THE INTERSECTION OF ACADEMICS AND CULTURE: AN INTERPRETIVE
PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN
AMERICAN STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN THE METROPOLITAN COUNCIL FOR
EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM

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Abstract

The public school system is changing and so, too, are the lived experiences of African American students who attend predominantly White high schools through the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) program. Arguably, all students deserve access to high quality education, although student experiences differ in suburban and urban contexts. The lived experiences of suburban Whites and urban African Americans are vastly different. Education scholars continue to explore and research the phenomenon of lived experiences using interpretive phenomenological analysis as a qualitative research method to produce evidence associated with experiences. In this thesis, research interpreted the lived experiences of five African American students attending predominantly White high schools through the METCO program. Guided by cultural identity theory, the study sought to answer the following research question: What are the social and cultural experiences of African American students living in inner-city Boston who attend a predominantly White suburban school through the METCO program? Five major findings were discovered. First, student participants demonstrated an absence of understanding associated with the meaning and purpose of the METCO program. Second, long commutes on the school bus contribute to the lived experience and after-school activity decision-making of METCO students. Third, METCO students desire their suburban schools to nurture cultural interactions in a formalized manner across the student body. Fourth, African American students demonstrated intact cultural identities in their predominantly White suburban settings. Finally, situational occurrences involving culture reveal the ongoing presence of teachable moments for White teachers and school leaders.

Keywords: experiences, African American, students, culture, identity, METCO
Dedication

To the chief birth officer and educator-in-chief of my life journey—love you Ma

To my dad who missed this moment, I’m sure you would be proud—HLC

To the father who guided me spiritually as a man, you’re gone, but not forgotten—Rev. CET

To S & G, it wasn’t easy being your younger brother, but you both taught me a lot about “stuff”

I dare not forget to mention the Princess, thank you for inviting me into your life—DC

For the many who encouraged me along this journey—thank you!
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Addressing Educational Inequalities With METCO

Urban and suburban public schools are vastly different in terms of educational outcomes for Whites with European origins and African Americans, but also in terms of student experiences. Such differences, often referred to in the literature as inequalities, between the two types of schools and students’ experiences are stark and have the potential to impact student’s long-term personal development. Inequalities between schools and school districts have potentially broad consequences for students’ future educational attainment, employment, and family relations (Davis & Jordan, 1994). Loosely based on geographic location and economic status, school inequalities can lead to difficulties particularly for minority students, in obtaining a quality education in U.S. society (Gordon, Gordon, & Nembhard, 1994).

Educational inequalities disproportionately affect students of color. Scholars argue schools that generally service students of color, commonly referred to as minorities, tend to have fewer resources, outdated facilities, less qualified teachers, lower performance rates, higher dropout percentages, fewer graduates who pursue higher education and these discrepancies have a powerful impact particularly on the lives of young African Americans, which simultaneously affects society as a whole (Eggleston & Miranda, 2009; Stitzlein, 2008).

Public schools serving students of color, disadvantaged populations, and low-income families need to improve. Sleeter (2001) observed that education in many communities of color, as well as many poor White communities, is in a state of crisis. Similarly, Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) said, “By the time racial/ethnic minority students (particularly African American, Hispanic, and Native American students) reach high school, their achievement significantly lags behind that of White and Asian students” (pp. 66-67).
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. In response, several solutions were put forth to help bridge such educational inequalities. For example, the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) established a program designed to address inequalities in the urban and suburban education systems to rectify unequal access to facilities set up for formal public education (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011). Founded in 1966, the METCO program helped to desegregate public schools in Massachusetts. The program and participating schools came to be known and simply referred to as METCO with emphasis on voluntary suburban district participation in the public school integration process. The plan—bus students from urban communities to suburban school districts that were overwhelmingly White for such students to have an integrated educational school experience (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011).

Several solutions have been put forth to help bridge educational inequalities. Later, in addition to METCO, charter school programs such as Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) and Unlocking Potential (UP) arrived in Massachusetts. Although less popular and often not first choice programs, KIPP and UP programs were designated and set up to keep and service students within their urban neighborhoods.

By 2004, METCO-participating students accounted for a substantial portion of the African American, Asian, and Hispanic student enrollment in receiving suburban school districts. Studies showed, in Massachusetts, students who attended suburban public schools through METCO had generally benefitted from their time in the program, had shown more improvement between third and seventh grade, raised individual achievement scores, and were considered more likely to graduate from high school than other Boston public school students (Angrist &
Lang, 2004). By 2011, METCO continued to be the only program that addressed inequalities in the urban/suburban education system, such as the academic achievement difference or “gap” between White and African American students, which was determined to be a result, in large part, of the unequal access to facilities necessary for a formal education (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011).

In 2013, METCO was viewed as a positive educational alternative for urban families that addressed inequalities in the urban/suburban education system. By providing students of color access to better facilities, better curriculum, and better educators necessary to close the achievement and cultural gaps, it was argued that attending classes in suburban contexts might create or contribute to issues of a different kind. For example, Ladson-Billings (2013) informs how cultural identity and socioeconomic issues may affect students of color in spaces of privilege in suburban school settings, which remain White and wealthy.

While METCO students account for a substantial portion of the African American and Hispanic student enrollment in receiving suburban school districts, little evidence exists of social or academic benefits of METCO students as compared to their non-METCO peers and classmates (Angrist & Lang, 2004). METCO addresses inequalities in the urban/suburban education system, including the achievement gap between White and African American students, which is a result, in large part, of unequal access to facilities for formal education (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011). Although METCO is viewed as a positive educational alternative for inner-city families to provide students of color access to better facilities, curriculum, and educators, attending classes in suburban contexts alone may not be enough to close the achievement or cultural gap. Educational theory reminds the education community of the importance of
culturally relevant pedagogy and a basic understanding of students’ lives (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

Within predominantly White school settings, understanding the lived experiences of African American students is important and lends value to successful teaching and learning in a setting like METCO, which requires cultural agility by both African American students, their White peers, and White teachers. Cultural agility is defined as the metacompetency that enables professionals and students alike to perform successfully by moving and thinking quickly in cross-cultural situations (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2009; DeRue et al., 2012).

Students negotiating new environments bear the most substantial burden of adaptation, particularly in terms of cultural inclusion and identity recognition—despite the population of the nation becoming increasingly diverse, particular spaces of privilege are becoming increasingly White and wealthy (Ladson-Billings, 2013) in suburban school settings. According to Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011), “Children bring with them to school culturally-based ways of doing, seeing, and knowing” (p. 77). Therefore, this doctoral thesis attempted to capture and interpret the experiences associated with African American students in METCO and how they mobilize their resources to maintain their cultural and ethnic identities in dominant culture environments while simultaneously adapting to fit in socially and succeed academically in a predominantly White high school. Eggleston and Halsell-Miranda (2009) suggest, before attempting to interpret the phenomenon of lived experience of specific individuals, a researcher must deconstruct myths associated with the research participants’ experiences and create availability to connect with the participants’ actual experiences, which leads to a greater level of intellectual understanding, discovery, and potential contribution to existing and ongoing research on the phenomenon.
Value of Experience

African American students tend to bring rich experiences and perspectives to multicultural teaching and to their school peers (Sleeter, 2001). Even though this thesis interprets the lived experiences of several African American students across high school grade levels, the researcher hopes to uncover some of the social and cultural challenges experienced by the participants. According to Milner (2007), “Never before have public school teachers in the United States been faced with the challenge of meeting the needs of so many diverse learners, yet the teaching force is White, monolingual, and middle class” (p. 394). By interpreting the lived experiences of the participants, the public school community—students, parents, teachers, and school leaders—are better informed of the significance that race, culture, and ethnic differences between teachers and pupils can present for students of color in predominantly White school settings.

According to the Selected Findings section of a 2013 report commissioned by the National Center for Educational Statistics, “About 82 percent of all public school teachers were non-Hispanic White, 7 percent were non-Hispanic African American, and 8 percent were Hispanic” (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013, p. 3). When considering African American and Latino students, Ladson-Billings (2013) observed African American and Latino students alike can go through 13 years of public schooling—from kindergarten to 12th grade—and never have an African American or Latino teacher. Arguably, teachers in a suburban setting are often ill-equipped to understand the complexities that minority students—African American and Latino—face when they enter the classroom through complex desegregation programs like METCO. Students of color who enter into a new setting with a very different worldview and distinct set of experiences look at the world through a lens that their peers and teachers have not perhaps begun
to consider. Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) provide insights relative to teaching students of
color by observing and indicating that

racial or ethnic minorities see, view, and perceive themselves and others differently than
those who are of the majority group . . . recognize the value of lived experiences by
marginalized groups in understanding and making meaning of the world. (pp. 70, 73)

African American children bring to school with them culturally based ways of doing,
seeing, and knowing, but White teachers who are responsible for diverse populations of students
struggle with interpreting the complexity of how culture, race, and ethnicity influence the
academic, social, emotional, and psychological development of students of color and its
connectedness to learning (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Embedded in this thesis are detailed
experiences of how students of color, more specifically, African American students, view their
participation in a contemporary desegregation and inclusion program, while managing the
complexity of a rigorous academic setting as they build peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher
relationships across racial, cultural, and ethnic boundaries. Broadly put, this thesis interprets how
African American students maintain, negotiate, or surrender their cultural and social identity and
the strategies they use to adapt and succeed in a suburban, culturally exclusive school
environment as METCO students.

Scholars have attempted to identify and explain the challenges African American
students face achieving academically in predominantly White school settings, though more
recently, a growing and major concern by education researchers has been how to address the
race/ethnicity-based achievement gap between mainstream and minority children (Brown-Jeffy
& Cooper, 2011; Gordon, et al., 1994). While current research has addressed race/ethnicity-
based achievement gaps, few studies have traced the lived experiences of racial minorities—
particularly African Americans—navigating predominantly White suburban school settings from the perspective of the students. According to Marsh, Chaney, and Jones (2012), “Scholars remain interested in how African American and Latino children adapt to what is viewed as the more promising sites for high-achieving academic performance—White suburban environments” (p. 40). With research mainly focusing on academic performance, this thesis builds upon limited research that interprets the actual, lived experiences of African American students who attend a predominantly White suburban high school as participants of the METCO program.

**The African American Student Experience**

Existing research has consistently reported on the African American male and his underachievement. However, in 2009, Eggleston and Halsell-Miranda (2009) published findings focusing on African American females and their perceptions of the challenges and opportunities in a predominantly White educational institution and on how the experience affected their racial, cultural, and ethnic identity. Studying the lived experiences of both African American males and females is qualitatively informative; therefore, this thesis highlights the lived experiences of both genders across high school grade levels as students attending a predominantly White high school through the METCO program, a voluntary school desegregation program.

Eggleston and Halsell-Miranda (2009) documented findings concerning the lived experiences of African American females in a predominantly White high school to foster educational support for African American females. Not long after, Marsh et al. (2012) informed “future research should qualitatively examine more closely how young African American men and women in both racially homogenous and racially diverse school contexts deal with their initial feelings” (p. 48) and cultural identities. As a qualitative thesis, this study attempts to advance existing research by interpreting the lived sociocultural experiences of African
American students from inner-city Boston who attend a predominantly White suburban high school through the METCO program, one of three interdistrict desegregation programs in the United States and the second longest running program of its kind (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011). Holland (2012) asserted how research exploring the lived sociocultural experiences of African American students in programs like METCO is essential since “we lack a deep knowledge of what the experience of integration is like for students and how the organizational and cultural context of a school affects African American students in contemporary desegregation programs” (p. 101).

The METCO program is not a unique school integration program; it is one of three voluntary integration programs in the Northeast United States (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011). Similar initiatives include Project Choice in Hartford, CT, previously known as Project Concern, and the Rochester, NY-based, Urban-Suburban Interdistrict Transfer Program (Estorino & Krizack, 2000). Although each of the three desegregation programs is fundamentally similar, pairing low-income students of color from the inner city with school districts in suburban communities, METCO differs structurally because of its status as a nonprofit organization and board of directors (Estorino & Krizack, 2000). In spite of being a Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) contractor, METCO functions as an independently managed and operated organization, which affords it a measure of independence not available to Project Choice and the Urban-Suburban Interdistrict Transfer Program, both of which are state-run programs. METCO enjoys a level of independence and autonomy, but DESE oversees the functioning of the METCO program and ensures participating suburban school districts receive state funding for students of color participating in the program. METCO, as an independent program, handles its own registration and referrals of students, offers academic counseling,
tutorial services, summer school, and other support services to participating students (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011).

The DESE describes the METCO program as a voluntary desegregation program comprised of 37 suburban school districts, predominantly White, situated in cities and towns just outside the boundaries of the city of Boston (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011). Thirty-three of METCO’s 37 school districts are located within metro Boston and the remaining four school districts near the Springfield, MA area (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011), an area in the Western part of Massachusetts.

Elementary, middle, and high school students, mostly African American and Latino, who participate in METCO, are selected through an application process and, upon acceptance, are bused to member-affiliated, suburban school districts (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011). Continuing, Eaton and Chirichigno (2011) highlight how the METCO program, with all of its academic benefits and positive learning outcomes, challenges students of color to be successful in an academically strong environment. However, minority students involved in the program face challenges because the potential for social and cultural disconnect from inner-city living is strong.

Problem of Practice

All students deserve access to high quality educational experiences. However, African American students in urban school contexts have a number of difficulties and challenges in receiving a quality education and are often unable to have access to the same educational opportunities as their White suburban peers (Gordon et al., 1994). Little is known about social factors linking lived experiences to the achievement gap between African American and White students, but what is known, for some African Americans, the disadvantages are severe and
pervasive (Downey, 2008). 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 opportunity in urban school contexts, school desegregation programs like the METCO program were specifically created and designed to help bridge the educational opportunity gap by providing full-service transportation for select students, mostly African American and Latino, from their urban neighborhoods to “opportunity-rich suburban schools” (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011, p. 1).

According to Angrist and Lang (2004), METCO students benefit from their time in the program and despite obvious sociocultural differences between students of color and White teachers, some African American students are satisfied with their White teachers. While METCO students seem satisfied with the White teachers, for other African American children attending a predominantly White suburban school, their experiences are not always positive (Dickar, 2008; Eggleston & Miranda, 2009; Henfield & Washington, 2012). Eggleston and Miranda (2009) inform how research has been limited to the specific academic experiences of African American students within predominantly White suburban schools, yet there appear to be deficiencies in evidence that adequately captures the interpretation of the African American student and their unique experience beyond academic underachievement. The research conducted in this thesis contributes to the deficiency of findings by interpreting the unique, actual, lived experiences 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 their suburban White peers do not and, therefore, may “experience a different type of ‘normal’ life” (Milner, 2007, p. 389). However, there is still value and learning
opportunities from people who have had a range of different experiences in life, but different, in this sense, does not necessarily mean deficit or deficient (C. M. Ford, 1996; Milner, 2007). Despite differences, researchers continue to document how the African American experience varies from one school system to the next (O’Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007). Different experiences by disadvantaged students of color, both in academic and cultural contexts, furthers the need to conduct research involving the lived experience of African American students attending predominantly White schools.

**Justification for the Research Problem**

*The Urgency of Now: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and the Black Male*, a 2012 report sponsored by the Schott Foundation for Public Education, informed that all students must 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. Some scholars suggest, 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 informs how students of color are sensitive to culture and the role it often plays in their learning and school experience. 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”
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 a predominantly White school. Revisiting Holzman et al. (2012), the aim of this research is to advance the notion of an ideology, which is to produce an ethos of care for students of color in a dominant culture school setting through the accounts presented by African American students attending a METCO school. By presenting lived accounts, this thesis advances current research by detailing what Brown-Jeffy and Cooper said is “the relevance of the text to the child’s own experience” (p. 68) in a predominantly White school environment.

Despite access and opportunity, African American students attending suburban schools through the METCO program are also navigating and assimilating within two distinct domains. The first domain is the urban community in which the student resides. As aforementioned, the urban community is often associated with being of lower socioeconomic status and a stark contrast to the suburban lifestyle. The second domain is the geographical space in which the school district is located—the suburbs. For African American students attending predominantly White schools, “moving between distinct White and African American worlds often makes the METCO students feel they truly belonged in neither” (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011, p. 23), a phenomenon further explored in this thesis.

Limited empirical evidence exists indicating whether or not METCO-affiliated school districts and towns are lacking in community acceptance of the program in public discourse. Eaton and Chirichigno (2011) inform how suburban residents do not have a complete understanding of the goals, funding structure, and underlying justification for the METCO program in their suburban communities. For residents who lack a full understanding of METCO’s purpose and funding structure, Ispa-Landa (2013) suggested hosting open discussions
to increase levels of interethnic tolerance, friendliness, and friendship in suburban schools among
town officials, school leaders, and suburban residents to inform all stakeholders of the
significance of a METCO partnership.

Suburban schools are perceived to be superior to urban schools and children who attend
suburban schools are believed to get a better education (Golba, 1998). By participating in the
METCO program, African American students gain access to a presumed superior academic
environment. Conversely, students of color often find themselves at a cultural disadvantage in an
environment where they try to maintain and display their ethnic and cultural identity while
navigating their intercultural relationships with White teachers and peers in a suburban school
setting (Nieto, 1999). Nieto (1999) debated 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. She claimed learning 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. 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.

Deficiencies in the Evidence

As a program, METCO is not unique. According to a 2011 Pioneer Institute for Public
Policy Research report, “METCO is one of eight voluntary inter-district school desegregation
programs operating in the United States and the second oldest continually running program of its
kind in the nation” (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011, p. 24). To add, research studies concerning
African American students and their academic performance in predominantly White, K-12, school settings has been the subject of a growing number of scholarly works over the past 2.5 decades (Brown & Davis, 2000; Davis, 2003; Franklin, 1991; Gibbs, 1988; Hopkins, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Madhubuti, 1990; Noguera, 1996; Polite, 1994; Polite & Davis, 1999; Prince, 2000). While previous research has been conducted over the past two decades on the academic performance of African American students in predominantly White schools, Henfield and Washington (2012) said, “Although research on White teachers’ experiences with African American students exists, there is little research on White teachers charged with educating African American students in predominantly White schools, specifically” (p. 150). For African American students participating in METCO, the program affiliation is with predominantly White suburban school districts.

