

Capturing everyday experiences: the use of self-directed photography and map work in research on children's geographies.

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the merits of using self-directed photography and map work in research conducted with children on their local geographies. Discussion is based on findings from multi-method research conducted with children, in middle childhood, in a range of rural and urban setting in Fife, Scotland. The richness of children's everyday interactions, their intimate knowledge of and engagement with their surroundings, and their negotiation of their localities, were clearly conveyed in this research. The incorporation of photography and map work into the methods used allowed children to site themselves in their everyday environments, revealing their micro-geographies, and various people and places of significance. Photographs and maps produced by children are incorporated here to illustrate their active, emotional and imaginative engagements in their localities. Attention is drawn to the continuing importance of neighbourhood space to children, with many of the children involved in this research relating a definite sense of belonging and an ability to make their own space within their localities. The methods used were effective in capturing children's everyday experiences, aiding their engagement in the research and increasing their participation. However, the use of visual methods in research is not unproblematic and methodological and ethical issues to consider are also addressed.

Study context and brief overview of main findings

Findings from research conducted on children's geographies in Fife, Scotland (see Ross, 2002) are drawn upon here to discuss the use of visual research methods in research with children. The methods used were designed to increase children's participation allowing them to convey their knowledge through multiple routes of expression. Nearly 90 children aged between ten and twelve years from seven primary schools took part in activity-based research during 1997. The activity sessions consisted of mapwork exercises, children's self-directed photography, writings, drawings and commentary. Activity sessions focused on children's knowledge, experience, negotiation, use of and meanings attached to their local area. This was followed by interviews with selected children and parents. A separate questionnaire

survey was conducted through 14 primary schools in Fife to which 200 children and 134 parents responded.

A review of existing UK research reveals, diminishing opportunities for children's independent negotiation of their localities, increased social and spatial controls due to real and perceived dangers, and the growing commodification and institutionalisation of childhood (Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg 1990; McNeish and Roberts 1995; O'Brien, Ruskin and Greenfield 2000; Valentine 2004). A protective outlook towards children is increasingly evident, leading to a merging of the fields of play and care, expanding the provision of organised activities and facilities for children and reducing opportunities for their general outdoor play (Valentine 1997; Scott 1998; McKendrick, Bradford and Fielder 2000; Smith and Barker 2001).

In the Fife study children had comparatively high levels of independent mobility. It was common practice for children in the middle years of childhood to negotiate school journeys independently; 4/5th of children travelled without adult accompaniment to school, most walking. Many had strong neighbourhood attachments and social networks and related a definite sense of belonging. In addition to traditional child spaces (parks, gardens and local grassy areas) children also played and socialised in the street, natural areas and areas of waste ground and more marginal spaces. These featured across all settlement types and were significant to both boys and girls, indicating a degree of commonality in their childhood experiences. Emerging strongly was the tendency for children to make use of and 'colonise' whatever natural, abandoned, derelict or marginal spaces were available in their local area and reconstruct these as 'unofficial play spaces'. In this respect, their play was reminiscent of findings from research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s with children on their localities (Ward 1978, Hart 1979, Moore 1986).

Recent research within the UK has paid increasing attention to changes in the nature of children's play, with the rise in home-based leisure and organised activities commented upon (McKendrick, Bradford and Fielder 2000; Holloway and Valentine 2003). However, findings from the Fife research indicate that this is not at the expense of children's general outdoor play. Children were found to still play traditional games, reporting '*hanging around*' and '*mucking about*' in their local areas. This is an important point to note as this indicates that children have time and space to use their local area in an 'unstructured' way. Aitken (1994)

discusses the importance of children *'doing nothing'* citing research by Wood (1985a; 1985b) and Little (1980) that paid attention to the children's everyday, seemingly trivial interactions in and with their environments. Such research notes children hanging around, waiting for events to unfold, and filling time with multitudes of minutes, mundane, overlooked interactions and escapades. Quoting Wood (1985a, p9) discussing findings from his research conducted in Barranquitos, Puerto Rico, Aitken reiterates the importance of children's ability to be able to choose to *'do nothing'*, and of the need to look in detail at children's 'unstructured' use of their localities, to uncover the multitude of activities that *'doing nothing'* entails:

'Doing nothing is an unfolding of things to do, an unfolding of things that have no names, like mooning around a lampost or kicking stones into the drain across the street; an unfolding of things to do that do have names, like a whole string of street games ... doing nothing is almost everything. As a term, it conceals as it identifies. It is both comprehensive and evasive, simultaneously screen and mirror. Like a kaleidoscope, it is everything, and it is nothing. Most of all it is doing.'

