intimately tied to performing it" (p. 156). In other words, the lack of conversation and training, starting with the most basic of questions—"What is race?"—meant that teachers reduced what it meant to "consider race" to another, everyday teacher task to complete.

The melting pot framework silenced teachers of color, like Mrs. Carlotta, who had experiential and professional insight about the nuances of why and how considering race was important for classroom placement decisions. Instead, classroom placement rested on the logic that "diversity" (as code for race) should be evenly distributed among the classrooms and the avoidance of a generally unspoken discomfort with having "a bunch of Black kids in the same room [because] it looks bad." This colormute (Pollock, 2005) fear was "one of those things people never talked about." In this way, the melting pot framework allowed for the appearance of racial integration without taking on complex considerations about what it might mean to challenge a color-blind narrative of meritocracy, equality, and how race matters in the lives of students (Castagno, 2008).

This process lacked clear guidance, training, historical context, and even factual evidence that would enhance a race-visible analysis of the homeroom-sorting process. Addressing racism was reduced to avoiding the appearance of racial segregation. Thus the principal's "melting pot" framing left teachers to sort students by race devoid of a conversation about race as a system, the complexities of racial categories, or the relationship between race and culture. Considering race through this melting pot framework dismissed the needs of individual students and became an exercise where the objective was simplified to creating classrooms that did not look racist.

Understanding race as simply visual was the accepted norm. This norm negated the need to question, converse about, or participate in training about race as a complex construction. During my observations, individual teachers did not enter the process with racist intentions. However, the "melting pot" framing silenced any consideration of critical questions about race, evidence (i.e., performance data disaggregated by race), or resources (i.e., professional development) that could add to a more complex conceptualization of what it might mean to consider race in classroom placement. Thus inquiries about the problems related to reducing race to skin color alone remained "confusing" and resulted in a problematic process.

For example, students were sorted as "high achieving and low, then boys/girls, and minorities," where "minorities" were imagined as outside of academic achievement and gender. These misguided categories determined student placement decisions and created a scenario where racialized students became raced bodies that required a melting away of their unique strengths, personalities, identities, and academic interests.

This oversimplified framing of race allowed for partial stories, omissions of student identities, and false information to guide classroom placement decisions. For example, the principal's observation that there were "so few African American students" went unanalyzed by administrators and teachers. This claim omitted important questions about changing local racial demographics or the historical exclusion of students of color and their families through a segregated schooling system. Furthermore, the focus on the Black/white dichotomy left no room for critical conversations about the "other" group(s) represented in the school and what "considering race" might mean in an increasingly racially diverse school. In addition to discussing race in overly simplistic terms, the melting pot framework perpetuated racial myths by dismissing the need to analyze school data in this process. For instance, the principal's statement that "there are just as many kids considered 'other' as there are white kids" was false. According to school data based on enrollment forms completed by parents, the "other" category would have been 11% (3% "other" and 8% "Hispanic"), whereas the white population totaled 75% (Artifact 47).

In the end, "the way things have always been done" meant that race was a topic that was preferable not to discuss or see, but if it became unavoidable, it was almost exclusively a visual category. The contradictions of color blindness—only seeing race but not actually dealing with race/racism—created a discomfort for teachers who critiqued and rejected the task. This was represented by statements from teachers such as "I'm just uncomfortable with this whole thing. I don't want any part of it!" and "I don't know why we have to do this anyway. Why it matters so much." These statements signify a general dissonance about the logic, ethics, and emotions wrapped into the conversation, where teachers were troubled by the very nature of considering race, since truly considering race would necessitate complex conversations about educational equity and truth-telling about the myth of meritocracy (Castagno, 2008). Simply put, equity cannot be a sincere or reachable goal in a melting pot framework.

Legit, Mixed, and Others

"Race" was consistently a space of conflict and tension for teachers attempting to categorize students, particularly multiracial students. In my first observation of the classroom placement process, teachers decided how to begin. One third-grade teacher asked bluntly, "Can we just have a stack of white and everybody else?" During the third-grade process, one teacher asked if they were ready to consider mixed students. Another teacher replied that they were just sorting Black students, the "legit, not the mixed yet."

