



ARTICLE FROM THE BOOK:

Cyclists & Cycling Around the World – Creating Liveable and Bikeable Cities

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Safe Routes to Schools – From road safety to community building

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A sustainable mobility and road safety project

Safe Routes to School projects aim to encourage and facilitate children and young people travelling to school independently and actively (by walking or cycling), through signalised and adapted routes that make this activity safe and appealing.

The first Safe Routes to School projects were born in the first half of the 1970s, but it wasn't until the 1990s that they were broadly disseminated. The emergence of the car in the urban scene, with the subsequent loss of public space, the increase of insecurity on the roads - especially for vulnerable users - environmental pollution and a general decrease in the quality of life, were the main reasons for the creation and dissemination of these projects. Road safety is the core of these early initiatives, and the situation lead to Safe Routes to School focussing mainly on encouraging active travel to school.



“Muévete en bicicleta” (Getting around by bike). A planning instrument with the aim of promoting bicycle use for transport in the Safe Routes to Schools. Palau-solità i Plegamans (Barcelona)
Source: City Council of Palau-solità i Plegamans

As the years have gone by, the initial concept of Safe Routes to School has been broadened to include other aspects that had not been considered at the beginning. The idea that actions should not only be aimed at the protection of vulnerable users (cyclists and pedestrians) but also at changing the behaviour of those who make them vulnerable has become more relevant. Therefore, current initiatives are framed in a global policy aimed at the recovery of public space, traffic calming and promotion of walking and cycling. Efforts are made to achieve these policies through *push & pull* measures, that is, measures that benefit the mobility modes that are intended to be promoted at the same time as they discourage those mobility modes causing damage to the people and the environment.

When Lenore Skenazy was called “America’s worst mother” for allowing her 9-year-old son take the metro on his own, she decided to launch the blog “Free range kids” and created a whole **movement for children’s independence**. This concept is used in mobility campaigns such as the homonymous one in the UK, designed by Sustrans organization.

A cross-cutting, education, participation and community building project

The concept of Safe Routes to School broadens and improves with more aspects. Although the key aspect for its analysis is the route that children and young people take every day from home to school, the project has a great potential to create a change of behaviour if it is also designed with educational purposes in mind. In this sense, Safe Routes to School should be seen also as an educational tool for training in involvement in participation processes, ethical values and critical capacity. All these will be aimed at producing more committed, respectful, responsible, independent and caring citizens.

Image of the exhibition
“Caperucita camina sola.
The re-introduction of
children in the city”
Source: CENEAM



Furthermore, it must be taken into account that Safe Routes to School is a participative process involving different stakeholders. This means that the feasibility and success of the project will greatly depend on the capacity of these stakeholders for team work and their ability to coordinate the measures to implement. In order to achieve this, a commitment must be established by three main communities of stakeholders. Firstly, there must be a commitment from the *local administration*, through the coordination between the municipal services to avoid isolated public policies and improve efficiency in the management of resources. Secondly, there must be a commitment from the *teaching staff*, who must propose alternatives and promote changes from the participation of the teachers, executive managers, non-teaching staff and, above all, with the participation of the schoolchildren and their families. Thirdly, the commitment of the *neighbourhood* is a key aspect. They can support the project with their active involvement, following basic rules for a good rapport, behaving respectfully with public space and offering help and improving safety for the children that may need it.

In the projects of Safe Routes to School it is necessary to draft a pre-participation plan starting with interviews with the staff in order to help define the relevant stakeholders and the relations between them.

Action plan

The development of a project of Safe Routes to School has a crucial stage for its success in the execution of the actions planned. Although this action plan will be tailored to each case, in general, it will have to be developed in each of the following fields:

Public space interventions. Improvement of public space is a key issue in achieving the minimum levels of safety on the students' routes. Safety should not only be guaranteed but also communicated to children, young people and their parents so that they feel less vulnerable. In this field, actions include traffic management, road interventions, safe crossings and crossroads, street signalisation and improvement of infrastructures and services for the bicycle.

In the city of Barcelona, more than 60 schools have implemented a **Safe Route to School** plan with an important impact on the urban landscape. Changes in behaviour result from changes in the design, readability and interpretation of the streets. All the street users show a more responsible use of the public space and feel safer.



Signalisation of Safe Routes to School in Barcelona.
Source: P. Avellaneda

Educational and formative actions. It's important to tackle the actions aimed at promoting a critical response to the environment. This will allow, on the one hand, a change of behaviour in public space users and, on the other hand, the involvement of all stakeholders with the project. Actions in this field can be addressed to teachers, students, families and city council officers. These actions range from teaching guidance, support in educational actions for the students, production of didactic materials, use of the project for pedagogy, conferences and forums for teachers, families and officers, etc.

Bikeability is a cycling safety training program for children. There are three levels of training to achieve the necessary skills to cycle to school independently and safely. This is certified at a national level (UK). The project is managed by the Department of Transport of the United Kingdom government, which has also delivered a national standard for cycle training.

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 **bacc**
Bicicleta Club de Catalunya

Spain.
Pedagogic projects for primary and secondary.
Sources: Conbici and BACC

Communication actions. All the above mentioned actions would have a low impact if they were not supplemented by communication actions in order to show and disseminate the goals and benefits accomplished. Such actions can be addressed to either participant stakeholders of the project or to the rest of the citizenship. These actions include information about the project in the schools web page or/and in the city council web page, the publishing of leaflets and an electronic magazine, the opening up of party, press and media appearances as well as other possible activities.

