

**How does the Van Gogh School Street
contribute to a more Sustainable and
Child-Friendly Neighbourhood?
A Lambeth Case Study**

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May 2022

BA Designing Cities: Planning and Architecture

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Acknowledgement

Firstly, I would like to convey my sincere gratitude to my supervisor and course leader Giulio Verdini, for the encouraging tutorials and continuous guidance throughout the process of writing this research report.

Further, I would like to express my appreciation for Enrica Papa and Emilia Smeds who have inspired my research topic and welcomed me to the EX-TRA project team.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their unconditional support throughout my studies, encouraging me to explore my interests and always believing in me. This achievement would have not been possible without them.

Marie Kaune

Abstract

With the consequences of the advancing climate crisis and cities emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need to reconsider priorities in urban planning and design, to create better places for people.

Several initiatives such as the School Street programme have been implemented across London over the last two years, enhancing the public realm and making sustainable travel a priority. Putting the development and well-being of children at the centre of its programme, School Streets address the needs of a very underrepresented group in urban policy and decision-making processes.

This report explores the Van Gogh School Street in the London Borough of Lambeth and its contribution to the wider neighbourhood through analysing relevant literature and primary data collected from pupils of Van Gogh Primary School, to highlight the importance and potential of consulting children in urban planning processes.

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Introduction

As cities are growing, they transform under the pressure of events such as Climate Change and the Covid-19 pandemic. Urban planners, designers, architects and politicians are responsible for guiding the progress of change, creating more sustainable and just cities that accommodate for the rising number of city dwellers.

This report focuses on the role of children in urban planning, who are often neglected in local policy and planning processes, especially during the consultations phase. The importance of considering children in urban planning is manifested in global frameworks by the UN and in some cases in national and regional policies. However, this is rare, and scholars have stressed the increasing importance of considering children in city planning (Bishop & Corkery, 2017; Gill, 2007; Gill, 2021; Fainstein, 2014; Olsen, et al., 2019).

In light of the recent Covid-19 pandemic, countless interventions enhancing the urban public realm have been implemented across the globe and particularly in Europe. London has been at the forefront of cities implementing different measures and experiments to widen cycle paths and reclaim road surfaces for pedestrian use. Amongst those interventions was the fast-tracking of the School Street concept, originally piloted in 2018, reaching around 500 sites across the city in March 2022. (Mayor of London, 2022)

What are School Streets?

Aiming to improve the spaces in front of primary schools by reducing road danger, improving air quality, tackling congestion and increasing active travel, the School Streets programme has a long list of objectives. To achieve those, during school pick-up and drop-off times, the road in front of the school is temporarily closed for motorised traffic through modular barriers on either side of the intervention. (School Streets Initiative, 2021)

Focusing on the School Street in front of Van Gogh Primary School in Lambeth, the report aims to bring together primary data, collected from pupils and local residents, as well as existing literature, local plans and policies, for an analysis of the success of the experiment. Exploring social and environmental dimensions on the neighbourhood scale, just city theories, sustainability concepts, post-pandemic development and the role of children in the built environment are taken into consideration.