Findings from the Fife study highlighting the continued presence of children in public space. Two recent UK studies focusing on the local practices of young people in working class neighbourhoods also found young people to exert a presence on the streets. Research conducted in a council estate on the outskirts of an East Midlands town with children aged 9-16 found that *'young people can gather to affirm their sense of difference and celebrate their feelings of belonging'* in their localities (Matthews, Limb and Taylor 2000, p64). Similarly research conducted in South Wales with working class teenage girls highlighted their use of the streets as a site for leisure, disrupting associations of public space as predominantly male space (Skelton 2000).

Merits of using self-directed photography and map work in research with children

The methods used in the Fife study were effective in uncovering children's everyday geographies. In particular the incorporation of visual research methods into the research process proved effective in engaging participants and increasing their participation. It was a means by which children could depict and convey impressions of their identity and site themselves in their everyday environments. Self-directed photography and other visual methods are increasingly used in geographical research with children on their social and environmental relations, providing a visual reference of places, people and elements of the

local environment that children deem significant (Aitken and Wingate 1993; Buss 1995; Young and Barrett 2001). Visual methods are seen as a useful means of capturing children's experiences of their everyday environments, their place attachments, negotiations and engagements in their localities, and effective in capturing underlying meanings, particularly when images are used as the basis for further discussion. A strength of self directed photography, noted in the Fife study, was that it gave prominence to minute detail, and the mundane aspects of everyday life, recording aspects that might otherwise have been overlooked. This paper includes examples of children's map work, photographs and excerpts from their commentaries, demonstrating that visual methods can be effective as a means of researching children's geographies, providing insights into their active, emotional and imaginative engagements in and with their environments.

Utilising self-directed photography

In the Fife study nearly 90 children took part in the activity based research. They were asked to draw maps of their local area and to take photographs of places liked, disliked and school journeys. When individual children's photographs were combined, 501 photographs of places liked or disliked and 361 photographs of their school journeys were produced. Children were free to record what they wished within the remit provided, unhindered by adult intervention, giving them a degree of control within the research process. The process used was influenced by a number of other studies that utilised self-directed photography in research with children (Aitken and Wingate 1993; Buss 1995; Jones and Cunningham 1999). Children provided written and verbal commentaries on the content and meaning of their photographs. The maps and photographs were content analysed and categorised into broad themes. When amassed the photographs represented common themes and attributes that children gave significance to. Further analysis of the maps, photographs and children's commentaries allowed more personal and symbolic meanings to emerge, focusing attention on the local geographies and practices of children and highlighting personal and community identities.

There are however methodological and ethical dilemmas to consider when utilising visual material. There are problems inherent in converting images to textual information and there will always be a degree of subjectivity involved and a reduction of the information contained in each image through categorisation. Dialogue with participants is necessary to minimise misinterpretation and to gain more detailed accounts of the content and meaning of the images from participant's perspective. Maintaining the anonymity of participants and

