

Development Department Research Programme

Children's Attitudes to Sustainable Transport

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The Scottish Executive commissioned research on children's and young people's attitudes towards sustainable transport and transport choice and how these attitudes are developed by schools, the informal education sector, parents, and children's own experiences as transport users. The study consisted of review of existing research, inputs from a wide range of experts and practitioners, and the main fieldwork consisting of 12 case studies across a variety of Scottish schools.

Main Findings

- Most young people had a good awareness of sustainable transport issues, and all had at least some basic understanding. How much children knew was affected by the level of input in individual schools: the extent of teaching about sustainable transport was patchy across surveyed schools.
- However, knowing about sustainable transport did not necessarily impact on attitudes or behaviour. For example, nearly all secondary pupils felt that the car would play an important role in their transport choices as adults, despite a very wide understanding of the negative effects of pollution and congestion.
- A deeper understanding of relevant issues was demonstrated in children participating in whole-school programmes such as Eco-Schools or Health Promoting Schools. Higher levels of commitment, led by the school in a cross-curricular manner, were sufficient to affect everyday behaviour and influence parents.
- There are many opportunities within the 5-14 National Guidelines to teach concepts related to sustainable transport. However, the research suggested these were not immediately obvious to curriculum planners and classroom teachers, and appropriate resources, guidance and schemes of work were felt to be lacking.
- The research highlighted the importance of understanding age, gender and location differences when targeting children with specific messages about transport. Thus, environmental messages were seen to be unlikely to be successful in promoting behaviour change, except with primary children and their parents. Boys were more responsive to health and fitness messages, while girls were more open to the social aspects of travel, viewing buses and walking much more positively than boys.
- Children reported receiving conflicting messages about transport. For many, the greatest influence on travel behaviour came from parents, and differing messages from parents and school were seen to cause conflict between what children's attitudes were and which behaviours were possible.

Introduction

The aim of this project was to improve understanding of the role environmental education plays in influencing the attitudes of young children and teenagers to sustainable transport issues.

Research Methods

The study involved a review of existing knowledge, inputs from a wide range of experts and practitioners and the main fieldwork - 12 case studies across a variety of Scottish schools. Young people, their parents and teachers were engaged via qualitative and quantitative research tools.

Education for Sustainable Development

In the schools surveyed, the coverage of transport within formal education was patchy, with decisions on whether to cover transport issues being left to the individual teacher. Despite feeling that levels of awareness are higher now than in the past, respondents suggested that current levels were still inadequate.

Delivering an understanding of sustainable transport through education is one of the most important factors in achieving change in travel behaviour. Pupils need to have an understanding of the basic concepts in order to know why there are benefits and disadvantages related to various modes of travel. With an appropriate level of understanding they will be able to make more informed decisions. There is a risk, however, that if this is only delivered through the classroom young people will receive conflicting messages. Young people are very quick to see examples of inconsistency, for example when they learn about the importance of recycling in the classroom, only to discover that the school does not use recycled paper. Whole-school approaches can usefully reinforce what children learn in class.

The survey activities highlighted that children in committed whole-school programmes such as Eco Schools or Health Promoting Schools showed a deep understanding of relevant issues. Their higher levels of understanding and commitment, led by the school in a cross-curricular manner, were sufficient to affect everyday behaviour and influence parents. However, it was noted that it is possible for schools involved in these

programmes to 'skip' the issue of sustainable travel altogether, which would obviously impact on what changes were possible.

Forming Attitudes

Recent research shows that children's travel behaviour follows closely that of their parents. There is also some evidence to suggest that adult travel behaviour is influenced significantly by behaviour patterns set in childhood. Surveys have shown that children as young as 7 make initial associations between modes of transport and different segments of society. Even within the 10-12 age group, transport that is "cool/trendy" becomes increasingly important in making travel choices.

Children's Views - Primary

Children at primary school level were enthusiastic about walking and cycling and recognised the health and environmental benefits. These ways of getting around were seen to provide personal freedom, independence and the ability to explore, as well as being fun. In almost all the schools surveyed, there was latent demand for making more specific journeys by bike, especially by boys.

Children at this age were generally positive about public transport, and understood and enjoyed the benefits of convenient local travel, either alone or with parents/friends. While the benefits of the car were understood widely in terms of convenience, speed and comfort, a negative overall view was also apparent. The car was seen as a restrictive and boring mode of travel, and other factors such as pollution, congestion, parking and costs were widely raised without prompting.

