

I

Beginnings

In 1986, parties in a California school desegregation and racial discrimination lawsuit reached a settlement ending nearly ten years of rancor and litigation. The principal outcome of this agreement was the creation of a unique, voluntary, interdistrict transfer and desegregation program, later referred to as the Canford Program after one of the plaintiffs in the original lawsuit. In practice, the Canford Program provides opportunities for families of minority students from a racially segregated, under-resourced, and poor-performing school district to apply for a transfer to one of several surrounding elementary school districts, which are generally better resourced and better performing and serve primarily white students and families.¹

The set of circumstances present in this program is particularly compelling. On the surface, at least, the Canford Program seems to provide a unique educational opportunity for a group of students who are traditionally counted among the at-risk or underserved. In certain ways, this opportunity boasts much of what educators have long argued for in the way

of meeting the needs of all students. Students are afforded access to experienced, well-prepared teachers who are not overwhelmed by the circumstances of their vocation, and a strong, motivated peer group; teachers maintain high academic standards, are equipped with the necessary materials and support to teach toward them, and encounter low levels of bureaucratic oversight and interference.²

Given this special opportunity, how did the students fare in their crosstown schools? This book is the result of my efforts to explore the experience of students participating in the Canford Program, and to do so from the perspective of the youngest of those involved in the program. By spending two years in classrooms, on bus rides, and in the homes and after-school care settings of thirteen remarkable young children, I learned a great deal about the complex and dynamic enterprise undertaken by the Canford students. My hope is that in sharing and reflecting upon their compelling stories, I might help others to better understand the nature of this experience for the benefit of these students and others in similar situations.

The First Day of School: Two Perspectives

Shady Grove Elementary School sits high on a hill overlooking a quiet, suburban neighborhood in Arbor Town, California. The school building, consisting of three hexagonal wings extending from a central library, is reminiscent of a honeycomb. Each wing contains six classrooms divided by flexible, movable walls—a feature of 1970s-era “open classrooms” that now serves only as a historical relic. The classrooms all open both inward toward the central library and outward to an expansive out-

door play yard and capacious green fields. The effect of the school's architecture is a sense of fluidity reflected in the continuous, purposeful buzz of activity in and around the school throughout the day. Students and adults roam the vast corridors and entryways in a steady stream of movement and activity. When school is in session, this hive is alive!

It is early morning on a late August day. The sun shines brightly on the school and grounds. The air is tinged with excitement and anticipation as teachers, staff, and students begin to arrive for the first day of school.

The first youngsters to trickle in are older students—fourth and fifth graders who bike or walk to school on their own. They arrive early and eagerly begin getting reacquainted, building and reorganizing social ties and networks.

A bit later, other students begin to arrive with their parents. Some walk, some bike, and still others arrive by car. There is a great deal of chatter between, among, and across children and adults as they make their way to the school building and their respective classrooms. A wide variety of emotions can be read on the faces of both adults and children, though most seem excited and even joyful about the prospects of new beginnings.

Hand in hand, Megan and her mother, Sally, walk to Shady Grove Elementary. Though it is her first day of school at Shady Grove—Megan will be entering kindergarten today—she is quite familiar with the place. As they live nearby, Megan and her family have spent many hours at Shady Grove using

the school's fields and playgrounds like a local park. In addition, Megan's older brother, Bill, is a third grader at Shady Grove; in fact, Megan's kindergarten teacher was also Bill's kindergarten teacher. Still, as Megan and Sally walk to the door of her classroom, Megan clings tightly to Sally, hiding most of her head and face behind her mother's shirtsleeve.

As they enter the classroom, Megan's teacher, Anita, immediately greets Megan and her mother. Anita has a gracious smile and a warm greeting for both Megan and Sally. Anita and Sally spend a few moments catching up as Anita helps Megan find and attach her nametag. Anita suggests that Megan take her mother to the cubbies and see if they can find the one assigned to her, and she points the pair in the appropriate direction. Then Anita hands Sally a flyer describing the numerous activity centers in the classroom. Anita proposes that after a quick "tour," Sally and Megan settle into an activity together until it is time for the class to gather at the meeting circle. "I'm so excited to have you in our class!" Anita says, as Megan and Sally set off on their tour and another family waits to be greeted and oriented.