Relating the Discussion to Audiences

Race and culture continue to be difficult topics to address, especially in public school settings and classrooms, but “students and teachers need to build a classroom community, making it a safe place in which to nurture everyone’s cultural identity (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011, p. 78). Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) suggest that when opportunities to discuss race and culture arise in a professional setting, the classroom can be an ideal place to hear the voices of all students and use such a moment as an instrument for professional learning and deeper cultural understanding. We communicate with others as a means of expressing thoughts, sharing our experiences, and creating and accessing knowledge, both general and situated (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). To embrace the concept presented by Brown-Jeffy and Cooper, students and teachers are perfectly situated to start a classroom community, creating a safe place to nurture everyone’s experiences and express their cultural identities. With METCO students serving as
the principal research participants, this thesis intends to give voice to a select group of African American students, going beyond their academic performance, to highlight their social involvement and navigation among intercultural peer groups in school, while concurrently maintaining their cultural identity as students in a predominantly White suburban school setting.

Significance of Research Problem

The differences in the quality of education offered by suburban and urban schools are startling, and inequalities in schooling experiences have potentially broad consequences for students’ future educational attainment, employment, and family relations (Davis & Jordan, 1994; Stitzlein, 2008). Access to opportunity rich education through quality curriculum, teachers, and other school activities is of particular importance for students and parents. African American students, a population already marginalized in school settings (Finn & Cox, 1992; Irvine, 1990; Sanders & Reed, 1995), must also consider the social and cultural complexity African American students face attending predominantly White schools.

For students of color, both male and female, METCO provides an academically rigorous and quality educational experience, but what’s lacking are research studies probing what the actual school experiences is like for African American students attending a predominantly White high school (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011). While studies have been conducted on African American students within predominantly White educational institutions, few studies have addressed the specific topic of African American adolescents and their perceptions about their education within such environments (Eggleston & Miranda, 2009) and their lived sociocultural experiences in that space. As a subject and topic of considerable personal and professional importance, this research interprets the personal accounts and lived experiences of African
American students participating in the METCO program, equally distributed between males and females, across high school grade levels.

Teachers and peers are especially influential in shaping the school-related behaviors of African American males and females, yet little attention is given to explaining their academic performance and social behaviors relative to other structural and contextual influences in school settings (Davis & Jordan, 1994). Previous research shows that negative school experiences and outcomes for African American students are often products of school contextual and structural factors that limit learning opportunities, especially for African American males (Ferguson, 1991; Polite, 1993b). Existing research reveals how integrated, public schools force African Americans to temporarily leave their “all-African American neighborhoods,” their religious and social environments to interact with members of the dominant culture (Marsh et al., 2012). Although voluntary, METCO buses students of color from urban to suburban communities for the intended purpose of integrating and desegregating predominantly White schools districts.

The African American student experience in a predominantly White school environment continues to evolve, yet little is known concerning the racial, ethnic, and cultural experiences of African American students participating in desegregation programs like METCO. Downey (2008) said, “Understanding cultural roots to the African American/White gap remains an important social science goal” (p. 122). Marsh et al. (2012) posit research is required to understand the extent to which a desegregation program like METCO is actually meeting the unique social and cultural needs of its students of color. Furthermore, scholars remain interested in how African American and Latino children adapt to what is viewed as the more promising sites for high-achieving academic performance—White suburban environments (Marsh et al., 2012), but more needs to be discovered about the unique social and cultural experiences of
African Americans attending such school environments. From this thesis, this research will interpret the actual experiences of African American students and detail how they view their social and educational experiences while attending the METCO-affiliated high school.

**Purpose Statement**

“Experience can be a masterful teacher” (DeRue, Ashford, & Myers, 2012, p. 258). The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis was to interpret the lived, sociocultural experiences of African American students attending a predominantly White high school through the METCO program. It is important to acknowledge the process of learning from experience and its occurrences over time, but learning from experience also requires identifying and comprehending different patterns within and across experiences (DeRue et al., 2012; Matlin, 2002) of a particular group over time. For this thesis, identifying and comprehending the lived experiences of African American students in the METCO program, over a small window of time of less than 2 years, is essential to the findings presented.

While in school, each student had a unique experience. However, when researching the experience of a particular group, like African American students, it is important to capture how the group views their experiences being part of a particular environment and whether or not the organizational features of the school influence their experiences (Holland, 2012). As a tool for discovery, the use of semi-structured, private, one-on-one interviews affords the researcher an authentic opportunity to gather detailed information concerning each African American student’s experience. Each interview was a chance to reveal an unfurling of perspectives and meanings, unique to an individual’s embodied and situated relationship to the world (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) and experience as a METCO student. The findings of this thesis aim to provide an honest account of how African American students interpret their lived experiences of attending a
predominantly White high school by asking specific questions and a subsequent subset of questions.

Central Research Question

The central research question for this study is: What are the social and cultural experiences of African American students living in inner-city Boston, yet attending a predominantly White suburban school through the METCO program? Asking open-ended questions invites student participants to reflect on their individual, lived experiences as residents of inner-city Boston, while students attending a predominantly White suburban high school. From this approach, the researcher gains meaningful insight into activities and to the various things happening to them during this experience as METCO students (Smith et al., 2009).

Positionality

As an African American male and former urban high school student from the mid-1980s who was bused, I was familiar with METCO and a small portion of their suburban school partners. Admittedly, having normalized my substandard urban learning environment and low quality athletic programs and facilities, I envied several African American friends who were METCO students, individuals who routinely described pristine settings, nicely manicured athletic fields, and competitive sports programs, not to mention the positive influence their visual surroundings of wealth and affluence provided. Historical familiarity with the METCO program has the ability to influence my opinion or predisposes me to make certain conclusions in this research. However, to eliminate the possibility of personal bias, feelings, and opinions as a researcher, I approached each interview from a position of neutrality, focusing solely on their individual lived experiences as African American students participating in a modern era version of the METCO program.
As a person with a similar cultural background to participants and personal experience attending a predominantly White high school in Boston through the controversial bussing era, I am cognizant of the possibility of influencing responses to interview questions. Therefore, through bracketing, a technique that allows researchers to set aside their experiences and take a fresh perspective (Moustakas, 1994), I suspended my personal experiences during the process of evaluating assumptions and biases before constructing the necessary research questions.

**Theoretical Framework**

Cultural identity theory is the theoretical framework for this research study. Culture is generally associated with race, which contributes to how African American people view themselves in the world and school. Milner (2007) said, “It may seem inconceivable to some that race, for instance, still has a profound influence on how people experience and live in the world” (p. 390). With cultural identity as the theoretical framework, the researcher interprets the lived experiences of African Americans as unique to their Blackness and quite different from the experiences of Whites. People of color are not White people with pigmented or colored skin; their experiences are shaped by their racial, ethnic, and cultural heritage, among other qualities (Dillard, 2000). Furthermore, the researcher, by using cultural identity theory as the theoretical framework, will present an interpretive account of African American students from the lens of their cultural and social experiences as METCO students.

Scholars in education have recognized the promise and utility of cultural identity theory in education and their work has made a meaningful contribution to what is known about culture and race in education (Duncan, 2005; Lynn, 2004; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Tate 1997). In addition to contributions previously made, combined with what is known about race in education, Milner (2007) exacts the point by informing how the analysis of both race and culture are also important
to consider in the study of people, perspectives, experiences, and space. By accepting culture as important factors in education, researchers can better understand the lived experiences of African American students attending a predominantly White suburban high school. Milner (2007) further informs how racial and cultural identity theories appear to be connected to self-identity and linked to an individual’s interaction between different cultures and ethnic groups. He continues by highlighting the importance of building upon the fundamental components of each theory by providing alternative epistemologies, and methodologies for studying people of color and their multiple and varied identities and experiences as African American students. Furthering the work of other scholars, this thesis revives previous studies of the actual experiences of African American students attending a predominantly White high school.

By using cultural identity theory as the theoretical framework for this thesis, each African American participating in the research serves as the official narrators of their experiences, serving as independent experts who provide meaningful insight and testimony into their actual cultural and social experiences as students of color attending a predominantly White high school. Dixson and Rousseau (2005) stated the importance of voice and narration by writing, “The voice concerns the assertion and acknowledges the importance of the personal and community experiences of people of color as sources of knowledge” (p. 10). In allowing participants to describe their individual experiences, each student brings forward a reflective account of their life, serving as a knowledge source, providing the researcher with an unique opportunity to listen attentively and “think through what is happening in a particular research community, with race and culture placed at the core” (Milner, 2007, p. 396).
Cultural Identity Theory

Race is a socially constructed concept, which is the defining characteristic of African American group membership (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Although both culture and race are considered defining characteristics for African Americans, each can be a taboo topic for discussion, especially in racially mixed settings. Interestingly, in school settings, many students are interested in the topic, but mostly in hearing other people talk about it (Tatum, 1992). Despite being viewed as a taboo topic, it is widely known that children as young as 3 years of age notice racial differences and talk about it in ways that make adults uncomfortable (Phinney & Rotheram, 1987; Tatum, 1992). Harper (2007) describes how African American students contend with complex social and emotional adjustment issues in school, including the development of healthy self-concepts and feelings of belongingness. Fortunately for African American students attending predominantly White schools, discussing topics of race, culture, and identity can lead to greater forms of awareness for Whites and potentially serve as a positive reinforcement to African American students and their sense of belonging and cultural identity.

Race and culture are regularly viewed as being the same and are often used and defined in a similar context, where both culture and race are used interchangeably, as if all members of a racial group share a unified set of beliefs or patterns of behavior (Lamont & Small, 2008). Given the delicate and sensitive nature of identity and how African American students view themselves in the context of attending a predominantly White high school through the METCO program, the use of cultural identity theory as the theoretical framework for this thesis will inform the education community to view race, culture as separate, yet equal contributors to the pedagogical paradigm.
In the METCO-affiliated schools, there is a racial and cultural imbalance between White teachers and African American students, and when teachers fail to consider their own and their students’ cultural and racial backgrounds in their teaching work and instead adopt a color and culture-blind set of beliefs, ideologies, and practices, opportunities for increasing their cultural competency are missed (K. Johnson, 2002; Lewis, 2001; Milner, 2007). Theoretically, the framework of cultural identity theory has value-added potential, contributing significantly to the research community and ongoing efforts into the scholarly exploration of the lived experiences of African American students attending predominantly White schools as METCO students.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The educational experiences of African Americans have been discussed and problematized in the social sciences, educational, and political literature, with most concentrating on poor academic performance, school dropout, special education referrals, and school-based disciplinary troubles (D. Y. Ford & Moore, 2013; Howard, 2013; Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, & Watson, 2014; Tyler, 2014). Now education research literature is beginning to give voice to a shifting perspective, one that gives voice to African American students who are achieving at high levels, have positive attitudes towards schooling, possess strong academic identities, and are pursuing postsecondary education (Howard, 2013; McGee, 2013; Toldson, 2014; Wiggan, 2014). Although more and more educational research literature has sought to unpack the social and academic experiences of African American students, limited research exists detailing the lived experiences of African American students in predominantly White school settings (D. Y. Ford & McGee, 2013; McGee, 2013; Thompson & Davis, 2013). In this chapter, the researcher examined and analyzed handpicked, peer reviewed literature detailing the overall schooling experiences of African American students attending a predominantly White high school, along with select research specifically focusing on African American students participating in the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) program.

The Phenomenon of Lived Experience

“African Americans’ experiences in the United States differ significantly from those of members of other ethnic groups” (Sellers et al., 1998, p. 18), and given the process of schooling is fraught with challenges, studies show how people of color, typically African Americans, have historically been misrepresented, exploited, silenced, and taken for granted in educational research (Dillard, 2000; Stanfield, 1995). In fact, some education researchers have given
privileged status to dominant, White voices, beliefs, ideologies, and views over the voices of people of color (Gordon, 1990; Tillman, 2002). The findings presented in this research give a voice to the lived experiences of African Americans by allowing each participant to describe and tell their individual stories of experience attending a predominantly White school through the METCO program.

Experience varies from person to person, but value and promise are in people who have had a range of experiences in life (C. M. Ford, 1996; Milner, 2007). The information shared by each student participating in this study attempts to provide useful information to the METCO community, whereby each African American student’s individual account serves as a personal testimony of their lived experience relative to attending a predominantly White school. Personal testimonials have the potential to be powerful and informative tools for change, broadening awareness for White educators who seek to improve teaching and learning practices for students whose cultural backgrounds are different from their own (Banks, 2000; Gay, 2000; Gollnick & Chin, 2004; Irvine, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001; Riley, 1999).

This literature review details why the school environment and learning experience for African Americans differs from those of other racial groups, particularly Whites, and how the concept of race and culture is recurrently invoked (O’Connor et al., 2007). Culture is an important component of this research thesis. The phenomenon of lived experience, when viewed through the lens of cultural identity theory, uniquely positions the researcher “to probe more deeply and specifically into issues” (Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005, p. 583) connected to the whole school experience of African American students participating in the METCO program. By probing more deeply into “issues” and through interpretation of the lived experiences of African American students, the METCO community gains what Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005)
describe as an insider perspective of how students of color develop their educational trajectories in school, under certain conditions, and between racial and socioeconomic groups. In addition to gaining an insider perspective from each student participating in this study, this thesis seeks to align their experience in the context of peer-reviewed literature to provide a scholarly framework to support the findings associated with the lived experiences of African American students attending a predominantly White high school through the METCO program.

**African American Students in Suburbia**

Race, culture, and gender, among other factors, may play central and independent roles in how people live and experience life, both inside and outside the education environment (Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Weis & Fine, 1996). When considering African American students participating in the METCO program, there are both benefits and challenges, inside and outside of their school environment. METCO exposes African American students to schools that are affluent and consistently rank in the upper echelon of high performing school districts in Massachusetts (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011). Several challenges exist for African American students in METCO. One noted challenge for African American students mentions White educators and their inability to determine whether or not some African American students experience challenges negotiating social and cultural differences in White schools (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011). Eaton & Chirichigno (2011) also mention how some METCO students, mostly African Americans, are experiencing challenges assigning meaning to their long-term personal development and academic success relative to school support systems.

In success or failure, African American students participating in the METCO program are the authentic voices of their lived experience. Castro (2010) said, “Individuals determine their
own experiences, successes, and failures” (p. 202). To learn and understand from the experiences of the research participants, the investigator takes into account the social patterns and culture of a small group of African American students and how they individually navigate and assign meaning to their suburban, predominantly White school experience. Learning is the process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding (Fiol & Lyles, 1985), but learning from experience requires identifying and comprehending different patterns within and across experiences (Matlin, 2002).

**The High School Peer Relationship Ecosystem**

By understanding the ecosystem of peer relationships formed by METCO students, that is, webs of intercultural and cross-cultural friendships among White student/teacher groups, the education community becomes more informed of the changing needs and experiences associated with African American students. For African American students attending predominantly White schools, having a variety of proximal and peripheral core network relationships provides multiple opportunities and types of support. According to Jones et al. (2017), “Young people need support from an array of adults and peers to meet key developmental milestones” (p. 1). Furthering the point, Jones et al. also informs how young people access different core supports at different times according to the individual’s changing needs and the degree to which a given core is responsive to those needs. An example of core supports for a student, their web of networks, is captured in Chapter 3, Figure 2.

**Multicultural Education**

The “melting pot” concept of American multiculturalism suggests White suburban schools become more and more culturally diverse. According to Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011), increased cultural competency for predominantly White educators can promote a more
intersectional and robust learning experience for students of color. As more and more multicultural students continue populating urban and suburban schools, preparing culturally responsive teachers with the willingness and abilities to teach in these increasingly diverse schools represents, perhaps, the most daunting task facing teacher educators today (Castro, 2010; Gay, 2002; Villegas, 2008). By capturing the lived experiences of African American students participating in the METCO program, the researcher advances limited research informing suburban educators, who are overwhelmingly White, how African American students view their multicultural educational experience.

**Summary of Secondary Education in Massachusetts**

Findings captured in my thesis are introspective accounts of the actual lived experiences of African American students attending predominantly White high schools through the METCO program. To further support the purpose of this study, a historical and factual account of public school desegregation policies in Massachusetts serves as a foundational component that links legislative policy to the formation and establishment of the METCO program. Table 1 captures historical moments in secondary education in Massachusetts, along with topical areas of significance and support documentation.

Furthermore, the addition of details for each area substantiates the importance of each through scholarly reference, subjectively providing an evidence-based contribution to the import of findings reported in this thesis.

**Landmark School Desegregation Cases in Massachusetts**

Despite its good intentions and the spirited motivation for school integration, from efforts to desegregate public schools in Massachusetts, more specifically in Boston, a horrific experience was born. According to Hornburger (1976), as said by Nelson (1974):
Table 1

*Milestone Moments in Public Education in Massachusetts*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Significance</th>
<th>Supporting Documentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landmark public school desegregation cases in Massachusetts</td>
<td>• Racial Imbalance Act of 1965&lt;br&gt;• Morgan v. Hennigan 1972&lt;br&gt;• The Garrity Decision of 1974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO)</td>
<td>• Formation of METCO&lt;br&gt;• Educational equity through the METCO program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other police, all the force could supply, stood elbow to elbow to protect Black youngsters. Still, violence was not prevented. Stones and bottles thrown at busses broke the windows and cut children’s skin. High school students beat each other with fists and clubs. A Black man who happened to be parked near a gang of White youth was dragged from his car, kicked and beaten until rescued—and only because he was Black. (p. 235)

Hornburger (1976) illustrates a vivid and grisly depiction of the preliminary stages of school desegregation in Boston, Massachusetts, and the defiance displayed by Whites to integrate predominantly White schools within Boston Public Schools (BPS, as cited in Nelson, 1974). However, prior to a federal ruling in 1974 to desegregate BPS, elected officials in Massachusetts enacted the Racial Imbalance Act of 1965 in Massachusetts.

