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Interface childhood: emoji mapping as a method of gaining the perspective of Belfast children on their local urban environment

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ABSTRACT

In Belfast, long standing peace walls continue to divide communities physically and emotionally, shaping everyday realities of children growing up in interface areas. Despite policy frameworks supporting children's participation, their perspectives remain largely absent from planning and regeneration processes. This paper explores children's emotional geographies using an innovative method: emoji mapping. As part of a wider PhD research project, emoji mapping was applied during a series of four-day workshops which engaged 47 children aged 7 to 13 years. Through the mapping exercise and informal conversations, children expressed their emotional attachments to local spaces, revealed constrained mobility patterns, highlighted internalised boundaries and place quality. Findings show that spatial segregation is not only material but deeply embedded in children's cognitive and emotional landscapes. The paper reflects on the potential of emoji mapping to meaningfully engage children in post-conflict urban research and planning, offering recommendations for practitioners seeking more inclusive, child-centred approaches to urban futures.

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Belfast; interface communities; emotional mapping; children; urban planning

Introduction

In recent decades, there has been growing recognition that children's experiences of urban environments deserve greater attention within research, policy, and planning. Traditionally regarded as passive recipients of adult-designed spaces, children are increasingly acknowledged as active participants who shape, interpret, and navigate the built environment in complex ways. Their perspectives offer vital insights into both the functional and emotional dimensions of everyday places. As cities grapple with challenges of inclusion, mobility, and social cohesion, understanding children's spatial experiences becomes essential not only for creating more equitable environments but also for fostering urban futures that are genuinely responsive to all inhabitants.

This shift in perspective has been strongly shaped by developments within the field of childhood studies, which redefined children as competent social actors in their own right. The emergence of childhood studies as an interdisciplinary field was instrumental in challenging traditional views of children as passive dependents. Scholars such as James and Prout (2015) emphasised that children are active social actors, capable of shaping and interpreting their own experiences. This reconceptualisation of children's agency laid the foundation for major policy developments, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child focus on participation rights and the rise of Child-Friendly Cities initiatives that seek to embed children's voices within urban planning processes.

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The UNCRC, particularly Article 12, positions children as individuals with the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and to have those views given due weight. Initiatives such as UNICEF's Child-Friendly Cities framework have translated these rights into urban planning practices, seeking to create environments that recognise children as stakeholders with valuable insights into the spatial and social organisation of cities.

However, understanding children's engagement with urban environments requires attention not only to the functional accessibility of space but also to the emotional geographies that shape their everyday experiences. Places are not neutral backdrops but are imbued with feelings, memories, and social meaning. Emotional attachments to, and exclusions from, particular spaces profoundly influence children's sense of belonging, safety, and identity within the city.

While research has increasingly explored children's participation in planning processes, there remains a gap in understanding how children's emotional relationships with space are shaped in contexts marked by division and conflict. In cities like Belfast, where historical conflict has left lasting spatial and social divisions, children's experiences of place may be profoundly affected by inherited boundaries and collective memories.

This paper explores how children's emotional geographies are shaped by divided urban environments, using emoji mapping to capture the spatial experiences and emotional attachments of children living in Belfast's interface communities.

Literature review

Children's rights and participation in urban space

The 1990s were characterised by policy shifts towards greater recognition of the child and young person's voice. It was only during this period, when children and young people were deemed of a certain 'status of importance', that children and young people were added to the list of groups which planners started to give special consideration to in the planning process (Freeman 2006). The end of this period of delayed non-inclusion was largely as a result of the UNCRC (UNICEF 1992). This 'status of importance' levered a greater onus on the drive to create and support child-friendly cities, or at the very least, to be seen to be working towards this. The fact that children should be valued in creating environments to support life-long positive development is a key component in that aspiration. Children have a special interest in the creation of sustainable human settlements that will support long and fulfilling lives for themselves and future generations' (UNICEF 1997: preamble).

Agenda 21 from the UN Earth Summit and City Summit indicates that children and youth are a major group who should be involved in participatory programmes to improve the urban environment (Chawla 1997). According to the UNCRC, not only should concerns for children's welfare be given priority, but children themselves should also be given the opportunity to speak up and have their voices heard (Nordström 2009).

