

## Coming from Where We're From: The Stories and Experiences of African American Students in Predominantly White High Schools

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*This research is presented in a narrative form that captures authentic student voices and experiences of African American students, who have faced the complexity of adjusting to and navigating through unfamiliar terrain while simultaneously building nuanced relationships—peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher—across racial, cultural, and ethnic boundaries. It notes that the social and academic experiences, opportunities, and outcomes for suburban White students, as compared to their urban African American peers vary significantly.*

Not only are urban and suburban public schools vastly different in terms of educational outcomes for students with European origins as compared to African Americans, but their lived experiences and daily interactions differ as well. Urban represents central city; suburban represents areas surrounding a central city within a county constituting the metropolitan statistical area (Hu, 2003).

Conditions that exist in a suburban school setting, such as larger budgets, access to more personalized curricula and extracurricular activities lead to an increase in the student population's access to opportunities such as social and economic mobility. On the other hand, according to Darling-Hammond, Friedlaender, & Snyder (2014), inadequate funding hampers many schools serving low-income and minoritized students from fully realizing their goals and addressing student needs. Urban principals report having about seven times less autonomy in matters of school policy, resource allocation, and personnel decisions than their average suburban counterpart (Hannaway & Talbert, 1991). As a result, an urban setting typically has more funding shortfalls and simultaneously fewer resources, human capital and otherwise, with each negatively impacting urban student outcomes. Incongruity in urban schools, often referred to in research literature as *inequality* is stark and has the potential to impact students' long-term personal development. While geographic location and socioeconomic status are just two factors that may lead to difficulties for traditionally marginalized students in obtaining a quality education in American society (Gordon, Gordon, & Nembhard, 1994), the experiences of students in the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) program illuminate other nuanced variables that detail their educational journeys in suburban schools in Massachusetts.

A lack of funding for public schools has potentially broad consequences when considering equity and access to quality education. For urban school districts, "Because American schools are typically funded through property taxes and African American

families are more likely to live in communities with lower property values, they are unable to generate enough tax revenue to fund their schools at the same level as their suburban counterparts” (Ladson-Billings, 2013, p. 106).

In Massachusetts, during the early 1960s, educational differences and inequalities between suburban and urban public schools created a sense of urgency for low-income parents, particularly parents of African American students. The METCO program was established in 1966 to address inequalities in the urban and suburban education systems and rectify unequal access to formal public education (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011). The program and participating school districts emphasized voluntary suburban district participation in the public-school integration process. The plan was to bus students from urban communities to suburban school districts that were predominantly White to provide such students with an integrated educational school experience (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011).

Historically, for some African American students, internalized racism has reinforced thoughts of suburban schools being superior to urban schools, and children who attend schools in the suburbs receive a better education (Golba, 1998). Harper (2007) informs how internalized racism occurs when socially stigmatized groups (e.g., Black males) accept and recycle negative messages regarding their aptitude, abilities, and societal place, which results in self-devaluation and the invalidation of others within the group (Essed, 1991; Jones, 2000; Lipsky, 1987; Pheterson, 1990; Pyke & Dang, 2003). African American students who participate in the METCO program, therefore, gain access to a presumably superior academic experience at a school far from their neighborhoods.

These students often find themselves at a cultural disadvantage in an environment

that does not actively affirm and celebrate their ethnic and cultural identities, yet the students attempt to navigate intercultural relationships with White teachers and peers nonetheless (Nieto, 1999). Nieto (1999) further posits that it is not possible to separate learning from the cultural context in which it takes place, or from an understanding of how culture and society influence learning. The learning process is a complicated matter and is influenced by many factors, like the individual’s experiences, cultural values, ethnic and racial connections, and relationships between student and teacher (Nieto, 1999). Furthering the point, Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) inform how crucial it is for teachers to learn about their students, especially those who are culturally different from themselves; teachers must also comprehend that students who are racial or ethnic minorities see, view, and perceive themselves and others differently than those who are of the majority group.

