

## Researching children's geographies using a multi-method approach

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### The Project

Research was conducted on children's geographies in a range of rural and urban settings in Fife, Scotland during 1996 and 1997. It is discussed here in relation to the main findings and to the methods used. Altogether 84 children aged between ten and twelve years from seven primary schools in Fife took part in activity-based research. This was followed by interviews with selected children and parents. The activity sessions consisted of mapwork exercises, children's self-directed photography, writings, drawings and commentary.

A separate questionnaire survey was also conducted through 14 schools in the Fife area to which 200 children and 134 parents responded (for more detail see Ross 2002). The methods used were designed to increase children's participation allowing children to convey their knowledge through multiple routes of expression (see also Prout 2002; Matthews, Limb and Taylor 1998). Activity sessions focused on children's knowledge, experience, negotiation, use of and meanings attached to their local area. The questionnaire surveys provided information on children's negotiation of their local area, activities, place attachment, and restrictions placed on use of the local area. The survey findings placed the work from activity sessions in a local context and also allowed comparisons to be made with previous research placing findings in a wider context. Two visual research methods used, mapwork and photography, are discussed here in greater detail. The presentation of map drawings and photographs include excerpts from children's commentary. Individual names and specific locations have been changed, however children's spelling and grammar have not been altered. As part of the mapwork exercises, children were asked to draw maps of their local area (Figure 1). The incorporation of map drawings into this

research was used to aid understanding of children's conceptions of their local area, in order to ascertain what the features of significance and importance to children were when defining their local area.

### Children's maps

Children's map drawings were content analysed with features classified under theme headings (such as parks and play areas, natural features, institutional and community facilities). This allowed comparisons to be made by settlement type and gender.

In addition to children's map drawings, photographed maps of the local area were used to gain further information on children's navigation of the local area, place preferences and spatial boundaries.

Elements which featured in at least a third of children's map drawings included friend's or relative's houses, gardens, main roads, schools, local shops, local parks, and trees or bushes. These were common to both girls' and boys' map drawings, and showed a degree of consistency across all types of settlement.

Commercial facilities appeared more often in girls' maps, which also contained more evidence of social relationships. Boys' maps more often included specific features such as woods, car parks and football pitches. Evidence of social relationships and natural aspects were more apparent in maps from smaller settlements and institutional, community and commercial facilities featured more often in maps from larger settlements. This is demonstrated in the examples shown in Figure 1.

The maps drawn by children from new town and town locations show some evidence of social relationships such as 'Tony's dad's garage' and the 'Grumpy blacksmith's garage', however those from small town and village locations highlight social relationships to a greater extent, with many friend's and neighbour's houses named. This may indicate a certain familiarity based on social proximity between those in smaller settlements, which is not present to the same extent in more urban areas.



### **Children's photographs**

Children's views and experiences of their local area were explored further through use of photography. This method has been used in research on children's geographies to great effect, providing a visual reference of places, people and elements of the local environment which children deem significant (Buss 1994; Young and Barrett 2001; Aitken and Wingate 1993). In this study children photographed places liked, disliked and their school journeys.

Children's competency in photography was not important. The importance of photography was that it allowed children to record aspects of their environment in their everyday setting, aspects which may have been lost by solely basing the research in the school setting. The photographs were content analysed, looking at the location and subject of photographs, using information from children for categorisation. The photographs were collected together in individual workbooks alongside the other materials produced in the activity sessions. These workbooks were then referred to during the interviews conducted with children, allowing children's own meanings and associations to come to light.

Traditional child spaces featured strongly and a variety of gardens, parks and play areas were included in children's photographs. These were valued as play sites and for socialising. The tendency for children to play in the street and on patches of grass in their immediate local environment in addition to designated play areas was noticeable. Natural and unkempt areas also held attraction. The capacity for children to appropriate and make use of whatever space is available to them emerged strongly. Children in villages made greater use of surrounding natural areas, those in towns made greater use of unkempt areas and those in the new town made greater use of marginal spaces such as garages and car parks. The importance of areas that children can adapt to their own needs and shape to become their own places has been commented upon previously (Hart 1979; Moore 1986; Ward 1988). Some gender differences in children's use

of space were evident with boys playing more sports and consequently making greater reference to institutional and community facilities and girls placing more emphasis on social relations, making greater reference to home and commercial settings.