Teachers made subjective decisions based on racial phenotypes of children who were described as "light skinned" or as having "dark skin." The problematic nature of this process was particularly evident in the case of two multiracial Jamaican immigrant third-grade students. One teacher asked, "Like what do you do with this kid? She's mixed, but she's light skinned and you could never tell, so I put her as white. So, what pile does she go in? Is she African American, or white, or other?" Eventually, the teacher decided to categorize the student as white. Another teacher decided about her multiracial Jamaican student, "Well, like I have one, he's mixed. He has dark skin, so I guess I'd say he's Black" (field notes).

Several teachers expressed frustration and even pity directed at multiracial students. For example, the second-grade lead teacher questioned the category of multiracial and asked me, "What would you put? Other? Because some get mad if you call them one or the other." After realizing that the teachers sincerely wanted my insight, I said, "Well, for my children I'd put Black and white." The teachers stared at me with puzzled expressions, and after several seconds of silence, the lead teacher curtly said, "Just put 'other' because they're Black and white." In the same conversation, another teacher sighed as she spoke about one of her multiracial students who she said had "just realized he was mixed when he was walking down the hallway" (field notes).

There was no clear definition on "other" or what some teachers categorized as "other-other"; however, the category was clearly used to move students outside of a white category. For example, the "other" category was described by the second-grade team leader: "other is everything that is not Black or white" (field notes). Across grade levels, multiracial students were placed into "white," "Black," "other," and "other-other" categories. The other-other category emerged in second grade, when a teacher asked, "Do we say Black, then white, then do we say other-other? How do you do that? I don't really understand how to do that. Other: white Black, Hispanic; other, what . . . ?" The other and other-other positioning of students across grade levels included multiethnic students such as "Kinu who was from Sri Lanka, but he lived in France," and students who were "Hispanic," "not Mexican," "half and half," and "mixed" (field notes).

Analysis of Legit, Mixed, and Others

The multiracial category is an important entrée into an analysis of the divisive nature of monoracism that did not begin with individual teachers. Nevertheless, monoracism must be considered by teachers and teacher educators (Howard, 2018b). At Lincoln Elementary, classroom placement was guided by thinking about race in Black/white binary terms through a monoracist paradigm—the idea that humans can be divided into discrete racial categories as a means to privilege the white race (Harris, 2016). Monoracism made multiracial identities impossible and relegated them to a nonsensical "other" or "other-other" (nonwhite) position in a racial hi-

erarchy. This resulted in false assumptions that disrespected bicultural, binational, and multiracial student identities, a common trend among educators more broadly (Chang, 2015; Winn-Tutwiler, 2016).

While some teachers admitted "I don't understand how to [categorize multiracial students]," any disruption of the monoracist paradigm was dismissed by responses like the second-grade team leader's assertion of "just other" or the introduction of an "other-other" category. The monoracial paradigm remained intact despite suggestions about the complexities of race, ethnicity, and nationality (i.e., Kinu from Sri Lanka and France). The homogenized other and other-other categories served to negate intersections of ethnicity and nationality with race (Berry, 2014) and even dismissed student and family self-descriptions.

Monoracial framing affected the perception of multiracial students in a number of adverse ways. For example, when discussing "Black" students, one teacher discounted the legitimacy of the blackness of multiracial students, saying they were just sorting the "legit, not the mixed yet." Colorism was present in this process, where, for instance, multiracial Jamaican students were assumed to be "white" or "Black," respectively, based on appearance and perceived proximity to whiteness (Harris, 2016; Howard, 2018b). Another example was a teacher's expression of pity about her student who "just realized he was mixed walking down the hallway." This statement discounted this 7-year-old child's prior racial knowledge and made assumptions about what it might mean to be "mixed." Ironically, it was evident that these teachers, like many teachers, had no clear working knowledge about multiracial identities (Howard, 2018b; Winn-Tutwiler, 2016).

