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Counting the uncounted: African American students in Reading Recovery

Catherine Compton-Lilly
University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

Abstract
This article examines Reading Recovery as a microcosm for issues related to race and access. Tenets of critical race theory are presented to explore how racial biases are systemic in our ways of being, teaching, and conducting research. Specifically, I present data for African American children involved in Reading Recovery in one Midwestern American city and explore contextual factors and policies related to both Reading Recovery and the sociopolitical context in which children live that affect their ability to benefit from the program. The article ends with a set of conclusions related to how well African American children are served by Reading Recovery.

Keywords
African American children, Reading Recovery, reading intervention, sociopolitical context, systemic racism, critical race theory

Introduction
I begin with three stories. The children in these stories are composites of real children I have known and some I have taught. All of the children participated in Reading Recovery, the subject of this quantitative analysis. While I have changed their names to protect their identities, their stories are very real.

Keisha is a six-year-old African American girl who, after 12 weeks of Reading Recovery lessons, became increasingly reluctant to leave her classroom. One morning, in frustration, the Reading Recovery teacher took Keisha aside and called her mother. When the mother answered the phone, the

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Reading Recovery teacher explained the situation and handed the phone to Keisha expecting that the mother would convince her child to attend her reading lesson. After a brief conversation Keisha hung up the phone. The Reading Recovery teacher asked, 'OK, what did you mother say?' Keisha answered, 'My mom asked me if the those White teachers were getting on my nerves again.' Interpreting this as a lack of parental support, the teacher considered Keisha’s case hopeless and she was dropped from Reading Recovery.

Shonda, another African American first-grade student, was doing well in her Reading Recovery lessons. She was in her sixth week of the program and was independently reading books that were significantly more challenging than the books she had been reading when she entered the program. At this time, her mother was informed of a long-awaited opening in the new subsidized housing project on the other side of the city. This was good news for the family as the newly constructed units were much cleaner and safer than the apartment in which they had been living; the new residence would also be less of a strain on the family’s budget. Unfortunately, this meant that Shonda would attend a different school on the other side of the city where they did not offer Reading Recovery.

Finally, Walter, an African American boy, came into the Reading Recovery program in February after his teacher had finished working with another child during the first half of the year. Walter scored poorly on his initial assessments and had a slow start with his lessons. His early lessons were devoted to mastering one-to-one correspondence between spoken words and the words on the page and particular attention was paid to learning a core of words that Walter could read by sight. Despite his slow beginning, eventually Walter began making notable gains with reading and writing. Unfortunately, the school year ended before Walter had received a complete 20-week program. Rather than successfully completing the program, Walter’s program was considered incomplete and Walter was left reading books that were several levels below his classmates.

I am an academic of European American heritage who has grown up, studied, and taught in the USA for 18 years. I am professionally affiliated with Reading Recovery. My experiences with the program have alerted me to challenges in serving students of color.

This article addresses issues that extend beyond the three stories introduced above and the case of Reading Recovery. It is about systemic issues related to schooling, educational policies, social issues, social policies, and research methodologies. This article is not about the effectiveness of Reading
Recovery; it is about the systems within which educational programs operate. My goal is to address the educational experiences of African American children, like Keisha, Shonda, and Walter, whose stories cannot be told unless we are willing to look closely at data and specifically examine the experiences of particular groups of children.

In this article, I use quantitative research methods to reveal the ways attention to program effectiveness can obfuscate inequities related to the program’s success for some groups of children. While previous analyses support the effectiveness of Reading Recovery for African American and second language students (Bueker, 2004; Rodgers and Gómez-Bellengé, 2003), I focus on the children who are not counted in these analyses to reveal how implementation policies associated with Reading Recovery intersect with race. I raise questions about which students are counted when the program is evaluated and how school policies and broader social policies insidiously and systematically privilege White children. The effectiveness of intervention programs and the effectiveness of programs for particular groups of children are not the same thing. While we might expect that one program cannot serve all children equally well, we should not expect some groups of children to be denied equitable access.

