

**VIEWS FROM A SCHOOL BUS WINDOW:
STORIES OF THE CHILDREN WHO RIDE**

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B.Ed., University of Lethbridge, 1978

A Project
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
of the University of Lethbridge
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF EDUCATION

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA

February 2004

Dedication

This project is dedicated to the rural children who ride school buses and to the students who I was able to interview. I thank them and their families for their help and support, and I hope that by writing their stories, a difference will be made to the rides that they will take everyday in the future.

Abstract

Everyday, hundreds of students in rural areas of Alberta and other parts of Canada start their day by boarding a big yellow school bus, the vehicle that transports them to and from school. For them, their school day begins and ends with a bus ride. For many, the ride is lengthy. This study presents qualitative research that forms a profile of what concerns students about their bus rides. 62 children from ages 5 to 18 were interviewed to determine what they thought about riding the school bus and what social, psychological and intellectual implications exist for these children. Seven major themes emerged through the interviews: boredom, safety, relationships, community bonding, student behaviour and attitudes, medical concerns, and student responsibilities. Writing their stories, and stories from my memories of riding the bus, is part of the action research involved in this project; a textual reflection on lived experiences. Most of the stories related to at least one theme, and many stories included several of the themes. Recommendations for ways of improving bus rides include collaboration between all educational partners, placing another adult on each bus, and better and varied training for drivers enabling them to be more skilled in relating to the children.

Acknowledgements

First, I wish to recognize the cooperation and assistance I received from the families of the children I interviewed in this study. Because of the enormous response to my letters requesting informants for this study, I was able to successfully conclude my interviews in the spring of 2003.

Second, I wish to recognize the assistance and flexibility I received from my principal, the teachers in my school, the principal and the teachers of the high school where some of the interviews were conducted. Their cooperation in allowing me to access students and use their facilities helped me to successfully complete the interviews.

Third, I wish to recognize the people who helped edit this project. Their time, ideas and suggestions were very helpful to me.

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Chapter One: It Begins With the Bus

Mrs. Johnson came into my office. Her eyes were red, and her cheeks tear-stained. She was clearly upset, and needed to see me...now! After calming her as much as I could, I offered my help. The problem was the bus. Well, it was the children on the bus, the ones that were making “my son’s life hell.” She wasn’t going to stand for it anymore. Her son, her daughter and herself had put up with it for most of last year hoping that it would “sort itself out,” as some things need to be settled by the students themselves or by the bus driver. Almost every day last year, her son had come home in tears because of what the kids on the bus had said or done to him.

Now after only three days of the new school year, it started again, and she wasn’t going to stand for it. Something needed to be done about these children. Her son did have special needs, and she knew he wasn’t perfect, but a daily routine of being “bugged, agitated, called names, hit, laughed at, bullied and intimidated” wasn’t acceptable and it had to stop. The bus driver hadn’t addressed the problem and she had spoken to him frequently. Now she needed my help.

After investigating the situation, talking to the children identified as the alleged culprits, as well as the victim, my interest was piqued. I asked the children the necessary questions to clarify that particular situation, but I also asked more pointed questions about what else happens on their bus rides. The children answered all of my questions freely and eagerly. They had many and varied stories about riding the bus. Answer after answer spoke of the situations that occurred on a daily basis.

Background

I began talking to more bus students and teachers in my school. As an administrator, I wanted to know if and how riding buses was affecting the students in my school. Talking to rural parents

whose children rode the bus daily, especially for long distances, also gave me insight into the students' busing experiences. I began to visualize and gain perspective on the busing situation in my locality, the Livingstone Range School Division(LRSD#68) in the southwest corner of Alberta. More and more busing queries began to formulate in my mind and I started wondering what was happening on our school buses. How was riding the bus affecting the children?

While listening to the comments of these children, their parents and from other teachers, glimpses into my own bus riding memories kept reoccurring. They were moments of déjà vu, knowing about their experiences, reliving in my mind the stories they were telling. I knew those stories; I had lived them too. My family lived on a farm 18 miles from town and riding the school bus was almost a daily event for 12 years of my life. I had lots of memories of bus riding years, some good and some not. Comparison stories started formulating in my mind. My memories were in a different time and many things had changed; yet many things had remained the same. It seemed to me that riding the bus was an artifact from my past that had remained unchanged for the students of the present.

Each time I heard a story of theirs, I compared it to one that I had lived. I remembered the boredom that set in day after day, and the ways I tried to resolve it. I fondly remembered my driver as I heard stories about their bus drivers and how they influence the children they transport. I remembered conversations with my friends and kids of neighbours, and the occasional time when a fight broke out. I remembered the cold days in winter, when my feet froze because there was only one floor heater at the very back, and my bottom was almost numb from the cold of the hard vinyl seat. I remembered the heat in summer when opening the windows meant that a dusty hot breeze would only slightly change the temperature inside the bus. I remembered my life on that bus.

It was through these informal conversations and a lapse into my own childhood and teenage memories that my research question for this project was formulated. After many conversations and much consideration, I realized that students who ride the bus have stories that need to be heard. Their voices were patiently waiting to speak out to someone who would listen with compassion and empathy. I wanted to become that person. I wanted to hear and write their stories. They were willing and so was I. The result was that my research question was posed. What are the social, psychological and intellectual implications from riding the bus?

Another reason that this topic interested me was that as a teacher and administrator in Alberta's public school system, it is my responsibility to teach the curriculum, ensure a safe and caring environment for all children in my school, and be accountable to the parents and guardians of my students for their learning needs. Year after year, new and special programs are initiated to help students with various learning disabilities. Behaviour programs to promote acceptable socialization, fair play and manners are being researched and implemented. And reams of professional development opportunities are being made available to teachers to help them cope with changing curriculum, program plans, and better ways to understand and meet the students' diversified needs. Along the way, there are continuous accountability checks; surveys and evaluations by Alberta Learning, divisional office, school administration, parents, students, and the public at large. These surveys contain questions all focusing on what really matters to the stakeholders in our educational system. Should busing be part of the evaluative process?

The final reason for selecting this research question was that my own children rode the bus. Although for them the length of time on the bus was much shorter than those of the students I interviewed, they still encountered many and varied experiences. As I began my research

project, they regaled many of their own stories to me. Some memorable events still stand out in their minds.

Every aspect of the educational system is and has been scrutinized by the public: every aspect...except busing. Busing is one aspect of public and private education in Alberta that has virtually remained unchanged for decades. There have been improvements to the policies and to the buses themselves, better training for drivers, and safety concerns addressed, but the manner in which students are transported to school is almost the same as it was 20, 40, 50 years ago. There is no system of evaluation and accountability to check if students and parents are happy. No tool of measurement asks, "How are we doing?" For all the educational gains we have made inside the school building, for all the strides in accommodating the needs of our children, does it all fall apart on the bus? Once on board the school bus, is what is learned and maintained from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. every day in school lost on the bus?

As educators, we are dedicated to student learning; learning for the whole student, where virtually every aspect of his/her education is considered and addressed. All social, psychological and intellectual needs of every child in our schools must be met. Society seems to be downloading more responsibilities onto the educational system, the schools and their teachers. The misbehaviour of a student on a bus can be deferred to the administrator of the school that the child attends. Like Mrs. Johnson, parents complain of bullying and other mistreatments of their children and look to teachers and administrators for help and solutions. Over the five years of being an assistant principal, from year to year, I have seen a growing number of bus related complaints. The concerns came from parents and bus drivers, and from the students themselves. Usually the complaints I hear are about behaviours and intrusive personal actions on space and

property. There is always high expectation on the part of the complainant that the situation will be resolved quickly once I'm involved. I try.

What is happening on those bus rides that is impacting the children who ride, and possibly undoing what parents have taught them in their homes, and teachers have taught them in school? The bus driver is the authoritative figure on the bus, but he/she deals with many variables aside from the number of children riding in the seats behind. Road conditions, weather, traffic, the size of the vehicle itself, the varying ages, the behaviour and the number of children, the noise factors inside and outside the bus, personal concerns and plans, all may affect the driver in his/her responsibility to deliver the precious cargo to and from school. Can that school bus driver be expected to be the driver, the teacher, the weatherman, the traffic cop, the disciplinarian, the nurse, and the parent all wrapped into one person? Can he/she be expected to be *everything*, and ensure the social, psychological, intellectual and physical safety and well being of every child on his/her bus? It's a tall order, yet that is exactly what is expected of *every* bus driver on every route everyday.

As I articulated my research question; what are the social, psychological and intellectual implications for children riding the bus, I didn't realize how important my research would become to my informants and myself. It soon became apparent to me that the students I spoke to informally earlier and the ones I interviewed held strong opinions about their bus rides. The bus rides affected them in many ways. No one had ever cared enough to ask them questions about their bus rides before. They were anxious, excited and eager to tell their stories. What social, psychological and intellectual implications truly exist for these children I believe will be depicted in the bus stories, theirs and mine.

Through this project, I am regarding the opinion of the children who ride as utmost in importance. I am interested in knowing why or why not they like their bus ride so I can write about their concerns and what is important to them. I also want to compare the experiences I had riding the bus many years ago with the insights current bus riders have today. Until now, there is very little research evidence that students' opinions and comments have been utilized in making busing decisions. Isn't it time that we actually ask the students?

So...it begins with the bus. Twice each day, hundreds of Livingstone Range students catch themselves ascending the stairs of a big, yellow, multi-seat bus, the vehicle that will transport them to their destination...school. Then, later in the day, this same bus will take them back home again. The students know the smell of the diesel fumes mixed with dust; hard, cold, vinyl seats on bums and backs and legs. They can hear the squealing voices, shuffling feet, and the roar of the engine. They can taste the sugary sweet savor of a random treat for good behavior. They anticipate the longing gazes out the windows, yet another long, boring and noisy bus ride.

Rationale

Because half of the student population in Livingstone Range School Division ride school buses, the effects of riding a bus concern and pertain to a large number of people other than the students themselves, which alone is significant. Parents and caregivers, teachers, school administration, central office administration, school bus contract providers, bus drivers and the director of school bus services for the division are all stakeholders in constructing and maintaining school bus services and transportation policies for the school division. How school bus rides affect the children intellectually, psychologically and socially needs to be considered for all the stakeholders mentioned above.

Another reason for conducting this research is that results could impact the amount of buses serving each community and the establishment or re-establishment of routes according to distance and directness. With rural school divisions seeing a decline in student population, closure of some schools because of low usage becomes reality. The result is more students being transported to other school facilities farther away.

Who would benefit from this research, and what would be gained from the information? I was interested in this question because as a student, I rode the bus for 12 years each day for over 45 minutes in the morning and over one hour in the afternoon. It was a “treat” not to have to ride the bus on Friday afternoons when my parents picked up my siblings and me instead of us riding the bus home. (In spite of music lessons, it was still a treat to be picked up). I was even more intrigued to find out answers to my question since talking to more students and parents, reliving my own bus experiences, and researching this topic and finding little information.

Families of children riding the bus for long periods of time, teachers, and coaches of these children, and the drivers of the buses would also be interested in knowing how longer bus rides affect students. Students, especially some young students, struggle with staying alert, organized and focused through a long school day. I have heard stories of children being tired. I have heard stories of parents trying to feed their children at breakfast time so they have food in their stomachs, and children resisting because they're too tired to eat or not yet hungry. They're forced to awaken so early to catch the bus on time, specifically on the longer bus routes. I have seen the tired children.

From time to time, discussions are held to lengthen the school day, by adding more minutes to a shorter number of instructional days. When these issues are discussed, are rural students living great distances from school considered? Administrators and decision makers

considering these options need to be aware of the numbers of students riding buses for lengthy periods of time.

Board members, bus supervisors and superintendents may also want this information in helping to make decisions on busing and bus policy. Safety issues would be the ultimate consideration. Do they know how, when, why and how often safety issues arise?

There is a trend occurring for a small number of financially secure city dwellers to move to the country. Land in outlying areas, depending on the location, is selling for a high price to people who “want to get away from it all” or change their lifestyle. Some of these sites are remote in relation to the nearest viable community with a school. Children attending school in the nearest community may have to endure a lengthy bus commute on roads where conditions change almost daily based on the weather. Therefore, future segments of the rural population may be interested in reading this study before purchasing acreages.

As a significant number of students in this school division utilize bus transportation as the mode of getting to and from their school destination, social, intellectual and psychological concerns surely arise; perhaps more frequently than we know or assume. Through my research interviews, I hope to find out what some of the implications of bus rides are, and determine if this is truly an area of need to be seriously addressed by division administration.

The last but most important reason for conducting this research study was because the stakeholders that hold the most importance in this issue are the students themselves, yet historically they have been the ones who have been consulted the least. There is much research on busing costs, busing safety, busing policies, busing disabled students and eligibility for riding the bus. The practical way to approach this topic is to go directly to the source, the students.

In the next chapter I discuss how the data obtained from reviewing literature on busing revealed to me that interviewing students and writing their bus stories would be a meaningful alternative to conduct school bus research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Included in this literature review are two aspects of my research; one side dealt with the issue of busing, and the second one reviewed literature on writing as research. The first part of this chapter will discuss the data obtained on the issue of busing.

Busing Research

Most of the research literature reviewed was published in the United States and dealt with racial and anti-segregation issues, busing for educational purposes and eligibility of transporting blacks versus whites. The information was dated and not relevant to my research question. Several major themes became apparent to me in reviewing and analyzing the literature related to my hypothesis.

There was mention of conditions that contribute to concerns expressed by rural parents and communities about the length and potential dangers of rides experienced by students who attend rural elementary schools.

Teachers and parents have expressed interest for evidence related to busing and school achievement, amount of recreational and renewal time, potential physical and emotional dangers and extra-curricular activity involvement. Existing information is mostly based in the United States, and contains almost no anecdotal evidence related to my research question.

There was concern about the burdens on children and families, because of the time families spent on obligatory activities such as outside chores and homework, thereby reducing the time that was available for recreation and renewal.

There was a lot of rural opposition to school consolidation or closure. There was little consideration for the students and families who were directly affected by the consolidations and closures. There was a lot of financial evidence that supports these decisions. Children's time on

long bus rides was determined to have economic value that was not accounted for in consolidation schemes. The cost of children's time was assumed to be "0" as considered by government entities. The long term and short term effects of long bus rides on children of all ages could not be measured in dollars and cents, but in the social, intellectual and psychological implications. These effects may stay with children for various lengths of time depending on the emotional impact certain incidents may have upon them.

I read data that dealt with pupil transportation costs in Alberta. The average distance of student travel was calculated by dividing the total number of miles traveled in a year, by the total number of students bused. Cost per pupil/mile was actualized, but only in transportation dollars. The social and intellectual cost of the amount of time students rode over those miles was not a part of this study, but more research was recommended

The influence of school busing on school achievement was virtually unknown, but nonetheless important. There was some evidence that children who were bused for longer distances seem to take courses that were less demanding academically. Some parents were led to believe that better educational opportunities were available in larger schools and were persuaded to giving their children the opportunity to attend larger schools with more options in the hope of more academic gains. The affect of longer bus rides were realized after the fact and some believed that lengthy bus rides have a detrimental effect on academic progress.

White's (1971) American study, and Fox's (1983) Canadian study did support the hypothesis that significant social and intellectual differences were found between transported bus students and non-transported students. Fox's (1983) article outlined nine topics concerning the degree to which children are affected by long bus rides, and came the closest to my research topic. It was more extensive than my own study.

Busing may be considered as another feature of schooling in our educational system. In some cases, bus rides are unreasonably long, especially for younger children. In outlying locations in our own province of Alberta, children endure very lengthy bus rides.

I found that there was an erosion of community life after the closure of schools. Schools are places of gathering for many extra-curricular and after-hours events associated with many aspects of community life. After a school closes, the center or hub of activity of that community, the number of activities also declines.

Students tended to participate in fewer extra-curricular activities if they lived a long way from the school where a lot of the activities took place. The further families live from the school, the fewer parents tended to be involved with the school. In White's (1971) study, 120 grade 4, 5 and 6 students bused an average of 2 ½ miles one way, and 120 grade 4, 5 and 6 non-transported students were studied. No significant intellectual differences were found, but a difference in after class activities (social impact) was detected. Non-transported students participated in more after school activities. This study was conducted in the United States, but it supports my hypothesis that social implications of bus rides do exist. The transported students in this study did not have long bus rides.

The literature reviewed indicates, and in some cases specifies, the need for more study of long bus rides related to student achievement. There also seems to be a lack of anecdotal evidence in the studies I read. Most of the literature I reviewed was based on evidence in the United States. Some of the information was relevant and some was not. However, that too was an indicator to me that now was a good time to do my own research on a topic that is relevant to the situation here in my school division, in this province and in our country.

It was both discouraging and encouraging to me to assess the small amount of available researched data on my topic. It was discouraging because current relevant Canadian data is sparse. It was encouraging because an investigation of research for this topic would be timely, relevant to the situation in Southern Alberta, and have potential sociological and pedagogical worth for our own rural students, their families and their teachers.

I began my data review with LRSD#68 policies on busing. There wasn't much information specifically relevant to my topic. Policies do address inclement weather pertaining to student safety, dress and contingency plans for student accommodation. Rules for school buses, operational procedures, distance measurement and routing practices are also included in the policy manual. Aside from student conduct, the social, intellectual and psychological side of busing policies is not addressed.

In a review by Stanley and Associates (1979) this dated material analyzed deficiencies in the pupil transportation system and made recommendations for alleviating these deficiencies. The people surveyed lived in Alberta but none were actually affected by busing issues. No one asked the opinions of teachers and/or principals, bus drivers or students and families or at least it is not evident from the report. Survey forms with 19 questions were distributed to 120 school jurisdictions, without specifying who in the school jurisdictions answered the questions. A portion of each of five questions addressed some social and intellectual student needs: planning of new facilities, distance from schools, time on the bus, modifications of school operations, and complaints. The population actually affected by school busing wasn't part of the consultation process. In rural areas the busing authority is one of the partners in the education of children. It is necessary to collect data and information from the sources: from the bussed students, their families and their teachers. The study identifies three aspects of pupil transportation: policy,

planning and operations. Where do the social, intellectual and psychological implications fit in? This area of research has not been included in this report; however, those implications will be addressed later in my project.

Last, and perhaps most importantly, were the anecdotal articles, the real life stories that were actual news items and specifically dealt with the social and intellectual impact that riding a bus had on some of the riders. The real life stories that I accessed, the actual news stories by McDowell (1996) and Derworiz (2001), related more closely to my research topic. Children *are* affected by long bus rides, and Zars (1998) outlines several points to support this theory. These were the stories that had the biggest impact on me as a researcher. These were the stories that help me formulate my research question and realize that students needed to have their stories told and written. The students needed a voice.