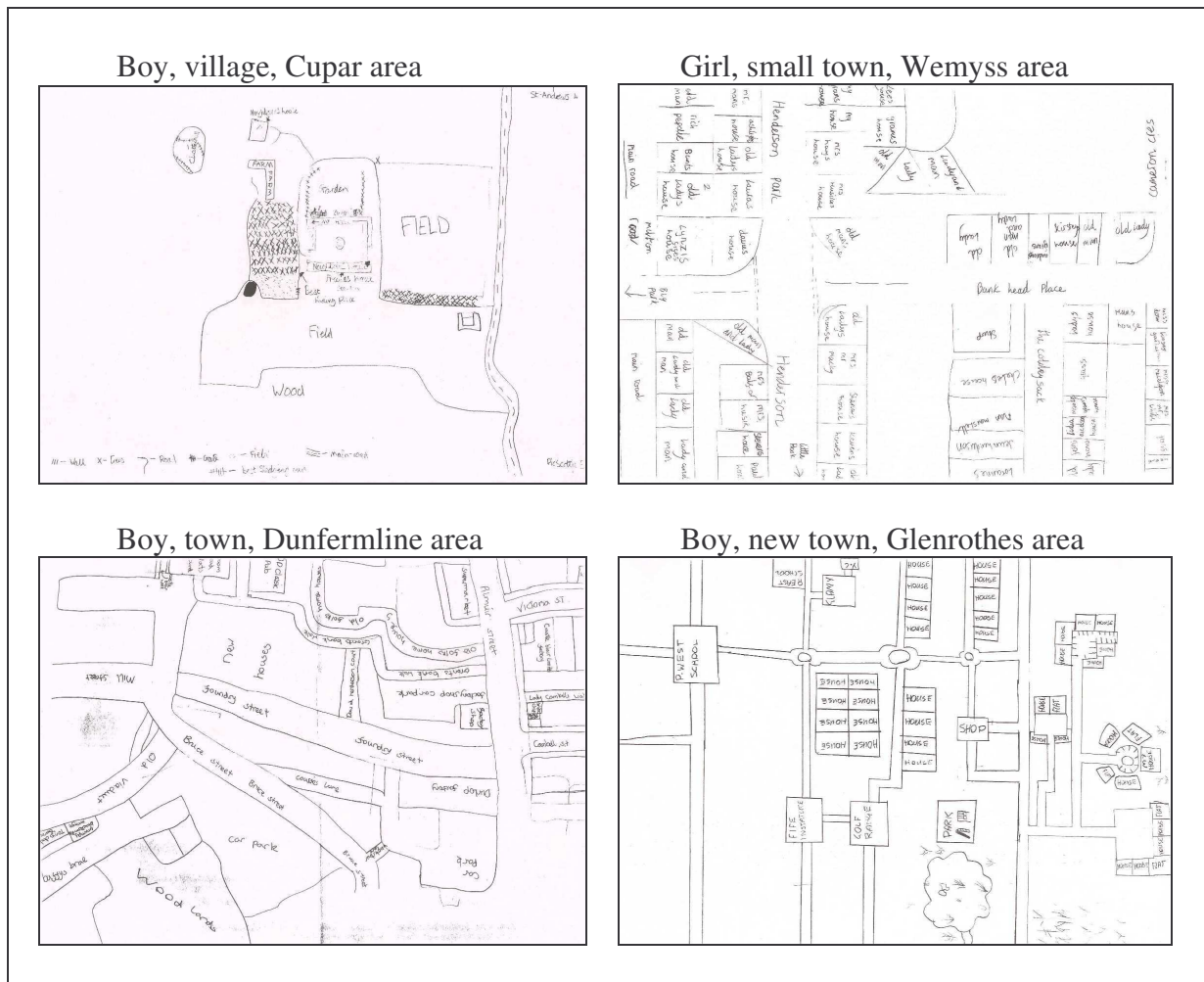
research locations is problematic. In this study, children included themselves, their friends and family, other people and a variety of places in their localities in the visual material produced. The inclusion of children's map drawings and their photographs in the presentation of findings allows the strength of this method to become clear, providing a strong visual narrative of children's local geographies; however it also permits individuals and places to be identified. Permission was granted from participants for the visual material to be used in the presentation of findings, and those images selected for presentation were chosen with care, often reflecting my own concern with maintaining anonymity, rather than children's views on images of themselves, their localities and their practices being revealed. Ethical considerations inherent in the utilisation of visual research methods in research with children is an area that requires further attention and one that needs to be carefully negotiated with research participants.

Children's map drawings of their localities

Map drawings were used to aid understanding of children's conceptions of their local area, to ascertain what the features of significance and importance to children were when defining their local area. The examples of children's map drawings included in this paper convey some of the richness of material produced and demonstrate the variety of styles children adopted when representing their localities. The drawings were content analysed and grouped into themes (e.g. housing, streets, parks, natural areas, commercial areas, community facilities). Common features found in both boys' and girls' map drawings, and across all settlement types were: children's homes, gardens, friend's or relative's homes, local housing, local streets, main roads, schools, local shops, local parks, and trees or bushes. These aspects are apparent in the examples of map drawing shown in Figure 1. Children's traditional play spaces often featured strongly. Natural features while evident across all settlement types were most prevalent in the maps from village locations. Waste ground and work sites featured more often in maps from town and small town locations, and were little evident in the maps of children from the new town location. This reflected the segregation of land use in new town environments, and the more common occurrence of waste ground and vacant sites in older settlements that had gone through processes of growth, change and decay. A key theme to emerge from this study was children's capacity for adapting their local environments, appropriating spaces and reconstructing them as spaces for play and socialising, e.g. children in town and new town locations utilising car parks, outside of business hours as play spaces. The maps drawn by children from new and older town locations often demonstrated detailed

knowledge of street layouts. The existence of children’s local social relations was evident, with friend’s, relative’s and neighbour’s houses, marked. These were generally more evident in the maps produced by girls, and in those produced by children from smaller settlements, indicative perhaps of a certain familiarity based on social proximity.

