Susan E. Eaton

The Other Boston Busing Story

What's Won and Lost Across the Boundary Line

Yale University Press New Haven and London

My editor at Yale, Susan Arellano, expressed tremendous enthusiasm for this book from the beginning. Knowing that she believed in this work was especially important during the usually isolating editing and revision process. Thank you also to my manuscript editor, Jeff Schier, at Yale. Deborah Kops edited an earlier version of this manuscript. Their talent and precision improved it immensely. Thanks also to Candice Nowlin, editorial assistant at Yale.

My parents, Nancy and Guerry Eaton, gave me the gifts of perseverance and self-discipline. Their pride in my accomplishments helped me push this book forward. Sidney B. Kramer, my father-in-law, who conveniently happens to also be a literary agent and lawyer, generously worked out contractual details for me. For this, and for the interest and pride that he and his wife, Esther Kramer, have in my work, I'm grateful.

Many METCO administrators were helpful to me during my research. Jean McGuire and John Shandorf at the central office in Roxbury talked with me several times and reviewed the manuscript. They were always open and never sought to influence my work. Jean, METCO's dedicated, long-standing director, is an inspiration. Thank you also to Adreene Law, Manuel Fernandez, Veronica Valentine, Thelma Burns, Dana Johnson, and other METCO administrators who helped me get the project off the ground.

A special thanks to my friend and former Boston news reporter Nick Mills, who gave this book its title. He has expertly named books now for both me and my husband.

Thank you also to friends and colleagues who listened and gave me advice, encouragement, inspiration, and criticism over the years: Jennifer Jellison; Ann Donlan; Ed Kirby; George Counter; Jacqui Deegan; Everly Macario; Elissa Kleinman; Adrian Nicole LeBlanc; Joan and Bob Weiss; Mitra Shavarini; Miguel Morales; Jane Ewing; Karen Armstrong; Judy Pace; Jim Sparrow; Bob Crain; and A. Michael Huberman.

Any errors or omissions, of course, are my own.

1

The Other Boston Busing Story

No horde of newspaper photographers showed up in the suburban town north of Boston to record Barbara Michaels'* small moment in history one summer day. In June 1975, Barbara was the town's first student to graduate through a voluntary program called METCO, which bused black students from Boston to public schools in white suburban communities. Barbara was asked to give a speech, and she had good things to say.

Looking back that day on her years as one of a handful of black METCO students in her school, Barbara was glad she had left her neighborhood school in Boston and come to this small, suburban town. She had grown accustomed to the hour-long highway commutes from and to her city neighborhood. Barbara had a nice suburban "host" family, who had helped her become more familiar with this town.

Barbara still chuckles when remembering the day that she and her mother visited the town before school started. They had never even heard of the place before Barbara won a coveted METCO spot at the start of her eighth-grade year.

*Barbara Michaels, like all the identifiers of past METCO participants, is a pseudonym. See Appendix I for details.

"I remember driving out there with my mother one day in the summer before school," Barbara recalls. "Just to see it, to check the town out, and at first looking at all the big houses and thinking, 'What's with all these big houses?' But it was so quiet. You see all these big houses [and] you think, 'Well, people must be living there, right?' But where were all the kids? You know, in the city, it's more active, kids are out, playing together. It feels more alive. So, that was strange to me. Just that small thing. It all seemed so strange."

Barbara remembers, though, that she eventually made good friends. And she overcame the academic struggles of junior high through hard work. By the time she was in high school Barbara earned good grades and by her senior year, she was looking forward to attending college the next fall. Barbara felt fortunate.

But Barbara recalls disappointments, too. She was a track star whose record runs had helped get her suburban track team to the state finals. But Barbara suspected she had failed to win votes for team captain because she was black. She had tried out for cheerleading, but the white parents doing the judging had said Barbara didn't "jump high enough" to make the squad. Even the white teachers looking on during tryouts had sided with Barbara when she complained to the vice-principal of "blatant racism." Barbara had said: "C'mon, if I'd have jumped any higher I'd have been in the rafters," and the teachers had nodded in agreement.

Then there were the classroom discussions about slavery and Jim Crow. All the white kids had turned and stared at Barbara, seeming to search her face for reactions, for answers. That had made her angry. "Turn around," Barbara remembers having told her white classmates. "Turn around. I'm trying to learn this, too. I wasn't there. I'm just trying to learn, here."

Today, Barbara thinks she never did learn enough black history. And her response was to "take every black history course I could in college. Because I was lost. I was totally lost. I did not know my history."

