

**Title: Children's neighbourhoods**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores children's relationships with their homes and the neighbourhoods in which they live. On the child's journey through life there is a gradual exploration from home to the wider world, with the neighbourhood providing a starting place for this exploration. Good neighbourhoods act as the centre of the social and cultural life of children and their families. However, many children are becoming alienated from their immediate neighbourhood and community as their daily life activities school, shopping, play, relatives, doctors disperse across the city and cars are needed for access. For some children the neighbourhood increasingly represents a type of terra incognita, a space they pass through to access places that matter to them. For other children the neighbourhood still remains the focal centre of their lives, the place where they interact with neighbours, play outdoors, go to school, church, playcentre, shop, and socialise. This paper presents the results from a study in the city of Dunedin New Zealand that explored children's relationship to neighbourhood in particular their experiences of neighbourhoods as sites of social connection. It analyses the factors that both encourage and inhibit neighbourhood connectivity. Whilst the focus is on children wider lessons for planners generally are explored on encouraging neighbourhoods that encourage greater social connectivity for all.

## **Children's neighbourhoods**

### **Introduction**

Neighbourhood is an important construct in children's lives. It has traditionally been seen as the focal point from which children over time expand their horizons as they move out into the wider city environment. In a similar way the journey to school has been seen as a starting point in children's independent journeys and interactions with wider society. Increasingly research evidence suggests that these two assumptions no longer apply for many children in western cities (Collins and Kearns 2005; Freeman, 2006; McMillan, 2006). Their reality is increasingly likely to revolve around an expanded urban territory with much stronger dependence on adults for accessing this territory, together with limited connection to their immediate neighbourhood. Research undertaken by Karsten and van Vliet (2006) in the Netherlands found that children's daily territory, that is places they travel to independently, had shrunk precipitously whilst there had been a large expansion in the daily activity sphere. In Dunedin research was undertaken to establish firstly, whether the traditional assumptions around children's lives and the assumed centrality of neighbourhood still applies or is the reality as expressed by Karsten and Vliet (2006) of a larger urban activity sphere more appropriate. A second aim was to explore children's social connection to neighborhood and the factors that encouraged and discouraged social connectivity.

### **Neighbourhoods**

There has been a considerable upsurge in interest in neighbourhoods, in part generated by the place based nature of many urban regeneration strategies (Meegan and Mitchell, 2001). The focus on neighbourhoods, particularly when associated with the allocation of scarce resources and the investment of capital, generates several questions, not least of which are the following: what is a neighbourhood, how can they be defined, where are their boundaries and what meaning if any does the term have for its inhabitants. Patsy Healey refers to neighbourhood as 'living space' (in Megan and Mitchell, 2001, p.2172) which recognises both the social and physical dimensions of neighbourhood. A more precise though not necessarily more helpful definition is given by Galster

“Neighbourhood is the bundle of spatially based attributes associated with clusters of residences, sometimes in conjunction with other land uses” (2004, p.2112). More useful in our research is the definition by Kearns and Parkinson (2001) where they identify three levels of neighbourhood, the smallest of which is the ‘home area - an area of 5-10 minutes walk of one’s home’. Here we would expect the psycho-social purposes of neighbourhood to be strongest” (p.2103).

Neighbourhoods, should act as a point of social contact. The Canadian ‘Alberta Family Friendly Community Assessment Checklist’ has as its first two criteria ‘neighbourhoods welcome family as community members’ and ‘people know their neighbours’ (Premier’s Council, 1994). Doreen Massey coined the term “throwntogetherness’ to describe how the public realm can provide touch points from which trust can develop (Massey, 2005). In Australia writing in his book ‘Street Reclaiming’ Engwicht (1999) talks of ‘spontaneous encounters’, those unanticipated meetings on streets. Contact and interaction form the basis of a socially connected neighbourhood based community. This connectivity is essential for children’s well being. Children have also been the focus of the growing social capital research agenda (Holland et al. 2007).