I examine Reading Recovery as a microcosm for issues related to race and access. First, I briefly discuss some of the ways in which race has affected children’s school experiences and describe the basic tenets of critical race theory, which reveals the systemic nature of racial bias in schooling. Next, I present the methodological procedures that were used to obtain and analyze data for Reading Recovery, focusing specifically on African American and European American children from one Midwestern American city. Findings from the analysis are then presented. The article ends with a set of conclusions related to how well African American children are served by Reading Recovery and how the program affects their literacy learning experiences.

A literature review: Systemic racism in education and critical race theory

In 1995, Berliner and Biddle wrote a book entitled The Manufactured Crisis in which they challenged the purported crisis in American schools arguing that ‘one of the worst effects of the Manufactured Crisis has been to divert attention away from the real problems faced by American education’ (p. 4). They identify these real problems as the lack of equitable educational opportunities for all children and specifically the ‘malignant discrimination’ (p. 227) that
has operated for years against African American children and their families. Berliner and Biddle maintain that injustice grounded in racial discrimination against African American people began when enslaved African people were brought to America and continues as disproportionately large numbers of African American families are ghettoized in the rural South or the slums of northern cities. They remind us that educational inequality is grounded in social and economic injustice.

Racism surfaces in American schools in a myriad of ways. In addition to visible differences in school funding, educational resources, and the maintenance of school buildings (Kozol, 1991), less obvious inequities also operate in schools. For example, Jencks and Phillips (1998) describe five varieties of test bias that operate within schools, privileging children from White, middle-class backgrounds and disadvantaging others. They cite historical and ongoing arguments referencing biological determinism and assumptions about family backgrounds that inform the thinking of teachers and thus the educational experiences of children of color.

One manifestation of systemic racism is evident in the historic construction of reading assessments over the past 100 years. Willis (2008) has documented the parallel development of reading assessments and IQ tests. Most problematic are shared and fundamental assumptions about the intellectual superiority of the White male population and the development of social and educational systems that support this premise. Willis documents a confluence of interests, including roles played Edward Lee Thorndike and William Gray, which shaped both reading assessments and IQ testing. As Willis reports, the field of reading comprehension research and testing, ‘although in its infancy, played a critical role in maintaining dominant ideologies, from its philosophical underpinnings to the content and interpretation of tests, to the promotion of test results as scientific facts’ (p. 176). The effect of school system biases that disadvantage African American students is particularly problematic in the state in which this research was conducted. According to a revised report by Greene prepared for the Black Alliance for Educational Options in 2002, Wisconsin simultaneously had the third highest overall graduation rate for high school students and the lowest graduation rate for African American students in the USA.

While racism in the USA has a unique history and occupies a particular place in American society, systemic racism also extends to educational efforts in other parts of the world. For example, Janks (2005) documents systemic racism in her work with South African refugees. Stein (1998), also working in South Africa, advocates the use of narrative enactments with pre-service
teachers to allow them to explore their own histories as raced and classed beings and to consider the effects of this positioning on their work as teachers. In England, Leung et al. (1997) identify a ‘historical racism and disdain for the peoples and languages emanating from former English colonies and third-world countries’ (p. 545).

In the USA, critical race theory emerged as ‘a legal theory of race and racism designed to uncover how race and racism operate in the law and society – [that] can be used as a tool through which to define, expose, and address educational problems’ (Parker and Lynn, 2002, p. 7). Critical race theorists (Delgado, 1995; Greene and Abt-Perkins, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Parker and Lynn, 2002; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002) have argued that race is an undeniable dimension of the educational experiences of children. As Solórzano and Yosso (2002) explain, ‘a critical race theory in education starts from the premise that race and racism are endemic [and] permanent’ (p. 25); they argue that foregrounding race and racism in education is a critical step towards opposing and eliminating forms of subordination based on race, gender, class, and other differences.