Ultimately, students were sorted into categories largely characterized by "white and everybody else." Monoracism served to negate valid questions about these categories and their meanings and ultimately silenced the possibility of multiracial (and multiethnic) realities. In this way, student self-identifiers and their family backgrounds were discounted and dismissed by a binary narrative of race (Berry, 2014). Because monoracism was an unquestionable reality, student placement decisions were made based on binary thinking. As a result, considering race through a monoracial lens meant that multiracial students' cultural, ethnic, national, and racial identities were dismissed as a significant part of who they were inside or outside of school.

Everybody Needs to Be Put in a Box

Racial stereotypes were appended to the racial categories into which students were placed. For example, while looking at the group of forms for African American second graders, a teacher asked skeptically, "Are there highs?" (field notes). Her assumption was that there would be no high-performing African American students in an entire grade level, a racialized stereotype not applied to white second-grade students. In third grade, the team leader, Mrs. Smith, declared, "We need to pass

out all the minority students equally." The day after the sorting process, Mrs. Smith commented that the process "seemed to be racially motivated," as it was explained to her by the principal. In the same conversation, she critiqued her own strategies: "We passed out all the minority students based on their race and didn't consider their personality or what they need." Indeed, several teachers described the process as something very much "like playing cards." In Focus Group 2, one fourth-grade teacher critiqued, "It was like, OK, give me a high-achieving female Black. That was the way, and I did not like it." One example of an inherent problem was how the forms were completed and used. This was illustrated by a third-grade teacher who was confused about what to write for "race." She said, "This one has dark hair, and her mother speaks Spanish, but she's not Mexican because that offends her." Mrs. Smith replied, "Well, have you asked her?" The teacher replied, "Well, yes, but I forgot what she said."

After sorting students like "playing cards," each grade level analyzed equality among homerooms using tally sheets representing each homeroom composition. Tally sheets included "Black, white, other; boy, girl; and high, medium, low," where high, medium, and low signified academic ability based on test score data (field notes; Interviews 11, 12, 14). The only teacher who I observed analyzing homerooms through a more complex lens was Mrs. Carlotta. I watched her privately analyze her homeroom tally sheet, where she considered tallies of student identities based on a more holistic view. Rather than having separate tally totals under columns for race, ability, and gender, Mrs. Carlotta combined categories representing several identities for each student (i.e., "medium, Black, boy" and "low, white, girl") as she analyzed potential classroom compositions. Her team leader rejected this more complex analysis of classroom compositions. Mrs. Carlotta reflected,

> I didn't like the way it was being done, but I was told by the team leader that "that's the way it was being done." Once again, they're not sensitive to race. It doesn't matter . . . you don't see that, you don't feel that because it's not you. You would have to be me to know what it's like what it feels like to be that one. (Interview 13)

Mr. Jackson critiqued "the boxes that we put children in." He said,

> Those kids don't even realize. They don't even know until they grow up and they see, this person looks at me and expects this of me because of what? That's the box we made for them in kindergarten and pushed them through the system. (Focus Group 2)

Analysis of Everybody Needs to Be Put in a Box

Considering race by engaging in a process akin to "playing cards" did not lead to critical conversations about classroom compositions or student placement. Essentializing student identities (Ulysse, Berry, & Jupp, 2016) by reducing students to their teacher-interpreted racial categories nullified potential benefits of considering race in classroom placement. Instead, as Mr. Jackson described, students were

"put in a box and placed into a room." The forms themselves, and the tally system as it was applied, left little room to analyze other important identity markers that contributed to interpersonal communication and learning styles within classroom compositions. The "playing cards" approach reduced students to objects, or as Ms. Smith observed, the process neglected to "consider [minority students'] personality or what they need." For example, the teacher who "forgot what [her student] said" about her identity, as "not Mexican," essentialized (Ulysse et al., 2016) this student as a nonwhite "minority" student. Essentialization omitted significant aspects of her identity, such as language and culture.

Essentializing students based on race surfaced dangerous stereotypes. For example, the second-grade teacher who questioned "Are there highs?" (high-ability Black students in second grade) demonstrated an ideology where smartness was assumed to be a property of whiteness (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). This false stereotype is not unique to Lincoln Elementary; rather, sociocultural constructs of smart children as white children have been documented in research (see Ford & King, 2014; Howard, 2018c). Yet, these stereotypes remained unchecked.

