

**REVIEW OF “Desegregation” of  
English schools: bussing, race and  
urban space, 1960s-80s, by Olivier  
Esteves (Manchester University  
Press, 2018.**

**Reviewed by Ludi Simpson**

While working in Bradford Council in the early 2000s, a young French student asked me about the policy of bussing Asian children from where they lived to schools outside the city centre, a policy that lasted in several English towns from 1964 to 1980. This was before my time so I put Olivier Esteves in contact with friends who had been bussed and I didn't think much more about it.

This astoundingly clear book is the result of Esteves's interviews across England, his searches for primary documentation of a little-discussed policy, and his social analysis of educational and political trends of the time. His commitment to truthful investigation shines throughout his account.

Bussing was a response to the growing number of Asian children in schools in inner cities in the early 1960s. A muddled imitation of the USA, where neither immigration nor language was the issue, coupled with a short-sighted expectation that immigration would be temporary, led to the unjust policy of bussing in a dozen towns in England.

Olivier Esteves summaries that while many young Asians throughout Britain suffered isolation and bullying, “What is different... about bussing is that many thousands of Asian pupils were forcefully transported to far away schools, especially in Ealing and Bradford, that their parents had little or no say in it, or did not know

they could have a say, and that most of these children were of primary age” (15).

The bussing was also unjust because it was only one way (Asian children taken from the neighbourhood rather than white children bussed in), it led the bussed children to isolation and bullying, it denied them access to extracurricular activities (because they were bussed back at the end of the day), and it was based on colour not educational need (English speaking Asian children were bussed). Olivier explores the context deeply, pointing to the lack of resources for inner city schools which bussing relieved, to the racist fear of immigrants exemplified by Enoch Powell’s hate-filled speeches, and the quiet administrators’ attempts at assimilation and dilution of neighbourhoods with many immigrant families.

Quietness was a feature of the policy. Bussing was not a big issue at the time. It was more in the nature of a short-lived experiment that hardly gets a mention in political histories. In the same period, a pupil-centred revolution in primary education was trail-blazed by the Plowden report of 1967 and the work of the Inner London Education Authority which roundly rejected bussing in favour of neighbourhood schools. Along with the introduction of comprehensive schooling which was planned nationally from 1965, these developments get the bigger treatment in 1960s and 1970s educational history.

The quietness of bussing is also evident in the lack of evidence that surrounds its introduction. It was rarely debated openly. There were few race or ethnicity statistics before the 1991 census first introduced its ethnic group question, despite the Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968. UK policy felt it was colour blind. When Dave Drew and I organised a conference in 1983 on ethnic record-keeping, many of the attendees wished to restrict that collection, suspicious of data’s use to control rather than to liberate its subjects. Bussing was introduced in response to an evident increase in Asian numbers in a few schools, which offended parents’ and administrators’ sense of the White normal. According to Olivier Esteves, Education Departments were aware that bussing was on the fringe of illegality,

that it could be challenged because pupils were not chosen on the basis of their English ability, and therefore spoke little about it and did not encourage scrutiny from Community Relations Councils. But bussing certainly mattered to the children (the 'Pakis' on the bus), and sharpened the political consciousness among young people, including those who went on to form Bradford's Asian Youth Movement and the Southall Youth Movement.

Bradford was one of the few areas that kept statistics on immigrant children, perhaps as a result of the small pox outbreak in 1962 that originated with an immigrant from Pakistan. When I worked in Bradford from 1981, the regional health authority's vaccination and immunisation records included a field with categories 'Caucasian', 'Negro', and 'Half-caste', terms that others hesitated to use. In Bradford, dispersal was introduced from the start of 1965 and involved a central medical examination, language centres for the schooling of those with little English language, and dispersal (bussing) for all schools that would otherwise exceed 25% of Asian children on their roll, irrespective of their English ability. It was supported by all parties and praised nationally as pragmatic and efficient.

The general praise for bussing when it was introduced does not stand the scrutiny it deserves but did not get until this book's study.

- Family unity was ignored, unlike for native children's school allocation.
- Bussed children were isolated from their own neighbourhood as well as within the schools they were bussed to, which rarely knew what to do with them or how to respond to bullying from other children.
- The policy emphasised a pupil's family country of origin, rather than educational needs.
- The schools that the children were bussed away from were more capable of dealing with their needs, and sometimes expressed their dissatisfaction with the policy.
- The issue of insufficient school places was not discussed, but transferred to the schools that the children were bussed to; in later

years of the policy some local children were turned away from the bussed-to schools, which fuelled opposition to the bussed children and to the policy.

- As immigration was not temporary, and adults will have children, the number of children to be bussed steadily grew so that bussing became something other than pragmatic and efficient. Olivier Esteves's book covers the local history not only where bussing was introduced but also in Inner London and Birmingham which rejected bussing. He traces the national discussion, the growing opposition and resistance to bussing, and devotes a chapter to the experience of bussing by the children who were bussed. Not all remember it as a bad experience, though most do focus on the adverse impact of being denied a normal schooling. For some, bullying included thugs from the National Front name-calling and harassing when they left the school gates to get the bus back home. Some became hardened to racism and are grateful for the survival skills learned then and used to succeed later. However, it is in the nature of this research that those interviewed are those now most visible and satisfied with their later lives.

Olivier Esteves's overall assessment is that this solution to tensions of colonial adaptation to the colonies' labour arriving in Britain, was a failure. Its end meant an equality of sorts for Asians who could now be schooled together.

Much of the debate is familiar, as those against bussing argued that it segregates the children by enforcing racialized double standards, while those for it argued that it would prevent segregation by putting children of different origins together. Those slippery words segregation and integration are part of the historical record of debate, but do not contribute to the understanding that this book provides.

Perhaps it helps for an insightful outsider such as Olivier Esteves, to see the bigger picture. Now a professor of British Studies at Lille University, he writes with accuracy and a love of life that clearly motivates his effort to create a greater understanding, and to share it. The book is highly recommended.