There are a relatively small number of students riding buses in LRSD#68 for extended periods of time. However, my study would be of considerable significance because it would address an area of school busing that has been virtually ignored in the past. The social, intellectual and psychological impact on students should and must be considered when administration makes policies affecting that particular segment of our school population. The numbers of students and the wide and diverse regions discussed in my research data are extensive. The data I collected was on a smaller scale, however, it will be relevant to my school division and will address an area of need where little current information presently exists. White (1971) states this to be a topic of high concern.

Most of the data reviewed included busing policies, deficiencies in transporting pupils, planning, busing operations and pupil transportation costs. In most of the articles, there was

resounding emphasis that little or no research exists on this topic, yet also in most of these articles, this was stated as a topic of high concern.

The narrative data that I collected will address the need to explore one more avenue to help students be successful and to build a stronger partnership between all stakeholders in the transportation system in our school division.

Writing as Research

The second aspect of my research centered on the decision to use narrative writing as part of the research methodology for my project and was originally sparked by reading the newspaper articles in my literature review on busing. The retelling of the events and incidents as they happened, the stories of real people, real children, the truths and meaning the stories carried, evoked my own bus memories, and spoke to my research question. The stories by McDowell (1996) and Derworiz (2001) were highly personalized.

I also wanted to inject the stories about my own memories of riding the bus. By recreating my own lived experiences with/in my project, recalling images, characters, and allusions I was engaged in what Richardson (1994) calls the *narrative of the self*. My stories were specific to particular events I lived by riding the school bus for many years. Richardson (1994) also discusses writing as a process of discovery, utilizing self-knowledge and knowledge of the topic from a personal point of view. One purpose for my project is self-discovery as gained from my individual understanding of my research topic.

Listening to the children's experiences, telling and writing their stories, I as the narrator hoped to bring meaning and knowing to their lives, and to mine. Richardson (1994) says by writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. I chose

the narrative point of view, knowing that the content of my topic and myself as the writer are inseparable.

I then began reading literature on action research. During the summer of 2001, Dr. David Townsend, (personal communication, July, 2001) in a lecture, spoke passionately and enthusiastically about the need for the collection of data to drive our educational policies, programs, and pedagogy. I investigated other forms of action research. Calhoun (1993) defined action research as “a problem solving cycle for improving organizations” (p. 62) first developed by Kurt Lewin. She added Corey’s definition of a “disciplined inquiry to improve the quality of an organization and its performance” (p. 62).

Before conducting my interviews, I knew that teachers, parents and children were not completely happy with the service the busing system provided. I had heard informally of problems associated with riding the bus, and as a school administrator, had dealt with several bus-related problems and incidents. I formulated the question, “What social, psychological and intellectual implications exist for students who ride the bus for long periods of time?” Knowing of existing concerns, and remembering my own bus rides encouraged me to pursue this as my action research project.

Calhoun identifies three levels of action research, the benefits associated with action research at each level, and finally, reflects on action research and how it has impacted the schools as a problem solving process.

The simplest level fulfills the needs of an individual teacher conducting research to see what is happening in her own classroom. To determine the effectiveness of a technique used in a teaching lesson would qualify as an individual teacher’s action research.

Action research at the next level may involve some or all of the teachers within the school. An endeavor to help all the students with an issue would be the reason for this level of action research. It may be conducted with the help of a university professor or central office personnel.

The third level of action research would involve a larger number of people, in wider circumstances. It may involve teachers and administrators from across a school division with central office support and with a university link.

This article addresses the needs of all educators and shows how action research can be incorporated at the level of a single classroom, to a more broad based inquiry such as a division-wide project. Anyone can conduct action research once they have some evidence indicating that a problem exists, a process can be derived, and an outcome or solution found. Change will result.

Research conducted by a single teacher will have immediate impact on the students in her class, as she may modify her program according to the outcome of the action research. School wide action research may impact students as a general population with a common problem. Measures may be incorporated in each classroom addressing similar issues or may be addressed from the office in a school wide policy or rule. A division wide action research project may change programming needs, policies, curriculum delivery, etc.; it will affect staff in each school and ultimately the children in their care.

My school bus study is a research project that would incorporate aspects of two levels of action research. The research was conducted on a local level; however, it may impact all bus students in my school division and in others. Provincially, I hope it provokes further investigation and changes to make school bus life more livable for the children.

Van Manen (1990) brought together the two worlds of pedagogically grounded research and the writing about everyday lived experience. He clarifies this approach as having no separation in interpreting research and theory from the textual practice of writing. I have come to pursue human science research because of my interest in and concern for children in their world. A textual reflection on the lived experiences and practical actions of their everyday life in riding the bus makes the research and the writing almost inseparable. Once I have gained the knowledge, acting upon the information or making appropriate recommendations for action makes the connection between the research and the improvement that may come from being pedagogically associated with the children in our realm of responsibility.

Action research proceeds with a very realistic view. It addresses the three levels of action research taking it from basic to more complex levels. To someone unfamiliar with the term of action research, it is a quick and positive reference guide to initiating a project. Anyone can do it. By using action research, I can give examples, describe problems, outline benefits, and discover side effects. Action research is achieved by trying to find an answer to a problem. From what I now know about action research, it can and does elicit excitement and energy because of the discoveries made and possible changes created from the research.

As an educator, trying to learn, improve and change is key in keeping current and alive in the profession. Action research is a productive tool on reaching solutions to problems and answers to inquiries. Calhoun (1993) has explained this concept in a simple and practical form. Van Manen (1990) has tied the human science research effectively to educational pedagogy. I have taken the challenge in proceeding with this project utilizing both structures.

Chapter Three: Methodology

To analyze the impact of bus rides through the stories the children told me, synthesize the information and discover, through the writing of the stories, how the situations implicate and impact their lives, was the foremost intention throughout my project.

I felt it necessary to interview the students who ride the buses, in a quest to understand what they think about riding the bus, how it affects them, how it could be made better and to be their voice. At the conclusion of my study, I hoped that I could make practical recommendations to the school busing authority; recommendations that will make riding the bus more pleasurable for the students. I have already felt the impact of this study on my own teaching and administrative practices. From listening to the children during the interviews, it didn't take me long to realize that some changes needed to be made and that I could begin making those changes in my own school. Recommendations for wider changes began formulating as well. It also came very apparent to me in a short time that it was really important for me to record and to write about what these students were telling me. They were so passionate about their experiences. That passion became part of my drive and enthusiasm for the writing.

I had a need to talk to the children. I had a need to hear their stories, their voices. I think they had a need to tell me as well. After sending out letters and getting consents from parents, one mother stopped me on the street and said, "My kids can't wait to spill their guts to you!" Another boy was waiting anxiously at his home's patio doors watching and waiting for my arrival. When I got out of my truck, he greeted me with "What took you so long?" I was thrilled.

The other key feature for my project was the memories I held from riding the bus for my own educational years. For me, it began with the bus every day; for many children today, it still

begins with the bus. I wanted to hear current bus stories and compare them to what I remembered as a bus student.

This is how I conducted the interview process for my project. An initial letter outlining the study was sent to students and their families in the study area. I chose students whose bus rides were at least 30 minutes long, one way. The area of study was within the Municipal District of Pincher Creek and students attending two LRSD#68 schools in Pincher Creek. This initial letter was sent out as soon as my project was approved and I received official permission to begin my fieldwork.

The consent forms came back very quickly. I made a plan for the interviews and set up the appointments. I interviewed 62 students in Kindergarten to grade 12. My objective was to interview at least two from each of the aforementioned grades. All interviews were audio taped. I heard many stories. I heard the incidents and events containing information that showed how students are socially, intellectually and psychologically affected by bus rides. I went to the homes if the parents preferred or they brought their children to my home. I tried to make the interviews as simple as possible for the parents and the children. I didn't want to be intrusive. Parents were keen to have me listen to their son's and daughter's concerns and comments. If it wasn't possible to interview the students in my home or theirs, I arranged for a personal day to be spent at school. I attained the permission from the teachers from whose class I was removing students for a short time, and conducted the interviews in my office. I interviewed them in groups; either siblings or a group of two or three bus riders who may or may not have known each other. At the high school, I attained the permission from the principal and teachers, and conducted the interviews in groups in their conference room.

I used my interview guide (Appendix A) with the predetermined questions, but found that some of the student's comments needed clarifying and that spurred me to ask additional questions. As I listened to the children relay their stories to me, I also made a few jot notes. These notes served as reminders. Sometimes the children would say something that interested me, but I didn't want to interrupt their thoughts as they were speaking. Before the interview ended, I made sure that I went back over my notes so I knew all the necessary questions had been asked and answered. Once the interview was over, I thanked the participants and offered them each a gift of my appreciation for helping me with my project. Once alone, I marked each tape as to its contents. In my jot notes, I made reference to significant stories, the ones that I knew I wanted to write about. Then at a later time I listened to those particular episodes, made more notes and then wrote that story.

The interviews are written as stories, which I wrote after the interview process had been concluded. The stories are based on the dialogues that I had with the students and the dialogues I had with my own memories. I became the storyteller and, according to Wolcott (1990), am inviting the reader to see through my eyes what I have seen and heard, then offering an interpretation of those views. This method of social research is both a process whereby the interviews were conducted to gather the data and a product, the written account of the stories of the children that I have interviewed. It is important to me to illustrate and interpret the perspectives of my interviewees. I hope to have created an ethnographic description of our rural school children population that has separate and significant classifying attributes, and specific needs related to this rural setting. I believe that this is important research, as it directly addresses the problems and challenges, as well as the celebrations and successes of children riding a school bus. I believe this to have been my responsibility, to reveal to others these aspects of this un-

researched segment of a specific part of our school population who is bound to long school bus rides in order to complete a full primary and secondary education.

From the fall of 1962 until the spring of 1974, I too rode the bus. It was 18 miles to school each morning and 18 miles back home again in the afternoon. During those hundreds of rides, I too had my thoughts about riding the bus, some good and some not. In interviewing those 62 students, I became more and more curious not only about their stories, but also about my own bus experiences. How are they the same, and how are they different? How did I feel and think about riding the bus years ago? How have they affected me, then and now? What have I discovered?

I was the person doing all of the interviewing in my study. Because I too rode the school bus, I have many memories of varied weather conditions, good and bad incidents, and conversations with a variety of children and bus drivers. I carry with me forever those experiences, the unforgettable moments of these long school bus rides from many years ago. Most are still vividly alive in my mind and I frequently compare them to the stories I heard during the interviews. I have interspersed some of my memories as specific vignettes among my collected stories from the children I interviewed.

This added another aspect of action research to my project, as I have the lived experience of riding the school bus. My own bus stories about significant events and incidents that happened years ago when I was riding the school bus as a child are interspersed throughout my project as part of an investigation of myself. My intent was to discover more about myself by writing these stories. Utilizing my own experience, and drawing upon the information gained from the new research stories would allow me to learn about these children but also learn about myself. Writing these stories is a method of knowing, and as the author, I know and I will tell. I have

heard, I have listened, I have internalized. I have written. I have compared. I have heard and listened to others' stories. I have made them as important to me as they are to them. I have written their stories and mine and have noted important congruencies. The knowledge and insights gained about myself, and of those that I interviewed, will benefit me as a teacher and assistant principal when dealing with issues relating to children.

The 62 children told me many interesting and varied stories about riding the bus. After concluding all the interviews, reviewing the audiotapes and my notes, I decided which of the student stories I wanted to write about. I selected the stories based on the following criteria. Many of the dialogues I had with the children held similar content. For example, I heard many times over about the importance of the occasional treats provided by the bus driver. Many children also described their relationships with the bus driver and the other children on the bus. Because I heard these comments frequently, I knew that these stories should be included in my collection. I also made my selection based on the passion I heard in the students' voices and the emotion I observed on their faces. I also wrote the stories that I felt held the greatest impact and implications for the students.

In selecting my own stories, I tried to include the bus memories that held the most impact for me. The very important relationships that I established with both the bus drivers I had over my 12 years had an incredible impact for me, so I knew that I needed to include stories about them. After the engaging conversations with the students, other memories surfaced for me. Events and incidents such as treat day, bullying, and funny adventures. I felt a need to include them as well, to point out how over the bus riding generations, some things change and some do not.

The most important aspect of riding the bus for me was the relationships I had with my bus drivers and with the other children on the bus. This research project had almost been

completed when I realized the significance of the relationship with two bus drivers. Both were significant for me for different reasons. It was only near the conclusion of the writing of this project that I realized that I needed to include the story of “Elmer the Tough.” So I did.

According to Wolcott (1990), the narrator has an advantage as he can introduce the characters and settings, filling in the necessary details or offering different perspectives of the story. I hoped to emphasize what was important to the characters and their feelings associated with riding the bus. I wrote about the events and incidents that engaged them, those that they thought were important as well as the ones that answered my research question. I wrote their stories; the stories that clearly indicate that riding the bus is a social, intellectual and psychological event for children, and that some of these incidents have profound and reverberating effects on them. I tapped their memories as they talked about their drivers, the children they sit with, the bus itself, their friends, the boredom, the fights, the teasing, the bullying, and what they liked or didn’t like about riding the bus. I listened closely to these children, young and older, and as they spoke into the tape recorder, I watched the expressions on their faces, and heard the anxiety and passion in their voices as they told their important stories. Some not only answered my question, but also talked on and on knowing that someone was finally listening. I have endeavored to show how the experience of riding the bus, for two or more hours a day, has shaped, influenced and affected the children’s lives.

I have arranged the stories according to themes that emerged during the interviews and in the subsequent writing of the stories. There were seven major themes that evolved through the interview process. At least one of the major themes emerges in each of the 15 stories, and in some cases, one story may include several of the identified themes. I believe these stories to be a

good representation of the bus riding population across this locality, across the school division, and across the province.

I have begun with the theme that was the most important to most of the students: boredom. Following are stories that involve an aspect of safety, then relationships and community bonding, student behaviour and attitudes, medical concerns, and finally student responsibilities. In Chapter Five each of these themes is discussed.

The stories of the students I interviewed are written in Times New Roman script and my own bus memories are written in Verdana Ref script. Here they are. Here are the stories: Theirs and mine.

Chapter Four: The Stories of Life on the Bus

Jake and the Yarn

It was an innocent act of retaliation, but for some children it turned into the bus event of the year. It was an event that affected all the children who rode home on that particular bus that afternoon. It would be talked about years later.

Jake got into an argument with one of his junior high teachers. As soon as she left the room, he started to plot and plan how he was going to “get back” at her. Of course, it would be in good fun, but he would make his point. As he looked around the room, he spied a large spool of yarn. It was thick, brown, prickly yarn. He picked it up and tossed it into the air, catching it over and over, all the time thinking, unaware of the minutes ticking by toward the final bell. When it rang, Jake ran half-heartedly down the hall toward his locker to pick up his backpack and head to the bus. He was still carrying the spool of yarn. Oh well. He’d just toss it into the garbage can outside as he waited for his bus. It would serve that old teacher right when she looked for it tomorrow. As he neared his bus stop, the friend he was walking with questioned him about the yarn. “Where did you get it and what exactly are you going to do with it?”

Still thinking and laughing, the idea suddenly popped into his head. Jake told his friend that when the bus stopped, he should run onto the bus and open the window of the seat they usually sat in. Jake would then tie an end of the yarn to the metal railing just where the bus came to a stop. Jake would then throw the spool into the open window and run onto the bus himself. When the bus started moving, the yarn would unravel and the boys and the other students on the bus could watch as the length of yarn became longer and longer as the bus continued on its way. And it happened just that way.

The scene was set and the boys could hardly contain their anticipation and laughter as the bus pulled away from the school. It didn't take long for the rest of the students to realize what was happening. Jake and his friend made a huge ruckus from their vantage point at the back of the bus. As the yarn unraveled along the streets, all of the students on the bus, young, old and in-between, shouted and watched the reactions of the people in vehicles, on bikes and walking as they saw what was going on. Predictions as to when the yarn would run out started to fly. At about at what point along their journey the yarn would end, became the main topic of the gaiety on this bus. Watching ahead and looking back following the line of yarn was the focus of every child's attention minute after minute. What fun!

The bus driver, too, joined in. He laughed along with the rest of his crew. He tried to pay close attention to the saga of the yarn, watching in his rearview mirror, trying to catch a glimpse of the yarn itself, asking questions of the students furthest back in the bus, wanting to know what was happening as he turned corners, or sped past a car or rounded the curve with the bushes. He wanted to know all the details: if it broke or became twisted in the trees, or if it hit the vehicle they just passed as he continued to drive the children home. He too wanted to be part of the fun. He probably hadn't had this much fun in all the years of driving the bus.

Once the younger children realized that the bus driver knew what was going on, they thought that Jake was going to get into major trouble. But they were quite surprised when the driver laughed along with them and became part of the game, swerving from side to side on the road, trying to make the yarn break. He too enjoyed this party atmosphere, as he shouted right along with the rest of the kids.

But all too soon, the yarn ran out. The empty cardboard spool was tossed out the window and the chaos settled down, back to the normal din and drudgery of going home on the bus. But

it was exciting for a while. There would be many embellished stories around the supper tables that night as the children retold the adventure of the Jake and the yarn.

A simple act of retaliation on the part of Jake turned into an exciting bus ride and entertainment for many children and a bus driver. This incident turned the ordinarily boring bus ride into an event. But did he get his retaliation? He certainly didn't retaliate on the teacher that made him angry earlier in the day. She probably didn't ever find out about what Jake did. The yarn had simply disappeared from her classroom and she probably soon forgot about it.

The bus driver certainly didn't mind the whole event. In fact he himself was fully engaged in the activity while driving the bus. What was the message to the children? Jake received no reprimand from the driver, so would the children understand that as long as no one is in danger, this kind of activity was condoned by the person in authority? By letting this activity continue children may think that other similar activities could be initiated on other bus rides without consequence. The bus driver was in charge of the situation and chose to allow it to continue and actually actively participate in it towards its conclusion. Is this proper protocol for a bus driver? He has responsibility to keep order on the bus and ensure the children get to their destination in a safe and acceptable manner.

But what of safety and danger issues? Was anyone in danger and was there an issue of safety? Even if the children on the bus were in no danger and everyone seemed safe, should this kind of spontaneous activity be allowed to occur? Was the safety of the children compromised in any way?

How were the children affected by this event? It may have been good conversation for the supper table that night, but would it have long-term effects in their future? Other children

who witnessed this event, at sometime in their future, may decide to initiate something similar thinking that it was O.K. and that no one would mind, least of all the bus driver.

Or would this event be an isolated incident, quickly forgotten with the start of a new school day, and another boring bus ride? For several students to retell this story, it must have been a highlight in their school bus memories.

