

*The Bus Kids: Children's Experience with Voluntary Desegregation*¹, by Ira W. Lit, is a qualitative study of kindergartners participating in the Canford Voluntary Transfer Program². Canford was the result of a 1986 desegregation and racial discrimination lawsuit. It allowed families of minority students from South Bay City, an under-resourced school district, to apply to a limited number of transfer spaces into 10 better-resourced elementary school districts in surrounding communities.

Lit spent two years as a participant observer, studying 13 kindergartners over two academic years, in their classrooms, during their bus rides to and from school, in after-school programs, and in their homes. He also interviewed parents, teachers, and administrators. Lit hoped that his study would *help others better understand the nature of this experience for the benefit of these students and others in similar situations* (p. 2). Lit focused his study on the Arbor Town School District, which in 2002, was serving about one-half of the approximately 2,000 Canford students.

FINDINGS

- **The bus ride between home and school added to the challenges young students faced adapting to the new transfer-school environment. It also increased the children's sense of isolation.**

The long bus ride from home to school lacked supervision and was chaotic for the young children. Kindergarten teachers described the children as *hungry, upset, jangled, and hyped up* (pp. 29-30) when coming off the bus. Moreover, the bus rarely arrived in time for Canford children, unlike resident children, to experience a calm transition to school activities. Finally, the long distance the children traveled magnified the differences between their home and school environments. This often resulted in the transfer students feeling isolated from the resident children.

- **The Canford students experienced social isolation within their transfer school, making it more difficult to access the educational resources potentially available to them.**

Unlike the resident children, the Canford students had neither social networks nor knowledge of *shared rules and community practices* (p. 56) when they started kindergarten. They had few opportunities to develop friendships through out-of-school and social activities due to bus schedules and long travel times between home and school. Similarly, long distances made it difficult for Canford parents to either socialize with resident parents or participate in school activities. In addition, Canford parents, due to cultural and linguistic differences, were often unable to help their children develop new social relationships.

- **The young students received little adult support and guidance as they navigated new and unfamiliar experiences of *doing school*.**

¹ Lit, I.W. (2009). *The bus kids: Children's experiences with voluntary desegregation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

² Canford, South Bay City, and Arbor Town are pseudonyms for California school districts and a California school desegregation program.

Beyond negotiating racial, ethnic, and socio-economic differences, the young Canford students were required to adjust to new and unfamiliar activities and transitions in the classroom and on the playground. These experiences each had their *own set of expectations and norms* (p. 85) which adults often failed to clarify. While a few students learned how to adapt, most students were *often left exposed in a precarious school environment* (p. 124).

- **Parents, administrators, and teachers believed in the importance of the transfer program as an educational opportunity but did not systematically address the emotional and social consequences of the transfer experience.**

Parents believed strongly in the educational opportunity of the Canford program but were often not engaged *in the subtle dynamics and features of the school experiences of their children* (p. 130). Administrators did not consider the Canford students as a distinct student group facing unique educational challenges. Teachers did not receive special training or curriculum guidance to address transfer students' educational challenges.

- **Teaching styles influenced the educational experiences of Canford students.**

When teachers provided strong support and varied curriculum and activities, the students found experiences that fostered success and belonging. Canford students with limited options in the classroom were more likely to *find failure and frustration* (p. 162).

WHAT CAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS DO WITH THESE FINDINGS?

- **Embrace the Challenge of Diversity:** Lit suggests that policies and programs that facilitate the social integration of transfer students can positively influence their educational success. This could include mentorships between resident and transfer families and more opportunities for transfer families to engage in social and after-school activities. School districts could also openly address race and class differences among the students. Finally, districts could provide mental health support to young transfer students who may be struggling.
- **Recognize Untapped Arenas of Educational Opportunity:** While some unstructured time is important to young children, Lit recommends that teachers and administrators increase social and educational opportunities during long bus rides, recess, lunch, snack, free play, and transition times.
- **Create opportunities for students to learn and master necessary non-academic skills:** Lit recommends an apprentice-style of teaching where, in addition to academic instruction, the teacher helps *make the subtle and implicit rules and expectations of school more clear and explicit* (p. 164). In addition, varied curriculum and activities help students find experiences that foster success and belonging.

Lit contends that strategies to help students integrate into their transfer school are essential to their academic success. This requires additional studies of the transfer-student experience as well as innovative programs and teaching strategies. More broadly, he hopes school districts will *work to develop and support teachers, schools, and approaches to education that are increasingly designed for the success of all of our children* (p. 178).