LOOKING THROUGH THE EYES OF PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS: A STUDY OF HOW WHITE TEACHERS TALK ABOUT RACE

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I. Introduction & Rationale:

We live in an ever-changing world in which children need to, and should be, exposed to different cultures, races, and ethnicities. However, in our schools there is a cultural gap amongst teachers and children. While 83 percent of public school teachers are White, the percentage of White students decreased from 61 to 52 percent between 2000 and 2010 (National Center For Education Statistics, 2010). In contrast, Hispanic public school enrollment during this period increased from 7.7 to 11.4 million students, and the percentage of public school students who were Hispanic increased from 16 to 23 percent".

The imbalanced racial distribution of students in comparison to disproportionate amount of White teachers is evident in Massachusetts as well, where it's not uncommon to walk into a primary school classroom and find a White teacher amongst a majority of racially diverse students. In fact, according to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2014), while only 66% of K-12 students in Massachusetts are White, 91% of teachers are White. In our racially charged society, the disproportionate number of White teachers to students of color raises questions, about possible implications and prompts one to question – can White teachers effectively teach across racial lines?

I was not offered the opportunity to explore the importance of race during my primary school education. As a result, I grew up without the knowledge of what the word 'race' truly meant. I was not exposed to this topic until a much later age in which I became aware of my classmates whom I knew were different than me. This hindered my ability to learn about different cultures and ethnicities,

which in the end impacted my views on this topic. This proved to be problematic in my life, most specifically seen in missed opportunities to form relationships with children of different ethnic backgrounds than my own. In not fostering these friendships, I believe that I missed out on an even greater opportunity – learning, at a young age, to embrace the beauty of different cultures found throughout the world.

When I was in elementary school, I used to believe that talking about race was not important because it was something that, I presumed, my teachers did not find value within due to their lack of lessons centered on this topic. After entering college, and becoming a part of a very diverse collegiate community, my eyes have been opened to the importance of celebrating and embracing race. My only wish is that my elementary school teachers had provided my classmates and me with lessons on different cultures and races, instead of merely avoiding the topic altogether.

As an aspiring elementary school teacher, I want to know how to address this important topic when talking to my future students who may or may not be aware of the complexity of race. This has furthermore led me to research a variety of studies conducted in the past that center on how primary school teachers talk about the controversial topic of race within their classrooms. The goal of this small study is to investigate the ways that White primary school teachers talk about race in their classrooms.

II. Existing Research

The disproportionate percentage of White teachers teaching in increasingly diverse public school districts has led to a great deal of research centered on how White teachers talk about race within their classrooms. Race is a controversial topic within the field of education, and studies suggest that teachers are often reluctant to engage in lessons and discussions that address race with their students (Bolgatz, 2005). As an aspiring teacher preparing to serve children in the racially diverse districts that lay North of Boston, I was drawn to these previous studies and was eager to learn more about how I might approach race in my own practice.

One study, which offers important insights concerning the way White teachers' racial views influence the way they talk about race in their classrooms, was published by Amanda Lewis (2001). Lewis' study examines a "colorblind" approach used by a suburban school of teachers who teach in a primarily White school community. When Lewis went to the school that she was using for her research, she noticed that several individuals mentioned a lack of talking about race in the classroom due to their colorblind approach. This colorblind approach seeks to have teachers disregard their students' race, and in turn look at all of their students the same. When these individuals did talk about race, "it was primarily in relation to 'others'—people of color, and primarily Blacks" (786). For example, during one of Lewis' interviews with a mother, she asked about how the school taught their students about issues of diversity, to which, the mother responded by saying, "Well, I think that a—a certain part of that they don't have to deal with,

because the school's not extremely multicultural. You know. It's not—uh there's not a—a lot, a lot, a lot of Black people that go there. So I think maybe they don't have to address it too much" (786).