Mabel the Moose

Sometimes unforeseen things happen. We all know that. Buses are not exempt. Getting stuck in a snow bank, unable to make the run home because of a blizzard, a flat tire, a child that is supposed to be on the bus but can't be found; these are all instances where the unknown or unforeseen happens.

Over the years, a lot of surprises happened to me riding the bus, but there are a few that stand out as memorable experiences. One such event was the day the moose stood in the middle of the road and wouldn't move.

It happened shortly after turning off the highway onto the gravel road, the second last leg of our ride home. Just minutes after turning off the highway, the road descends into the river valley, the Oldman River. There is a one-lane bridge across the river, and care must be taken to watch for oncoming traffic. If two vehicles approach the bridge at the same time, the one that gets to the bridge first has the right of way, while the vehicle on the other side waits for its turn. It must pull over in order for the oncoming vehicle to pass once it is on the other side of the bridge.

Usually, everyone displays and practices proper protocol when approaching a bridge in this way. However, one day there was a particular animal that did not know about the proper protocol in crossing one-lane bridges.

It was a beautiful fall afternoon, sometime near the beginning of October. The bus was just coming down the hill going into the river valley. Up ahead I could see something brownish black standing inside the bridge. I heard Darlene say, "Something is down there." As the bus slowed, more and more of us quieted our voices and activities, as our attention was drawn to the figure standing about halfway across the bridge. Darlene slowed right down, and eventually stopped. By the time the bus had stopped, students on the bus were standing either in the aisle or on their seats trying to get a good look at what it was that was blocking the bridge. It was a moose: a big...a really big moose. A female moose, I think, as it had no antlers.

No one could believe it. It was uncommon to see a moose in this part of the country. I had never seen a moose before; Darlene made that same comment, as did every child on the bus. I couldn't recall my dad ever talking about this being moose country. So what was it doing here, out of its usual environment, what was it doing in the middle of the bridge that we needed to cross, and how were we going to get across the bridge? Time was passing, and no one moved. The bus didn't move, the moose didn't move. When and how was this standoff going to end?

A lot of speculating started happening by the children around me. Someone even named it Mabel. Mabel the moose. Mabel the moose wouldn't let the bus go by. Quite a few minutes had passed. Soon a truck was behind us, and a couple of vehicles were at a standstill on the other side of the

bridge. Still Mabel didn't move. Darlene honked the bus's horn. Mabel didn't move. The driver from the truck behind us got out and came to talk to Darlene. We all strained our ears to hear what was being said. Was a plan being formulated? More minutes passed. I knew that my mom would be waiting for us in the car at the end of our lane by now, and soon she would be wondering what had happened to us, and why the bus hadn't yet arrived. Little did she or any of the parents know that Mabel had ventured into our territory. Little did Mabel know that she was the focus of much attention, and that she was making time stand still as she stood still.

No one knew how to tackle this problem. It was widely known to us, and to the adults in charge of this situation, that moose can be very aggressive and dangerous animals. I'm sure this knowledge was hindering any formidable plan to get the moose on its merry way. Everyone hesitated to go out there on that bridge and "Shoo" that moose away. It was kind of exciting to have this happen to us. It would be fun to tell my teacher of my experience the next day at school. She would probably tell me to write it down; it would make a good story.

Well, I'm not sure why, but pretty soon, everyone talking outside the bus got tired of standing around, not knowing what to do, so Darlene got back on the bus and shut the door. The others who were standing around got back into their trucks and cars. By now a fair number of vehicles had accumulated on both sides of the bridge.

Finally, I knew Darlene, my hero, would be the one to come to our rescue. She put the bus into gear and slowly ventured onto the bridge deck. Slowly, slowly, almost inching, she moved the bus toward the moose. All of us children were absolutely silent, waiting and watching the outcome of this adventure. The bus almost got to Mabel when she lifted her head, looked at this big yellow monster bearing down upon her, and with a final chew of her cud, began to walk towards the other side of the bridge. It took only a few minutes, and she was there, with us following her, nudging her onward, gently willing her to keep going so we could keep going on our way. When Mabel got to the other side, she descended down the river bank and headed off into the trees, without as much as a glance back towards us. And we just kept on going up the other side of the river valley. We all followed her into the bush with nothing but our thoughts.

That was the only time I ever saw a moose as a child. It was the only time I ever saw one from the windows of my school bus. It was exciting and I'm sure it proved to be the source of many stories at many houses that night. I remember we all talked about it around our supper table that evening. Mabel's whole escapade added over 45 minutes to our bus ride that night, but it was worth it. It was one of the most exciting things that ever happened to us over all those years of riding the bus. Little did Mabel know that she relieved our bus boredom for a few short moments on the way home from school that day. It was worth being late, even though all the

parents worried. No one had been in danger, and we all got to see Mabel. I wonder what ever happened to her and where did she go from there?

The parents did worry as to our whereabouts. Today, with each bus equipped with two-way radios, a message would have been conveyed to worrying parents in no time. But in those days, and especially the day that Mabel crossed our lives, we were suspended in time and caught in the drama of life in the country. A time when two-way radios didn't exist, cell phones were science fiction, party line telephone systems were the only way to get messages through, and parents relied on, trusted in and expected the common sense and practicality of the driver in making good judgments. Parents didn't have the luxury of being notified of every delay and mishap involving their children. Parents of today are lucky. They can track their children from the moment they leave home in the morning, until their return after school. They can relax a little more.

Up in Smoke

The pecking order of where children can sit on the buses with no seating plan is determined by age and grade. The older students get the furthest back seats, while the youngest students tend to be cast to the front. Middle-aged children, the ones in junior high school or in upper elementary school, fall into the seats in between. These are the children who are not quite teenagers yet, or have just become teenagers. Their turn for occupying the revered back seats is a year or two down the road. Sometimes an older student will “buddy up” with a younger child and allow him to come to the back to talk. When this happens, the younger child seems to sit on a pedestal for that short time and has acquired certain panache or claim to fame—at least for a little while. If nothing else, the pretence of being a “big kid” prevails for a short bus ride home and for bragging rights the next day when he or she is banished back to those front seats once more.

For many of the bus rides and for most of the children, boredom is a complaint that rings far and wide on bus rides. Children find themselves trying to invent new things to do or games to play whilst riding the bus, trying to ward off the boredom that sets in soon after the school year starts. Activities of choice seem to be talking, studying, reading, looking out the windows, playing dolls (for the younger girls), playing trucks (for the younger boys), playing cards, playing “I spy,” and telling jokes. Occasionally, someone starts an activity that is intended to be innocent but in reality turns out to be dangerous.

One such activity started with some older boys who always sat at the back of the bus. These high school boys weren’t interested in studying or reading as a regular school bus activity. In fact they tended to be loud and sometimes “obnoxious.” Some of the younger children were intimidated by their rude remarks and actions and consequently had little or nothing to do with

them. Usually they didn't even turn around in their seats when the noise and jokes got really loud. The younger kids avoided those older kids by having nothing to do with them at all.

Some of these older boys carry disposable butane lighters with them on a regular basis. No one knows whether they actually smoke; however, they did have lighters with them on this one particular afternoon. This day, the bus ride was as boring as ever and a cheerful mischievousness filled the air. The boys at the back decided to get out their lighters and "flick their Bics." They played a game of dare for a while, trying to see who could hold their finger over the flames the longest. The first place prize was never determined, but fame accompanied the record holder. After they tired of this game, they discovered that the vinyl that covered the wooden seats where they sat had melted when the lighter's flame got near enough to the fabric. So for the next while, the boys proceeded to burn holes into the vinyl of their seats. They tried to be inconspicuous and nonchalant about their activity, so as not to draw attention from others on the bus, especially the bus driver. However, that usually wasn't a problem. She didn't pay much attention to them on most days. They burned several holes in the vinyl before they became bored with this business. Then the boys got bold.

Sitting just ahead of one of the boys, and paying no attention to the boy behind her, was Kristin. She was thirteen or fourteen then. She had long blonde curly locks of hair. It was gorgeous. Occasionally her hair would fall over the back of her seat into the territory of the boy behind. She was flirting with those boys, trying to get their attention. She thought one boy liked her a little because he really didn't care if her hair fell into his territory. He thought she was kind of cute anyway. What happened though was "accidental" in the words of the boy, but "intentional" in the words Kristin. What is real, who knows? But while the boy was flicking his lighter, he flicked it just once too close to her hair, and her gorgeous hair was flung over the seat

at the right time. All of a sudden some of those blonde curls went up in smoke. Singed hair stinks. It wasn't long before everyone on the bus knew something had been burnt; even the bus driver.

The bus driver immediately stopped the bus on the side of the road and quickly made her way to the back of the bus where the singed haired girl was screaming and shouting profanities and insults at the boys who couldn't contain their laughter. The scene didn't change much once the driver reached the boys. They were still snickering in spite of being asked to apologize to the girl and having the lighters confiscated. Her friends consoled Kristin as much as possible as did the bus driver. She moved nearer to the front of the bus to be away from the maniacs. She never did return to the back for the remainder of the year. Her friends moved up to the front too.

The boys were only slightly reprimanded by the bus driver. Whether the bus driver informed their parents is unknown. The girl was devastated that this could have happened to her. Her hair was everything to her. The next day she came on the bus with a shorter style, but eventually it grew longer. Her parents did complain to the supervisor of buses, and a stricter bus driver was assigned to this particular bus route shortly thereafter. The boys continued to be obnoxious and loud and they even continued to bring lighters on the bus. The younger children were always glad when those boys weren't on the bus or when one by one they began driving themselves to school or when they graduated. The girl with the singed hair would never forget the school bus ride, nor would most of the children who rode that day. It was an event that will be remembered for a long time.

Close Call on the Highway

When parents give the school busing authority the job to transport their children to and from school, there is a question in the back of their minds or a feeling in the pit of their stomachs: “Will my child be safe today?” Parents trust the driver of the bus will get their children back safely each and every day. Usually that is the case; however, one day, on one bus route, there was a close call.

Maggie has a particularly long bus route with many country delivery points. The children on her bus were special to her and over the years she had developed relationships with most of them. However, the family that just moved in on the old Carlyle place had two children who deemed a bit more of a challenge than most for Maggie. Millie, the older sister in grade four, was sweet most of the time, except when, in the rearview mirror, she occasionally was seen as being sneaky. But Alex was another story. He knew exactly how to bug everyone around him and bring out the worst in others. He was a problem. Everyday, especially on the afternoon ride, Alex created disturbance after disturbance. Maggie had never had such an aggravating child on her bus before. But she tried her best to keep him settled. Separation from the other children was the answer on most days, but sometimes even that strategy didn't work.

It was a rainy, foggy day in October and the visibility on the highway and roads varied throughout the day. By 3:30 p.m. the rain had become fairly steady, but rainy days weren't really a hazardous problem for Maggie.

On that particular rainy October day, Alex was being very active, bouncing around in his seat and shouting to other children. His Ritalin medication was quickly wearing off. A war of words broke out between him and two other boys two seats behind. In her mirror, Maggie could see the situation escalating in spite of attempts by Millie to subdue her brother. A few

reprimanding words from Maggie should calm the ruckus, and moving Alex to the seat behind her should solve the problem, at least for today.

But before Maggie could engage her plan of action, punches and hair pulling between all four children was creating chaos as she tried to watch the road, the traffic, and the children. She looked for a road approach up ahead but couldn't see one coming up. The fight behind her was growing more intense by the second. She simply must pull over, park the bus and stop the situation immediately. At the bottom of the long Dunham Creek hill wasn't good, but what choice did she have? What decision should she make?

Quickly she decided that intervening in the fight was more important. She pulled the bus over, parked, put on the emergency brake and marched back to where the fight was continuing. She grabbed Alex from atop of one boy and told him to "get your butt to that front seat over there!" She sent Millie with him. The other two boys immediately stopped their retaliatory moves once Alex and Millie were moved to the front of the bus.

All of a sudden, Bill, who was sitting in the very back seat, screamed, "LOOK OUT!" A huge transport truck was barreling down the hill right toward them. Bill was sure the truck was going to slam into the back of the bus. Maggie looked up just in time to see the truck clip the mirror of the bus with its front fender. Her heart raced as she clamored back into the driver's seat. She sat staring out the window, until someone finally said, "Maggie, aren't we going to go home?" Maggie gathered her wits and started the bus moving once again. Only when she got back to her own home that evening, did she realize the miracle of not having a horrific accident that day.

The children who endured the bus ride that day and witnessed the near accident were extremely scared, especially the older ones who realized the severity and the dangerous

possibilities of the situation. Once parents heard of the close call, many complaints were registered with the busing authority and Maggie lost her job as a bus driver.

For the younger students on the bus, they didn't realize the closeness of disaster. For the older students, the incident soon faded to merely a bad memory. But that particular spot at the bottom of Dunham Creek hill would always remain significant to them as they passed by every day thereafter. The psychological impact of that event will always be with them.

The issues of trust and safety are at the core of this story. Parents trust that their children will be delivered safely to and from school while the students on the bus shouldn't have to worry about anything other than the conversations with their friends, the book they're currently reading, or the movie being shown at the theatre on the weekend. There is a trust that the bus driver uses best judgment and careful consideration in making the safest decisions. The driver is the controller of all the activity on the bus, good and bad. When an incident like this occurs, how long does it take for both parents and the children to regain confidence in another driver or in the busing system? How long will it take for the children to become less afraid or parents no longer fearful of bad weather conditions on school days?

That truck barreling down the hill could have collided with the bus, jeopardizing the lives of many students. Training drivers in proper safety procedures when needing to pull off to the side of the road is imperative. The question of student supervision can also be raised here. Is it feasible to ask a bus driver to add the duty of supervisor to a list of growing expectations already outlined as part of his/her job? Should a second adult be hired to ride the bus with the sole purpose of keeping order and discipline among the students?

School Bus Express

They call it the quickest route out of town for the students who ride this bus. It is the shortest route, as far as time is concerned. Students who ride board the bus at 3:30 p.m. every afternoon and arrive at home by four. The actual distance is equitable to other routes, but it's fast for other reasons.

One spring afternoon, the bus ride was exceptionally quick. It was so quick that the RCMP actually got involved. What started out as the quickest ride home turned into the slowest.

The town kids had all been released from the confines of the bus, and the driver headed out of town on the normal route. All four remaining children had moved to the furthest back seats, the prime seats, and had settled in for the ride home. They were talking between themselves about their day. It was a daily activity that they enjoyed. Two of the four, Stephanie and Carl, teenage brother and sister, were making plans for the evening ahead. Moving cows, doing a few chores and maybe checking out the creek to see how high the water was running would be among their after school activities. And of course...studying. The other two, Vicky and Tim, were gazing out the windows searching for a glimpse of a deer, or a coyote, looking at the newborn calves in the pastures and commenting on what they saw. All of a sudden, a police car appeared from nowhere, tailing the school bus, with its red and blue lights flashing.

Carl saw it right away but assumed it would be passing them as soon as it rounded the curve up ahead and could clearly see its way. So he and Steph continued their conversation. Vicky turned and knelt in her seat at Tim's cuing, in order to watch the police officer until he passed by. They waited and waited, but the police officer never passed them. He continued to follow them with lights flashing. Soon, Carl and Stephanie stopped talking and watched too. Carl decided to tell the bus driver, Bob that perhaps he should pull over onto the shoulder of the

highway to let the police pass. Bob said that if the police wanted to pass, he could do it without him having to pull over. So Bob continued along. The police officer did not pass; in fact he put on his siren. Bob, swearing under his breath, couldn't figure out what "in the heck" was going on and pulled the bus to the side and slowed down... a bit, but he did not stop. Finally, Carl yelled to Bob that the police officer was hand signaling to him to pull over. So Bob came to a stop on a road approach on the highway. The police officer too stopped, got out of his car, and came to the door of the bus. Absolute silence prevailed among the children as the officer spoke to Bob.

The unmistakable words rang loud and clear throughout the vastness of the bus. "Sir, could I please see your driver's license?" When Bob asked why, the officer replied, "You were speeding, sir. You were going 129 km per hour, and the speed limit is only 100 km. Sir, do you have any children on board?" Bob then answered that students were on board and the officer thought it best if Bob radioed to his base station so parents could be phoned to inform them that their children would be a little late this afternoon.

Although the day's ride started out to be quick, it ended up as being one of the slowest by the time the driver received his ticket and a thorough lambasting by the RCMP officer for speeding. He had been breaking the law, but with students on board, it made the infraction worse.

Carl and Stephanie couldn't wait to get home to tell their parents of the events of the ride home this day. When Tim and Vicky got off at their stops, they both ran as fast as they could to their respective houses to tell their moms what had happened. The next day, they would have great stories for show and tell at school. It was so exciting! It's not every day your bus driver gets a speeding ticket.

The Fight

One of the most memorable incidents that happened on the feeder bus was a fight—a major fight—between two of the boys that rode on the bus. I was probably about 12 years old, so I can remember the details distinctly. The fight was between Merlin and Lonny.

Merlin was a boy as old as my brother Henry. I can't remember how old he was when this fight happened, but he must have been 16 or 17. He was the furthest pick up for the feeder bus. As I was growing up, I thought on more than one occasion that my parents chose a homestead that was too far from town. By car, it took us over half an hour to get to town. It took the same amount of time coming home from town. By bus, it was about 45 minutes to town, and over an hour coming back. Well, by bus, Merlin lived at least twenty minutes further north than us. By my standards, he had a really long bus ride. Merlin's dad and my parents knew each other well. His dad was one of the original members of the community, just as my dad was. They were neighbors and friends for many years. Merlin's mother had passed away years before. I can't remember her at all. Merlin was the youngest of three children, and the only boy. His sisters must have been quite a bit older than him, as I can't at all remember riding the bus with either of them. Everyone (meaning my brothers) thought Merlin was a know-it-all, a big mouth, and a smart aleck. I don't remember him that way,

but I do remember that he talked a lot, and always smiled. To this day, whenever I see him, which isn't often, he is always smiling.

Lonny too was the youngest of three and the only boy. At the time of the fight, he would have been about thirteen. He too was a know-it-all, a big mouth, and a smart aleck. I do remember those characteristics about him. I also vaguely remember both of his sisters riding our feeder bus. Lonny was a good match for Merlin. They had many arguments through the years. They also had many boasting matches, always trying to outdo each other with their various feats and stories, true or made up. Many exaggerated tales were spun in that bus. They usually started on the main bus and transferred over to the feeder bus. My brothers and I were witness to these episodes. That was probably why I lived with the impression that both these boys were big mouths, as my brothers rarely held their opinions to themselves, once we got off the bus and into our house. On many evenings, suppertime was alive with conversation, of happenings from throughout the day and from the ride home. Their opinions were always given with some force; so much so, that their impressions were vividly imprinted in my mind.

