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Introduction

This piece will reflect on the cultural and knowledge exchange processes of a co-created project conducted between April 2024–November 2024, entitled *Family Routes*. The co-creation integral to the project has been embedded in the entire project life-cycle, from data collection through to designing the dissemination materials. It is also reflected in planning for the next phase of the project, where interactive elements have been incorporated into the exhibition to seek further input from stakeholders in the community. We plan to use these expanded conversations as a starting point for the next phase of working in and with the community, to extend the project's breadth, reach and impact.

Walking with families as a route to wellbeing and connection

This project aimed to explore the relationship between walking and well-being in families with preschool-aged children, focusing on a place-based context (Kirklees) by mapping their walking practices. This aligns with the UK Government's renewed emphasis on place-based solutions for health inequalities and wellbeing, and their benefits to local communities, not just socially and culturally but also economically. While walking is often considered a mundane activity or a means to an end, it is actually a complex interaction of physical, psychological and environmental factors that impact individuals, groups and the landscape. Walking with small children, in particular, presents a unique set of logistical, physical, and emotional challenges (Platt, 2024), which this project uses as its point of departure. Despite these difficulties being common in everyday life, there is a lack of research on the specific issues families face when walking with young children, and the extent to which these require place-based solutions.

Walking is not just a practical activity; it also helps us make sense of the world around us (Ingold and Vergunst, 2008). Yet, research indicates that children's spatial freedom is shrinking (Jack, 2010), making access to nearby outdoor spaces vital for fostering a sense of belonging and connection to the environment. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted disparities in access to green spaces across the UK, with *The Ramblers* (2024) reporting that 21 million people live more than a 15-minute walk from a green or blue space. While 15 minutes may seem manageable to many, walking with small children can take considerably longer, turning this distance into a significant barrier for families who want to spend time outdoors together.

Creative methods and mobilising the child's eye view

Using creative mapping and mobile methods, this project collaborated with young families to explore the relationships that are formed between bodies and spaces, reflecting on varying experiences and interpretations of localities.

Eight families took us on a series of sensory ethnographic walks of their local area in Kirklees, and we recorded video footage from both parent and child perspectives.

These walks were purposely led by the families, using routes familiar to them which they regularly took, whether that be a walk with the dog around local woodland or a trip to the shops. We aimed to record the varying experiences of participants in these walks in as unobtrusive a way as possible. Using Go-Pro cameras proved a successful means of capturing both parent/carer and child's-eye perspectives, which were then edited into a 40-minute split-screen film which highlighted the contrasting experiences of the adults and young children. This amplified the physical and also cognitive differences in how spaces are used and understood by different age groups, with the children, for example, being more care-free in their path-finding, whereas the adults tended to take a more direct route. The children's preoccupations tended to be more imaginative and fictitious, with games and stories being created along the way, and artefacts being collected and used as props for this kind of play. The adults, unsurprisingly, were more concerned with practical and logistical aspects of the walks, such as ensuring safety and time-keeping. Their way-finding was more deliberate with concerns of navigating the spaces taking priority. This isn't to say that the parents involved didn't join their children in their play and imaginings, in fact, it was observed that the children allowed and enabled the adults to step outside of their 'adult world' for periods of time. Indeed, this is evidently one of the joyful aspects of going for a walk with a child: the child's view of the world gave the adults permission to be playful and experience their neighbourhood in different ways.

Furthering this collaborative approach, we then worked with Ellie Thomas from The Children's Art School (Huddersfield) who are experts in working with very young children in a creative capacity to help them explore their worlds. Participants created a visual outcome which translated multisensory memories of their walks into what might be described as a form of creative cartography. Recognising the difficulty of soliciting feedback from young children - a challenge which had arisen in the early stages of the research when attempting, unsuccessfully, to interview preschoolers about their experiences - this approach was taken to provide a vehicle for the young participants to express memories of their walk in ways which were meaningful to them. We felt it was important that we, as academics, handed control over to Ellie and the families, realising that any attempt to pre-empt what might emerge from the activity, or to try to solicit the kind of feedback we needed, would ultimately undermine the participatory nature and the authenticity of the work. We also came to the conclusion that it was important that children were given the freedom to use their imaginations to enrich the research outcomes. While it was necessary that Ellie developed an approximate framework for the workshops to ensure the children and families had some structure to the sessions, the outcome was unexpected and opened up new perspectives on their walking experiences that we had not considered. The families created a large-scale printed landscape of the area and used collage and illustration to add features of their walks that had been important to them, ranging from flowers and animals, to traffic and, interestingly, even fictitious elements such as wolves, bears and hot air balloons. Even babies were able to mark-make to have their own input in the creative process. Participants also considered their walks in relation to their ideas of 'home', crafting 3D structures which represented their houses and creating their own versions of remembered paths and roads to connect the landscape with these structures.