Sally and Megan have arrived early, so the classroom is rather open and quiet. The activity centers are easily distinguished around the oddly shaped room: blocks in one corner, and building toys in another; a lofted playhouse overhanging a quiet reading space; three circular tables in the middle of the room, each replete with writing and

drawing materials; and near the back door, a large circular rug bordered with the letters of the alphabet, hand-painted in gold and silver. Megan and Sally wind their way around the room, each in turn guiding the other, as they explore and get comfortable with Megan's new classroom.

Meanwhile, as the time nears for the first bell of the school day to ring, a traditional yellow school bus pulls up in front of the flagpole at the main entrance to Shady Grove. This bus, known as the Hills Bus, provides transportation for students within the large geographic area of the school attendance zone, particularly in the ranging hills to the north of the school site. As the students depart from the bus, a contingent of about a dozen adults are present, prepared to meet their youngsters riding the bus to school for the first time. The parents have taken the time to drive themselves to school while their children ride the bus, to greet them on the school side of the trip. In this way, parents are able to help facilitate their children's first-day transitions from home to bus to school to classroom. As they wait, the parents chat casually, outwardly excited and at ease with one another. Once the children arrive, they pair off with the adults, and parents engage children in conversations about the bus ride and their first day of school. The group then proceeds together toward the students' classrooms.

About five minutes later, at precisely 8:00 A.M., a digitized bell-tone sounds, signaling the official beginning of the school day and year. Several minutes later another bus arrives at the circular entry-

way to the school, which is now nearly deserted. This second bus is known as the SBC Bus. It transports interdistrict voluntary transfer students from South Bay City, a much less affluent city across the freeway, to various schools within Arbor Town. Because of the distance and the number of school sites involved, some of these students will have been in transit for nearly an hour by the time they reach their final destination.

This time two adults, both African American, are present to meet the school bus. The adults seem anxious and uncertain. As the bus begins to pull into the drive, one of the parents asks the other why no one from the school is there to greet the bus.

As the younger, mostly first-time students walk off of the bus, they congregate around these two adults. The parents ask the younger children about their bus ride while trying to elicit directions to classrooms from the older children. After a while, these parents wave down another adult (a classroom assistant at the school) who happens to be walking past the area. The two parents inquire why no one from the school has come to greet the bus and support the students. This assistant says she does not know, but she helps guide the parents and the children in the direction of their classrooms.

One of the new kindergarten students to arrive on the SBC Bus is named Marikit. Marikit's older sister, Michelle, is a second grader at Shady Grove. Michelle and Marikit begin to walk toward the school buildings with the small group of children who have congregated by the two adults. At

some point Michelle runs off to her classroom, and the rest of the group wind their way around the building toward the primary classrooms. Eventually Marikit is dropped off in front of her room, and the rest of the group continue on to find their own.

As Marikit enters her new classroom—alone—her teacher, Anita, warmly greets her at the door. Anita assists Marikit in finding and placing her nametag on the front of her shirt. “Ooh! What a beautiful name you have! Did I say it right?” Anita asks. (She did not.) Marikit quietly repeats her own name as she glances around the busy room. Anita tries again to pronounce Marikit’s name, and Marikit nods in approval. Anita then points Marikit in the direction of the cubbies and instructs her to put away her things and then choose an activity to work on before the first class meeting. From her perch at the doorway, Anita points out the drawing table, the reading area, and the playhouse in particular. Marikit turns toward the cubbies as Anita proceeds to welcome another late-arriving family.

As she moves toward the cubbies, Marikit is struck by an immense display of sights, sounds, people, and activities. By this time, the room is full of both children and adults, most of whom are busily engaged in activities. There is a cacophony of sounds as parents and children interact and engage one another in a multitude of ways. Marikit appears awestruck by the scene before her, but she proceeds to take her first cautious steps into her new classroom.

Marikit puts her things away in her cubby and slowly walks around the room. She looks somewhat apprehensively at many of the different activity centers. After a short time she stands near a table where children, most of whom are accompanied by a parent, are drawing with crayons. Marikit silently observes the other children working at the table. Soon thereafter, Anita comes by and asks Marikit if she would like to join the activity. Marikit nods in assent, and Anita helps to seat her in a chair and provides her with a piece of white paper and a set of crayons. Marikit holds a crayon and looks pensively at it and the paper. Moments later, just as Marikit begins drawing on her paper, Anita rings a small brass bell and sings out “Gather ’round, now! Gather ’round!” signaling that the time has come for the first “class meeting.” Anita begins to gather the students together in a circle on the alphabet rug. As she does so, Anita walks over to Marikit and leads her toward the group by placing her arm around Marikit’s shoulder and walking with her to the rug, where the two sit side by side. As Anita begins to greet the students, Marikit leans in toward Anita and nestles in under her arm.