The photographs revealed children's active, emotional and imaginative engagements as they react to the fabric of their everyday environment and incorporate this in their play and movement through their local area. The examples shown in Figure 2 convey the awareness and interaction that children have with their environment, for instance in activities such as rollerblading, appropriating features with given functional meanings, kerbs and railings, and adapting these in their play. One girl describes features of her school journey such as the 'bumpy hill', 'small hill' and 'biggest hill', and trees with birds, another recounts the potential for impromptu play en route to school, of 'snowball fights' and stopping to play in a park passed. Awareness of minute details was demonstrated, 'a gap in the hedge looking at the field' of significance as this was where horses were kept.

In presenting findings I endeavoured to relate the physical, experiential, emotional and imaginative aspects of children's geographies, the micro-scale of their experiences, to capture some of the 'nowness', the immediacy of these experiences. Aspects given precedence, such as gaps in hedges, flowers, kerbs and railings, different kinds of trees may appear mundane or trivial. However these have personal significance and are rolled into childhood experiences, the sum of all of these small parts playing a powerful role in children's geographies. This is important in the forging of children's identity and is implicit in shaping children's sense of belonging and attachment to their local area. The importance of home and garden sites, streets and the local area in general, parks and play areas and natural features emerged. This was evident in the range of research methods used: surveys, interviews, photographs and drawings.

## Figure 2: Children's photographs

**Boy, new town, Glenrothes area**



'My friends and me play football up here all the time.'

**Boy, town, Dunfermline area**



'Me at Alaris rails doing a SUPER SOAL (Rollerblading).'

**Girl, town, Dunfermline area**



'This is the play area, in the middle of the houses.'

**Girl, small town, Wemyss area**



'This is one of the things I like in my area because it has a tree house and lots of long grass.'

**Girl, small town, Wemyss area**



'This is my way to school in the morning it is a picture of a gap in the hedge looking at the field at back of the house. On my journey to school I usually walk with Rona. I walk up the holdings. In snow in the winter I have snowball fights and it takes me about 15 minutes... we pass the trees & some houses & the park next to the school we sometimes play in it.'

**Girl, small town, Wemyss area**



'On my journey to school this is what I see before I go to the shop. In winter the trees host lots of birds which makes Amy and me more happy. On my way home I go out the bottom gate, walk up the hill, past Callum's house then down the bumpy hill. Then I walk up a small hill, down the biggest hill past Mary's, Mr Duncan's and the farm, down another small hill, along the main road then I'm back home.'

These featured across all settlement types and were significant to both boys and girls. This indicates some commonalities in childhood experiences, with familiar local places and natural features central to children's geographies.

Organised activities and institutional, community and entertainment facilities featured in children's accounts also, however, this was not at the expense of their 'free play'. General outdoor play and informal sporting activities featured strongly. Children still played traditional games, and reported 'hanging around' and 'mucking about' in their local areas. Spontaneity, improvisation and temporality characterised many of their activities. This is important as it indicates that children have time and space to use their local area in an unstructured way.

Previous research highlighted the detrimental effects on children when unable to access their local area (Corbishley, 1995). My research highlighted the positive effects on children when able to participate in their local communities. Many conveyed a strong sense of belonging with the time spent in the local area outwith adult supervision contributing to the development of their personal and community identities. Most could name and describe many favourite places or friends in their local area. An ownership of space was communicated, with children able to make their own places. Children were able to develop coping skills and a sense of responsibility for themselves, learning through experience and gaining in competency, through their autonomous use of their local area. This highlights the continued importance of local social relations in a globalised world: as Kearns and Forrest (2001) discuss, the neighbourhood still matters.

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## Observations on the way to and from school

### Walking to school - girl, village, Cupar area



My way back from school going down the hill.

'I get very tired walking up the hill in the morning and when its raining heavily I get soaked and when a car drives past me on the hill I have to scramble up the muddy bank, its horrible when a car sokes me with muddy water.'

### Walking to school - girl, new town, Glenrothes area



'I walk from school through here. The woods are good for playing hide and seek

'At 8.50am my sister and I start walking to school. We go along the front of our houses, pass the field, go along the back of the houses, go down the path beside the school, then turn in the gate and we're at the school. It takes about 2 minutes.'

### Walking to school - boy, town, Dunfermline area



Me walking across to the corner shop

'It takes about 1 minute to get to school and I have to get crossed the main road by a lollypopman. I sometimes have to travel with my brothers and I get to school about 8:20am or 8:30am. When I get to school I play football and I am the goalkeeper.'

### Walking to school - boy, village, Cupar area



The road to school

'Sometimes it's pretty boring, like there's no-one there, you're just walking along, but sometimes it's alright if like, just nature, you hear birds and that, or I just think about football or something like that, just walking along, just dawdle along.'