

Antero Garcia

*All through the Town: The School Bus as Educational Technology*

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Growing numbers of scholars have subjected various educational technologies to historical analysis. Antero Garcia's book *All through the Town* offers a concise account of the origins, political uses, design features, social experiences, and prospects of an ubiquitous, but largely overlooked, analog educational technology: the American school bus. In considering both its physical features and cognitive dimensions, the author contends that the school bus has been "the most disruptive piece of technology that has shaped the learning experiences of young people" (2). In its power to transport rural schoolchildren beyond their immediate surroundings and as a vehicle for racial desegregation, Garcia characterizes the school bus as "the longest-lasting and most widely felt intervention in public schooling in the past century" (2). It is therefore unjustifiable, he argues, that most Americans implicitly accept the school bus as it has existed for generations: an uncomfortable and grueling ordeal that disregards "the joy, freedom, or interests of young people" (5). In viewing the school bus as a technology "of control" (4), Garcia laments the thousands of hours that many schoolchildren are confined on their way to and from school: "sitting, waiting, sleeping, with no access to a bathroom or permission to eat food" (3). The school bus, in other words, is fundamentally inhumane.

Garcia's brief historical account of the school bus recognizes its origins in rural education during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But his focus is primarily on the centrality of the school bus in the contested efforts to racially desegregate American schools following the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision of 1954. In this context, the term busing assumed a political connotation. And as white resistance to school busing persisted in parts of the Southern and Northern United States, the federal commitment to racial desegregation subsequently eroded. By the late twentieth century, it became evident that school attendance patterns remained largely unchanged because of residential segregation and school redistricting. Buses continued to transport children to school, but they failed "to meet students' academic needs while affirming their inherent value as people" (30). In particular, students of colour have endured the most inconvenience, discomfort, and indignity through the "educational tax" (31) of busing. These historical developments lead Garcia to conclude that "the technology of school busing has proven ill equipped to combat the resilience of wealth and whiteness" (31) in the United States.

In addition to the racial injustices associated with school busing, Garcia argues that the experience of being a school bus passenger on a daily basis is dehumanizing. The hours spent commuting each day are "exhausting" (33), children are often sleep-deprived, and their actions are monitored through onboard cameras. Garcia also conveys the disruption caused by "the sheer noise and discombobulation" (37) from the vehicle's engine and the traveling schoolchildren. The school bus's physical features, meanwhile, have remained primitive. The plastic benches lack seat belts, arm rests,

and storage spaces, while the windows are typically difficult to open and close. The vehicle as a whole, Garcia suggests, is “little more than corrugated steel and bolts holding together sheets of metal” (5). As such, the school bus’s composition “prioritize[s] utility over comfort and sociality” (49). Because these physical elements of the school bus are so clumsy in design, Garcia urges us to acknowledge what little regard is given to the comfort of schoolchildren. This point becomes especially salient when contrasting the school bus with relatively plush charter buses for corporate employees. Ultimately, many schoolchildren’s basic needs are ignored in favour of the school bus’s antiquated technology. “When we center the *tools* of educational technology over its users,” he cautions, “we must question who these tools benefit and at what scale” (34). Yet popular indifference to questions about whether school buses have improved children’s lives, or if they have facilitated racial desegregation, leads Garcia to contend that American society is largely indifferent about the welfare of most schoolchildren.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Garcia’s analysis entails his characterization of the school bus as an educational platform, akin to a classroom or online digital learning environment. Noting that platforms in learning contexts possess social, designed, and material dimensions, he encourages us to consider the interaction among these elements: “a *relational* view of platforms that situates them within a broader picture of schooling and technology today” (54). In viewing the school bus as a platform, its impact on people becomes evident: facilitating on campus attendance; limiting children’s movements; and executing social policies such as desegregation. As such, Garcia concludes that the school bus is “a cognitive technology that reorients our assumptions of where schooling occurs and how” (70). But unlike other educational technologies such as computer-assisted learning that are continually developing, the school bus has remained stagnant and continues to “restrict multiple dimensions of human agency” (71).

Garcia’s slim volume does not provide an exhaustive account of the school bus’s origins and evolution for interested historians, who are likely to raise some probing questions. For instance, what was the significance of early school busing for rural students and school consolidation in the early to mid-twentieth century? What characterized schoolchildren’s bus riding experiences in the years following *Brown v. Board of Education*? To what extent did the rise of school choice in recent decades impact school busing? Nonetheless, this introductory account succeeds in depicting the school bus as a pervasive educational technology with profound consequences for most American schoolchildren. It illustrates how the bus has moved children relatively safely to and from their schools, but with virtually no consideration for their comfort. We also come to appreciate that its physical features have remained relatively unchanged over multiple generations. Furthermore, as a tool of social engineering in the United States’ failed efforts to desegregate its schools, Garcia’s analysis implicates the school bus in perpetuating the indignities and educational obstacles for historically marginalized children. *All through the Town* thus heightens our awareness and encourages additional critical interrogations of this seemingly benign, yet undeniably powerful, educational artifact.