In an article entitled, 'It’s your World, I’m just Trying to Explain It', Ladson-Billings (2003) explains that racism is often invisible and is treated as normal in American society; one goal of critical race theory is to make racism visible. As she explains, ‘it is so ingrained in our society, it looks ordinary and natural to people in the culture’ (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 11). As Ladson-Billings and Tate remind educators, ‘racism is not a series of isolated acts, but is endemic in American life’ (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995, p. 52). Research methods and practices are not immune to this danger. Critical race theorists argue that educational institutions and educational researchers (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002) often function in contradictory ways; thus, oppressive, marginalizing, and silencing actions coexist alongside worthy intentions to emancipate and empower. Our responses to difference are always clouded by intentional and unintentional biases that compromise our ability to consistently act towards positive change. While we view ourselves as working and acting in neutral and unbiased ways, our actions and ideas are infected by historical and socially shared assumptions about race and difference. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) argue for the development of a critical race methodology that explicitly addresses issues of race and racism. In their words, this methodology foregrounds race and racism in various aspects of the research process, challenges traditional research paradigms and theories that are routinely used to explain the experiences of students of color, presents
transformative solutions to racial inequities, and focuses on the racialized experiences of students of color.

One danger in talking or writing about race is that transformative knowledge is threatening to dominant groups that have vested interests in maintaining the status quo (Jay, 2003). As Tatum writes, ‘an understanding of racism as a system of advantage presents a serious challenge to the notion of the United States as a just society where rewards are based solely on one’s merits’ (Tatum, 1992, p. 6). Those who benefit from racism are likely to access resources to inform existing school policies and curriculum while denying the existence of racism in schools.

As a White educator, it would be easy to ignore race and remain silent. While I am a product of American society and thus subject to the assumptions and privileging related to race that accompany generally accepted ways of thinking, I initiated the current project in response to my awareness of racial biases in Reading Recovery. In this article, I strive to identify how race operates in Reading Recovery and alert readers to policies and practices that systematically disadvantage African American students.

**The research study**

Questions of equity and access are uncomfortable topics for researchers and educators. They remind us of the systemic biases that favor some and challenge others. Effectiveness research can appear comfortingly neutral, legitimate, and scientific. It is much easier to say that an intervention works or does not with a certain percentage of children than it is to look closely at who is counted, who obtains access, and who faces life situations that limit equitable access. It is easier to revise instructional programs so that they successfully serve more children than it is to rewrite society in ways that challenge existing practices and procedures to ask who is served and why.

Attending to race in educational research is difficult and both qualitative and quantitative researchers can be guilty of neglecting race and difference. However, race can present a particular problem for quantitative researchers. Assumptions about the neutrality of effectiveness research, the belief that numbers do not lie, and issues related to sample selection can obfuscate the impact of race. Attending to race requires attending to issues that are generally easier to overlook than to address. In addition, race is often intertwined in complex ways with class, gender, culture, nationality, and language. Economic class in particular raises a complex set of issues related to housing, employment, neighborhood, and available resources which have very real effects on
the educational experiences of children both in their homes and in schools. Examining the intersections of race with student achievement may tempt us to throw up our hands and lament that nothing can be done; the issues are too big and the systemic biases that pollute educational institutions are too ingrained in our society.

The research community and study sample

This research project was completed in a mid-sized, Midwestern city with a total population of approximately 200,000. The school district is the second largest in the state, serving over 24,000 students. In recent years, the percentage of European American students in the district has decreased as numbers of students of color increase (Table 1). Of the 37 Reading Recovery teachers in the district, there was only one African American, one Latina American, and one Asian American Reading Recovery teacher in the school district.

The sample included 211 children who had received Reading Recovery over the course of one school year. Of these, 135 were identified as African American and 76 were identified as European American. While African American children comprised only 23% of the school population, they were significantly overrepresented in the Reading Recovery sample (61%). Entry to the program is based on student performance on a set of six reading and writing assessments. Specifically, the six subtests of Clay’s An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (2002) were used to identify differences in the literacy skills of first-grade students involved in Reading Recovery. The six subtests included: an analysis of children’s oral reading to determine children’s instructional text level and to record children’s reading behaviors; a letter identification task to ascertain what letters children know and their preferred mode of identification; a word test to determine whether children were acquiring a reading vocabulary; concepts about print assessment to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2005</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>European American</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
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</table>
ascertain what children have learned about how spoken language maps onto print; a writing vocabulary assessment to determine whether children are acquiring a writing vocabulary; and an assessment of how well children hear and record the sounds they heard in words. The lowest-performing first-grade students in each school were selected. The students in the sample attended 21 different schools from across the district.