African American children bring to school with them culturally-based ways of doing, seeing, and knowing; however, White teachers responsible for educating diverse populations of students struggle with interpreting the complexity of the influence that culture, race, and ethnicity have on the academic, social, emotional, and psychological development of students of color and its connectedness to learning (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Culturally-based ways of doing, seeing, and knowing are naturally expressed by African American students with urban backgrounds through their use of African American English, code-switching techniques between urban and suburban settings, traditionally Black or African American hairstyle options and clothing choices, often containing socially conscious messages, like “Black Lives Matter” and “Hands up, don’t shoot”. Educators need to learn as much as they can about their students: who

they are, what they value and believe, and what they hope for and desire (Nieto, 2012).

Embedded in this research are detailed experiences from the point of view of a sample of African American students who participate in the METCO program. Their narratives describe the ongoing complexity of adjusting to and navigating through unfamiliar terrain and simultaneously building productive relationships—peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher—across racial, cultural, and ethnic boundaries. Broadly put, this research interprets how African American students maintain, negotiate, or veil their cultural and social identities and the strategies they leverage to negotiate a suburban, predominately White school environment.

#### PURPOSE AND JUSTIFICATION

This research explores in detail the manner in which the participants, African American high school students, make sense of their personal and social worlds (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher interprets meaning from the participants' experiences to "describe insights and lessons learned" (Callary, Rathwell, & Young, 2015, p. 65) based on the students' perspectives of various events (Smith et al., 2009). The presented findings intend to contribute to the ongoing yet limited research related to the complex experiences of African American high school students attending predominantly White schools. A 2012 report, *The Urgency of Now: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and the Black Male*, sponsored by the Schott Foundation for Public Education, (Holzman 2012) highlighted the fact that all students should be given a fair and substantive opportunity to learn, regardless of who their parents are, where they were born, and the zip code in which they reside. However, the report further posited that this was not always the

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case for many students, and as a result, a moral imperative to address such identified inequities needed to occur. To meet the learning needs of African American students, teachers working in desegregation programs need to exhibit an “ethos of care towards minority students that is culturally appropriate and authentic” (Holzman, Jackson, & Beaudry, 2012, p. 95). An ethos of care can be powerfully cultivated by practicing culturally responsive pedagogy, an approach to teaching and learning that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Holzman et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ware, 2006).

Current research emphasizes the level of sensitivity that students of color experience as it relates to culture and the role it often plays in their perception of the school as a whole, and of their learning experiences, specifically. Teachers and other staff may look upon the students of color they serve as “damaged and dangerous caricatures” (Delpit, 2006, p. 13) who are ill-equipped to meet academic standards. This fog, or the interplay of one's bias and ignorance, influences teachers' interactions with students of color and perpetuates stereotypes about student capabilities. As such, assumptions are made about students based on their race, sex, class, disability status,

religion, language, national origin, legal status, and other identities due to teachers' biased perspectives that need broadening in order to more adequately relate to, affirm, and sustain students' cultures (McCall, 2019). According to Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011), "Theories and research which argue that students, especially those from status-oppressed minority groups, are sensitive to their treatment in school by teachers, administrators, and peers" (p. 67). Therefore, McCall (2019) posits that teachers strive to instill in students that, as an educated populace, it is critical to reject and/or overcome learned helplessness and to subvert, rather than reinforce, perpetuate, or confirm negative stereotypes. The misinformed, dominant view and the imbalanced systems that keep subgroups of students down and elevate others must be recalibrated, and schools have the potential to do just that by bettering students' lives through fostering learning experiences that affirm their individuality, cultures, backgrounds, and ideas.

Through a program like METCO, an underlying goal of this research is to further inform the secondary education community of the lived experiences of African American students attending predominantly White schools. By presenting lived accounts, this research supports and advances Brown-Jeffy and Cooper's point about "the relevance of the text to the child's own experience" (2011, p. 68). In the voices of the student participants, they are empowered to analyze their own understandings and ultimately influence their daily academic and social interactions in predominantly White spaces.

