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Whose Concern Matters?: Student Support and Project Concern

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Senior Research Project

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“Our children going to the suburbs, they take a lot with them. They are not given the opportunity to express themselves in the way that they should be because it is hurting themselves. It is closed. It’s not opened to involve as much as it should. So they are taking with that, with no outlet. So the suburban schools are benefiting, but they are benefiting less because they can not be themselves.”

Nessa Orum- Director of the CREC Choice Program

Introduction

School integration requires much more than just transporting students from one neighborhood to another. It requires support academically and socially from several sources. This is the case with the voluntary city to suburb busing program in Hartford from 1966 to 1998, Project Concern that bused students of color from Hartford to public, predominantly White suburban schools. This senior research project investigates and analyzes how the sources of support received by Project Concern students affect their long-term memories of their experience in the program. My findings give me great confidence that there is a connection between strong support and positive experiences from Project Concern staff, family, and school personnel because of the high frequency of support from these sources. Because of the not so high frequency of strong support from the suburban community, I have a lower level of confidence that there is a relationship. Because of the low frequency of strong support from bus/transportation and urban/home community, I can not make claims about their relationship to positive overall memories of Project Concern.

This subject matter is significant because city-suburb busing programs result in much more than school desegregation. They have significant consequences for many of the individuals involved, especially those students of color who are placed in predominantly White and suburban

school environments. In retrospect, there are many aspects of their experiences that are well worth exploring in order to understand the city suburb transfer program more completely. Project Concern, Hartford's voluntary busing program, was initiated in 1966 and affected many students' lives until its finish. Now that these alumni are adults, we can gain many insights on busing programs (specifically Project Concern and busing programs in general), support for the students, and desegregation by examining their experiences from how they remember it. With the Connecticut Supreme Court case, Sheff versus O'Neil being settled, desegregation is at the forefront of educational policy makers' plans. By 2007, Hartford's goal is to have thirty percent of urban students enrolled in integrated Hartford Schools. The other seventy percent have other choices including Project Concern's descendent, Capitol Region Educational Council's Choice Program (CREC). The Choice Program voluntarily buses students of color from Hartford schools to predominantly White suburban schools, continuing where Project Concern left off. The Sheff settlement also allotted forty-five million dollars to be spent on school desegregation in Connecticut over the next four years, including the Choice Program. By examining what type of strong support in the city to suburb busing program was the most influential, it could allow us to predict the best ways to spend that allotment. The oral histories of those who have experienced such programs are important to document in order to obtain first hand accounts of the voluntary city to suburb busing experiences and outcome.

Methodology

The research was conducted by a process of interviewing those who have participated in Project Concern at any point as a student with a standard set of interviewing questions. The

questions that were asked to the interviewee were those that were created by the Education 308 class in the Fall of 2002 with the help of Renita Satchell, a Project Concern alumnus who participated as the first interviewee during a class time. I included in my research the ten interviews previously conducted and transcribed by the class as part of my data. Both Dana Banks, who is also pursuing to further her study on these Project Concern oral histories, and I conducted and transcribed seven more interviews each of other alumni at their convenience in addition. We collaborated on our oral history research in order to gain a fuller understanding of the wide range of experiences. We collected our sample beginning with a list of alumni that we received from Mary Carroll, the former director of Project Concern, that she collected because their children are enrolled in the CREC Choice Program. From those interviews, we obtained references of other alumni contacts. We attempted to create a sample of a diverse range of graduation years, suburban schools, and a balanced mix of males and females. Our final sample consisted of fifteen females, nine males. We had alumni whose graduation years ranged from 1977 to 1993. The twenty four alumni were bused out to ten different suburbs. [NOTE: The Project Concern Oral History Interviews have been deposited at the Hartford Studies Project, Trinity College.]

In order to be able use the oral histories, we had the volunteer interviewees sign a consent form allowing us to use the information collected in my academic research project and allowing them any restrictions they felt appropriate. In addition to the oral histories collected of Project Concern alumni, we also conducted an unstructured and informal interview with Mary Carroll and Nessa Orum, the director of the CREC Choice Program today. All but one of the interviews were conducted by a White student of Trinity College. This factor might have had an influence on some of the responses to questions concerning their experiences in Project Concern. As

Susan Eaton, author of The Other Boston Busing Story¹, stated in a recent interview “when interviewing cross-race, one must acknowledge the ‘white elephant’ in the room.”² By this, she suggests that by having a White interviewer conducting an interview on racial matters, there could be a sort of uneasiness or even possibility of sugar-coating of answers.

