Stories of Boston's Busing Desegregation Crisis: the role of historical narratives in contemporary urban educational politics

Meghan Doran, PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Northeastern University
Email: meghandoran@gmail.com
Introduction

Once viewed as an abolitionist haven, the perception of Boston as a racially liberal and welcoming city was shattered nearly forty years ago when protest erupted over the desegregation of the city’s schools. For over two years institutions (primarily city government, the police, and the schools), communities, and activists in the city were embroiled in at times violent conflict. Boston’s 1974 crisis over school desegregation brought to the fore the intersecting tensions of race, class, and neighborhood underlying urban educational politics. While the crisis eventually subsided, many of the tensions it evoked remain unresolved. In 2012 Boston, like other cities across the United States, put together a task force to reconsider its school assignment process, with a push towards a return to neighborhood schools, which it has not had since its schools were desegregated. In this context, the way that people in the city remember and understand the crisis over school desegregation continues to be both relevant and contested.

This research asks how narratives of history impact contemporary urban politics. To answer this question I examine the narratives of the crisis Boston experienced in the 1970s over school desegregation that have circulated through the city’s process to reform school assignment. Through participant observation and interviews I explore the multiple stories that people involved in the public process of reforming how students are assigned to schools tell about this history. I argue that this history both constrained how school assignment could be accomplished and was used by actors to contest how we should approach, race, schooling and the distribution of resources in the city. Ultimately a narrative emerged which distanced the present from the history, but this narrative was not without contestation I conclude with a discussion of the nature of collective remembering in the urban educational politics, arguing there is a complex relationship between the past and the present, where each shapes the other. Those interested in how the urban terrain is shaped as an intersection between
global and local forces should heed the role that historical narrative plays in contemporary urban educational politics.

**Literature**

Sociologists studying the processes of memory have long known that story-telling is an essential method through which we make sense of our social reality (Maines 1993, Somers 1994). Although there is a rich and growing literature concerning this complex and active relationship between the past and present, urban sociologists have also yet to fully explore how narratives help us make sense of the city. The role of collective memory and narratives of the past are not often central considerations in sociological treatments of political claims-making and decision-making. Macro-level approaches detail the construction of the city by looking at a constellation of social forces involved in the social production of space, often emphasizing the role of powerful economic and political actors seeking particular ends (Castells 1977, Gottdiener 1985, Sassen 1991). Influential political economists such as Castells (1977) and Gottdiener (1985) created a theoretical space for the role of symbolic meaning in shaping human action in cities, yet both leave this concept underdeveloped. At the same time, there is a rich ethnographic tradition in urban sociology from the Chicago school to the present that explores how people live in and experience the urban environment (Short 1971), but rarely from the perspective of urban politics.

Studies of urban politics in the tradition Stone’s (1989) regime theory focus closely on actors at the level of the city, giving deep historical accounts of urban development as they outline the particular coalitions that drive urban politics. The study of urban regimes, however, while making space for the historical peculiarities of space, makes little reference to contemporary meaning-making related to that history in urban environments. This tradition extends into the literature on urban education politics. In his study of regime politics in urban education in Baltimore, for example, Orr (1996) maps out the actors and relationships involved in school reform, giving a detailed historical context. However, the ways that
people understand schooling in relationship to Baltimore’s history and the role that understanding plays in coalition building are absent (see Henig et al [1999] for a comparison across cities).

Theorists of cultural politics suggest that political claims are not only strategic, based on needs and relationships, but also structured by symbolic meaning and available cultural narratives (Olick and Levy 1997, Alvarez et al 1998). In their work on ‘growth machines,’ Logan and Molotch (1987) extend work on regime politics to consider the symbolic meaning of place for many city residents in contrast to the exchange-value perspective brought by pro-growth urban elites in business and politics. For Logan and Molotch, sentiment and symbolic meaning are key components of contestation in cities with pro-growth regimes (though they only have impact where strong organization is present). Studies of gentrification have tied narrative directly to place-making, showing how gentrifiers, real estate developers and the state all work to tell new stories about gentrifying neighborhoods (Blokland 2009, Smith 1996, Zukin 1989). Furthermore, studies of the role of narrative in social movements have shown that social movements are often ‘wars of interpretation’ that take place in multiple arenas, including politics, as much as they are struggles to achieve material demands, while struggles for the democratization of social relationships (in terms of race, class, gender, etc.) are as political as they are cultural (Alvarez et al 1998).