Whilst ensuring the rights of children should be a universal given, there remains variance in the ways in which children are able to access their rights. This has increased particularly since the adoption of the UNCRC where the notion of children's voices and their participation is advocated under Article 12 (Cassidy et al. 2017). Studies by Conrad, Cassidy, and Mathis (2015) indicated that children did not see themselves, or other children, as decision-makers or as empowered people in society. This is particularly challenging in contested societies, where a segregated built environment can have a direct impact on the development of the child.

While significant policy frameworks have emphasised children's rights to participation, research consistently demonstrates that children remain marginalised within the design, planning and governance of urban environments. Studies such as Derr et al. (2013) and Malone (2015) highlight that children's voices are often tokenised, overlooked, or excluded from meaningful decision-making processes. Dominiak-Szymańska, Łaskiewicz, and Kronenberg (2024) research reinforces these

findings in which their study on children's participation in green space planning revealed that despite policy frameworks advocating for inclusion, children's voices are frequently underrepresented in actual planning practices.

A cross-country study undertaken by Gemmell et al. (2023) demonstrated that children experience unequal access to environmental amenities and heightened exposure to urban risks, highlighting systemic violations of child rights in the built environment. Collectively, these studies underscore the need to critically examine not only formal rights frameworks but also the persistent spatial and structural factors that constrain children's full realisation of their rights in everyday urban contexts.

Children's participation is a natural ally with potential benefits for all (Derr 2015). To facilitate children's participation in research, there needs to be methods and spaces which enable and allow children to express their views (Lundy and McEvoy 2011). This is because all too often, children are ignored in discussions about the built environment, a point made by Schaefer-McDaniel (2009) when stating that, 'children are rarely recognised in neighbourhood research and their perceptions of the neighbourhood and environments they occupy everyday go unnoticed' (p.417).

Emotions and place

Emotions have a strong influence on the urban environment, they can affect how places are perceived and how people understand spatial layouts (Zadra and Clore 2011). Maps also play a huge part in determining how people can express their attitudes and feelings towards a place, this is particularly evident in research around environments. Emotions can arise from interaction with an environment where these feelings can be locatable within bodies and spatial contexts (Caquard and Griffin 2018). Emotions are not only individual feelings but are deeply entangled with spatial experiences and collective histories. As Caquard and Griffin (2018) argue, emotions can be embedded into landscapes through memories, attachments and shared social practices. Similarly, Tolia-Kelly (2006) highlights how emotional attachments to place are shaped by histories of conflict, racialisation, and belonging, making emotional geographies inherently political as well as personal. Rather than viewing emotions as static categories of 'positive' or 'negative', it is important to acknowledge their dynamic, often contradictory nature; a single site may simultaneously evoke feelings of joy, fear, nostalgia and anger depending on context and personal histories (Bondi 2006). Anderson's (2009) notion of affective atmospheres further emphasises how emotions are not contained within individuals but can circulate collectively, shaping the 'feel' of environments themselves.

Emotional mapping is significant in providing a means to allow people the platform to share their feelings related to place and can be used as a method to allow citizens to draw upon their experience of that place (Pánek 2018). Beyond this, emotional mapping serves not merely to chart feelings onto place, but to reveal the layered, often contested meanings that spaces hold for individuals and communities.

Interfaces communities

To better understand the emotional geographies experienced by children in Belfast, it is necessary to first unpack the concept of 'interface' and its impact on interface communities. Belfast is a divided city where the scars of its ethnonational conflict known as 'the Troubles' have resulted in defensive architecture, euphemistically termed 'peace walls'. These were erected in the past in an effort to maintain security between two opposing communities during the Troubles from the late 1960s to minimise violence. These walls remain a prominent feature of the urban landscape today, symbolising both historical conflict and ongoing division.

Peace walls and other physical barriers, such as fences, major roads or open voids, mark the spatial divisions between historically opposing communities in Belfast. These 'interfaces' are not

limited to material structures like peace walls and motorways they are also deeply symbolic, shaped by collective memories, emotional ties and inherited narratives of conflict and mistrust. Thus, community divisions are sustained not only by physical features but by embedded emotional geographies that continue to shape everyday life. The term ‘interface community’ refers to populations living alongside these dividing lines, whose daily experiences are shaped by both tangible and intangible boundaries. Understanding the concept of the interface and the lived experiences of interface communities is essential for interpreting how such environments shape children’s perceptions of place.