By conducting oral histories as a means of collecting information, we gain a lot more than just occurrences and statistics. When a student participated in Project Concern, they had to adapt to a new set of pedagogical values, social norms, speech patterns, and cultural practices. We must realize the symbolic meanings that are created with city to suburb busing programs. By doing this and not the reciprocal, we are implicitly stating that “White is Right” and that they must learn to adapt in order to survive. This cultural shift is not easy and a student needs support in order for a program like Project Concern to be successful. By collecting oral histories of the alumni of this program, we can determine how the types and degree of support received by Project Concern students years ago affected their overall memories of their experience.

I organized the different sources of support into six categories that are listed below. Below each category label and description is an example of what would have been regarded as strong support:

- Project Concern staff and programming
 - “We did have a person from the Choice Program [meaning Project Concern] who was at our school, her office was at our school, and she was kind of like our mother...if we had disagreements...we always had to go

¹ Eaton, Susan E. The Other Boston Busing Story: What’s Won and Lost Across the Boundary Line. Yale University Press; New Haven, CT. 2001.

² Eaton, Susan. Interview with Ed 308 seminar via phone. October 29th, 2002.

see [her]. That was my concept of support in school, and if I had any problems with anything, she would take care of it.”

- Family- This could include siblings, grandparents or other family members, but in most cases concentrates on the student’s parents.
 - “My mother was made aware of the program...she was always pushing for education and to make it work for me. Not just go and come back...My mom was very supportive and open to me developing relationships... I am very thankful for my mom and family support and the opportunity to be in a situation where people were pulling for me academically.”
- Suburban community- This mostly includes suburban peers/friends and friends’ families from the suburban communities where the participant attended school through Project Concern.
 - “Sometimes some of the people who lived out there in Plainville, they would let us come and stay over their houses when we were in activities...they fed us dinner and washed and changed...Then after usually a bus would come and get us or someone’s parent would come and get us from the dances and the afternoon activities. It was fun getting into different atmosphere and interacting with different people, different colors then yourself.”
- School personnel- This includes teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, administration, and other staff from the suburban schools.
 - “When I say support, I mean through the faculty...Playing sports helped because again [more activities] in school...but later on I had the support of some teachers in the high school. I was seen as a student, but a student who had potential and something to offer, and to the administrations of the school...they gave support there.”
- Bus/transportation- This includes support which includes bus drivers and availability of bus transportation.
 - “Most of the time, they had a bus or a cab company, Canada Cab, used to come and pick us up after school. Just long as they had enough children that were staying that they would send a bus, or even if I was the only one that stayed, which sometimes it was, they would send a cab for me. Yup, bring me home.”

- Urban/home community- This includes friends from the neighborhood, religious organizations, or other community influences.
 - “Because I had that relationship with the kids at home, I could come home and jump right in and have a good time. I could go to school and focus on academics. I think I had an advantage being that I lived in one community where I felt comfortable and welcomed and going to a school in another one. I had the community at home: my church, my family, all from Hartford, being a close knit community.”

There was not one interview questions that directly questioned these types of support. The only question that concerned support was “What type of support did you receive while in Project Concern?” How they chose to understand that question was up to the alumni. As I was reading the oral histories collected, I noted if the alumni mentioned that these six types of support were present, not present, or if they did not mention it at all. Their responses for each category were weighted as either “strong” or “weak” support.

In order to evaluate if the alumni’s long-term memory of Project Concern, I carefully examined each oral history transcript in order to gain an understanding of its success. Although I was attempting to gain a general impression, there was one question that was the most helpful. This question was, “Would you repeat this program? Why or why not?” I then categorized their responses to that question as well as overall impression of experience as either positive, ambivalent, or negative. The sample consisted of thirteen positive overall memories, nine ambivalent overall memories, and two negative memories. To analyze the affect of the types of support, I counted and examined examples of the support that was discussed by the alumni in order to find any sort of pattern.