Contemporary studies of urban educational politics point to the role of neoliberal ideology in urban policy (Hankins and Martin 2006, Lipman 2011). The neoliberal politics of education entails building coalitions to support the implementation of specific policies that support privatization and decentralization, such as the growth of standardization and privatization. The cultural politics of urban education are built around a logic of accountability and choice – a new common sense of how schools should be administered. Race and class remain central to the cultural politics of education as reform movement draws on the urban imaginary of the poor, black and brown students languishing in underserved schools (Haymes 1995, Lipman 2011).
Neither the logics of growth or neoliberal privatization have marched uncontested through cities and urban school systems, though they may have formed the dominant discourse (Brown 1999, McCann 2002). These narratives do not go unchallenged; instead the dominant discourse is continuously remade and challenged through a discursive struggle over meaning and values (McCann 2002). It is my argument that part of this discursive struggle in the cultural politics of urban education occurs through competing narratives of the city’s history. A stronger understanding of memory can help elucidate the workings of urban politics.

Places are articulations of social relations set in time as well as space, and thus often contested through narratives of the past (Blokland 2001, Degnen 2005, Massey 1995). Empirical work, focused primarily on the UK, has begun to affirm the interconnection between place, memory, narrative and social relations. In her study of an inner city London neighborhood, Jon (1996) shows how people construct their sense of place to relation to race, class and national identity. She finds that people from different economic class backgrounds draw on different pasts which inform their understanding of the present and future. Mah’s (2010) more recent study of industrial ruination in another British city, Newcastle upon Tyne, focuses on ‘living memories’ of events that have not yet found closure. She argues that collective memories are social reconstructions of the past and thus spaces not just where there is difference, but spaces of active contestation around social relations. Like Jon, Mah found that memories varied by class. Through her work on memory in a coal mining village in Northern England, Degnen (2005) lays out a comprehensive model of social memory which includes three dimensions: time, space and relationality. Degnen argues that places not only evoke the past, but in these histories people tell stories of how the webs of relations that exist within a place have come to exist. This theoretical and empirical work suggests that people use stories of the past to discuss and contest the meanings of place and that race and class identification are significant in the construction of social
memory, though much of it does not directly address how the construction of memory impacts urban politics.

Studies that have looked directly at social memory in urban politics suggest that further exploration of history as a point of contestation will be illuminating. In his study of post–civil war Beirut, Nagel (2002) describes how the city is being both rebuilt and recast as unified. Struggles over the telling of the history of the city revealed that disempowered groups rejected this dominant discourse. In her study of neighborhood gentrification, Blokland (2009) found that historical narratives are central to place-making, impacting how a neighborhood is defined and thus what resources it is able to access. In the New Haven neighborhood she studied, long-time Italian Americans (even those who no longer lived in the neighborhoods) and more-recent gentrifiers emphasized a diverse and vibrant neighborhood with a strong ethnic heritage, which ignored the role and position of their poor black neighbors. Excluded from the history and narrative of the neighborhoods, those residents found it harder to have their needs met through city and social services.

I aim to build upon the work of Nagel, Blokland and others to look closely at how history is understood and deployed in urban educational politics. In Boston, I have chosen to look at how the history of school desegregation is impacting a contemporary process to reform school assignment. Scholars of social memory have looked at both the role that memory plays in constraining options in the present and ways that present social relations influence how we remember the past (Schudson 1989, Zerubavel 1996). In this paper I explore both, asking how does Boston’s history of school desegregation impact the contemporary process to reform school assignment, and how do the actors in this process actively use this history in the work of reforming school assignment?

Methods

My analysis for this research is based on participant observation, semi-structured interviews and documents collected during a year and a half of field work. As an activist-ethnographer I attended 32
meetings related to school assignment, including community meetings, External Advisory Committee
meetings and Boston School Committee meetings over a 12 month period. At these meetings I observed
and spoke from multiple positions: as a researcher, as a parent who would be impacted by any change
in school assignment, and as an organizer for the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project, a community
history and change project for which I have worked since August 2011. Each of these positions has
contributed to my overall perspective for this research.

I also interviewed ten people from the 24-member External Advisory Committee [EAC] which
was appointed to make a recommendation to ‘improve school choice.’ Three of these interviewees
identified as white/Caucasian or Irish Catholic, one as Hispanic, one as black and Latino, one as black and
Chinese, and 4 as Black/African American. All of the interviewees identified as middle/upper middle
class and all held professional positions in the business or non-profit sectors (as did all of the members
of the EAC) and all of them graduated college. Seven of them hold post-graduate degrees. In short the
group of EAC members I interviewed was diverse and with high socio-economic status, which is
reflective of the EAC as a whole.

Finally, I analyzed hundreds of documents, including meeting minutes, videos, transcripts of
speeches and community-produced letter and flyers. Field notes, interviews and documents were all
coded for themes which form the basis for this analysis. The research reported here represents
preliminary analysis of data from my larger dissertation project which asks the same question, about the
role of memory in contemporary urban politics, but from a broader perspective by looking at grassroots
actors and politics in addition to the institutional actors and politics presented here.