**Reading Recovery**

Reading Recovery is a short-term intervention for first-grade children who, according to the assessments described above, are experiencing difficulty with learning to read. Children meet individually with a specially trained teacher for 30 minutes each day for an average of 12–20 weeks. The goal is for children to develop effective reading and writing strategies that allow them to be successful in the regular classroom program. The bulk of each lesson involves the student reading familiar and novel texts and writing about student-selected topics. The child also spends a few minutes each day working with letters and words in isolation. The primary focus of Reading Recovery is to help low-performing students learn and apply a range of strategic problem-solving strategies to the challenges they encounter when reading and writing.

Reading Recovery is characterized by mandatory and intensive professional development experiences. While initial teacher training lasts for one academic year, teachers continue to participate in ongoing professional development sessions as long as they continue to be Reading Recovery teachers. Extensive use of a one-way glass observation room enables teachers to observe and analyze each other’s lessons. Through these experiences, teachers become sensitive observers of students’ reading and writing behaviors and develop the ability to make moment-by-moment analyses to inform their own teaching decisions. The reading program has been widely implemented in New Zealand, Australia, the USA, Canada and England. It has been operating in the USA for almost 25 years.

**Data collection**

Reading Recovery teachers have been trained to electronically submit data to a National Data Evaluation Center (http://www.ndec.us), which operates on behalf of the national Reading Recovery organization. Strict data entry procedures are in place for Reading Recovery and data are checked by one of two district supervisors as well as staff members at the data evaluation center.
Data were collected for all children served by Reading Recovery, even if a child had only one Reading Recovery session. At the end of the Reading Recovery program, children were assigned to one of several end-of-program status categories. Successful children met the rigorous criteria for completion of Reading Recovery. Children who did not meet these criteria after 20 weeks of intervention services were considered unsuccessful and were recommended for further support beyond Reading Recovery. Children who remained in Reading Recovery at the end of the school year and did not have an opportunity for a complete 20-week intervention were considered to have an incomplete program. Children who moved or left the school before they had had the opportunity to complete Reading Recovery were designated as moved. Finally, a few children were removed from Reading Recovery under unusual circumstances with fewer than 20 weeks of instruction (e.g. the child was placed in a kindergarten classroom, a parent requested that the child be removed from the program); these children were considered to have none of the above status.

Data analyses
My encounters with African American children who were not well served by Reading Recovery led me to conduct the analysis described in this article. I purposely draw upon constructs grounded in critical race theory to reveal some of the ways racism invisibly operates in schools (Ladson-Billings, 2003). My goal is to challenge the seeming neutrality of quantitative research to reveal how numbers can obfuscate the significance of race. Critical race theorists (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002) encourage researchers to foreground race and identify the ways race operates in educational policies and practices that differentially serve African American and European American students. In this article, I look beyond studies that demonstrate the general effectiveness of Reading Recovery to consider how well Reading Recovery serves African American children, including children who do not receive complete interventions or are hindered by policies that disadvantage children who bring diverse experiences to Reading Recovery classrooms.

The quantitative analysis described in this article involved four steps. First, program outcomes for African American and European American children were examined using raw numbers and percentages. I drew upon the local data described above to identify success rates for all the children served, children with complete programs, low socioeconomic status (SES) African American, and low SES European American children.
Second, $\chi^2$ tests were conducted for all children served by Reading Recovery and for children who received a complete intervention to examine whether differences in success rates were statistically significant. $\chi^2$ analysis determined whether the success rates of the two groups of students were evenly distributed according to predictable proportions or whether racial differences were correlated with the success rates of children.

T-tests were then used to determine whether the average number of weeks, the average number of lessons, and student absences for African American and European American students who had complete programs were significantly different. ANCOVA analysis was used to control for students’ incoming writing vocabulary scores to determine if the students’ entry level correlated with the amount of time children spent in Reading Recovery.