A similar thought was expressed through the reluctance of the school's community to talk about issues of race in their district's classrooms. Lewis' (2001) examination of the school's curriculum suggests that race was only explicitly addressed during Black History Month, which was "district mandated" (786). In the end, it appeared that in the community featured in Lewis' study, parents, community members, and teachers declined to take an active role in helping to educate children about race because of their belief that, "everyone is the same, and that we should all be colorblind" (788). Yet, there is little evidence that such a "colorblind" approach is effective, particularly since it contributes to a lack of talk about race in the classroom. Ultimately, Lewis concludes that the "colorblind" approach does little to build the type of society where students from all backgrounds are celebrated. She concludes by stating that, "A more critical multicultural education must not only seek to produce students who can think critically about their world, it must also endeavor to serve the larger goal of changing that world" (805). To this end, schools must not ignore and avoid race, but must become places that welcome and embrace dialogue about race.

In a similar study, Patricia Cooper (2003) examined the perspectives and practices of three White teachers working in an urban community who used a colorblind approach, which ultimately led to a lack of talking about race. Cooper's findings suggest that these teachers were unable to acknowledge their

students' racial identities, evidenced by their inability to explicitly and openly talk about current racial issues to their students. These teachers felt that the "most equitable stance toward race was a color-blind one" (424) and that they were fearful that "such [a] discussion would be misunderstood by administrators, parents, and the community at large" (424) and therefore should be avoided completely.

The problem with these teachers avoidance of race dialogue is that it did not allow for teachers to embrace and value their students' racial makeup, which is a key part of any child's identity. Therefore, in not verbally recognizing their students' racial makeup, the teachers featured in Cooper's (2003) study were unable to truly understand their students. They also miss an opportunity to help their White students to understand the importance of race within our ever-changing world. Ultimately, Cooper sums up her study by stating; "It is imperative for teacher education programs to recognize the importance of assistance and training for White teachers" (425) who are preparing to work in diverse communities. Cooper suggests that teachers should seek to openly talk about race within their classrooms in order to respect and embrace the diverse communities which they are working in.

While Lewis (2001) and Cooper (2003) examined teachers who took a "colorblind" stance and avoided race dialogue, another researcher, Lauri Johnson (2002) focused her study on six White teachers from racially diverse classrooms who "had been nominated as being 'aware of race and racism' by a diverse panel of experts" (153). When asked whether the participants saw the race of the

students, or if they saw themselves as colorblind, one teacher responded by "admit[ing] that she used to think it was wrong to notice the race of her students, but her view had changed: 'Before I had that liberal mentality, that mentality where everyone is the same. Well, that's not true. This person's experience may be very different than mine and I need to understand that before teaching them or before engaging them in conversation'" (161). Another teacher responded to Johnson's question by saying, "I'm aware of race, mostly because I'm aware of (the student's) culture. To me it's more about culture" (161). This particular teacher's definition of personal culture included "an individual's class background and sexual orientation as well as racial and ethnic affiliation" (161). In contrast to the "colorblind" participants in the Lewis (2001) and Cooper (2003) studies, the perspectives of those highlighted in Johnson's study suggest that some teachers highlight the need to take into account their students' racial identities in order to provide them with not only a greater level of instruction that takes into account their past experiences, but also the opportunity to talk openly about race.

In helping to foster their students' identity development, the teachers in Johnson's (2002) study who were able to openly accept and embrace talking about race within their classrooms also appeared to provide students with the opportunity to achieve a greater level of academic success. For example, one way that a teacher included talking about race in her classroom included "incorporate[ing] some multicultural curriculum through her literature discussion groups, and she had organized an ongoing book discussion group in which teachers talked about issues of race, culture, and inequality" (161). Students

seemed to be particularly engaged during this time. Ultimately, Johnson (2002) sums up her study by stating; "I also became painfully aware of how far we have to travel as individuals and a society to understand how conceptions of race and racial privilege structure our identities and our institutions" (164). To achieve such a level of awareness among all members of our society will depend both on our teachers developing conceptions about race and racial privilege are established and also upon their introducing race as a critical topic to be addressed with their students - beginning in primary school.