**Racial Imbalance Act of 1965 in Massachusetts.** Massachusetts General Law (MGL), Part I, Title XII, is specific to education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. MGL Chapter 71 of the same law is specific to public schools in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. A historical amendment to MGL. Chapter 71, signed into law by the Massachusetts General Court, was section 37D; the Racial Imbalance Act of 1965. The African American community of Boston pressured state legislators for better, integrated schools, resulting in a legislative bill to provide racial balance in public schools in Massachusetts. At the time, the Massachusetts state
legislature introduced section 37, subsection D of the existing law (MGL Chapter 71), which in part states:

Any non-white pupil attending any public school in which racial imbalance exists shall have the right to be transferred to and to attend any other school, except an exempt school, of his parents' or guardian's choice for his grade level and under the jurisdiction of the same school committee or regional district school committee if racial isolation exists in such other school; and any white pupil attending any public school in which racial isolation exists shall have the right to be transferred to and to attend any other school, except an exempt school, of his parents' or guardian's choice for his grade level and under the jurisdiction of the same school committee or regional district school committee if racial imbalance exists in such other school. (MGL Ch. 71, 37D, 1965)

In 1965, African Americans pressured the elected leadership to broaden the racial and cultural composition of the public school landscape in Massachusetts; the result was the Racial Imbalance Act. Historically speaking, White public schools in Massachusetts racially marginalized and excluded African Americans from equitable public schools in Massachusetts. According to Sellers et al. (1998), “For nearly 100 years after the end of slavery, laws were enacted with the expressed purpose of making social contact between Whites and African Americans illegal” (p. 18). For African American families, passed legislation is evidence of the advancement of integration beyond the social contexts, but it also furthers the demand for schools to facilitate the participation of African American children beyond extracurricular activities, which lead to interracial contact (Allport, 1954; Holland, 2012) and exploration of multicultural classrooms. Interracial contact is part of the school experience for both African American and White children.
Arguably, segregation is a known practice for BPS. At the time of the Racial Imbalance Act of 1965, “there was no question that Boston Public Schools was segregated” (Abrams, 1975, p. 6). Conceptually, public schools were created for all people. Historically, students attending BPS were assigned to schools within close proximity to their residential community, and given the City was profoundly segregated by race and ethnicity at that time, the schools were subsequently segregated. Furthermore, the practice of school segregation was knowingly supported by members of the Boston School Committee. The Garrity Decision of 1974 changed the practice of school segregation, a ruling that required the enforcement of the Racial Imbalance Act of 1965, eventually ushering in a busing program. Conversely, suburban public schools simply lacked diversity of students altogether, which the METCO program helped to change, starting in 1966 (Abrams, 1975).

Geography, or residential placement, should not be the determining factor for attending a good school. In Boston, school placement is determined by physical address—poor community, neighborhood school. By determining school placement through residential address, BPS created an ethnic and cultural divide, segregating its residents with the residual effect creating a lack of racial and cultural diversity, resulting in default school segregation. Coincidentally, research suggests intentionality of default school segregation by the Boston School Committee, the volunteer, mayoral-appointed governing body of BPS. Abrams (1975) states:

School segregation in Boston was not the fortuitous or adventitious result of a neighborhood school policy and segregated housing patterns, but rather was the foreseeable and intended result of deliberate, conscious, purposeful policies and practices of the Boston School Committee. (p. 6)
It was not until 1972 and the case of *Morgan v. Hennigan*, when BPS and the actions of its school committee would be challenged legally in a U.S. federal court.

**Morgan v. Hennigan of 1972.** In 1972, “there was no question that Boston schools were segregated” (Abrams, 1975, p. 6). According to Hornburger (1976), in response to the segregated acts of the Boston School Committee, the education committee of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) filed a class-action lawsuit in 1972 against the Boston School Committee, claiming BPS, through the actions of the Boston School Committee, willfully segregated city schools. Hornburger (1976) furthered the outcry of African American parents and their displeasure of segregated schools in Boston by footnoting a 1972 case filed by the NAACP, better known as *Morgan v. Hennigan*. In Hornburger’s (1976) research, Tallulah Morgan, an African American parent, represented 14 other African American parents of BPS students, with James Hennigan, then-chair of the Boston School Committee, filed a lawsuit with the Federal District Court of Massachusetts in Boston. According to Hornburger (1976), at the time, BPS ranked as one of the worst systems in the nation, as such, the matter of school desegregation was litigated in front of Federal Justice Wendell Garrity (Abrams, 1974). Despite the historical and legal wrangling associated with school desegregation, Lee (2004) informed how students of all races in diverse districts report positive interracial learning experiences.

**The Garrity Decision of 1974.** In 1974, Judge Wendell Garrity, a federal justice with the U.S. District Court for the District of Massachusetts, ruled that schools in Boston were unconstitutionally segregated and “ordered the Boston School Committee to desegregate the schools” (Abrams, 1975, p. 5). The eventual ruling by Justice Garrity would ultimately lead to the development of a controversial busing plan, the Garrity plan, designed to “balance” any school that had a non-White student population of over 50% (Abrams, 1974). Interestingly, the
Garrity plan was purposely designed to comply with the Racial Imbalance Law, passed by the state in 1965, which required school districts to implement plans to “balance” any school that was over 50% non-White (Batson & Hayden, 1987).

The controversial ruling handed down by Garrity in 1974 imposing busing of African American students attending a predominantly White BPS high school provides a contextual framework that not only shapes the conversation of school integration, but also the need to design a research study that is more attentive to the lived experiences of African Americans attending predominantly White schools. By designing a study that interprets student experiences, the researcher attempted to identify nuances that distinguish different experiences, from generic problems to more sophisticated matters involving transformative experiences (Tyson et al., 2005). Similarly, Logan, Oakley, and Stowell (2003) posit:

We look at children’s experiences in the neighborhoods where they live (how separate? how unequal?) and the schools that they attend. These are both important to child development, but we believe schools have a particular importance because of how they affect children’s chances for achievement in their adult lives. We also look very closely at differences within the metropolis between the City of Boston, other smaller cities, and suburbs. It turns out that the exclusion of minority children from suburban neighborhoods and schools is the most significant key to racial inequality in the Boston region. (p. 1)

Building from Logan et al. (2003) and their views of the important role schools play in child development, I am inspired as a researcher to interpret the lived experiences of African American students attending a predominantly White high school.
Formation of METCO

The birth of METCO is a hallmark moment in public education in Boston. In 1963, a group of African American parents and community leaders began organizing to address the poor quality of education for African American students in the City of Boston and their efforts led to the start of Operation Exodus, a program that bused more than 400 students daily from overcrowded Boston schools to under-enrolled suburban schools (Estorino & Krizack, 2000). Estorino and Krizack (2000) further report that, in 1965, the Massachusetts Federation of Fair Housing and Equal Rights took an interest in urban-suburban educational cooperation, sponsoring a meeting with more than 12 suburban school districts to explore the development of such a program; after several more meetings, representatives of suburban school districts outlined the basic program that became METCO in 1966.

Since its formation in 1966, the METCO program has grown significantly in participation from suburban school districts and in popularity among Boston residents. In 2011, Eaton and Chirichigno (2011) said, “Surveys show that urban parents tend to enroll their children in METCO so their children might receive a better education” (p. 4). Despite the popularity of the METCO program and African American residents of Boston seeking a better education option for their children, “even with the addition of METCO students, the vast majority of the student enrollment in these suburban districts remains overwhelmingly White” (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011, p. 8).

In August 2016, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education reported the METCO program partners with over 30 suburban public school districts throughout eastern Massachusetts, captured in Table 2.
### Table 2

**Participating METCO Public School Districts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Public School District Offering a METCO Program</th>
<th>Approx. miles from Boston*</th>
<th># of Students Enrolled in METCO (From Aug 2016)**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Essex—north of Boston</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lynnfield</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marblehead</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Swampscott</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arlington</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bedford</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Belmont</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Concord/Concord-Carlisle (Shared school district)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middlesex—north/northwest of Boston</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lexington</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Melrose</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Natick</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Newton (two campuses)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>North Campus (NC)</td>
<td>11 to NC</td>
<td>429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South Campus (SC)</td>
<td>12 to SC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sherborn</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wakefield</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wayland</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Braintree</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brookline</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cohasset</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dover/Sherborn (Shared school district)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foxborough</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Needham</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sudbury</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Walpole</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wellesley</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weston</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weston</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Westwood</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Norfolk—south/southeast of Boston</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hingham</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scituate</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Mileage readings taken from Google Maps, reflecting a one-way school bus commute.

** Estimated enrollment figures taken from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education website http://www.doe.mass.edu/metco/funding.html
In addition to naming participating school districts, Table 2 also identifies the associated state county, approximate miles traveled on a school bus in one direction by students, and the approximate number of enrollments within each district.

Contributing to the lived experiences of African American students participating in the METCO program is the morning commute on the school bus. Four of the five students participating in my research are bussed a considerable amount of time, to nearly a full hour. Data captured in Table 2 informs a one-way morning commute of a METCO student can be as short as 5 land miles, or as great as 31. Consequentially, to arrive at school on time, some METCO students start the academic day with a commute during the twilight hours of the morning, whereas White suburban classmates are within walking distance. Nevertheless, parents still register their children for METCO in hopes they will receive an overall better education (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011). Hypothetically, access to a better education requires some degree of sacrifice and for African American students participating in METCO, the sacrifice for a better education requires an early morning commute, an activity contributing to the lived experience of African American students.

Educational Opportunity Through METCO

According to Farmer, Hilton, and Renaux (2016), “Education has been and continues to play a central role in the lives of African Americans” (p. 133). This research does not compare academic achievement between African American and White students, nor will it attempt to evaluate academic rigor between urban and suburban schools. Research concerning academic achievement (and underachievement), or even which school system is better than the other has advanced. The phenomenon of lived experience is a growing opportunity in educational research. Building upon a growing opportunity, this research explores the life experiences of African
American students attending a predominantly White high school through the METCO program, yielding qualitative findings that can inform teaching and learning practices across cultures. Harper (2009), borrowing from Strayhorn (2008) suggests, researchers should consider how African American students’ sense of belonging at predominantly White schools hinges in large part upon interacting with peers from different racial/ethnic groups.

Although “METCO creates some degree of racial and ethnic diversity in suburban communities where otherwise there would be little or none” (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011, p. 4), as well as access to an improved educational opportunity, missing are the voices of experience to describe what it truly means to be a METCO student. By conducting research that captures the lived experiences, socially and culturally, of METCO students, the researcher gives a voice to actual experience, allowing the participants themselves to deconstruct their individual experiences.

**Equity, Access, and the Socioeconomics of Public Education**

A lack of funding for public schools has potentially broad consequences when considering equity and access to a good education. For urban school districts, “Because U.S. 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 an urban school district like BPS, the city of Boston funds 125 elementary, middle and high schools for approximately 56,000 students (BPS, 2019). Comparatively, the typical METCO-affiliated suburban school district, while affluent, funds a sizably smaller number of schools and students. When considering equity, access and the socioeconomics of public education, size matters.
Achievement/Underachievement

Although viewed as a solution to the achievement gap, METCO was, in part, created because of geography, desegregation, and socioeconomics. Empirical research shows academic underachievement is pervasive among African American students in PreK-12 schools; this problem is particularly acute for males who face unique challenges socially and emotionally (Howard, 2008). To understand the phenomenon of experience, this research explores the personal accounts of African American students, city of Boston residents, who attend a predominantly White high school in a suburban setting through the METCO program. The information presented in this thesis builds upon existing scholarly research, peer-reviewed literature from education journals, educational association publications, and to a fairly lesser extent, sponsored studies by government agencies that capture and report academic data related to African American students. For example, the thesis incorporates and reports current statistics data and analyses from DESE.

The METCO program offers students from the inner city an excellent education and graduates students of color at higher rates than BPS. Eaton and Chirichigno (2011) said, “In 2009, 93 percent of METCO students graduated high school on time compared with 81.5 percent of students statewide, 61 percent in Boston and 61 percent in Springfield” (p. 1). Furthermore, “METCO students consistently graduate high school at far higher rates than the state average” (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011, p. 19). According to a 2007 report by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation’s Report Card, Boston students’ performance is on par with the national average for all public schools, including suburban schools (Lutkus, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). Given METCO’s report on high graduation rates and Boston’s report of performance, the researcher fills a void not captured by METCO or BPS data,
which is interpreting the lived experiences African Americans through the lens of culture and social identity, and how they define and assign meaning to their experiences as participants in the METCO program.

**Cultural Identity Theory**

Cultural identity is one part of a larger concept of individual identity and adolescence is a critical time during which the process of identity formation takes place (Eggleston & Halsell-Miranda, 2009; Jameson, 2007). For African American students attending predominantly White high schools through the METCO program, the concept of identity could be an essential component associated with the phenomenon of lived experiences. Building upon existing research, scholarly and peer-reviewed literature highlighting cultural identity theory is used to advance the intellectual credibility of the findings presented in this thesis.

According to Collier (2009), cultural identity theory is one of several theories developed to build knowledge about the communicative processes used by individuals to construct and negotiate their cultural group identities and relationships in particular contexts. Collier (2009) further stated, research guided by the theory today most often includes discursive analysis of public and interview texts focusing on the forms through which cultural identity positions and intercultural relationships are negotiated. The theoretical foundation for this research is cultural identity theory and its attribution to African American students who attend predominantly White school settings.

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. Interestingly, not long before, Prager (1982) typified the relationship between the African American (Black) culture ethos and mainstream U.S. 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 participating in the METCO program must 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 White experiences, like clothing options and music preferences. Conversely, Holland (2012) informs, a more recent phenomenon is how White suburbanites place value upon African American males for their urban characteristics and embodiment of rap and hip-hop stars. Although a recent phenomenon, research further exploring the lived experiences of both African American males and females is a chance to seize of an opportunity to learn more about cultural identity.

African Americans’ experiences in the United States differ significantly from those of other ethnic groups, because in certain parts of the United States, African Americans must negotiate 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.
“Acting White”

The use of nontraditional language is central to the character and identity of the African American student, but Sellers et al. (1998) suggest race, a socially constructed concept, is a defining characteristic of African Americans. Urban vernacular is commonly used among African Americans, but when African American students engage in traditional, standard, Eurocentric forms of the English language, they are often referred to as acting White.

Often used amid African Americans, the phrase “acting White” depicts specific African Americans who use language or ways of speaking; displaying attitudes, behaviors, or preferences; or engaging in activities connected to White cultural norms (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; McArdle & Young, 1970; Neal-Barnett, 2001; Perry, 2002; Tatum, 1997). Researchers contend the charge of acting White is directed toward African American students striving toward academic success and embracing traits and language used by Whites, but while minimally studied, the empirical foundation underlying the burden of the acting White thesis is fragile at best (Tyson et al., 2005). Since this research explores the lived experiences of African American students attending a predominantly White school, exploring the concept of acting White links to the problem of practice studied in this thesis.

Code Switching

In a given situation, to better understand and contribute to the immediate environment, code switching is an acceptable practice. For African American students participating in the METCO program, code switching is a widely used concept. Ladson-Billings (1995) describes code switching as the ability to “move with facility, in language between African American language and a standard form of English” (p. 482). Code switching is not exclusive to African American students. For example, as suburban White students increasingly listening to rap and
hip-hop music, becoming more fascinated with its images (Holland, 2012) and urban lyrical content, they are using music and the concept of code switching to improve their network and social status with African Americans. According to Holland (2012), “The more diverse a school is the more opportunity there is for cross-race interaction and therefore the more likely it is that interracial friendships will form” (p. 104).

**Congruent Theory**

Cultural identity theory is the primary theoretical framework for this thesis. However, when examining the life experiences of African American students in a predominantly White high school, the theory of social identity is an appropriate supporting theory, giving way to views of how African Americans view themselves socially relative to the larger dominant population. Ashforth and Mael (1989), borrowing from Tajfel and Turner (1985), leading social identity theorists, express how, within the scope of social identity theory, “people tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories, such as organizational memberships, religious affiliation, gender, and age cohort” (p. 20). They continue by informing, although a person defines their individuality, an individuals’ identity and placement relative to a larger group, albeit through success or failure, is important to the individual. Concerning social identity theory, Ashforth and Mael (1989) states, “The individual defines him—or herself partly in terms of salient group memberships” (p. 34) and how “identification is the perception of oneness with or belongingness to a group, involving direct or vicarious experience of its successes and failures” (p. 34).

Social identity theory is multilayered. In Figure 1, scholars Tajfel and Turner (1979) created a social identity theory diagram. In this thesis, the diagram serves as a research tool to identify the various stages of social interaction and development of an individual, simultaneously
authenticating the central theme of this thesis, which is the interpretation of the lived experience of African American students attending a predominantly White high school through the METCO program.

Cultural identity brings forward the lived experience of “Blackness” for the African American student, whereas Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) diagram of social identity theory describes the personhood of identification and acknowledgement of social identity and the individuals’ interacting progression from one group to the next. Building upon the model designed by Tajfel and Tuner, my thesis furthers each phase of the African American experience in predominantly White schools by examining the following two areas:

1. **Social identification**: adopt the identity of a group
   - Social comparison and positive distinctiveness: social identity contributes to our self-image, so we seek positive social identities. We compare in-groups with out-groups to establish superiority
2. **Social categorization:** categorize individuals into groups
   - Category accentuation effect: exaggeration of intergroup differences and intragroup similarities

   African American students attending predominantly White high schools through the METCO program socially participate and academically compete with both in-group and out-group networks. Interestingly, Tajfel (1970) found that 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 inform how groups, which people belonged to, were an important source of pride and self-esteem, and these groups give individuals a sense of identity and belonging in the social world.

   Continuing, Tajfel and Turner (1979) describe the central hypothesis of social identity theory that the in-group members will actively seek to find negative aspects of an out-group, in turn, enhancing their self-image. Affirming social identity theory, Tajfel and Turner posit that people tend to categorize themselves into groups to gain a greater sense of who they are, with consequences for self-esteem, prejudice, and stereotyping. Nearly a decade after Tajfel and Turner describe the central hypothesis of social identity theory, Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, and Smith (1998) assert, “Personally affirmed group identities are those groups that the individual uses to define himself or herself” (p. 716), a concept frequently used by African American students attending a predominantly White school environment.
Scholarly Works

Race, culture, and social identity are significant aspects of the findings presented in this thesis. The work of highly regarded scholars is compiled in Table 3 as a short list of primary scholars who continue to shape and support the ongoing development of cultural identity theory, as well as the topic of race and academic achievement concerning high school aged African American students and their interaction with dominant culture school staff and peers. In addition, the scholarly achievements by Gloria Ladson-Billings, Sonia Nieto, and Prudence Carter are among the individuals who have contributed great insight into this research.