If Barbara didn't learn black history in her white high school, what she surely did learn was how to "survive intact" in a white-dominated society. For Barbara, METCO was a preview of what her life would be. She says, "It taught me how to work with all different types of people, how to find my way and just survive intact as a black person in a white world. So, I was collecting information out there, collecting my information for the world. And you learn it. You have to learn it. And you do need it. This is something you find out later."

Crossing the Lines for Three Decades

Decades after Barbara's journey, thousands of racial minority students from Boston still travel to suburbia for their educations. Thirty-four-year-old METCO is the longest, continuously running voluntary school desegregation program in the nation and one of just a few of its kind. An acronym for Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity, METCO was founded in 1966 by black parents and activists who originally saw the program as a partial and temporary remedy for the poor conditions in Boston's then-segregated, predominantly black schools. Urban activists and some suburban ones alike wanted desegregation through METCO and developed it peacefully, some eight years before Boston's now infamous struggle with a very different, mandatory form of busing, which began within the city in the mid-70s.

Though not a government-initiated program, METCO had a relatively warm political welcome in part because it helped the city of Boston comply with a new law. By busing black children from urban schools to predominantly suburban ones, METCO helped meet requirements of the state's 1965 Racial Imbalance Law. This law, designed to diminish racial segregation, gave certain monetary benefits to local school districts, which drew up desegregation plans whenever more than 50 percent of students in a school were racial minorities. (This law is being challenged in a 1999 lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in Boston.

Plaintiffs argue that admission decisions in one community are encouraged by the law, and based on race, in violation of the students' equal protection rights.)

But despite the link between METCO and a law designed to encourage racial integration in education, parents who signed their children up for METCO were rarely searching for racial integration, or, to use the more modern term, "diversity," per se. According to surveys, these parents were searching for what they thought would be a "better education" for their children (Batson and Hayden, 1987; Orfield, 1997). It is important to draw a distinction here between the goal of "equal educational opportunity" and that of "diversity." While the two are surely compatible, from the perspective of parents, they are very different. Giving students equal educational opportunity implies that resources are being distributed to them that previously had not been made available. One might think of it as evening up the score. The goal of diversity, however, speaks to the need for all children—including the most privileged white students—to interact in learning environments with colleagues from varied racial, ethnic, economic, even geographic backgrounds. Diversity, then, is a pedagogical interest, in which varied perspectives, and ways of thinking, informed by family backgrounds and culture, are viewed as necessary elements of a full education.

The two concepts—equal educational opportunity and diversity—are usually treated separately in the courts, but often are muddled together in discourse about educational policy. From its founding, METCO clearly has encompassed both goals. For urban blacks, it has provided equal educational opportunities; for suburban schools, it has provided some racial diversity.

At the time of METCO's founding in the mid-1960s, even the program's initiators expected METCO's life span would be short—about three years, until Boston "straighten[ed] out" (Batson and Hayden, 1987). In METCO's inaugural 1966 year, 220 black children, from the first through the eleventh grades, traveled to seven

suburban communities. More than three decades later, in 2000, about 3,100 Boston students traveled to 32 participating METCO communities. About 4,300 men and women have graduated from the program in the last three decades.*

Though some suburban communities pick up a share of the costs themselves, METCO is paid for primarily by the state. In 1998, the program received an increase of $400,000 from the state, its first funding increase in 12 years, bringing the state's total contribution to $12.4 million. Before this increase, METCO had operated for a decade on $12 million in state funds annually, even as education budgets rose elsewhere in the state.† The program has two levels of administration. Administrators in the central office, located in the predominantly black Roxbury section of Boston, make policy decisions, oversee placements and transportation, coordinate special programs such as college tours, work directly with state officials, and counsel and advise parents and students considering the program. Out in the suburbs, METCO directors, assistant directors, counselors, and tutors work with METCO students, their parents, and the personnel in the school district. They often act as advocates and coordinators for the students, set up special programs for them, and maintain files to keep track of students' progress. Most often, these directors have offices within METCO schools; others, stationed at district central offices, make frequent visits to students and teachers at the schools. Students are assigned "host families" at the start of their schooling. The host family usually will include a child in the METCO student's classroom. The suburban family is supposed to act as an informal guide to the community and also provide transportation when needed, help the child if he or she

*Technically, there are no admission standards for the program, though some districts employ informal standards for students to remain in their district and will "counsel" students out because of discipline or other problems.

†METCO Central Office, Boston, Mass.

becomes ill, and be a friendly, reliable, close-by contact for the METCO student and his or her family.