The term social capital refers to “the processes between people which establish networks, norms, social trust and facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Bullen and Onyx, 2007, p.2). Where children are clearly present, feel safe and have freedom to interact the development of social capital is encouraged. Children themselves benefit from enhanced social contact but so too do their parents and the wider community. The study ‘Backseat children’ by the organisation Living Streets found “regular spontaneous contact in a neighbourhood builds up levels of familiarity and trust making people feel better about their community and their place in it – leading to the growth of social capital” (2008, p.7). Writing on another London based initiative (home zones) Gill reports “the presence of children playing in a street can be seen as a litmus test of the level of community cohesiveness in a neighbourhood” (2007, p.7). In Australia, Malone unsurprisingly, in “Every Experience Matters” found the social domain to be a critical component of children’s experiential learning.

Traditionally, the neighbourhood is seen as the primary source of children's entry into the wider social domain, their point of contact for engaging with community outside of their family and an important contributor to their own construction of their community identity (Figure 1). The question for this study was; does neighbourhood still perform this function in the light of what many see as neighbourhood decline? Forrest and Kearns, for example, state that many now believe "as a source of social identity the neighbourhood is being progressively eroded with the emergence of a more fluid, individualized way of life. Social networks are city-wide, national, international and increasingly virtual" (2001, p.2129). If this decline is viewed together with Karsten and van Vliet's (2006) identification of children's reduced independence related to the larger urban activity sphere then a reduced association with neighbourhood could be expected amongst the children in the Dunedin study.

*Insert Figure 1 here*

### **The Dunedin research**

The Dunedin based 'children's lives' study took place in five schools during 2006, these were schools where most children would be expected to live locally. In 2008 funds were obtained to extend the study and five additional schools were included, these incorporated schools with particular character traits e.g. rural, religious affiliation and schools known to have a large number of pupils commuting from outside the school's immediate locality. In 2008 additional question relating to neighbourhood and social interactions were included in the study to further explore issues identified as important in the 2006 study. The study (which now refers to both 2006 and 2008 data) was carried out by a team of five researchers who all had experience of working and researching with children and young people in various ways. The experience of two of the researchers was primarily in education, one in the field of children's physical activity and early childhood, one in children's and health research and one primarily in research around children, planning and the environment. In the study we hoped: to develop an understanding of understand how children relate (spatially) to the city and their

neighbourhood in their daily lives and to understand children's social connection to the place they live.

***Insert table 1 here***

Ten schools were selected to participate in the project. Socio-economic and geographic criteria were used to select the schools. As far as was possible with a small sample, schools were selected that represented a cross section of socio-economic circumstances, using school decile ratings as indicators for selection as indicated in table 1. The schools used ranged from decile 2 to decile 10 (where 1 is the lowest socio-economic level and 10 the highest). The second factor used was geographic, to include city schools, a rural school, schools in discrete suburbs separate from the main city and schools in suburbs on the edge of the city and schools in areas of different socio-economic character and housing type e.g. a state housing suburb. The data was collected in three ways, from children's drawings/ maps of their neighbourhoods showing the places that matter to them, individual interviews with the children at school, and use of an interactive air photo/ GIS of the child's home and neighbourhood. In 2006 parent interviews were included but dropped in 2008 and there was a short interview with the teacher to see if there were any critical factors we needed to know to evaluate the children's maps (not part of this paper). The information from the map and interview was put onto a geographic information system (GIS) which facilitated the identification of spatial patterns and relationships.

The children were in the 9-11 year age range with most being age 10-11 and generally in the final year of their normal primary school education. This age was selected as it is an age at which children usually have developed some independence, are active in their neighbourhood and accessing different parts of the city both independently and with family and friends. The gender distribution was uneven in the different schools but overall quite evenly split with 83 boys and 80 girls. There were significant variations in the proportion of children at each school that lived locally. This was important as attending the local school is a key determinant of many other neighbourhood

relationships (Figure 2). The findings presented in this paper are taken from a much broader study and focus here on just three of the factors relating to children's neighbourhood relationships, children's use of the neighbourhood, children's attitudes to their neighbourhood and children's neighbourhood social relationships.