Context

In 1989, fifteen years after the violent and tumultuous desegregation of Boston’s Public Schools,
Judge W. Arthur Garrity closed the federal case on all parts of his court’s desegregation order except
one – the provision that the BPS must hire at least 25% Afrian American teachers. That school year the Boston Public Schools implemented a new school assignment process, “The Controlled Choice Plan”, which split the city into three zones and assigned students to schools in those zones based on proximity, sibling attendance and racial composition of the zone. In 2012, the zone system was still in place with an important exception: in 1999 a federal court had ruled that the BPS could not use race as a basis for school assignment (Bordas 2006).

Early in his career Mayor Thomas Menino pledged that he would reform the city’s school assignment system. In 2004 the mayor and then School Superintendent Thomas Payzant put together a committee to reform school assignment headed by Ted Landsmark, best known in Boston as the African American man in an iconic photo depicted being stabbed with an American flag by ‘anti-busing’ protestors at city hall. The committee ultimately recommended that no major change be made due to a lack of quality educational options across Boston’s neighborhoods. They also noted in their recommendations that “even though the city has changed dramatically, given Boston’s history of segregated schools and busing, [a ten zone assignment model] would have opened old wounds for many of Boston’s older residents, creating much divisiveness throughout the city” (Gonsalves 2004). In 2007, Carol Johnson was appointed Superintendent of the Boston Public Schools; she led another failed attempt at reforming school assignment in 2009. In his 2012 State of the City speech, Mayor Menino announced once again that he would be working to reform school assignment, with a goal of sending students to schools closer to their homes:

... something stands in the way of taking our system to the next level: a student assignment process that ships our kids to schools across our city. Pick any street. A dozen children probably attend a dozen different schools. Parents might not know each other; children might not play together. They can’t carpool, or study for the same tests. We won’t have the schools our kids deserve until we build school communities that serve them well. I’m committing tonight that one year from now Boston will have adopted a radically different student assignment plan – one that puts a priority on children attending schools closer to their homes. I am directing Superintendent Johnson to appoint a citywide group of dedicated individuals. They will help design the plan to get us there and engage the community on this...
transition. I know I have talked about changing the student assignment plan before. We have made many improvements over the years. 2012 will be the year to finish the job. (Menino 2012)

In March of 2012, the BPS announced the formation of an External Advisory Committee on Improving School Choice (EAC). The committee met over the spring and summer, while the BPS held two rounds of community meetings across the city. In the fall the BPS presented five models it had worked with consultants to develop based on EAC and community feedback. One of these models was based strictly on proximity; the other four were all zone-based. Not long after, several ‘community proposals’ arose as alternatives to the BPS models, including one by city councilor and soon-to-be mayoral candidate John Connolly and one from a Graduate Student in math at MIT, Peng Shi. The Peng Shi proposal caught the attention of the EAC and with revision became a top-contender. This ‘home-based’ model allocated a basket of options to students based on their home address and the quality of options available to them (as measured by standardized test scores.)

Throughout their year of operation the EAC met regularly, listening to and debating proposals and reviewing data. Due to public meeting laws in Massachusetts all meetings were public, and often included time for public comment. Early on in the process two key dilemmas were raised that resurfaced continuously through the EAC’s process both in their own meetings and in community feedback meetings led by the BPS. The first was a tension between providing ‘equitable access to quality schools’ and sending student to schools ‘closer to home.’ This was because the quality schools were unequally distributed across the city – some areas had several, while others had almost none. The other, related tension was between increasing quality and providing equitable access to quality. The EAC announced early on that their task was not to directly raise the quality of the schools. However, there was a consistent call from some community members to raise school quality in areas where it was lacking, before making any change.

In February of 2013, after several delayed votes, the EAC voted to recommend the ‘home-based A’ model to the Superintendent, over a model that split the city into 11 zones and another home-based
model. The vote was nearly unanimous - 4 committee members abstained, purportedly for their lack of participation in the process, 2 voted for no model, and one voted for ‘home-based model B’.

The superintendent then recommended this plan to the school committee, with a further recommendation to alter the lottery algorithm for assignment to remove a proximity preference (a recommendation which the EAC had voted against). In March the Boston School Committee voted 6 to 1 to approve the superintendent’s recommendation, thus, as the *Boston Globe* put it, “scrapp[ing] a school assignment plan developed under court-ordered desegregation almost a quarter century ago and embrac[ing]a new system that seeks to allow more students to attend schools closer to home” (Vaznis 2013).

*Leadership and Media: Contesting History*

From the outset there was a question as to what role the history of school desegregation in Boston would play in the city’s process to reform school assignment. At the first community engagement meeting of the process in March, 2012, State Representative and historian Byron Rushing addressed an audience of parents, advocates, and BPS staff in a Roxbury school auditorium, with the members of the EAC sitting on a stage behind him:

“All of this is about memory. All the arguments we have over the next couple of days will be about memory. Now memory is essential. Memory tells us, informs us who we are and where we are. We know we are in this very place because we remember coming here. If you had amnesia at this moment, you would not know where you are, it is memory that locates you. But memory is limited, because memory is individual and personal. And somehow, we work all of us, to find out what your memories are, to find out each other’s memories. We not only try to find out the memories of the living, we want to know the memories of the dead. And gathering all this together is what we call history. You cannot do this without memory, you cannot do this without history. “