Conclusion

Research concerning African American students and underachievement continues to provide meaningful insights on deficiencies associated with teaching and learning across racial and cultural lines. Previous research and literature shared throughout this review highlights teaching and learning practices involving cultural, economic, and social backgrounds of African American students attending predominantly White school districts.

Cultural capital plays a critical role in social, academic, and economic attainment for Whites, simultaneously contributing to the overall lived experiences of its members (Carter, 2003). Despite playing a critical role in social, academic, and economic attainment, previous research shows that nondominant culture tastes, preferences, and experiences can influence the impression of powerful gatekeepers in the school and workplace (Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991; Moss & Tilly, 1996).

The purpose of this IPA thesis was to explore in detail how participants, African American high school students, are making sense of their personal and social worlds (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher interprets meaning from participant experience to “describe insights
Table 3

Peer Reviewed Literature on Identity Theories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity Theory</th>
<th>Focus Area</th>
<th>Scholar(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Cultural        | Teachers; professional competency training and professional development      | • Ladson-Billings, 2014; 1995
                |                                                                             | • Carlton-Parson, 2008
                |                                                                             | • Hall, 2014
                |                                                                             | • Nieto, 2008; 2013
                |                                                                             | • Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011
|                 | Students; African American growth, expression and individual development (nonacademic) | • Ladson-Billings, 2014; 1995
                |                                                                             | • Ogbu, 2004
                |                                                                             | • Jameson, 2007
                |                                                                             | • Hall, 2014
                |                                                                             | • Holland, 2012
| Social          | Individual development                                                      | • Nieto, 2013
                |                                                                             | • Tajfel & Turner, 1979
                |                                                                             | • Ashforth & Mael, 1989

and lessons learned” (Callary, Rathwell, & Young, 2015, p. 65) from the individual participant's perception and view of an object or event (Smith et al., 2009). The findings presented in this thesis intend to contribute to the ongoing, yet limited research concerning African American students attending predominantly White high schools. As a scholarly contribution, building upon peer-reviewed literature provided the necessary evidence-based credibility of all content areas for readers concerning the actual experiences of African American students attending a predominantly White high school through the METCO program.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

All students deserve access to high quality educational experiences, yet there is a historical legacy of dual discrimination and institutional oppression against African American students within the educational system (Stapleton, 2016). Stapleton (2016) said, “Black students are experiencing more subtle verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual insults that seem unconscious, pervasive, and hard to prove” (p. 151) than their White counterparts. By conducting this study, I give voice to the lived experiences of five students of color, mainly self-identified as African American, with a few acknowledging their Caribbean roots, who currently participate in the METCO program.

METCO, as described by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, is a voluntary school desegregation program created to bridge the educational achievement gap. METCO provides full-service bus transportation for African American and Latino students to opportunity-rich suburban, predominantly White schools for the purposes of racial balance where otherwise diverse student populations are minimal (Angrist & Lang, 2004; Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011). Although the lived experiences are the focus of this thesis, the integration policies used to create METCO appear to have been at least partly successful, in the sense that they increased student diversity and reinforced the probability that White and African American students can study and learn together (Rossell & Armor, 1996; Welch & Light, 1987). Yet little research exists that captures the phenomenon of the lived experience of African American students in the METCO program.

Qualitative Research Approach

Multiple research approaches exist from which to choose, with select approaches used specifically for understanding the phenomenon of experience. Initially considered were grounded
theory, ethnography, and IPA. Grounded theory relies heavily on interviewing as a way to best capture the experiences of participants in their own words, which is an approach consistent with the constructivist position (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2013). One-on-one interviews served as the primary method for capturing the experiences of participants in this thesis. However, since grounded theory means the researcher chooses forms of data collected to yield text and images useful in generating a theory (Creswell, 2012), it was excluded as a research approach.

Ethnography is a research approach steeped in describing, analyzing and interpreting a cultural group’s shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language developed over time (Creswell, 2012). Like grounded theory, ethnography was excluded, too, since participants are high school students with individual experiences and lacking in the area of development “over time” since the “time” was not clearly defined. Finally considered was IPA, an inductive research approach used specifically for interpreting the lived experiences of a specific group (Callary et al., 2015), in this particular case, African American students participating in the METCO program.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a qualitative approach to understanding participants’ lived experiences to describe what a topic is like for them within a specific context, which relates the person to the phenomena at-hand, or the person-in-context (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2008; Smith, 2004). Through the use of IPA, the researcher “extends simple descriptions and makes sense of participants’ lived experiences by developing an interpretative analysis of the description in relation to social, cultural and theoretical contexts” (Callary et al., 2015, p. 63). Additionally, by selecting an IPA research approach, the researcher offers “an interpretative account of what it means for the participant to have such concerns within their particular
context” (Larkin et al., 2008, p. 113), like living in an urban community while attending school in a suburban community through the METCO program.

According to some scholars, qualitative research has endorsed understanding the “insider’s perspective,” the idea and reality that people can, from inside their culture, “get close” to their participants, or what has been defined as objects of study, so they can experience for themselves the subjective dimensions of the phenomena they are studying (B. Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Merriam, 2001). While the researcher shares a similar biographical background to the student participants, each student serves as an independent expert and master storyteller of their own lived experience.

Research Tradition

Interpretive phenomenological analysis is a qualitative research methodology used to understand participants’ subjective realities through personal interpretations of their lived experiences and the meanings they assign to these experiences (Smith, 2011). It is suggested, “IPA studies should have a clear focus that provides detail of a particular topic” (Callary et al., 2015, p. 64). The basis of this thesis is to interpret the lived experiences of a small group of African American students, male and female, across grade levels and how they assign meaning to their experiences attending predominantly White high schools through the METCO program.

Educators closely connected to students have routinely conducted IPA research examining the lived experiences of specific groups, but limited research exists that interprets the lived experiences of METCO students specifically. According to Cooper, Fleischer, and Cotton (2012), “Research in this area has been conducted almost exclusively by instructors with their own students, and the studies typically are limited to a sample of students from a single academic field or are focused on a single methodology” (p. 3). As an African American researcher and
outsider to the METCO program, the IPA framework is useful to a researcher serious about interpreting the African American experience and advancing the research literature in ways that validate and give voice to people who have often been silenced, misinterpreted, misrepresented, and placed on the margins (Milner, 2007).

**Research Considerations**

According to some scholars, qualitative research is neither based on a single methodology, nor does it belong to a single discipline (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Determining the appropriate methodology for a research study draws on philosophical ideas in phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, hermeneutics, and other traditions to support the attention on “quality” rather than “quantity” (Brewer, 2003).

There is a wide variety of theoretical paradigms, methodologies, research strategies and methods in qualitative research traditions, ranging from descriptive study, case study, field research, ethnography, participant observation, biographical method, life history, oral history, narrative inquiry to phenomenological research, ethno-methodology, symbolic interactionist study, grounded theory and action research. (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 312)

With many from which to choose, the three essential elements of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, combined with the underpinning of interpreting the lived experience of a specific group, catapults IPA forward as the best research tradition for my thesis.

**Theoretical Underpinnings of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

Interpretive phenomenological analysis studies are composed of three key positions: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, and the research has a clear focus that provide details of a particular topic being investigated (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2013). In IPA studies,
scholars recommend researchers be open to adjusting their ideas and responsiveness to interpretations of data based on participants’ responses, while presenting the participants’ experiences within a specific context, relating the person to the phenomenon (Larkin et al., 2008).

**Phenomenology**

Creswell (2013) informs that phenomenology describes the *what* and *how* individuals experience phenomena and develops descriptions of the essences of experience, but does not explain or analyze descriptions. In addition to describing the what and how of phenomena of experience, research is crucial for capturing the workings of complex social processes and the inconsistencies between what people *say* and *do* (O’Connor et al., 2007). The researcher interprets the phenomenon of experience, as described by participants, allowing each student to serve as their individual expert. However, when reviewing and interpreting collected data, the researcher will exercise discretion when encountering inconsistencies, if any, and extract portions that create conflicting accounts and recollections from participants.

**Hermeneutics**

While IPA is based on interpretation, hermeneutics is a theory that underscores the textual meaning of interpretation, as in the techniques used in speaking and writing that divulge the intentions and contexts of the speaker and writer (Smith et al., 2013). For African American high school students living in inner-city America, speech and coded language are central to the sociocultural traits associated with urban living. African American youth tend to use speech and coded language as a method to crisscross social circles and negotiate the world. Speech and coded language are important considerations when considering the concept of hermeneutics and interpreting the lived experiences of a specific group.
Idiography

The third position of IPA is idiography. Idiography relates to the details and thorough analysis of small cases, which differs from mainstream psychological studies that are monolithic in nature (Smith et al., 2013). For the purpose of this thesis, through the details of their individualized experience, each participant’s account serves as a “small case,” with each case requiring, and receiving, a thorough analysis by the researcher, specific to the individual sharing their lived experience.

Research Question

IPA involves detailed analysis of verbatim accounts of a small number of participants (typically less than 10 people) through semi-structured interviews (Larkin et al., 2008; Smith, 2004). My thesis builds upon purposeful sampling techniques to ensure a homogenous sample of participants with common characteristics and experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Here, the common characteristics and experiences are African American students participating in the METCO program.

When interviewing, Fontana and Frey (2005) describe how interviewers tend to gravitate toward their own motives and biases based on biographies and contextual experiences. They suggest, before conducting the interview, exploring personal motives and the potential impact of biases and motives, prior to constructing questions. IPA research contains an interpretive component and, therefore, cannot be absent of biases, assumptions, and implications shared between researcher and participant. Allen-Collison (2009) notes the impossibility of bracketing one’s biases completely, but the bracketing process allows researchers to suspend their assumptions and “adopt a more self-critical and reflective approach in research” (p. 286). The concept of bracketing helped clear the way for me to proceed with creating purposeful, open-
ended questions with prompts to help participants trigger specific experiences related to each research question asked of them (Tawse, Bloom, Sabiston, & Reid, 2012). By asking the five participants to share their experiences as METCO students, they are invited to be self-interpreting beings. With each question, I encouraged participants to actively recount experiences and people in their lives and learn anew from it, in light of the present (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009).

This thesis is devoted to accurately interpreting and presenting the lived experiences of the African American students participating in the METCO program. Smith et al. (2009) inform that when using an IPA research method, the researcher should be committed to the examination of how people make sense of their life experiences, major or minor. To better understand how each individual participating in the research makes sense of their life experiences, the researcher will delve into the mindset of participants and the language used to articulate their experiences in the world and, when necessary, decode language used in code switching to make sense of their meaning making (Freeman, 2008; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

**One-on-One Interview Protocols**

A goal of IPA is to give voice to the individual; IPA is less concerned with generalizations across participants. With several types of question and answer formats from which to choose, the researcher used one-on-one interviews as the method to obtain data. According to Creswell (2002), “One-on-one interviews are ideal for interviewing participants who are not hesitant to speak, who are articulate, and who can share ideas comfortably” (p. 218). One-on-one interviews are designed to increase the comfort level of each participant, subsequently creating an environment of honest and open sharing of experiences.
Interview Phases

The IPA method for this thesis requires three interview phases. The first phase serves as an introductory interview, a method used to collect background information and informed consent from each participant. The first phase is intentionally brief, not lasting more than 30 minutes, and technically viewed as a “warm-up” session or an initial conversation to “build rapport with participants so that they feel comfortable speaking in depth” (Callary et al., 2015, p. 67). Building a rapport with participants is an essential element to the research process.

The second phase of the interview process is more detailed and time consuming. To obtain the necessary details from participants’ experiences, Smith (2015) informs that interviews generally last for a considerable amount of time, usually an hour or more. Adhering to Smith’s suggestion, the researcher, for the second interview phase, allocated between 60-90 minutes to ask participants questions specifically about their individual experience, using questions rooted in the literature review and theory.

For the third and final interview phase, the researcher facilitates a participant check-in, a review of sorts involving accounts captured in transcripts. The third phase also serves as an opportunity for the researcher to ask a follow-up set of questions, to clarify points shared by interviewees, if necessary.

Research Participants

The participants in this study were high school students who culturally and ethnically identify as African American. Participants were both male and female, registered as METCO students, and in grades across the high school levels—ninth through 12th grade. African American students are the focal point of this thesis for two primary reasons. The first reason is the cultural connectedness between researcher and participants. As an African American with a
colorful and storied lived experience attending a predominantly White high school during the tumultuous era of bussing in Boston, METCO program students offer another type of lived experience in the modern era. The second reason is researcher positionality and personal understanding of inner-city African American culture and 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, like tutoring or quality afterschool programming, are all common experiences.

The intended outcome of this thesis is to present the lived experiences of each participant, while remaining both aware and sensitive to the societal conditions contributing to the lived experiences of the African American students. According to Smith and Osborn (2008), researchers should become aware and concerned with each student participants’ personal perceptions and experiences, while informing how experiences shape their lives and inform their thinking about society. As a visual representation, Figure 2 is a web of support, a graphic representation capturing intersecting points contributing to the life experience of a school-aged youth. As it relates to this thesis, Figure 2 serves as a visual reference highlighting the multiple intersecting points of a student’s personal life. 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.

**Recruitment and Access**

Student recruitment and voluntary participation is a critical component of this research thesis. By tapping into personal relationships with adults who are parents of high school-age children, the researcher gained access to a select group of African American students attending METCO-affiliated high schools. After orienting both parents and students to the nature of the
research, the research protocols, and method for acquiring information, one-on-one interviews, five African American students, two males and three females, agreed to participate in the research.

**Research Setting**

Given the highly sensitive and confidential nature of the research information, and to insure the highest level of comfort for all student participants, each interview was conducted in a mutually agreed-upon space. Mutually agreed-upon spaces for interviews benefitted both the researcher and participant by providing increased levels of comfort as each individual offers accounts of their lived experiences at METCO student.

**Data Collection**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument of data collection, or the primary instrument in data collection and analysis (B. Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Merriam, 2001). The field of education has seen an increase in the number of qualitative studies that include participant observation as a way to collect information (Kawulich, 2005). However, for the purpose of this thesis, the researcher used a three-phase, one-on-one interview process as “a
flexible and powerful tool to capture the voices and the ways people make meaning of their experiences” (Rabionet, 2011, p. 563). Each phase of the one-on-one interview process was conducted in timed stages, using the following designated timelines:

1. Phase 1 interviews: approximately 20 minutes in length where the researcher explained the research study, gained informed consent, and collected background and demographic information.
2. Phase 2 interviews: approximately 60-90 minutes in length where the researcher asked specific questions that align with the literature and theory.
3. Phase 3 interviews: approximately 20 minutes and served as a participant check, a time to review transcripts, ask follow-up questions, and clarify any mistakes.

**The Interview Process**

One-on-one interviewing was the primary vehicle for collecting data. During the one-on-one interview, each participant engaged the researcher in a series of questions throughout the 3-phase process (see Appendix A). To maintain the highest degree of integrity over the interviewing process, it is ethically important to phrase questions in a manner that is not leading, but open to participant ideas of what is most important (Callary, 2013). Even more, good interview techniques often involve a gentle nudge from the interviewer to prompt discussion between the researcher and participant (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In addition to a gentle nudge, Callary et al. (2015) suggest prompting participants ahead of their interview about the importance of discussing their personal experiences to insure rich and personal information is obtained. Callary et al. (2015) said the following script is ideal for an IPA researcher when preparing participants for their interview:
I want you to understand the point of this interview is to capture your specific lived experiences; therefore, I am going to encourage you to use “I” statements instead of “we” statements. This is your time to speak about your own experiences, wants, and needs without having to consider others. (p. 68)

The general interview questions for each of the five student participants are listed in Appendix A. As indicated, Phase 1 is background and familiarization stage. Phase 2 is the investigative questions for each participant, with Phase 3 concluding the process, or serving as the clarification/follow-up stage. According to research standards, at the conclusion of the interview process, researchers are encouraged to share individual transcripts with each participant to confirm that they faithfully represented the conversation and were truthful in sharing their lived experiences with the researcher (Callary et al., 2015).

Data Storage

Privacy of all recorded personal accounts is quintessential to the integrity of the research. To insure privacy, each one-on-one interview was captured using an enhanced digital voice recording application on a password-protected iPhone. The digital voice-recorded information was not only be stored on an iPhone for easy access, but also stored and backed up to a secure, password-protected Cloud account that is only accessible by the researcher.

Digital voice recordings provide the highest quality of sound clarity and easy access to participant voices. In addition to using a digital voice recording application, an appropriate and increasingly common approach in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2012), the researcher will also use traditional notetaking as an alternative method for capturing information in written form. All handwritten notes and associated paper materials will be stored in a key-locked file cabinet, with exclusive access belonging solely to the researcher for an indefinite period. Audio-recorded one-
on-one interviews were professionally transcribed and produced in written format for ease of analysis by the researcher.

**Data Analysis**

Analysis of collected data is an important part of the research, and with IPA research, the aim is to understand the content and complexity of meanings shared by participants, which involves engagement in an interpretive relationship with the transcript (Smith et al., 2009). Information and meanings shared by research participants is not easily understood or interpreted, it “must be obtained through a sustained engagement with the text and a process of interpretation” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 66). Agar (1980) advises researchers, when reviewing transcripts, to read them in their entirety several times, immersing one’s self in the details, trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts. To break the data into parts, Smith et al. (2009) suggest using a 6-step analysis process in Figure 3, where the researcher considers each transcript separately, or case-by-case.

Qualitative analysis in IPA research is personal, not prescriptive. However, to ensure an orderly process, borrowing from Smith et al. (2013), the researcher analyzed data in three ways: (a) descriptive experiences; (b) the manner in which participants described their experiences (i.e., their use of the word “I” versus “they,” pauses, laughter) and (c) interpretations about how participants understood the experiences they described. By using the 3-step process, the researcher brought forward a descriptive view of how each individual assigns meaning to their distinct lived experience.