*Insert Figure 2 here*

## **RESULTS FROM THE STUDY**

### **Neighbourhood use**

We were interested to see if the expanded urban territory evident through analysis of children's activities and overall travel patterns impacted on children's neighbourhood connections. Are neighbourhoods still places of physical connection? The children varied significantly in their physical connection to their local neighbourhood. There were children who evidenced strong connections in that they spoke of many places locally that they frequented for play, for activities or local services that they used such as the corner shop/dairy. The children's maps were instructive in this regard. A map drawn by a boy from a discrete state housing hill suburb, for example, shows good knowledge of and connection with his neighbourhood physically - including bush tracks, farms and tracks to the farms, the skatepark, shops and other places. An extract from this map can be seen in Figure 3. Social connections are evident mainly in showing friends homes and 'our' hut. The boy who drew the map described his hut as follows: "Our hut in ... gully made from material on site, bring nails from home, Jeremy, Levi, Skye, Thomas, Cory, and Riley go by selves, tell Mum, she's not been there, go every day". This map certainly seems to bear out Kytta's (2004) assertion that even spatially limited environments can offer a rich source of affordances.

These spatially limited but environmentally rich affordances were continually evidenced in the children's narratives on their lives such as evidenced in one girl's description of her neighbourhood which includes: "Scutty the hedgehog's grave, shed on Cary street

with smiley faces and suns and rainbows, really cool! Street that Laura lives on has chain letter box stand...” A boy from a suburb that is a separate settlement some way from the main city, showed similar environmentally rich affordances in the interview: “Swing in big gum tree beside road, Carp Road, no one’s property...ride to Black beach, play in bushland with brother, at boat ramp swim with brother”. Both these children are describing environmental features and experiences that are spatially very close and within their home area (i.e. 5-10 minutes walk from their home) as defined by Kearns and Parkinson (2001).

We found no obvious difference between the detail on the maps or in the richness of the child’s stated connection to their neighbourhood, between children who drove to school or walked (this only applies to children attending local schools). Perhaps in part because even though children may be driven to school (often due to family constraints and multi-modal car trips) walking to friends was still the predominant mode of travel. The children, as Pooley et al. (2005) also found in their UK study, still want to walk and walking is an integral part of their neighbourhood access. The desire to walk and travel independently was most evident in the response to the question of how would you prefer to travel to places close to home where walking was the commonest preferred method (Quigg and Freeman, 2008).

Children with higher levels of independence generally showed enhanced neighbourhood connection, factors positively influencing independence were:

- attendance at the local school - attendance at the closest school (usually the same)
- attendance at a lower decile school (this did not apply where the school was in a discrete suburb)
- low traffic density
- living in a discrete suburb (i.e. one with clear boundaries and a strong spatial identity)
- higher deprivation levels
- higher population density
- gender, being a boy

- having no car.

Commonly, children attending distant schools, travelling by car and children in peripheral suburbs or rural areas exhibited low neighbourhood connectivity as assessed by the number of places in their neighbourhood that they used or talked about. This low connection applied to both physical and social connectivity. Most children in the study made regular journeys outside their home neighbourhood. Even those that attended a local school usually went to activities elsewhere in the city on a regular and often daily basis. This extensive travel occurred for children of all socio-economic groups and occurred even for children living in suburbs at a distance of several kilometres from the main city. Children from the rural school did travel less for daily activities but did still travel for weekend sport and other activities. Children travelling to distant schools had the highest travel levels as they would travel outside their neighborhood not only for school, but sports and other activities, to see friends and for many children the wider city was their ‘neighbourhood’.

### **Attitudes to Neighbourhood**

The children revealed good knowledge of their local neighbourhood and were generally happy with where they lived. Nice neighbours were consistently mentioned as something children liked in their neighbourhood, though noisy neighbours were disliked (Figures 4 and 5). Even in this small study the importance children’s wanting to be socially connected to their neighbourhood is evident, as is the frustration when social connections, primarily access to friends is difficult. A selection of things the children said they liked and disliked about their neighbourhood are indicated in the list below.

#### **Likes**

- *Lots of bush. Close to all my friends.*
- *Next door neighbours are really nice, nice people in neighbourhood.*

#### **Dislikes**

- *Boy racers on the road. Snow days - car crashes are funny to watch.*
- *Far away from town, have to leave early and get up early as Mum and Dad work in town.*

- *Easy to get to places. Easy for all family.*
- *Nice people, quite quiet, close to shop.*
- *Like to go biking, not busy area, not a steep hill.*
- *Lady who lives next door is really nice. Nice people across the road and their grandkids are nice too.*
- *Next door neighbours are really nice. They have a dog.*
- *Friends close by, Nana close, not far from school, house is sunny*
- *Close to the sea, lots of hills and trees to climb. Fun place to be.*
- *I know everyone, and the neighbours are nice.*
- *Sometimes the neighbours are noisy yahooping.*
- *Some friends too far away from my house*
- *Not near friends and can't walk there.*
- *Lots of dogs.*
- *The ships are too noisy - we might be getting something to stop the sound.*
- *A long way to get to school. I'm not anywhere near friends, practically nothing to do.*
- *Not many children, but 2 boys. Boring because I'm the only girl in the neighbourhood.*