After giving a history of race and school assignment beginning in 1849 and ending with school desegregation in the 1970’s, Rushing goes on to conclude:
"What can we do? We cannot fear the bad news of the story. We cannot ignore the bad news of the story. The decision was in 1974. That was 38 years ago. How many parents in Boston are not 38 years old yet? So there is a whole population of people who only hear about this, who don’t have it in their own memory. But then, how many people in Boston are over 38 years old? The first piece of anything we do like this has to begin with people connecting on the memory, connecting on the history, coming to a consensus on what happened. Maya Angelou has it correct: ‘History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived. And if faced with courage, need not be lived again.’ (clapping from audience) So to do this recalling, we must confront first and admit our lack of consensus about education.

That Byron Rushing was chosen to give this speech in a Roxbury auditorium, introduced by mayor Menino is significant. Roxbury is viewed as the heart of Boston’s black community, and Rushing it’s darling historian. To kick off the community engagement process in such a way, with Rushing’s clarity about the role of memory and history in relationship to the present, with the EAC sitting behind Rushing, and with Mayor Menino’s support, appeared to signify that deference to Boston’s desegregation history would play an important role as the city addressed how school assignment should be revised.

As the process proceeded, however, a different reality materialized. Over the summer at community conversations across the city and at EAC meetings, the history of school desegregation never made it onto the agenda. At the end of the summer, Mayor Menino delivered a very different message in a community meeting in his home neighborhood of Hyde Park: “this is about the future, it’s about the future of the Boston Public Schools, it’s not about the past. We could sit here and argue about what happened in the past – uh-uh, it’s not gonna work. It’s about our young people, that’s why I’m so engaged.” Again the place where this speech was delivered is significant – Hyde Park is a traditionally white, though now diverse, neighborhood and an important part of Mayor Menino’s base. In previous speeches Menino had not mentioned the history of school desegregation, and here he signaled that he felt the history has no place in this process.
So how did the process go from appearing to be steeped in history to one which is future-oriented and where the past is marked as off-limits? The answer to this may lie in the EAC itself. As Isabel\textsuperscript{1}, an active EAC member, told me:

[Another member of the EAC] and I met with the Superintendent and [some of her staff] to get to know each other for a session and [we] were very vocal we are not doing this based on history. We are moving ahead, it’s a new day… [Neither of us] are from here. We want to bow with respect to the history but let’s move on. Whereas [the BPS staff members we met with] absolutely didn’t want anything to do with that. They wanted very much to have history in the forefront and make it be basically the base from where we were starting. And we fought back on that politely and gently.

Arthur, another EAC member, spoke about the presentation from Representative Rushing, which he had missed:

So the very first meeting at Orchard Gardens and that was when they kicked it off and they brought in folks from around the city. Byron Rushing spoke and I guess his speech generated a bit of controversy and he talked about that early history… I think some people were not happy with the fact that he referred back to that very early history.

Arthur goes on to say he can’t quite recall, but he doesn’t think it was EAC members who expressed unhappiness about this. Regardless, between these comments and the mayor’s apparent lack of support, it seems there was some push back on taking a historical perspective and talking directly about the city’s school desegregation history. Finally, there was also media pressure in this regard. Lawrence Harmon, a long-time Boston resident and writer wrote an editorial in the *Boston Globe*, praising the mayor’s selection when the EAC members were announced as a signal that they would be leaving the past behind:

In 2004, Menino chose Theodore Landsmark to head the school assignment committee. The specter of busing floated over the hearing rooms in 2004. This time around Menino has chosen Hardin Coleman, the dean of Boston University’s School of Education, to head the committee. In Boston for only four years, Coleman said he hopes to provide ‘fresh eyes to a decades-old

\textsuperscript{1}All names and some identifying information have been change to protect respondents’ identities; Racial categories are based on self-identification.
problem.’ The new committee... should step forward boldly, untethered to the flawed policies and practices of Boston's past (Harmon 2012)

There was, however, by no means a consensus that the history of school desegregation was irrelevant to the process of reforming school assignment. Superintendent Johnson continued to bring the history of school desegregation in her speeches throughout the process. At the first presentation of possible models for a new school assignment process in September (a month after Menino gave his speech in which dismissed ‘the past’), Superintendent Johnson named people in Boston who had been in the city during school desegregation:

As we embark on the choices we have as a community, we cannot forget the sacrifices and determination of many who came before us to address the issues of excellence and equity... We won’t forget the hard won 1954 Supreme Court decision or the tumultuous events in 1973 and 1974. Many in our community do remember. Teachers like Phyllis Ellison Feaster who was then a student at South Boston high school but now teaches at the Roosevelt K-8 School in Boston. Or others like Suzanne Lee, Carmen Pola, or Mel King, who are still actively involved in our community. This is Boston’s legacy and we cannot ignore it or dismiss its significance.