Acknowledging evidence that a "color-blind" approach to race may be less effective on students, other scholars have looked to identify the ways in which aspiring teachers can acquire the skills that will prepare them to openly acknowledge and talk about race. Christine Sleeter's 2001 study takes a closer look at the achievements and shortcomings of several different strategies and trainings used for educating teachers to talk about race. An example can be seen in Sleeter's debate over the effectiveness of "Stand-Alone Multicultural Education Courses" (98) and "Multicultural Education Coursework With a Field Experience" (99). For, as Sleeter has argued, some students go through this coursework with field experience and achieve a level of "greater willingness among many to consider working in an urban school" (99). However, as Sleeter has said, there are still some students who go through this coursework and remain unchanged, prompting Sleeter to raise the question, "are [future teachers] growing enough to become strong teachers in culturally diverse schools?" (100). Sleeter's study underscores the complexity of the question of how White teachers talk

about race in their classrooms, since it illustrates that without effective opportunities for teachers to reflect on their own racial situation, they may never fully understand (let alone embrace) the importance of developing explicit strategies for talking about race in their classrooms.

In the end, the topic of how White teachers talk about race within their classrooms is researched due to the fact that it is important for educators to be able to effectively teach children of all different cultures regardless of their own representative race. As the research presented here suggests, that the colorblind approach is not widely seen as effective. In the end, it may actually be negative to the development of students' racial identities and ability to freely talk about race in their classrooms. This leaves one to question – what other positive approaches are there for teachers to use when talking about race in primary school classrooms? And furthermore, do these approaches differ based on suburban/urban school settings? Ultimately, this is still a topic that needs further research in order to help understand the best ways to aid teachers in talking about race to their students.

III. Research Questions

In designing my research questions, I had to take a closer look at the goals of my study. As recommended by Maxwell (1996), I made sure to reflect upon my connections to my topic, my prior knowledge of my topic, along with the theories and approaches already researched pertaining to the topic of my study. This ultimately led me to design the following research questions:

- **How do primary school teachers talk about race in their classrooms?**
- **Do teachers talk about race differently based on the racial make-up of their students?**
- **Are there different teaching approaches to use when talking about race in primary school classrooms?**
- **Do teacher approaches and perspectives differ based on suburban /urban school settings?**

IV. Methods

a. Participants

Four White female primary school teachers were interviewed in this study. Out of the four teachers interviewed, two had been teaching for more than 10 years, and the other two teachers had been teaching for fewer than five years. It was important to get a wide range of findings in this study; consequently, I sought to find teachers who taught different grade levels. Therefore, the primary school grade levels represented in this study include: Kindergarten, first, second, and fifth grades. A graphic of the four different participants in this study can be seen in Table 1.

Two out of the four teachers in this study teach in a racially diverse school in an urban city North of Boston, Massachusetts. In this specific school district, there are a high number of English Language Learners and immigrant children who speak multiple languages. The teachers interviewed from this school district were one second grade teacher, and

one fifth grade teacher. The racial make-up of the student population in this specific school can be seen in Table 2.

By contrast, the other two teachers interviewed in this study teach in a school that is predominately White and racially homogeneous located in a suburban town North of Boston, Massachusetts. In this specific district, there is a low number of English Language Learners and immigrant children. The teachers interviewed from this district were one kindergarten teacher, and one first grade teacher. The ethnic make-up of the student population in this specific school can be seen in Table 3.

As seen in Tables 2 and 3, the schools and districts from which teachers were recruited for this study differ greatly with respect to the racial and ethnic make-up of their students.