Figure 1: Children’s map drawings



Children’s photographs of their localities

The remainder of the paper utilises children’s photographs and related commentary to illustrate the merits of employing self-directed photography in research with children on their social and environmental relations. The paper looks firstly at children’s use of ‘unofficial play spaces’, and continues onto the ways in which children adapt the environment in their play, finishing by focusing on the meaning of the school journey to children. When presenting findings individual names and specific locations have been changed, however children’s spelling and grammar have not been altered.

Children's use of 'unofficial' play spaces

The capacity for children to appropriate and make use of whatever space is available to them emerged strongly in this research. 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. Children's fascination for 'unofficial play spaces', unkempt areas of abandoned waste ground, derelict buildings and marginal spaces has been discussed in previous research (Hart 1979; Moore 1986; Aitken 1994; Jones 2000), as outlined by Ward (1978, p71):

The place that is becoming, the unfinished habitat, is rich in experiences and adventures for the child, just because of the plenitude of 'unmake'.

Children's use of 'unofficial' play spaces in many ways resonated with previous research that indicated children favoured natural environments for the greater freedoms they permitted, because they were dynamic environments that could be transformed creatively through play (Ward 1988; Nabhan and Trimble 1994). Similarly the Fife study demonstrated that children's preference for unkempt areas, waste ground and marginal spaces centred on their appropriation and adaption of these environments, their reworking of them into play spaces. The process involved in the creation appeared of paramount importance rather than the finished product, as children recounted their building of dens that *'might just fall down'*, their utilisation of found objects, such as sticks to *'whack stones'* with and *'bits of broken wood'* to build *'ramps'* to jump over. The unfolding of events was clear *'just muck about'*, *'just wander off'*, *'then I move on'* with children's activities very much based on their reactions to the fabric of their everyday environment. Spontaneity, improvisation and temporality characterised many of the activities children described.

Figure 2 captures some of these areas: *'Magnets'*, an area of waste ground, with disused buildings, a place the children simultaneously described as a *'wasteland'*, *'full of rubbish'* and as *'smart'*, a place to *'chill and hang out'*; a tunnel, which children dared each other to go through; and the site of a former gang hut, now part of a building site.

Figure 2: Children’s ‘unofficial’ play spaces



Magnets the place where we chill and hang out. There's two old air raid shelters there.
(boy, town, Dunfermline area)

'What about Magnets'?
'That's a wasteland.'
'It's all full of rubbish.'
'It's not, it's alright sometimes if you go, the bomb shelters are as smart as anything.'
'Yeah, you're not allowed in them anymore, but we just sneak in.'
'All the older people smash the walls that have covered like the opening and that...so we just go in.'

(Interview extract: boys, town, Dunfermline area)



This is the tunnel you climb down and go throw [through] - it's VERY MUDDY!!!!
(girl, town, Dunfermline area)



This is the old gang hut. It's been wrecked by the builders.
(girl, town, Dunfermline area)