The two figures which show children's likes and dislikes in relative are informative. The children made 250 mentions of things they liked in their neighbourhood compared to only 134 mentions of things they disliked, with a number of children (32) saying there was nothing they disliked. Children almost universally liked where they lived regardless of whether it was a high income, low income, city, rural or other place and regardless of the type of home they lived in. They had very positive attitudes to their own living circumstances. This did not mean they were unaware of problems, as they were able to name things they disliked, the most frequent being traffic and limits, often limits referred to boundaries around where they could go. Children disliked limits being placed on their independence and places they could go to, however, whilst they disliked these limits they did not seem to challenge them. For example, if their roaming limit was their street they stayed within the street for play. They found the positive factors easier on the whole to identify, these included access to facilities such as the beach (four schools were close to

beaches), local shops, the school and the park. On the social side friends and neighbours were especially important and not being close to friends was often the primary dislike of where they lived.

In 2008 we asked children if they felt safe in their neighbourhoods. The results were encouraging as nearly all (84) children felt safe. Some children especially in one suburb that had the highest mentions of crime, talked about police raids and ‘druggies houses’ and said their suburb was unsafe in parts. However, this did not restrict their freedom and this suburb had the highest levels of independence and social connection. Neither did they suggest that they themselves felt unsafe, more that they recognised unsafe elements. It seems that these children had very good understanding of their neighbourhood, were active explorers, had high independence levels, and were strongly connected to their neighbourhood. They seemed to benefit from their knowledge, knowing where was safe and where wasn’t and knew which houses and places were to be avoided. Thus, these problems whilst acknowledged did not preclude their freedom and overall good relations with their neighbourhood. Some children conversely exhibited very poor neighbourhood knowledge and it could be that this lack of knowledge was in fact a greater problem for these children as their knowledge of safe places was also limited. Safety and feelings of safety are linked closely to social connection, the next topic.

### **Social Neighbourhoods?**

Children were asked about the people that mattered to them, relatives, friends, neighbours and asked to put these on their maps. In 2008 children were asked to indicate on an air photograph the homes of people they knew. Children’s social connections were scored using the information from the maps, interviews and air photo and based on people they could talk about or knew in their neighbourhood. The factors that most positively influenced social connection were:

- attendance at the local school - attendance at the closest school (usually the same)  
attendance at a lower decile school (this did not apply where the school was in a discrete suburb)

- low traffic density
- active travel modes (i.e. walking or bus)
- living in a discrete suburb(i.e. one with clear boundaries and a strong spatial identity)
- higher deprivation levels
- higher residential density.

These factors are almost identical to those for physical connection. As with the question on safety most children were very positive about their neighbourhood. Again the following questions were only asked of children in the 2008 study. When asked 'if they lived in a friendly neighbourhood', 84 children said yes. The same number said yes to the question 'is there someone in your neighbourhood you can go to for help if you need it'. Half the children had visited a neighbour in the last week and just over half said yes when asked 'do you ever do anything to help your neighbours.

In terms of the children's own social connections there was a very high level of variability from children who knew no one in their neighbourhood and couldn't even recognise their neighbours to children who during the interview had to be told to stop (each child was only allowed out of class for 30-40 minutes) as they went through their suburbs naming people. The key influencing factors were attendance at the local school, geography as in a neighbourhood with clearly defined boundaries and a clear sense of community and individual family factors such as whether children were allowed to independently socialize, or socialising was primarily with the child's ethnic, cultural or extended family group. For some children who attended the local school there was clear evidence of strong friendship groupings, with several groups naming each others home's on their maps. In their interviews access to friends was a very strong determinant of children's expressed satisfaction with their social lives. 'Close to friends' was a very common statement about what they liked about their neighbourhood. Whilst overall there were many positive findings, for some children the pattern discussed by Forest and Kearns (2001) whereby 'neighbourhoods as a source of identity is being progressively eroded' was clearly evident for some of our children, especially those children with

complex lives. This is, for example, where children attend distant schools, there is much 'trip chaining', i.e. multiple location journeys to school, shop, activities, sibling activities, and parents work. This erosion was graphically illustrated in the map of a boy living in a rural settlement who attended school in the city, his map showed his own home and all the neighbours whose houses were all (with the exception of the home of an adjacent relative) labeled 'anonymous house'. This boy lived in a neighbourhood characterized generally by high levels of social connectivity for children who attended the local school.

