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THINKING ABOUT BUS JOURNEYS TO SCHOOL: A PLAYFUL APPROACH TO WORKING THROUGH LIVED EXPERIENCES WITH YOUNG TRAVELLERS

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Getting from home to school is an integral part of each day for young people. The school day starts and ends with a journey, whether this be by foot, on a bike, in a car or in larger scale private or public transport vehicles. For some young people and their families, this journey is easy and maybe even fun, for some it might be a nightmare. The journey to school can be a short hop or a long haul. Each individual has their own particular journey to school but what unites the individual student stories is a general lack of acknowledgement of these experiences by staff in the school they attend. Perhaps a reason for this is that the journey to school lies in a space *between*, a space between home and school. For staff, the school day begins when the students arrive on the school site, as this is when their responsibility begins. However, for students, the journey from home is integral to their school day, so it could be argued that for the young travellers their school day has begun before they reach the site, and it may not have started in a way that makes them ‘ready for learning’.

In this piece, we are thinking about journeys to school by bus and more specifically, those journeys made by high school students; young people aged 11 to 16 or 18 years old. In many places around the world, a significant proportion of the high school age population are transported to school on buses whether they be public ones or bespoke ‘school buses’. For example, in the United Kingdom, using a bus is the most common way to get to school (National Travel Survey, 2014). Similarly, in New Zealand, secondary school aged young people are the biggest users of buses, including commuting to school (New Zealand Household Travel Survey, 2015). In the US more than half of all students travel to and from school on school buses (Vincent et al, 2014).

Home to school transport is a complex issue and its position between home and school is complicated further by being between government departments, policy frameworks and commercial and private interests. The commute from home to school “exists at the intersection of a range of contemporary public policy debates, including those related to public health; urban transportation; choice within education markets and other public services” (Ferrari and Green, 2013, p. 2771).

In some countries, there is state funding for transport but for the majority, the journey to school is the responsibility of the child's parents, so is implicitly tied up with issues of social justice. For example, school choice assumes students and their families have the necessary capital to make these choices. The process and enactment of school choice is known to be complex and is clearly constrained by many factors including economic, social and cultural capitals. Offering choice without the necessary resources (such as transport) to make and enact these choices, perpetuates socio-spatial inequalities. For example, students in urban areas are likely to have more schools in their locality and access to suitable public transport. Students in rural areas have fewer schools within reach, are more likely to travel long distances and are less likely to use public transport to get to school. There is also some evidence that suggests, as a result of market-oriented school policy and school choice, students are travelling further to school (see Gristy & Johnstone, 2017 for details on these issues) with increased travel times and associated impact on their health and wellbeing (Solstad & Solstad, 2016).

The journey from home to school is a significant part of the school day for pupils. The physical and social nature of the journey and the transport options available have an influence on young people and their experience of school and this is well researched (Gristy & Johnson, 2017). Young people’s journeys to schools are considered a peripheral part of the school day, there is ambiguity about responsibility for them and consequently they are not a priority in schools nor are they well understood.

For some of the many young people travelling to school each day by bus, these journeys are social opportunities to hang out in parent free zones if travelling on bespoke ‘school buses’, with the only adult on board being the driver. For others, these are journeys to be endured or survived. We have been working with young people, exploring their experiences of travelling on buses and have made use of the *Travel Remedy Kit*, an idea put together by Laura Watts and Glenn Lyons (2010) which was produced with a view to ‘remedying’ journeys that are difficult or unpleasant. Through using the kit, travellers can think about how their journeys might be made differently, and ‘better’ (Whalley et al, 2017). This *Travel Remedy Kit* could be used with groups of students to help develop coping strategies for their journeys to school, or with students who have problematic bus journeys to school.

The *Travel Remedy Kit* comprises two elements: a deck of cards with details of the journey and the making of a ‘travel pack’ which is designed, with use of the cards, for the passengers and their particular journeys that need remedying. We used the cards in the pack developed by Watts and Lyons (2010). Copies of the cards can be found at <http://sand14.com/travel-remedy-kit/> and they could easily be adapted for use by school bus travellers. Working with the kit involves three stages: design of the kit, travelling with the kit and a final debrief and discussion of the kit’s effectiveness. The student travellers can work together or with a teacher or a parent. Anyone working with students on this activity would learn a great deal about the lived experiences of the students’ journeys to school.

1. Identify a journey that needs ‘remedying’. How might this problematic journey be made into an ‘ideal’ journey? Working with the deck of cards the discussion opens with two cards: *Imagine your Departure* and *Imagine your Arrival*. The discussion continues using three sets of cards, which are called the *journey cards*. The first emphasises the *story* of the journey and might include cards such as:

‘Gift’ – ‘Travelling can be an escape from everyday commitments and responsibility-free time can be a gift. You might contact friends and family or write a diary. How might you make this journey a gift to yourself?’

or

‘Boredom’. The less you plan things to do the more likely you are to be bored. Repetition of a journey also tends to lead to boredom. But repeating a journey creates the possibility it might be different this time. Are you bored with your journey? How might you make it different this time?’

The second kind of kind of card focuses on elements of *time and space* and in Watts and Lyon’s (2010) version of the game these include cards such as *‘Quiet space’, ‘Sharing space’* and *‘Making space’*. The final suit contains *objects* that could be included in a *Travel Remedy Kit* which the travellers put together for themselves, suggestions here include the obvious *‘Mobile phone’* card and also a *‘Writing’* or a *‘Something to munch’* card.

Students then take one card at a time from the pack and reflect on the implications and significance of those ideas, activities and artefacts from the journey that need remedying. If a card does not seem relevant, discard it. Relevant story, space/time or object cards are placed on the table in relation to all the other cards, in order to build up a visual representation and story of the journey.

2. Using ideas from the cards that have been used to tell the story of an ideal version of the journey that needs remedying, the student traveller can now put together a ‘kit’, containing both material objects and thinking tools that will remedy their journey to school. The ‘kit’ can then be tried out on the problematic journey.
3. Finally, the travellers reflect on their journeys with their remedy kit in a discussion with their peers, teacher or parent.

Through this process, the participants can find ways to re-think their journey, moving from an articulation of specific problems to a discussion of potential remedies. We acknowledge that students on buses have a limited agency to change their physical journey to school but they can change the way they conceptualise and articulate their journeys. We think our adaptation of the ideas of Watts and Lyons (2010) offers a playful, creative and thought provoking activity that could be used to support students as they explore their positive, as well as negative, school bus journeys. In addition to

supporting students through this process, teachers would learn a great deal about the lived experiences of their students' journeys to school. Using a 'game' such as this avoids the risks of listing the issues and repetitive and unproductive recalculating of the emiseration (Slee, 2001) of the journeys to school. "As in life, what matters is not the final destination, but all the interesting things that occur along the way" (Ingold, 2007).

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