Mrs. Carlotta, like many scholars of race in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Lewis, 2010; Milner, 2018; Sleeter, 2016), suggested and demonstrated that a deeper analysis of race was desperately needed. However, essentializing approaches to racial categorization were reinforced by the first-grade team leader as simply "the way it was being done." Although Mrs. Carlotta's attempted to advance the process by introducing strategies for analyzing the complexities of classroom placement by looking at students' intersectional identities, this strategy was dismissed. As a result, student identities were reduced to a racialized box described by Mrs. Carlotta and Mr. Jackson, who pointed out the dangers of the melting pot framework.

In sum, oversimplifying the significance of race (Berry, 2014) by reducing conversations to skin color and appearance alone failed to engage generative conversations or accurate depictions of how race might be a significant factor in classroom composition or student placement. The expectation that students fit neatly into gender, ability, and/or racial categories was synthesized by Mrs. Carlotta's and Mr. Jackson's descriptions that "everybody needs to be placed in a box." This focus on racial categorization as an essentialized identity disregarded necessary conversations that could lead to generative race-visible classroom placement decisions.

Discussion and Implications

Considering race as a means for working toward equity in classroom placement necessitates honest discussions about race as a social reality and truly engaging in a larger conversation with teachers about the meaning of educational equity (Bell, 1983). It would also necessitate a critique of whiteness-at-work (Yoon, 2012) that prevents "the ability of educators to unlearn habits that impede the practice of just and equitable education" (p. 588). Equity-oriented placement would negate the melting pot

framework as viable in this process and would necessitate complex conversations about monoracism and multiraciality. Furthermore, it would demand the space for nonessentialized identities of students to be recognized rather than students being placed in boxes and shuffled around like playing cards. Unfortunately, because the classroom placement process did include training or dialogue about the complexities of race and racism, this opportunity was largely missed at Lincoln Elementary.

My aim is to question the way things are done to begin a conversation about how teachers and teacher educators might engage in race-visible conversation about classroom placement for equity purposes. This call is tempered by Leonardo and Zembylas's (2013) statement that "if educators are going to challenge racism in schools, this goal is forged within a clear commitment to expose the insidious emotional power of racism and its affective investments in white identities" (p. 162). In other words, calling for race-visible classroom placement decisions will necessitate difficult dialogues for both teachers and teacher educators, who are overwhelmingly white (Milner, 2018; Sleeter, 2016). As Matias (2016) has found, I anticipate that teachers will utilize emotional pivots away from this race-visible conversation, much like the teachers at Lincoln Elementary did to avoid the discomfort of facing racism in teacher work. However, if we, as teacher educators, do not move this conversation forward through critical questions and training, color blindness, monoracism, and essentialization will narrate this regular practice in schools.

In the case of Lincoln Elementary, classroom placement was largely disrespectful of students. From previous research, we know that placement decisions have significant academic and social effects (Belfi et al., 2012; Gottfried, 2012; Henderson, 2011), yet these decisions were made for students based on a melting pot framework that disregarded student identities and needs. To create a better framework, I assert that teachers are not the only ones implicated in imagining a better process. Teacher preparation and training have yet to theorize or provide teachers with the training necessary to move outside of this framework. As a result, Lincoln Elementary teachers are not alone in their lack of understanding about what it might mean to consider race for classroom placement decisions. Therefore the field of teacher education must take up the questions and tensions articulated by teachers in this study. That is, how might we structure placement decisions that (a) simultaneously consider students' personalities, learning needs, and racial identities in student placement decisions and (b) analyze classroom composition decisions in ways that take into account multiple identifiers, such as race, gender, language, ethnicity, and abilities? Considering these questions in specific school contexts could lead to generative conversations in classroom placement processes.

Based on findings from this study, I propose six specific recommendations to structure race-visible conversations and processes for classroom placement:

1. Reject the melting pot framework.

2. Consult students' permanent records (completed by their families) for racial identifiers rather than relying on race as a visual category.

