



## FEATURE

### The Aberdeen Reading Bus: Its journey to date

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# The Aberdeen Reading Bus: Its journey to date

*What is the Reading Bus? Morag Russell tells its story*

*The Reading Bus is fun on wheels.  
It takks ye fur a hurl.  
It wheechs ye aff tae Story Lan  
Fa feys and' kelpies birl.*

Sheena Blackhall [Aberdeenshire dialect writer and poet]

Imagine a literacy resource which travels around, into the community, a welcoming environment for adults and children. This is the St Machar Reading Bus, brightly coloured and full of exciting literacy learning opportunities. The exterior is striking, decorated with art work by a child from a local school. Inside, the bus offers a large comfortable seating area for children, dedicated IT workstations, a collection of large puppets, an inviting one-to-one tutorial area and plenty of space for displays of literacy resources. There is an interactive whiteboard and a data projector and there are even plans to include a dance mat! There is information for adults who want to improve their own literacy skills and there are also facilities for making and enjoying a cup of tea.

The physical reality of the Reading Bus is visually stunning; the atmosphere inside, when children and families are present, is delightful; for children and families the bus is, in the words of Sheena Blackhall, 'fun on wheels'. This bus has become, in a very short time, a very special feature of the community it serves. The bus and the idea of the bus permeates the community, and beyond, in unexpected ways. Interdisciplinary links have been forged and groups and individuals have communicated very effectively as a result.

Most importantly, perhaps, there is a real sense of ownership. In the words of one child, 'This is not just any bus. This bus is more than a normal bus. This bus is our bus!'

## The 'community' of the Bus

The Reading Bus caters for one Aberdeen secondary school (St Machar Academy), ten feeder primary schools and three nurseries. The St Machar area is situated in the east end of Aberdeen and is far removed from some of the more privileged areas in this seemingly prosperous city. In January 2005, while the bus was being planned, we could read in the *Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation* (2004): 'Within the area there is a high incidence of deprivation in terms of health, education, skills and

training and housing. In Aberdeen, a city of plenty, the gap between the most and least privileged communities is very marked.'

## The origins of the Bus

The bus evolved, appropriately enough, from a perceived need and an associated idea. Jenny Watson, depute head teacher at Hanover Street School, in the St Machar catchment area, had been involved in developing various successful school-based projects to raise achievement in core areas. As part of her Master's Course (Scottish Qualification for Headship), she developed a highly successful family numeracy initiative with children who were not engaging well with maths. During this work, it became clear that there remained a small but significant number of 'hard to reach' parents. It seemed that, for some families, who might have failed in school or who might feel that school had failed them, the prospect of coming into school was a daunting one. During a later industrial placement with a bus company, Jenny saw something which seemed to offer an answer to this problem: employees of the company, who were not skilled in ICT, were engaging in computer training in a specially converted bus. In conversation it emerged that those people would not have been willing to go to the local college or evening class, but were much more confident about crossing the threshold of this bus, which was within the immediate community of their daily lives.

And so the idea of 'The Reading Bus' was born, as Jenny considered the possibility of converting a bus to use with parents and families from her own school, and providing a similarly welcoming and non-threatening space for the 'hard to reach' parent group identified earlier. Initially, when this was discussed with colleagues in Hanover Street School, it was envisaged that this converted bus would cater solely for parents and families from their own school. As the idea developed, it quickly became clear that the project was too big for just one school and it was agreed to involve the entire cluster of feeder schools for St Machar Academy. The

following aims were agreed:

- To promote reading as a source of lifelong pleasure;
- To raise attainment and achievement of children at risk of early failure;
- To encourage family learning in a non-school environment;
- To involve and empower fragile parents in their children's learning.

From the start, it was clear that this was always going to be more than a library bus and that this was not just another parental involvement initiative. At the heart of the project there is an on-going commitment to keep the needs of 'hard to reach' families central to its development. There is a great deal of evidence that parents living in the sort of poverty outlined above feel alienated from schools. The Scottish Executive suggest that schools may only have control over around 15% of children's learning (Interchange 39, SEED 1996). If we genuinely want, in the long term, to 'raise attainment and achievement of children at risk of early failure', perhaps the involvement and empowerment of 'fragile parents' is a necessity and a responsibility. The idea emerged of a bus providing a neutral or 'third' space, a 'half-way' house between home and school.

### **The start of the journey**

Jenny was seconded by the authority initially for three days per week and eventually on a full-time basis. Despite this, the development of the bus took rather longer than originally planned. There were complex tasks of planning and co-ordinating fund-raising activities and engaging the interest and support of children and families. A committee drawing on a wide range of community members and parents was set up to help guide the planning. Around the same time, staff from Aberdeen University engaged in research to explore child, family and community perceptions of literacy and to support the project in its aims and practice.

Inevitably, there were hurdles along the way and the bus launch had to be postponed more than once. However, this was not seen as a negative feature and Jenny acknowledged that this lengthy 'gestation period' allowed for reflection and enabled the bus itself to take rather different routes than those originally envisaged.