**Coding**

According to Creswell (2012), “The object of the coding process is to make sense out of text data, divide it into text or image segments, label the segments with codes, examine the codes
for overlap and redundancy, and collapse these codes into broad themes” (p. 243). Smith et al. (1995) advises looking in detail at the transcripts of one interview before moving on to examine the others, case by case, which follows the idiographic approach to analysis, beginning with particularities and working up to more generalized categorization. From Smith’s advice, after a detailed review of each one-on-one interview, the researcher produced data sets, labeling each set with codes to minimize overlap and redundancy of commonly used language and phrases by participants. In this research study, the goal of coding was to categorically narrow, decreasing the number of codes to a smaller, manageable, and usable set of not more than five themes. As a point of reference, Creswell (2012) offers a visual representation in Figure 4 of the coding process for qualitative IPA research, a process referenced in Chapter 4, the data collection, coding and analysis section.

Interpreting meaning of words and phrases used by student participants may not be entirely clear to the researcher, so Smith (2015) recommends the researcher comment on the use of language by participants and/or sense of the persons themselves and while moving through the transcript, comment on similarities and differences, echoes, amplifications, and contradictions in
what a person is saying. According to Smith, this is an acceptable practice in IPA research since parts of the interview process will be more revealing of insights than other parts.

Creating Themes

Immediately following coding was the creation and connection of themes. It is suggested, “The use of themes is another way to analyze qualitative data [and], like codes, themes have labels that typically consist of no more than two to four words [across] five to seven” categories (Creswell, 2012, p. 248). After establishing themes, “the researcher tries to make sense of the connections between themes” (Smith, 2015, p. 70), recognizing “some of the themes will cluster together, and some may emerge as superordinate concepts” (p. 70), with each providing value and insight to the overall research findings.

Transcribing and Coding Transcripts

Transcribing raw data with a digital voice recording application, combined with in-the-moment handwritten notes, required filtering for accuracy to determine if data were missing. Furthermore, to conclude the 4-phase data collection process, a cleansing of data was initiated to
ensure the inclusion of all relevant and applicable data. According to Creswell (2012), “Missing data will yield fewer individuals to be included in the data analysis, and because we want as many people included in the analysis as possible, you need to correct as much as possible for missing data” (pp. 181-182). All participant experiences are valuable contributions to this thesis; therefore, a critical examination of collected data were vetted to make certain all participant voices were heard.

**Trustworthiness**

Each participant is the expert of their individual experience. However, the researcher made reasonable conclusions about the information gathered to protect the integrity of the research findings. Eisner (1991) advises researchers to seek a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility and allows the researcher to feel confident about what is shared by participants. While the potential for embellishment by students is present, consistent engagement and building of a trusting relationship minimized exaggeration of truth by participants. Continuing, to reduce the potential for inaccuracies shared, the researcher deployed the process of triangulation to authenticate information. During this phase, authentication came from different individuals (e.g., student peers), types of data (e.g., observational field notes and recorded interviews), and methods of data collection (e.g., documents and interviews), which guides the researcher to develop a report that is both accurate and credible (Creswell, 2012).

Creswell (2013) describes triangulation as a process of corroborating evidence from multiple sources. The researcher cross-referenced collected data among different participant groups (e.g., students with students, students with teachers) for commonality, themes, and accuracy. By comparative analysis of all handwritten notes with all digitally recorded interviews, the researcher further established themes associated with the tenants of phenomenology to
support the credibility, reliability, and validity of the research findings associated with the lived experiences of African American students attending a predominantly White high school through the METCO program.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

According to Grinyer (2009), the code of ethical conduct emphasizes the importance of respecting the anonymity and privacy of research participants. To protect the privacy of all research participants and information obtained in connection with the research, anonymity, confidentiality of identities, privacy, and personal accounts shared by student participants were protected. To preserve privacy, the individual names of participants and schools are altered to maintain the highest level of confidentiality and anonymity. Although notetaking and a digital voice recording devices were used during the actual interviews, information gathered was labeled with pseudonyms issued to each participant. When mentioned, specific school names were removed from transcripts.

**Limitations**

The findings presented in this thesis do not serve as a universal voice for all African American high school students attending a predominantly White high school, and it certainly does not imply an entire culture of high school students experience the same phenomenon. This thesis reinforces that “African Americans’ experiences in the United States differs significantly from those of members of other ethnic groups” (Sellers et al., 1998, p. 18), and “their experiences are shaped by, among other qualities, their racial, ethnic and cultural heritage” (Milner, 2007, p. 389). Capturing the lived experiences of African American students participating in the METCO program gives voice to interwoven factors of race, culture, heritage, and social identity, among other qualities, experienced by a small group of students, adding a
scholarly contribution to future IPA research studies concerning the lived experiences of African American students attending predominantly White high schools.

**Conclusion**

IPA research is concerned with trying to understand what a phenomenon is like, from the point of view of the participants (Smith, 2015). For some African American students participating in the METCO program, living in inner-city Boston contributes to the phenomenon of experience. For a student living in a low-income household, they are grappling with a host of societal issues, such as crime, poverty, limited out-of-school time educational resources, violence, and unemployment. African Americans, mostly males, regularly experience difficulties obtaining a quality education in this society (Gordon et al., 1994). Even more, the issue of African American students participating in culturally sensitive environments, like attending a predominantly White suburban high school through the METCO program, invites the scholarly community to further research the issue of race, culture, and ethnicity as a contributing factor to the academic experience of students of color.

While the METCO program continues to record data associated with academic outcomes of students of color, a lack of data exists that focuses on the lived experiences of African American students from inner-city Boston who attend high schools in affluent suburban communities. For most African American students participating in the METCO program, their social norms, cultural norms, racial norms, and economic status are similar—in most cases, identical. However, the culture of poverty ideology is another body of assumptions designed and often used to explain the etiology of social problems among African Americans in dominant school settings (Oliver, 1989). The findings reported in this thesis interpret the lived phenomenon of how five African American students made sense of their suburban school
experience with METCO being sensitive to social, cultural, and racial conditions that can impede learning for African American students.
CHAPTER 4: REPORT OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Many researchers have contributed to the conversation about high-achieving African American students, but a growing number of studies are focusing on their experiences at predominantly White institutions (Fries-Britt, 1997; Harper, 2009; Maton, Hrabowski, & Grief, 1998; Strayhorn, 2008). This research interpreted the lived experiences of five African American students who attend predominantly White high schools through the METCO program.

Public schools provide various places and spaces for socialization and interaction, but African American students, when attending predominantly White schools, are adjusting, culturally and socially, in an effort to develop quality friendships and social networks outside of their own cultural groups. Whiting (2009a) posited, for African American students to be successful in certain settings, they must be willing to make sacrifices, to let go of some aspect of their sociocultural identity, to “fit in” their predominantly White school setting. The findings in this chapter capture specific accounts associated with the lived experiences of five African American students attending five individual suburban, predominantly White high schools affiliated with the METCO program.

Research Participants

For this research, five African American high school students, two males and three females, were interviewed. In addition to providing details about their lived experience as METCO-affiliated high school students, each offered a glimpse into their home life. Table 4 represents individual information about the five research participants. The five participants are Jace, Jennifer, John, Sydney, and Talia, with each participant representing an individual suburban school district associated with the METCO program. Participation in this research required individuals to possess a cultural identity associated with the African diaspora.
Table 4

Student Participant General Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Self-Defined Culture</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Residential Community in Boston</th>
<th>Distance to School (One-Way)</th>
<th># Years in METCO Program*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jace</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Roxbury</td>
<td>Approx. 10 miles west of his home</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>American-born Jamaican</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mattapan</td>
<td>Approx. 11 miles NW of her home</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>West Indian American</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Mattapan</td>
<td>Approx. 30 miles NW of his home</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hyde Park</td>
<td>Approx. 20 miles west of her home</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talia</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mattapan</td>
<td>Approx. 6 miles north of her home</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. * Not including K1 or K2 grade levels

Personal Information

In addition to the general information, the five individuals provided small details about their personal lives. Jace is a tall and stout student athlete, a basketball player, with a dark complexion and interesting hairstyle. Jace is surprisingly quiet and rather soft spoken for a young man of his physical size. To begin the one-on-one interview, I asked Jace to paint a picture of his home life. He responded by saying, “I live in a house with my mother and father, who are married. I have two older brothers, both graduated from METCO too. I don’t really interact with my two older brothers because they both work, so they’re rarely home, so I get home, play my game, and do homework.” In addition to his home life, I asked Jace to define himself culturally and he responded by saying, “I just see African American.”

Jennifer, an articulate, thoughtful, and well-spoken young person with a chocolate brown complexion, appeared eager to participate in a discussion about her experience as a METCO student. With an upright posture, excellent eye contact and adoring smile, Jennifer listened attentively to each question and responded with the confidence of someone who has been interviewed many times before, but this was her first. When asked to paint a picture of her
family, she said, “I live with my mother in a house, but lived with both parents until like a year ago.” When asked to describe herself culturally, Jennifer said, “I’m Jamaican on both sides of my family. My parents and grandparents are from the island themselves, so I’m 100% Jamaican, but born here, so I’m an American-born Jamaican.”

John, a lean, about average height teenager with a dark complexion and has a precisely shaped coiffure. He is an athlete, a football player, who speaks confidently, but seems a bit eager to respond to each question as if he can predict the coming question. When asked to paint a picture of his family life, he said:

“It’s pretty stable, because you hear that typical Black homes are always fighting, like both parents don’t live together, stuff like that, but my family is the complete opposite. My parents live together, they are happy, married, and they do everything they want. So, my painting is like a traditional family, how everyone sees the ideal family, like together, they love each other, they want what’s best for one another, me and my little brother. Additionally, John offered an interesting response to my question about describing himself culturally by saying:

I would say West Indian American because that is what I have been told I am. I am not going to call myself African American if I am not a direct descendant of Africa. I come from different islands, so I call myself from the region I’m from, so I would say West Indian American.

Sydney, a cautiously curious individual with a light brown complexion, has long curly hair and is somewhat small in stature. Also a student athlete, a volleyball player, she initially appeared shy, but I discovered she is merely slow to speak so to offer thoughtful responses to my questions. When asked to paint a picture of her family, she said, “I live with my mom. I have an
older brother and an older sister. I know my sister graduated from Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, which is METCO. My brother went there for a couple of years, but he didn’t finish there.” After painting her family picture, she too was asked to define herself culturally, to which she said, “Just African American.”

Rounding out the list of five participants is Talia, a bubbly young person with a big smile plastered to her face. Talia is another teenager with a light brown complexion, a loosely wrapped bun hairstyle sitting atop her head, and visibly displaying warm characteristics from the moment she sat down to participate in the interview, giving the impression of a person who is humbled to participate in the research. Unlike the other four participants, Talia’s selection to participate was due to her limited time spent as a METCO student—2 years. In response to the same question about her family, she said, “I have an older sister who went to Southeastern Technical Regional High School in Brockton, and an older brother, but I don’t know where he went to school because he lives in a different state. I’m the only one out of my siblings that’s in METCO.” When asked to describe herself culturally, Talia confidently responded with “I’m African American.”

**Professional Contributions to the Research**

As suggested when conducting research involving the lived experience of individuals associated with a particular cultural group, perspectives of professionals who have a panoramic view of the interlocking components of the culture and environment can be included (Hale & Bocknek, 2016). Secondarily contributing to the research were two adult secondary education professionals. As parent-professionals involved with METCO, each was grounded in the practice of public education and intimately understands the lived experiences of African American
students attending predominantly White school districts. The two adult education professionals participating in this research included.

Ms. Blackman, Director of Student Support Services for METCO, has over 4 decades of professional experience in secondary and postsecondary education, having served in Montessori schools, a local area community college, as a METCO coordinator, and director with two separate school districts. Ms. Blackman is an articulate, elder African American woman who happens to be the parent of a daughter who is an alumna of a METCO-affiliated school district.

Mrs. Garcia, a community activist and METCO parent, became the first CEO of METCO in 2018. Mrs. Garcia is a trained social worker who took the helm of METCO after more than two decades of leadership experience with the social services agency Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD). Self-proclaimed, Mrs. Garcia is a staunch parent advocate, maintaining an active presence in the METCO schools at which her two daughters currently attend. Personally, Mrs. Garcia is a light-complexioned woman of multicultural origin, proudly identifying and declaring her Latina heritage.

**Data Collection, Coding, and Analysis**

An important component of scholarly research is the collection, coding, and analysis of data, which will be discussed in the following sections.

**Data Collection**

Individual interviews served as the primary means for collecting data. To accomplish each interview, the researcher initiated a 3-phase process, see Table 5. Initially, three of the five interviews took place in a public space, a local Dunkin Donuts franchise, that was easily accessible and familiar to the interview participants and their parent(s). The remaining two interviews took place in the private home of the participants, with parent and guardian present.
Table 5

**Phased Interview Process**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Phase</th>
<th>Purpose of Each Phase</th>
<th>Result(s) of Each Phase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1: Familiarization</td>
<td>• Develop an informal information sharing flow between student and researcher</td>
<td>• Gain the trust of student participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2: In-Depth Interview</td>
<td>• Exploration into the actual lived experiences of each participant</td>
<td>• Intentional reflection and unfiltered sharing of lived</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Allow student participants to be experts of their own experience</td>
<td>experience as METCO students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3: Interview Recap</td>
<td>• Review transcripts with the interviewee for accuracy,</td>
<td>• Provided clarification of any “coded” language used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Additional commentary, if necessary</td>
<td>• Allowed participants to recount their responses and offer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Phases 1 and 2 of the interview process were accomplished simultaneously, with Phase 3, the data verification step, taking place shortly thereafter.

**Putting It All Together**

Following a thorough review of the interview transcripts, information was separated by content and assigned codes. Codes are “tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56). The creation of codes is the initial step in analyzing interview data (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011).

After collection and analysis, data were segmented by content. Segmenting, labelling of information, aided in the configuration of group specific information shared by each participant. To appropriately segment coded information, labels were issued to chunks of data, usually phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that connect specific codes or sets of information gathered from the interview transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Having amassed a significant amount of codes, initiating Creswell’s (2012) visual model of the coding process, the considerable
number of codes were narrowed to a reasonable number of themes. Creswell suggests creating five to seven. Figure 5 captures the 3-step inductive coding process.

**Identified Themes**

The inductive coding process produced five thematic categories, each contributing to the intended purpose of the research, which was to interpret the lived experiences of African American students participating in the METCO program. In addition, coming out of the five thematic categories were descriptive textural and structural subthemes. According to Sailor (2013), textural and structural descriptions are created from a synthesis of the research, originating from the participant's individual descriptions of various experiences. The following five themes emerged: (a) absence of understanding associated with the meaning and purpose of the METCO program by the METCO students, (b) long commutes on the school bus contribute to the lived experience and after-school activity decision-making of METCO students, (c) METCO students desire their suburban schools to nurture cultural interactions in a formalized manner across the student body, (d) African American students demonstrated intact cultural identities in their predominantly White suburban school setting, and (e) situational occurrences in school involving culture reveal the ongoing presence of teachable moments for White teachers and school leaders.

**Theme 1: Absence of Understanding Associated With the Meaning and Purpose of the METCO Program by the METCO Students**

Four of the five participants spent the majority of their schooling in the METCO program. As such, time spent in the program was considered as an interesting point of reference and potential contributor to their individual knowledge and familiarity of the METCO program. When asked, how long have you been participating in METCO? Sydney said, “I have only
attended METCO.” Jennifer said, “I’ve been in METCO since K1.” John responded by saying, “I was in the Neighborhood Charter House School in Dorchester I think pre-K or like, K-1 before going to METCO.” Jace said, “I spent first grade in Boston Public Schools and started attending my METCO school in the second grade.” As previously mentioned, Talia was chosen to participate because of her limited amount time participating in METCO—2 years. In her response to the question, she said, “For elementary and middle school, I went to school in Brockton. Then for eighth grade I went to a Boston Public Schools, then the METCO school I go to now.”

Participants were asked about their familiarity and knowledge about METCO. After stating METCO is an acronym representing an organization with a long-standing history, each participant was asked if they knew what the acronym “METCO” represents or why the program was formed a long time ago. Jace responded with “I’m pretty sure I was told, but I probably forgot.” Jennifer said, “I do, and I don’t. Like, I learned it, when we have like this transitioning meeting from 8th grade to high school, but I forgot. They told us. I know the first part is like metropolitan something then I can’t even remember the rest.” John said; “I never knew what it stood for, but I knew it was an acronym.” From the remaining two participants, responses that are more definitive emerged. Sydney, after a brief pause, said, “Mm-mm, no.” Talia said, “No, I don’t.” Despite four of the five students having spent upwards of a decade participating in the
program, there does not appear to be a correlation between their time spent in the program and their familiarity, or lack thereof, about METCO being a school desegregation program created in the 1960s.

Two of the five participants, Jace and Sydney, had elder siblings who also participated in METCO, yet all five individuals demonstrated limited knowledge about the purpose of the organization or meaning of its acronym. METCO provides an orientation-style information session for incoming students and parents, but the retention of knowledge and ongoing awareness about the organization appears nonexistent. Even more, neither student mentioned in-school opportunities to learn more about the history and nature of METCO nor that it is a school desegregation program. Supporting the thematic finding, Table 6 captures the frequency of student responses to specific questions associated with METCO’s purpose, meaning of its acronym and their time participating in the program. From the thematic finding, compounding information emerged leading to the establishment of the following textural and structural subthemes in Table 7.

**Theme 2: Long Commutes on the School Bus Contribute to the Lived Experience and After-School Activity Decision-Making of METCO Students**

Participants were also asked about their experience commuting to school. 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 school bus ride was an active moment used for engagement with peers, in addition to brief intervals of rest, like sleeping.

The METCO program has approximately 30 participating suburban school districts, and even though some districts are less than 5 miles outside of Boston, others are as far as 30 miles
Table 6

**Theme 1: Absence of Understanding Associated with the Meaning and Purpose of the METCO Program by the METCO Students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categorical Inquiry</th>
<th>Participant Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full knowledge of METCO’s purpose and meaning of its acronym</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial knowledge of METCO’s purpose and meaning of its acronym</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited/absence of knowledge of METCO’s purpose and meaning of its acronym</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten [or more] years participating in the METCO program</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7

**Textural and Structural Subthemes of Theme 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textural Subtheme</th>
<th>Structural Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is limited evidence to determine if knowledge about METCO or program participation culturally reinforces, or actually contributes to the lived experiences of each student participating in this research.</td>
<td>To the students, METCO is simply a program name tangentially representing each student through their enrollment in a predominantly White school district.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(one way) outside of the city limits. Angrist and Lang (2004) wrote, “Despite strong public interest in METCO, there’s little evidence on the effect of METCO participation on the students commuting daily from Boston” (pp. 1615-1616). Each participant was asked about the time they wake up for school and their daily commute to school. John, who travels the farthest distance to school, 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 goes to school wake by “around 7ish, some of them later than that because they’re like 5 minutes away, walking distance.”