3. Invite students to describe themselves, identifying their most salient identities (i.e., boy, smart, athlete, popular). This would provide insight about how students see themselves and could offer their next teachers important insight about them.

4. Evaluate school and grade-level performance and discipline data to consider racial trends at the school.

5. Analyze classroom compositions based on multiple identifiers (i.e., race, gender, academic achievement).

6. Engage in honest conversations and provide training for teachers relevant to race and racism (i.e., What is the history of racism at this school? What is multiraciality?).

Professional development related to classroom placement decisions is needed, and this could take many forms. First, when teachers consider race within professional learning communities (Servage, 2008), there must be training and support to foster a deeper understanding about the complexities of race. This would necessitate safe spaces to engage in dialogue. Ali Michael (2015) provided an example of an inquiry group focused on raising race questions with teachers. Using an inquiry process for considering race in classroom placement is one possibility for improved practice. Second, these findings echo a call for research about teachers' understandings of multiracial identities (Howard, 2018b). Third, while the present study is focused on race-visible classroom placement in elementary homerooms, race-visible decision-making about placement decisions, such as gifted and talented, ESOL, and reading groups, are needed. There must be careful consideration for the ways in which context matters (i.e., geographical location, school demographics, school culture) and how decisions must be responsive to specific contexts in each of these potential lines of inquiry.

In addition to these recommendations for P–12 teacher practice, the present analysis holds several implications for teacher educators. For instance, as a teacher educator, I have shared teachers' comments about the classroom placement process (organized as a reader's theater script) with preservice teachers in my courses. We discuss the discourse, interactions, and outcomes of this process, and together we generate suggestions on how this process might be improved. These discussions provide preservice teachers with real-life examples of how race matters in teacher work. Several preservice teachers have commented in class and in synthesis papers that this exercise created a space to connect the significance of race and intersectional identities to their future work as teachers.

Final Thoughts

Teacher education is well positioned to engage in a new conversation about the connections between teachers' everyday decision-making and race/racism in schools.

Unlike the "new conversation" at Lincoln Elementary about demographic shifts at the school, which silenced important questions about race, teacher education must engage in race-visible dialogue with and training of (future) teachers. Classroom placement is an important practice applicable to teachers and teacher educators across the country. This practice must include race-visible critical dialogue beginning with, For what purpose? For whose benefit? The answer must include students' needs and strengths. This process will require that we grapple with tensions about the significance of race and racism in both teaching and teacher education (Milner, 2018; Sleeter, 2016), while not reducing race-visible conversations to essentializing categories for the benefit of white students and white teachers. Reducing this process to simply avoiding the appearance of segregation only serves to assuage white guilt, which does not equate to equity.

Although considering race in classroom placement did not result in generative race-visible decisions at Lincoln Elementary, I remain hopeful that through reflective practice and ongoing support, it is possible. Taking into consideration the complexities of race could serve to improve both classroom composition choices and student placement decisions. Working through the tensions and discomforts of race-visible analyses is not easy work. However, if "equal education" (Bell, 1983, p. 295) is our aim in making decisions about classroom placement, then teachers must engage in critical dialogue and training that pushes beyond "the way things are being done."

Notes

[1] All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

[2] The author uses capital *Black* and lowercase *white*, following the lead of Dumas (2016), who explained, "White is not capitalized in my work because it is nothing but a social construct, and does not describe a group with a common experience or kinship outside of acts of colonization and terror" (p. 13).

[3] This research was approved through the institutional review board process.

[4] I use the term *Lincoln* to refer to the town and *Lincoln Elementary* for the school. I chose the term to represent the contested and changing nature of this space, its long history with racism, and the contradictions present in Abraham Lincoln's words, actions, and legacy as the end of legalized racial oppression (see Bigelow, 2012).

[5] I observed these three grade levels because meetings were happening concurrently at some grade levels. Teachers from kindergarten and fourth grade were a part of focus groups and confirmed that a similar process happened at their grade levels. Fifth grade did not participate because their students were entering middle school.

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