To analyze the affect of the types of support, I counted and examined examples of the support that was discussed by the alumni in order to find a sort of pattern. I used thematic analysis to analyze the collected information. By looking at the frequency of strong support

from each of the six categories in positive and ambivalent overall memories, I can draw connections between the presence of strong support and positive overall memories. With a high frequency (eleven or more instances) of strong support, I have great confidence that there is a connection between a particular type of support and a positive memory. With a lower frequency (five to ten instances) of strong support, I have less confidence in the relationship between support and positive memory. With a low frequency of strong support (four instances or less), I can not make any claims about the relationship between the source of support and a positive memory in Project Concern.

Existing Literature

In Thomas Mahan's article "The Busing of Students for Equal Opportunity,"³ he examines three desegregation busing programs including Hartford's Project Concern, Boston's METCO, and in White Plains, New York. He discusses that it is not just the heterogeneous school environment that is the issue in city to suburb busing, but the learning, teaching, reinforcing, and expectations of the school environment that are important factors to students who participate in these programs. He believes when a minority student from the city enters a predominantly White and suburban school, resocialization will take place because of the norms, values, and expectations of their new environment, especially if "supportive assistance is provided in the initial exploration" (pg 292). By examining these three city to suburb busing programs, he discusses their overall objectives including suburban objections or supporting of the program. He had similar research methods to my research project in that he conducted fifty

³ Mahan, Thomas W. 1968. "The Busing of Students for Equal Opportunities." *The Journal of Negro Education*. V37, i3. pp 291-300.

structured interviews with Project Concern students, however, his oral histories were collected while the students were still attending Project Concern and his interviews were conducted by an African American. He states that an aspect that separates Project Concern from the other two busing programs is that “Hartford has operated an experiment within an experiment in that it has provided a supportive team (teacher and paraprofessional aide) to supplement the suburban school’s resources in some instances and not in others in the hope of being able to determine whether suburban placement or supportive assistance or both is the ‘treatment of choice’” (pg 295). In my research project, we can investigate similar questions by looking at the presence of the school/Project Concern support and see if it is as important as other sources.

Susan Eaton’s book, The Other Boston Busing Story, is another valuable piece of existing literature. She describes the memories of students participating in a similar voluntary busing program in Boston. As for types of support discussed, Eaton stresses the occurrence “in which black students made connections with powerful whites and were provided opportunities as a result. These stories often involve host families or parents of good suburban friends” (pg 151). This can be translated into the presence of positive support from the suburban community throughout my research. However prevalent this might be, however, Eaton states that the most important influence on a student’s success in a city to suburb busing program is their parent’s support. This includes the belief that their child should continue in the program when she says that, “most important, METCO’s past participants point out that the program wouldn’t have had a chance to benefit them at all had their parents not been supportive of the program and, in many cases, forced them to stick with it” (pg 154). She states that this is the most important factor in the adult alumni’s memory of sources of support in retrospect. Again, we will see how these speculations are reflected in the oral histories collected from Project Concern alumni in my

research. We used this work to structure our own research on Project Concern. It analyzes oral history interviews from alumni from Boston's busing program, METCO, much like our research.

Results, Conclusions, and Policy Implications

The results that we derived from our data displays very useful information concerning the type of support that available to Project Concern students and the relationship to overall positive memories of the program. Out of the twenty-four interviews conducted:

- Thirteen alumni stated that they received strong support from Project Concern.
- Twelve alumni stated that they received strong support from school personnel.
- Eleven alumni stated that they received strong support from their family.
- Eight alumni stated that they received strong support from the suburban community.
- Four alumni stated that they received strong support from their urban/home community.
- Three alumni stated that they received strong support from bus/transportation.

As we can see from these numbers, the three sources of strong support that have the strongest relationship to the overall memory of their experience in Project Concern were from Project Concern personnel and program, school personnel, and family.

From the oral histories that we have collected, many conclusions about the type of support received can greatly affect the overall memory of Project Concern Alumni. From this small sample of oral histories, we can not make generalizations of the memories of all Project Concern Alumni, the presence, nor lack of support from these several sources. We can, however, examine the examples and reflections of the alumni in order to gainer a greater understanding of how the support sources affected their memories of Project Concern.

As stated in Mahan's article, we can see how the support provide by Project Concern staff is a important role in the success of the voluntary city to suburb busing program. Because

of the high frequency (thirteen out of twenty-four) of strong Project Concern support, I have a greater level of confidence that there is a relationship. The majority of the alumni interviewed stated that they received positive support from Project Concern staff. One positive respondent (5) stated that she had “a great paraprofessional who was our bus aide also, she was a bus aide as well as a paraprofessional. She was like a mom to me, she was like a surrogate mom to all of the [Project Concern] students.” She continues to state that the students could go to her with any types of problems and the paraprofessional would be there to help. This type of support connects the Hartford student connect in their suburban environment by giving them a direct support network as well as a voice in the school.