Figure 1 Van Gogh Primary School Street, Photo Credit: Marie Kaune

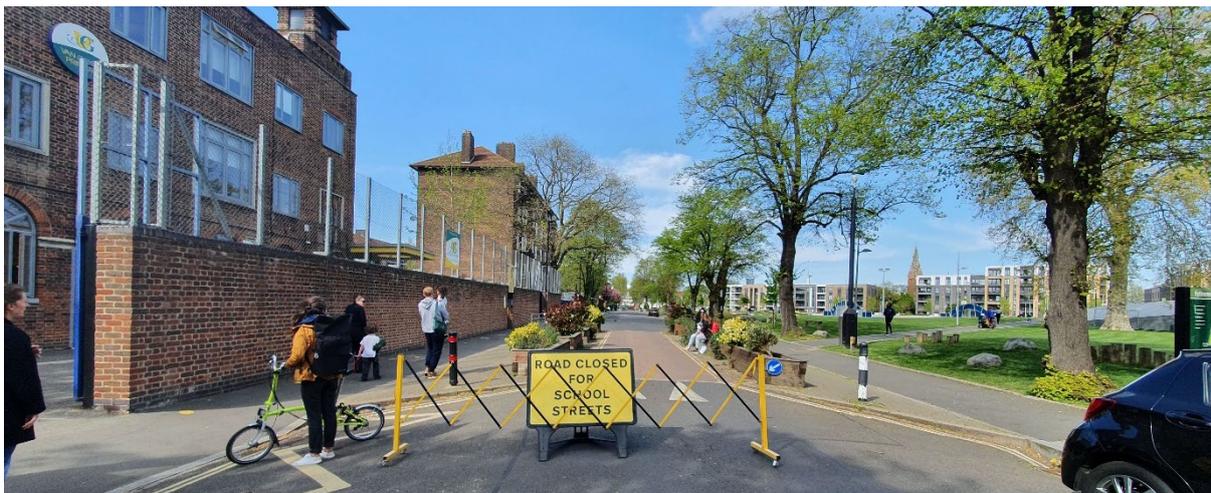


Figure 2 Van Gogh School Street Site Plan, Source: Digimap, Edited: Marie Kaune



Research Objectives

With the collected data and analysis of existing literature, the research intends to develop an understanding of the impacts of the Van Gogh School Street on pupils and local residents, placing it in the London context and investigating its relevance to local policies and frameworks, highlighting the importance of considering children in urban planning and calling on governments to create more opportunities to involve children in policy and placemaking. The report also seeks to contribute to the European funded 'EX-TRA Experimenting with City Streets to Transform Urban Mobility' project. (EX-TRA, 2022)

Research Questions

- What is a child-friendly neighbourhood?
- What are the characteristics of a sustainable neighbourhood?
- How is the Van Gogh School Street experiment perceived by pupils and local residents?
- How can the School Street experiment become a more effective feature, in Lambeth and elsewhere?

Research Hypothesis

The recovery of cities from the Covid-19 pandemic presents an excellent opportunity to emphasise conscious consideration of children in the built environment and the provision of consultation platforms for children in urban planning processes. This can be undertaken on small scale experiments directly influencing children, such as School Streets.

The Van Gogh School Street experiment contributes to a more child-friendly and sustainable neighbourhood, and the majority of pupils and local residents perceive the intervention as positive.

Literature Review

Policies and Frameworks

The rights of children were officially recognised and documented for the first time in the Geneva declaration in 1924 by the League of Nations. (Humanium, n.d.) A few decades later, following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, the United Nations have developed a framework setting out 54 articles for the protection and safeguarding of children as ‘childhood is entitled to special care and assistance [...] and the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth’ (United Nations, 1989, p. 3).

While the articles touch on every aspect of the life of children, some are especially important when considering children and their role in cities and urban planning. Article 12 states ‘Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously’. While Article 24 calls on governments specifically to ‘provide good quality health care, clean water, nutritious food, and a clean environment and education on health and well-being so that children can stay healthy’. (United Nations, 1989)

In 2004, UNICEF established the Building Child-Friendly Cities Framework for Action concentrating on children’s rights in cities and local governments, describing the urgency of considering children in urban planning due to the ‘rapid transformation and urbanisation of global societies; the growing responsibilities of municipal and community for their populations in the context of decentralisation; and consequently, the increasing importance of cities and towns within national political and economic systems’ (p. 1).