In the *Globe*, regular reporter Adrian Walker (2012) took a markedly different perspective on the history from Larwence Harmon, emphasizing its importance in explaining contemporary distrust of the district when it comes to issues of school assignment and race, and fears that an EAC vote might fall upon racial lines.

On the EAC itself, there were also some efforts among members to incorporate some historical understanding of school desegregation into the process. The first draft of the EAC recommendations memo, presented by co-chairs Helen Dajer and Hardin Coleman, makes no reference to the 70s, but does recommend “we acknowledge the failed logic that leads to busing within a small urban district.” Minutes from the meeting where this was initially presented state that ‘concerns about the memos statements regarding busing’ were a central part of the discussion surrounding the recommendations.
The language was eventually discarded and replaced with a more direct reference to the history of school desegregation:

The EAC’s assessment is that the use of busing across wide geographic areas as a primary strategy for student assignment has limited strategic purpose in Boston’s contemporary context. The data assembled by the EAC shows that busing is neither counteracting historical race and class inequities, nor is it counteracting current inequities... At best, busing may be helping to promote diversity in neighborhoods in Boston that remain racially and/or socio-economically segregated. However, given Boston’s changing demography since the desegregation era – and its emergence as a far more diverse city in many respects – busing may not have the import that it once did as a tool for advancing diversity, inclusion, tolerance, and equitable educational outcomes.

When this provision of the memo was discussed, again there was controversy over the characterization of busing, both from the committee and in community comment, where one individual described the statements on desegregation as ‘offensive.’ Rather than come to a consensus on the historical legacy of school desegregation (as Byron Rushing had suggested during the beginning of their process), the committee decided to strike any reference to the history, including changing the word ‘busing’ to ‘transportation.’

Though the history of school desegregation in Boston came up from time to time in EAC and community meetings, it was never given full attention after Representative Rushing made his first speech. Instead a narrative emerged which put a distance between the past and the present by emphasizing the changed nature of the city. Lawrence Harmon was the first person I heard during this process to state this narrative publicly and succinctly in his March editorial: “The 1974 federal desegregation order that mandated widespread busing of students expired long ago. Federal Judge W. Arthur Garrity won’t be walking through that door, folks. In a city where nine out of 10 students are minorities, the sensible goal now should be to ensure high quality schools that children can reach on foot” (Harmon 2012). This was a refrain I heard repeatedly in community and EAC meetings – since the majority of students in Boston Public Schools are black and latino, desegregation (and the history of
desegregation in Boston) are now irrelevant. Others stated this more broadly in terms of the city – that so many residents today weren’t here in the seventies, that we can now move past that history.

On the face of this process, then, it appears that this contentious history was not an issue during Boston’s contemporary discussion of school desegregation. This assertion, however, was not without contestation, from within the school system, the media and on the EAC itself. It is not insignificant that at the level of city politics the leader who contended that this history should be included are black (Superintendent Johnson, Adrian Walker at the Globe, Representative Rushing) and that their statements occurred in Boston’s traditionally Black neighborhoods (both Superintendent Johnson’s and Representative Rushing’s speeches were given in Roxbury), while those advocating against the contemporary significance of this history (Mayor Menino, Lawrence Harmon) were white and and heir statements occurred outside of Boston’s traditionally Black community (Mayor Menino’s speech occurred in Hyde Park). Underneath the surface of an apparent consensus resided a tension surrounding Boston’s history fraught with anxieties around race, class, and neighborhood in the city.

The EAC: Avoiding History, Achieving (near) Consensus

Ultimately, the EAC avoided the history of school desegregation without significant debate. Underneath this apparent consensus, however, lay a surprising spread of beliefs about the role of history, the relationship of the history to school desegregation, and beliefs about contemporary race and class relations in Boston which tied directly to the city’s history. Through exploring these differences we can see the role that thinking about Boston’s history played in the EAC process.

For some on the EAC, school desegregation was a completed past, something that is perhaps important as an item of history, but which had no bearing on their present task. The three people I interviewed who self-identified as white, as well as several other people of color, all expressed a feeling
that both race and Boston’s history of school desegregation were not important for their contemporary work on school assignment. Richard, an African American male, was most vocal on this point:

I spent a lot of time saying ‘get over yourselves’ in my head. You’re really talking about 20 years ago, 30 years ago; it’s really not relevant today, just not relevant. People would say ‘you got to talk about race’, and I’d be like ‘why?’ And they say ‘well, there is a history in Boston.’ I felt focusing on the Boston history detracted from our ability to focus on really understanding the current problems and the immediate useful solutions. Not ignoring the clear inequities - that’s the problem - the history of – we have them because we screwed up before, why would I go back to look at previous screw ups. We had to commit to going forward. Make sense?