The central goal of METCO parents—to get a better education for their children—has remained unchanged over the years. In a 1996 survey, 73 percent cited a school's "academic program(s)" as the "most important" reason for sending their children to METCO (Orfield, 1997). The program enjoys an enduring popularity among black families. In fact, METCO cannot accommodate all the families that apply. In 2000, there were nearly 13,000 children on METCO's waiting list, and getting in requires thinking far ahead. A quarter of METCO parents surveyed in 1996 had signed up for the program before their sons and daughters were a year old (Orfield, 1997). Technically, METCO is open to all Boston schoolchildren, including white students. But in practice, it remains a program for racial minorities. There are several reasons for this. The waiting list is long, with racial minority families likely ahead of white students who might have applied in recent years. The program's administrative offices are in a predominantly African-American neighborhood, and METCO has a decades-long reputation as an equal education program for racial minorities. It is thus responsive—through its tutoring programs, college counseling, student support groups, and diversity training workshops—to that population.

Despite the unquestionable demand for METCO, the program has not escaped criticism. Even though METCO administrators have repeatedly requested public funds to pay for a systematic study of student performance, the legislature has never allocated the money. Even program supporters admit that educators, suburban administrators, counselors, and METCO administrators need to pay more attention to improving the academic performance of some students in the program. While the program boasts a 92 percent college-going rate, administrators in local school districts commonly complain about poor performance of a sizable share of METCO students.

These problems were underscored in 1999 when the school superintendent in the nearly all-white, middle-class suburb of Lynnfield complained of the poor academic achievement of some METCO students and threatened to end the program in that community. The reaction to the threat was swift and angry and illustrated METCO's political power and popularity. Hundreds showed up to protest the superintendent's statements, including many white Lynnfield residents. The superintendent backed off from his original threat, and town school committee members tried to refocus the contentious debate on how to improve METCO students' academic performance. During the controversy, a racially diverse collection of educational leaders from other suburban METCO communities spoke publicly, in television and radio broadcasts, about the program's benefits. These educators, while acknowledging some of the METCO students' academic difficulties, focused on the program's contributions, not just to the lives of black students, but to the otherwise isolated white students living in an increasingly diverse nation (Eaton, 1999).

Feeling the Weight of Separation

Though one can't tell from watching their routine, daily disembarkations off the school buses, the black METCO students' lasting presence in Boston's suburban towns is anything but ordinary. The small degree of racial integration that METCO creates in its participating schools is an anomaly among the more standard, long-standing patterns of racial and economic segregation in metropolitan Boston.

In 1990, about 24 percent of all Boston residents were black while about 11 percent were Hispanic. But in the combined population of all suburban communities that participate in the METCO program, just about 1 percent of the total population were black. In 1990, just 2 percent of this suburban population were Hispanic. The state's total population of black residents was

about 5 percent. Likewise, about 5 percent of the state's population were Hispanic* (U.S. Census Bureau).

The public schools reflect the pattern of segregation in the Boston metropolitan area. Public school districts in the north are usually divided along municipal boundaries, and children go to school in the community in which they live.† Most of the white suburban student population attends schools that are largely white, and most of the black population in Boston attends schools that are predominantly composed of racial minorities.‡ In 2000, 50 percent of the students enrolled in Boston's public schools were black and 27 percent were Hispanic.§ Without METCO students, the public school enrollment in many of the participating suburban communities would be less than 1 percent black or Hispanic.

The general pattern of racial segregation in greater Boston means that white suburban students usually need not confront racial issues. Likewise, Boston's black students, while they probably interact with whites more than suburban whites do with blacks, still can form social groups, go to class, and live in neighborhoods made up entirely of other blacks. They need not adapt to a foreign, all white suburban school nor feel isolated in any nearly all white classroom. There is little racial conflict precisely because there is little racial contact.

*Statistics calculated by the author from U.S. Census Data. Race & Hispanic Origin in 1990: Massachusetts Cities, Towns, and Counties Ranked by Per Cent Minority. 1990 Census of Population and Housing, Summary Tape File 1A, Table 10.

†In contrast, public school districts in the south often follow county lines, which encompass cities and suburbs. And in many areas of the south, rates of black suburbanization are generally higher, as blacks there have traditionally lived outside of cities

‡Boston public schools

§Of course, there are exceptions. Some schools, including Boston's prestigious exam high school, Boston Latin, enroll a racial mix of students. And many traditionally white suburban communities near Boston have become more racially and ethnically diverse in the 1990s.

Bouncing between two worlds, METCO's black students not so much cross but blur these racial boundary lines. One world is predominantly black and urban. The other is predominantly white and suburban. Thus, perhaps more intensely and personally than anyone else, these young students of METCO experience the possibilities and challenges associated with any effort to reduce the separation between city and suburb.