Hartford’s present day voluntary city to suburb busing program, the CREC Choice Program, does not have the aid of paraprofessionals because of funding issues. The director of this program, Nessa Orum feels that this is a tremendous disadvantage to the students:

We would love to see people from Hartford riding the buses with those kids and stay with them in the school district. They would be connected to families as well as the children. They need that built in support system. Until we can do that, we are just busing kids to the suburbs and not giving them the support that they need.⁴

The former director of Project Concern, Mary Carroll stated how the parents of the Hartford students were apprehensive about how their children would be treated in the suburban school so that is why “they came up with the answer of paraprofessionals. To add to what Nessa said, the other thing they did was to be a presence in that school. To listen, work with staff on things that perhaps out of not just racism, but out of sheer ignorance were harmful to our children and they needed to be told.” This supports the theory of the importance of support from the busing program itself. One respondent who said that she felt as if she had no support from the program stated that (9) there was no one during her Project Concern who bridged her urban environment

⁴ Nessa Orum and Mary Carroll. Interview with Lauren Gutmann. April 21st, 2003.

and suburban environment. She declared that it is “important to have someone out there from Hartford, who knows your background, knows your neighborhood.”

The second source of support that I believe was influential in a positive experience in Project Concern was the strong support of one’s family. Because of the high frequency (eleven out of twenty-four) alumni who mentioned strong family support, I have a greater level of confidence that it has a relationship to a positive memory of Project Concern. Nessa Orum is a firm believer in this as well with her direction of the Choice Program. She states that, “We help the parents that they need in order to better understand and support their children. We urge families to be involved in the schools. We have trainings to understand that without parental involvement, the students will not feel supported.” These training include workshops and orientations that allow the parents to be involved in their child’s suburban school. We can see this as a pattern throughout the oral histories of Project Concern alumni. None of the respondents who had negative memories of their experience stated that they felt that they had strong parental or familial support. However, half of the alumni who had either a positive or overall positive with ambivalence stated that they received strong parental support while participating in Project Concern. One definitely positive respondent discussed that his most supportive source was his mother:

She was always pushing for education and to make it work for me, not just to go and come back...My mom was very supportive and open to me developing relationships...I am very thankful for my mom and family support and the opportunity to be in a situation where people were pulling for me academically.

This pattern greatly reflects the finding that Susan Eaton found as well as we can see from the strong connection between family support and success in the school busing program. Another theme that we can see from participants who felt that Project Concern was successful was the fact that many alumni’s parents would not let them leave the program if they wanted to. Several

individuals stated that they would have left the suburban schools if given the opportunity, but their parents would allow them to and they were very grateful for that in retrospect. Two of the respondents who did not graduate high school through Project Concern state that they regret that their parents allowed them to and wished that they had remained in Project Concern.

One of the Project Concern alumni (16) interviewed who stated that he would not participate in the program if he had the opportunity said that he would in fact send his own children through a similar program “with them knowing that they had my full support.” He would make sure that his children could have open discussions with him about their experiences and issues about the program since he has been through a similar experience and can understand what they are going through. He believes that the support from the parents is what can make the difference between an overall positive experience and an overall negative experience.

The third source of strong support that I found to be influential to attaining a positive memory of alumni’s Project Concern experience was from school personnel. This includes teachers, principals, coaches, etc. Because of the high frequency of strong school personnel support, I have a higher level of confidence that there is a relationship to positive overall memory of Project Concern. This was an important source of support in order to make the students feel like they belonged there. As one positive alumni (3) remembers, “I felt that the teachers were very supportive. They never once made me feel like I didn’t fit in or that I was unwelcomed. If there was any academic help needed, they would always give me extra help.” One respondent who stated that he received no strong support from any source stated that he did from one teacher from the suburban school that he still remains in touch with.

There were several examples, however, of alumni stating that they had strong cases of negative support because of their urban or student of color background. However, what is very

interested in these three cases, one respondent had very positive memories of the program, one was overall positive with ambivalence, and the third has very negative memories. I find it interesting that among these three examples of teacher prejudices, (16, 19, and 21) there is not a common theme in overall memories of the program.