Table 1 – Overview of Participants

Participants	Number of Years Teaching	Grade Level
Urban Teacher #1	5	2
Urban Teacher #2	3	5
Suburban Teacher #1	12	Kindergarten
Suburban Teacher #2	13	1

Table 2 – Representative School in Urban City North of Boston, Massachusetts

Race	% of School's Student Population
African American	11.7
Asian	9.0
Hispanic	51.5
Native American	0.2
White	22.7
Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	0.0
Multi-Race, Non – Hispanic	4.9

Table 3 – Representative School in Suburban Town North of Boston, Massachusetts

Race	% of School's Student Population
African American	3.3
Asian	2.4
Hispanic	9.0
Native American	0.6
White	81.9
Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	0.0
Multi-Race, Non – Hispanic	2.7

All statistics from Table 2 and Table 3 are taken from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education – School/District Profiles

b. Recruitment

I was able to recruit these four teachers by sending out an e-mail to their representative Principals asking for permission to conduct this study, along with an attachment of my thesis proposal. After receiving approval, the two different Principals forwarded my e-mail to their staff at their school which included a brief overview of the study, examples of different types of questions I would ask in their interviews, a timeframe as to when the interviews would take place and how long they would take, along with a section that explained that I would keep their identities confidential in this study. In the end, I received four e-mails from two teachers from each school district's representative school who ultimately felt comfortable to volunteer as participants within this study. After receiving these e-mails I scheduled different dates and times to conduct my interviews with these four different teachers.

c. Interview Scenario

In interviewing these four teachers, I met with them before or after school in their classrooms. Prior to conducting the interviews, I made sure

to give a brief overview of my study, as well as give them the appropriate time to read and sign a consent form I created for this study (found in the Appendix). After reading and signing a consent form, I then asked if the teachers had any last questions before we started our interview. After addressing any questions, I turned on the tape recorder and began to ask my designed interview questions (found in the Appendix). These interviews tended to last 20 – 30 minutes. After each interview was completed I made sure to save a copy of the tape-recorded audio file, which was then transcribed into a word document and later analyzed.

d. Analysis

I analyzed the four different interviews following a qualitative coding technique recommended by Maxwell (1996). My initial step was to analyze my interviews by reading my transcripts and the observational notes that I had taken during each of the four interviews. While reading, I was furthermore able to jot down a series of notes and common trends that I saw in both the transcripts and observational notes I had taken. Ultimately, this prompted me to begin to "develop tentative ideas about categories and relationships" (105) pertaining to the different answers formulated from my interview questions asking during each interview. At this point I decided to use what Maxwell calls, "thematic analysis" (105) otherwise known as "coding" (105) to find similarities and differences which I then used to make new categories that would fit my different set

of codes. This then led to the categorization of my results, which can be seen in the next section.

e. Validity and Limitations

I am a White researcher who is studying race, and therefore, my perspectives and interpretations may be influenced by my own lived experiences and biases. A researcher from a different racial or cultural background, or who had experienced a more diverse upbringing, might have interpreted the results of this study differently. The validity of the results of this study should also be interpreted through an acknowledgement of the fact that the four teachers I interviewed are all White. Had the participant pool included a different racial composition among teachers, the data and analysis might have yielded different results. I have attempted to address these validity threats by providing, in the following section, multiple, direct teacher quotes so that the reader may evaluate my analysis. Nevertheless, the results and findings presented in this small study cannot be generalized beyond the experiences and perspectives of these four teachers.

V. Results

Reactive vs. Proactive Teaching Approaches When Talking About Race in the Classroom

Overview:

One of the most important findings of my small study was that while the teachers I interviewed were similar in that race was part of their classroom conversations, some teachers planned to talk about race while others only did so in reaction to unexpected questions or classroom circumstances. Further, this distinction seemed to be related to the district setting. For example, the teachers from the suburban district that was an urban city North of Boston were reactive and had to stop and plan lessons and units based off of their students' questions and comments that arose about race within class. In contrast, teachers from the school district that was a suburban town North of Boston were proactive and sought to incorporate talking about race to their students. In other words, the suburban teachers, who did not have many racially diverse students in their classroom, attempted to be proactive in their attempt to openly talk to their students about race through planned lessons. On the other hand, the urban teachers, who had racially diverse students in their classroom, often times had to stop lessons and take the time to either address their students' questions or concerns, or plan a new lesson or unit that was inspired based off of a child's inquiry about race that arose in a class discussion.