For Sydney, who travels the second farthest distance to school, she responded to the question by saying:
I get up at 5:30 a.m., but recently, like the past school year, I have given myself more
time, so I’ve woken up at like 5:15 a.m. and school starts at like 7:35 a.m. I never really
thought of it being like a part of the school day because usually I just sleep on the bus, so
I never really thought of it, me starting school, until I get to school and check into
homeroom and do all of that type stuff.

When asked if she knows the time her friends wake up in the morning, those who live in the
town where she goes to school, she said “no, but a lot of them are still sleeping when I’m on the
bus.”

Jace and Jennifer are practically equidistant from home to school, and each offered the
following responses. Jace said, “I get up around 5:45 a.m. and it takes about 35-45 minutes to get
to school on the bus, but this year, I’ve been getting rides to school by my mother since she goes
to work really early.” Jennifer said:

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.

When finished, I ask Jennifer to continue with her thought about “the good with the bad”
and she said:

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.

To clarify words like “everyone,” “everybody,” “us,” and “they” mentioned in her response,
Jennifer said, “Everyone and everybody is the White kids who live in . . . (name of school district
mentioned) . . . us are the METCO kids, and they are the teachers.”

Talia, who travels the shortest distance to school, said, “My school starts at 8:20 a.m., but
I wake up around like 6 a.m., but it’s not that far from where I live, so I can get there pretty quick
on the bus.” When asked about her friends, those who live in the town where she goes to school,
and if they’re asleep when she is commuting to school, she said, “I never really thought about it
because most of my friends who go to school with me are in METCO.”

Whether commuting a short or considerable distance to school, or waking up as early as
5:15 a.m. daily, four out of the five participants, when factoring in their commute, view the
school day as long and tiring. Remarkably, whether by school bus or parent, unanimously, the
participants do not consider the commute as part of their school day.

The five participants provided unique perspectives associated with their individual
commutes to school. Table 8 captures the students’ responses about commuting to school.

The commute to and from school was an interesting finding contributing to the lived
experience of the five students. For instance, two of the five students viewed it indiscriminately,
one viewed it as seasonally problematic, one looked at it as the price to pay for to participate in
the METCO program, and the one commuting the shortest distance did not consider it at all as
part of her lived experience. Supplemental to this finding, one of five participants, Jennifer,
assigned cursory meaning to her lived experience and the school bus commute, informing how
Theme 2: Long Commutes on the School Bus Contribute to the Lived Experience and After-School Activity Decision-Making of METCO Students

The commute can also infringe on her personal time and ability to participate in different activities in her residential community and often challenges her to prepare and perform at her best academically. Table 9 shows the textural-structural subthemes that emerged from this category.

Theme 3: METCO Students Desire Their Suburban Schools to Nurture Cultural Interactions in a Formalized Manner Across the Student Body

As Harper (2006) 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 one-on-one interviews, noticeable among four of the five participants is their willingness to establish friendships of different types across cultures and ethnic groups. On the other hand, one by one, 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 five African American students emphasized nonacademic spaces, like athletics, student clubs, and the cafeteria as places where friendship are developed, or attempts are made to develop friendships with their White peers. Although time spent in the program does not contribute to their knowledge about METCO as a whole, time spent in the program seems to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categorical Inquiry</th>
<th>Participant Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commute to school by district school bus or other means</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have commutes to school of 30-minutes [or more]</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider the bus ride a part of the school day or their lived experience</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9

Textural and Structural Subthemes of Theme 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textural Subtheme</th>
<th>Structural Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The bus commute has a dual-purpose, functioning as both an active [engaging] time for socialization among METCO students, and as a period for reflection and/or rest.</td>
<td>The school bus is a functional and necessary service provided by the school districts to METCO students and some local residents, but not viewed as an actual part of the school day.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

play an important role when considering the formation and sustainability of multicultural friendships.

Questions about cross-cultural friendships produced sensitive responses from the five participants. When asked to describe their multicultural friendship development, sustainability, and/or cross-cultural interactions throughout the school community, Sydney said:

I think it’s been a bumpy road because all of my friend groups have changed since first grade to now, but I was pretty much friends with the same people, mostly METCO kids, but recently I’ve tried to reach out to the kids who go to school out in . . . (name of school district mentioned) . . . just because it’s helpful to be friends with them.

For clarification, I asked Sydney, when using a term like “them,” are you referring to your White peers? She responded by saying:

Yeah, because usually at my school, it’s like the METCO kids are on one side, and the . . . (name of the school district mentioned) . . . residents are on one 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. That’s what I personally have tried to do and now I’m cool with a lot of them, but I have a really good friend who lives in the town, she’s White and I’ve known her since fifth grade.

Sydney was asked to continue her thought and share more about the African American community of students at her school. She responded by saying:
At my schools, 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 . . . name of school district mentioned) . . . that we’re all close with, so it’s like the five or six of us.

I know in Brookline there’s so many more METCO kids than there is in . . . (name of actual school mentioned) . . . so it’s like, if you’re the type of person who is gonna be friends with the METCO kids, but if you don’t get along with them and you don’t want to talk to the local residents, then you’re gonna be by yourself because there’s not that many of us. I feel like at my school, the METCO boys tend to be closer to the local residents because when sports come around, they stay out in . . . (name of the school district mentioned) . . . with their friends and stuff like that.

Jace, with a slightly sterner response to the question, answered by saying, “Me personally, I’m friendly with everybody. It’s like, if you don’t know me, I don’t know you, and if we get to know each other, we can be friends.” Talia, the participant with the least amount of years as a METCO student said:

It’s going good, but my social group is just mostly METCO kids, but most of the time I just hang around the same couple people. I don’t really have a lot of White friends, just because I don’t know them, but I notice in the cafeterias, mostly the White kids will sit together, but METCO kids will sit with them too, so they’re diverse I guess.

John, who appeared to be a rather social youngster with an outgoing personality, said:

It’s not like its good, but it’s not like oh I’m Black so I want to stick to my Black friends. I don’t try to push conversation because I’m not that type of person, but we can have a conversation like, oh, what’s up, we can talk like that.
Jennifer said, “It’s a little hard. 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.”

In some cases, attending a predominantly White school can appear culturally isolating, prompting African American students to form culture cliques. Summarily, cliques are groups of students who share the similar interests or cultural traits. In this particular example, METCO students tend to gravitate towards what is most familiar and known. Ms. Blackman put it this way, saying:

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 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.

The majority of participants provided a glimpse into how they view and value their interracial friendships, but it remains unclear how exactly those friendships were established. From that, the number of cross-race ties a student has tells us little about whether he or she feels like a valid member of the school community (Holland, 2012). In spite of expressing a willingness and openness to increase 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 how it creates a degree of difficulty in their efforts to form new friendships across the cultural spectrum and school community. On the other hand, the four students with considerable amounts of time participating in METCO described how their long-standing multicultural friendships have substantive meaning.

In support of this thematic finding, Table 10 summarily captures participant responses pertaining to the formation and sustainability of multicultural friendships and use of school and out of school spaces for their maintenance.

The establishment and maintenance of meaningful peer-to-peer relationships is 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 the interviews, four of the five students assign social value to existing friendships across cultures, shown in Table 11. This assignment affirms that long-standing relationships with White students who reside in the suburban school district were extremely pleasing, enjoyable, and sustainable to the participants. From the collective opinion of the group, while important, forming new friendships with White peers outside of their immediate social circle remains somewhat problematic.

**Theme 4: African American Students Demonstrated Intact Cultural Identities in Their Predominantly White Suburban School Setting**

From identity, multiple layers come out. Figure 6 is a theoretical and sequential formation of individual identity. In theory, from identity, 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
Table 10

**Theme 3: METCO Students Desire Their Suburban Schools to Nurture Cultural Interactions in a Formalized Manner Across the Student Body**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categorical Inquiry</th>
<th>Participant Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience difficulties or challenges establishing newer friendships with White students</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of alternative spaces (i.e., student clubs) and activities (i.e., sports) in school to establish cross-cultural friendships with White students</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spend social time with White friends outside of school</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11

**Textural and Structural Subthemes for Theme 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textural Subtheme</th>
<th>Structural Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Existing friendships thrive, whereas forming newer friendships remain elusive. Also, in-group cultural isolation, clique-forming social circles remain a practice by both African American [and White] students.</td>
<td>Schools, in addition to the classroom, provides interactive spaces for students to develop and form cross-cultural relationships.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6.** Classification of individual identity. Adapted from “Reconceptualizing Cultural Identity and Its Role in Intercultural Business Communication,” by D. A. Jameson, 2007, *Journal of Business Communication.*

Collective identity that influences our social and cultural identities (Jameson, 2007). Ogbu (2004) said, “People express their collective identity with emblems or cultural symbols which reflect their attitudes, beliefs, feelings, behaviors, and language or dialect” (p. 3). Here I link collective identity to my chosen theoretical framework, which is cultural identity theory.
Jameson (2007) contends that cultural identity focuses on “an individual’s sense of self derived from formal and informal membership in groups that transmit and inculcate knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, and ways of life” (p. 207), whereas social identity pays attention to a particular moment in time and “what roles people play in the present” (p. 207). Jameson’s description of identity is somewhat nontraditional, but it is useful in the research context of interpreting the cultural and social identity of the five African American students participating in my research.

When considering their collective identity, inviting the five participants to reflect upon their lived experiences posed challenges, particularly as it pertains to the presence of opportunities for African American students to share portions of their cultural and social identity in-school. Ogbu (2004) said, “Collective identity is the way minorities interpret the cultural and language or dialect differences between them and the dominant group” (p. 5). Further exploring collective identity, using language and other cultural differences, students were asked about ways in which their schools promote cultural awareness for White students about what it means for you to be an African American student in a predominantly White school district. Beginning with Jennifer, she said, “I mean, like socially and culturally, they discuss it with us, but they’ve never made it a thing where they sit down with all the other kids and explain to them what it is.” Jennifer provided clarification for the use of words and phrases like “they” and “what it is,” saying, “They are the teachers, and what it is means to be Black.”

Sydney, with a self-defined small population of African American students attending her high school, responded to the question by recounting an event at school involving a racially charged comment in school where African American students alleged a reference to monkeys by some White students, saying:
I don’t think there’s much teaching to the . . . (name of the school district mentioned) . . . students about our culture because even in history class, there’s so much stuff the teachers could be teaching all of us about African American history that they choose not to, or certain things that they could incorporate into the lessons that they choose not to. There’s so much African American history, but we never learn about it, and even when the whole incident went on, there was nothing. Even when they knew who had done whatever they did, there was no apologies, there was no meetings, no suspensions for racist comments, they didn’t do anything, except tell us in a nice way “you’re just gonna have to deal with it. It’s gonna happen.”

Different, yet brief, responses came from Talia, Jace, and John. Talia said, “They don’t teach us Black history, except in February.” Jace said, “Definitely a lot of differences, but I have a lot of . . . (name of school district mentioned) . . . friends and go to their houses and do whatever. I’m just Jace the . . . (name of the school district mentioned) . . . student.” For clarification, Jace explained “their houses” are the homes of his White friends.

Without offering a direct answer, John shared a brief occurrence involving a White classmate about slavery, mentioning how his White classmate said, “You should know what happened with slavery.” Continuing, John said:

It’s like they expect us to know, but to be honest, I don’t really know because I don’t like to bring up the topic. Everyone is like, you need to learn where you came from, but I don’t want to know about that because I can’t really say that I came from slavery.

**Facing differences, stereotypes, and assumptions.** Despite participating in a school desegregation program, aside from stereotypical assumptions, neither student felt they were, nor
were they labeled as, the in-school expert on Blackness by their White peers. Instead, several participants described personal experiences that challenged their sensitivities about their cultural and social identities. When asked, have you ever had a cultural experience at school that was rather personal or concerning to you as an African American? Sydney said:

There was an incident at my school where a couple of . . . (name of the school district mentioned) . . . residents were calling the METCO kids monkeys. I felt like the school administration didn’t do anything about it, but it happened. This isn’t the first time it’s happened. So, if all of us getting together and speaking up about it and telling administration how we feel about it, and venting to them when stuff happens, if that’s not gonna make them do anything more than what they are doing, what is? So, I feel like a lot of METCO kids have just given up, in terms of trying to advocate for themselves because we get the same answers every time.

Experience varies from student-to-student, school district to school district. Where Sydney experienced a rather personal and disheartening cultural challenge in school, John shared an impassioned reply about a lack of understanding related to inner-city living. He said:

They still don’t understand where you’re coming from a lot of times because you can act a certain way because of your upbringing. Like kids who are from Dorchester where there are often shootings, they don’t know what it’s like to live in that kind of environment, where you constantly have to watch your shoulder in case something pops off. Where they live, they can do whatever, they can be wherever and not have to worry about anything happening.

In John’s reply, the use of “they” is a reference to his White peers who reside in the suburb where his school is located.
Talia, from her brief time as a METCO student, described an event at school she remembered, recalling, “I think in October or November there was a walkout, but I forgot what it was for, but the news was there. It was also like this big thing, there was parents, people were holding signs, mostly the Black kids, but White kids were there too supporting us.”

Jennifer, in her response, spoke about assumptions and stereotypes, describing what she considered a typical White stereotype: “For a lot of kids up there, they think we live in apartment buildings, in housing complexes. I mean, a lot of people are shocked to find out, yeah I live in a house.” She further added, an assumption she often faces when moving about her suburban school community, saying, “When out there in . . . (name of school district mentioned) . . . and I walk around, people look at me like, ‘Is she stealing? or, ‘Should we call the police?’”

Individually, four of the five participants shared sensitive accounts of lived experiences in school, or the suburban town where their school is located. Unlike the four others, Jace simply said, “I’ve had no problems with it.”

Unmistakably, situations and circumstances involving race and culture arise, particularly for African American students in suburban, predominantly White school districts. Professionally, as the current leader of METCO, Inc, Mrs. Garcia is keenly aware of issues concerning or effecting 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 that 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.

**Gaining status.** Studies featuring interracial friendship patterns between African American and White students seem to neglect the role of status in the school’s social network as a concept contributing to the lived experiences of African American students (Holland, 2012). For instance, music choices, where White suburban males are increasingly listening to rap and hip-hop music, becoming fascinated with images the music represents, allow African American males in a majority White context to gain status, whereas African American females are not afforded the same type of cultural or social status in predominantly White school settings (Holland, 2012; Rodriguez, 2006).

In addition to rap and hip-hop music, athletics is another medium contributing to the elevated cultural and social status of African American males in predominantly White schools. When asked about the theory of elevated status afforded to African American student athletes, contrasting responses emerged from both male and female participants. Jennifer said:

Yeah, 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 and they’re just in love. They just go crazy.
For Sydney, a student athlete, when asked about the presumption of elevated status afforded to African American athletes in her predominantly White school, she responded by referencing both boys and girls, saying:

I do agree with that because there’s this one METCO girl at my school, who, she’s literally friends with everyone. When sports season comes around and they have late practices, and there’s no more late buses that come into Boston, I know she has a lot of friends who live in . . . (name of the school district mentioned) . . . who tell her oh, you can come stay over for the night or you can come have dinner and your parents can come pick you up at my house versus someone who doesn’t play sports and they’re just like I said, one of those METCO girls who just sticks with the other METCO girls and doesn’t really reach out to anybody else. And the same thing with the boys, like the boys who play basketball together, the METCO boys and the . . . (name of the school district mentioned) . . . boys, they’ll sleep over, stay the night or go have dinner with somebody in . . . (name of the school district mentioned) . . . so it helps you guys be friends and helps you guys build relationships.

Adding more, she said, “But I wouldn’t say it’s much more elevated, but I can agree with that in the case where people look up to them, and they get more praise than anybody else.” Talia, my third female participant, did not offer a definitive response to the question, other than uncertainty about the claim.

Toned down were the responses of my two male participants; each avoided self-promotion of elevated status due to their athleticism. John, a football player, concurred with the belief of elevated status for African American male athletes, but also offered a counter narrative by saying:
Yeah, it’s kind of like, because I play football, it’s the whole jock scene thing. I don’t get it. I don’t know why, I know the kids are like, you’re a football player, so they associate me with that group of people.

Jace, a basketball player, said, “I did gain a lot more friends from playing sports, so kids that I was on the basketball team with this year, I’ve never talked to or seen last year, but we’re closer now.”

**Code switching and acting White.** “Blacks have developed a separate system of behaviors and traits deemed appropriate for themselves . . . engaging in behaviors outside of this framework threatens the shared identity of the group” (Downey, 2008, p. 110), and when African Americans engage in such behaviors, they’re considered to be “acting White” by their African American peers. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) said, “To behave in a manner defined as falling within a White cultural frame of reference is to ‘act White’ and is negatively sanctioned” (p. 181). Language use by African American students in predominantly White suburban schools can be complex. When asked about their familiarity with the terms code switching and/or acting White, John said:

> Definitely a lot of that. Some days it’s kind of unavoidable. There are going to be White people that genuinely want to be your friend, but you still, at the end of day can’t act the same way that you act with your Black friends with them. I don’t know how to specifically say it, but it’s not the same kind of vibe. The vibe is different, how they act is different, what they want is different, it’s just different.

Jace, who seemed to approach the question as if it were an exam question, provided a more complete response, saying:
It’s basically how I talk with METCO kids versus how I talk to . . . (name of school
district mentioned) . . . kids. So, me, I try to talk the same way, but if it’s someone I’ve
known my whole life in METCO, I’m just going to talk to them regular, but if it’s
someone new, then I would talk to them a certain way. Then the more I get close with
them, I’ll start to talk the same way I do with my other friends.”

The female participants, also familiar with both concepts, shared responses slightly
different from their male counterparts. Sydney said, “I think it’s just like a professional thing that
you would want to do.” Talia said, “I notice other people they don’t code switch, but I do.”