I can't recall the origin of the fight. As usual, it probably started on the main bus, and transferred to the more confined environment of the feeder bus. We were pressed much closer together in the smaller bus, so the other students were either right beside me or across from me with only inches apart. Our knees almost touched. In the wintertime it made the ride

warmer but slightly uncomfortable as we were in such close vicinity of each other. I remember not liking it at all and tried to keep a distance between me and the next person, especially if it was a boy, much more than if it was my sister or even one of my brothers. I didn't like sitting beside someone that wasn't family...especially a boy!

The fight started to rage soon after leaving the other bus. The war of words got louder and louder and made me very uncomfortable. I listened intently, but tried very hard and succeeded in avoiding eye contact. I actually watched the bus driver's eyes in the rear view mirror as he surveyed the escalating situation. Elmer's glances into the mirror became more and more frequent and I could see he was becoming agitated. Once or twice, he hollered his characteristic "Hey!" and the voices settled and quieted for a while, but it didn't take long for the rage to continue with more force than ever. We were just rounding the corner, a few moments from Lonny's gate, when dead silence fell over the bus. There was absolutely no conversation, no noise, nothing. Elmer slowed down as he neared Lonny's gate and finally stopped. The bus door opened, Lonny jumped up, punched Merlin in the nose, and escaped out the door as fast as he could go. Everyone was shocked; speechless; and there was still not a sound in the bus. Not a sound, except for Merlin, who was screeching and swearing under his breath as he held his nose with his hands. What I was afraid to look at before turned into a staring spectacle for me afterwards. Blood started dripping

from between Merlin's fingers, and my brother, Henry, gave him his hanky. Merlin took the hanky to press on his nose. There were still no sounds on that bus other than Merlin's wimps and whispers. As we pulled away from that stop and continued down the road, I looked out the window and watched as Lonny ran and ran all the way down the lane towards his house. He never stopped, at least not while he was in view. Not one person commented on the outcome of this fight: not then, not the next morning, not a week later. Not ever.

The consensus between my brothers when we got home was that Merlin deserved it and good for Lonny for showing him up. I don't remember a fight before that one or after that held the same intensity or drama. It was like watching a movie, and Lonny had the last laugh. I can't pass judgment on whether Lonny's actions were justified, because in my mind they were both show off kind of boys. I did feel sorry for Merlin. He was put in his place, whether he deserved it not. Perhaps that's exactly what he needed. Maybe they both needed it.

I came away from witnessing that fight with disbelief that it could actually happen in real life, especially on my bus. I had a great story for my parents that evening when I got home and for my friends at school the next day. And as it turned out, not one of them had ever had a similar experience. I had outdone them all. Cool. I had witnessed an event that I

had previously only seen on television. It was a reality that I thought only existed in fiction.

The Wig

One shocking event that I experienced as a young student on the bus, (at least I considered it shocking at the time), was when, on the first day of school one year in September, I climbed up those stairs on my school bus to be greeted by Darlene, wearing a wig. It was a jet-black, pouffy, shiny, enormous, "piled high on her head" wig. I could scarcely utter a good morning I was so shocked at that sight. The idealistic view that I previously held for her all these years was spoiled. Darlene was in a wig. I couldn't believe it! Of course I wondered why she was wearing a wig, but I dared not ask, for really, it was none of my business and besides that, was I prepared for the answer? Never-the-less, I was extremely curious as to why my favorite bus driver was wearing a wig. It was fakery to the nth degree.

That afternoon, boarding the bus at school to go home, there she was again...*still* wearing the wig. I was hoping it had been a one-time episode because perhaps she hadn't had enough time to comb her hair that morning and by afternoon all would be well in the hair department; however, that was not the case. That wig was *still* on her head. All I could think about was telling my mom. I could hardly wait to get home to tell her about Darlene. The bus ride seemed extra *long* that day. I burst through the kitchen door and blurted in my loudest voice, "Mom, Darlene has a wig!"

Together, my mother and I discussed possible reasons why Darlene would need to wear a wig. However, we came up with nothing concrete. The

worst idea that we discussed was perhaps the possibility that she had cancer and was receiving chemotherapy treatments because her real hair had fallen out. On the positive and funny side of the possibilities, I thought she was a trendy kind of a bus driver, and wigs were becoming more popular, especially for women. She just wanted to be in style. By the time I went to bed that night, I wondered if Darlene would be wearing that ugly wig again in the morning.

With all of the activity in the house the next morning, I had forgotten about Darlene and her hideous black wig. I had forgotten...until I saw her through the window of the feeder bus as we approached the main bus at the rendezvous point. There it was again. The wig seemed to be a permanent fixture on the head of my bus driver. I guess I just had to live with it. I never discussed the wig with any of the other kids on the bus, but I wondered if they too were curious about it.

Days and weeks went by, and Darlene wore that wig, everyday, morning and afternoon. It actually became part of her, and I got used to seeing her in it. After a while, I never thought about it any more.

Then one day, there was no wig. Darlene was back to wearing her real hair. What happened? No one knew. And if they knew, they weren't talking. I continued to wonder for only a few days, then the wig was permanently forgotten and it never reappeared, not ever. But one day, towards spring, Darlene and I were having a conversation (as we sometimes did), about all

kinds of things. There was silence for a while, then all of a sudden she asked me if I had ever had a haircut that I truly did not like or if my mother had ever had a haircut she did not like. I cautiously answered, "Yes." Darlene then related to me how one day, near the end of the previous summer, before school started, she had gone to get her hair cut. She told me it had been a disaster. The hairdresser had cut her hair so short, she couldn't possibly be seen in public. So she decided to buy a wig, even though she found them deplorable. The wig was only a little better than the short haircut, but she knew it was a temporary solution and, after all, hair grows. And it did. Her hair grew, she could face the public again, and the wig was retired, not to be brought out again unless another emergency arose.

Mother and I hadn't even considered that possibility. But I was glad that it was only minor and not as serious as we had once discussed. Darlene was back just as she should be, hair and all. And I was back to my hero-worshipping once more.

I now realize the impact that Darlene had on me. She was a role model, an adult that I was expected to respect and obey, someone I enjoyed talking to because I felt important when we had a conversation. I think she liked talking to me too because I was always "so sensible" as a child and teenager. She was a friend. Seeing her in that wig put me into a world of disbelief. Why would she wear a wig? It was so out of the ordinary. That was what so shocking to me. The wig was out of routine. It wasn't normal.

Children today also thrive on normalcy. Younger children especially don't like change in routine, or treading in unknown, unfamiliar territory. For me, a wig on the head of my bus driver was a big deal. For a student riding the bus today, he/she may have just laughed and discretely may even have made jokes about it. But there are situations on today's bus rides where children become afraid because they are experiencing something that hasn't happened before. It gives them feelings of distrust, discomfort and in some cases fear.

Elmer the Tough

The most colorful bus driver I had, and in some ways the most memorable, was Elmer. For all 12 years, I rode the "feeder bus." The feeder bus took the alternate, opposite, shorter route, which when combined with the other route, became too long and time consuming to be covered by one individual bus. The feeder bus met the main bus at a predetermined spot, both in the morning to unload children onto the main bus, and in the afternoon, to load on children to deliver them back home in a "shorter" length of time. So for all the 12 years, I remember Elmer being the bus driver of the feeder bus, with only a few days of having a substitute driver. I don't think Elmer ever got sick, or if he did, he never took days off to recuperate. He was always there unless he attended meetings, or funerals, or took a trip to the city for a day. Otherwise Elmer was the patriarch of that bus route for all those years of my bus life. I know that he was there before me, and he was there after me. How many years he drove that bus, I can't say, but he certainly was a permanent fixture in the realm of bus drivers.

I can still picture him sitting in his driver's seat as I sit here at my computer typing this story. His story or perhaps I should say my story of him.

He was a tall, burly, stocky man. He had shiny jet black hair slicked back Elvis style, gleaming as it held tightly the streaks and lines made by the comb that he had pulled through probably only minutes before hopping

into the driver's seat. The lines in his hair matched the hard lines on his face. They were dark, weathered lines deeply ingrained into every part of his face. He wore the look of hard times and hard work. The look that life hadn't always been easy for him: He had been raised in a tough environment and was still living there. You could read his face and know that the lines read like the lines of a story where the main character knew nothing but hard work, tough times, and a struggle to keep the ends meeting.

A farmer by trade, I think he didn't really commit himself to this destiny. Struggling, as most farmers did, he used old outdated machinery, poor techniques, and really didn't ever spend the needed time necessary to massage and coax his land into providing fruitful harvest. Year after year, he was the last to have his crop seeded and harvested and in between, the weeds dominated his land. Unfortunately, his few acres were in prime public view, being directly along the main road and of course the bus route. It was a haphazard life not only for Elmer, but for all farmers. Bus driving gave some stability and extra income for him as he had a large family. He was a good guy, a good neighbor and friend. Someone you could always count on.

From time to time strange pungent odors would greet me as I ascended the stairs on his bus, usually in the afternoon. As a child, I never knew what they were. As an adult, I realized that they were liquor smells. I realize now that occasionally he had probably been drinking prior to driving the bus.

He was tough. At least I always thought so. In winter, he did wear a coat, but it was never closed or zipped. It hung open. And all through the years I never remember him wearing gloves or mitts, even when the temperature grew extremely cold.

His hands matched his face. They were weathered, and never really clean. I remember the right one atop the gearshift, almost a part of the gear shift itself. It was usually dirty, especially under the nails and in the wrinkles. They were huge dark hands that had done much hard work without any protection from the elements.

He always smelled of stale cigarette smoke. It was his trademark. It was a part of him. I'm sure at times he smoked on the bus before we got on. It was probably not allowed, but no one would complain about Elmer. He did his job. He always got us home safely again.

He was fearless. The roads winding through some of the countryside weren't always maintained and groomed perfectly, especially in winter. The lane going up to my house was especially hazardous at times. It lay north and south, and the wind blew from the west drifting piles and piles of snow along its whole expanse sometimes. But undaunted, Elmer drove on relentless in his objective of getting us home. It was kind of exciting. Sometimes I hoped that the drift would win, we would get stuck and would have to be rescued by someone in a tractor, Dad perhaps. Then wouldn't I have a story to share with my teacher and friends the next day at school? Or

even better, perhaps after being rescued, a decision would be made that the roads were almost impassable and the bus wouldn't be running the next day and we'd have a snow day. That would have even made a better story on my return to school. Unfortunately, this whole scene only happened occasionally; not nearly often enough for me. But Elmer made some of those trips exciting. He needed to get us safely home. It was his job.

In the winter though, Elmer usually only started his bus running moments before the main bus connected with him. The vinyl seats were rock hard and so cold that it was a long time after we got home before my bum would be warm. After having ridden for 40 minutes in a warm bus filled with many more warm bodies, it was shocking to board an icy bus with only a few kids to warm the space. We bundled up before we disembarked from our warmer haven. But that was a reality that I never got used to. Those vinyl seats are still being used on the contemporary school buses of today.

Elmer had a tremendous smile and a gruff bear kind of voice. He never spoke in complete sentences, but rather in phrases and fragments. His voice was deep and his grammar wasn't perfect, but no one expected it to be. It was a part of him. It made his character whole and complete. It made him Elmer. He always had a glint in his eye when he talked to me, and he smiled with only half of his mouth like he was making fun or like he had a secret. His eyes smiled as they shone. They spoke volumes. I knew he was glad to see us, his eyes told me so. He was always the same. He never changed.

But that's what was good about him. He was constant and consistent. He was usually late, both in the morning and in the afternoon, but you could count on that and so after making accommodations for it and not worrying about it, that's just the way it was. He treated us fairly. He was always the same. He was a good guy. He was Elmer and I liked him. It took me a while to warm up to him, probably 10 years or so after first encountering him, but I did come to appreciate and respect him. He was a part of the community, a part of my education, a part of my life that is past, but never the less a part that I will never forget.

Compared to bus drivers today, I wonder where Elmer would fit in. Of all the bus drivers I know and see daily as I do my after school bus supervision I can't picture Elmer among them. I doubt that he would conform to the training involved for today's drivers. He had his own spirit and certainly was independent. The courses on managing and handling students would have probably fallen on deaf ears, if he would have actually been present at one of those workshops. And from the safety aspect, aside from having a drink or two on occasion, he was probably as safe as any driver today, having volumes of common sense and loads of male ego. Drivers today make the decision when not to drive or cancel bus routes, before even going out into the countryside. For Elmer that would have been unheard of. He would try anything before conceding to weather conditions. It would have to be pretty terrible for Elmer to stay home.

Discipline was not a problem for him. He would treat each child the same, but he wouldn't put up with any bullying, fights, or bad behavior. One "Hey" from him as he caught a misdemeanor in his rear view mirror, would last months, for not only the culprit or culprits, but for everyone on the bus! If he said "Sit down," you sat down and didn't wiggle until it was your turn to get off. No one dared question him or talk back to him. He was the boss and we knew it. If he were a driver today, I'm sure he would run his bus the same and not have any child related problems, except perhaps from a shy little girl who was very afraid of him. But eventually she'd get to know him as her friend.

What About Us?

Noisy children seem to get attention from adults easily. By the same token, quiet ones are easily overlooked or even ignored.

Two young and very quiet girls lived with their parents on a farm and rode the school bus every day. They were very shy and kept to themselves all the time. They were never noisy or obnoxious. They were raised in a conservative, quiet home in a family atmosphere that held high traditional morals and values. The girls were taught to respect others and never to create attention for themselves. “To be seen and not heard” was an often-used household motto in their home and...everywhere else they happened to be. On one bus ride home, they weren’t even seen.

Katie and Mary were sisters. Katie was six years old and in grade one. Mary was five and in kindergarten. They were expected to play quietly, do their chores and not be disruptive. They were to speak politely to adults in all situations, in and away from their home. They were intelligent girls, but very, very quiet.

Getting comfortable in new situations was always a challenge for these girls, as they were raised in a closed and sheltered environment. They were rarely left on their own, and almost always had the guidance and company of their parents whenever traveling or away from home. Getting used to school was a hurdle especially for Katie. Mary adjusted more easily, probably because Katie had “gone before her,” and she had become familiar with the school when she accompanied her mother on occasional visits. However, both girls were very reserved in their demeanor and mannerisms at all times.

Riding the bus was another obstacle in going to school that took some time to overcome. The first year, when Katie rode to school by herself, passed without major incident. She didn’t really like riding the bus and only became somewhat happy with the necessary activity by

Christmas of that year. Katie sat immediately behind the bus driver so she wouldn't have to interact or associate with any of those "other" kids on the bus.

Mary adjusted better to bus rides because her older sister was there with her for sisterly support. Both girls spoke only in whispers to one another, huddled together in their seat, and stared wide-eyed at others kids, if they looked at them at all. At the beginning of the school year, the other kids frequently made fun of them; but when no reaction was received with the exception of wide-eyed stares, the jeering and laughter eventually became sporadic.

By February of Katie's grade one year and Mary's kindergarten year, the girls were moved to the opposite side of the bus, and one seat back to make room for an obnoxious nine-year-old boy who needed to be separated from the other children for a few days. However, once the isolation period was over and he moved back to his regular spot, the girls were not returned to their seats behind the driver. They never voiced their opinion or made known to anyone their wish to return to their former spots. So they remained there...quietly.

One day in March, the girls boarded their bus at 3:30 p.m. and sat in their seat as usual. Other children got on and the delivery home began. This day, however, was going to finish differently than usual. This day, there were fewer students than normal, and the bus driver took a shortcut across the countryside because certain children weren't on. This day, because of her shortcut, she forgot about Katie and Mary. She didn't pass their farm gate either because of her alternate route. She made all of her drops (or so she thought) and headed back to town to park her bus in the bus yard. The girls said not a word. The driver parked the bus, shut off the motor, opened the door and happened to glance sideways as she began to descend the stairs. And there they were! Katie and Mary were sitting where they should be, wide-eyed as usual; sitting huddled quietly in the corner of their seat.

After a gasp of disbelief, the driver went to the girls, gave them a hug and assured them that she would take them home immediately, as soon as she let their parents know what had happened and that the girls were safe. But before the driver could do that, the radio came on and the busing supervisor's voice was crackling on the receiver. The girls' parents had already phoned in to find out where their girls were, as they hadn't gotten off the bus when they should have. The driver took the girls home right away.

The incident made the girls lose confidence in riding the bus. For days afterwards they were fearful that the same thing would happen again. The driver did her best to reassure the girls that it would not happen again, and they eventually became comfortable riding the bus once again. The girls' parents tried to make the girls more responsible for themselves by having them practice being more assertive and look out for themselves. They started encouraging responses at family gatherings and community events where they themselves were present. They also solicited help from their girls' teachers, asking them to encourage their girls to be more independent and speak out in class and in situations where they needed to be more outgoing.

Being forgotten was not a pleasant experience for the girls. In fact they were scared, wondering what the outcome was going to be that day. However, it was a good lesson for the parents of these girls in making sure their children have the necessary capabilities and maturity in dealing appropriately with situations as they arise. The girls learned to speak out. Quiet children are a blessing to more than just parents. Bus drivers, teachers, church ministers and others appreciate well-behaved children. But children need to know when to speak out in protecting themselves and their interests.

It's All Worthwhile

Special times happen on the bus, very memorable moments that help kids get through the ride: activities and events that break up the boredom and monotony and sameness of each school day. These events are very important to the school bus children. They are made to feel special and rewarded for good behaviour.

On one bus, the driver had a special little girl that she called "Princess." "Princess" came to be one day when she boarded the bus feeling very sad and hurt because her mother had no time for her that morning. Mother was in a rush to get the children out the door, as she had to get to the city for an appointment. The request for 50 cents that she wanted for chocolate milk was pushed aside; and Mother had even promised the night before! But Marg the bus driver knew right away that something was wrong. Jean wasn't her usual cheery and chatty self, so Marg endeavored to do her best to heighten Jean's mood. Calling Jean "Princess" worked wonderfully. Jean not only got more cheerful that morning, but she is still called "Princess" daily and she loves the attention and the warm, fuzzy feeling it gives her every time she hears it. In her mind, she should be hearing it far more often.

Marg and Jean now have a very special relationship. It started out as an adult taking an interest in someone in need; even if it was for just a few minutes. But it is those few minutes that can make a significant difference in a child's day. When a child finds one adult who cares about him/her, his/her self-esteem climbs and his/her attitude toward life changes radically. When one child is singled out, and an adult finds ways to make that child happy or confident, the remaining children in the group benefit too. The adult has changed his/her ways and has made a special effort for one, and the bonus is that everyone else receives the same effort, even if only in minor

ways. It only takes one adult who shows care and concern for a child, to make a difference in his/her life.