The Troubles of Racial Integration

This examination of the perceived impact METCO has had on the lives of its past participants touches on important issues of our time. A better understanding of METCO, enhanced by the recollections and perspectives of the men and women who lived through the program, informs and expands public debate over the appropriateness of this and other racial integration programs in our race-conscious society. It may also broaden the knowledge of policy makers and advocates who see METCO-like programs as potential routes to achieving racial integration and providing racial minority children with access to high-prestige schools where advanced curriculum is available as a matter of course and large majorities of students go on to four-year colleges.

Public school programs such as METCO are also significant because they can potentially provide legal remedies for segregation and unequal educational opportunities. Since the 1970s, forms of mandatory desegregation, typically confined to one school district or municipality, have become increasingly difficult to achieve. In 1974, the Supreme Court cut off routes to integration in its 5–4 *Milliken v. Bradley* decision by ruling that surrounding suburbs cannot be compelled to participate in their city's desegregation plan. This ruling effectively closed off predominantly white suburbs outside the south from the requirements of desegregation. Thus, by the 1970s, for urban school districts, whose pool of white students was small and shrinking,

racial integration became nearly impossible. As whites increasingly moved to the suburbs, *Milliken* cemented in place the now-familiar pattern of predominantly minority, poor central city schools surrounded by white suburbs.

The north's persistent segregation and the state of the law under *Milliken* have led some civil rights lawyers and advocates in search of new approaches to educational equality. A handful of lawyers and advocates, hoping to get around *Milliken*, have sought remedies to racial segregation and inequality under state rather than federal constitutions (Eaton & Orfield, 1994; O'Connor, 1997). They argue that urban systems, because of their racial isolation (and accompanying concentrations of poverty), offer neither adequate education nor education of quality equal to that enjoyed by suburban children.

The argument was successful, in the landmark 1996 Connecticut case, *Sheff v. O'Neill*. In July of that year, the Connecticut Supreme Court ruled that the severe levels of racial segregation in the Hartford metropolitan area violated the state constitution's guarantee that "No person shall be denied the equal protection of the law nor be subjected to segregation or discrimination in the exercise or enjoyment of his or her civil or political rights." In her opinion, Connecticut Supreme Court Justice Ellen Peters wrote: "The public elementary and high school students in Hartford suffer daily from the devastating effects that racial and ethnic isolation, as well as poverty, have had on their education. . . . The issue is as controversial as the stakes are high. We hold today that the needy schoolchildren of Hartford have waited long enough." (Though a victory, the decision did not address the effects of concentrated poverty, which had concerned plaintiffs.)

The court ordered state legislators to correct the problem. But a state panel appointed to make recommendations to the legislature never resolved the circular question of whether the state should provide integrated schools or instead improve urban

schools within the current structure. A legislative package, which disappoints plaintiffs in its modesty, mixes both strategies. Regional magnet schools that draw a racial mix of students began there in the 1990s.

Efforts of the type under way in Connecticut are still rare and hardly signal a new trend toward metropolitan solutions. Even so, advocates are looking to these legal avenues and educational paradigms as models for racial integration and equal access (Duchesne & Hotakainen, 1996; Judson, 1996). But hopeful as they may appear, METCO-type programs, funded with state money, surely may be vulnerable to the now ubiquitous legal challenges to affirmative action and other race-based equal opportunity policies. Under such challenges, often backed by prosperous conservative groups, plaintiffs argue that race-conscious programs are discriminatory. Supporters, however, might argue that diversity, as it is achieved through programs such as METCO, fulfills a compelling interest by meeting specific educational goals.*

The state of the law in the area of K–12 education is still

*When challenged in court, any government program that provides preferences to a certain racial group must be reviewed under the "strict scrutiny" standard, requiring that it meet a "compelling state interest" and be narrowly tailored to meet that interest. This applies even to programs that are intended to aid a group, such as African Americans, who have been victims of government discrimination.

Several circuit court decisions are relevant. For example, in *Wessman v. Gittens,* the United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit struck down Boston Latin School's admission policy, which had given preference to some racial minority groups. But the court left open the possibility that achieving racial "diversity" may very well be a compelling state interest in specific circumstances. However, the court ruled, the "abstract" justifications offered by the Boston School Committee were not sufficient justification.