Jennifer combined her response to include both the school and her residential community,
saying,

When I come back to my community, it’s kind of like, oh, she sounds white or she seems
a little bit more educated than us or okay, she sounds a little different and so people, they
feel intimidated to talk to me. In . . . (name of school district mentioned) . . . I feel like

I’m on a very thin line where I have to be careful how I speak and act because people,
they’re already making assumptions.

**Social integration of the “N” word.** The use of the “N” word has been a controversial
ccontributor to U.S. history. From its use through the brutality of slavery, migration through the
traumatic Jim Crow era, and into the modern discourse, the N word and its use has not only
endured through the ages but has also been generationally transformed and redefined. In the
modern era, African American youth, mainly males (and some African American adults, mainly
males) have co-opted and transformed the use and meaning of the N word.

Recognizing the sensitivity of the topic, I considered the historical nature of the N word
and the lived experiences of a 21st century participant group, from which a thought arose: is
there ever an appropriate time for African American students to use the N word in a cultural
corext in predominantly White school settings, or even in their residential African American
communities? By addressing the use of the N word in my research with the five participants, I
learned, its use is truly determined by the individual. When asked about inter and cross-cultural
use of the N word in school (and their residential communities), the responses varied among four
of the five, offering shortened responses. John said, “I have said it before, but like, I don’t like to
use it constantly because I know where it came from, but I’ve said it once or twice, yeah.” Jace
said, “That is a thing that most METCO kids use, but it’s just their thing.” Talia said, “I still hear
people say the N word because they think it’s funny.” Sydney said, “I don’t use it because I’m
not gonna just talk to people any type of way.” Furthering the point, she said:

I think that the White students who use that word, use it because they hear Black students
use that word. I think some of them, I’ve heard some of them use it in their own
conversations, without a METCO student present. But I think that they wouldn’t use it as
freely if they didn’t hear the METCO students use it. I feel like, METCO students, or
Black students, even in the community, feel like, “Oh, I’m Black, so I can say the word,”
but if you’re gonna have a conversation with somebody else, who you feel like shouldn’t
say the word, don’t say it to them.

Throughout the interview process, Jennifer, whether intentional or not, consistently
engaged the concept of storytelling in several of her responses. Here she said:

In . . . (name of school district mentioned) . . . it would be a little awkward because
whether we’re at a party or at a dance or we’re just in school and let’s say a song plays.
All the White kids are singing it, all the Black kids are singing it and then the White kids
stop when the “N” word comes and the Black kids keep going. It’s just like, oh, that was
awkward, but yeah, my friends use it. A couple of White kids have used it and had interesting talks, not punishment. I mean you have stuff like that, so I mean, different things happen where culturally we hit an awkward point where it’s like okay, you need to back up.

With a little encouragement, Jennifer continued her storytelling by saying:

A lot of them will be like, “Well my Black friend gave me the N card, so I can say it.” I’m like no, because my main thing that I’m always trying to tell them, because one Black kid gave you that card, they have no right to give you that card, like they didn’t address a whole race of people, so like, no, you don’t have that card. I can take it back. Like, you can’t use that, yeah, no, you can’t say that.

The N card is an imaginary authorization, representing approval from a member of one group, African Americans, for casual use by an individual from another group, Whites.

The reasoning associated with the term collective identity is a significant finding, encompassing both the cultural and social identity of my African American student participants. When questioned, the five participants detailed individual experiences involving their cultural identity and encounters associated with group social dynamics as African American students attending predominantly White school districts through the METCO program. Several experiences and encounters were associated with stereotypical assumptions by Whites about African American culture and identity. In their responses, each student responded to situations experienced as individuals in ways that reinforce their separate existence and collective identity as African Americans (Ogbu, 2004), signaling their cultural identities are intact in Table 12.

Some educational research has sought to unpack the social and academic experiences of African American students attending predominantly White schools (D. Y. Ford & Moore, 2013;
McGee, 2013; Thompson & Davis, 2013), but an increasing amount of research has been exclusively dedicated to the life experiences of African American students attending predominantly White schools. Where cultural and social identity often influence and comprise the qualitative aspects of African American identity (Sellers et al., 1998), the five student participants provided insights into their collective identity experiences in predominantly White schools, producing the textural and structural themes in Table 13.

**Theme 5: Situational Occurrences in School Involving Culture Reveal the Ongoing Presence of Teachable Moments for White Teachers and School Leaders**

Nonacademic, teachable moments can arise unexpectedly. According to participants, opportunities do arise in school for teachers and students to learn more about each other and their cultural differences. Jennifer said, “A lot of the teachers don’t really know what it means to be METCO. They kind of just know, yep, they come out here and that’s it.” Nieto (2013) discusses how school is where you learn things that are worthwhile and important, but learning is far more than students and curriculum instruction. It is through the daily interaction with school leaders [and classmates] that determine the experiences and social location of African American students within their predominantly White school setting (Peterson & Spencer, 1990).

Minimally described during the interview process, four participants detailed how school leaders missed opportunities in school where additional teaching and learning about culture would benefit all students. The same four participants expressed isolated in-school situations involving race and/or culture, where the presumption of knowledge for school leaders to remedy the situation through open dialogues resulted in less than desirable outcomes as described in Table 14. Such an example begs the question: when nonacademic matters involving sensitive, often confusing, topics like race and culture arise, to whom do African American students turn
Table 12

Theme 4: African American Students Demonstrated Intact Cultural Identities in Their Predominantly White Suburban School Setting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categorical Inquiry</th>
<th>Participant Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for cultural expression in school</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal experiences involving collective identity</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiar with the concepts of “code switching” and “acting White”</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of the “N” word in school among African American students and other culture groups</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture-based learning offered by the school and/or specific teachers</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13

Textural and Structural Subthemes for Theme 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textural Subtheme</th>
<th>Structural Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prompted introspective reflection of experiences related to their individual collective identity among school networks, peer friendship groups and need to correct the misinformed of their lived realities.</td>
<td>Of the five school districts represented by the five participants, three are making gainful strides to promote teaching and learning about cultural groups.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14

Theme 5: Situational Occurrences in School Involving Culture Reveal the Ongoing Presence of Teachable Moments for White Teachers and School Leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categorical Inquiry</th>
<th>Participant Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experienced some form of prejudice, discrimination or marginalization in school</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School leaders publicly acknowledge or addressed forms of racial prejudice or discrimination</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School leadership that is either African American/Black, Latino/Hispanic, Asian or other</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

for answers? For METCO students, the METCO director is at their disposal as an in-school resource for counsel and problem solving.

**METCO and METCO directors.** METCO is an incorporated entity with a chief executive officer leading an organization of 13 staff members. Additionally, METCO has a 14-member governing board of directors, with institutional oversight monitored by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Despite possessing the
METCO designation in their job title, the current collective of METCO directors are unaffiliated with METCO. METCO directors are full-time school district employees and manage the METCO program according to their school district leadership mandates. METCO works in partnership with its affiliated school district leaders to maintain diverse learning environments in suburban schools, yet each participant in this study was unfamiliar with the functional relationship between METCO, their METCO director, and the school district. Teachable moment?

Fortifying relationships. METCO relies upon its school district partners to support its goal of providing educational opportunities to inner-city residents in Boston but acknowledges the need to strengthen its relationships across the affiliated school district network to improve the lived experiences for African American students participating in the program. Ms. Blackman, Director of Student Support Services for METCO, is someone who works closely with the many METCO directors and school districts, and puts it this way:

I would say that the partnership between the districts is strong. We’d like to see it become stronger in-terms of understanding. By that I mean getting staff and administration on board to further their own knowledge about culture. I think, when we get them to have the buy in, we enrich everyone, we take it to a whole different level, the school system just kind of raises the bar for everyone, not only just for the school district, but for the community, asking what does the community understand about METCO?

Mrs. Garcia artfully captured her willingness to strengthen relationships with her suburban school partners as the CEO of METCO. As the parent of two METCO children who is concerned about the cultural experiences of her multicultural/multiethnic daughters, Latina, Filipino, Lebanese, and African American, in a predominantly White school, she continues her
volunteerism to broaden the cultural awareness lens of professionals in her daughters’ school district. She said:

I started initiatives with the superintendent around Latino Heritage and for the other cultures represented in the METCO program, and I talk with the PTO around diversity and what it means to be a welcoming community. I tell people, you have to try and contribute to the experiences of your children.

Opportunities exist for METCO and its partnering school districts to collaborate on professional development activities that involve culture. The subthemes in Table 15 capture highlighted points from the categorical theme.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, five African American high school students provided personal accounts of their lived experiences, suggesting their collective identities, the cultural and social components, are intact. The interview responses and casual interactions with the five participants provided valuable information into their individual lived experiences as METCO students. Revealed in personal accounts were in-group networks and long-standing friendships with White peers and classmates that contribute to an individual’s sense of belonging. In nonacademic settings, members of in-group networks generally associate through use of African American English vernacular, the acknowledgement of situational similarities, or even common experiences shared by other members of the in-group network.

With increasing numbers of students immigrating from Caribbean islands and portions of African nation states, the ethnic and cultural categorization of students of color is shifting. Presented in this study, why physically appearing to be “African American,” two participants also culturally identify with their Caribbean heritage. Periodically throughout the interview
### Table 15

**Textural and Structural Subthemes of Theme 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textural Subtheme</th>
<th>Structural Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students considered how they fit into the larger school and residential community where the school is physically located (the suburbs) while balancing their residential, inner-city community identity.</td>
<td>Involve METCO in the establishment of a cultural competency model and delivery of other forms of professional developmental training focusing on culture and cultural identity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

process, each participant managed to spotlight distinctions associated with their culture, identity, friendships across cultures, and in-school challenges they may have faced. When possible, either directly or through prompting, participants provided meaningful data points and clarification on matters in which I am either unfamiliar or simply did not consider. Teachable moment.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this research was to interpret the lived experiences of five 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 five African American high school students who participate in the METCO program. Shared are findings from the personal accounts of how the five 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.

Discussion of Findings in Relationship to the Literature

Reviewing contemporary research concerning cultural identity theory and the lived experiences of African American students attending predominantly White schools, I discovered two interesting viewpoints in reference to my research. The first point is that African American students who attend predominantly White schools are consistently managing their collective identity inside and outside the classroom; meaning, the students are in a persistent battle for shaping how they are perceived by social others in and out of the academic setting (Tyler, 2014; Tyler et al., 2016). The second point is that students expect school leaders to capitalize upon opportunities to improve cultural competency.

As often as they could, the five African American participants verbally demonstrated their mastery and possession of their collective identities. Whether in a predominantly White suburban setting, or their respective urban communities, each participant shared personal accounts of how their lived experiences in urban and suburban contexts shape and define their cultural identity and presentation to others across geographical proximities.
Responses from a series of questions led to the discovery of information supporting a shift in the research narrative, suggesting, while not universal, student experiences in predominantly White suburban high schools vary among African American students. The responses at the conclusion of the entire research process resulted in five conclusions, situated appropriately in the theoretical framework, offering contextual insight into the lived experiences of African American students participating in the METCO program. Lastly, accompanying each of the five conclusions are identified implications for practice.

Conclusion 1: Absence of Understanding Associated With the Meaning and Purpose of the METCO Program by METCO Students

Since its founding in the 1960s, METCO has maintained two distinct, yet compatible goals. The first goal is to serve as a school-choice program, and the second, to function as a purposeful school desegregation program. By functioning as both a school-choice and desegregation program, METCO provides students who live in Boston with access to smoothly functioning, often quite affluent, suburban schools that enjoy reputations for academic excellence and rigor. By forming, METCO brings a degree of racial and ethnic diversity to suburban communities where otherwise there would be little to none (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011).

With the assistance of state funding, METCO provides diversity and educational opportunities for more than 3,000 Boston school students and, combined with a considerable waitlist of potential incoming students, the program appears to possess a high favorability rating among Boston’s African American and Latino communities. According to Eaton and Chirichigno (2011), “METCO is extremely popular among students and their families . . . surveys show that urban parents tend to enroll their children in METCO so their children might
receive a better education” (p. 4). Although perceived as access to a better education and popular program among Boston residents, the five student participants demonstrated a lack of understanding about METCO’s origin and longstanding history of providing educational opportunities for African American and Latino students. Furthermore, limited evidence exists to draw connective distinctions between the amount of time students spend in the program, their retention of knowledge about METCO, its relationship to their in-school METCO program, and how participation contributes to their lived experiences. The finding suggests an opportunity for nonacademic, programmatic learning exists.

**Practice Implication 1.** METCO provides incoming students and families with a program orientation. During the incoming student orientation process, students and families are presented with a host of information, like participating school districts, school assignment, overview of potential academic rigor, summary of student expectations, as well as the role of the METCO director, a school district representative and in-school resource to program participants. Surprisingly, a common theme among the five participants was the absence of understanding about METCO and how it tangibly or intangibly contributes to their individual lived experience as program participants.

As a practice suggestion, with a formidable history as a school desegregation program, affiliated school district leaders and METCO have a chance to collaborate and formalize learning about METCO and the program. Through a formal process of learning, schools honor the history of the organization and teach lessons associated with the cultural importance METCO brings to the various suburban school districts.

For METCO and its program participants, ongoing learning and reinforcement of its partnership with participatory school districts serves as a platform for all students and teachers
alike to collectively intensify their historical knowledge about METCO and respective in-school programs. In fact, should schools encourage METCO students to lead certain aspects of the teaching and learning process, they give a voice to the independent experts, allowing African American students living through the experience to share personal accounts of how participating in the program contributes to shaping their collective identity.

**Conclusion 2: Long Commutes on the School Bus Contribute to the Lived Experience and After-School Activity Decision Making of METCO Students**

In the after-glow of “Operation Exodus,” an education movement in Massachusetts during which mothers and fathers organized to transport their children from overcrowded predominantly African American schools to better-resourced suburban schools, the METCO program was established; it was 1966 (Formisano, 1991). From the outgrowth of the movement toward school consolidation, student transportation continues to play a major role in the education of American children (Cheresh, 1973). Opportunities for cultural integration in predominantly White schools are not without considering school assignment and busing programs. In METCO, depending upon the school assignment, program participants are subject to either a brief or considerable commute in time and distance to school.

Massachusetts, the birthplace of public school education, is also home to the first state-supported busing program. Regarded as a way of equalizing educational opportunity for some African American and Latino families, busing offers a better education to children who would have otherwise been deprived of such opportunities (Cheresh, 1973; Mills, 1972), a necessary topic when discussing school desegregation, busing, and the impact on students commuting. Mills (1972), from a comment in a report by the Department of Rural Education of the National Education Association, described:
The daily trip to and from school is an informal learning situation that reflects the feelings, the desires, and aspirations, the problems, the successes and the failures of pupils. While the morning ride carries the joys, the enthusiasms and sorrows of home, the afternoon ride from school back home brings together the reactions to the school activities of the day. There is no better-defined continuity of home and school life than may be observed on the bus as children leave home to ride to school and as these same children leave school in the afternoon to return home.

Theoretically, bussing African American and Latino students to suburban school districts exposes them to a better education. However, some argue riding the school bus is psychologically bad for children, though not factually supported by evidence (Hornburger, 1976). From testimonies of the five participants, each person considered busing as a nonacademic part of the school day and viewed it more like a time for social engagement, resting, or review of academic material. Conversely, three of the five participants sentimentally expressed concerns about whether or not their commute is ever considered by White peers and teachers. Moreover, two participants who commute more than 35 minutes to school mentioned busing as a factor in their decision and ability to participate in scheduled activities at school.

**Practice Implication 2.** Talks with students concerning the commute to school made known connections to their lived experiences. With four of the five students commuting a half an hour or more to school, responses to interview questions revealed both favorable recollections and concerns about busing. Favorable recollections consisted of things akin to socializing with other African Americans from the inner city, sleep time, and last minute review of academic material, like checking study notes for a test. Concerns were many, from factoring into decisions
to participate in specific afterschool activities, to limiting the student’s ability to form relationships with teachers. For individuals whose commute to and from school is greater than half an hour, busing contributes to their lived experience.

The commute to and from school was an interesting and important finding. The finding suggests, based on credible arguments presented by four of the five METCO students, districts should consider augmenting student expectations, taking into account the commute to school has implications contributing to the experiences of a relatively small population of students. Equitably, where population of students spend upwards of 30 minutes or more on the school bus, the commute, according to participants, is more than a simple and arbitrary exercise for getting to school. Jennifer said it best:

The bad would have to be the travelling. It’s long. It’s hard. 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.

Education, teaching and learning, is not a one size fits all model. When teachers and school leaders take into account the different type of experiences each student encounters with getting to and from school, viewing each independently and completely, then “one more night,” as Jennifer stated, seems like a smart and logical thing to do, signaling an acknowledgement; the commute matters.
Conclusion 3: METCO Students Desire Their Suburban Schools to Nurture Cultural Interactions in a Formalized Manner Across the Student Body

Researchers have not paid enough attention to similarities and differences in the daily experiences of African American and White students (Tyson et al., 2005). Even 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). This research aimed to broaden the scope and significance of the lived experiences of African American students attending predominantly White suburban schools. In this conclusion, the research highlights how a lack multicultural learning and interaction among student groups contributes to the lived experiences of my five participants.

The interviews assisted the researcher with understanding the participants’ sense of belonging to their suburban school community and how it hinges in large part upon their interacting with peers from different racial and ethnic groups (Strayhorn, 2008). Interviews revealed, while in school, METCO students are partially disconnected from community customs, and “instead of being surrounded by peers and teachers who likely understand their speech patterns and cultural norms, they are likely misunderstood” (Hill, 2009, p. 120). Additionally discovered, throughout the school day, four of the five METCO students discussed regular attempts to step outside of their culture group and immediate friendship circles to form new relationships with unfamiliar (White) students. As Sydney stated, “It’s better to be friends with them.” The preliminary steps to socially integrate their culture group, as well as those of their White peers, suggests the African American participants place value on their need to enlarge
their relationship network, secondarily enriching their lived experiences in a predominantly White suburban school district.