Despite the fact that the actual bus took a long time to materialise, the concept assumed reality in the minds of children and adults almost from the start. This was largely due to the formation of a Primary Enterprise Committee, made up of P6/7

representatives from the ten feeder schools. These children worked tirelessly to raise funds for the bus by organising events, such as bag-packing at a local supermarket. They also made presentations to local businesses to persuade them to become involved in the funding; this involved them in business breakfasts and various boardroom meetings. Eventually £120,000 funding for the bus came from the Scottish Executive Education Department, Aberdeen City Council and local businesses. In addition there were donations from various charities, such as Aberdeen Students Charities and North Sound Cash for Kids.

The bus was eventually launched in August 2006. Typically, children introduced all the speakers, they greeted the guests as they arrived, handed out badges and helped to film the event. Hundreds of school pupils and special guests saw the unveiling of the bus by Balamory's Edie McCredie (actress Juliet Cadzow).

And so the bus set out to follow its route in and around the community, visiting, for instance, schools and the local hospital. Personnel on the bus include storytellers, arts literacy workers, health workers, community police and teaching staff, as well as colleagues from partner agencies, such as librarians. On a typical day, when the bus visits a school, children enjoy having stories read to them; they may re-read a 'class' book, written by themselves; small groups can be seen engaging in child-led research, guided by an education researcher; there may be a meeting of the school's Enterprise Committee, to decide on important matters related to the bus. In the school there will be other literacy activities taking place, related to the bus. These might include the creation of story-telling performances; broadcasting focus group activities, where material is prepared for release on local radio; the writing of reading bus diary entries to be posted on the Reading Bus website. As a matter of course, families are welcomed on the bus. All activities, whether or not they are actually situated in the bus, are designed to bring literacy into the heart of the community.

### **The children**

The bus has proved to be popular beyond all expectations. Groups of children congregate in the playground and await its arrival impatiently. One teacher commented: 'My only complaint is that the time is too short and the children had to be dragged away from all the treasures the bus has to offer'. Late one afternoon, while bus personnel were in the process of locking up, after an open day, a child came rushing into the playground, dragging his mother by the hand. 'She nearly missed the bus and

she HAS to see it! I've run all the way home and we've run all the way back!' Children have become wonderful ambassadors, providing a vibrant home-school link.

The success of the project is evident and while it is clear that there are many reasons for this, there seems no doubt that the children themselves, who have been empowered throughout, have been a major driving force. From the start, they have been involved in all aspects of planning, for instance, in designing both the interior and the exterior; preferences were expressed as to who might be the star guest at the bus launch. Groups of children from all ages and stages visited a local bookshop and selected books, with incredible care and sensitivity. Teachers involved would now suggest that they would never again select library books solely on their own judgment from publishers' catalogues.

Each school now has a Primary Enterprise Committee, involved in fund-raising, decision-making, talking to peers, working with staff from a local radio station and providing ongoing advice about bus matters. Throughout, children have demonstrated that, given favourable contexts and genuine tasks, they are extremely competent and resilient young people. As the profession moves into a new era, implementing the recommendations of the Scottish Executive Curriculum Review Group, *A Curriculum for Excellence* (2004), those young pupils have a great deal to teach us all

### The way ahead

The bus is now a familiar sight, in the St Machar community and beyond. It has travelled as far as Glasgow, to the SETT Conference, and has brought its own special brand of magic to the 2006 Reading Bus Conference. Every school in the St Machar catchment area has benefited from the community

and literacy experiences the bus has to offer. The journey of the bus, however, is by no means completed; there are several important milestones ahead. A Writer in Residence, appointed in June 2007, will work with children on the bus for four days a week over the coming year. Aberdeen University and Aberdeen City Council are preparing an interim evaluation of the pilot programme, which will continue to inform the development of the bus. Further funding for research has been won from the Scottish Community Action Research Fund (SCARF), an association which gives community groups support to improve their skills and confidence to carry out their own research; presently a group of parents is exploring ways of helping boys to become enthusiastic readers. The 'Book Group at Ashgrove', which has enabled one mother to read a complete novel for the first time, has proved to be immensely popular; parents who have been involved are enthusiastic ambassadors for the Reading Bus and continue to spread the news about Bus events throughout the community and beyond. This pilot project has opened up new and exciting opportunities for family involvement. The website ([www.readingbus.co.uk](http://www.readingbus.co.uk)) which is attracting interest worldwide, will continue to provide information for all, as well as providing a showcase for children's achievements.

The journey goes on. A grand Bus Birthday Party was held in August 2007. In the words of the children interviewed on the video clip available on the Reading Bus website: 'The bus will not just go around schools. It'll go to community centres, parks, supermarkets, anywhere in Aberdeen...and then THE WORLD!'

*Sae step aboard the Reading Bus  
An dinna let it pass!  
The travellers are ony age  
The journey is first class.*