### **PROBLEM TO BE CONSIDERED**

African American students in urban school contexts face a number of difficulties and challenges in receiving a quality education and are often

unable to access the same educational opportunities as their White suburban peers (Gordon et al., 1994). Little is known about social factors linking lived experiences to the opportunity gap between African American and White students, but what is known, for some African Americans, the disadvantages are severe and pervasive (Downey, 2008). McCall (2019) highlights the fact that systemic challenges exasperate societal racial disparities that fuel the underperformance of African American boys in school, resulting in the fact that only 47% graduated on time from high schools in the United States in 2008, compared to 78% of White boys (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010). The consequences of this situation have generally created significant limitations on students' socioeconomic mobility, leading to high rates of unemployment, crime, and incarceration for growing numbers of young African American males, but all youth have agency to determine who will play an active role in the construction of their developmental pathways, choosing who they engage with and for how long, chiefly as it contributes to the individuals academic success and long-term betterment of their life (Lee, 1995; Pufall Jones, et al., 2017).

While scholarly research has been conducted, "Sociologies have not paid enough attention to similarities in the daily experiences of African American and White students in school" (Downey, 2008, p. 113). To address the lack of high-quality educational experiences in urban school contexts, a school desegregation program such as METCO was specifically designed to bridge existing gaps by opening a door of opportunity to students of color, mostly African American and Latinx. As part of the program, these students were provided full-service transportation from their urban neighborhoods to "opportunity-rich suburban schools" (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011, p. 1).

According to Angrist and Lang (2004), METCO students benefit from the program, despite obvious socio-cultural differences between White teachers and their African American and Latinx students. In fact, some African American students are satisfied with their White teachers, but for other African American students attending suburban schools, their experiences are not always positive (Dickar, 2008; Eggleston & Miranda, 2009; Henfield & Washington, 2012). According to Eggleston and Miranda (2009), the existing literature related to African American students within predominantly White schools is limited to their specific academic experiences that do not adequately embody the full essence of the African American students' unique experiences beyond academic underachievement. Our research contributes to the field through an interpretation of stories and lived experiences shared by students that show commonalities related to issues surrounding race and the manner in which participants negotiate those experiences. Complexities exist for students in terms of their depth of association with multiple identities, and the relationships with others in the community that serve to support or dismantle those identities of African American students attending a METCO-affiliated program high school.

Students of color from urban contexts who attend predominantly White suburban schools often face challenges that their suburban White peers do not and, as such, may "experience a different type of 'normal' life" (Milner, 2007, p. 389). In general, the experiences of African Americans in the United States differ significantly from those of other ethnic groups, due in part to the navigation and negotiation of three distinct but interrelated realms of experience: (a) oppressed minority, (b) African-rooted Black culture, and (c) mainstream U.S. culture (Boykin, 1986; Sellers et al., 1998). According

to Ladson-Billings (2013), "We fail to recognize how different the experiences of today's students are" (p. 106), but the findings in this thesis will advance research efforts to better understand the experiences of African American students attending predominantly White high schools through METCO. These different experiences, as internalized as academic and cultural challenges by students of color further the need to conduct research to better understand them to level the playing field.

### SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURE AND IDENTITY

According to Collier (2009), culture and identity are two theoretical concepts developed to build knowledge about the communicative processes used by individuals to construct and negotiate their cultural group identities and relationships in particular contexts. African American students in the METCO program socially participate and academically compete with both in-group and out-group networks. Interestingly, Tajfel and Turner (1979) found, even without competition, participants tend to favor their in-groups over their out-groups. Socially, individual movement and participation between groups is linked to an individuals' self-esteem, confidence, and ability to interact and actively engage others, both in-group and out-group. Tajfel and Turner (1979) identified two sources of self-esteem: (a) personal status and accomplishments, and (b) status and accomplishments of the groups. The two scholars posit that affinity groups were an important source of pride and self-esteem, and these groups give individuals a sense of identity and belonging in the social world.

Carlton-Parson (2008) informs that culture is an important variable to the practice of teaching and learning, yet research involving African Americans often neglects the cultural-historical domain. Prior to this, Prager (1982)

typified the relationship between the African American (Black) cultural ethos and mainstream American culture by stating:

It is not the mere fact that Blacks hold a dual identity . . . ; to one degree or another, every ethnic and racial group has faced a similar challenge. The Black experience in America is distinguished by the fact that the qualities attributed to Blackness are in opposition to the qualities rewarded by society. The specific features of Blackness, as cultural imagery, are almost by definition those qualities, which the dominant society has attempted to deny in itself (p. 101).

