

The ATE, listening to children's needs

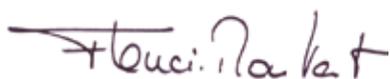
The ATE *Association transport environment* has been creating school mobility plans (SMPs) throughout Switzerland for nearly a decade. It has been doing so with the certainty that the child's perspective is of prime importance in the design of public spaces. This is why ATE attaches particular importance to the feelings, perceptions and needs of schoolchildren as they make their way to and from school each day.

Analysing a multitude of routes to school has enabled the ATE to build up a rich collection of accounts in the form of drawings made by children. This study closely examines those accounts.

This 'kid's-eye view' is too often overlooked by urban planners and political decision-makers. These daily journeys are made primarily by children, making them the ultimate experts on the subject and 'case studies' of their own use of public spaces.

School Mobility Plans reflect the diverse environments and routes to places of learning. The benefits and drawbacks of these routes are explored through children's eyes and drawings. They reflect children's sensibilities, which all too often are not considered.

For this study, a selection of drawings was shown to a panel of researchers. The resulting report aims to make children's voices heard and provides food for thought for developing spaces adapted to children's needs.



Françoise Lanci Montant,
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MOBILITY FOR THE FUTURE



Children, the top experts on their daily journeys

Drawings, analyses, recommendations

Giving children a voice



By Patrick Naef,
geographer and
anthropologist¹

The problems associated with child mobility have already been widely explored, both in academia and by practitioners who design the spaces in which children move around. However, children's voices are rarely heard. Moreover, discussions on their mobility very often focus on safety. While safety is a top concern, many other elements come into play when children move around. When they go from point A to point B, children discover new horizons. They socialise when in groups. They develop their independence and identity.

Taking inspiration from their own experiences, 120 children drew pictures as a means of answering two simple questions: 'On your way to school, what do you like and what do you dislike?' A collection of 240 drawings was then analysed by five experts - an engineer, a historian, a lawyer, a geographer/urban planner and a learning specialist - who were asked to answer the following question: 'What limits/facilitates children's movements?' Guided by an interdisciplinary approach, the experts were each tasked with bringing a complementary perspective based on their specific expertise.

In the first analysis, Jean Zermatten approaches the issue from the perspective of a legal expert on children's rights. He stresses that considering the needs of children is an obligation under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Doctoral student Sara Camponovo describes how, for children, their school route provides a space and time of their own where they can speak freely while developing their identity and autonomy. Philippe Gasser then lends his perspective as a city planner and transport engineer, emphasising that for children, getting around is not just a secondary need, it is a moment that provides a wealth of experience. In the next analysis, geographer and urban planner Aurélie Schmassmann demonstrates the importance of the environment, both

natural and built, surrounding children's school routes. She notes the extent to which the drawings reveal problems linked to urban design. Like Sara Camponovo, Aurélie Schmassmann also focuses on that special time when children can enjoy their freedom beyond the watchful eyes of adults. Lastly, historian Carina Roth points out that certain elements, such as the length of the journey, animals encountered along the way or the atmosphere among friends can be either liberating or oppressive depending on the context and the children.

The analyses are followed by two complementary perspectives. The first lists other studies conducted around the world on the subject of school routes. The second highlights two articles of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which provide the basis for the principle of 'children's best interests' along with the participation of children and the consideration of their views.

The key objective of the study was to translate children's needs into recommendations for those who shape the public domain. The resulting report is therefore aimed at professionals working in the fields of mobility and public spaces (city planners, engineers, architects), decision-makers and their teams (magistrates, municipal and cantonal administrations), researchers and associations, not to mention parents and anyone else with an interest in the topic.

The ATE hopes you enjoy reading this report and would be glad to provide you with the complete version of the study in French. ■

¹ Patrick has been working for the University of Geneva since 2010 and collaborating with the ATE since 2016. He helps create synergies between practice and academia. In particular, he has been involved in research on child mobility and the shared use of public space.

The synthesis of the expert's reports led to the formulation of recommendations that meet the needs expressed by children. They are grouped according to the different stakeholders to whom they are addressed.

Recommendations to professionals and decision-makers

School routes

School routes must be understood and designed as a space for play and freedom and not just as a utilitarian route. It should include 'safe zones', places where children can engage in play and shared activities, as well as vast green spaces. There is no need for sophisticated facilities and layouts: children need only be given the freedom to choose and to use the space and its elements creatively.

Designing school routes

The design of school routes must be a trade-off between safety and learning. Although safety remains the major challenge, school routes are also where children learn how to navigate hazards and interact with others.

Automobile traffic and speed

Automobile traffic and speed are constant concerns for children. Around schools, this threat must be limited by reducing traffic speeds and the space allocated to cars.

Imagining and designing school routes

The conceptualisation and design of school routes should include consultations with users - children and parents - while following examples of good practices. This consultation process should not be a perfunctory exercise, but rather, should factor in the specific needs of children. School Mobility Plans are participatory tools that include children's voices.

Recommendations to parents

Active transport

Active transport (walking, cycling, using a scooter) should be promoted, as it is essential to children's well-being and development. If the school is too far or the itinerary too complicated, children should be allowed to walk at least part of the way.

School routes

School routes should continue to be spaces just for children, where they can enjoy some free time to chat, play, relax or take a break. To do this, the most fulfilling path should be given priority over the fastest, allowing children to take detours if they wish. If necessary, plan so that they have extra time on the schoolward and homeward journeys.

Supporting children's journeys

Children must be supported in the learning process. Allow children to learn how to handle dangers, while choosing how they move about so that they can forge their own experience. Allow children to travel to school alone as soon as they are capable. The Pedibus ('walking bus') and the Vélobus ('cycling bus') services provide excellent intermediate solutions.

Conclusion



Children make their own way to school at an age when their physical and personal development is in full swing. That is why it is essential that great care go into designing school routes.

The experts' conclusions and recommendations support and confirm the analyses carried out in the framework of the 30 or so School Mobility Plans we have developed in recent years. The environment in which the children move around must of course be safe and allow them to gradually learn the rules of the road. However, we must go beyond that by considering all the wealth and diversity that school routes have to offer. It provides an invaluable space and moment between home and school, where children can take pleasure in exploring the environment around them with friends or family. It is a place for expression, play, exploration, discovery and experience, where social bonds are created and where passions are born.

Providing a space for children while being attentive to their unique needs means offering them a separate, special space, a complementary educational space, which is essential to their development.

For the ATE, the opinions of the experts and professionals who studied these drawings highlight, more than ever, the importance of designing public spaces with the needs and feelings of children in mind. We need to provide them with environments that are both fun and safe, but which also have their share of mystery to allow children to freely explore the world around them and create relationships outside the family. Furthermore, what we do for children's school routes must also be done for the other facilities they use.

Children are both promoters of the appropriation of public spaces and indicators of its success. At a time when greener, more inclusive and more welcoming public spaces are being created out of concern for the climate, this study is an invitation and a call to include children in the discussions surrounding projects and how they are implemented. Without a doubt, their views, needs and wishes are the keys to great achievements. ■

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