Simple Pleasures

An event that students look forward to on a different bus is “random sucker” day. No student really knows when “random sucker” day will occur and only the bus driver knows for sure, but this bus driver rewards her bus riders for good behaviour and proper bus manners when they least expect it. Usually once or twice a month, just when the students on her bus start to get a little unsettled, she plans a day when she hands out a sucker to each student. She does this in the afternoon once she has collected all of her students at all of the schools. The students cannot wait for “random sucker” day, and at my school they talk about it at their lining up spot all the time; always hoping that perhaps “this is ‘random sucker’ day”. Their behaviour is geared toward being good all the time. They think that their behaviour on their bus is the best, because their driver rewards them all the time. Perhaps it is.

On many, many buses treat night is something to look forward to. Some bus drivers treat their students to a pop, or a slurpy, or an ice cream cone before leaving town on their way home, at Christmas time, Valentine’s Day or at the end of the school year. Some buses drivers tell the children to bring money on certain nights, and he/she will stop at the convenience store so they can buy a treat for the ride home. Some bus drivers do both. Other bus drivers make popcorn balls, cookies, or candy and give those their students on special occasions. No matter how the driver distributes treats, or when the driver decides that today is a good day for a treat, ALL of the riders love it! All children love to get food, and occasions of this sort highlight their school bus memories. The bus driver becomes instantly popular, and seems to hold that status by his riders for a long time.

Another simple pleasure for students who ride the bus is being able to listen to music. All modern school buses are equipped with AM/FM radios so both the driver and the children can

listen to their favorite station and their favorite tunes. This occurrence is especially popular in the afternoon when the mood on the bus is light and children can't wait to see their friends and share information about the day's events. Having the radio on adds to the atmosphere and relaxation of some students and the enjoyment of the ride home. Most of the students enjoy the music on the radio, as long as they get to choose the station, thereby choosing the music that station plays. Students like to have input as to what is played on their bus radio and unhappiness and displeasure is apparent when they are not allowed to choose favorite music. Listening to the radio is an activity that does help to relieve some of the boredom that sets in on those long bus rides.

Students really like these positive aspects of riding the bus. For all, these little pleasures make the difference...makes the bus ride bearable.

Treats

Darlene was a special bus driver because she gave us treats. Usually treat time was at Christmas and at the end of June, before school let out for the summer. I remember the first two times I received treats from her.

I remember my first "treat" day. It was the first day of school before Christmas holidays. When I got on the bus at school that afternoon, there were two boxes by Darlene's driver's seat. One was heaped with popcorn balls wrapped in wax paper. I could tell they were popcorn balls, because they were round, I could see popcorn through the wrapping, and...there was an unmistakable aroma of popped corn. Besides, my mother made popcorn balls at Christmas every year, and for sure I knew exactly what they looked and smelled like! The other box was a box of Japanese oranges. In those days, Japanese oranges came in a wooden box made of slats with a label only on one side, and the flimsy green paper that was wrapped around each orange peeked through the spaces between the slats. Those oranges could not be confused with anything else.

As soon as I spied those boxes as I ascended the steps of the bus that afternoon, I couldn't wait to see what their destination would be. Not once did Darlene refer to the contents of those boxes in any way. Not a word. Not a gesture. Not even a hint. But I am sure of one

thing. She did get the attention of every child on that bus that day, for everyone was eying those boxes and drooling. The bus was full of chatter wondering who they were for.

The bus ride seemed long that day. Not only because we were embarking on two weeks of holidays from school, but also because we wanted to know the outcome of those treats. She kept her secret for as long as she could. Just as we pulled up to a stop at Elmer's feeder bus stop, and just when we thought the treats were destined for somewhere other than us, Darlene announced that as each of us left the bus, we were to take a popcorn ball and a Japanese orange. They were Christmas gifts from Elmer and herself. I couldn't believe my ears. I was thrilled. So was everyone else. If I thought the bus was full of chatter before, it was bursting now. I was so excited that I coveted mine to show my mom. My brothers ate theirs as soon as they got on the feeder bus. But not me. I wanted to show Mom the treat, and save them for later, when I could savor every bite.

The second time I remember getting a treat on the bus from our driver was very near the end of June, just before the start of summer holidays. After picking up the last students at the high school, the bus always motored down main street before turning left at the intersection at the highway to head out into the country. At that intersection was a fast food place called the "Bunny Bar." My family

always stopped at the "Bunny Bar" before going home after church on Sunday mornings. We ordered soft ice cream cones every time, for the "Bunny Bar" had the best soft ice cream in town. That was a treat we looked forward to from Sunday to Sunday. I went to church just to get the ice cream cone afterward.

Every school day afternoon, I looked longingly through the window at the "Bunny Bar," wishing that I could be that person standing at the window placing her order. I remember thinking about soft vanilla ice cream, swirled in high white spirals on top of a cone that broke easily when you held it too hard in your hand. I could almost feel its cool creamy whiteness on my tongue. But I knew that it was an impossibility. That only happened on Sundays, and only with my family after church. But one very hot June day, the bus didn't follow its regular route down Main Street. It did go part way down the street, but just before we got to that intersection, Darlene turned the bus to the right, went around the "Bunny Bar" building, and parked right in front. She told us to stay sitting, as she would be back in a few minutes. It didn't take long, and she did return with a tray loaded with soft vanilla ice cream cones. They were for us. We were all ecstatic and very quiet, waiting for our turn to receive a cone. Because of the heat inside the bus, the ice cream started to melt almost immediately, so we had to lick very quickly. It was great! Every June that I can

remember, Darlene stopped at the "Bunny Bar" and bought us an ice cream cone. It became tradition. And unfortunately, it became expected. We anticipated the stop from year to year. It was still special, but not like that very first ice cream stop. I now wonder if that first surprise visit to the "Bunny Bar" was as significant to the others on the bus as it was to me.

Treats are still extremely important to the children who ride the bus today. It is a positive way to say, "You're special," "I like you," or "Thanks for being a good kid." No matter how much time passes, some things change and some things don't. Receiving treats from the bus driver is still the most popular topic discussed by children who ride the school bus. Like me, it will remain a part of a good memory about riding the bus long into adulthood. It is an example of giving and receiving, realizing that there was a special relationship with a bus driver: a significant adult from my school days past.

Bullying Lester

I can't remember it being intentional. At least not the first time it happened; not the first time I did it.

The boy's name was Lester. Who would name a kid Lester anyway? Lester was a cross-eyed, blonde geek, whose mother straight cut his hair like a girl's. He wore glasses whose lenses were as thick as the bottoms of pop bottles. And he always had a blank look on his face, like he was empty inside. He was either shy, scared or naïve. Which, I'm not sure, but he stared at everyone and everything and he never uttered a word. He always stared at me, at my sister, at my brothers, at other children, at everyone! He held the handle of his Bugs Bunny lunch kit in one hand and he stared. Sometimes I would stare back and eventually he would turn his head forward again like an owl, 45 degrees in one smooth motion.

One afternoon, my sister and I were laughing out loud about something that happened at school and I noticed Lester staring at me. So, on the spur of the moment, and *very innocently*, I stuck out my tongue at him. Immediately I saw the reaction on his face. He was shocked. I could see it in his pop bottle eyes. That one spontaneous incident started a routine. Every time Lester stared at me or my siblings, I would stick my tongue out at him. We began to make a game out of it. We planned to pick on him; very, very subtly without letting Elmer, our bus driver, see us doing it. Oh yes! We were sneaky. We would discuss strategies at home, and make

plans to get him to show some emotion, to change the expression on his face. We planned to make fun of him. We planned our bullying sessions. It became our behaviour, my behaviour.

Occasionally, Elmer would make a comment about Lester's strange quirks and habits, but only after Lester got off the bus. That gave Beth and me more fuel, momentum, the O.K., the go-ahead, the permission to continue with these subversive activities. And did we have power!? I was thirteen and Lester was probably six. I thought I had power, but I didn't realize what a bully I was. After all it was so much fun, even though deep inside my heart, I knew it was wrong.

It's been almost 30 years since I rode the bus, yet those days, the days of the bullying, have been relived in my mind and haunted me dozens of times. Now I protect and advocate for victims of bullies, almost daily, as a teacher and assistant principal. Only now do I fully understand the actions of bullies and the reactions of the victims. Only now do I fully understand my actions. My deliberate activities so many years ago have caused me to question the implications of the long bus rides children endure day after day, mile after mile, for up to 12 or more years of their life. What effects do these long bus rides have on the children who ride them? Are there incidents of bullying, and by whom and how often? How do these events affect the way the children perceive and feel about riding the bus, about the students they share the bus with, about themselves?

Some of Lester's experiences were unpleasant ones because of my sister and me. Some of mine are unpleasant now. Perhaps those occasions on the bus meant that Lester's confidence and self-esteem dropped and mine rose; at least for those moments.

A few years ago, Lester approached me at a swim meet. I didn't recognize him. He was handsome and he didn't have pop bottle glasses any more. We chatted for a while. About what, I can't recall; all I could think about was how horrible I had been to him so many times. I was so embarrassed. If I could only erase those days, those moments on the bus. I wondered if he remembered as clearly as I did.

Tom's New Coat

Tom was a neat boy. His smile stretched from ear to ear and lit up the room when he came in. Being happy was easy for Tom; it came naturally. He kept busy all the time and “being bored” wasn’t in his vocabulary. He loved his friends. He loved his farm and his parents. He loved his brother, most of the time. He loved his life.

Tom was growing, as all healthy ten-year-olds do. Winter was coming and Tom needed a newer, bigger, warmer coat. One Saturday, his mother and he went shopping in the city to find the perfect winter coat. And they did.

It was black and silvery gray. The silver part was at the top on the yokes at the front and the back. It had some bright red piping that separated the gray from the black fabric on the bottom part of the coat, both front and back. It had a hood that was lined with the softest black fur Tom had ever felt. The cuffs on the sleeves were lined with the same black fur. The hood had a lace inside the outside edge that could be tightened and held in place with a toggle on each side. If Tom ever had to walk in a cold wind or on a stormy day, he could put up the hood on his coat, tighten the toggles so the hood was pulled in close around his face, and be as snug as a bug as he walked along. The coat also had two big pockets, one on either side. The pockets had zippers on the top so nothing could fall out when zipped up. This was especially important to Tom as his mom always put a snack in one of those pockets for the ride home on the bus each day. Occasionally he had lost that snack because it had fallen out of the pocket on his old coat. But that wouldn’t happen any more. The zippered pockets fixed that. Tom wore that coat almost the whole way home that day it was new. He loved it so much! He loved the soft fur the best. It felt so nice against his cheeks and forehead and around his wrists. He promised his mother he would take good care of his new coat.

Tom liked to be busy, even riding the bus. It wasn't hard for him to find a friend to play a game of cards with. That was his favorite pastime, especially for the bus ride home. In the morning no one really felt like doing much of anything. Everyone was usually quiet and some people even slept. But after school was different. There was an excitement to seeing some of your friends and discussing the day's activities, especially what happened on the playground at recess.

The children made room on someone's seat to play the card game. The seats are slippery and sometimes the cards slip off onto the floor, so the children try to place the cards "just right." Not too near the edge, or they'll fall off for sure, and not too near the crack between the bottom horizontal part of the seat and the vertical back part of the seat. The cards get stuck in that crack sometimes. So playing cards on a seat on the bus takes more skill than knowing which card to play. It takes skill in just laying the cards down. It was a fun activity to do, it passed the time and every day was different.

On this particular day, Tom and his friends were playing cards, as usual. It was late in the fall, and Tom had been wearing his new winter coat for a few days already. The weather had turned colder, and Tom's mom wanted him to be warm and comfortable. On this particular day, Tom and his friends were playing cards, and as usual the children were having a good time. The children who rode Tom's bus were really nice, and they were friends off the bus too. This day was just like any other day, except for a few horrifying moments in Tom's life. One of the playing cards fell onto the floor. Tom reached down and over to pick it up. It was hard to find. He really couldn't see it, and he was trying to get it without getting out of his seat. At the same time as he was trying to get his card, the bus was approaching a drop off stop. Tom couldn't remember exactly what happened to cause his scare and his injury. But he told me this:

I bent over to get the card. I was trying to feel for it. I couldn't see it. I bent over to get it and all of a sudden the bus driver put on her brakes really hard. The next thing I knew is that I had slipped off my seat and I was choking. I couldn't breathe! I was so scared. I tried to hold my neck but I couldn't loosen it. It hurt. Pretty soon somebody grabbed me by my arm and dragged me back onto my seat. I think it was Brady. I started to cry.

The lace on Tom's hood had slipped between the seat and the metal tubing that framed the seat. When the bus driver stepped on the brake abruptly and quickly, Tom slid off his seat, and because the toggle on his hood didn't budge, the lace tightened around his neck, cutting off his circulation and choking him. Tom actually had a red welt around his neck that night. Tom was terrified. He cried and coughed almost the whole way home to his house. His mother was very anxious when she heard his story.

Even though this had happened to Tom two years before I interviewed him, it was still vivid in his mind. He said he never wore that coat again and every new coat after had no toggles on the hood. He is still afraid, especially when his bus driver puts on the brake a little too suddenly. Tom still plays cards and tries desperately not to drop any. That day the happy Tom everyone knew became a scared little boy, and playing cards on the bus turned from a fun activity to something very frightening. It shouldn't have.

The Accident

Many situations cannot be controlled and on most days accurate predictions of a boring ride might be voiced by almost all of the riding students. But occasionally, an event or incident occurs which stands out in the mind's memory for a long time. For some students, a lifetime.

One day as the journey home reached the halfway point, the bus suddenly slowed and came to a stop. On bus # 1143, the students were talking, reading, looking out of the windows, or playing cards; the usual quiet activities that happened regularly on this bus. Hardly ever anything new or exciting happened on these trips. Except today.

When the bus stopped, George, the driver, opened the door and leaped from his seat. When the kids investigated where George had gone in such a hurry, they saw a white and blue truck at the bottom of the ravine near the creek. George was hurrying down the rocky slope towards the smashed vehicle. It looked as if it had lost control and rolled down the ravine, as it was on its side, the cab, and hood, and sides completely smashed and crumbled. As George neared the wreck, he stopped momentarily, long enough to shout up to Roger, a grade 12 boy, to radio home base and tell them an ambulance was needed immediately.

Roger had never used the bus radio before, but he had watched George use the system many times. He knew just what to do. Home base answered. Roger gave the bus supervisor the message, estimated as best as he could how far out of town they were, and explained what had occurred. He also told the voice on the other end that George was at the accident site helping an injured man. The busing supervisor asked Roger to make sure all the students were safe and not near any danger. Roger was then asked by the supervisor to take charge of the children by having them stay on the bus and keeping them calm while their driver helped the injured man. Help was going to be sent as soon as possible.

In about fifteen minutes, the ambulance arrived, as did the police and the supervisor. The supervisor ensured that all of the children were fine; and George got back on the bus, thanked Roger and finished his route. Roger went back to reading his book as the students continued on their journey home. That day the bus ride turned out not to be the typical boring ride they all had anticipated. George and Roger should have been commended for their efforts, responsibility and bravery.

How much responsibility should be given to older students in a time of crisis? If the driver is away from the bus, who else is to assume a leadership role? Is it necessary to train and/or prepare older students on every bus, in the event that something may happen to the driver or he may need assistance? Is it fair to ask an older student to step into a leadership role to take control of a situation when the bus driver can't?

Roger was pleased to be able to help in this case. He took it all in stride. In fact, he felt shy about accepting recognition for his efforts. To Roger, it was “nothing.” His parents had certain expectations of him as the oldest one in his family. He had been alert enough to watch the driver use the bus radio frequently, and he could operate it effectively. When he had to as the oldest in a family of four, he naturally assumed the big brother role and could take charge of the students still on the bus when George left it to investigate the accident. But what is the norm when asking students to accept responsibility in an unfamiliar situation? Could every student be able to handle the situation as effectively as Roger did? If something had gone wrong or had not proceeded as it did, what would the outcome have been? It may be necessary to give older students responsibility in the bus, but can we rightfully ask a student to take charge of a situation when the driver cannot? Is there a choice?

Chapter Five: Important Themes

Before conducting the interviews with the bus students, I had wondered what themes would be more prevalent and important from interview to interview, student to student. For some of the interviews I was surprised and for others my expectations were confirmed. Based on some of the informal stories I had heard prior to conducting the interviews, and from some of my own bus memories, I had thought that there would be a relative balance between positive and negative experiences for children riding buses. There seemed to be a greater number of negative stories compared to positive experiences. For both, the same important aspects of riding the bus were repeatedly revealed. Over and over, I heard what the students were passionate about and what was important to them.

Boredom

Just as “treats” was the most frequent answer students gave me when asked what it was they liked best about riding the bus, “boredom” was the most frequent answer they gave when asked what it was they did not like about riding the bus. All students, young and older, boys and girls, across all grade levels, cited boredom as their number one reason why riding the bus was such an unpleasant experience almost everyday.

All students looked for activities that relieved the boring episodes of riding the school bus. The question of likes and dislikes related to riding the bus came very early during the interview process. A question that I hadn't thought of asking until well into the first interview was, “If there was one thing you could change about riding the bus, what would it be?” Many responses indicated changing the boringness of the ride as the first thing they would change.

The ride was boring most of the time for most of the children. They looked for activities to pass the time, especially on the ride home, and cherished incidents and moments that

interrupted the regular routine of the bus ride. Many examples for trying to alleviate the boredom were given by my subjects.

The students often mentioned that the bus ride in the morning wasn't as boring as the afternoon ride home. Some of the reasons they gave included being too tired to do anything but sleep or look out the window at the passing countryside. The students who lived the farthest away from school were the ones who indicated that in the morning the bus atmosphere was very quiet because everyone slept. It was an early start for them, some boarding the bus by 7:30 a.m. Getting up and dressed and having a bite of breakfast was challenging enough. Many parents of the students who rode the longest distances packaged their breakfast for them, enabling them to eat on the bus, and allowing for a little extra time for sleep. Not only did these students get some extra time in their beds, but they also took advantage of the extended trip to town by sleeping on the bus each morning.

On other shorter routes, the atmosphere in the morning was also quieter than that in the afternoon. It was a time for sleeping and gazing on those routes too. These were the two favored activities in the morning that seemed to pass the time effectively and quickly for most of the children.

The afternoon ride was different. Students were excited to see their friends to discuss the events of the day. No matter which school they attended, everyone had stories to tell and status reports to give. The chatter on the bus was delightful and exciting as all children gabbed and gossiped about teachers, tests, recess, and the best times of their day. For many of the children, being able to visit with their friends was the best way to relieve the boredom. However, as the friends came to their specific points of parting (homes and farms), other activities were incorporated to pass the time. Reading, playing cards, listening to music on personal stereo

systems, listening to the music on the radio on the bus, looking for wildlife out the windows, playing with toys, and doing homework were the activities students usually engaged in while on the boring bus ride home.