Similarly, in *Eisenberg v. Montgomery County Public Schools,* the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit struck down a race-sensitive transfer policy at Montgomery County, Maryland's elementary and secondary schools. But that court also chose not to decide whether racial and ethnic diversity is or might be a compelling state interest. But the 2nd Circuit in *Brewer v. The West Irondequoit Central School District* reversed a lower court finding that had granted a

unclear, for as of 2000, the Supreme Court had not ruled on questions related to race-conscious policies in K–12 public education. But whatever its legal standing now or in the future, understanding the experience under METCO allows all of us in our increasingly diverse nation to better comprehend the challenges and possibilities that come with crossing over racial and ethnic boundary lines. In fact, it is those sitting outside the world of legal scholarship and equal rights advocacy who view racial integration not solely as a remedy to inequality but as a way to prepare young people of all races and ethnicities for life in a racially and ethnically changing United States (Smith, 1997; Bok & Bowen, 1998). And many educators and policy makers in the northern states, who are constrained by fragmented, racially isolated school districts, recognize that the only way they can provide diverse environments for learning is by fashioning cross-district or metropolitan solutions.

Voluntary, metropolitanwide programs, such as METCO, are significant too, because they may simply be more popular among racial minority parents than traditional, mandatory forms of busing. Surveys suggest that a majority of black Americans still

preliminary injunction to a white student who had wanted to participate in a suburban transfer program designated for racial minority students. The court remedying segregation could be a compelling government interest.

Thus, the question as to whether the achievement of racial and ethnic diversity in education can be a compelling government interest appears to be open. In fact, as of July 2000, the 5th Circuit, in *Hopwood v. Texas,* is the only circuit court to hold that using race in admissions or attendance zoning for reasons other than remedying specific acts of past discrimination can *never* be compelling.

Consequently, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Regents of the Univ. of California v. Bakke,* which held that race may be one factor in a college's admission policy, appears to remain good law. In his opinion in *Bakke,* Justice Powell reasoned that a university derives benefits from enrolling a diverse student body, which contributes to a vigorous exchange of ideas in the educational environment.

strongly support integrated schools for their children. But surveys also suggest that parents desire more educational choices (Orfield, 1994). Ironically, as the popular press reports increasingly on African Americans' disenchantment with busing in Boston and elsewhere (i.e., Yemma, 1997; Fineman, 1996), the waiting list for METCO continues to grow, even though it buses students much farther than typical desegregation plans.

What METCO Is All About

Perhaps the program's enduring popularity stems from the rare, dual solution it offers. This and similar programs are true efforts to combine desegregation and quality education. This is significant because public discourse about school desegregation reflects a frequent dichotomy between the goals of "quality" education and of desegregation (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Desegregation critics and local school officials commonly argue that desegregation requirements must be eliminated or greatly reduced so educators may focus on teaching rather than social policy. Under this popular argument, so-called quality education and desegregation are in opposition. Even the most well-respected public opinion polls ask respondents to choose between the two concepts (Orfield, 1994). Putting oppositional rhetoric into action, lawyers trying to dismantle desegregation and affirmative action policies have used the dramatic quality versus integration dichotomy to great success. More than a dozen desegregation orders have been lifted since the 1980s as "quality" became a new buzzword and the Supreme Court loosened standards to free school districts from their duty to desegregate—a move that commonly prompts a return to segregated schools (Orfield & Eaton, 1996).

Yet, METCO has always been viewed by activists and parents as an educational program *and* a racial integration program,

thereby avoiding these popular debates. People may attach to METCO whichever priority they wish. While scholars and social critics disagree about whether choice-based programs undermine racial integration and about whether racial integration even matters, METCO circumvents these controversies by being at once a racial integration and a school-choice program. And for now, METCO has managed to sidestep traditional objections to affirmative action and so-called quotas because, while it does not cater to whites, it does not displace them either. Indeed, METCO is a racial integration program for the mere fact that it does create some racial integration where otherwise there would be little to none. But perhaps more importantly, METCO is a public school–choice program that gets black students into high-performing schools, which greatly appeals to parents who believe these suburban schools are better than those in the city (Batson & Hayden, 1987; Orfield et al., 1997b). The politicized debates over the worth of school desegregation and the appropriateness of school choice and affirmative action surely will continue. But for parents, enrolling in METCO is not a political act. It is a practical one.

Even so, there is still much nationwide disagreement over METCO-like programs that bus racial minority children to predominantly white schools, a debate I discuss fully in chapter 7. Briefly, the most common complaint is related to human and monetary resources. Race-conscious choice programs like METCO are certainly responsible for the departure of some good students with involved parents from urban school systems. A related complaint is that money spent on such programs would be better used improving predominantly black city schools so that black children and their families will no longer feel compelled to leave their neighborhoods.

Second, critics often complain that educational choices such as METCO denigrate black communities and contribute to their erosion. According to this theory, black children, exposed to

suburban lifestyles and white settings, will abandon their neighborhoods and their culture. Though one argument is about money and the other primarily about culture, identity, and belonging, the two complaints often are linked. (See, for example, Yemma, 1997; Schlinkmann, 1997; Shaper Walters, 1996; Fineman, 1996.)