The framework identifies fundamental rights for young citizens including the ability to have a say in decision-making processes, being able to articulate their thoughts about their wants and needs for their city, moving around safely without supervision and growing up in an unpolluted environment. It also highlights the necessity of commitment from the government to implement policies and provide guided change. (UNICEF, 2004)

More recently in 2020, the Mayor of London has produced a report aiming to include children in urban development and make London child friendly. Acknowledging the

limited influence children have on the built environment and policymaking, it defines access to social and physical infrastructure as well as safe and independent mobility for all children as its main objectives. Further, it is recognised that ‘A London that works well for children and young people will be a London that works well for all of us’ (Mayor of London, 2020, p. 9).

Another important document was published in 2021 by the Mayor of London, outlining the creation of School Superzones and thereby providing another framework prioritising children’s health and wellbeing in London. The School Superzones initiative, predominantly implemented around primary schools, also provides an opportunity for councils to identify borough-wide priorities through engaging with a variety of departments and local stakeholders in the consultation and implementation process.

The Post-Pandemic City

With the recent Covid-19 pandemic and its influence on society, economic activity, nature and ecosystems, an abundance of new literature around the influence of lockdowns on urban areas has emerged.

Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir (2020) discuss the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on cities highlighting the arising opportunities for urban planning, design and management that can be used to ‘build back better’ (p. 12), the need to review and update policies as well as the importance to adapt development and regeneration to become more sustainable and environmentally friendly. The article emphasises the influence of action taken today on cities in the post-pandemic era as fundamental to achieving more sustainable places.

Analysing the economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on cities, Brail (2021) highlights that ‘the pandemic represents an acceleration of pre-existing urban conditions’ (p. 598) disproportionately affecting cities. With mobility patterns shifting and structural and systematic imbalances worsening ‘the pandemic provides an opportunity for renewed commitments, reflection, and action’ (p. 600).

Florida et al. (2021) debate the future of cities in the post-pandemic period, predicting the decrease of urban areas as places for shopping and work as commuting activity declines. While lockdowns have worked as forced experiments, causing radical short-

term change, there are long-term effects on society, the structure and morphology of cities that will transform town centres to become 'cultural and civic gathering places' (p. 18).

With cities becoming 'laboratories in new ways to govern and shape their futures' (p. 20), the article defines 'social scarring, the forced experiment of the lockdown, the need to secure urban built environment against future health and climate risk, and changes to urban built form, real estate, design and streetscape' (p. 3) as the key forces influencing the development of urban areas in the post-covid period. Hereby, it is important to focus the emerging new urbanism on inclusion and the recovery of the economy to achieve resilient urban areas.

In a report on potential scenarios for the two London Boroughs Lambeth and Southwark in the post-pandemic era, Travers et al. (2021) discuss the implications of Covid-19 in addition to Brexit, indicating the significance of both events and their combined power to bring about permanent change for London. Their study indicates complex challenges for local authorities, social organisations including schools and health providers, and other public and private stakeholders when delivering a strategy for the Covid-19 recovery of Lambeth and Southwark. However, taking inspiration from international initiatives and decision-making around covid recovery can make it easier to address those challenges and deliver effective strategies.

Environmental and Social Justice

With social transformation, questions around democratisation and globalisation-driven exposure of societies and ecosystems, 'environmental justice and human rights movements are merging together as a global force' (Mohai, et al., 2009, p. 425) to overcome those issues.

Although Wolch et al. (2014) already mention access to green space as one environmental justice issue, its dilemma has only recently received more attention through the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Following the recognition of green space access justice, academics and professionals call for better, more sustainable design of street spaces, especially in areas that are neglected or used by citizens belonging to underrepresented groups such as children. (Varma, 2021; Rehan, 2019)

Olsen et al. (2019) point out the importance for local authorities to be able to consider the impacts of urban areas on children and their differing perceptions of the built environment compared to adults, to achieve a better understanding of the complex urban environment. This can be achieved through equal representation of disadvantaged groups in urban planning decision-making processes, 'change in the rhetoric around urban policy' (Fainstein, 2014, p. 1), and a focus on 'bottom-up urban green space strategies' (Wolch, et al., 2014, p. 241).