Finally, the average pre-intervention assessment scores of African American and European American students on each of the six tasks that were used to select children for Reading Recovery were used to document the differences in literacy achievement levels between the two groups of children when they began the intervention. These data provided the researcher with insights into initial differences between African American and European American students.

Once statistical discrepancies between African American and European American students were identified, constructs drawn from critical race theory were referenced to identify invisible but salient policies and practices that systematically privileged European American students. For example, the 20-week limit for Reading Recovery services generally worked well for European American students but identified a disproportionate number of African American students as unsuccessful, despite African American students generally entering the program with lower entry scores on initial assessments. By connecting discrepancies with policies, we begin to reveal the ways racism insidiously and invisibly operates within educational systems.

**Researcher reflections**

When I began this study, I was interested in the Reading Recovery experiences of African American children. I knew first hand the stories of children, including Keisha, Shonda, and Walter, who slipped through the cracks. As children inhabiting complex contexts that featured unappreciated cultural diversity, poverty, high mobility among schools with disparate reading programs, and inconsistent classroom experiences, these children did not easily fulfill the expectations of the 20-week reading intervention. As a Reading Recovery
teacher in a high-poverty school, I met many children with unsuccessful stories.

When I moved to a mid-sized Midwestern city and became a Reading Recovery trainer, I examined Reading Recovery data from the local school district. I noted that there was a 20% difference in success rates between African American children and European American children when we considered all the children served in Reading Recovery. With the support of the National Data Evaluation Center associated with Reading Recovery, I was able to complete the data analyses described below.

**Findings**

In this section, I explore some of the quantitative findings that complicate the Reading Recovery experiences of African American students in one Midwestern city. Specifically, I explore students’ success in Reading Recovery, length of students’ programs, and their assessment scores when they entered Reading Recovery.

**Successful completion of Reading Recovery**

χ² tests were conducted for all children served by Reading Recovery and for children who received a complete intervention program to determine whether success in Reading Recovery was evenly distributed among African American and European American students. Two categorical variables, race and intervention success, were considered. Two samples were analyzed. The first sample was composed of all children who were enrolled in Reading Recovery at some point during the school year. This total sample included every child who had received even one or two lessons. Students with successful programs, unsuccessful programs, and incomplete programs, as well as children who left the school and the very small number of children who were removed from Reading Recovery, were in the total sample. The other sample comprises only those children who received the complete intervention. These children received at least 20 weeks of Reading Recovery lessons.

For the sample that included all children served by Reading Recovery, African American and European American students have significantly different discontinuing rates, with χ² = 8.77, p < 0.05 (Table 2). This χ² analysis reveals that African American and European American children do not successfully complete the intervention in predictable proportions and that African American students do not fare as well as European American students.
However, because many children in this sample did not receive a complete intervention, these data do not challenge the effectiveness of Reading Recovery for either African American or European American children. When we examine the success rates of only those children who received complete Reading Recovery programs (20 weeks or more), the difference between African American children and European American children decreases and is no longer statistically significant, with $\chi^2 = 1.93, p > 0.05$ (Table 3).

Thus, the statistical significance of race disappears when only children who have had a complete Reading Recovery program are considered. Although differences remain, the proportions of African American and European American children who are successful now fall within predictable proportions. The $\chi^2$ analysis has revealed a relationship, but it diminishes in significance when only children with complete interventions are considered. The positive finding is that if both African American children and European American children receive a complete Reading Recovery program, their success rates are statistically comparable although a gap remains between the two groups. Focusing on complete intervention children provides a more valid analysis of Reading Recovery’s effectiveness because it considers only those children who received the complete intervention rather than

### Table 2. Frequency and $\chi^2$ values of ‘discontinued’ for all African American and European American students served

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>European American</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>8.77*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsuccessful</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>98</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>211</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significant at 0.05 level.

### Table 3. Frequency and $\chi^2$ values of ‘discontinued’ for African American and European American students with complete interventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>European American</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>1.93NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsuccessful</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>161</td>
<td></td>
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NS not significant at 0.05 level.
including some children who may have been served for short periods of time (i.e. one week or less, one month).