Support from the students suburban community (predominantly friends from school and their families) were a source of support for a large number of Project Concern alumni. Because of the not so high frequency (eight out of the twenty-four alumni) of strong support from the students' suburban community, I have a lower level of confidence that there is a relationship to an overall positive memory of Project Concern. I, however, believe that this is because this source of support is very important for the enjoyment of the student in the new environment at the time, however, is not necessary for the success of the program. What is needed to cultivate strong support from the suburban community is some sort of program that will include the suburban community in issues pertaining to them and the bused Hartford students.

There were no instances of any sort of supportive programming for the Project Concern participants or their suburban peers (such as diversity workshops or orientation programs). One student (22) did express the need for something of the sort in order to facilitate discussion and bring the students together. One student who had a lot of ambivalence about her experience with Project Concern described some programming that would have been extremely supportive if they had occurred during her schooling:

Maybe there should be a program on diversity or something to bring the kids together, some common ground. When I was there, there was nothing. Again, we were thrown into it. if there was some sort of transition, something during the summer for the kids who are bused in to go and meet some of the kids who are already there to form some sort of relationships, maybe that would better. Not just thrown in there during a school day.

I believe that the CREC Choice Program feels the need for this type of support for their students because they have implemented a similar program even though they do not have proper funding to hire paraprofessionals, which, as we have seen patterned throughout the oral histories, had proven to be a strong source of positive support for Project Concern students. This, then, would be a productive use for the funding that was allotted by the Connecticut Supreme court to be used for desegregation. Both those alumni interviewed who have experienced this type of program and the director of the new voluntary busing program stress this idea. By doing so, the city to suburb busing program will attempt to bring the racial divide together for blatant discussion and dialogue.

The two sources of strong support that did not seem to be very influential on alumni's overall memory of the program was support from bus/transportation and home/urban community. Because of the low frequency of strong support from bus/transportation (four out of twenty-four) and home/urban community (three out of twenty-four) I can not make any claims about the relationship between strong support and overall memory of Project Concern. However, throughout the interviews, I did notice a pattern of many people regretting not being able to participate in extra-curricular activities due to a lack of transportation. Eight of the twenty-four alumni interviewed stated that they could not participate in extra-curricular activities because of the lack of transportation and time involved in going to and from Hartford to the suburbs. Because they woke up very early to catch the bus and did not get home till late, the Project Concern students often could not join a sports team, attend social events, or become a member of a hobby/interest group offered at their suburban schools. Many of these respondents felt that if they had been able to participate in the extra-curricular activities, they would have fit

in more and possibly connected more with their suburban community. One positive respondent (3) stated:

That was the worst part of it all for me. My mom didn't drive. My dad worked a lot so it was difficult for me to get involved in after school activities...so extracurricular activities were very limited. That is the one thing I regret out of it because I couldn't really participate like I wanted to because of the distance that I lived.

In order for desegregation programs like Project Concern and the CREC Program to succeed, students can not be disadvantaged because of where they are coming from. By not providing enough transportation to allow the urban student full equality of participation levels, you are curtailing their ability to accepted and connected to the suburban environment. Besides implementing a better, more efficient transportation, there could also be after school programming involving the school in an urban context. Hartford is rich with cultural outlets that are not available in the suburban communities: museums, political offices, theatres, etc. If there were suburban school extracurricular programming involving these outlets, it would facilitate not only the inclusion of Project Concern students, but the connection between the suburban and the urban environment. It might also de-demonize the city for many suburban students and families.

Using these twenty-four oral histories of Project Concern alumni, I explored how the sources of strong support affect the overall memory of the alumni years after their experience. From the higher frequency of strong support of Project Concern, the school personnel, and the students' family, I have a greater level of confidence that there is a relationship between the support and the overall memory. From the not so high frequency of strong suburban community support, I have a lower level of confidence that there is a relationship. Because of the low frequency of strong bus/transportation and urban/home community support, I can not make any claims about the relationship of the support to the alumni's overall memory of Project Concern. By examining these findings, we can really explore ways to increase the success of a voluntary

city to suburb busing programs like Project Concern. In a time like today when desegregation is at the head of educational policy-makers priority list, this analysis is integral to our understanding of the busing experience.