Despite years of criticisms, supporters of racial integration programs such as METCO for the most part have not directly addressed these crucial questions about culture, identity, and community. Equally true is that critics of racial integration, in their speeches and position papers, usually fail to address the fact that METCO, if a student can get in, does not keep families waiting for the ever-elusive promise of urban school reform. Through METCO, parents simply see well-functioning, well-connected, prestigious suburban schools that offer their children opportunities that already exist.

Looking more deeply at METCO won't silence such public debates, which are often rooted in emotion and ideology rather than research and fact. But this book explores, through the words of the former METCO students themselves, the experiences and lasting impressions of people who actually went through an unusual and extreme form of racial integration. What they say forces us to think about contemporary questions and narrowly constructed controversies in new, more sophisticated ways.

What This Study Can Teach Us

In this study, adult former METCO students speak about what they think they gained from their experiences in METCO and what they think they lost. They also discuss whether they think METCO was worth the displacement and inconvenience it required. By allowing past program participants to talk about their educational experiences in their own words, I do two things that previous

research on racial integration in schools has not: I consider myriad aspects of the educational experience simultaneously, and I consider an integration program's perceived impact over the long term rather than just the short term.

Desegregation-related programs and policies have typically been studied by scholars from various disciplines, each asking questions related exclusively to his or her field. Sociologists and policy analysts, for example, generally look for external indicators of success. They might compare the college graduation rates for desegregated and segregated blacks. Social psychologists, meanwhile, would scrutinize individual internal processes associated with an integration experience and focus most often on self-esteem, development of racial identity, and relationships with family. Thus, research on public school integration usually increases our understanding of one aspect of the experience, or the perceived effect of integration on one element of a person's whole life. But social scientists have rarely considered the entire experience of public school integration from the perspective of black students who then went on to live their lives after the experience.

Certainly, there has been considerable research and even more speculation about the effects of racial integration on black students. Most of the research considers desegregation's effects on student test scores and self-esteem while the students are still in school. But as other researchers have noted, this focus on the shorter-term impact of racial integration as measured by test scores does not speak directly to the earliest goals of the school desegregation movement. The argument underpinning the pre-*Brown v. Board of Education* cases, which sought access to higher education, was this: Ensuring blacks entry into predominantly white, middle-class schools would improve their changes for social mobility by linking blacks to social networks and prestige associated with these white-dominated institutions (Kluger, 1975; Wells & Crain, 1994; Orfield & Eaton, 1996).

Thus, to assess a program's longer-term impact on human lives, it is necessary to talk with program participants not when they are children and teenagers immersed in the process of integration, but later, when they are adults with life experiences well beyond high school. Such adults can discuss not only their recollected school experiences, but, more important, their mature perceptions of the ways these experiences affected choices, behaviors, attitudes, relationships, and career paths.

A few studies do examine the longer-term effects of school desegregation. Generally, this research—including some on Hartford, Connecticut's Project Concern program, which is similar to METCO—finds that blacks who participated in desegregation programs are more likely than their segregated counterparts to have high aspirations, consistent career planning, and career patterns that would prepare them for their desired occupations (Gable, Thompson & Iwanicki, 1983). A follow-up study of the Connecticut program found that blacks who had attended desegregated schools were more likely than blacks from segregated schools to have a racially mixed social network of friends and acquaintances and to live in racially mixed neighborhoods (Crain, 1984). Yet another study, published in 1985 and comparing the graduates of Project Concern with those of city schools, found that the desegregated black students were more likely to enroll in college and work in occupations traditionally dominated by whites (Crain & Strauss, 1985). Other studies have shown that higher college graduation rates and particular types of job opportunities were also associated with prior school desegregation for blacks (Wells & Crain, 1994).

My study gains focus and many of its principal questions from this previous body of work. But this study differs markedly from previous research. These longer-term investigations were almost all statistical and thus, by their nature, were not designed to probe either the human processes benefiting from integration programs or the meanings people attach to their own

experiences under such programs. Asking open-ended questions that give people the opportunity to reflect, qualify, and fully explain themselves, their opinions, and their perceptions surely will add to our understanding of the gains, the losses, and the complexities found in the kind of experience that METCO offers.

This study was guided by three groups of questions. The first group focuses on respondents' memories and the meanings they attach to them. What salient recollections do black adults have of their experiences of attending suburban schools while living in the city, and what recollections do they say best characterize such experiences? As they look back on some of the events, what have those memories come to mean and symbolize? For example, if a student remembers fondly a cross-race friendship, does that memory help sustain hope for racial harmony?