However, questions remain. What happened to those children who did not receive a complete Reading Recovery program? Complexities arise when we consider the varied outcomes for all of the children served by Reading Recovery (Table 4).

A close look at the outcomes for the two groups of children reveals some troubling findings. First, by limiting the sample to only children who received a complete program, 41 African American children (30.4%) are removed while only nine European American children (11.8%) are removed from the sample. While no European American children moved away during their 20-week intervention, 11 (8.1%) African American children moved and were unable to complete Reading Recovery. High mobility is an expected effect of poverty but appears to differentially affect the 126 African American students compared to the 27 low-income European American children in this sample.

Finally, the rate of incomplete programs for African American children is more than twice the rate for European American children. Children with incomplete programs began Reading Recovery part-way through the year and, due to the ending of the school year, were not able to complete Reading Recovery. In fairness, we must acknowledge that in this school district, like most American districts, the school year is not long enough to accommodate complete programs for two consecutive groups of Reading Recovery students. Specifically, the school year in this district averages only 34 weeks; this means that in order for there to be time to make a complete program available to all children, some children must finish the program in less than 20 weeks so that others will be able to receive their complete 20 weeks. Later in the article, I examine whether the low entry scores of some

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Successful % (n)</th>
<th>Require further intervention % (n)</th>
<th>Incomplete % (n)</th>
<th>Moved % (n)</th>
<th>NOA % (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American (135)</td>
<td>45.9 (62)</td>
<td>23.7 (32)</td>
<td>19.3 (26)</td>
<td>8.1 (11)</td>
<td>3 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European American (76)</td>
<td>67.1 (51)</td>
<td>21.1 (16)</td>
<td>9.2 (7)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>2.6 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaps</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
African American children, and other children, suggest that they should have access to longer interventions.

While this article has dealt primarily with race, it is clear that intersections exist between race and SES. Of the 135 African American students in this sample, 126 qualified for free or reduced lunch; of the 76 European American children, 31 qualified. Therefore, a higher percentage of African American children qualify for free or reduced lunch. Interestingly, when they receive a complete intervention, low SES African American and European American children have comparable success rates (Table 5).

While race and SES are not statistically significant factors for complete intervention children, differences become apparent for low SES students when we include those children who did not receive a complete intervention (Table 6).

While we would expect that success rates would be lower when we consider children who did not have a complete program, it is problematic that African American children in these cases fare less well than their European American counterparts. These discrepancies point to the existence of systemic racism as identified by critical race theorists and applied to the findings reported in this article. In the following sections, I explore the amount of time children spend in Reading Recovery and then consider whether differences in entry scores explain differences in the number of weeks children spend in Reading Recovery.

### Table 5. Success rates for low-income African American and European American children who receive a complete intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Complete intervention students</th>
<th>Successful interventions</th>
<th>Percentage of successful interventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low SES African American</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>64.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low SES European American</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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### Table 6. Success rates for all low-income African American and European American children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All served</th>
<th>Successful interventions</th>
<th>Percentage of successful interventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low SES African American</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low SES European American</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Length of the Reading Recovery program and student entry levels

Because the data for all children served include children who either moved or were removed from the program, in considering length of time in the program, I consider only complete intervention children. Due to differences in sample sizes for African American and European American children, I used t-tests to explore whether or not averages for weeks in the program, numbers of Reading Recovery sessions, and numbers of student absences were statistically different for African American and European American children. Three statistically significant findings were revealed. First, complete intervention African American students spent more weeks in the intervention (Table 7); this difference is statistically significant.

On average, African American students ($M = 17.51$) spent almost two more weeks than European American students ($M = 16.01$) in Reading Recovery. This difference was tested using independent samples $t$-test, and was shown to be statistically significant with $t(159) = 2.42, p < 0.05$.

Second, complete intervention African American students attended more intervention sessions (Table 8). African American students ($M = 63.50$) attend almost four more sessions on average than European American students ($M = 59.67$). This difference was tested using independent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7. Descriptive and $t$ values of total weeks African American and European American children spend in the intervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$n$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significant at 0.05 level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 8. Descriptive and $t$ values of total sessions African American and European American children spend in the intervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$n$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significant at 0.05 level.
samples t-test, and was shown to be statistically significant with $t(159) = 1.67$, $p < 0.05$.