Research has shown that interface areas often experience heightened levels of socio-economic deprivation, reduced mobility and increased exposure to inter-community tensions (Browne and Dwyer 2014; Byrne et al. 2017). Interfaces are both barriers and frontiers, they simultaneously discourage interaction while also acting as sites where limited and sometimes ambivalent cross-community contact occurs (Leonard 2006; Shirlow 2003).

Importantly, interfaces are not neutral spaces, they are laden with emotional and political meaning, functioning as sites where the memory of conflict is spatially anchored (Davies et al. 2019). For children growing up in these communities, the interface is part of the fabric of their everyday geography, shaping patterns of movement, perceptions of safety, and even future aspirations. These enduring barriers not only regulate patterns of physical mobility but also inscribe emotional geographies, shaping children’s spatial imaginaries, attachments and senses of belonging. Understanding the interface as both a physical and a psychological construct is crucial for interpreting the emotional landscapes mapped through this research.

Recently, a growing body of research has developed looking at attitudes to interfaces, including considering views on their removal. Much of this research has examined how people have been affected by such barriers in the city and explores the lasting effects that the sectarian divide has had on everyday mobility to residents (Davies et al. 2019; Dixon et al. 2019; 2022; Huck et al. 2018).

While research has primarily involved adults, studies with children in Belfast have used other methods distinct from emoji mapping such as mental mapping (Murtagh and Murphy 2011), photo-elicitation (Leonard and McKnight 2015) and narrative walkabouts (McAteer, Loudon, and Higgins 2024).

Children growing up in interface areas have had little choice but to adapt to the man-made security structures that divide and define their neighbourhoods. These barriers combined with rising car ownership and expanding road networks, have reshaped movement patterns and restricted children’s freedom. As Tranter (2006) notes, ‘car dependency and traffic risk have, ‘deprived children of autonomous movement and restricted the development of their spatial skills’ (p.127). In deprived interface communities, physical barriers further limit children’s mobility, connectivity and access to opportunities available elsewhere in the city with structures such as the Westlink motorway entrenching division (Cunningham 2014). Importantly, children’s movement is shaped not only by infrastructures but also parental perceptions. While today’s children may not face past levels of violence, their parents’ experiences often lead to restricted freedom due to fears about outdoor safety (Alparone and Pacilli 2012; Fyhri and Hjorthol 2009)

Early researchers (Hart 1979; Moore 1986) recognised mobility as essential to child-friendly environments. A child-friendly city should ensure children feel respected, connected, and empowered (Chawla 2002; Malone and Tranter 2003). Freedom of movement is crucial for children’s development, helping them make sense of the world beyond the home. A child-friendly society supports this by fostering connection, participation, and independence. As Egli et al. (2020) argue, ‘knowing more about children’s likes, dislikes, and use of destinations will help decision-makers to build better and more tailored neighbourhood destinations that children are likely to use, value and that have additional benefits to health through supporting health promoting behaviours’ (421). Thus, the exclusion of the child’s voice from the renewal of places or regeneration neglects and removes an essential pillar in any child-friendly city.

Research aim and methodology

Utilising new forms of engagement to gather data on children's perceptions and movement is important in gaining an insight into how children view aspects of their own neighbourhoods (Hallett and Prout 2003). Given the complex nature of Belfast's post-conflict-built environment, it was especially important to employ a tool which was going to allow children to communicate their views on the built environment within their communities with ease. This is crucial because research has highlighted that planning and designing with (instead of for) children should be actively encouraged (Derr and Tarantini 2016; Francis and Lorenzo 2002; Pawlowski et al. 2017), because children's voices have something valuable to add to debates about their lives (Holloway and Valentine 2000).

The development and increasing recognition of creative methods allows us as researchers to tap into the experience and minds of children (Blaisdell, Arnott, and Wall 2019). It is important to note that the emoji mapping activity was conducted during a four-day workshop as part of a PhD project engaging 47 children, aged between 7 and 13. These workshops trialled a range of creative engagement methods such as mental mapping, photography, photovoice, brainstorming, Adobe Photoshop and modelling through Dream Boxes. For the purpose of this paper, only limited results chosen to help communicate the effectiveness of emoji mapping as a research method will be shared.