Reading was a very popular activity to do on the bus. Students said it was easy to read, and as long as they didn't get car sick, it was a preferred activity. They could escape into the pages of another time and only surface when the bus driver, a sibling or a friend called out "We're home!" Then marking the page, and gathering up belongings was the last step in being home at last. "It's easy to carry a book in my backpack."

Studying for an upcoming test or doing homework was also an activity students engaged in occasionally. But one student said, "My teacher doesn't like it so much when I hand in homework that I've done on the bus. She says it looks kind of messy. So I try not to do that so much."

Card playing was a popular pastime among older boys. They sometimes made bets between themselves, with pennies usually but occasionally with more. Betting seemed to create problems between friends, when one owed the other more than he could pay. So just playing for fun was better. Not only did the children who played the card games pass the time with some fun, but it was also entertaining for children in surrounding seats. You could always tell when there was an interesting game going on, because there would be a quiet huddle of children around one particular seat, usually near the back of the bus; a cluster of children kneeling, leaning, and not uttering a sound. The games could get so engrossing that the driver would have to call to the students several times to get them to get off the bus. It was a good activity, as long as someone remembered to bring a deck of cards: a deck with *all* of the cards.

Listening to music on personal stereo systems using their headphones was something that many older girls did to relieve the boredom. Some of the children had CD players and some had tape players. Both were used quite frequently, especially when there wasn't anyone interesting to talk to. The students also liked to listen to music being played on the bus radio, but only if they could choose the radio station being played. The drivers who asked their riders for input as to which radio station to listen to were very popular among the students, and the students were happy with the choice of music selected. But on buses where the driver decided which radio station to listen to, the students were often disgusted and unhappy and looked for other things to occupy their time.

Many children liked to look out the windows, watching for wildlife. They became very excited when they caught a glimpse of a deer, an elk or even a coyote. It was even occasion to shout out loud when a bear, a moose or a cougar crossed the road or the highway ahead of the bus. As I remember my own memory of Mabel the Moose, I know that was truly an exciting experience forty years ago. I'm glad to think that these are still special events for children today.

Playing with toys seemed to be an activity that younger children preferred to do on the bus. Girls liked to play with dolls, specifically Barbies, and boys liked to play with soldiers and army men, space toys and cars. Occasionally some of the toys got lost, at least temporarily. Cars and trucks would roll off the seats and onto the floor, and disappear until the next day or two days later when the driver cleaned his/her bus. They would then be returned to their rightful owners. Voices among the playing participants sometimes got loud when plots got exciting, which annoyed older students. Usually however, the play was active enough that the children were fully engaged, having a lot of fun and not bothering anyone in surrounding seats at all.

One outcome that sometimes emerged from the boredom, the act of doing absolutely nothing at all, was that fights broke out. They started out by one child simple “bugging” another. The situation escalated and soon a full fight erupted. Sometimes the situation was bad or serious enough that “the bus driver had to pull over on the side of the road, and stop the bus, then stop the fight. She made the two kids who were fighting sit at the front of the bus right behind her and together. They didn’t like that so much but they had to do it. It was kind of fun to watch.”

“Picking” on victims may also have been a direct result from being bored. The “picking” led to teasing, name-calling, and bullying. If students had more structured activities on the bus and less instances of boredom, would these unpleasant incidents of fighting and bullying diminish?

Safety

The foremost responsibility of a busing authority should be to transport students safely to and from school. The vehicles need to be kept in excellent maintenance. Drivers need to be properly trained and assessed in correct driving procedures and have practice in operating a large, cumbersome vehicle in a variety of driving conditions including roads, weather, and traffic. Safe driving habits, accompanied by proper emergency protocol, need to be reviewed and practiced frequently by supervisors with their drivers. Effective student behavioural management strategies should be shared by teachers, and practiced by drivers. All of these issues surround the safe transportation of students to school and home again.

Every effort to ensure the safety of the precious cargo aboard school buses must take place. Traffic, road conditions and weather are distractions that cannot be ignored by the driver. Keeping the bus moving without incident is imperative. Student behaviour on the bus cannot be ignored either, for the individual safety of students is important. But is the driver able to

multitask so effectively that all areas of student safety are addressed? Is it feasible and practical to think that a driver is able to accomplish the job he was hired to do and accomplish that task with no injuries: physical, emotional, intellectual, or social?

From interviewing the students and writing the stories that were important to them and the ones they spoke about passionately, safety revealed itself on two levels: personal safety and the safety of children as a group. There were incidents questioning the personal safety of some of the children, however there were more instances of “whole bus” safety issues.

The story of Tom emphasizes the importance of personal safety. Tom was a happy-go-lucky, popular child whose laughter spread far and wide throughout the bus morning and afternoon and whose smile lit up the inside of the bus each day because he was “just happy all the time.” Yet because of coincidence, a confluence of three events on his bus one afternoon changed his demeanor. His personality changed from gloriously happy to fiercely scared within a matter of seconds. Although the incident had happened two years prior to his interview with me, the event was captured in his mind as if it had happened that very day. The fear in his voice was still real two years later.

There was no adverse student behaviour involved this time; only untimely coincidences that jeopardized a student’s life. How often do incidents like this occur? How often are we aware of them? Can they be prevented?

The personal safety issues that come to the forefront of our attention are the ones that involve student behaviour. The story about Kristin’s hair going “up in smoke” has many safety repercussions. These boys carried lighters with them as part of normal behaviour, yet they used a lighter to perhaps alleviate boredom and create some mischievousness. Maybe they were just having fun. Whatever the reasons behind playing with the lighter, a girl’s safety came into play

that day. Their intent was not to flame her hair, it just turned out that that's exactly what happened. It needs to be clear that objects like lighters and knives should not be allowed on buses. They are not allowed in my school, and knives are not allowed in any school. Should lighters also be confiscated? If they are allowed in a high school, can they be brought onto the bus? Do we need to make a habit of asking kids if they have them, or is a warning about carrying them enough? Kristin did have her hair burned to the point that she needed a haircut. It could have been worse.

And from my own memory, in "The Fight" that occurred between Lonny and Merlin, personal safety was also an issue. Merlin probably didn't think he needed to worry about his safety, especially in regard to a younger student, but the reality was that he was hurt. He aggravated the situation by teasing Lonny, and certainly didn't expect the retaliation that he received, but he got it! He really got it!

There are also issues surrounding the safety of the bus and its contents as a "whole package." The story "Close Call on the Highway" is an example of a situation that could have had devastating effects for all of the children who were still on that bus. Occasionally on the news, we hear of bus accidents. Fortunately, most of the bus accidents I know of have not resulted in deaths of either the driver or any of the riders. However, it does happen. We must make every effort to prevent school bus accidents of any kind.

Relationships

The relationships that bus drivers build and maintain with the children they transport emerged as a resounding theme through almost all of the interviews I conducted. It was extremely important for the bus drivers to hold positive, friendly attitudes towards the children on their bus, for the children to like, respect and speak of them with admiration.

When asked the question, “What do you like about riding the bus?” the answer that prevailed was, “When the bus driver gives us treats.”

Treats varied from driver to driver and bus to bus. Some drivers had prepared treats for their riders when they boarded the bus in the afternoon. Treats such as chocolate bars, potato chips, pop, juice, homemade cookies, or candy were often given the students at the end of the month, or in celebration of a special holiday, such as Christmas, Halloween, or Valentine’s Day. These special efforts made by the bus drivers towards their students remain permanently planted in their memories as outstanding events in riding the bus. They are important events. They help build a rapport with the driver; a rapport that may be remembered in a time of trouble or need at a later date and on a different occasion.

For me, this was one of my most vivid memories of my bus riding years. Darlene would give out popcorns balls and Japanese oranges at Christmas time, or a bag of candy at Halloween. These days were special to all of us.

Some drivers give students notice when they are planning to stop at a convenience store, so that students can bring money to buy their own treats. Sometimes, the driver will surprise the students by stopping at the convenience store and buying everyone on the bus a treat. The soft ice cream cone we received each June from Darlene was savored for miles and miles. The bus would be absolutely quiet of conversation until well out into the country. The treat was enjoyed by all. As I write about this small but important event in my life, I now realize that Darlene never bought a cone for herself. In all those years of stopping at the “Bunny Bar,” I don’t recall one time when I saw Darlene have an ice cream cone. Was it because she got sheer joy from watching us be engaged in this rite of passage? Was it because she felt she couldn’t drive the bus safely and eat an ice cream cone at the same time? Was it because she just didn’t want one?

Perhaps she just wanted to reward us for good behaviour. Whatever the reason, none of us noticed or cared then, at least no one said anything. But I do wonder now. Even though getting a treat occurred quite infrequently when I was a child, it did go a long way to liking my bus driver. That was not the only reason I liked her, but it was one more reason to my list.

One particular group of students that I interviewed remarked upon their driver as having random sucker days. This randomly planned positive reinforcement was a huge hit with the children. Here are some of their comments:

We never know when it is going to happen. When all of the kids have boarded the bus at the last school, she will all of a sudden pull over and stop alongside the sidewalk and park the bus. That's when we know it's 'random sucker day.' She reaches down into a black bag that she carries with her and pulls out a bucket of suckers. She gives us suckers when we have been really good on the bus, and there haven't been any fights. We try really hard to be good. Sometimes a lot of days go by before it's 'random sucker day.' But once, we had 'random sucker day' twice in one week. We must have been really good! We all love it when we get suckers; even the big kids. I think she likes it too because it's not as noisy on the bus for the ride home on those days.

Positive comments about bus drivers also came from students who got to know their drivers on a personal basis, or who already knew their drivers as a friend or a neighbor. One driver became an advocate for a little girl. That day "Princess" was a princess to the driver, to the other children on the bus, and eventually became the nickname her parents had for her at home. She felt special and self-esteem was created for her. It was an intellectual and emotional boost for that child.

The students who did not like their bus drivers were the ones who said:

She never says ‘Good Morning,’ ever. And she hardly ever smiles.” “I don’t think she likes kids. What’s she doing driving a school bus?” “She never stops to let us buy treats. Other drivers do because my friends tell me, but our driver doesn’t.” “She picks on my brother and he doesn’t do anything but just sit there. Who does she think she is anyway?” “She likes the town kids better than us. I know that, because after she picks up all the kids in the country, if she’s early she stops outside of town and we have to wait for, I think...at least ten minutes, because she says we can’t be at their stop too early. Then the town kids have to run and the parents don’t like that and she’ll get into trouble. I told her I thought that if she was going to stop outside of town everyday and make us wait, maybe we shouldn’t be getting on so early either and then we wouldn’t have to wait. We could spend more time at home. She didn’t think that was a good idea because she thought this was easier for her. I thought it was the kids that mattered.” “I didn’t even know the bus driver’s name until the end of October. She never told any of us until a kid called her ‘bus driver’ and she replied ‘I have a name, you know. It’s Miss Gilligan.’”

One bus driver respected her students enough to involve them in some of the decisions concerning them. They were consulted in arranging seating plans, acceptable kinds of behaviour, finalizing bus rules, and deciding on music when allowed to listen to the radio. The students on this bus were exceptionally happy and in their words, “Our bus driver is awesome. She isn’t easy, but she’s awesome!”

Having the same bus driver month after month and year after year also helped build a good rapport and relationship between the students and the driver. On a few bus routes, the children spoke of having the same bus driver every year. They got to know the driver, and he/she became their friend, another caring adult in their lives. In one case, it was a yearly routine or

tradition to have the bus driver and her family over for supper to say “thank you” for safely driving the children everyday without incident.

Over all the years that I rode the school bus, I had only three bus drivers. Barry was the first one. He drove the main bus route. His birthday was on the same day as mine. If for no other reason that made him special for me! Elmer was the feeder bus driver. When I was younger, I was a little scared of him. But I came to respect and like him a lot. He liked to tease...cute young girls...and of course... that was me! Every Christmas, on the last day of school before Christmas holidays, my dad would meet the bus at the end of the lane, get out of the truck, walk over to talk to Elmer and invite him to come home for a drink. I think this was a way for my folks to say “thank you” to Elmer. He never refused a drink. Darlene was the third and final bus driver I had. Barry and she were brother and sister. She took over Barry’s driving position when I was about in grade two. After that, it was just Darlene and Elmer. Mike, a man who lived in the neighborhood, was the relief driver and drove for both Darlene and Elmer when they were away, which was pretty much never. He was a large jolly fellow who always smiled and spoke to all of us. He had a thick English accent and told lots of jokes to us. I could never understand him, but I laughed when everyone else did. It was always a relief when it was time to get off at my lane and I didn’t have to pretend any more. It got easier as I got older; I think I finally started to understand what he was saying.

Some of the children in my interviews talked about their bus driver changing frequently. When asked what the reasons were for these frequent changes, the children rarely knew for sure but liked to speculate. The children complained of not getting to know their drivers. One year from April to June, my own children experienced six different drivers. I thought that was excessive. So did they. I phoned the bus supervisor to enquire as to the reason why this was

happening, she told me no one wanted to drive this route because it was too short and there wasn't enough money involved to make it worthwhile for someone to take it on. Money was the driving force in providing inconsistency for my children and the others on this route. How can that be the most important factor in busing children?

On one route, the children of the bus driver rode on the bus with their mother. They were on first in the morning and the last off at night. The children I interviewed on this bus all felt that the driver played favoritism with her own kids, allowing them privileges and extending the rules of the bus for them when she did not do the same for everyone else. The children did not respect her for her actions.

One rule she had was 'no eating.' Really, I think she had two rules. 'No eating' for us, and 'eating' for her own kids, because they got to eat and we didn't. They even got to stand up beside her when she was driving the bus. They did pretty much whatever they wanted to do. It wasn't really fair.

Students also commented about their bus drivers in relation to how they maintained order on the bus. The drivers who had a specific seating arrangement for their students held more control and the children were happier. There were no contests or races as to who got to the bus first to claim the "best" seats. There were fewer problems among the children themselves. Children who created problems, who were the bullies and those who bugged others, were separated from the others in some way. As a result fewer overall problems existed on these buses. The children felt the drivers were fairer and treated everyone equally. After completing all of the interviews, it became clear to me that the friendly bus drivers who liked and respected their students were the ones who were liked and respected in return.

Community Bonding

There seem to be segments of the school bus population that tend to bond together. As mentioned previously students and their bus driver share a certain kind of respect and bond, but there are also groups that bond among the students as well.

I think the first links of the bonding chain occur between siblings. Brothers and sisters have an uncanny intuition when their support or encouragement is needed. It usually happens when one is in trouble. Others in the family stick up for the victim by defending him and taking his side, at least in the public eye of bus peers. I heard many tales of a younger sibling being teased or picked on and the older brother or sister stepping in to defend the family rights by taking retaliation onto himself, telling the bus driver, taking the child to his seat and eventually telling the parents when getting home. I say that it is important to certainly defend a sibling in the public eye, even though the elder one may not *really* support him. There is expectation put on many children by the parents to “look out for Tommy,” “make sure Sarah gets to sit with her friend,” and “let me know if Peter doesn’t behave.” So at least on the rides to and from school, family members are expected to stick together. However, sometimes that’s where the relationship ends. In most cases, siblings really do stand up for each other, but I did hear about a couple of times that students made threats to their parents about a younger child.

Mom, if you don’t do something about Tim, I will never ride the bus again. He embarrasses me in front of my friends and the other kids just about everyday. Mom, can’t you do something? Can’t he ride another bus? Can’t you have the bus driver move him? Why do I have to put up with him on the bus too? It’s bad enough I see him at home and school. Please Mom...do something!!!”

This kind of situation falls within the parameters of student responsibility as well. Parents do expect older children to guide the younger ones. I know my parents expected it of my older brothers and of me. I made the same expectations of my own children. I think most parents do. Giving the older children in the family these kinds of responsibilities does have a psychological effect on them. Sometimes they don't appreciate the brothers and sisters as much and want less to do with them, sometimes it may bring them closer, and sometimes it may give them food for thought on wanting their own children some day.

I hated riding the bus with my older brothers. And I think they hated having me around. They never spoke to me on the bus. It was kind of like they were embarrassed to have me around. They always sat at the back of the bus with "their *boy* friends." They laughed, made jokes, jeered at others, and whispered all the time. They were bullies, in every sense of the word. Not all the time, but sometimes. I always thought I was the object of their laughter and games. I remember them not being very nice to me. I was nothing. They...were boys. Even at home they were far more important than my sister and me. My parents let them know it too. In retrospect, I know that a patriarchal style dominated my family. Dad was boss and what he said, went. So on the bus, what was I to expect? Help when I needed it? Encouragement when I was in a tough situation? Support when someone picked on me? No. What I got was ignorance: no tolerance, no smiles, nothing. They were too important to be nice to me even though I was their sister. To this day, I still get that feeling from my older brothers. My younger brother and I get along well and talk and regard each other as equals, but I never had that with the other two.

There was one current story that I could relate to in regard to non-support from a sibling. In this case, it was about a lone boy in a family, with three sisters. This boy seemed to like to show off and tease, and he consequently got into trouble at school as well as on the bus because

of his mischievousness. His sisters hated to have the responsibility of trying to make him behave, and so after a few years of constant embarrassment and frustration, they virtually gave up and he was on his own. They told their parents that they hated to have him around. They felt the same about him as the other kids on the bus. They could hardly tolerate him. From personal experience, these kinds of incidents and constant immersion into uncomfortable family situations have reverberating psychological effects for many years.

Another kind of relationship building that takes place on the bus is between students who attend the same school. There weren't any particular stories of competition between schools on the bus itself; however, I became very aware of comments like, "They go to the other school," "They're not from our school," and "I don't like them because they think their school is better than ours." It was clear that students from each individual school thought their school was best, their teachers out-ranked others, and that they learned more in their school than in the other school. Groupings of students on some buses related directly to which school they attended. There were exceptions. Friends crossed paths and looked forward to each other's visits upon getting on the bus. But not all, and not on all buses.

In order to save money in the busing system, once buses have collected their cargo in the country, most are expected to make stops at designated spots in town to pick up students. This is a service of convenience so parents don't have to drive their children to school or students don't have to walk far distances, especially in adverse weather. There used to be a bus in town that solely picked up and dropped off children just in town. However, that service was discontinued as it became too costly, and parents weren't willing to have a user-pay fee increase. So the solution was to have rural buses pick up these students once their country route was completed. The country students disliked this process. They resented the town children. They made the bus

crowded, the bus got really noisy, and more problems arose when the “townies” got on. It was a relief when they got off. So a bonding occurred between the country children, based on this criterion; they lived in the country, not in town. Did a bonding occur between the town children? I can’t say. That was a question that was never pursued in my interviews. It was very apparent that the rural children felt that they were infiltrated by the “townies.” In some ways the town children were discriminated against. They were excluded from actually being thought of as “true” bus students. “They’re not real bus students. They live in town.”

