

Schools in urban areas are inevitably shaped by their environment and the living conditions of their students and families (Warren, 2005). While this interaction is crucial for the development of urban schools and their students, it remains under-researched. A particularly relevant theme in this context is students' school travel, as it (1) tangibly represents the link between home, neighbourhood, and school and (2) engages students in actively taking responsibility for themselves, others, and their environment (Ramos et al., 2023). As Ramos, de Mello, and da Silva Bastos (2023) emphasize: "... [the] completion of the journey independently strengthens the ties of identity and community belonging, demonstrating active citizenship in terms of city participation".

In recent decades, school travel has been extensively studied from various perspectives. Geographers have focused on the development of cognitive schemas of space among children, using the journey between home and school as an opportunity for mental mapping (e.g., Silva et al., 2020). Psychologists have examined the independence with which pupils travel to school and the social relationships they build (e.g., Scheiner et al., 2019). Health researchers have investigated the reasons behind parents and children choosing (or not for) active school travel as a natural means of daily exercise (e.g., Buttazzoni et al., 2023; Schicketanz et al., 2022; Schicketanz et al., 2024). Sociologists have shown how social groups allow children to develop autonomy depending on parental social capital (Rivière, 2021). A significant factor for parents increasingly driving their children to school over the past few decades is the perceived insecurity of the journey (e.g., Martin et al., 2021). However, the globally observed decline in active travel modes (e.g., Buliung et al., 2009; Kytä et al., 2015) has introduced numerous health risks, such as rising child obesity rates and reduced motor skills (Pan et al., 2020), while also hindering opportunities for children's social and cognitive development (e.g., Schicketanz et al., 2024; Silva et al., 2020).

Research indicates, however, that children from low socioeconomic status families, particularly in (large) urban areas, are more likely to engage in active school travel due to a lack of access to motorized transportation (Orellana et al., 2024). While this offers developmental and health benefits, it raises questions about how these children and their parents perceive and cope with the insecurity and unfavorable conditions in their neighborhoods, which deter more affluent parents from allowing active commuting (Orellana et al., 2024).

This study examines the school travel experiences of children and their parents in a deprived urban context to gain a deep understanding of (1) the choices they have or perceive related to school travel, (2) the influence of the neighborhood or environment on these choices, (3) the impact of the home context on these choices, and (4) the notions of empowerment that these pupils and their parents associate with school travel. By understanding the interplay between urban schools, their neighborhoods, pupils, and families (Milner & Lomotey, 2018), education in urban schools can be enhanced (Warren, 2005). To this end, the following research questions are proposed:

1. How do primary school pupils and their parents shape and experience their school travel?
2. What contextual features empower primary school pupils and their parents to achieve a positive experience of school travel?
3. What strategies do they use to navigate the challenges and unfavorable conditions in their neighborhoods?

To address this research question, a single case study was conducted in a fifth-grade class with 25 pupils aged 10-11 years old at a French primary school located in one neighborhood of a Parisian suburban city. The school is situated in a densely populated urban area characterized by a mix of residential neighborhoods, primarily social housing, as well as commercial and industrial zones. The school serves a diverse student population that reflects the socio-economic and cultural diversity of the area, including many single-parent families (32.8% in Gennevilliers compared to 22.5% in Paris), families living in poverty (26% in Gennevilliers compared to 11.8% in Paris, with a median income of 1321 euros per household in Gennevilliers compared to 2265 euros in Paris), and families with a migration background (31.3% in Gennevilliers compared to 18.5% in Paris) (INSEE).

A variety of data were collected in November 2024 to comprehensively understand pupils' school travel experiences from multiple perspectives:

- Survey (pupils): The validated 24-item Perceived Active School Travel Enablers and Barriers for Children (PASTEB-C) survey (Buttazzoni et al., 2023) was translated into French and administered to the pupils. This survey assessed perceived barriers (e.g., active school travel skills, motivation, road safety, social safety) and enablers (e.g., enjoyment, supportive environment, safe environment) of active school travel.
- Smiley Maps (pupils): Pupils traced their trajectories from home to school on a printed map of the neighborhood. They were asked to mark significant places (e.g., starting and ending points, stops, places linked to events) and associate these with emotions using emoji stickers. Next, they rated their journeys to and from school.
- Group Interviews (pupils): Four group interviews, each with five or six pupils, were conducted to discuss the smiley maps. Based on Lefebvre's (1991) theory of space, guiding questions explored pupils' perceptions, emotions, and actions during their journeys.
- Focus Group (parents): A focus group with nine mothers discussed the initial findings from the surveys, smiley maps, and group interviews with pupils. The mothers provided their interpretations of these preliminary results, contextualizing them within their home situations, neighborhood, and school. The discussion focused on the emotional experiences of school travel for both parents and children, and the solutions parents implement for potential obstacles (e.g., fear).

The data were transcribed, translated into English, and analyzed using MAXQDA24 software. The thematic analysis was based on Barrett's framework for citizenship competences.

The results highlight the dual nature of children's and parents' experiences with school travel. On one hand, children find joy in small pleasures like spending time with friends, enjoying natural surroundings, and feeling a sense of freedom and happiness after school, which contribute to their overall well-being. On the other hand, they face challenges such as tiredness, stress, and anxiety related to security issues in the neighborhood. Parents confirm and detail these dichotomous experiences. They state that the familiarity and efficiency of their compact, well-connected neighborhood generally give them a sense of security, although they remain cautious of crime and potentially dangerous individuals who sometimes approach their children. Some incidents have heightened fears, especially regarding girls. Additionally, parents note that fifth-grade children need to gradually grow in independence to prepare for middle school. They employ various strategies to balance safety and independence, leveraging strong community support, solidarity among parents, and the resilience of children in dealing with unforeseen events.

The results of this study suggest that school travel offers children valuable opportunities to explore their neighborhood, develop responsibility, and gain independence. While interacting with diverse community members can be challenging, it also encourages children to broaden their perspectives and navigate real-life contexts openly. Participants highlight that support from the city and the school, along with strong community solidarity among parents (social capital), are crucial factors for fostering positive school travel experiences.

This exploratory study confirms that the immediate school environment offers learning opportunities for citizenship competences, warranting further exploration through comparative studies in other urban contexts.

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