

The boy on the bike

Clark Denby

In this article, Clark encourages teachers to open up discussions that involve pupils as legitimate partners in the creation of mobility solutions in their local area.

In mid-November 2022, shortly after a video of a 5-year-old boy cycling to school was posted on Twitter by his father (@azb20019) and discussed on the Jeremy Vine show (Channel 5), the video 'went viral' – it had been viewed by 2.7 million people (Figure 1, Alexander, 2022). Having research interests within both urban geography and mobility, I was drawn to the comments section. What struck me was that the issue of independent and shared childhood mobility within their communities was clearly a contentious issue for parents, teachers, planners, geographers, legal experts, road users and others; the one set of people missing from the conversation was children. This led me to think that how children feel about their own travel within their 'transitional [community] spaces' (Kullman, 2010) was a conversation that really needed to involve them.

Legitimising children's voices

The short answer to such questions as: 'When are children actually involved within their community planning?', 'Where do we see and hear their voices and ideas expressed within our active travel infrastructure?' and 'Just how do children feel about their journeys within their community?' is 'very rarely'. However, the fact that they are not involved in the planning of active travel within their communities gives us teachers the opportunity to collaborate with our pupils on this issue, and ensure their voices are heard by those involved in the planning and provision of active travel infrastructure.

There are a number of excellent studies across a range of methodologies that highlight the value of pupils' involvement within school travel, with many studies centred upon themes of health and risk while adjusting to an adult-designed environment (see e.g. Egli *et al.*, 2020; Saleme and Pang, 2021; Morris *et al.*, 2022), but these place the child as subject to adult thought and strategy. The results of, for example, adult-designed online surveys, demonstrated that children not only enjoy the social interaction of active travel, but are also clearly able to express their perspectives regarding likes, dislikes and future recommendations.



Figure 1: Video of the 5-year-old boy cycling to school. Photo © @azb2019.

A significant movement has been an increasing awareness that there is real value in understanding children's views regarding active travel, spatial knowledge and how they see their journeys (Ross, 2007; Kirby and Inchley, 2009; Wilson *et al.*, 2018). More recently, the systematic review of qualitative and ethnographic studies by Morris *et al.* (2022) concludes that there is a legitimate opportunity to meaningfully involve children in interventions that involve solution-focused action research. Okay, so what can we do as teachers? How can we focus this research into the primary curriculum? How could this look within the teaching and learning space?

Pupil agency

The KS1 and 2 National Curriculum in England (DfE, 2013) gives us a clear framework of opportunities to support multi-disciplinary projects that forefront geography. There is potential to involve pupils, families, teachers and active travel and planning professionals to, jointly, put forward children's ideas, plans and designs about what they want and need their community travel infrastructure to look like. In essence, we are adding children as legitimate partners in the design of their community.

The work of Ergler (2021) highlights that 'children are intuitive urban planners' able to play proactive roles within the planning and design of their future communities. This New Zealand-based study also argues strongly that children who inherit their communities should have the right to 'participate and help make the most of their cities in a safe, inclusive way'. Indeed, Anna Nikolaeva (lecturer in urban planning at the University of Amsterdam) posits that: 'mobility's something we share, like the air we breathe or the language we speak, and it's something we need to give meaning to collectively' (cited in Verkade

and te Brömmelstroet, 2022, p. 217). Our school and community environments provide us with spaces for children to explore ideas of mobility and active travel inside and outside the classroom, both individually and collectively.

Here, you could set pupils up as urban planners in the style of 'Mantle of the Expert' (Heathcote, n.d.) with the remit to devise a 'safe cycle to school project'. Pupils could draw cycle routes on local maps, which they then present to the local council, and/or write to local newspapers with the intention of sparking debate and promoting change in their locality.

Opportunities for teaching and learning

There are exciting opportunities to enable the development of digital skills for teachers and pupils, using free online software such as Sketch-Up, Sketch-Up for Schools and Google Earth. These include easily accessible and navigable tools that can be incorporated into a wide range of learning activities across the KS1 and 2 curricula.

Fore-fronting geography within KS1 and 2 presents multiple opportunities to support the development of pupils' knowledge and skills, and includes place knowledge, human and physical geography, and geography skills and fieldwork, both locally and further afield.

Teachers can open up these explorations by looking at different types of settlement and inviting pupil-use of digital tools to map, create and document sketches of our communities as well as other areas. Pupils can then begin to develop their sense of place and relational mobility within transitional spaces by extending their KS2 project work, knowledge and skills. This can involve incorporating comparative case studies of mobility and active travel within both local and wider locations.

Action research

We know our pupils are competent, creative and intuitive rich imagineers who are active rather than passive learners (Edwards *et al*, 1998). Listening to these characteristics through, for example, the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2011) opens up opportunities to gain insight into their lives, to understand their thoughts about how pupils see their mobility within the community. This pedagogy of listening can involve a range of methodological ‘pieces’ (Clark, 2005), which support the exploration of places, spaces and mobility within the past, present and future (Figure 2).

Their learning can become all the more meaningful and powerful when we enable pupils to develop partnership, and leadership, within a collaborative and transformative project that involves a range of people across the active travel and mobility agenda. There are many types of experience to be offered here, and it is important that pupils’ lived experiences are legitimised as both equal and important within the planning for community active travel and future mobilities.

A pedagogy of listening

Through a pedagogy of listening – involving different voices and methods – pupils can explore their own and others’ lived experiences within the geographical spaces and places of their community. Creating and documenting these legitimate mobility experiences can both support the development of learning within the curriculum and encourage shared planning for community mobility.

Through ‘internal listening’ (listening to their own thought) about mobility, pupils can make sense of their own world and reflect upon what it means to be them, in their community, in this moment, in the past and in the future. Collaboration between pupils and wider social actors allows them to move towards ‘multiple listening’ focused upon children’s mobility in relation to place, space, and time. In this way pupils can be active partners in the design of safe travel routes.

Once both internal and multiple listening methods have been explored, ‘visible listening’, or listening that involves documenting the lived experiences, at

individual, group and community level can be implemented. This collaboration can be used to document an emergent legitimisation of pupils as valued and active partners in the shaping of active travel and mobility futures within their community.

Narrative devices within the Mosaic approach (Figure 2) provide practical examples of listening tools that can be used by pupils, practitioners and wider voices. These methods can be used to imagineer and shape individual, group and community mobility futures.

Moving towards care-full cities

This article has opened a debate on how we can provide opportunities for pupils to be heard, and for those involved in active travel and mobility planning to begin to consider the legitimacy of pupils’ voices within community development. The challenge, as Ergler *et al.* (2020) states, is for all of us to develop space to integrate young children’s views, experiences and suggestions about our local area. We can then move towards designing more intuitive, care-full cities — ones we would all benefit from living in.

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Method	Comments
Observation	Qualitative observation accounts
Child interviewing	A short, structured interview conducted one-to-one or in a group
Photography and book making	Children’s photographs of ‘important things’ and books
Tours	Tours of the site directed and recorded by the children
Map making	2D representations of the site using children’s own photographs and drawings
Interviews	Informal interviews with practitioners and parents
Magic carpet	Slide show of familiar and different places

Figure 2: Methodological ‘pieces’ of the Mosaic approach. Source: Clark, 2005.

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