Another reason some of the rural students resented the town students was because on some routes in the mornings, the bus drivers stopped outside of town to accommodate the town students. If the bus was too early, the driver would wait outside the town limits until minutes passed (sometimes as much as ten), so the bus would be at the right time to pick up at designated points in town.

Is there a difference in attitudes, behaviour, and expectations between the rural students and the town students? Does this dichotomy carry over into other areas such as sports teams, school friendships, and playground activities? Do these attitudes between the two groups continue on for longer than the bus years? These attitudes have psychological implications. How long and how serious they are will differ from student to student.

Student Behaviour and Attitudes

Over the course of interviewing more than 60 students, it became quite apparent that there were those children who liked riding the bus and those who did not. The younger children, those ten and younger, seemed to enjoy riding the bus for various reasons. It was the children older than ten that really did not like riding the bus.

The factors that influenced the younger students opinions about riding the bus were varied. The relationship they held with their bus driver was very important to them. They liked the treats that were given out, and simple efforts such as saying “Good morning,” “See you tomorrow,” “How was your day?” or “What radio station would you like to listen to?” seemed to make the difference as to whether or not the students respected and liked their drivers, or whether they liked their bus ride.

Younger students liked to visit with their friends, have a chance to play or have a snack. The unstructured time on the bus was welcomed just to relax after a long day. The amount of boredom that students experienced also affected how the students felt about riding the bus. Usually if their ride was filled with activities, they enjoyed the bus more or despised it less. If the children had many friends on the bus, they certainly didn’t mind the ride to and from school. However, if there tended to be behaviour problems, if the child was being bugged or bullied and if they had few friends, he or she longed for parents to take them to school or pick them up often. That comment surfaced several times during the interviews.

Older students disliked riding the bus to a greater degree. They too felt the bus driver created a good or bad atmosphere, depending on the amount of respect and credibility the driver gave the students, whether or not seating plans were instituted, how discipline and student management was handled, and the friendliness of the driver toward the students. Effective or ineffective strategies on the part of the drivers affected student attitudes. Added to the driver attitudes were the length of ride, the number of friends that rode too, and the activities that helped to alleviate boredom. The longer the ride, the more the students disliked riding. Older students looked forward to the day when their parents allowed them to drive themselves to school on a regular basis.

Noise created by younger students seemed to irritate older students. Most didn't tolerate the noise and actions generated by the younger crowd. The boarding of the town students infringing on the rural students' bus also was a process that all students interviewed commented negatively upon. Picking up town children by rural buses began when I was a student in grade six. I remember the day that routine started. I do not remember it with fondness, for I too did not like the town children coming on my bus. We were picked up five minutes earlier in the morning and the bus became noisier and more crowded. I too felt these "townies" infringed on my bus "space." My own children also did not like picking up town children as part of their bus route, for all the same reasons.

If the students didn't like the bus, they looked for examples of things that were wrong with riding the bus, even in some instances where the parents were present in the interviews. Some parents would say, "Oh, riding the bus isn't all that bad, think of some of the fun times." But students would counter with, "Yeah, but you don't have to ride it everyday. You don't know what it's like when the townies get on or when those little kids make a racket!"

Students who liked the bus ride had a positive attitude toward it and cited examples of why riding was fun. "Playing with Barbies with my friends everyday is a lot of fun." "The driver always calls me 'Princess.'" An interesting fact about "Princess" was that she was the youngest of three sisters. She loved riding the bus because she was special, yet her older sisters didn't like riding the bus at all.

In the above examples, the effect that bus rides had on the students could be categorized as social and psychological. Friends or lack of friends made a big difference to students; the rest of their day at school and how they functioned there may have been affected because of what happened on the bus. Certainly their demeanor when arriving home at the end of a long day is

affected, again by how the bus ride home worked out. The bus ride could either cloud or embellish the outlook a child had on what came next.

Medical Concerns

Diesel fumes and dust. These were two smells that students commented on frequently during their interviews. “Disgusting,” “annoying,” “choking,” “makes breathing difficult,” and “it’s everywhere” were comments made by students about dust and diesel fumes when asked about things they didn’t like about riding the bus. These comments and concerns came from older students, 12 or 13 years and older, and were almost exclusively made by girls.

The girls noticed the diesel fumes while the bus was stationary, usually when parked at the curb in front of the school at the end of the school day. As they walked along the row of buses waiting for students to board, the fumes were overwhelming. They started taking alternate, more direct routes to their buses, cutting across the school lawn, instead of walking beside the buses along the curb. Using this strategy minimized the amount of fumes they smelled outside. In the summer, if the windows were open on the bus as it waited, the interior filled with fumes. So even though the fumes were avoided outside, as soon as the students boarded they were immersed in them. The students complained of headaches, nausea and upset stomachs, and spells of coughing upon entering a bus filled with fumes. If the moments waiting turned to minutes, they often became dizzy and encouraged the bus driver to hurry to get the vehicle moving. Once the bus started moving however, motion sickness was added to compound the misery of the diesel fumes.

I remember a family living across from my school. The parent often sat on the front steps of her house at 3:30 p.m., waiting for her children to walk home across the street. She told me that she only went out at the last possible moment because the diesel fumes from the buses

parked across from her were very strong and overwhelmed her and her young children. Finally she decided to write a letter to the supervisor of busing, to investigate the possibility of having the drivers shut off their bus engines while waiting for the children to be dismissed from school and get on the buses. In her letter she pointed out that not only was inhaling diesel fumes a health danger, but it was also an environmental hazard, as the fumes contributed to air pollution. The principal of our school received a copy of the letter, and it was shared with me. I thought that the point of the letter was well made. As a result of this letter, the bus drivers were asked to shut their engines off while waiting in line on the street at the end of the school day. It makes me wonder if this is current practice at every school in every town. If it isn't, it should be.

While the amount of diesel fumes in the air can be somewhat managed or controlled, the amount of dust in the air cannot. Living in a rural area where hundreds of gravel roads crisscross the spacious countryside, dust is an inconvenience that we as residents all have to tolerate. Unfortunately the only effective way that dust can be controlled to a great extent is with the cooperation of the weather. Widespread rain or snow is the only extensive solution to subduing dust and creating an atmosphere of clean, fresh, and breathable air.

During the interviews, older female students frequently commented about the amount of dust they endured out in the country while riding the school bus. If the wind was calm,

Sometimes it seems like the dust just comes up through the floorboards. It is everywhere.” If the wind followed the bus, “...it is so bad, you can't see out the windows because it surrounds you and you can hardly breathe because it comes in through the windows, open or closed. It is best to keep them closed. Air conditioning in the bus would help.” The dust didn't bother the children as much when the bus headed into the wind. The wind blew the dust away from them. But on those summer days when it was

really hot, and a breeze was blowing the wrong way, "...the ride home was almost unbearable. It was so hot in the bus, but we didn't dare open the window, because all the dust would come in. Basically you cooked.

I too remember dust. That part of riding the bus has not changed over the years. I remember looking out over the horizon, and seeing a cloud of dust rise and move along with the wind currents. It was easy to tell if a car was coming; you could see the dust long before you could see the vehicle. On some afternoons, my mother or father would drive to the end of our lane to meet the bus so we wouldn't have to walk the $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile home. I can just hear them say, "I knew the bus would be here in a few minutes because I could see the dust rise around Monty's corner. And I was right. Here you are. Let's go home."

Dust along the country gravel roads must be a problem everywhere, in every school district across Canada and North America. In the past years, the weather patterns in our corner of the world seem to be drier than what I remember as a child, thus meaning dry soil conditions and more dust. In wetter and more humid climates where more precipitation occurs, dust may not be a prevalent problem.

Student Responsibilities

On a regular basis, bus drivers must practice evacuation drills with all of the children who ride on the bus. The bus driver directs the practice and incorporates the help of older students. If the driver is ever injured in a real emergency situation, the older student helpers must be able to take charge and evacuate the bus to the best of their ability, to try to ensure the safety of everyone on the bus.

How *old* should an “older helper” be? Is it wise to give a student the responsibility of being in charge of other students? In an emergency situation, what is the practical alternative solution?

The story about the accident where Roger, an older student on the bus, was asked to take charge while the driver was assisting a crash victim in the ravine below, is a typical example of a student given a lot of responsibility. Bus evacuations are practiced at the outset of each new school year. A bus driver volunteers her time to practice evacuation routines with all school students in our busing district, and bus drivers are directed to practice evacuation procedures with the students on their particular route. From being a teacher supervising students in a class while the volunteer driver talks to the students and walks them through the proper procedures, I know that older students are given the responsibility of being a helper and a leader and aiding other bus riders in exiting the bus safely in an emergency situation.

The School Act states: “A student shall...co-operate fully with everyone authorized by the board to provide education programs and other services...” (School Act, 1995, p. 17). This means that the students must co-operate with the bus drivers, take direction from the bus drivers, and if asked, must be a student helper in an emergency situation. Unless there is another adult on the bus to help the driver, the first choice is to designate a responsible older student as helper. Perhaps that is the solution – to have another adult ride on every bus on every trip.

Chapter Six: Implications

The stories have been told. They have been heard. Now they have been written. The remaining challenge is to realize the impact and implications that riding a school bus had on the students, but also how writing the stories had impacted me, the storyteller.

As I began to listen to the stories and the messages, I knew instantly I wanted to be their voice. My memories were stirred repeatedly. With each group of children I interviewed, my pulse quickened, my imagination soared, my empathy reached new heights, and I became passionate to share with them my own experiences. By listening to them, I understood the significance of the relationships with the bus drivers, and the discriminatory actions and activities of the students. I understood the health issues when students breathe in dust and diesel fumes or when their feet freeze on the cold winter ride when the bus's heater doesn't work properly. There is a lack of sustainable activities for students to be engaged in, to ward off boredom and behaviour problems such as bullying. I was reminded of the safety concerns surrounding speeding buses, or buses parked at the side of the road, or driving in bad weather with questionable road conditions. I remembered the amount and necessity of responsibility given to the students if put into precarious bussing situations. I understood their tales and began to understand mine. What started out as only bus memories from thirty to forty years ago had turned into compassion and knowing what I was really feeling then, what the children are feeling now. Their stories have given me insight into my heart. I know now what I felt then.

The first notable theme that emerged was boredom. Boredom was *lived* by just about all of the bus riders I interviewed. It was foremost on their list of things that they did not enjoy about riding the bus. They lived for friends to visit with, immersion into a good novel, a friendly

game of cards, a great song on the radio, a good sleep in hope of waking up at their destination, treats from their drivers, or an entertaining event; something out of the ordinary.

What affects student behaviour and attitudes about riding the bus and being on the bus? Boredom is certainly a contributing factor to negative student behaviour. There are just not enough interesting and structured activities for students to engage in while riding the bus. There are certainly no activities organized by the driver other than treat stops. The students themselves are responsible for their own entertainment. Do they need entertainment? They may not need it; however, they do seek it.

Mabel the Moose entertained my peers and me on the bus and provided us with interesting table talk at home that night. Jake found a ball of yarn in a school classroom, and devised an entertaining plot only moments before boarding his bus. Both Mabel and Jake put boredom on hold for a few minutes. The colorful conversations and the embellished stories that were told following those events would make an English teacher proud had they been written in creative writing class. These two incidents could have been the starters for great imaginative stories.

Safety is a key component for school buses. Safety is the first consideration when dealing in any situations involving children. The busing authority strives to ensure bus drivers are trained not only in good driving habits, but in other areas as well. Safety procedures are reviewed with students through bus evacuation practices, in case of an emergency or an accident involving the bus. All bus drivers are required to have first aid training and must keep it current. A Class 2 license is necessary to operate a school bus, and the drivers take S-Endorsement training for winter driving which requires a week of practical driving as well as a week of in-class theory.

The school bus is outfitted with many safety features as well. Each bus is equipped with a two-way radio. Constant contact can be kept with the home base or the bus dispatch office. This contact can be used for messages to the driver about road conditions, missed students or when a major problem occurs such as a flat tire or a stalled motor. Up high, at the front of every bus is a black box. This box can house a video camera when necessary so student activities on the bus can be recorded and reviewed. It is particularly effective for drivers to use this technique and not tell the children when there is a camera in the box. Normal or in some cases abnormal activities can be recorded and if there are problems on the bus, the tape is clear evidence. Plans and solutions can be devised based on the information viewed through the videotapes. In addition to flashing orange warning lights and red stop lights on the front and back of the bus, a long arm swings out into the oncoming traffic lane once the school bus has stopped. There is also a stop sign that swings out from the bus for a more additional visual warning to motorists when the bus stops. Some smaller buses are quipped with seat belts in every seat, and some larger buses have seat belts in the two front seats. Some drivers use these seat belts to restrain children who do not want to sit down while the bus is moving. There are two emergency exits on every bus. A window on either side of the bus near the center seats can be pushed out in an emergency, as well as the back door exit. The windshields and the back windows on every bus can also be pushed out if needed. Every bus is well equipped with mirrors to ensure good and safe views for the bus driver.

The training that the bus drivers have and the safety equipment on every bus are extensive. Then why is safety still a concern while transporting school students? From time to time there are articles in newspapers and magazines about bus accidents, and from my own student interviews, I know of three serious situations where student safety was jeopardized. The

stories entitled “Close Call on the Highway” and “School Bus Express” clearly indicate poor safety habits on the part of the bus driver. Whether the students realize the precarious and dangerous situations they have been subjected to, is not the issue. The issue is that they did happen. We just don’t know about them or they are not reported.

How do safety issues impact the students? Student lives must be preserved at any cost. Exposure to dangerous situations must be kept to a minimum. Some circumstances cannot be controlled, however every effort must be made to insure the safe transportation of the precious cargo inside that big yellow school bus.

An exciting thing was when the bus was going down the big hill one day in wintertime and the road was very, very icy. The driver tried her best to keep the bus on the road, but could not. She slid right into the ditch. The bus driver radioed to the office and they sent someone to pull out the bus. It took a long time for them to get there and it was cold. I knew I was going to be pretty late that day. I don’t like being late because the teachers hassle you, you miss part of the lesson and you never really catch up the whole day. You might as well be gone for the whole day instead of just being late.

The relationships established between the bus driver and her students or between the students and the bus driver are also shared between the generations. Darlene and her jet-black wig created questions and concern for an impressionable young girl, and made her think about her driver in new ways. She cared enough about her idol that a change in her appearance made her more aware of others. The “Princess” is now a more confident happy child, because she has identified another adult who showed special and needed attention to her. She found another someone who cares about her and who she can go to for a hug.

The bonding that occurs between siblings, just at the right time or when needed, shows through over and over in many stories. Where would you be if your brother or sister didn't protect you? The bonding that occurs between the rural students sets them apart as a different "group." The town "trespassers" are almost put into a discriminatory situation, where neither group wishes to mix with one another. There are major social implications of this issue. Are we not taught to accept all people regardless of social or geographical distinctions? These two segments of local society, the "country group" and the "town group" mingle together during school hours. Why is it different on the bus? The rural students take ownership of their bus. After all they are providing a service, a luxury for the town students so their parents needn't drive them to school or so they don't have to walk. The "townies" are infringing on rural territory. What of the segregation of students between schools? There are social implications and competitions between the schools. I believe parents are more serious advocates for the schools their children attend. Parent bragging rights for the school follow their children. Competitions as to who had the best academic or discipline programs run ramped among the coffee shop patrons. When a child overhears these conversations between adults, will they affect how he/she views the girl sitting across the aisle on the bus, because this child attends the "other" school, the one his/her mother talks about?

The other side of the story existed among some students also. There was great comradery between students, girls and boys, across grades, ages and schools. Many children had good friends in other grades and at the other school. The bus ride to and from school allowed for a strong socialization time, because they had few other opportunities to do so.

If the rides are relatively short, behaviours among the students seem to be better controlled. Seating plans organized by the driver also contribute to a more positive atmosphere

on the bus. An established pecking order, whereby the older students claim the back seats of the bus for themselves, and in age descending order the other students are officially given their assigned seats for the year seems fair to most students. Only when the driver grants permission can children move to other seats, and that normally occurs when someone is not on.

Some students cited that unfair habits of the bus driver make it harder for students to respect their drivers. On some routes, the bus driver's children are allowed to ride the entire route, or part of the route, because childcare for the driver is an issue.

Her kids can crawl under the seats or jump over the seats, or stand in the aisles any time they want to, and she doesn't say anything to them. She allows them to sit wherever they want, even if it's at the back of the bus. Some of the big kids get mad at them when they have to move to one of the front seats, but she doesn't say a thing. In fact, I think she expects everybody to 'bend over backwards' for her kids. They're the worst of all the kids on the bus. They misbehave all the time because they know they won't get into trouble. It's not fair.

On another bus, "Her girl always wants to come to sit with me. I don't want her to sit with me. I want to talk to my friends. She's eight and thinks she's a cool fourteen. Her mom never says a word to her."

One thing I have learned through my years of teaching and also from the interviews, is that students have a keen sense of what's fair and what is not. At a young age, they already realize which situations are honorable and who it is that has honesty and integrity. Children migrate to the adults that they can trust and who have a reputation for dealing fairly with all involved players. They tend to know instinctively, stay away from and distrust those people who do not treat everyone in a fair manner. It only takes once for a child to know whom he can go to

for fair treatment. If the only adult on the bus is a driver who plays favorites not only with her own children but also with others, students who feel they have been treated unequally will have a negative attitude about the bus, and throw all rules and regulations out the window.

Because of the advancements in medical technology in this twenty-first century, heightened awareness of exposure to unhealthy alliances bombards us daily through the media. Those that affect children who ride the school bus include the smelly diesel fumes emitted by the buses having diesel engines. Motors that use diesel fuel use less of the expensive commodity, making a good case for use by busing authorities, especially for the buses that clock many kilometers in a day. But those diesel fumes that fill the air, and in some cases a bus that has its windows open while parked, make a hazardous situation for students who are susceptible to headaches or car sickness. The bus ride alone causes headaches and nausea for some students without the added odor from the diesel fumes. Dusty country roads are still dusty country roads. The gravel used to surface the roads causes a lot of dust to rise as vehicles speed over them. This phenomenon has not changed over the years. Although more secondary roads and highways have been paved since I rode the school bus, most country roads are still covered with gravel, a more economic and renewable resource. Dust does cause medical concerns for those children susceptible to asthma attacks. To those who do not have breathing problems, dust can still be “choking” and “ugly.” “It covers everything.”

Noise created by younger children irritates the older children on the bus. Older students complained of the “little kids” being too noisy so they couldn’t concentrate while studying, and giving them headaches. “The bus motor makes enough noise, the kids just add to it.”