Previous research has employed creative techniques such as mental or cognitive mapping, (Freeman and Vass 2010; Gillespie 2010; Kaisto and Wells 2021; Smith and Aranha 2022; Thommen et al. 2010). Traditional mental mapping often relies on children's drawing skills and assumes spatial literacy that may vary with ages and confidence, sometimes limiting younger participants' ability to clearly express emotional experiences. Other methods include photo-elicitation, photography and photovoice (Adams, Savahl, and Fattore 2017; Bourke 2017; Butschi and Hedderich 2021; Carroll et al. 2019; Clark 2022; Honkanen, Poikolainen, and Karlsson 2018; Li and Seymour 2019; Sancar and Severcan 2010; Shortt and Ross 2021; Teixeira et al. 2020) which generates rich discussion. However such approaches can depend on children's access to cameras and the ability to conceptualise place through photographic representation, which can introduce adult-mediated framing.

Emojis are commonly-used digital pictograms that can express emotions and be used in text messages, emails and on social media platforms and are generally accepted as a light-hearted, almost comedic form of communication (Stark and Crawford 2015). The value of visual communication is pronounced in understanding how children perceive their environment (Catanzaro and Collin 2023). Emoji mapping, by contrast to other methods combines intuitive visual communication, familiar from children's everyday digital lives with geographical mapping, allowing children to express complex feelings rapidly and autonomously. Emojis have been used in research carried out by Fane et al. (2018) where they are described as;

... a visual research method offered a vehicle for limiting adult input and bias about children's experiences ... providing opportunities for young children to express their understanding and interpretation of feelings, everyday things or event. (372)

Hence, the employment of a geographical understanding of emotions is a viable means to enable children's expression, even if the children are from complex neighbourhoods which are historically linked to the emotional responses of actual and feared conflict or attack. This method minimises adult interpretation at the point of data creation, empowers children as primary meaning-makers, and offers a more immediate, playful means of documenting emotional responses to local environments.

Combining maps with tools that relate to expressing emotions can benefit researchers when investigating children's environments (Nold 2018). Therefore, the aim of using emoji mapping was to enable a different way for children to illustrate their use of local affordances and to gauge their independent mobility within their neighbourhoods. Emoji mapping can address key limitations of prior creative methods by bridging the gap between emotional literacy and spatial representation.

Description of research

The physical context

The current permanent interfaces in Belfast are commonly constructed using brick, concrete, and / or fencing. That separation is manifested further with visible illustrations within each of the two communities in the form of flags, murals and painted kerbstones indicating the spatial divisions of the two main ethno-national groups (McAlister, Scraton, and Haydon 2014) (Figure 1).

In visual terms, these interfaces serve as a constant reminder of the past and physically embed separation into everyday living, causing permanent segregation and disconnection from other parts of the city. This intense spatial division is further reflected in residents' highly segregated mobility patterns (Hocking et al. 2018). Both communities often use different facilities and pathways in order to avoid the other community (Murtagh 2003; Shirlow 2003). Yet as Leonard (2006) points out, 'despite the levels of segregation, both working-class Catholic and Protestant communities experience similar social and economic disadvantages' (227). The painful irony of interfaces is the level to which they separate the lives of people facing shared challenges associated with hardship and multiple deprivation.

Moreover, interface communities are located in areas where everyday movement and daily living tend to stay within the constraints of their boundaries (both hidden and visible). Typically, these locations are in close proximity of one another or even sit adjacent to one another. Despite their placement, Nationalists and Unionists within these areas continue life in 'mutually exclusive social worlds' (Leonard 2006). It is highlighted in research by Dixon et al. (2019) how segregation has negatively, 'shaped citizens' capacity to move without restriction through the city, access its public spaces freely or benefit fully from its resources and facilities' (478).



Figure 1. Children playing near an interface known as a 'peace wall'. Picture by author.

Study context

This research engaged children from four interface communities, two groups from Nationalist and two groups from Unionist communities. Within each of those localities, an example of a peace wall and an example of an infrastructural boundary (major road) as interface types were chosen.

The participating centres were, Grosvenor Community Centre and Clonard Monastery Youth Centre, both situated in the Lower Falls area; the Charter Youth Centre located in the Sandy Row area and the Black Mountain Action Group, situated within the Black Mountain area. All four participating Community Centres are located in areas of Belfast that not only have physical constraints due to peace walls and infrastructural boundaries, but also suffer high levels of socio-economic disadvantage. The latter is evidenced by all four neighbourhoods being ranked in the top 8% most deprived areas in Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure, (NIMDM 2017) a metric of social prosperity used by the devolved Government in Northern Ireland (Figure 2, Table 1).