**Practice Implication 3.** Emerging from the five interview transcripts and in-the-moment field notes were recurring expressions of appreciation for existing relationships outside the participants’ culture groups. Three of the four participants displayed an authenticity and sincerity toward the formation of new relationships outside their culture group. As predominantly White suburban schools become increasingly multicultural, school districts, in collaboration with METCO, can build upon student experiences to advance school practices to improve nonacademic student engagement and interactions across culture groups. Structured, student-led interactions, simultaneously managed by teacher leaders and METCO director, diminishes misinformed curiosity about cultures outside each student’s own culture group.

**Conclusion 4: African American Students Demonstrated Intact Cultural Identities in Their Predominantly White Suburban School Setting**

Ogbu (2004) said, “Collective identity usually develops because of people’s collective experiences or series of collective experiences” (p. 3). A proportional element contributing to the cultural identity of the African American is language usage. In the context of their presence in predominantly White school settings, language expressions during interview conversations exposed how each participant manipulates their use of language to identify culturally and socially. Since children learn the power of words in the development of their sense of self (Abrahams, 1970; Hale & Bocknek, 2016), the five participants admitted interchanging African American English vernacular with Standard English. African American English vernacular is a commonly used, widely acceptable form of language enjoyed primarily by and among African Americans to express their thoughts and opinions in-group. One by one, participants reflected
upon their lived experiences and collective identity as students in predominantly White suburban schools, using culturally acceptable language and phrases to define their membership to a specific group of learners, METCO students, and active participation inside in-school social networks with other African Americans, Whites, and other culture group enrolled in their school populations.

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 a culturally sensitive challenge at school. Four of the five participants described stereotypical, race-based assumptions as their commonly encountered culturally sensitive challenge.

Browaeys and Price (2015) inform, culture partially shapes our identity, how we define ourselves, and how we define others. Socially, the five participants independently identified themselves as METCO students who participate in multiple nonacademic activities within their suburban school, like sports, student clubs, and occasional school dance parties. Not surprising, the five students culturally identify through parental descent and naturally gravitate toward their defined culture group in school, a culture group where they feel most comfortable and truly possess a 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 of their differences from suburban classmates and peers while participating in all school and
community-related activities (Fecho, Davis, & Moore, 2006; Hill, 2009). As Ms. Blackman said, “I used to 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.”

After thoroughly reviewing each interview transcript, other components associated with cultural identity, like gender, language usage, and nonacademic school involvement—all of which may influence the way African Americans feel about themselves as individuals and students attending a predominantly White suburban school through the METCO program (Rowley et al., 1998)—were considered. The interview process uncovered how males and females viewed their experiences and individual self as students participating in the METCO program. In spite of a small sample size, four of my five participants disclosed separate encounters associated with their collective identities through a race-based experience in their predominantly White school setting. Unfortunately, findings were inconclusive to factually determine if gender, grade level, and nonacademic school involvement were factors contributing to the lived experiences of the five participants.

An interesting finding associated with conclusion 4 is the use of the N-word in predominantly White suburban schools. Each of the five students made known the N-word is frequently used by African American students, mainly the males, in school. Several participants mentioned its moderate use by some White males. While widely popular in the urban core of Boston, mainly among African American males, the familiar and often ease of use of the word in school across cultures remains unclear, though not fully accepted when used outside the culture group.
Practice Implication 4. The participants in this research represented five separate suburban school districts, in which stereotypical and race-based assumptions exist. Common stereotypical assumptions about African American students attending predominantly White schools are: African American kids are good athletes, they are affirmative action beneficiaries, they are underprepared “at-risk” students who all emerged from low-income families, or residents of urban ghettos (Cuyet, 2006; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2007; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). The participants were not exempt from disproving stereotypical assumptions. In fact, testimonies of four participants detailed several racial and cultural encounters with White peers. Despite the possibility for stereotypical assumptions hindering relationships between African American and White students, upheld were their collective identity and sense of belonging by disproving and deconstructing stereotypical assumptions about their culture.

Findings suggest that by forming student-led cultural learning communities, school leaders not only promote cultural awareness, they potentially reduce stereotypical assumptions. By allowing African American and students of multicultural origins to share information with classmates and peers in a structured, teacher-facilitated learning format, perhaps through the concept of storytelling, schools foster learning across cultures. Structured, student-led learning can also promote awareness about the environment in which non-White urban students live and potentially inform how the intersection of urban living and suburban engagement contributes to their collective identity and lived experiences. By creating student-led cultural learning communities, schools reduce stereotypical perceptions, which often influence the views of others (Eggleston & Miranda, 2009; Harper, 2009). Moreover, by using the concept of storytelling, a
useful approach to cultural education, schools advance a truthful form of sharing about people related to their experiences (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

**Conclusion 5: Situational Occurrences in School Involving Culture Reveal the Ongoing Presence of Teachable Moments for White Teachers and School Leaders**

Teacher professional development is fertile for the introduction of new and innovative forms of training, but how can suburban school districts better match teaching with the home and community cultures of their students of color? (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The findings of this study support that, in Massachusetts:

The state should find new ways to support school districts participating in METCO program, possibly by tying building reimbursements to participation and offering competitive grants for teacher training or innovative programs that enhance the educational experience of METCO students and help foster positive relationships between METCO students and resident students. (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011, p. 2)

The history of public schools has maintained a two-pronged approach; teachers teach, students learn from teachers, though scholars have pondered over strategies to assist teachers in teaching about diversity (e.g., multiculturalism, racism) and interacting with the diversity found within their classrooms (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). In suburban schools, Ladson-Billings (2000), a leading expert on the subject of culture, identity and cultural competency training, informs that schools must be intentional about training staff to engage students who represent cultures outside of the dominant group.

Whether in urban or suburban contexts, participant statements suggest there is an interconnectedness between culture and their educational experience as African American students who attend predominantly White suburban schools, with each element playing a
discernable role that influences their lived experiences (Nieto, 2008). Adding more, Ms. Blackman and Mrs. Garcia provide supporting views of how African American students are negotiating a nuanced, two-fold experience, marking the need for cultural competency training to better equip teachers for an increasingly dynamic, active, and changing classroom composition of students.

**Practice Implication 5.** METCO, through its school integration program, continues to be a provider for cultural inclusion and school choice; still, districts with predominantly White populations have cultural deficiencies among their teacher and school leadership ranks. In suburban public schools where growing numbers of African American and multicultural students are enrolling, diversifying staff across the school districts remains slow, if not problematic. Suggestively, two thoughts come to mind. In the first, school districts must re-establish their partnership with METCO to recruit qualified professionals who culturally reflect the growing culture groups within their respective school districts. In the second, also in partnership with METCO institute plans to create a transformative professional development and training model geared toward improving cultural competency in suburban school districts where African American and Latino professionals are lacking.

Colleges and universities may need to improve their teacher education programs, particularly for White teachers engaging the profession where public school districts are experiencing higher enrollment numbers of culturally diverse students. According to Gay and Howard (2010), teacher education programs must be more deliberate about preparing European Americans to teach multicultural and multiethnic students of color, particularly in predominantly White districts that are facing increasing racial, cultural, and linguistic divide between White teachers and K-12 students of color.
Outside of the classroom, limited space and structured time exists for students to converse about their lived experiences as African Americans attending a predominantly White suburban high school. Informally, students gravitate to the METCO office space in school for casual, in-group forms of engagement during their lunch period. Although the lunch period gatherings in the METCO office space appear more unconscious and reactive by African American students, coordinated and structured learning in the form of focus group discussions involving White students can create a quality learning time and space for a larger population of students. By using familiar spaces in school and inviting out-of-group students to participate in focus group discussions, schools take proactive steps towards promoting the importance of formalizing teaching and learning about culture.

Discussion of Findings in Relationship to the Theoretical Framework

Using cultural identity theory as a theoretical framework aided in the work of interpreting the phenomenon of lived experiences of five African American students attending a predominantly White high school through the METCO program. The experiences shared by the five participants informs how individual experiences are shaped by, among other qualities, their racial, ethnic, and cultural heritage (Dillard, 2000). Surprisingly, for some like my five participants, while it may seem inconceivable, race and culture still have a profound influence on how they experience and live in the world (Milner, 2007).

Personal Narratives

The five participants narrated their experiences, serving as independent experts sharing meaningful insight and testimony into their actual experiences. Dixson and Rousseau (2005) talked about the importance of voice and narration used to describe and capture the experiences of people of color. Allowing the five student participants to voice their experiences advances
attention to their lived reality, bringing forward a reflective dialogue between interviewer and interviewee “to think through what is happening in a particular research community, with race and culture placed at the core” (Milner, 2007, p. 396). The exercise of interviewing properly placed the five African American students at the core of the research effort, positioning each person to describe their culturally exclusive experience as students of color attending a predominantly White suburban school as METCO students.

The findings in this research, relative to the theoretical framework, further the notion of how cultural identity is often viewed as a defining characteristic for African American group membership (Sellers et al., 1998). Research informs race is considered a taboo topic for discussion in racially mixed settings, but the five students expressed an interest in learning more about culture and having teachers teach more about it in their lessons (Tatum, 1992) and not just during Black History Month. Students suggested lessons on culture can lead to greater forms of awareness for all students, but when specific to African American culture and history can potentially serve as a positive reinforcement to their sense of belonging in a predominantly White suburban school setting.

Limitations of Study

At the conclusion of the research process, I determined there are two fundamental limitations. The first limitation of my study is the randomly selected sample size of participants, where five high school students represented five independent, suburban, public school districts affiliated withMETCO. Fractionally, relying on the testimonials of a small sample size limits the generalizability of my findings. A second limitation lies in the variables associated with school proximity and possibly the school bus commute. Based on school assignment, some school bus commutes are relatively short, whereas others are upwards of an hour away one way. Given two
distinguishable limitations, the findings presented are not universally applicable to the more than 3,000 students participating in METCO, students who attend more than 30 affiliated school districts across the network; therefore, these results must be interpreted with caution as they are delimited to reflect the experiences the cohort of participants only (Farmer et al., 2016).

**Recommendations for Future Research**

In addition to practice suggestions, the researcher offers three recommendations for future research concerning the lived experiences of African Americans as participants of METCO and programmatically as METCO students attending their many affiliated school districts. Peer-reviewed literature informs, METCO has aided the academic community by actively participating in research studies, mainly focusing on the academic achievement, or underachievement, of its African American and Latino students. However, with newly appointed leadership, a reorganized staff, and a wide-ranging set of external partnerships, METCO is shifting its delivery of services to students and families, along with pitching school district collaborations for cultural competency training.

Continuing, for aspiring researchers, an education opportunity organization with a half-century history and currently over 3,000 students participating in its program annually, METCO is rife with pathways for continued research focusing on the lived experiences of African American and Latino students, an area where limited research exists. To advance research into this topic, I offer the following four recommendations for future research.

- Replicate this study across the entire METCO network of schools to gain a statistically significant view of the lived experiences of African American students participating in the METCO program.
• Conduct an alumni-only, quantitative version of this study. By interviewing African American alums, males and females, individuals who graduated within a targeted timeframe (less than 5 years), a researcher can analyze historical data to determine improvement measures and growth margins over time associated with the African American student experience and their participation in a METCO-affiliated school district.

• Initiate and monitor outcomes associated with cultural competency training as a professional development model. With over two dozen suburban school districts in Massachusetts offering a METCO program, for school districts launching some form of cultural competency training in the present, a researcher is afforded valuable time to accumulate qualitative data and yield measurable outcomes to report the impact of the training model.

• Include school staff. Whenever possible, as new forms of inquiry evolve concerning the lived experiences of African American students in predominantly White suburban schools, research should include school staff. As enrollment of children into METCO remains positive by African American parents, researchers bringing into view the interconnectedness of academics, culture and lived experiences of African American children participating in METCO, school staff involvement will be critical to ongoing efforts of exploring the phenomenon of experience associated with African American students attending predominantly White suburban school districts.

**Conclusion**

This study interpreted the lived experiences of African American students participating in the METCO program. Data analysis revealed five conclusory findings: (a) the absence of
understanding for what METCO represents as an organization does not appear to effect the lived experiences of the participants, (b) the commute matters for those who commute to schools where considerable amounts of time are spent riding on the school bus, (c) improvement of multicultural learning and interaction is needed to bridge cultural gaps between African American and White students, (d) intact collective identities informs each participant is familiar with their cultural and social identities as African Americans students in a predominantly White school district, and (e) the presence of teachable moments exist for both White teachers and students alike.

Similar to Mann (1848), I, too, believe the public school is the greatest discovery made by man. However, public schools must move beyond academic success as the measure of a good education. Suburban school districts should concern themselves with the social and cultural integration of its African American students. In doing so, suburban schools validate the lived experiences of all students, inviting their experience to contribute to the suburban learning environment, one of which the African American students participating in this research seem to enjoy being a part.

It almost appears illogical to offer a conclusion, given the close personal significance of this project and reasoning associated with the call for ongoing research. As an African American researcher, when saying goodbye to my five participants, I found comfort in knowing the five participants shared and entrusted me with a small piece of their lived experiences as METCO students. In exchange, I present the best possible interpretation of their experiences, hoping to inspire aspiring researchers to further the exploration into the lived experiences of African American students attending predominantly White suburban schools.
The lived experiences of African American students participating in the METCO program remain a story seldom told. As the reporting instrument, I yield to the testimonial of one program participant in particular, John, giving rite of passage to his voice of expertise to the research community concerning his lived experience as an African American student attending a predominantly White suburban school, saying:

We should be represented better, like when you guys are talking about different schools, METCO program should be one of the first things you bring up, not after you’ve gone through sports, academics, whatever, and then the METCO program. Not being like the backup, we want to be front and center, we want to be represented well, not just this thing lurking in the back.

Thank you, John, for the reminder, and in response to your advice, as an African American researcher and active out-of-school time volunteer to urban youth who attend predominantly White high schools through the METCO program, I intend to carry forward the findings revealed in this research. In furthering my research practice and advancement of the phenomenon of lived experiences, I will be mindful of what I learned about African American students participating in METCO and, whenever possible, work in collaboration with the leadership of METCO and the member professionals across the vast network of suburban school districts sponsoring a METCO program.

As the researcher, I wanted to learn firsthand about the lived experiences of African American students participating in the METCO program, and I did. In response to learning, I plan to revisit METCO leadership (and school district leaders, if possible) with my research findings. In doing so, I will offer a suggestive proposal to assist in planned efforts to formalize professional learning in the area of cultural competency for teachers and administrators, while
simultaneously advancing the importance of cultural identity, the history of METCO, and the value of having informal focus group discussions involving all students.
## Appendix

### Interview Process and Phases

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<th>Phases</th>
<th>Questions</th>
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| **Pre-Interview** | **Q:** Before we officially begin, although your parent(s) approved of your participation, do you agree to participate in my research interview?  
**Q:** Do I have your permission to record the interview?  
**Interview statements:**  
• If you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, just let me know and we can move on. Okay?  
• Remember, this is completely anonymous and confidential. Your birth name or the school you attend will not be used in the final report, but I do expect you to answer each question truthfully. Okay? |
| **Phase 1**   | **Q:** Since this is completely anonymous, which name would you like to use for this interview? You pick.  
**Q:** As a student of color, how would you define yourself culturally and ethnically? For instance, do you see yourself as Black, African American? Caribbean American, West Indian American, Kenyan American?  
**Q:** If this is too personal, please let me know. Think of yourself as an artist and paint a detailed picture of your family life for me? For example, which neighborhood do you live in Boston? Do you live in a two parent or single parent household? What is your parental work situation? Do you have siblings? If so, what is your placement in the birth order?  
**Q:** So where is your school district? What is your current grade? Remember, the school name will not be used, but I will share the geographic location.  
**Q:** How much did you know about METCO prior to being in the program?  
**Q:** Did you know METCO is an acronym?  
• If no, explain what it means.  
• If yes, do you know what each letter in the word “METCO” stands for?  
**Q:** How long have you been a METCO student at (school name)?  
**Q:** How long does it take you to get to school on the bus?  
**Q:** On average, what time do you get up in the morning to catch the bus?  
**Q:** How would you describe your overall social and academic experience at (school district) so far?  
**Q:** So, what does it personally mean to you to be a METCO student? |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q: What is most important, or significant to you about being a METCO student?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Q: Did you ever attend a Boston Public School prior to this school? If yes, can you share what was that like for you?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q: I am sure you did not have a choice becoming a METCO student, but if you had a choice, where would you like to go to school? Why?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Q: What’s it like socially and culturally being a Black male in a majority White school?</th>
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<td>Q: Can you describe some of your routine neighborhood experiences? In other words, what are some of your everyday life experiences where you live?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q: What are some of the differences in your lived experiences between your residential community and your METCO community?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q: Describe how your home and METCO life experiences are similar, or different?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q: Can you give a few examples of any social and cultural challenges you may have experienced being a METCO student?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q: In the more casual spaces in school, like the hallway, cafeteria, or even athletic field, can you tell me about your social interactions with White peers and the school staff and how it might be different [or the same] with your African American friends and adults?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q: How does the school position students of color to express or teach others about their culture, and for you to learn about other cultures?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q: This might seem like a hard question, but do you think about interracial dating? If so, as a student of color, can you talk about what that means to you? If you do not date interracially, can you talk about why you do not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q: Help me understand your social circles in your neighborhood and in school. Describe each for me, the role you play, and the roles others play?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q: I would like to hear your perspective on language between friends. Have you ever heard of the term “code switching”?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• If no, explain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• If yes, can you talk about how you code switch between school and your neighborhood?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q: Can we talk about the “N” word?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• If no, move on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• If yes, ask next question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q: Tell me, when you are hanging out with friends in your home community; do you and your friends use the “N” word in reference to each other? If so, what does it represent when you use it with friends in your local neighborhood?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Q:** Do you use the “N” word in school with your Black peers? How about around your White friends?  

**Q:** If yes to its use with Black friends, why is it okay to use the “N” word used in one place and not the other?  

**Phase 3**  
(Clarification/Follow-Up)  
**Q:** If you had a chance to speak with another African American male [or female] just starting out in METCO, what are some of the things you would share?  

**Q:** If you could add something else, other types of important information, what would it be? In other words, what would you want the education community to know about your experience as a METCO student?  

**Q:** We covered a lot and thank you for participating. If I can ask one last question, what are your personal thoughts about this entire exercise (if any)?
References