Over the years, great strides have been gained in heating the bus on cold winter days. My mother knew of our cold plights on those days and would have a hot bowl of soup and a pair of

handknitted slippers waiting for us when we got home. That memory still warms me. Heating systems on the bus have been improved, and so have the quality of boots and clothing. The children today are very lucky to have the wonderful assortment of materials and fabrics from which their clothing and footwear are manufactured. These health issues have a direct impact on the students' willingness and desire to ride the bus.

Responsibilities given to student on the bus may affect their willingness to take on more responsibility in other situations. Either a student will gain more confidence and want more responsibilities from his parents, teachers, or even the hockey coach, or he may take the opposite point of view and relinquish the responsibility to other students or family members because he "doesn't want the stress" or he feels he's not ready for it or old enough. Will this latter attitude prevail forever and affect his risk-taking abilities later in life?

As I survey the results of my interviews, the most important aspect of riding the bus is the need for happiness, contentment, and belonging. The social, emotional, and psychological side of the child needs, wants, and craves comfort. Anxiety producing situations need to be diminished or eliminated.

One aspect of bus rides that was not evident was the effect they had on student learning. No one felt that riding the bus had any effect on their academic performance in school. The major implications were social and psychological.

Writing the students' stories made me more empathetic to their plight. The life and lifestyle that their parents have chosen for the family means certain pre-determined aspects of daily routine. Because of distance from the town and school, riding the bus is a forgone conclusion for those children in families who live on farms and acreages in the country. Writing their stories and mine has given me insight as to yet another important factor in a child's

education. When parents wave good-bye each morning, and teachers ensure all students are on the bus each afternoon, we cannot close our mind to them until we see them next. Instead we should be questioning the experiences the children are enduring on that big yellow bus and how they are affected. We should be continually investigating and researching what is happening to our students. The stories that I heard and wrote have spurred me to make any changes within my power, and have encouraged me to make practical recommendations to others with more authority.

As educators, we teach children what the government sets out in the curriculum, and we try to do it in the most pleasant, efficient, and creative way to ensure that learning is taking place. We carry out our duties because we care about the children we teach. We care about the *whole* child. We care about the social, the intellectual, the emotional, the psychological and the physical child. We care about what happens to him/her before and after school. About how he's/she's clothed and what he/she eats for lunch. We care about his/her academic progress and strive to provide programs to meet his/her needs. We want every child to be safe and happy and to grow to be a contributing citizen to society. Some of those children we care about ride the school bus everyday. We care what happens to them on that bus. We want them to be happy on the bus.

Chapter Seven: Recommendations for the Future

At the outset of the interview process, I consciously predicted what some of the outcomes might be. Some of my predictions were confirmed, and yes, there were some surprises. The most surprising evidence to me was the imbalance of more negative stories compared to positive ones. I had anticipated there would be more of an even division between happy stories and unhappy ones. There was an absence of stories that made students feel glad to ride the bus. There were more negative stories.

Seven themes emerged through my interviews with bus students: boredom, student behaviour and attitudes, relationships between students, bonding between students and the bus driver, student responsibilities, medical and health concerns, and safety. As I listened to the stories and incidents the students related to me, and through the subsequent writing, I have gained a better perspective on busing students. Riding the bus every day, for extended periods of time, thirty or more minutes one way, really does affect students in several of the identified themes.

Boredom was the biggest and most frequent issue raised throughout my interviews. Students longed for reasons not to ride the bus, reasons for their parents to take them to school or to pick them up after school. Bus drivers try to relieve the boredom by stopping for occasional treats and children themselves try to be creative in finding ways make their time on the bus time pass by more quickly. What more could be done entertain the bus riders or at least keep them occupied? Some of the new vehicles that are being manufactured now have televisions and DVD players as part of the vehicle option package. Is that the next step for buses? Is it necessary? Boredom may never fully be relieved for the students who ride the bus. It may always just be a part of riding the bus to and from school everyday; something to live with.

The next theme that emerged during my interviews was one of safety. No one interviewed felt that the bus itself was unsafe. Much has been done to make sure the buses are well equipped with as many safety specifications as needed. The safety issues that need to be addressed are the ones of decision-making when situations arise, such as distractions on the bus involving student behaviour, e.g., bullying, teasing, and fights.

“Close Call On the Highway” clearly outlines what could happen when a bus is pulled over on the side of the road. It was not the best place to pull over. Other factors were involved as well, including the weather and other traffic, but the location where the driver pulled over was questionable and put the lives of all the students that day in jeopardy. In that instance, another adult supervisor on the bus could have solved the behaviour problem, and the bus driver need not have stopped at all. For that day on that bus, that would have been the perfect solution.

The driver that was caught speeding on the bus route home while driving the bus made a poor choice that day. His job is to transport the children to and from school in a safe manner. Was that manner safe? He may not only have been unsafe, he was breaking the law. Even bus drivers are not exempt from following the law. The driver getting a speeding ticket while driving the bus is not a good example for the children who are on that bus. The ticket itself is a good deterrent for the driver, but should the busing authority also impose a reprimand or a suspension? Should the driver lose his/her job? Had the speeding occurred while taking the drivers test, the driver would not have passed the test, therefore not receiving his/her next level of driver’s license.

The relationships that students have with the other children on the bus are important. Friends and the occasion for social interactions are very important, especially to upper elementary, junior and senior high students. Younger children concern themselves with playing

with toys and with snacks. There seems to be no difference with girls and boys with the importance of relationships to each other. Both sexes stated the importance of having friends on the bus and the importance of talking with their friends. Friends and the activities associated with them helped to relieve the boredom of riding the bus. Friends were missed when they weren't on the bus. The image that stuck clearly in my mind was the comradery that existed between students and siblings of all ages across all grades and both school divisions. The children had friends in grades younger and older than them, and in other schools. Older children looked out for younger children, especially brothers and sisters. Neighbor children also looked after one another because they were friends outside of school and outside of the bus. It was great to see. Perhaps, depending on the child, more responsibility of this nature can be given to children. Buddy systems might be established where a younger child can count on an older one for help and support on bus rides.

The relationship between the students and the bus driver was a major area of concern for all of the children. Whether the relationship was positive or not, the students commented upon it. That alone told me that it was important to them. How their driver treated them influenced their views of riding the bus. The drivers that were fair in discipline techniques and who respected the students were popular among the children on those buses. Respect became reciprocal. Drivers who were friendly and appreciated the students for their good behaviour were acknowledged as good drivers and adult friends. It was another adult-student relationship that showed an element of care and consideration and for some students who may not get that from anyone else; it may affect their day, their week, and their life. Many of us can remember an adult from our past that had influenced us in some way. It could have been a bus driver.

Student behaviour and attitudes is probably the next major issue of concern for bussed students. Students who misbehave on the bus, students who create havoc of any kind, episodes of teasing, name-calling, gesturing, and general bullying need to be addressed in a more effective way. As discussed previously, bus drivers have a huge job description. Safety should be first and foremost in their minds while transporting the children to and from school. How do the kids need to be kept safe? Emotional and social safety is as important as physical safety. But how can this be accomplished with only one adult on the bus, and that adult, the driver, is busied with many other important jobs, the least of which is driving the bus? The time has come that perhaps placing another adult supervisor on some buses should be considered. Another person of authority with the purpose of watching over the children and supervising their activities might be the answer to decreasing and possibly eliminating behavioural problems and concerns that many students and parents have. That way the bus driver can focus his attention and efforts solely on driving the bus and transporting his cargo safely to school and home again. The appointment of another adult on some buses would be beneficial in dealing with emergency situations, perhaps organize safe and quiet activities to relieve boredom, and help build more solid relationships between the children where necessary. With another adult on the bus, the two shy little girls would not have been left on the bus only to be discovered when the driver shut it off back at the yard. It would be interesting if student attitudes would be affected with the addition of another adult on the bus. A second adult would not have to be present on every bus on every ride. There may only be a need for two or three on a rotational basis.

On other buses, seats with seat belts might be used to restrain younger students who have problems sitting still or like to bug other children yet have a difficult time listening to the bus driver. Children have an uncanny sense when to bug or bully, and it is usually when the adult is

busy and can't act upon the situation. Reeves (personal communication, October 16, 2003), said that in most of the recent behaviour research, with many children who begin their school day on the bus, behaviour and attitude is cited as a great concern. In a study on improving academic performance in children and youth, as the academics of the students improved, so did the behaviour on the bus. There was a 51% reduction in adverse student behaviours when the academics improved. The key is collaboration between all partners in a student's education; teachers, administration, bus supervisors, bus drivers, and most importantly, students. Collaboration between all of these stakeholders within one school is important, but collaboration between schools is also important. Staggered bell times at each school within the same town would help in planning more efficient drop off and pick up times. Concentrated efforts should be made in improving students' academics. As their academics improve, self-esteem and self-worth improve, relieving the pressure to show off and be noticed in other ways, ways that may invoke negative behaviour. The more we collaborate, the better we get!

Making the bus ride as pleasant as possible would be the most convincing argument in changing behaviour and attitudes for the students who ride the buses. Friendly bus drivers and drivers that respect the students and some of their requests are the most popular kinds of drivers. Those that ask which radio station to listen to and those that converse with the students are the drivers that the children love. These drivers become another adult friend in their lives. It is an adult friend that cares about them and rewards them from time to time with a well-deserved treat or special privilege. Does it need to be a prerequisite when hiring bus drivers that aside from a clean driving record and a Class 2 license that they prove they have good public relationship skills, good child management skills, and know something about child psychology and behaviour? I laugh sometimes at the advertisements placed by the busing authority when

recruiting new bus drivers. These ads are usually placed in the newspapers and on television in August before the start of the new school year. The advertisements ask for housewives, retired men and women, or someone who would like a second part-time job to apply. The only qualifications are to have a Class 2 license and be willing to get first aid certification and a few other skills as deemed necessary by the busing authority. I think the job description should also include the ability to demonstrate how to deal effectively with all ages of children, including strategies for behaviour management, positive reinforcement and social skills.

Adding more buses with shorter routes may also help in reducing the amount of time students need to ride the bus. The addition of a bus that only picks up town students would lessen the amount of time rural students spend on the bus, and may also alleviate the bad feelings and resentment the rural students have toward town students.

As already discussed, the school bus system is the one aspect of our educational system that never gets evaluated. It would be beneficial to survey the bus students and their parents. A check twice a year to ask, "How are we doing?" or "How can we make it better?" would help make the bus ride easier for the students to digest. Just the knowledge that someone cares enough to ask might be good enough, even though action may be far away. One thing I learned during my interviews that critically affected some of the bus students at my school was how we dismissed the bus students. By 3:30 p.m. each day, there is a row of buses lined up at the curb outside my school. We call those "the first round buses" because they start at our school. Simultaneously at the other two schools in town, buses are also lined up at 3:30 p.m. When the bell rings at the end of the day, the students who ride those buses panic as they anxiously and hurriedly gather their belongings and run helter-skelter out the door. They often don't get their coats on or done up, boots are often carried in their hands, and their packsacks may or may not

be zippered. They worry about not getting to the bus on time, and being left behind. When I initially learned of the anxiety this created for these first round bus students, I phoned the busing supervisor asking if the buses could wait a couple of extra minutes in order to reduce the anxiety in those first round students. She informed me that the bus drivers wait five minutes and no longer because they have to get going on their route. They have a schedule to follow and a time line and they do have lives themselves that they need to get back to. I suggested that this was their job, and whatever the job required was what they should deliver in terms of service. She didn't agree with my philosophy, so nothing changed.

Then this past fall, I suggested to the administration and the teaching staff at our school that we re-structure our school day. As a result, we have allowed for a ten-minute block of organizational time at the end of the day. The teachers let the students gather their possessions during this time in order to get out the door promptly at 3:30 p.m., calm and collected. When the bell rings, the feelings of panic no longer exist for those first round bus students and they can get to the bus without hurrying or feeling agitated. This was a good solution to the problem. There are many solutions; we just have to find them. Sometimes brainstorming is effective and then trying the ideas on a trial and error basis. All would be in an effort to keep our children happy.

This action research conducted as part of my project has affected me as a teacher and administrator. Because of interviewing students and investigating the implications of bus rides, initiatives I have started and the staff have implemented in my school have had the greatest positive effect on the bus students.

Medical and health concerns were also cited as important. Diesel fumes can be controlled. The buses can be shut off while waiting, and started only when ready to go. That would eliminate fumes being smelled by students and everyone else. Dust is hard to control,

especially when most country roads are surfaced with gravel. Are the buses tight enough so little or no dust gets into them? It's hard to control that situation in the summers, when the students like to have the windows open for some cooler air. Better heating systems in the buses would keep the students warmer in the winter, and allowing the buses to warm up when the air temperature is really cold, would address this problem as well.

The last theme that emerged as being an important aspect of riding the bus is the amount of responsibility students are given on the bus. In an emergency situation older students are asked to take charge or at least help. Is it necessary to train these students more extensively? With another adult supervisor on every bus, utilizing older students in emergency situations may not occur as often, although it may not eliminate the possibility. Some students have more common sense than others, and have not had much responsibility in the past. Choosing the right person for job may be difficult. Hopefully, for most of the time on most of the rides, an emergency situation may never arise.

One group of children who ride school buses and attend the schools in Pincher Creek that were not part of this study were the Native students who live in and around the hamlet of Brocket. The Peigan busing authority transports these students to schools in Pincher Creek. They were not included because it would have made this study too extensive. The study had to be restricted. However, a study involving the Native students in this same locality would be beneficial for comparison purposes: Do similar social, psychological, and intellectual implications exist for Native students riding the school bus?

So the year is 2004 and we are still transporting children by bus. It's not a bad way to do the job, it's economical and it serves the purpose. It is quite efficient, as large numbers of students can utilize the service with a low cost ratio. But it is 2004. Improvements have been

made to so many aspects of our society. Improvements have been made to other aspects of our educational system. We are accountable to our parents, the administration, to the taxpayers, to the government, but most of all to the students. It is not good enough anymore to just transport students to and from school; we must go further. We must do a better job of keeping the students socially, intellectually, and psychologically safe and happy, so what parents do with their children before and after school, and what teachers accomplish during school, is not undone on the bus. The atmosphere and activities on the bus should at least compliment what the other partners are doing to create successful students and citizens.

I believe the interviews I conducted were a true representation of students' opinions. The stories are real stories and represent incidents and events that are happening to bus students all the time. The environment and timing may be different, but I think every bus student has a story to tell, something that has affected the way he feels about the bus and riding it. There are some aspects of bus transportation that may not ever change. The vehicle itself is bright yellow. It is a symbol that tells people near and far away that it carries special cargo. It shouts "BE CAUTIOUS!" That is something that should never change. It is part of the educational scenery.

Another aspect of bus transportation that must not change is the extent to which safety precautions are taken. The physical safety of our students cannot be compromised at any time. Maintaining a high safety standard is the most important strength of the busing transportation system. There is a concerted effort to make the bus ride as safe as possible. However, there is room to build on the diversity of the resources within the busing system. We can build on the strengths of the whole education system by tapping the expertise of other partners and in-service the bus drivers on other aspects of their job besides driving the bus vehicle.

The students, I interviewed had a few minutes where they had a chance to vent; a chance to tell someone who was willing to listen that they have concerns and opinions and that they should be heard. They had a voice. The busing system needs to change; it needs to focus on what matters to the students. Bus morale will go up, and the result will be happier children.

The boy was 13. He was very compliant about being here and completing his task for the few minutes that it took to answer the questions. His answers were curt yet polite, but I had to be persistent in getting almost every answer he gave. He presented himself as being bored or uninterested, just as his comments were. To him riding the bus was a necessary evil. He really didn't like riding the bus. It was boring. He didn't do anything at all except talk to the people around him and look out the window. He said he didn't like riding the bus because he really didn't have any friends there, and he didn't care to sit with anyone. He was not talkative during the interview and I got the feeling that that's the way he was on his bus. It seemed that nothing excited him; nothing made a difference to him. However, his time had been spent thinking, time well spent. He had concluded that the way the busing system ran in his neighborhood was not efficient and because it wasn't efficient, he had to ride the bus longer in the morning and in the afternoon. He came up with an idea of how his bus and the other two buses in the area could be more efficient, utilizing shorter driving routes. The result would be shorter riding times for all students involved on the three buses, not getting late to school so often, and less time on the bus. He had told his ideas to his parents, who said he should tell the bus driver. The driver politely listened to him and said she had no control over which roads she could travel. The route was set. Too bad, even if his ideas made sense. Nothing changed.

Through writing the stories of students like this boy, and all the others, I found a way to address the need for change. This action research was my motivation of wanting a change for

these children; all children who ride buses. The writing of the stories is the voice of change; my voice and the voices of the children. It is the voice necessary for change.

It wasn't until I wrote and rewrote these stories that I realized how important it is to give students a voice in what affects them everyday. Because these discoveries, realization and understanding, I encourage other teachers to listen, to write and to encourage their students to write. Give the children a place, a voice in the classroom, in the school, in their education. They need the support from us to present their voices and be heard.

The self-discovery and knowledge that I gained through the writing was a way of finding my own voice. My thoughts and actions as a teacher and administrator have become more sensitive to students' needs in more than just the school bus environment. Students immerse themselves in many environments throughout each school day and as an educational leader, I must truly listen and act on those needs and encourage my colleagues to join me. No decisions should be made without conducting the most important research, by asking this question; "How will it affect the children?"

I heard. I listened. I wrote the stories. I was the voice, the voice of the children who ride. Is anyone listening?

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Appendix

Guide for Interview Questions

1. Where do you live? Where do you take the bus from?

Do you think that's a long way from school? Do you like where you live?

Are there a lot of children who live near you and ride the bus for a long time?

2. Tell me what you like about the bus ride.
3. Tell me what you don't like about the bus ride.
4. Tell me about your bus driver.

What is he/she like?

Do you like him/her? Why or why not?

5. Tell me about the kids who ride the bus with you.

Are there older/younger kids who ride your bus?

What do you think about riding with an older/younger student? Do you like it?

Why or why not?

6. Who do you sit with?

Do you like to sit with him/her?

Who asked you to sit with him/her?

Why him/her?

What do you talk about?

What kinds of things do you do with him/her?

Tell me about him/her.

7. What kinds of things do you do while you're riding the bus?

8. Can you remember some things that have happened to you while riding the bus?

How did you feel about that?

9. Is it different riding the bus from the morning to the afternoon?

What makes the morning different from the afternoon?

10. What are the best things about riding the bus?

11. What are the worst things about riding the bus?

12. If you could decide not to ride the bus, would you and why?

13. Do you tell your parents or teachers about things that happen on the bus?

14. What makes you happy about riding the bus?

15. Is there anything that frightens or scares you about riding the bus?

16. Is there anything you would like to add or anything else you would like to tell me about riding the bus?