Finally, in addition to spending more weeks in Reading Recovery and receiving more intervention sessions, African American students were absent from school more often (Table 9).

The $t$ value of the total number of days African American and European American children with complete programs are absent is significant with $t(159) = 3.88$, $p < 0.05$. Specifically, on average, African American students ($M = 6.19$) are absent two and a half more days than European American students ($M = 3.43$). Despite this statistically higher absence rate, complete intervention African American students tend to spend more weeks in the program and receive more lessons. However, the possible advantages associated with more time on the program disappear when the data are controlled for students’ incoming writing vocabulary scores. In other words, children with lower entry scores tend to require more time to complete the program and the additional lessons they receive are not enough to positively affect their success rate.

Factorial ANCOVA was used to determine whether low entry-level scores or the race of students explained differences in time spent in the program. Writing vocabulary scores were used as a proxy for all entry levels scores; they have been identified as the single score that best represents students’ general incoming literacy abilities of all the scores collected for children in Reading Recovery.

ANCOVA analysis was completed using student race and entry writing vocabulary as the independent variables. The dependent variable was the amount of time the children spent in the program (Table 10).

When considering both the total number of weeks and the total number of sessions, fall writing vocabulary has a statistically significant relationship to the amount of time children spend in programs exclusive of the students’ race. Lower entry scores on writing vocabulary correlate with the longer periods of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>$t$ value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6.19</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>3.88**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European American</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significant at 0.05 level.
time and the increased number of lessons received by African American Reading Recovery students. Lower entry scores on other assessments (Table 12) support this finding, suggesting that the lower entry scores of African American children contribute to longer Reading Recovery programs for African American students when compared to European American students.

**Table 10.** ANCOVA summary table for the total weeks African American and European American children spend in the intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall writing vocabulary</td>
<td>119.16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>119.16</td>
<td>11.06</td>
<td>0.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student race</td>
<td>16.15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.15</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>0.224NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>1099.48</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>10.78</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1261.56</td>
<td>104</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significant at 0.05 level; NS not significant at 0.05 level.

**Table 11.** ANCOVA summary table for total sessions African American and European American children spend in the intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall writing vocabulary</td>
<td>1983.72</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1983.72</td>
<td>12.79</td>
<td>0.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student race</td>
<td>18.19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18.19</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.733NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>15825.98</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>155.16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18014.45</td>
<td>104</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significant at 0.05 level; NS not significant at 0.05 level.

**Table 12.** Average fall entry scores for African American and European American students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African American students (n = 52)</th>
<th>European American students (n = 33)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing vocabulary</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRSW</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRL</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LI</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In summary, the data presented above reveals several important findings that have implications for the implementation of Reading Recovery. The following findings are informative:

- When examining all children served by Reading Recovery, African American children have statistically lower success rates.
- When considering only children with complete programs, disproportionate numbers of African American students are removed from the sample.
- More African American than European American students move and are unable to complete Reading Recovery.
- Many more African American students reside in low socioeconomic households.
- African American students spend more weeks in Reading Recovery and receive more lessons but also have more absences.
- African American children tend to enter the program with lower scores on reading assessments.

Together, these findings suggest that the current implementation of Reading Recovery is in some ways problematic for African American children in Wisconsin. While African American children who receive a complete program do almost as well as their European American counterparts, too many African children do not receive a complete program for a range of reasons and their needs are not being met.

Conclusions

This article reminds researchers and educators that while important insights can arise from simple analyses of program effectiveness dangers reside there as well. The issues raised in this article are systemic; they have long histories that are rooted in particularly ugly displays of racism and classism and the denigration of diverse cultures. They relate to policies that have been developed to serve the needs of children in dominant groups without attending to how these policies affect other groups of children.