In organizing the findings of this study, there are two different sections (reactive and proactive) that have three different examples taken from teacher interviews and include a short narrative at the beginning of each sub-section followed by an explanation.

Reactive Teaching Approach – Urban City North of Boston Teachers

As mentioned above, one of the patterns that emerged from the current study was the fact that interview respondents in the urban district research site tended to speak about race only in *reaction* to an unexpected classroom situation. The following examples demonstrate three different instances when these urban teachers had to respond to a problem or situation that occurred and address the current issue at hand. All of these examples include a student, or group of students, who brought up the issue of race, which then was addressed by a teacher. Therefore, none of these examples were previously planned teaching moments and required the teachers to use a reactive teaching approach when talking about race in their classrooms.

- ***Social Language Usage - "N-Word"***

One way that the reactive teaching approach is displayed within primary school classrooms is seen when teachers are compelled to respond to students' unprompted use of social language in the classroom. It is not uncommon to walk into a classroom and hear students use language that may come off as offensive or derogatory (Fisher, 2008). For this reason, there are many different approaches that teachers take in these instances to address their students' use of social language in the classroom. In this example, a Second grade teacher from an urban school district reacts to two of her student's social use of the "n-word" when talking to each other. Unaware of the hurtful nature of this word, these students

hurt another child's feelings, which then prompted this teacher to react to the situation.

> *"I have two African American students who also call each other the 'n-word', but not in a negative connotation. They will say like, "Yo ____. What's up?", but they are just talking and that's how they address each other. But I had a girl get upset because they said that and she was like, "Oh they are saying the 'n-word'", so I had to sit down with them and say, "I know that is your social language, but it is not school language, because you hurt someone's feelings by saying that". They said, "Well, that's just the way we talk to each other". So I don't think they realize that it is negative until it is said to them or by someone else" (Urban School District North of Boston, Second Grade Teacher)*

In this instance, race was discussed in the classroom in reaction to a comment made by a student. Indeed, when teaching in a racially diverse community; it is not uncommon for children to infuse their social language into the academic classroom, whether it be appropriate or inappropriate. This furthermore can spark feelings of uneasiness, seen specifically in this example, when students are unaware of the different meanings of different words within their social language that may hurt and offend a fellow classmate. Having said that, this teacher had to be careful how she reacted to this incident, while at the same time making sure to make the appropriate decision of how to respond to

solve this issue at hand. In deciding to talk to both the boys who used the inappropriate social language, and the little girl who felt offended, this teacher used this instance as a teaching moment, in which she was able to educate her students about race by promoting a tolerant and safe environment where all of her students could feel welcomed and safe. Thus, the ability to react to unforeseen classroom circumstances can be an important tool for teachers in fostering such a classroom environment.

- ***"That's Racist!"***

Another way that the reactive teaching approach can be seen in primary school classrooms is in teachers' reactions to their students' keen and heightened awareness of racial comments. In this example, a Fifth grade teacher from an urban school district reacts to a student's outburst in regards to a comment an author made in his writing, which they perceived to be racist.

"I mean we have had circumstances where someone will say or hear something when we are reading something and it says, "the Black boy" and they will say, "That's racist!" and it's really not. So we do bring up the fact that there is a difference between describing someone's skin color, like if you say the "White boy" they are White. They are kind of quick to call it racism, when it is not" (Urban School District North of Boston, Fifth Grade Teacher)

This incident prompts one to see that children, especially those who live in a racially diverse community, may have heightened awareness of the racial dynamics that exist in the larger society. For, in this fifth grade classroom, students were actively able to attempt to point out moments of racism within the literature that they are reading in class.