### **Discussion: neighbourhood mostly matters**

To conclude, most children showed a clear sense of connection to their neighbourhood. This was evident in the maps they drew which showed both social and physical connections. It was supported by the interviews where the children again spoke knowledgeably about their neighbourhood, places accessed, where family and friends lived, where they played and also restrictions around this access as stipulated by their parents and through their own experiences (e.g. scary dogs live there). While walking to school rates were lower than expected given the relatively short distances between home and school for most children, walking remained a common means for traversing the suburb, especially for play and visiting friends. It is thus reasonable to assume that Engwicht's (1999) 'spontaneous encounters' occur for these children. However, for children whose independent mobility is limited to the immediate home area or 'nowhere' (44 children) such interactions will be much more difficult. Most children remain social and physically engaged with their neighbourhoods. Though they were regularly accessing services and facilities outside the neighbourhood this was normally in addition to accessing those in the neighbourhood such as parks, corner shops (dairies) and beaches.

Even where the child's map portrayed the area immediately around the home, the interviews with the children and their parents indicated regular use of the wider city environs. For the majority of our children the neighbourhood, 'home area', defined by Kearns and Parkinson (2001) as typically an area within 5-10 minutes walk from home remains extremely important as indicated in the strong detail of the maps, especially around the school, neighbours, corner shops, churches, and important local features such

as the beach. To conclude, we did observe as did Gill (2007) a move towards a more risk averse society. For our study children safety concerns clearly limit the extent to which they can access their neighbourhood independently or with friends and safety is a prime determinant of the high levels of private car use even for short journeys. The issue of social erosion at the neighbourhood is present and increases as children attend schools outside their local area. We would argue, however, that the lives of most of the children are, nonetheless, still rich in experiences and connected to their neighbourhood as indicated in the fact that half our 2008 children visited a neighbour in the last week and over half helped their neighbours in some way. Children and their families do take advantage of the range of activities available in the wider city, but they strongly connect to and enjoy their neighbourhoods, most play and explore their neighbourhood (albeit in a restricted area). They seem to manage their often complex and somewhat independently constrained lives with great dignity and tolerance.

### **Acknowledgements**

This paper builds on a paper published in '*Childrenz Issues*' which documents findings from the 2006 part of the study.

Reference: Freeman, C and Quigg, R. (2009) Children's Lives: A Dunedin study, *Childrenz Issues*, 13 (1), pp. 35-42.

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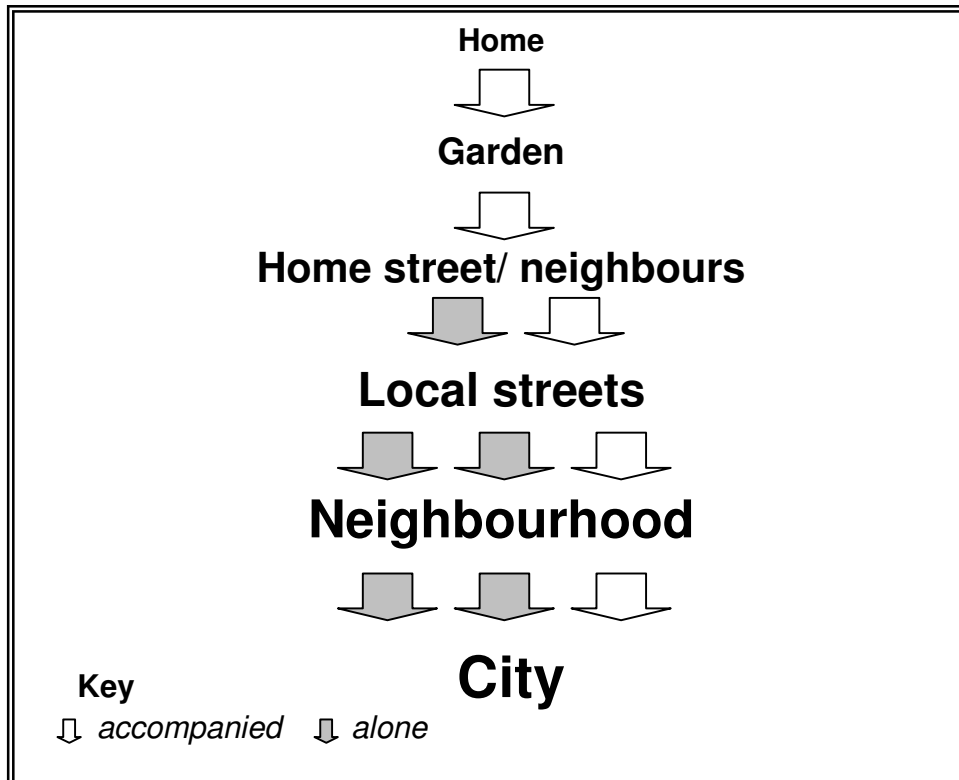
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**Table 1 School and methodology summary**