African American students in the METCO program adjust to their dominant culture school settings while simultaneously maintaining their sense of value and identity by commonly displaying behaviors, traditions, and cultural styles that may not conform to dominant cultural norms. Because of physical identifiers, such as skin color, clothing and vernacular choices, or one's gender and stature, African Americans must be consciously aware that others may respond to them differently due to deep-seated implicit biases about a racialized group. The sense of duality that exists and the constant codeswitching that occurs for these

students, particularly boys, stunts their authentic selves in a community that appears unsupportive at times (McCall, 2019). Conversely, Holland (2012) addresses the phenomenon by which White suburban students place capital on Black culture, particularly music, hairstyles, and language. Albeit a recent phenomenon, research with a focus on further exploration of the perception, beliefs, and interactions between White and African American students and its impact on the social and academic experiences of both African American students is worth understanding.

### PHENOMENOLOGY

In phenomenological studies, the research is trying to describe the *what* and *how* individuals experience phenomena while simultaneously avoiding explanation or offering an analysis of the experience (Creswell, 2013). In keeping with the tradition of IPA research, we interpreted the phenomenon of experience as described by our participants, allowing each student to serve as the individual expert. The following argument is presented in a narrative form that captures authentic student voice and experiences. A thematic cross-student analysis demonstrates commonalities amongst the participants, but also details distinct experiences.

### METHODS

Through parental ties, three high school students were invited to voluntarily share their individual lived experience as METCO students for this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The student participants attend three separate suburban school districts participating in the METCO program. The students, a 10th grade male and two 11th grade females, each identify culturally and ethnically as African American, even though the male and one of two females also acknowledges

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their West Indian origins as being important to their identity. Also offering expert insight into this study are two administrative leaders representing METCO, Inc., individuals who are not only cognizant of the African American student experience in predominately White high schools, but who are also working with METCO program students, their families and alongside school leaders to bring about more awareness and need for sociocultural training to White teachers and staffers concerning sociocultural sensitivity training. The two administrative leaders offered recommendations and working with students, families and alongside school administrators to bring awareness to the experience of African American students attending predominately White high schools.

African American students are the focal point of this research for two primary reasons: namely, the cultural connectedness between researcher and participants, and researcher positionality and personal understanding of inner-city African American culture. As an African American with a colorful and storied lived experience, I attended a predominantly White high school during the tumultuous era of bussing in Boston, and the experiences and opportunities afforded to me are similar to those described by participants in this study. The socioeconomic disadvantages often associated with, or contributing to, the lack of African American student success- poverty, long commutes to school, or limited access to learning supports and certain opportunities like tutoring or quality afterschool programming- were all common experiences between the participants and the individuals who conducted this research, which happens to be as an African American male and African American female.

By using an IPA method, the research gives voice to the participants as they describe and make sense of their

experiences (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2008) as African American students from inner city Boston attending a predominantly White suburban high schools through the METCO program. To learn more about the personal experiences of each participant, a central question asked individually [and privately] of each participant over the course of a nearly 90-minute, nearly six-month interactive interview process was: “What’s it like for you culturally and socially to attend a suburban high school as a METCO student?” Expressed individually from each African American participant were multiple forms of interaction between distinguishable “communities”, like school, home/family, sports and peer friendships. Figure 1 Web of Support best captures the intersecting points described by the participants actively contributing to their life experiences as school-aged African American youth participating in the METCO program. Unlabeled markings serve as placeholders, exclusively reserved for individuals to add extensions of their networks, or factors contributing to their lived experience as a METCO student.