Streets as Places

The purpose of streets has transformed throughout the centuries, especially with the invention of the automobile and its significant dominance on roads transforming streets into traffic channels and thoroughfares. In literature, demands for greener, more accessible and people-friendly city streets have become louder and with increasing awareness of climate change and considering the Covid-19 pandemic the need to reassess street space and transform them into more sustainable places has become ever more important.

Rehan (2019) identifies the use of 'sustainable streetscape as an approach to provide an attractive and safe sustainable urban environment, and to sustain the development process' (p. 173) to deliver positive long-term effects on the wider ecosystem, city infrastructure and society. Making streets safer, environmentally friendly and places for social interaction contributes to the formation of sustainable cities.

Appleyard (1980), Jacobs (1993) and Vich et al. (2019) highlight the importance of streets to function as places where people are able to meet and spend time together in a 'learning environment' (Appleyard, 1980, p. 108) to improve social infrastructure among neighbourhoods and enhance 'urban dimensions and functions of simple paths and roads' (Vich, et al., 2019, p. 57).

The significance of inclusive policy around public space, more particularly street space, with an emphasis on children is stressed by Banerjee (2001) and Blinkert & Weaver (2015). The authors point out the important role of local authorities and regional governance in making policies and protecting children to ensure equal opportunities for all citizens and a sustainable, healthy future for cities through child-friendly and greener placemaking.

Bridges et al. (2020) and Varma (2021) continue the discussion about children in the urban public realm and the influence of city planning on children's health, development and independence. Pointing out that considering parents' perception of the safety of urban spaces is essential Bridges et al. (2020) demands a 'more systematic reporting of implementation', while Varma (2021) argues that intentional planning and cities 'have great potential to simultaneously leverage children's rights and localize the SDG's' (p. 40).

The Local Context – Vassal

The Van Gogh School Street is located in Vassal in the Borough of Lambeth. At the time of data collection, Van Gogh Primary School was only operating on one of its sites on Cowley Road next to Myatt's Field Common Park.

The school is surrounded by the Cowley Housing Estate and Myatt's Field North Estate (Cowley Resident Management Organisation Ltd, 2022; Lambeth Council, 2022). With a relatively small catchment area, most pupils live within a 1-2 miles radius (Locrating, 2020). The population of Vassal lies at around 15,600, with 16.5% being under the age of 16 and over half of the residents being from an ethnic minority background. (Greater London Authority, 2011)

Methodology

The research comprises a systematic analysis of existing literature, policies and frameworks, the collection of quantitative and qualitative data through a paper survey and Commonplace, a citizen engagement form, site observations and informal conversation with school staff from Van Gogh and Reay Primary School, a neighbouring school also participating in the School Street programme.

The paper survey, consisting of seven multiple-choice, four open-end questions and a creative mapping exercise, was given to year four and five teachers from Van Gogh Primary School to conduct with their pupils. In total, 100 surveys were completed by pupils aged eight to ten years old.

On Commonplace a total of 17 comments from 2020, 17 comments from 2021 and 12 comments from 2022 about the School Street specifically, and 22 comments from 2022 about the wider neighbourhood were analysed. Comments on the School Street Commonplace consist of answers for up to 25 multiple choice, open-end and picture questions. They were undertaken anonymously, none of the questions was compulsory and participants were able to withdraw at any point. Comments on the wider neighbourhood were collected from a heatmap of the area taken from Commonplace.

Site observations were undertaken during several afternoon pick-up hours in March, April and May 2022.

Data Collection Findings

Commonplace Responses

The Commonplace data showcases a generally positive perception of the School Street intervention with some negative voices indicating problems around road closure and parking.

Notable is a shift from data collected within the first few months after the introduction of the School Street intervention in 2020 to data collected in 2021 and 2022. While the first round of data collection had a very high percentage of people agreeing with the intervention as time goes on more issues arise and more mixed responses were collected. This is also due to the fact that the launch of the School Street coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, with lockdowns leading to drastic changes in behaviour

and travel patterns as people were forced to stay and work from home. Therefore, the experience of the School Street has significantly changed over recent months revealing new benefits and challenges to local people and the wider neighbourhood.