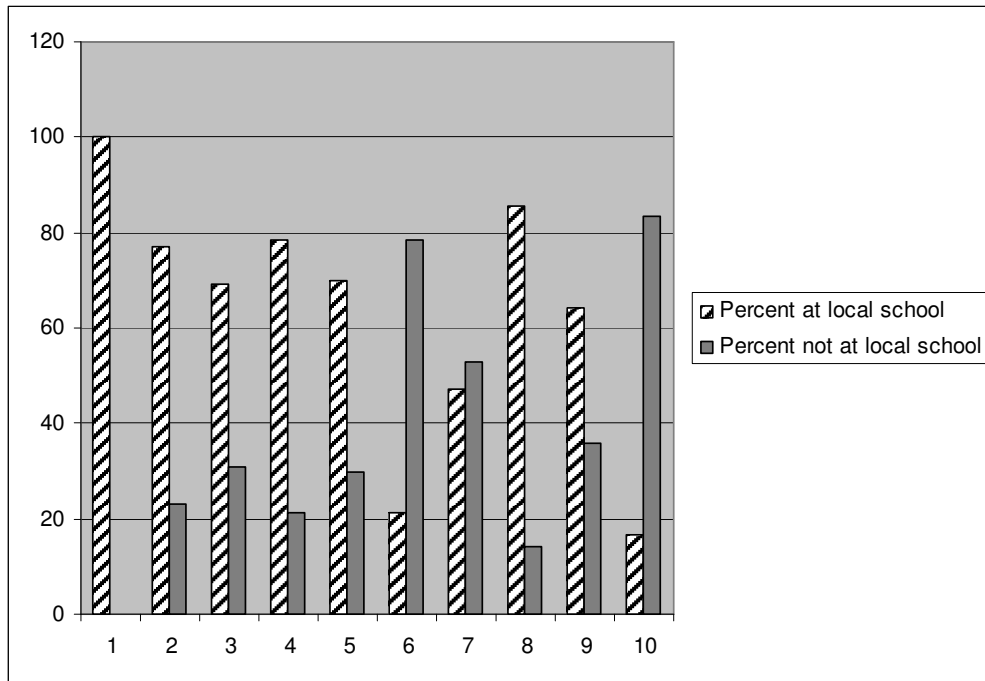
2006	2008
<i>Number:</i> 71 children in 5 schools	<i>Number:</i> 92 children in 6 schools
<i>Age:</i> 9-11	<i>Age:</i> 9-11
<i>School profile:</i> 1 decile* 2 - 1 decile 3 - 1 decile 5 - 1 decile 9 - 1 decile 10	<i>Schools:</i> 2 decile 2 - 1 decile 5 - 1 decile 8 - 2 decile 9
<i>Geography:</i> 2 city, 2 separate settlements, 1 hill suburb	<i>Geography:</i> 3 city, 2 hill suburb, 1 rural (2 commuter schools)
<i>Data collection methods:</i> Children's city/ neighbourhood maps Children's interviews Parent interviews Teacher interviews GIS mapping	<i>Data Collection methods:</i> Children's city/ neighbourhood maps Children's interviews Teacher interviews GIS mapping Air photo mapping