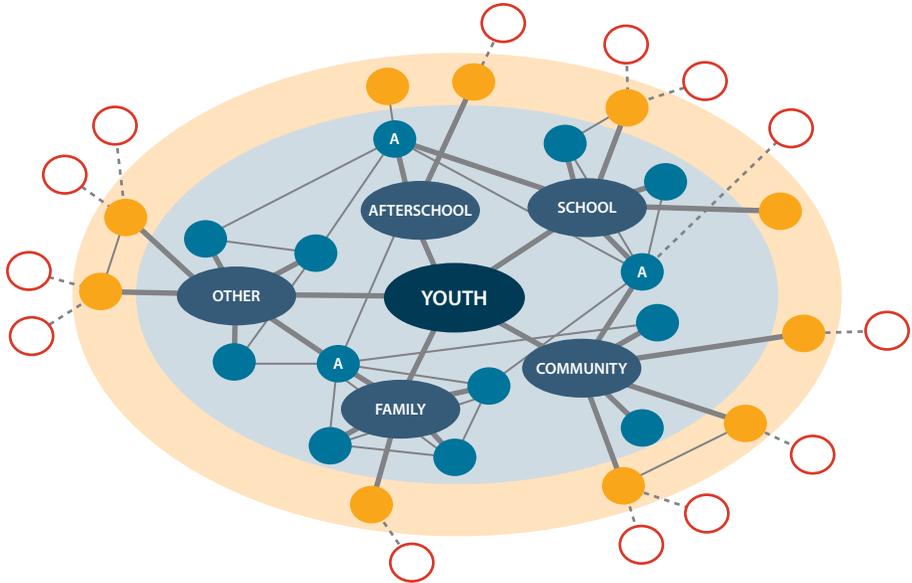
## IDENTIFIED THEMES

Three themes emerged throughout this research study: (i) long commutes on the school bus contribute to the lived experience and after-school activity decision-making of METCO students; (ii) METCO students possess a desire for their suburban school communities to nurture cultural interactions in a formalized manner; (iii) African American students maintain intact cultural identities in their predominantly White suburban school settings.

### **Finding I: Long Commutes on the School Bus Contribute to the Lived Experience and After-School Activity Decision-Making of METCO Students.**

Participants were asked about their overall attitude toward their daily

**Figure 1. Web of support.** Adapted from “Defining Webs of Support: A New Framework to Advance Understanding of Relationships and Youth Development,” by S. M. Varga and J. F. Zaff, 2017. Retrieved from [https://www.americaspromise.org/sites/default/d8/webssupport\\_researchbrief\\_v2.pdf](https://www.americaspromise.org/sites/default/d8/webssupport_researchbrief_v2.pdf)



commute to and from school, and its impact on their decision making and resultant perceptions about their school setting. According to Hale and Bocknek (2016), it might be significant to determine the amount of time a child spends in quiet activities or active movements when researching the phenomenon of experiences. Participants shared that the bus ride to/ from school was an active moment used to engage with peers, in addition to brief intervals of rest, like sleeping. Despite strong public interest in METCO, there is little evidence of any effect of daily commutes from Boston on METCO participation (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011, p. 1615-1616). One participant, John, a 15-year old student travels a considerable distance to school. When asked about his morning commute to school, he said:

I wake up around 5:30 a.m. to 5:45 a.m. On a good day, it takes about an hour to get

to school, on a bad day, an hour and a half, 2 hours. There was this time last year, I was on the bus for two and a half hours I think, but it was snow and traffic, so I couldn't really blame that on a specific reason, well I could, but wasn't like it was anyone's fault.

John shared that his friends, who live in the town where he attends school, wake up “around 7-ish, some of them later than that because they're like 5 minutes away, walking distance.”

In posing a similar question to Jennifer, a 16-year old female student, she responded by saying:

I'm lucky enough to get this good opportunity and sometimes you have to take the good with the bad. The bad would have to be the traveling. It's long. It's hard. I get up at 5:30 a.m. and it takes around

50 minutes to get to school on the bus, sometimes longer in the winter, but that's because we stop at another school.

Continuing, Jennifer furthered her thought about “the good with the bad” by adding:

I mean, riding the bus was never really good from when I was younger. Kids were mean and for people to be mean to you for like 50 minutes, it's annoying, it's really upsetting. Plus, I feel like sometimes with our classes, too, it's like I don't want to say there's never any mercy, but it's like we have so much to juggle, the waking up earlier than everyone else and then the long homework assignments and then trying to combine that with sports is also hard and everybody gets home like 3 hours earlier than us, so it's hard and sometimes it's like they can't give you a reprieve, like “I can give you one more night.” They'd never do that, so it's a little hard sometimes.

**Finding II: METCO Students Desire Their Suburban Schools to Nurture Cultural Interactions in a Formalized Manner Across the Student Body.** As Harper (2007) informs, peer support is critical to African American student success and significantly enhances the quality of their experiences in predominantly White learning environments. During the interviews, noticeable among participants was their willingness to establish friendships of different types across cultures and ethnic groups, yet all participants resisted the concept of trying to “fit in” with their White peers.