It is possible that such observations of perceived racism would be less likely within in a suburban community that is not racially diverse, because students may not be as consciously aware of race because there is a lack of diversity within their community. However, it is important to note that this teacher reacted to this moment by pointing out to her students that the author of this piece of literature was not being racist, in fact, they were just using descriptive language to describe the character that they were writing about within the story. Therefore, this teacher reacted to one student's initial comment and heightened alertness to moments of racism, and redirected the student, along with their classmates, to see the difference between a racist comment, and a descriptive writing choice that the author made. Again, this is an example of a reaction, rather than a planned teaching opportunity.

- ***"Who was Harriet Tubman?"***

A third way the that the reactive teaching approach can be seen in primary school classrooms can be seen in teachers' reactions to students developing an interest in a topic that pertains to race. In this example, a second grade teacher

from an urban school district reacts to her students' inquiry amongst a topic that initially shocked them, and in the end, related to some students' ancestral history.

"I know that when that slavery issue came up, which I had no idea that it was going to come up, because we had this group come and they did a great play and presentation about it, but then the kids had all of these questions – "Well, why was Harriet Tubman doing this?", "Why was she so scared?", so it brought up all these questions that I wasn't prepared for, so I had to step back and try to teach it from a perspective of looking biographies and seeing how these people looked at racism" (Urban School District North of Boston, Second Grade Teacher)

This instance presents an example of how teachers who teach in a racially diverse community often times have to take a step back and react to their students' questions, comments, and concerns in order to plan future instruction. In this example, this teacher planned an entire unit where she was able to use biographies to look at how past individuals, such as Abraham Lincoln, for example, viewed slavery, and more importantly racism. Therefore, this was an unit of study that this particular teacher had never planned on teaching, however, was successfully able to create in response to the questions and concerns of her students in regards to this topic that impacted many of their past ancestors.

Takeaway Points of the Reactive Teaching Approach:

The reported experiences of the two interview participants from the urban school district North of Boston provide examples of moments in which students can provide their teachers with unexpected – but potentially important - opportunities to address key issues concerning different aspects of race. Had these teachers ignored their students' comments, or not taken a step back to address them, they would have discounted the topic of race and done an injustice to their students and their heritage. In the end, these teachers benefited from using a reactive teaching approach, which provided them and their students with the chance to explore different aspects of race.

Proactive Teaching Approach – Suburban Town North of Boston Teachers

In contrast to the "reactive" teacher moves described in the previous section, teachers in the suburban school district more frequently discussed race in the classroom when they brought it up. In other words, these teachers *proactively* introduced the issue of race to their students through extensive lessons and different learning opportunities that they deliberately planned within their curriculum. In the following examples, you will see three different instances when the two suburban teachers interviewed for this study acted in anticipation of future problems, needs, or changes. Each example includes a teacher, or social worker, who brought up the issue of race within the context of a lesson. Therefore, these examples were previously planned teaching moments and required the teachers to use a proactive teaching approach when talking about race in their classrooms.

- ***Teaching "differences"***

One way that the proactive teaching approach can be seen in primary school classrooms can be seen in teachers exposing their students to differences in lessons that they create. In this example, both a suburban kindergarten and first grade teacher provide their students with lessons to enhance their understanding of differences in race and special education students.