In-Class Survey Responses

A total of 100 surveys were collected with participants being between the age of eight and ten years old in year 4 and year 5 of Van Gogh Primary School.

- 1) The majority of participants travel to school using a form of active travel like walking, cycling or using a kids scooter (55%), and around a third is being driven (29%)
- 2) As the school has a small catchment area most pupils live within a commute of 10 mins (66%) and 20 mins (25%)
- 3) While only 3% commute to school independently and 3% travel with friends, the overwhelming majority of pupils are accompanied by family members (86%)
- 4) The perception of safety when travelling to school is generally high among participants, with 72% stating they feel 'very safe'
- 5) 82% of participants like the School Street Experiment
- 6) One of the most stated reasons why participants like the School Street Experiment is because it makes them feel safe
- 7) One of the most stated reasons why participants dislike the School Street Experiment is because it prevents cars from parking next to the school gate
- 8) Some participants stated that the School Street has made them more social and active, before and after school, while others indicate that it has not had a significant impact on their daily life
- 9) Most participants have stated that they use the School Street to cross over to the park, chat with friends or walk and cycle along the road
- 10) The majority would not change anything about the School Street, while a few participants mention they would prefer more seating or planters, some indicate they would prefer better parking solutions

Discussion

Reviewing relevant literature has shown the importance of reconsidering priorities in urban planning to achieve better and more sustainable cities with a special focus on the role of children in the built environment. Their consultation can enhance decision and placemaking, transforming urban areas into more liveable places that are designed for humans rather than vehicles.

The collected data of the in-class survey highlights the significance of road safety for children with the majority of pupils mentioning the aspect as the main reason for liking the School Street. By temporarily blocking the road, more space is provided for everyone using the School Street allowing for increased social interaction which is indicated in the survey with pupils stating they use it to meet and talk to their friends before and after school.

Some also state their wish for a wider road closure and more seating options which indicate the potential for the School Street intervention to be expanded and equipped with additional features.

However, concerns about the issue of parking were raised several times in the in-class survey, predominantly by pupils who are driven to school. This suggests a disproportional influence of the School Street intervention on people travelling by car which is also reflected across all Commonplace responses. While most local people agree with or feel neutral about the intervention, the people who submitted disagreeing responses are mainly car owners.

The temporary road closure is affecting the ease of driving as longer routes have to be taken to avoid the School Street, and actually increases crowds of parent's cars double parking on double yellow lines at either end of the intervention. The parking issue can be identified as the main weakness of the intervention as it is the most mentioned problem across all data.

Limitations of the School Street

With the observation of parking issues around the School Street, the intervention seems to lack a sufficient integration into the surrounding neighbourhood and rather than solving the overcrowding of cars in front of the school gate, it dislocates the problem by a few meters to the borders of the intervention.

Furthermore, as School Streets are often managed by school staff, there are problems with the maintenance of the intervention and enforcement of rules. As the pandemic had led to higher numbers of staff falling ill, schools have found themselves unable to dedicate staff to put up the barriers in the morning and afternoon and due to the lack of official council representatives or traffic wardens present at intervention sites, there are no consequences for parking offences.

While School Streets close roads for general motorised traffic, an exemption is in place for local residents allowing them to use the road during the School Street hours. This displays another limitation, mentioned several times in the pupil's survey, as it leaves pedestrians and cyclists who are of the impression they have the road for their sole use, at risk for accidents with passing cars.

Moreover, school staff have reported a lack of signage around the intervention site, leading to confusion and misunderstandings among local people, especially at the beginning when School Streets were first introduced.

