

National Association for Small Schools

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The Right NOT to be Bussed

“On the Relationship between the School Journey and Social and Emotional Adjustment”

NASS summarises and reviews this work done by Professor Terence Lee in 1957,
published in “The British Journal of Educational Psychology”

We recognise that this work is half a century old but argue that at a time of increasingly worrying and very costly consequences of educational failure in society, and growing concern for the nature of childhood itself, this subject is relevant as it found clear evidence of negative social and emotional effects on children, particularly the younger boys.

We do not assert that the bus journey to school is a factor contributing to changes in the character of childhood that are increasingly termed “toxic childhood” but it may contribute even so.

We also recognise that in 1957 parents rarely drove children to school and still less chose schools involving a daily commitment to drive children to school. Lee largely contrasted the conventional school bus and walking, the alternative.

883 children from 57 rural primary schools were assessed by their teachers on ten dimensions of personality. Comparisons between journeys involving a) short walking, b) long walking, c) short transport and d) long transport showed differences both for individual behavioural traits and for a combined index, suggesting a relationship between long journeys and maladjustment. For approximately equal times transport journeys were associated with poorer adjustment than walking journeys. Boys in the sample showed poorer adjustment than girls and greater differences for length of journey. The apparent effect lessens with age in the case of walking but not of transport. Traits considered included absenteeism, aggression, depression, popularity, concentration, energy, eating difficulties and response to affection. There was almost a complete unanimity among the traits to sustain the main tenor of the findings, namely the strong evidence of an association between the long school journey and maladjustment. The findings throw doubt on mere fatigue as the causative element. Younger children might well react less favourably to walking than older ones in terms of physical fatigue but this does not explain why, age for age, boys perform less well than girls. The effect of transport persists when that of walking lessens.

Lee focused his discussion on factors such as *maternal separation*, and especially the young child's perception of his mother's accessibility. Other studies have shown the especially significant maternal bond between mothers and sons. Certainly Lee's study should be better known than it is and there is surely scope for further investigation. It is very relevant in any debate asserting the importance perceived by the child of the relationships between home and school and teacher and parent. The value placed upon this relationship is evidenced in the consistent opposition of parents to school closures.

The psychological underpinning argues that where walking, usually along known and familiar routes, still provides a mental line of communication back to home and parent, and therefore potential retreat, the bus journey is a distinct and separate episode fracturing that emotional thread. Today walking unaccompanied is anyway less the case and the car journey ‘safely’ connects the parent or other adult ‘friend’ very directly to the school. The mobile phone adds security for all children whose parents may need to be contacted but particularly for parents with cars.

There have also been for many years complaints about what happens on school buses, behaviour that generates irritation even anger in drivers, situations among and between children, usually older, bigger children that can strike fear and anxiety into children's minds especially in their first years at school. That the observed hazards of bus journeys are psychological in character lends weight to Lee's conclusion that the emotional separation factor, the parental umbilical link, broken in the case of bus journeys, accounts for these effects at social and emotional levels.