Marikit and Megan are similar in many ways. They are both beginning their first day of kindergarten at Shady Grove Elementary. They both have siblings in the school and have been to the site on previous occasions, though Megan, who lives in the neighborhood, has done so with much greater frequency. Megan and Marikit are both five years old. Both of

them are eager to begin school, and they both have some trepidation about the situation as well.

In many ways, of course, the two girls are also quite different. To the degree that individuals can be reflective of a larger group, Megan is a typical neighborhood student at Shady Grove.³ Her family owns a home a short walk away from the school. Her father is a legal librarian at the law school in the neighboring university. Megan's mother is a marketing vice president in a large software company in Arbor Town. Megan is of mixed ethnic origin: her father is Jewish and her mother is Japanese. Both of her parents have graduate degrees and place a high value on education for their children.

Marikit, in her turn, is a typical student in the Canford Program in many ways. Her family rents a small home in South Bay City. Marikit's family is of Filipino origin, and English is not the family's primary language at home; however, Marikit has a strong capacity for comprehension and speaking in English. (This fact is difficult to discern initially, as Marikit is nearly silent for the first several weeks of school.) While both of her parents work—Marikit's mother is a nursing assistant and Marikit's father is a short-order cook—they still struggle to keep up in a geographic region where they are considered to be among the working poor. Marikit's mother has her GED and is taking night courses to earn a nursing degree. Her father completed two years of high school. Both of her parents place a high value on education for their children.

This narrative highlights some of the common elements in the experiences of Canford students attending schools in Arbor Town. Most of them arrive at school—often late—after an early morning waking and a lengthy, difficult bus ride. Few Canford students have the benefit of a comforting parent

to support the early morning transition to school, though they all have parents interested in their educational endeavors, evidenced at a minimum by their persistence and involvement in securing a rare slot in the program for their children. Once they arrive at school, the Canford students have access to the plentiful resources (materials, facilities, and personnel) of a school district with a strong reputation and high ratings on common measures of school achievement. At the same time, access to these resources requires the navigation of a complex series of challenges for participating students.

Canford parents have high hopes and expectations for the educational opportunities provided through this transfer program—and these dreams may well be warranted given the resources and general performance of the Arbor Town schools. Yet broadly speaking, few of the organizing participants involved (parents, teachers, or administrators) seem to take full account of the complexity of this endeavor for the program's children, nor do they seem to account for the potential impact of these challenges on the students' school experience. Under-scored by Marikit's story and the others that follow, I believe, is the intricate nature of the Canford students' journey. I hope that through this book the reader can begin to see the layers of complexity that define the school experience for Marikit and other Canford students, as well as the ways this experience affects the lives of these young children.

Charting a Course

For six years before commencing my graduate studies, I taught kindergarten, third grade, and fifth grade in a public school district in northern California, one of the ten districts originally participating in the Canford Voluntary Transfer Program.

During that time I came to know an increasing amount about the Canford Program, though my knowledge was initially limited to personal experiences and interactions with students, parents, other teachers, and a select few administrators; the school and district provided no comprehensive orientation, information, or guidance regarding the program or its students.

My personal educational philosophy manifests a strong belief in the value of social, cultural, and educational integration, as well as a conviction about the need for greater equity in educational opportunities and outcomes. Frequently, I wondered if and how these goals were being attended to or fostered through the Canford Program. What might be the benefits and drawbacks of the program for participating students and their school peers? What was the experience like for young children who left their own neighborhood to pursue educational opportunities in a distant community? Was opening the doors into such a setting enough to foster their success? Did we (teachers, administrators, and parents) know or do enough to support these students, who in many ways seemed to struggle in this environment? Over time, I became increasingly attracted to and interested in the experiences of the Canford students and their families. When I later determined to pursue a doctoral degree in education, my encounters with the Canford Program remained at the forefront of my mind, and thus the seeds of this book were sown.

My early exploration of the Canford Program revealed an intriguing history and distinct possibilities for further study. Sixteen years after its inception, 2,219 students had accepted transfers as part of the program, and yet virtually no effort had been undertaken during that time to explore the experiences or perspectives of participants, families, educators, and community members affected by the program, or the outcomes

and impact of the program itself. Such a bold experiment demanded further examination.