Recommendations for the Future of School Streets

Recent data has shown a significant improvement in air quality and a reduction in road incidents on School Street intervention sites around London (Transport for London, 2021; Road Safety Knowledge Centre, 2021), a success for the main objectives of the programme, suggesting the continuation of the School Street not only in Lambeth but across the city. This includes the Van Gogh School Street, where responses collected from pupils and local people correspond with the general positive attitude of citizens towards the programme.

Recommendations for the future include the provision of staff, employed by the council, carrying authority to enforce rules and to assist school staff with putting up the School Street barriers, as well as more engagement from the council for collaborations with schools to ensure equal conditions for all pupils in the borough.

A close collaboration between councils and schools also allows for easier data collection through the engagement of teachers and with class surveys, like the data collection undertaken for this report and in accordance with the STARS accreditation scheme by TfL (Transport for London, 2022).

Further, after around two years of the School Street programme running, every School Street should be reviewed on a case-to-case base. For the Van Gogh School Street, an extension of the intervention would be beneficial to allow a better impact on the wider neighbourhood providing access to Myatts Field Common Park not only for Van Gogh Primary School but also for Cowley Housing Estate. Generally making School Streets permanent has been supported by previous research (Transport for London & 2CV, 2021).

A permanent closure of Cowley Road for motorised traffic would only restrict a small percentage of locals who own a car as the majority of residents travel on foot and by bike. With the post-pandemic transition of urban areas towards more sustainable cities, providing more street space for children and people using active travel methods will have benefits not only for the environment but for the local community and wider neighbourhood.

Conclusion

Pupils from the Van Gogh Primary School perceive the School Street as a positive intervention that enhances the public realm in front of their school by providing more space to meet, play and socialise. The majority of pupils support the road closure as it makes them feel safe on the street.

While there are challenges around the intervention including parking offences and lack of signage, overall, the School Street contributes to a more child-friendly environment around the school encouraging active travel and increased social interactions. Interventions around schools are particularly effective as they impact the daily life of almost every child independent of their ethnic, financial or social financial background.

To ensure effective future development of the School Street programme councils should play a more active role in supporting schools, working closely on a case-to-case base considering local voices. However, as this case study has shown the most important consultation is the one of children as their direct participation will provide the answers needed to create safer, more sustainable and healthier cities.

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Appendices

Appendix A: In-Class Survey

Research Report and EX-TRA project, University of Westminster – Marie Kaune

April 2022

How does the Van Gogh School Street Experiment contribute to a more sustainable and child-friendly neighbourhood? Class Workshop

Hello, my name is Marie, and I am a student at the University of Westminster studying Architecture & City Planning.

For my final project, I am doing research on the School Street in front of your school and need your help. Please can you fill out the questions and if you have time do the drawing exercise at the end? Thank you so much!

- 1) Age: _____ 2) Class: _____
- 3) How do you travel to school? (Please circle the option that applies to you)
Walking – Cycling – In the car – By bus – Other: _____
- 4) How long does it take for you to get to school?
0 to 10 mins – 10 to 20 mins – longer than 20 mins
- 5) Who do you travel to school with?
Parents – Siblings – Grandparents – Other Family Member – Childminder – Other: _____
- 6) Do you feel safe on your way to school?
Yes, very safe – A little – Neutral – Not really
- 7) Do you like the School Street experiment?
Yes, very – Yes, a bit – Neutral – Not really – Not at all
- 8) Why do/don't you like the School Street experiment?

- 9) Has the School Street changed the way you travel to school? And if so, how?

- 10) How do you use the School Street?