Peer-to-peer friendships are established, or attempted, in a variety of ways and settings in school, like the classrooms, or common areas like the cafeteria and athletic field. In addition to classroom

interactions, the African American participants emphasized nonacademic spaces, like athletics, student clubs, and the cafeteria as chances to cultivate friendships with their White peers. Each participant in METCO emphasized how the amount of time in the program played an important role in the formation and sustainability of their multicultural friendships.

In some cases, attending a predominantly White school can appear culturally isolating, prompting African American students to form culture cliques where groups of students who share similar interests or cultural traits gravitate towards one another in an affinity. Debra Ward, Director of Student Support Services for METCO, put it this way:

In my experience, students of color who live in the suburban town and those from the inner city felt some isolation, but once inside the school, formed their own bond and were protective of each other. They would all sit together in the cafeteria, and staff would ask, “Why are all the Black kids sitting together?” So, we look at things like that and ask; what is the affinity, where do kids get their support during the day, particularly in the high school? Because they're all in different classes and sometimes they're the only one of their

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kind in a classroom. By the time lunchtime rolls around, they want to be with somebody who looks like them, who understands their language, and their language not just being English, but understands their cultural language, their diversity and where they can take a breath, let their hair down, so to speak, and just be themselves.



In spite of expressing a willingness and openness to increasing their friendships in school, expanding friendships to include White student peers outside of the immediate social network presents challenges.



With a majority of participants providing a glimpse into how they view and value their interracial friendships, it remains unclear exactly how those friendships were established. Even more, the number of cross-race ties the African American students participating in this research tells little about whether the boys or girls feel like a valid member of their respective school community (Holland, 2012). In spite of expressing a willingness and openness to increasing their friendships in school, expanding friendships to include White student peers outside of the immediate social network presents challenges. The participants shared views of isolation, whether consciously or unconsciously, and the degree of difficulty in their efforts to form new friendships across the cultural spectrum and school community. On the other hand, students who have been in the program over multiple years described how their long-standing multicultural friendships have substantive meaning.

The establishment and maintenance of meaningful peer-to-peer relationships are important, but the racial composition of both the school and individual classrooms can also affect students' friendship choices (Fries-Britt, 1997; Goings, 2016; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Holland, 2012). From personal interviews, students indicated how long-standing relationships with White students who reside in the suburban school district were extremely pleasing, enjoyable, and sustainable to the participants. Still, for some African American students, forming new friendships with White peers outside of their immediate social circle remained somewhat knotty. Sydney, a 17-year old 11th grade female who has only attended a METCO school describes it this way, saying:

At my school, there's not that many of us, there's only two people of color that I'm really close with and then there's one student who lives in the town that we're all close with, so it's like the five or six of us, but the METCO kids are usually on one side, and the White kids who live in the suburb are on the other side and they're not gonna come say anything to us, so the only way we're gonna be friends is if the METCO kids mingle in with them.

Similar in thought to Sydney, Jennifer said:

I don't want to say I'm isolated to METCO students and kids that are ethnic, but that's how it feels a lot of the time, but if you're an athlete and you're Black at my school, your status is elevated to the max. Everybody knows you, all the girls like you. I wouldn't say all the Black girls like you because if you're in METCO and you've been with these

kids since kindergarten, they're like *that's just Paul and nobody cares about Paul*, but a lot of the White girls, they go crazy over the Black athletes.

**Finding III: African American Students Maintain Intact Cultural Identities in Their Predominantly White Suburban School Setting.** From identity, multiple layers are discovered and revealed. In theory, both objective and subjective identities emerge. The subjective identity produces a personal identity, which is made up of “unique elements that we associate with our individual self” (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 212) and a collective identity that influences our social and cultural identities (Jameson, 2007). Ogbu (2004) posits, “People express their collective identity with emblems or cultural symbols which reflect their attitudes, beliefs, feelings, behaviors, and language or dialect” (p. 3). Unmistakably, situations and circumstances involving race and culture arise, particularly for African American students in suburban, predominantly White school districts. Professionally, the current CEO of METCO, Inc., Milagros Arbaje-Thomas is keenly aware of issues concerning or affecting METCO students and offers suggestive approaches to addressing issues involving students, race, and culture. She said:

I keep aware of all the racial incidents in the towns and following-up with the districts about what they're doing. I'm hiring a director of diversity, equity and inclusion, with the METCO headquarters supporting the towns around racial incidents that are happening. I've been keeping up with all those things, people using the N-word, people putting videos out there and making fun of our students. To respond to that from a headquarters level, we'll have

a person respond to that and support a process when it does happen, at both proactive and preventative levels. This person is going to be creating a new curriculum for us on diversity training, cultural competency and curriculum bias. My goal is to go to all the towns, if you are a METCO town; you have to go through our training, and we can be a professional development entity for the sites and towns.

Even though some educational research has sought to unpack the social and academic experiences of African American students attending predominantly White schools, an increasing amount of research – like this – has been exclusively dedicated to the life experiences of African American students attending predominantly White schools (Ford & Moore, 2013; McGee, 2013; Thompson & Davis, 2013).

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to interpret the lived experiences of African American students attending predominantly White high schools through the METCO program. Using cultural identity theory as the theoretical framework, this study interpreted findings from one-on-one interviews conducted with a sample of African American high school students. Shared are findings from the personal accounts of how African American students manage their cultural and social identities, while simultaneously making sense of their placement, belonging, and interpersonal relationships in their predominantly White school districts as students in the METCO program.

Researchers have not paid enough attention to similarities and differences in the daily experiences of African American and White students (Tyson et al., 2005). As increasing numbers

of African American families move into White suburban areas each year, research remains mainly concentrated on academic experiences of African American students within predominantly White suburban schools (Eggleston & Miranda, 2009). Because race is such a significant part of American society, most African American students are able to report feelings about being African American and attending a predominantly White suburban school (Rowley et al., 1998). Still, “the effects of racial integration are quite pervasive and often present situations that are almost impossible with which to cope” (Hornburger, 1976, p. 239). Separately, each participant interviewed articulated situations validating their collective identity, mentioning how they either encountered, handled, or coped with culturally sensitive challenges at school.

Browaeyns and Price (2015) inform how culture partially shapes our identity, how we define ourselves, and how we define others. Socially, the participants independently identified themselves as METCO students who participate in multiple non-academic activities within their suburban school, like sports, student clubs, and occasional school dance parties. Not surprising, the students culturally identify through parental descent and naturally gravitate toward their defined culture group in school, where they feel most comfortable and possess a true sense of belonging. Still, interview findings illustrate a collective sense of not wanting to change who they are or how they speak; they simply want to be understood and accepted for their differences from suburban classmates and peers while participating in all school and community-related activities (Fecho, Davis, & Moore, 2006; Hill, 2009). As Ms. Ward put it:

I tell my students, this is your learning environment, you have 4 years to complete it, and the only difference between you

and them is your zip code, so therefore I want you involved in everything possible.

Although Ms. Ward promotes a message of sameness between the African American students participating in the METCO program and the White residents of suburbia, she is not suggesting the cultural differences and lived experiences of individuals from each of the two distinct groups are similar, they’re dissimilar. Later in her interview, Ms. Ward talked about how her message is meant to inform the African American students, the access and opportunity to a quality education and afterschool programming is the same between the two groups, so take advantage of all that is available while you’re a student in this school district.

As researchers, we intend to learn firsthand about the lived experiences of African American students participating in the METCO program. In response to learning, we plan to revisit METCO leadership and other interested parties to share research findings. In doing so, we offer a suggestive proposal to assist in planned efforts to formalize professional learning in the area of cultural competency for teachers and administrators. Effective teacher interaction with students that support and affirm their identities is critical. An emphasis must be placed on dedicating time and space to provide that training to improve staff-student relations and students’ perspectives on school climate and culture. A series of professional development that supports school and district staff inquiry into issues of race and gender identities, along with effective teaching and learning strategies and their intersectionality, could address the needs that surfaced during the focus groups. A firm commitment to more inclusive practices in a setting that values and affirms the backgrounds of others will serve as a safeguard against disconnection and serve as a scaffold for increasing students’ sense of belonging.

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