As I began to consider the design of a research project, many promising avenues of pursuit seemed to be open, since so little work had been undertaken in regard to the program. By both necessity and interest, though, I narrowed my focus to a particular piece of this terrain. In general terms, this book is designed as a qualitative exploration of the experience of kindergarten students in their first year as participants in the Canford Program. My goal was to learn about the broad range of experiences relevant to this important transitional year and to illuminate the quality of life in schools for these young children. Domains of interest included the social, emotional, cultural, and developmental as well as the academic. General questions that helped to guide my study included the following: What was the experience like for the Canford students? What were their daily routines? How well did these students adjust to and fit into a geographically distant neighborhood school setting? What kinds of social connections did they make? How did they interact with peers and teachers? What opportunities and hurdles did they encounter? How did they feel about their experiences? What seemed to support and what seemed to impede their development? Broadly, what did these young children have to teach us about their experience that could be applied to other similarly situated students?

I believe that the Canford Program is illustrative as well as unique, and it deserves attention on both counts. The program is unique in its inception and design: ten school districts entered into a voluntary agreement to enhance the educational opportunities primarily for students in one of those districts, and they did so by providing enrollment opportunities for interested parents. At the same time, this program illustrates a

host of educational phenomena of potential interest. For example, discussions about school choice programs, from magnet and charter schools to voucher programs, currently abound in the policy arena. The federal No Child Left Behind Act explicitly provides for school transfers as one means of redressing the ongoing failure of schools to meet national standards. The experience of the Canford students may well have something to teach us about such plans and programs. Embedded in the day-to-day lives of the Canford students are other issues of substance, including school desegregation and integration; busing; the processes of school transition, socialization, and adaptation; heterogeneity of classrooms and schools; the efforts of schools and teachers to support diverse student populations; issues of race, language, and culture; and questions of educational equity, to name just a few. Too rarely in our local and national debates do we reflect on the nature of the experiences we are creating from the point of view of the children involved. The experiences of the Canford students may shed light on larger issues, drawing our attention both to the day-to-day experience of the children involved and to the larger issues entwined in it. Ideally, such investigations will enhance our ability to make decisions and successfully implement the complex policies that have real-world consequences for children.

I think it is important to be clear about the aims and limits of this work from the outset. First, I want to clarify for the reader that this is not an evaluative study. It does not measure the program's overall "success," or critique the choices of parents who enroll their children in this and other such programs, or provide a cost-benefit analysis of the tradeoffs entailed in participation, though each of these aims is valuable in its own right. Rather, this book was designed as a qualitative

exploration of the lived experiences of the youngest participants in this novel program aimed at providing opportunities for educational achievement and social integration.⁴

My primary purpose is to illuminate the unique qualities and character of the life of these students. To that end, I have produced a narrative study. The work contains observations, descriptions, vignettes, quotations, dialogue, and my own perspectives and analyses. This approach borrows from a rich tradition in the qualitative or ethnographic mode, including the works of Alan Peshkin, Philip Jackson, and Vivian Paley, to name just a few. My primary research tool was my work as a participant observer in the schools and classrooms of thirteen kindergarten students over the course of two academic years. In addition, I spent time with students on the bus, in their after-school programs, and in their homes. I interviewed parents, teachers, and administrators, and I also used a variety of interview formats to elicit the perspectives of the students in this study. Each of these approaches enhanced my understanding of the educational endeavors of the Canford students. (See the appendix for further discussion of research methods.)

This work is organized with an eye toward illuminating the experience of the *students* in this program, taking account of and valuing their own perspective and experience. Far too little research in education emphasizes the student point of view, and this is particularly true for the youngest of our grade school students. In the words of Philip Jackson in *Life in Classrooms* (1990), “We had better move up closer to the immediate experience of young children if we are to discover what life in the classroom is really like. In short, we had better get to our informants while the smudge of chalk dust is still on their sleeves.”

At its core, my research is about the experience of a group of minority students whose parents take advantage of an opportunity to transfer their children out of an impoverished and poor-performing school district and into a neighboring district with a predominantly white student population that is affluent and high performing. An illustration of this set of circumstances may well have implications for many young children and educators, both those in this program and also those in similar settings.

My aim, then, is to elucidate for the reader some of the texture and depth of the Canford students' experiences. If successful, this effort will focus some attention on spaces and places in the educational lives of young children that we often overlook, ignore, or believe to be either irrelevant to or beyond the scope of our work as educators. I am hopeful that we might expand our understanding of the possibilities of schooling and education and think more deeply about how our roles as educators might encompass the needs of our students, their families, and their communities.