The use of Community Centres as research locations was intentional to create an informal and safe setting, where children ordinarily engage in play development outside of their formal educational settings that are also situated close to their homes. Table 2 outlines the demographic groups of the participants involved from each centre.

Emoji mapping process

The use of emojis, as described by Fane et al. (2018), is a research tool that instead seeks to position children as the 'knower' and 'framer' of knowledge within the research process. For the emoji mapping workshop, materials for each child comprised two matching sets of emoji stickers, A3 maps of the child's neighbourhood, tracing paper and a pre-prepared 'recording' sheet for the children to use.

The two matching sets of emoji stickers and recording sheet provided children with a space to stick a duplicate version of the emoji they used on their map and then write beside it 'what does this emoji mean to you?' alongside an opportunity to note down 'why did you choose it?'.

The A3 map which the children were given purposely had their Community Centre at its centre point to help the children orientate themselves when viewing the map. The geographic map used



Figure 2. Illustrating community centre locations in the context of the city and pictures of the nearest interface boundary/wall (pictures and map taken from Google Earth).

Table 1. Study area context.

Study area context			
Area	Background	NIMDM rank 2017	Interface boundary type
Grosvenor Community Centre	Nationalist	30/890	Infrastructural: Westlink Motorway
Clonard Monastery Youth Centre	Nationalist	55/890	Peace wall (brick, steel & iron) 25 feet high
Black Mountain Action Group	Unionist	60/890	Peace wall (brick, steel & iron) 25 feet high
Charter Youth Centre	Unionist	67/890	Infrastructural: Westlink Motorway

Table 2. Demographic groups.

Community centre	Participant numbers	Age & gender
Grosvenor Community Centre (GCC)	12	7–13 (11 girls & 1 boy)
Clonard Monastery Youth Centre (CMYC)	14	10–12 (14 girls)
Black Mountain Action Group (BMAG)	9	9–12 (7 girls & 2 boys)
Charter Youth Centre (CYC)	12	7–10 (9 girls & 3 boys)

was taken from Google Earth from a bird’s eye view and then printed onto an A3 page. Tracing paper was then placed on top of the maps before beginning. This was to both allow for comparisons between different mappings when overlaying all the gathered data at the end of the session and to also put the children at ease should they worry about making a mistake in placing a sticker incorrectly that might damage the map. During the workshops, informal conversations were used to supplement the emoji mapping activity. The researcher engaged children in short, open-ended discussions about the meanings behind their emoji placements, allowing deeper insight into children’s emotional associations and spatial experiences. This approach ensured that children’s own interpretations guided the analysis, minimising adult assumptions in meaning-making. Children were free to decline answering any questions during informal conversations and the research emphasised that participation was voluntary at every stage of the workshop activities.

Ethical process

Ethical approval for this study was obtained through Queen’s University Belfast and granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences. All participants were recruited through four community centres that already provided regular programming for children within the selected interface areas. Participation was entirely voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from children’s parents/guardians and assent forms completed by the children themselves. The workshops were delivered in a way that prioritised children’s comfort, creativity and confidentiality.

The decision to name the community centres was carefully considered and approved as part of the ethical review. The centres themselves served broader catchment areas and no individual child or personal address was identifiable from the findings. As such, naming the centres helped provide important socio-spatial context without compromising participant anonymity. Where direct quotes or mapping examples are included, individual participants are anonymised using age and gender coding only.

Findings: children’s emotional maps of Belfast

Incorporating children’s perceptions of local affordances and mobility was key to understanding how those in interface communities navigate their neighbourhoods. The use of emojis which is common in young people’s digital communication through texts and social media (Evans 2017) helped connect the mapping activity to their everyday lives, sparking interest and discussion. This also enables children to express both positive and negative feelings toward different local places.

Local affordances

Positive spaces

Children associated positive emotions with locations such as friends' and relatives' homes, and sometimes their school, though not all viewed school positively due to individual experiences. Clonard community participants expressed strong attachments to nearby food establishments, where they were free to visit, meet friends, socialise or enjoy favourite meals as illustrated in [Figure 3](#).