- 11) If you could change one thing, what would you change about the School Street?
I would change...
- 12) Please can you draw a map or a picture story describing your commute to school?
(You can use a separate sheet or the back of this paper)

Thank you for your participation! 😊

Appendix B: Additional Information for Teacher

Research Report and EX-TRA project, University of Westminster – Marie Kaune

April 2022

How does the Van Gogh School Street Experiment contribute to a more sustainable and child-friendly neighbourhood? Class Workshop

Research Aims:

- Understanding the impacts of the street experiment on pupils, parents and local residents
- Investigating the experiment in the London/Lambeth context and its relevance to local policies
- Considering the role of children in Urban Planning and calling on governments to create more opportunities involving children in policy and placemaking

Questions 1) – 7)

Gathering more general data on travel behaviour

Question 8)

Follow up on question 7)

Do you like that the School Street experiment gives you more space in front of the school to play/chat/meet others, that you are more independent in walking to school or that there are no cars parked/driving?

Do you dislike it because it is crowded or because you have to walk further to the car to get home?

Question 9)

For example: Did you drive to school before the School Street was implemented and now you walk/cycle? Are you allowed to walk the last bit by yourself/independently in the morning?

Question 10)

List some activities you do in the School Street like playing/talking to friends...

Question 11)

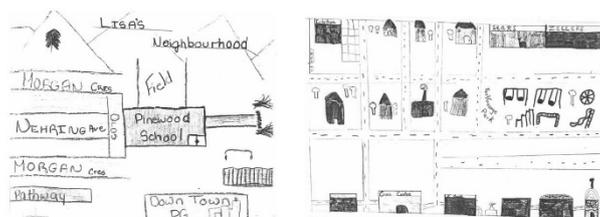
For example: Do you want the School Street to be there all day/every day? Do you want more plants/seats on the School Street?

Question 12)

Creative exercise cognitive mapping: it will highlight things that are important/significant for students on their way to school such as meeting other people, walking down a busy road, passing a dangerous junction etc.

It could show that a student who gets driven to school has the isolated experience of being inside a car while a student who walks to school knows their neighbourhood well and is able to identify key features.

Examples:



Developing Stages of Cognitive Map Representation		
Stage	Map style	Stage and comments
Topological (Egocentric)		1. Link-picture map Highly egocentric. Known places connected to home. Slightly iconic. Direction, orientation, distance, scale non-existent. Unco-ordinated map.
Projective 1 (Quasi-egocentric)		2. Picture map Still egocentric. Partial co-ordination and connection of known places. Direction more accurate. Road in plan form, but buildings iconic. Scale and distance inaccurate. Little development of perspective.
Projective 2 (Quasi-abstract)		3. Quasi-map More detailed and differentiated. Better co-ordination, continuity of routes. Some buildings in plan form. Direction, orientation, distance and scale improved. Better perspective.
Euroclean (Abstract)		4. True map Abstractly co-ordinated and hierarchically integrated map. Accurate and detailed. Direction, orientation, distance, shape, size, scale all roughly accurate. Map in plan form. No symbols highly iconic, so key necessary.

Appendix C: Data Summary of Questions 1) – 7)

100 surveys										
Age	8 years	9 years	10 years							
How do you travel to school?	Walking	9	51	40						
		Cycling	In the Car	By Bus (including train)	Void					
How long does it take for you to get to school?	0 - 10 mins	46	9	29	13	3				
		10-20 mins	longer than 20 mins	Void						
Who do you travel to school with?	Parents	66	25	7	2					
		Siblings	Grandparents	Other Family Member	Childminder	Family	Myself	Friends	Void	
Do you feel safe on your way to school?	Yes, very safe	61	7	/	5	3	13	3	3	5
		A little	Neutral	Not really	Void					
Do you like the School Street Experiment?	Yes, very	72	16	8	3	1				
		Yes, a bit	Neutral	Not really	Not at all					
		45	37	14	3	1				

Appendix D: Because of its size, the 100 responses from the class survey and the commonplace data can be found in the following google drive folder



<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ILO-HWdPe7j3EJmbBw9MtN6kaf-FO53a?usp=sharing>

Appendix E: Some pictures from site visits to the Van Gogh School Street, taken by the author



Figure 3 Parking Offences outside School Street



Figure 4 Resident driving through School Street during Intervention Hours