

Driving to School

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Whenever I travel by maxi and witness the way school children are transported to and from school, I cannot help but feel that children today are seriously deprived, and even placed at tremendous risk, especially when I compare their experiences to the good old days of train and bus transport which school children used during the 1960s and early 1970s.

The railway was abandoned around 1968, a few years before we began the process of universal secondary education that came with the oil wealth of the 1970s. So while we were adopting patterns of schooling that required an efficient mass transit system, we were abandoning the trains and moving towards a private vehicle system. This system was based on a local motor vehicle assembly industry and a public transport system serviced by the Public Transport Service Corporation (PTSC), and was later to be reconfigured to accommodate the maxi taxi as the main carrier.

Trains had guards on board who made sure that passengers adhered to safe practices. Buses were always under the charge of conductors and drivers who could insist on proper behaviour by passengers (even though buses were hopelessly irregular and unpunctual). In both instances, the people in charge were responsible and trained adults in uniform. Children could be reported to their school by the transport authority. Passengers could and did report drivers and conductors for dangerous driving or unacceptable conduct. In addition, the particular time of the trip, number of the bus, and names of the driver and conductor could be identified if necessary. These were well-regulated systems. Children were in the hands of safe adults, and were also safe from physical accidents because trains and buses never got into accidents.

The present maxi taxi system is not regulated. It appears that any and everybody qualifies as a safe transporter of school children. What recourse does anyone have against a maxi taxi driver who is driving recklessly or taking advantage of little girls and boys? Furthermore, the personnel operating these maxi taxis are mainly immature young men brandishing wads of dollar bills and playing dancehall music. In some instances, children are wholly dependent on PH taxis that are not even licensed to carry passengers.

In most cases, the nature of the arrangement is that these young men are not the owners of the vehicles but are working the vehicles on behalf of owners who expect a pre-determined daily fee. Over and above that, whatever revenues are collected accrue to the driver and conductor. This free market arrangement provides an incentive for maxi taxi operators to engage in unsafe practices, which are dangerous not only for school children but for everyone else, since the driver is trying desperately to make as many trips as possible.

The experience of driving to school by the most popular form of transport for school children today certainly does not induce a frame of mind conducive to learning. I cannot help but compare their experience to that of the good old days of the train, which I know

will never return. Train travel was very peaceful, silent, and yet social in nature. Groups of children met regularly in certain carriages. A train carriage could comfortably hold over fifty people. Seats sometimes faced each other, and with each seat accommodating four or five children, a group of eight could be easily seated in close togetherness.

Children actually did homework in these groups. We would test each other in vocabulary and other bits of homework. Train rides were so smooth that one could even do some written homework. I remember seeing adults, with legs crossed, comfortably reading a book or enjoying the daily newspaper. No ear-jarring noises to disturb—just the chugging rhythm of the engine filling the morning or the afternoon.

I remember eavesdropping on arguments among adult working-class men about whether Muhammad Ali could beat Joe Frazier a second time; whether Brazil could win the World Cup again; or whether Eric Williams was the brightest man in the world. Travelling by train was a truly educational experience! (I know I am opening up a floodgate of memories of the over-fifty age group in the society.)

But the essential thing I remember about the train was the socialisation into time management that it fostered. A train system must operate on schedule. This is an inherent requirement for its success. The 7.15 train or the 8.25, or whatever time, was institutionalised. You could tell your friends to meet you on the 8.15, in the third carriage. You could plan your life around the train. If you knew how long it took to walk from school to the train station, then you knew you could get a certain train and it would surely be there and leaving on time. Trains were so time specific that in the areas of the society where the train operated, folks told time by the trains.

Maxis are institutionalised in a completely different way. They carry names that suggest a certain notoriety, such as “dangerous” or “revenge,” and attract youths with their dancehall and “gangsta” rhythms. They seem to be successful in creating a cultural space for some youths, which allows them some level of freedom from the status quo, and the school to which they are transporting them is part of that status quo.

In North America, which we use as a standard for everything, a school bus system is an integral part of the school system. Children in rural areas and those who live far away from schools benefit from a specially arranged form of school transport at no personal cost. Of course, in their system schools are zoned so that children largely go to schools in their community, and so the provision of a dedicated form of school transport is conceptually simple. In our case, we may begin by simply setting clearer rules and penalties for those who transport school children, consider giving special licenses for the transport of school children, and have the drivers and conductors of those vehicles registered with the different school authorities.

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