The second group of questions focuses on the adults' perceptions of the long-term effects of their early integration experiences. In answering this question, the past METCO participants speak about the ways their educational experiences helped shape their attitudes and the choices they made over the courses of their lives. Many of the themes that emerge in discussions about memories of METCO—cultural isolation, the bridging of two worlds, increasing comfort—reemerge when respondents discuss their current lives. Necessarily, the former students also place in perspective METCO's role among their many other life influences, such as family, church, friends, and other educational experiences.

The third group of questions focuses on students' current assessments of their experience. Balancing all aspects of the experience, how do post-METCO adults characterize and explain the worth of their experiences? In answering this third type of question, I ask adults to consider whether they would repeat the program if they could go back in time and why they would or would not want their own children to enter METCO.

The Summary Story of METCO

As past participants tell it, the story of METCO is one mostly of clear gains put to practical use after high school ended. This seems to be the case even when the road traveled to get those benefits was rocky. The adults I spoke with often trace their current feelings of comfort, diminishing self-consciousness, and growing self-confidence in white settings to their earlier METCO experiences. And it is these acquired attitudes that, from the participants' perspectives, increased their willingness, even eagerness, to enter predominantly white settings when they perceived opportunity there.

Once in white settings, many of these adults speak of playing a role best described as a "bridge" between white and black communities, cultures, and individuals. Their ability to straddle and blend two worlds is, to many of them, a payoff for their childhood and teenage experiences in METCO. Some of the adults have professional jobs requiring them to act as bridges between cultures and communities. Others apply the same straddling skills in less conspicuous ways. They may feel adept at getting others to see and question their prejudices, or they may use casual conversation to make cultural and racial differences nonthreatening and enriching rather than intimidating and awkward.

Scattered among the stories of gain and increased personal power, however, are tales of real loss. Many of the adults still struggle today with questions about where they "fit" in society. Specifically, these black men and women don't always feel at ease in all-black settings and report that they are sometimes criticized there for "acting white." Many are acutely sensitive to what might seem like lighthearted ribbing or mock insults about cultural integrity. But to them, the joking is a painful, even maddening, a continuation of taunting they received from neighborhood friends and family members who didn't go to suburbia.

Some former students remember that as black children

bused out to white suburban schools, they did develop negative attitudes about their own neighborhoods or about blacks in general. But those opinions, born from simplistic analysis, proved transient and, as the adults recall, rarely lasted even through high school. Many of the reactions articulated by these adults seem to follow the course of normal racial identity development as described by other scholars (Tatum, 1997; Cross, 1995; Cross, 1991). Nevertheless, these men and women do perceive that their reactions at least were heightened by their stark, daily crossings over to the white world and back to the black world. The adults speculate that this straddling forced them to deal with issues and conflicts that they would not have had to confront had they stayed in Boston for their schooling. And past participants often express ambivalence, wondering whether they missed out on something important by not attending predominantly black schools.

But the oft-repeated charge that urban/suburban choice programs will rip black children away from black communities and black culture and make them aspire to suburban lifestyles does not match the experiences and sentiments of these adults. In fact, after high school, past participants of METCO reconnected to their neighborhoods and to black culture and history by deliberately seeking out predominantly black social groups and organizations. This pattern of reconnection is well described in the literature on racial identity development (Cross, 1991, 1995). But many past METCO participants do trace their reconnection impetus directly to their suburban educational experiences. Some assert that these reconnections were more deliberate and pronounced than they would have been had they never been displaced from their communities. These former students often see the reconnection as a remedy for the disconnection that METCO had imposed. But for others, community involvement and connections with black culture and the black church expressed

values learned in their childhood homes. Going to suburbia for school had neither negated nor diminished those values.

Remarkably, nearly all the adults represented here said they would indeed repeat their METCO experience could they go back in time. (Just four of the sixty-five said otherwise.) There surely is a range of enthusiasm and a score of conditions that come with such decisions but, interestingly, even those adults with primarily negative memories of suburbia say they would indeed return to METCO. In considering whether they would repeat their experiences or send their children to white suburbia, the adults weigh more than the negative and positive aspects of their experiences in the program. Their decisions, they say, are influenced more by their discoveries that the exposure they had in suburbia comprised fair approximations and decent preparation for life as blacks in white-dominated America.