Richard’s beliefs about the importance of this history are directly tied up in beliefs about racial equity in contemporary society – his comment suggests he believes there is racial inequity today, but that it is a result of past actions, more than contemporary racial relations; because we cannot change this history, exploring it is irrelevant. Christopher, another African American male, also expressed a sense that times have changed:

My life is not [my children’s] context. ... They need to know about Jim Crow, but they live in a different world where gay marriage is gonna be legal and you can love who you want to love. You can be African American and Latino and be president. You can be a woman on the Supreme Court. This is a different context. so balancing teaching the lessons of the past without tainting them with my old ‘here we go again.’

Whites tended to express this perspective from a more explicitly ‘post-racial’ perspective. Carl, a white male, commented on what he saw as a ‘colorblind’ process:

I had people warn me: ‘Oh my God, this is going to be potentially explosive. Don’t you know this is the third rail of Boston politics? It’s race.’ And I disagreed. I said ‘I don’t think so...I think we are a different city now and again we are a younger city...with different attitudes’ and I was right. Going to the EAC I just saw it was just completely. There were color blind people for the most part, they really were. So coming on the EAC the history was a big part of it for me. but for me it was in a good way. I wasn’t focused on the chapter I wasn’t a part of - the conscious segregation and the aftermath and the protests and the violence. I wasn’t a part of that ... and I thought that now that it had played itself out we could get students and parents amore involved with their schools with the selection of their school communities and move in that direction. And we did.
Like Richard, Carl depicts racialized conflict as a thing of the past; he viewed the EAC as a ‘colorblind’ body to which that history was no longer relevant. Pete, another white male, also viewed the history of desegregation as irrelevant to the present task, but felt that he was in the minority on the EAC as someone not approaching the task from a perspective of race:

> It didn’t take long at all before someone said ‘this is about race and busing’ and I was actually shocked. I was like ‘no it shouldn’t be about race and busing.’ It was a racial issue for some people and it was weird that they weren’t able to in some way bifurcate or separate the two and not make it a racial issue. Because once you make it a racial issue, your judgment for the better of the entire city is just done - now you are just representing a small group. So in my opinion once you are drawing that line now you are biased... It’s a different city. We are dealing with Asian populations we are dealing white populations we are dealing with black populations. We are dealing with socio-economic aspects. There were so many different pieces that to bring it down to that it was...in my opinion you miss the point.

For Pete school desegregation (busing) was directly tied to race – which from his perspective indicated a bias with no place in the process of deciding how students should be assigned to school. This view also arose several times in committee meetings when white committee members raised concerns as to whether it was legal for them to be discussing race in their consideration of school assignment.

While Richard, Carl, and Pete all stated that the history of school desegregation wasn’t relevant to the process for reforming school assignment, several others like Christopher, advocated for what they saw as a more balanced approach to the history. Isabel, a Hispanic female quoted earlier, advocated for a ‘deep bow’ to the history but also to move one, a position she related to how she views the city today in relation to that history:

> I think a lot of people who survived that, who lived through it have PTSD. I would say that the post-traumatic stress is so vivid in their minds of who I call the grandmothers of today, the African American grandmothers, that as much as I’d like to move on from it and say ‘it’s a new day and its 2013 and lets move past it with the deep bow of respect to that time, let’s move on’ I have to acknowledge that to some people it really is PTSD and they can’t move on because it’s really too painful.
Like Isabel, Pam wanted to recognize that some people were still impacted by school desegregation, but also had a strong sense that “that 70s piece of the conversation is dragging us down more than it should be:”

I think I kind of felt fortunate to not be carrying that wounding because I think it would have been hard to focus on the task. And if I did have more direct connection to that piece of Boston’s history I’m sure the EAC process would have felt long or longer, I’m sure it would have felt painful, more painful and I’m sure I would have felt more strongly that we weren’t addressing the quality issue enough. I think I would have carried that a lot more. And I completely understand that and I think that would have been my demand if I had experienced it firsthand. But, coming a little more from the outside and just from a very logistical standpoint I think it’s productive that the assignment piece is settled or at least has a framework so now everything moving forward can be very clearly about quality.

For Pam, confronting the issue of school desegregation would have led to a discussion of school quality, which she felt would have derailed the process.

Only one of the EAC members I interviewed argued that the history was directly relevant to today. However, comments made at meetings and in personal communications suggest she was not the only person who felt this way. Simone, a black woman, made this point strongly, arguing that:

I think the vestiges of that history help us understand why are we still a racially segregated city. Why are we still clustered in our ethnic groups and how do we have a conversation about that? That’s what I’ve been dismayed by - Just at the political leadership of the city...the Mayor’s office - I’ll sort of name it plainly. We’ve been good at taking on other things. So yes taking on the school system, looking at issues of housing. Looking at economic well-being, looking at jobs, I mean all that is so connected for us in this city around our history of racial divide. Not being willing to name it in that way I think is holding us back. Just to have a conversation and just to have sort of leadership recognize or acknowledge out loud to folks in this city, there are some things that we still need to heal from and we still need to handle deal with, talk about, because it does hold us back.