"Most lessons are conducted through the school's social worker who talks about the fact that "everyone is different, everyone needs different things" (Suburban School District North of Boston, First Grade Teacher)

"And differences with children with special needs as well. I think the earlier you can catch them and introduced things to them and have them understand – he is still your friend, he just may need this to help him, just like you need the glasses" (Suburban School District North of Boston, Kindergarten Teacher)

When asked how they talked about race within their classroom, the suburban teachers interviewed for this study were quick to say that they include a lesson at the beginning of the school year that is centered on helping students notice differences amongst each other. Both teachers noted that often times they, along with their students will bring up the issue of race and question why one student's skin color is different than their skin color, which provides an excellent

opportunity to openly discuss race. However, much of the discussion is centered on the difference between general education students and special education students due to the fact that this particular school has a high number of special education students. According to one teacher, the school's social worker comes "in to really talk about differences more because the kids who integrate into our classroom have – they might wear headphones because it is too noisy and things like that – materials that look different than what typically you would see for a kid in the classroom" (Suburban School District North of Boston, First Grade Teacher). This prompts one to see that these particular suburban teachers are attempting to be proactive by teaching their students about differences in special education students and students who are racially diverse to make them not only aware of these difference, but compassionate and welcoming to students who may be different than themselves.

- ***Martin Luther King Jr.***

Another way that the proactive teaching approach is seen in primary school classrooms can be seen in teaching about Martin Luther King Junior. In this example, a suburban first grade teacher teaches her students about Martin Luther King, Junior in an attempt to encourage talk about race and important individuals within society.

"Typically, January, Martin Luther Kind Jr. Day. We will study him and his life and we talk about how he was very peaceful and why he did what he did. Again,

that always gets brought up – skin color – and it is addressed but that is not the primary I think, you're not teaching differences in skin color, you are teaching why this man is important and what he did for people of different races. It's taught – everyone looks different, but everyone is the same inside" (Suburban School District North of Boston, First Grade Teacher)

When asked how she talks about race within her classroom, this teacher, much like many educators, teaches her students about Martin Luther King, Jr. before the holiday in order to educate them on his importance and peaceful nature in attempting to help individuals of other races. Therefore, this teacher, much alike many others, is attempting to be proactive in her attempt to help her students understand not only an important time within our country's history, but an important moment within our country's fight towards acceptance of all races. This prompts one to question - is teaching students about MLK Jr. one of the only ways teachers talk about race in their classrooms and more importantly, will teachers ever move beyond teaching only about Martin Luther King Jr. when providing their students with lessons centered on race?

- ***Acknowledging Bilingual Students***

A third way that the proactive teaching approach is seen in primary school classrooms can be seen in acknowledging and accepting bilingual students. In this example, a suburban first grade teacher openly accepted and gave multiple opportunities to one of her students who she encouraged to speak their native

language within the classroom. This furthermore prompted a dialogue about race and language.

"One of my little ones, I was speaking Spanish to him, and I think they are more intrigued, but I want them to ask questions about stuff like that. So, the kids were all just staring and wondering, "how do you know how to do that?" looking at me. I just think the more questions the better, and so we celebrate that – look at how amazing this is – he can speak English and Spanish – isn't that unbelievable? I can't speak like that in two languages" (Suburban School District North of Boston, First Grade Teacher)

This is an excellent example of a teacher who is able to embrace her students' differences in an attempt to proactively teach them about different races. In this example, this teacher openly accepted that one of her students spoke another language, and encouraged this student to speak their other language at different times throughout the school day. This initially intrigued many other students who were shocked to see that children their age, and adults, could speak more than one language. This then brought up the topic of language, nationality, and identity, which eventually led back to the topic of race. Having said that, this teacher showed that she was proactively including this student who was racially different than their classmates in an attempt to educate her students more about race.

Takeaway Points of the Proactive Teaching Approach:

The experiences and perspectives shared by the two interview participants from the suburban school district North of Boston, demonstrate a range of different instances in which their teachers have planned extensive lessons on race in order to address key issues that may arise within their classroom. Had these teachers not provided their students with these lessons, they would have ignored the topic of race and done an injustice to their students. In the end, these teachers benefited from using a proactive teaching approach, which provided them and their students with the chance to explore different aspects of race.