The chapters that follow explore these themes and findings more deeply. In chapter 2, post-METCO adults discuss their current understanding of their families' decisions to send them from their urban neighborhoods to suburban schools. The former students speak about what those understandings were when they were children and what their own mature reflections add to that picture. In chapter 3, the men and women recall their experiences as young people straddling urban and suburban communities. They look back on their experiences and explore what the memories have come to mean to them. In chapter 4, adults describe the gains they perceive from the METCO experience. The emphasis of this chapter is on how, concretely, the men and women used those benefits in later life. Conversely, in chapter 5, adults describe the negative aspects or losses they perceive were associated with METCO and how they resolved or failed to resolve those problems. In chapter 6, the post-METCO adults weigh both the positive and the negative aspects they associate with their suburban desegregation experience as they consider

whether they would repeat METCO and whether they would enroll their children in the program. Chapter 7, the final chapter, considers the implications of these findings. It details how this study might best inform debates over school desegregation and race-conscious choice programs such as METCO. It also reviews in detail the study's relationship to previous research and its contributions to current scholarship, and it suggests avenues for further study.

Who's Talking?

This study is based on in-depth interviews with 65 of METCO's past participants who have been out of the program for at least five years. The sample includes 30 men and 35 women. Forty-two of these adults could be classified as middle class and college educated; 17 could be classified as working class, either with a college education, some college credits, an associates degree, or high school diploma; the remaining 6 could be classified either as working poor or poor with no college education.

Forty-nine of the 65 adults I talked with had graduated from a four-year college or, at the time I met with them, were finishing work toward their degrees. Twenty of the 65 had completed some graduate work (either a law degree or a master's degree) or were working toward graduate degrees. Several more were planning to pursue graduate studies.

Of the 65 adults in this sample, 58 graduated from a METCO high school. Seven had dropped out of the program in high school and graduated from another school, earned a graduation equivalency diploma (GED), or never graduated from high school. Thirty-nine of these adults live in the city of Boston. Fourteen of the 65 live in Boston suburbs. Some of these suburban communities are affluent with relatively few black residents, but others are more diverse, both culturally and socioeconomically. Eight live outside Massachusetts, and all of these adults

characterize their neighborhoods as racially and socioeconomically diverse and primarily urban. Four others live in Massachusetts, but well outside metropolitan Boston. Two of these reside in diverse, primarily urban neighborhoods, while two others live in suburban communities that are predominantly white.

The past participants are of various ages. Eighteen graduated high school or were of graduation age (18) between the years 1971 and 1977; 24 graduated high school or were of graduation age between the years 1978 and 1983; and 23 graduated high school or were of graduation age between the years 1984 and 1991.

METCO in the Shadow of Busing

Despite its relevance to so many important issues, METCO's story has never been told. This small program has long been overshadowed by the drama, racial violence, and political tumult spurred by Boston's school busing order that went into effect in 1975.

At its most controversial, the desegregation order led to students being bused from predominantly black, poor, and working class Roxbury to predominantly white, poor, and working class South Boston and vice versa. The ensuing violence and racial tension were so intense that the busing order still ignites controversy. In 1997, more than two and a half decades after busing began, community leaders in South Boston even speculated publicly that the disintegration caused by busing was in part responsible for a rash of teen suicides in the neighborhood (MacQuarrie, 1997).

For many observers, both in and outside the city, busing in Boston did display desegregation at its most destructive and human beings at their worst. It wasn't long before busing in Boston became a popular symbol of the "failure" of liberal social engineering and the futility of trying to legislate racial equality

and racial harmony. Meanwhile, though, few onlookers noticed an irony not too many miles away. As the rocks flew, the tempers flared, and the fears escalated in Boston, black city kids were strolling with little incident into lily-white suburban schools. It was not always easy. But so close to the municipal boundary line, just out of sight of the gathered reporters, television cameras, and busing's now infamous race- and class-based rage, there were, and still are, other stories. These are stories about racial integration in what might seem the most unlikely of places.

2

Why They Went

Mae Rogers kept a map of metropolitan Boston in a kitchen drawer of her city apartment. A few years after her daughter Shirley was born in the 1960s, Mae took the map and began circling in red ink some of the rich towns ringing the city. Mae had learned about some of these towns when a few neighborhood children started going out to them for school every day through a new busing program. Mae didn't need to know much more about this program except that it got black city kids into some of the "best" public schools in Massachusetts.

Mrs. Rogers had never been to any of these towns herself. The subway line out of her Boston neighborhood didn't go directly to them. And she didn't own a car. "You have to understand this," says her daughter Shirley, now in her thirties. "A lot of people in some parts of Boston, they don't have knowledge of where things are outside their little neighborhoods."

According to Shirley, her mother did cling to a flowery image of the suburban towns and small cities that lay beyond metropolitan Boston's racial boundary line. In her mother's mind—and so in Shirley's mind too—there would be a lot of green grass out that way. "Greener! The grass was going to be greener," says