Using creative methods with children in research is powerful because it allows them to express emotions and experiences that may be difficult to articulate verbally (Tay-Lim and Lim, 2013). Artistic activities enable children to use symbolic representations that can convey complex emotions through imagery and metaphor, offering deeper insights into an individual's inner world which might not have been revealed through more traditional research methods such as interviews. Moreover, engaging in creative processes fosters perspective-taking, empathy, and open communication within families, creating shared experiences that strengthen relationships and furthered connection to the place-based settings being considered (see for example, Osgood and Odegard, 2022). Arts-based approaches also empower children, helping them feel a sense of accomplishment and control (Everley, 2001).

The final work is being displayed back in the community in the entrance to Holmfirth Library. This location was chosen as the library attracts footfall from young families, allowing audiences to reflect on the work in different ways than if it had been displayed in a gallery space or academic institution. As well as celebrating the creative work of participants and the insights learned from the project, the exhibition aims to elicit further feedback and begin further conversations from a wider audience across the community about the locality and its walkability for families.

The Family Routes Toolkit

Collaborate
Leverage the skills of others - Employ expert artist facilitators to help empower families to enhance their creativity - and don't assume what will emerge.

Connect
Establish trust - making use of existing community networks to understand the everyday experiences of those that live there. Go for a walk with the families - experience what they experience. Follow their lead - even better - follow the toddler! Give them time, no agendas.

Record
Record the experiences - make use of multi-modal methods (Go-Pros, video, photos, participant created images etc) Try not to interfere with the walk - parents have enough to think about and cope!

Co-create
Everyone can get involved - from simple mark-making (colours and shapes can express a memory or emotion) to detailed drawings. Take a step back to listen to and engage in spontaneous conversations. The process is as much about observing and listening as it is about a final visual outcome.

Disseminate and Reconnect
View the created outcome as a fork in the road - Rich with potential for further exploration, a step along the way and not a destination. Invite participants to reflect on their creation and welcome new organisations by finding ways of making the work accessible to a wider audience. Make use of place-based assets to display the work in community.

Further Knowledge Exchange

We envisage that this process will be translatable to new locations, respectful of place-based concerns relevant to the families in those areas, and plan to scale it up in this capacity. Throughout the research process, we have consulted with a campaign and grassroots organisations focused on enhancing walkability and access to green spaces (Blaze Trails CIC and The Ramblers). After presenting our project outcomes to these organisations, we explored ways to leverage the knowledge gained during this project for greater impact. The resulting toolkit (Powell and Platt, 2024) has

a dual purpose: it integrates the insights gained from co-creating with families into the campaigning and policy landscape, and it showcases a methodology that can be replicated for creative consultation with young families.

We are conscious that so far we have focused on rural and semi-rural communities and the concerns of these places might not be the same as in others. However, the toolkit is adaptable as it emphasises a co-creation approach which cedes control to communities and local creative experts. This method could be adopted to assess the way families engage with their local neighbourhoods, whether rural or urban, as long as researchers or consultants are willing to be open-minded and respectful to all voices, and can acknowledge the value of arts practices as a form of creative consultation. The project has been testament to the idea advocated so effectively by artist Bob and Roberta Smith, that 'Art Makes Children Powerful' (2012).

Dr. Anna Powell is a senior lecturer in art and design theory at the University of Huddersfield. Her work explores the relationship between art and its audiences, contemporary art and heritage, and public engagement in art and design. Anna has personal experience of navigating the challenging and rewarding world of walking with her own young children and through her work as a breastfeeding Peer Supporter.

Dr. Louise Platt is a senior lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University with an expertise in place experiences. Her research is interdisciplinary, exploring leisure practices and public space. Her own experiences of walking with a baby in lockdown and organising a mums' walking group inspired this project.

Image credits

Image 1: Powell and Platt, 2024. The Family Routes Toolkit. Image courtesy of the authors.

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