I do not suggest that the organization that collects and monitors data for Reading Recovery is consciously interested in denying children educational experiences or failing to meet the needs of African American children. In fact, I believe that the professionals in that agency are highly committed to the success of all children. Yet the fact remains that African American students are disproportionately excluded from this data set and their needs are not adequately addressed. I suggest that systemic forms of racism often remain unrecognized by researchers and educators and that this analysis of Reading
Recovery serves as a microcosm for explaining the role race plays in who gets counted in other educational contexts.

It is important to note that this study focuses on one community—a community that has only served large numbers of African American students in recent years. It is not clear that the data presented here is indicative of data in other districts that implement Reading Recovery. Regardless, I argue for careful and thoughtful analysis of data in all communities to ensure that children of all backgrounds are served equitably.

While this data does not identify significant problems for African American children who receive a complete program, it illustrates how race along with economic disadvantage operate below the surface of the findings. I argue that four issues related to the implementation of Reading Recovery contribute to its difficulties in equitably serving African American children.

First, school districts must seek ways to provide complete interventions to students who move to schools that do not provide Reading Recovery. If the new school is within the same district, former teachers could continue to provide services to students at their new school, or transportation could be provided that would enable children to stay in their old schools after families move. Students who move outside of district boundaries raise more challenging issues. While it may seem inconceivable that we would ask school districts to provide services to students after they leave the district, complete interventions are undoubtedly best for children. In an ideal world, school and district borders would not be the basis for educational decisions.

Second, the cultural backgrounds and funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) that children bring to classrooms must be considered. The tasks that are used at program entrance and exit were created in the 1960s and represent a narrow range of literate abilities that reflect generally accepted criteria for reading competence in schools. For example, the texts that children read at program entry involve subjects and experiences traditionally emphasized in middle-class European American homes, including color words and the names of zoo animals. Children who bring alternative experiences to school are likely to find these texts challenging. In addition, teaching children to identify letters by name, write their own names and other simple words, become familiar with book-handling skills, and explore concepts about print are routine practices in many middle- and upper-class families. Thus, entry test score differences are not due to children’s deficits but rather to the mismatch between children’s experiences and the school tasks. However, children who bring diverse literacy experiences are still expected to master this established set of knowledge. It is considered part of the process of
learning to read and is assumed to contribute to children’s eventual success in school; thus, traditionally accepted literacy competencies cannot be ignored.

Third, once we recognize that children bring different experiences to classrooms, and that existing assessments may represent extra challenges for some groups of children, we must provide children with the opportunity to learn the things that are associated with school success. For children who are unfamiliar with the concepts presented in the assessment texts and in the intervention program, providing them with the time needed to master these concepts is essential. In addition, efforts must be made to locate or create texts that resonate with the experiences of all children. Children can be helped to master the material of schooling but this requires building on their existing knowledge and providing them with specialized support in making that transition. These challenges, and the fact that children enter with lower scores on literacy tasks that are valued in schools, suggest that some African American and other children with diverse backgrounds may require extra time in the program to meet established standards for success. Not allowing educators to adjust the amount of time children spend in the program disproportionately penalizes African American children.

Finally, larger social issues, including complex configurations of social policies that act on children and families, must be addressed. Policies related to health services, employment, housing and social services are all relevant. Access to healthcare affects student absences. Housing policies and welfare regulations affect student mobility. Employment opportunities for parents affect children’s lives in many ways including the amount of time children can spend with parents, the literacy resources available in homes, access to personal transportation, and the amount of stress experienced by families. These social policies matter. They are systematic and relevant to the lives of children. They also disproportionately affect African American students.

It is easy to throw up our hands and lament that this is the way of the world and that solutions rooted in social and policy changes are too big, too complex, and too overwhelming. But this is the point of critical race theory. The conventional, systemic, and accepted ways of acting, being, and teaching are deeply ingrained in policies and practices that work for some children but not for others. For children like Keisha, whose teacher failed to create a trusting relationship, Shonda, whose family moved to obtain viable housing, and Walter, who needed more time in Reading Recovery, these deeply engrained policies and practices have very real effects. So we are left wondering how ways of knowing and understanding the world act upon us and affect the processes, procedures, and programs that we bring to the children we
teach; thus, we must continue to ask ourselves how can we learn to see what is not seen and learn to count those who are not counted.

References