While many others felt that the city had changed and that talking about the history would hold the process back in some way, Simone, flipped this idea on its head, instead asserting that not talking about the past prevents the city from ‘moving forward.’
The narrative of ‘moving forward’ – the city on a march of progress from inequity to equity, from racism to ‘colorblindness,’ from poor low educational quality to high educational quality – was consistent through nearly all of my interviews. What I have found most relevant in my interviews with EAC members is not simply their narratives of school desegregation in Boston, but their narratives of how school desegregation in Boston is connected to the present. This narrative of ‘moving forward’ is very much bound up in beliefs about race and class in contemporary society. All of the EAC members I interviewed commented on improved race relations in the city. Those who saw the history as not relevant tended to see racism as a past problem of which we continue to see on the vestiges. On the extreme end of this was Sophia, a white woman who spoke about race very little and only when I brought it up. Others who argued for a balanced approach to the history – one that recognizes it but doesn’t dwell on it - tended to feel that race relations had dramatically improved, but that racial segregation in parts of the city was significant and at least somewhat problematic. Finally, Simone who expressed a wish that the committee had dealt with the history more directly, viewed racism as a systemic issue with a continued impact on the city.

Class was also tightly bound up in these discussions of race and the history. With few exceptions, those that expressed a sense that race was no longer or less of an issue in education, also emphasized that class was now an issue. Arthur, an African American male, expressed this belief:

I think there are still issues related to race that have yet to be resolved. But I think it is not as open as it once was. I think the main issue is related to how things break down along class lines and the fact that different racial groups fall into those class categories much more significantly today than even in the past. You don’t have as much open racial animosity but you have a class structure where half the world doesn’t know how the other half lives. So there is a gulf between groups that tends to break down along racial lines today.

Many of the EAC members I interviewed discussed some variation of this belief: they associated the history of inequity in Boston with race/racism and present inequity with class/poverty. At the same
time, within this general assumption lay a broad spread of beliefs about race, class, and history as they relate to contemporary student assignment.

In spite of the fact that many EAC members seemed to agree that engagement with the history of school desegregation was unnecessary for their task, they also very much felt its presence in their work. When asked if they felt that the history of school desegregation was directly present in the work of the EAC, most of the EAC members I interviewed expressed that they thought that it was consistently present, either as an elephant in the room or as an issue directly raised, and suggested that it was more present than they thought it should have been. Few however could offer examples of direct times it had come up (hardy any even mentioned Byron Rushing’s speech), and instead turned to times when issues of racial equity were raised. The ‘elephant in the room’ appears to have been race as much as it was the actual history of school desegregation in Boston.

All of the EAC members I interviewed described the process as harmonious, claimed they were very pleased with the outcome and expressed satisfaction that the EAC had come very near to consensus – with only two members voting against the model they chose (and 4 abstaining due to not enough engagement in the process, one of whom expressed at a public rally I attended that she was disaffected with the EAC process and stopped attending for that reason). This does not mean there was necessarily consensus on the EAC about the role of race and class in the city, both past and present. A detailed look at how participants viewed the role of race class and history actually suggests significant variety, which would have made for interesting debate if dealt with directly and openly. It was not just that EAC members did not want to have these conversations or saw them as unnecessary – there was also an anxiety about having them. Some expressed a concern that talking about the history would derail the conversation, while others emphasized the difficulty of have discussions about sensitive topics publically – as Sophia put it, there was a pressure to be ‘politicaly correct.’ These comments suggest that
there were more difficult conversations, the history chief among them, that were avoided in the interest of allowing the process to move forward and avoiding conflict. By avoiding direct discussion of Boston’s historical conflict over school desegregation, the EAC avoided discussing race, both in the past and present, and endorsed a narrative of continued progress towards equity, despite underlying tensions about the role of race and class in contemporary Boston.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through the process of reforming school assignment in Boston a narrative of history emerged which minimized discussion of race and conflict: school desegregation was a result of interpersonal and institutional racism which no longer existed in the city; today the Boston Public schools are mostly children of color so the busing of the school desegregation era is no longer necessary. Though this was the dominant narrative, considerable tensions exist beneath it about if and how this history should be addressed which are directly related to beliefs about race, class, and the distribution of educational resources in the city. As the process unfolded, leadership in city government, the media and on the EAC contested the nature of this history and the role it played in thinking about the contemporary social relations in Boston. Ultimately, a direct conversation about the history of school desegregation and its relationship to contemporary school assignment was avoided. However, members of the EAC related that history directly to their beliefs about contemporary school assignment – it needed to be reformed because of the changing state of racial dynamics in the city. In addition, many of them described this history as omnipresent and synonymous with discussions of racial equity throughout their process.