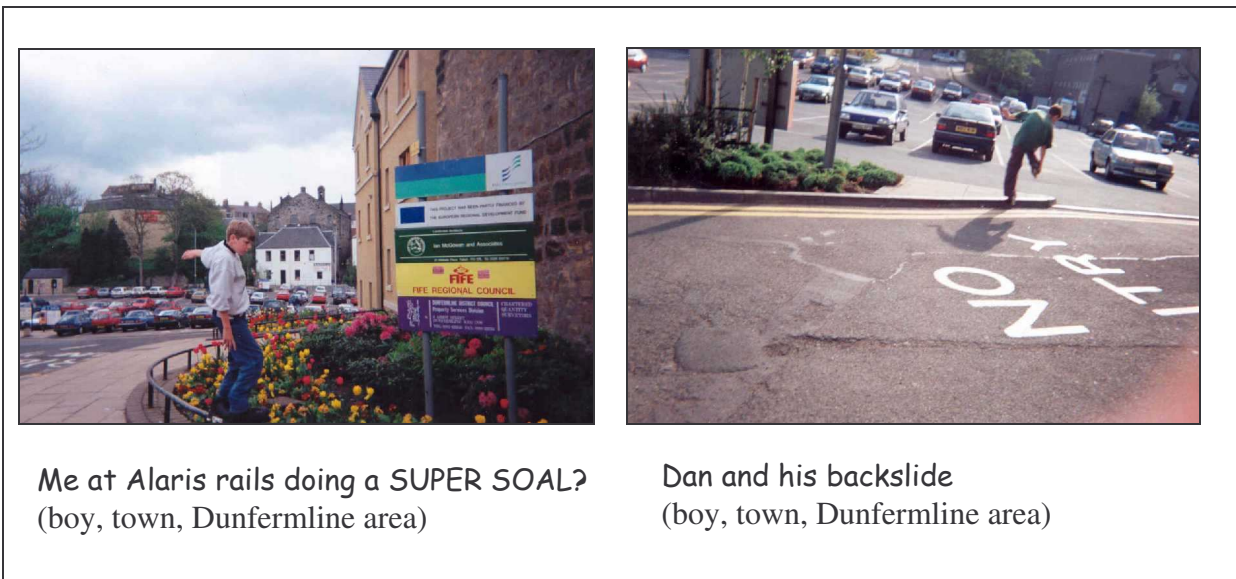
Part of the attraction of such sites lies in their marginal status, they are part of the local environment, however they are spaces often disregarded by adults in their everyday routines and as such are beyond adult's gaze. These places fulfil a social function for children, allowing them to gather and play unsupervised. They are often environments in transition and in the discussions held with children some described former 'unofficial' play spaces that had been lost due to transformations in land use through new building developments. These can be dangerous environments, remote or subject to physical decay, and were often places that parents worried about their children visiting. Children themselves reported finding some of these places scary, yet they were popular places for the children to play in nevertheless. Sibley (1995) has referred to this in terms of *'desire'* and *'disgust'* of the propensity of certain environments to trigger multiple emotions, those that are dark, secluded and scary can

also be exciting, stimulating, and lively environments for children's 'free play' and socialising. Natural and unkempt areas facilitate children's active and imaginative play, allowing children to test their boundaries and experience a range of sensations and emotions in their adventurous play and exploration. They allowed children to improvise with available resources, using the characteristics of the space available to make play environments.

Adapting the environment through play

The ways in which children adapt the environment in their play is aptly demonstrated when focusing on one of children's activities, rollerblading, revealing the ways in which sensory experience, social relations and physical space are interconnected (Stevens 2001). The ways in which children adapt and transform their environment in their play is evident in this pursuit (see Figure 3), where the very fabric of the environment is incorporated into their activities, illustrating minute geographical awareness and embodied environmental engagements.

Figure 3: Children adapting the environment



These children conveyed heightened awareness of body-environment engagements and a recognition that a transformation occurred through this interaction, as this boy makes clear:

There's this big like church, and they've got these long stairs and there's this bit that goes down the side ... concrete slabs put down the side. And there's this bit in the middle and you can skate down them ... That's what you do, you skate down walls and stuff like that. You make it out of your environment.' (boy, town, Dunfermline area)

Key to this process is the ways in which environmental features are adapted in a manner different to their original function: children in activities such as rollerblading appropriate features with given functional meanings such as steps, kerbs and railings and rework these as play features. Often in the process safety features are transformed into risk taking ones, and boundary markers are transgressed, blurring public/private space distinctions. These episodes demonstrate children's active environmental engagements, and children recounted walking, skipping, cycling, climbing, jumping, sliding, rollerblading, their way around their locales, adapting the environment and reconstructing it in their play and movement. As Moore (1986, p72) noted in his study on children's environmental experiences:

'In each study area, certain kids seemed to dance through their surroundings on the look out for microfeatures with which to test their bodies.'

However, children can encounter problems when adapting the environment in such a manner, as in skating in public spaces, when their bodily presence jars with adult expectations of appropriate use of space, as these boys discussed during a group interview:

'Rollerblading around the Glen [town park] and things, folk complain, you shouldn't be on them.'