Children's Views – Secondary

For older children, buses were seen as reliable, cheap and convenient, and were widely used. Suggestions and improvements provided by young people indicated their experience as regular bus users. School buses were generally unpopular for reasons of behaviour, vehicle quality and driver attitude, but there was a more positive attitude towards public transport amongst school bus users.

Attitudes to walking were generally favourable, and again there were good levels of understanding of health and

environmental benefits. However, children at secondary school identified many advantages in using cars, despite a very wide understanding of the negative effects of pollution and congestion. These views were held more strongly in urban and suburban areas. In rural areas, there was a sense that the car was a virtual necessity for making many journeys. Nearly all the pupils involved in discussion considered the car to play a key role in their future adult travel. For older individuals being able to drive was a very widespread and relatively unquestioned desire.

Factors in travel choices

Young people in the study were asked to rank eleven factors affecting how they travelled to and from school.

For secondary school pupils, *punctuality* was the most important issue, with *weather protection* and *exercise* also important. The issue of *good for the environment*, however, was ranked 10th. *Directness of journey* (i.e. door to door) was ranked as least important.

Pupils and parents ranked *healthy exercise* with equal (high) importance, indicating that health promotion messages regarding walking and cycling were reaching both groups equally well. For parents “*stranger danger*” was ranked as the second most important issue in deciding how their child travelled to school, especially for girls.

Gender, Age and Location

There was greater concern about environmental aspects of transport amongst girls, whereas boys were more aware of the health benefits of walking and cycling. Urban children were more likely to get views about transport from their parents, with both considering walking and cycling to school as unsafe.

There was increasing concern over environmental issues and the effects of congestion with age, perhaps indicating the cumulative effect of continued exposure to travel awareness messages. The importance of health issues decreased with increasing age but was still relevant for children in Secondary 6.

Mixing with friends on the journey to school was important for girls. Levels of cycling were lower, and cycling was perceived more negatively by secondary school pupils, especially with increasing age. The self-

completion surveys showed some suppressed demand for cycling that was less evident from group discussion, suggesting the influence of peer pressure. Greater suppressed demand was still evident in boys, who had concerns over bike security.

Older children especially suggested that public transport services could better suit their travel needs for work and socialising, and help reduce their dependence on others.

The role of parents

For many young people, parents were the biggest influence on travel behaviour. Children’s positive attitudes towards sustainable travel were likely to be compromised if parents were not signed up to the same agenda. However, focus group discussions suggested that parental influence was important in encouraging young people to consider issues such as exercise and independence when making travel choices. Some parents encouraged their children to walk or cycle because of the associated health benefits. Parental support was also important in making such choices easier. Pupils referred to the fact that parents provided an important ‘back-up’ service, which made it easier for them to walk, cycle or use public transport.

Parents were often misinformed about safety issues and many felt that the safest option was to drive their children to school. How children travel to school provides the baseline experience from which they form their own attitudes and adult behaviours.

Conclusions

The research suggests that there are opportunities within education, transport and other programmes to affect attitudes to sustainable transport.

Sophisticated and targeted approaches to attitudes and behaviour change are needed, recognising that individual needs change with age, location and gender. General travel awareness campaigns should highlight environmental, social, health and lifestyle messages that appeal to young people.

There is scope for the development of resources, encouraging practitioners to discuss sustainable transport in the classroom, and of other support mechanisms for schools such as training and advice. A

useful resource base would include model schemes of work and case studies where sustainable transport has been successfully integrated into the curriculum. Efforts made by schools should be acknowledged and the inspection process is a key means of doing this.

There are a number of ways that schools can become involved in whole school initiatives which support learning about sustainable transport in its widest sense, including active travel e.g. Eco Schools and Health Promoting Schools. Schools should be encouraged to include active and sustainable travel as an element of the wider initiatives that they take part in. One way to do this is to write a School Travel Plan as part of work they are already involved in.

Related initiatives such as road safety, citizenship and health promotion should make links to sustainable transport and avoid any conflicting messages to children or their parents. Making these links could also help reduce initiative-overload in schools.

Work in schools should be built upon outside the school gate. Means of involving parents and the wider community in adopting and acting upon positive attitudes to sustainable transport should be exploited. Examples include involvement in school travel plan initiatives, and development of workplace travel plans that deliver similar messages in other situations. Whole-school approaches are an appropriate means of shifting attitudes and transport could become a key aspect of this approach.

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ISBN 0-7559-3640-X