\* decile 1= low socio economic status, 10= high socio economic status

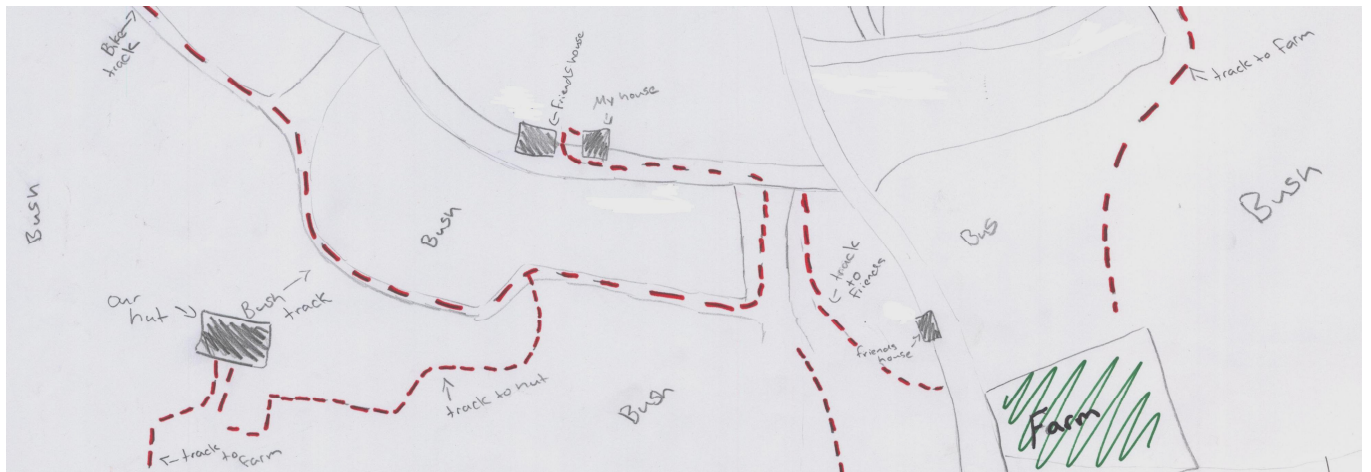
**Figure 1. Key steps in children's developing social and environmental experience**



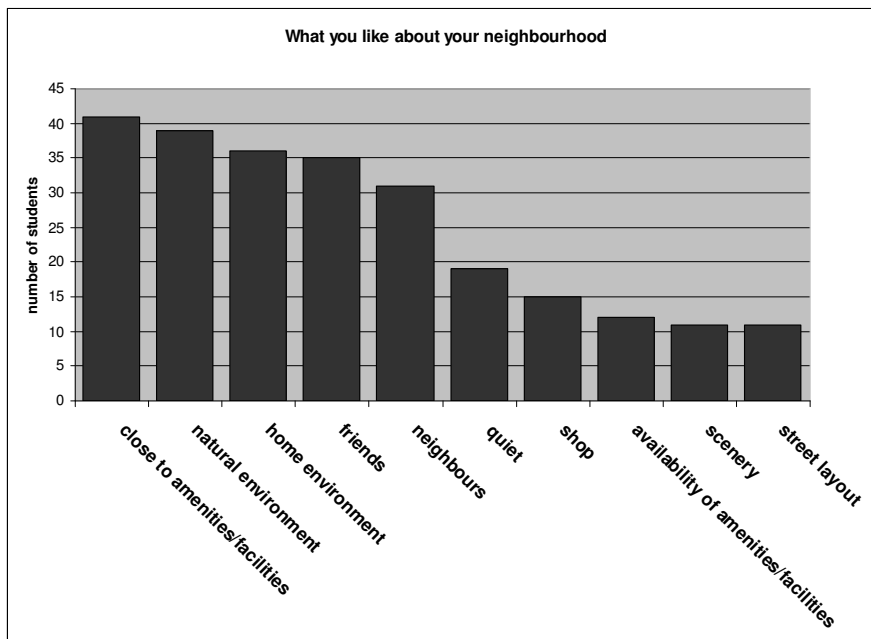
**Figure 2 Proportion of children attending their local school in the 10 study schools**



**Figure 3. Extract from a larger map showing extensive detail on places in the neighbourhood used for play and exploration**



**Figure 4 Children's neighbourhood - Likes**



**Figure 5. Children's neighbourhood - Dislikes**