VI. Conclusions

We live in a country that is filled with a vast amount of multicultural students with family ancestries from all across the world, and teachers should be encouraging open dialogue among students of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds regardless of whether their classroom be racially homogeneous or racially diverse. Race is an important topic that needs to be incorporated within the curriculum of *all* primary school classrooms.

This study set out to find how four White primary school teachers talk about race within their classrooms. The findings of this study suggest that teachers need to be prepared to talk about race from both proactive and reactive approaches – regardless of their racial backgrounds or the racial backgrounds of their students. That is, teachers must consciously incorporate considerations of race into their classroom planning, while also developing a level of understanding and flexibility that would enable them to react to

unexpected teaching opportunities related to race. Ultimately, developing these two skills is critical because it allows for teachers to be able to respond to any situation that arises within their classroom while simultaneously being prepared to talk about this controversial topic. It is important that teachers are both reactive and proactive within the classroom in order to respond to their students' questions, as well as, appropriately plan different lessons and units that highlight this important topic which impacts the lives of students across the country.

While this small study contributes to the broader understanding of race dialogue in primary school classrooms, it is important to highlight the study's limitations. This can be seen in the fact that I only interviewed White teachers, and a different racial composition of teachers might have yielded different results. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized beyond the experiences and perspectives of these four teachers.

Finally, the findings of this small study point to potential areas for further research. This study could be administered to examine a larger sample of teachers with more direct comparisons amongst grade levels in different districts. For example, comparing fifth grade teachers' approaches to talking about race in their classrooms. This study could also be administered to a more diverse pool of teachers to see if White teachers, Black teachers, Asian teachers, and Latino teachers all reported similar "proactive" and "reactive" approaches to talking about race in their classrooms.

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VIII. Appendix

a. Informed Consent Form

SALEM STATE UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

How do Primary School Teachers Talk about Race in their Classrooms?

I, _____(*participant name)*, agree to participate in the "***How do Primary School Teachers Talk about Race in their Classrooms?"*** study conducted by Jessica Dunn. I understand this project is studying how teachers talk to primary school students about race in their classroom.

As part of my participation in this study, I understand I will be interviewed. My part of the study involves answering a series of interview questions. I understand that I may not receive any direct benefit from my participation in this study.

I understand my participation is completely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time from this study. I also understand that some people may find it troubling to participate in some or all of the research activities required and that I may decline to participate in any portions which may make me feel uncomfortable.

I understand there are no risks involved.

I understand my participation in this study will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use my name and will not include any other information that could identify me as a participant. I understand that with my permission, the researcher would like to keep the audio recording of my interview secure in a locked cabinet until she completes her thesis (in 2013). Upon completion of the thesis, I understand that my recording will be destroyed by the researcher.

I additionally understand that the information provided to the researchers will be kept confidential with the exception of information which must be reported under Massachusetts's law including cases of child or elder abuse.

I have read and understand this information and agree to participate in this study. I will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

Participant's Signature:
(Signature) (Date)

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For questions or concerns about the research, please contact:
(Principal Investigator: Jessica Dunn, Jessld@comcast.net)
(Thesis Advisor: Chad Leith, Cleith@salemstate.edu)

For concerns about your treatment as a research participant, please contact:
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

b. Interview Protocol

- How long have you been teaching? What grade do you teach?
- Can you tell me about the school at which you teach?
- Can you tell me about your classroom?
    - Is it diverse?
- Do you think children in your school/class are aware of racial differences?
- When did you first become aware of race?
- Do you talk about race in your classroom?
    - If yes, how do you talk about it (through the use of books, videos, etc.)?
- When should teachers begin to talk about race to their students?
- Do you think some teachers find it uncomfortable to talk about race?
- Have you experienced moments of prejudice in your classroom or throughout the school?
    - If yes, do you address this issue? How?
- How accepting are children in your class towards children of different racial backgrounds?
- If you do not teach in a school that is diverse, how do you effectively teach children about other races and cultures?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your school/classroom and the topic of how teachers talk to students about race?