On the evening that the Boston School Committee voted on the EAC’s recommendations to reform school assignment, a steady stream of community advocates testified. While some were advocating for or against a specific part of their recommendations, the majority were there asking the school committee to address issues of the inequitable distribution of quality schools in the city before
making any change to the school assignment process – to, in essence, reject the EAC’s recommendations. Despite this persistent advocacy, the school committee voted (again almost unanimously) seven to one to approve the EAC’s recommendation. Regime politics were most certainly at work here – the mayor had brought together a broad, racially diverse sector of the middle and upper middle class professional community (both business and non-profit) through the EAC. But it was not the mere existence of the coalition that brought about the completion of this task where it had failed many times before. The process of the EAC and its community engagement was a cultural politics – ‘a set of discursive and material practices in and through which meanings are defined and struggled over, where social norms and values are naturalized, and by which ‘common sense’ is constructed and contested,” (McCann 2002:387) which enabled the school committee to approve a new assignment model.

In fact, the cultural politics of the process to reform school assignment in Boston were much more multi-faceted then what is presented here – they involved struggles around the definition of equity, values around neighborhood and community, and beliefs around how resources should be allocated in the city. What I have shown is the role that remembrance of history has played a critical part of these cultural politics. In this case, a discursive struggle took place in the media, between the mayor and the superintendent, and on the EAC around if and how the history of Boston’s school desegregation crisis should be remembered. This struggle was not just about defining the past, but around connecting the past to the present – and ultimately how we should think and talk about racial inequities in the city’s education system. Leaders and EAC members who advocated disconnecting from this history completely were arguing for a ‘post-racial’ narrative of the school system. Those who advocated for a recognition of the history also acknowledged changed race relations, but were more cognizant of the racial implications and potential inequities of school assignment. Though the ‘post-racial’ narrative appears to have won out, it was not without considerable community contention, as well as, however minimally, some attention given to ensuring racial and class diversity in the final plan.
The cultural politics surrounding history at play in this case are meaningful to the growing field of work looking at urban educational politics in cities around the world. While research demonstrates ‘neoliberal,’ market-based trends in educational planning across localities, we must also be aware of the historical particularities of place. In the United States, ‘school choice’ has become a watchword for decentralization and privatization associated with neoliberal ideology (Cucchiara and Horvat 2009, Lipman 2011). Cities looking to expand choice through decentralization and privatization may frame their claims in terms of racial equity (Lipman 2002), but they also have to contend in many cases with the relatively recent history of legally forced school desegregation. The legal issues of school desegregation that were raised in the 60s and 70s across the country may no longer be at play, but the memories and meaning associated with court-led intervention to remedy the inequitable distribution of resources continue to resonate. Contrary to the ‘post-racial’ discourse so popular in the United States today, race, privilege and the distribution of resources are still very much bound up together in our metropolitan areas - and there is a discursive struggle to define when and how race is discussed and how resources should be distributed, that is very much influenced by our struggles for racial equity of the past.

Social memory studies then, can contribute significantly to our understanding of how urban politics are enacted. As regime theory has demonstrated, coalitions and relationships are central to urban governance. The case of the cultural politics of school assignment reform in Boston shows that there is much more to understand about the fabric and terrain of these relationships. Scholars of social (or collective memory) have argued that memories of the past can both constrain and be shaped by contemporary politics, but have mostly focused on a national level – looking at, for example the holocaust in Germany (Olick 199), or the bombing of Hiroshima in Japan and US (Saito 2006; Zolberg 1998) – rather than on urban politics. In Boston, we can see both of these dynamics at work. The concept of ‘neighborhood schools’ that Mayor Menino referred to romantically in his announcement of
the school assignment reform was constrained not only by the contemporary reality of neighborhood segregation, but of the memory of a violent and tumultuous history around schools segregated by neighborhood. At the same time however, there were active efforts to minimize this history’s relevance and to construct a narrative that emphasized distance from that past. This tension between remembrance and exclusion of the city’s history of racism and violence signified a deeper tension over how we understand and address racism, how resources are distributed and who gets a say in how the city’s problems are defined and addressed.

Boston, like many cities across the country, is both debating and implementing policies based on an education reform movement which emphasizes neoliberal, market-based policies of decentralization and privatization. At the same time the city’s educational politics have been forged through a history that is at the same time common and unique—including white flight, civil rights, desegregation, and budget cuts/austerity. I have argued that it is not just the facts of this history that impact contemporary educational politics, but how this history is remembered, deployed and excluded—a process which occurs through both relationship building and contestation. The research presented in this paper explored how city leadership, media and EAC members remembered and used the history of school desegregation in their efforts to reform Boston. There was also an active effort in the community that constructed an alternative narrative linking the city’s history to the present, which I will explore in future work. Comparative work across cities may help us understand these dynamics even more deeply—what are the salient histories and how are they deployed? What are the results? Are there other places where contestation over the history has had a deeper impact, or does the dominant discourse always appear to prevail? The questions can help us further understand what I have argued here, that the contestation over memory is a critical element of contemporary urban politics.
References