'Cause they complain about you being there skating, and that you're going too fast and hurt yourself, or you'll hurt, or you'll hurt somebody.'

This can lead to conflict and policing of children's actions, which as referred to above, is often couched in terms of risks to or risks from children, with the rigidity to which use of space is prescribed affecting the degree to which this can be disrupted.

Children's adaption of the environment and their use of 'unofficial' play spaces in the Fife study concurred with findings from Ward (1978, p86), who states that:

'Children will play everywhere and with anything. The provision that is made for their needs operates on one plane, but children operate on another.'

The Fife study highlighted the wide range of settings for children's locally based play and socialising. In addition to the traditional child spaces of garden, park, playground, youth club, children, continued to seek out their own 'unofficial' spaces for play and socialising, and rework the fabric of the environment through their play.

The meaning of the school journey to children

The final theme to be addressed in this paper is the meaning of the school journey to children. In the UK much attention has focused on the changing nature of school journeys, with the trend towards increased accompaniment of children, increased use of cars and decrease in the numbers of children walking on school journeys, widely reported (Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg 1990; O'Brien, Ruskin and Greenfield 2000). Less well researched is the meaning of school journeys to children. Self-directed photography proved to be an insightful method for exploring children's school journey experiences. The children's photographs of their school journeys captured the variety of environmental settings, routes taken and people and places of significance to children that are combined in school journey experiences. The experiences of children who walked without adult accompaniment on school journeys are focused upon here, highlighting the rich variety of experiences that children's independent negotiation of school journeys can provide.

The range of sensations experienced through walking on school journeys in all seasons and weathers was conveyed in children's photographs, children's very direct and engaged interaction with their local environment well illustrated, and their micro-geographies revealed (see Figure 4). Children demonstrated their intimate knowledge and differentiation of terrain and noted the changing seasons and weather, and the effect that this has on their surroundings. The opportunity to look out for favoured aspects was evident in the photographs and commentary, such as '*a gap in the hedge looking at the field*' of significance to one girl as a place to look out for horses. This illustrates the richness that photographic material can bring to understandings of children's geographies, highlighting the significance of aspects that might otherwise be overlooked, unthought-of or trivialised. Social aspects of school journeys were particularly noticeable in girls' material. The complex arrangements involved in what may only be short journeys, co-ordinating with and meeting friends along the way or stopping off at friend's homes were highlighted, revealing even short journeys to be strategic in conveying inclusion in the peer networks. Established meeting points, such as the junction of two roads, shown in one photographs in Figure 4, demonstrate that co-ordinations in time and space are keys to feelings of belonging for children, particularly girls.

Figure 4: Children walking on school journeys



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 make Amy and me more happy. (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 the back of the house. (girl, small town, Wemyss area)



This was before I met up with them. Here you can just see them in the distance (girl, village, Glenrothes area)



I walk from school through here. The woods are good for playing hide and seek (girl, new town, Glenrothes area)



I have to go half way down the street then go in a passage way there is a path I go down it then I go through the playing field and the Park and then I am at school (girl, small town, Wemyss area)



The road to school (boy, village, Cupar area)
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

The potential for impromptu play responding to features along the route is apparent, one girl picking out a wooded area as '*good for playing hide and seek*'. In this way children disrupted the orderliness of their school journey routines by reacting and engaging with their surroundings in a spontaneous way, incorporating play opportunities into their journeys, or taking their own routes, short cuts, that circumvented pavements and roads. These routes, such as the track well worn through the playing field shown in one photograph in Figure 4 were less open to the casual surveillance of adults. These findings situate school journeys as experiential and sensational geographies, and make clear the linking of play and movement in children's negotiations of their localities.

Concluding remarks

Visual methods, in particular the use of self-directed photography were successful in engaging children in the research and increasing their participation in the process. The micro-scale of their experiences was well illustrated, with the inclusion of visual methods proving effective at capturing some of the 'nowness', the immediacy of children's experiences, uncovering what Roberts (1980) referred to as parallel worlds of childhood and adulthood. Children's locally based interactions, associations built with other children and with adults living and working in their localities, were communicated effectively, as were their environmental engagements. The photographs and accompanying commentaries were particularly effective in relating children's physical, experiential, emotional and imaginative geographies. However use of visual methods in research with children on their local geographies is not unproblematic and issues of confidentiality, interpretation, and presentation need to be carefully considered.

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