In the United Kingdom, city councils hire Sustrans organization. This includes the services of the cycling officers who help dynamise cycling by designing and executing action plans tailored for each school within the "Bike it" program for the promotion of cycling mobility in schools. Once a year "**The Big Pedal**" is organized which is a national competition in which all the "Bike it" schools participate. Schools organize activities during several weeks all over the country in order to get the highest number of students on their bicycles and scooters.

In Italy there is also a national campaign to celebrate cycling to school: it is a series of routes and parades called Bimbibici.



The Big Pedal. Activity of all the “Bike it” project schools at a national level in the UK.
Source: E. Anaya

Accompanying actions. The organization of “bike buses” or cycling routes to school can be a valuable complement to the rest of the actions. The concept is similar to the “pedibus” or walking routes to school, it is about cycling in groups to the school, picking up the children at several “stops” along the route.

In **Italy**, cycling promotion to travel from home to school is included in the national regulations (Legge 19 ottobre 1998, n. 366, “Norme per il finanziamento della mobilità ciclistica”, art. 10). Thus, FIAB (Federación Italiana de Amigos de la Bicicleta) manages the project “**Progetto Scuola**” to promote, amongst other measures, the “Bicibus” (i.e. in Reggio Emilia). In **Belgium**, the organization Pro Velo helps with the organization of the “Velobus”, with the project “**Ramassage scolaire**” (picking up of schoolchildren). In Spain, bike bus projects (“Bicibús”) have been working during recent years in more and more cities. Zarautz is possibly the most significant case, with a high number of children cycling to school trips. The national cycling organization Conbici, launched the project “**Con bici al cole**”, which is still being followed by several schools all around the Spain with bike buses. These are the examples of the school Jorge Guillén en Málaga or the secondary school Rufino Blanco in Madrid, amongst others.



Bicibus of the school Rufino Blanco in the neighbourhood of Chamberí, Madrid.
Source: Asociación cicloturista de usuarios de la bicicleta, Pedalibre.

Results

In places where a global vision of the city does not exist or the initial framework is not solid, the project of Safe Routes to School becomes an interesting opportunity to rethink mobility, road safety and public space policies, contributing with new arguments to the decision making processes in these fields. Including children in the evaluation of different aspects of the management or design of the road network or public space in general, usually brings about a change in the perception of planners and managers which, at the same time, modifies their definition of mobility, road safety and public space policies. In places where the global vision of the city does already exist, this initiative will sum up the actions undertaken in the framework of a wider policy about sustainability and the recovery of public space. In either case, the integration of a Safe Routes to School project with the rest of the projects in shared fields of action or/and objectives is a key element for its success and to achieve synergies.

“Civitas Archimedes” programmes’ main objective is to help cities adopt ambitious measures and policies towards sustainable urban mobility. In San Sebastián-Donostia, Safe Routes to School is one of its integrated 18 measures.



Activity en la calle todos pintamos (in the street, we all paint) developed in the frame of the Sustainable Mobility Week in Lleida (Spain).
Source: City Council of Lleida

Such an initiative contributes to building a citywide participative project which promotes and facilitates students' safe trips between home and school, supports an education strategy based on values such as respect, responsibility, solidarity and independence. At the same time as it implements an awareness raising tool where families and societies are reached through the work with schools, it disseminates sustainable and safe mobility messages while also shaping the strategy to recover the public space for the use of pedestrians and cyclists

From a systemic approach and beyond physical safety improvements, the project also allows building a participation model of great educational value, for it builds an extra bridge between the school and the city, and generates participation frameworks where children and young people can experiment and build their own independence, generate better communication and debate channels between the different stakeholders, and bring to light a collective work with a great potential.

Critical aspects (and how to solve them)

It could be said that the strong points of the project are also its weak points. One of the most common barriers in the development of a project like this is the difficulty of the stakeholders in understanding the timing of the measures defined in the action plan, especially those that require an intervention in the public space. To avoid the anxiety that this situation can generate, it is necessary to clarify from the beginning that the project is a long-term one, that it includes different stages of intervention, and that some are more active than others. This can also be solved by accelerating the action plans of the public administration or programming specific actions to be developed during periods of low activity.



In a school in the district of Poble Nou in Barcelona.
Source: P. Avellaneda

Another critical element is the participation process. These processes should be integrated, particularly by the promoters of the project, so that all stakeholders are aware of the difficulties implied in this kind of processes. To reach an agreement between all stakeholders involved and the lack of coordination in cooperation can be important barriers. But at the same time, they should be faced as challenges that may turn into incentives for working towards an education on mobility and fellowship resulting from this integral approach. In this sense, another difficulty is to include those who have the true leading roles in the process - children and young people! To achieve this, specific mechanisms must be established in order to ensure their participation with an active role by involving them both in the state of the art analysis and in the proposals for solving the identified problems and barriers.

Finally, the problem of what to do once the action plan has been executed is quite common. On some occasions this leads to a loss of interest from some stakeholders, turning the project into a plain road safety project. To avoid this, activities related to the aims of the project should be programmed periodically, and continue to strengthen pedagogic and education activities. The main stakeholders of the project can work as promoters or advisors of new projects that may arise in the same environment.

Whereas the “Cycling officer” was a professional worker from the “Bike it” programme by Sustrans organization, it’s important to mention that this role must be complemented by the “**Champion**”, the person responsible for the project inside the school. Once the promotion and guidance tasks of the officer are over, it is the “Champion” (frequently a teacher) who must continue the tasks and keep on working and developing the bicycle mobility plan of the school.

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