Children expressed a strong sense of place through mapping lines that illustrated movement boundaries. Some used colours to differentiate permitted (green) and restricted (red) zones. These visual cues conveyed their limited autonomy and the internalisation of safety rules shaped by adults (Figure 4).

The most utilised emojis were affiliated with more positive emotions when the children were describing their local affordances. The top five most used emojis are shown in the [Table 3](#). The places and comments written in the table have been taken exactly from the children's recording sheets. Although the common themes involved recreational spaces such as parks, sports and shops, social connections such as family and friends alongside educational buildings such as schools and libraries were also recorded.

Negative spaces

When illustrating negative feelings towards a space, the participants often highlighted parks, roads/motorway, school and derelict/bonfire sites. This issue of parks having negative connotations was common across the Grosvenor, Black Mountain and the Clonard areas. However children were conflicted in their feelings. One example is shown in [Figure 5](#) where the participant used two stickers on their local park illustrating their love towards that park but acknowledged that it is scary.

A few participants in the Black Mountain area (aged 11), highlighted their feelings towards the equipment in their parks. There were two parks located within this area (Highfield Park and Springmartin Park). The children expressed that whilst Springmartin Park was updated with new equipment, they felt that the equipment was geared more towards younger children below the age of 10. The younger participants aged 9 in this group thought that Springmartin Park was good although they described Highfield Park as 'old and boring' as shown in the below map. When questioned as to why they thought this they stated, that 'It needs to be better, we don't have fun in it so we don't go' (G9) (Figure 6).

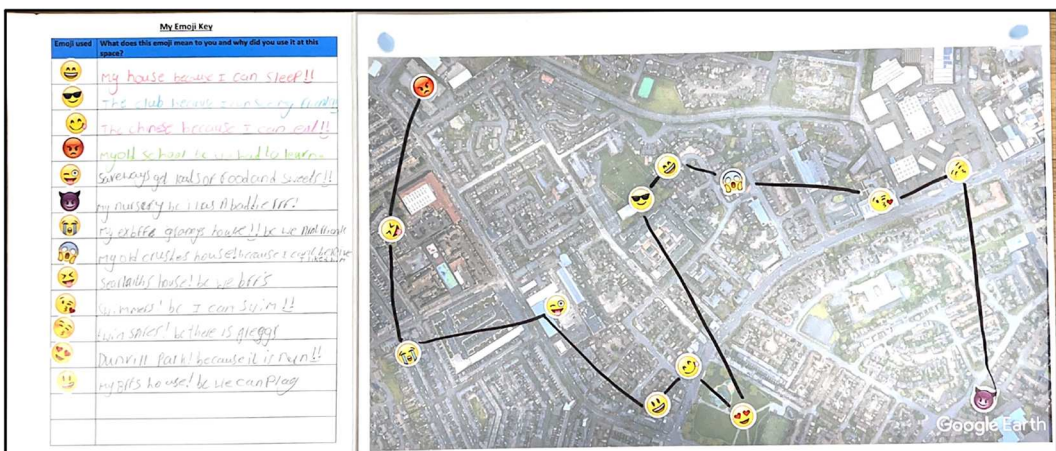


Figure 3. Example of an emoji map completed by a girl aged 10 in Clonard Monastery Youth Centre.

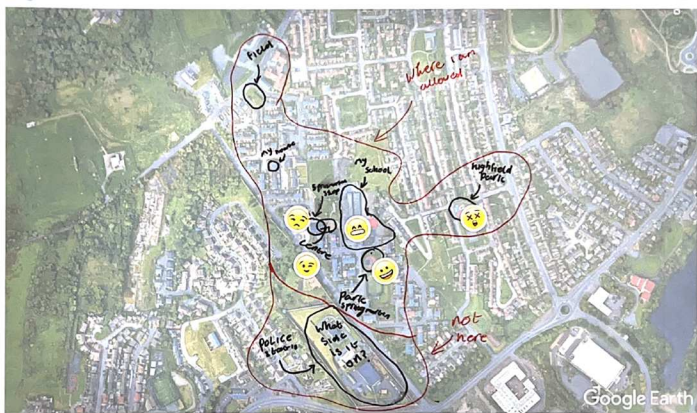


Figure 4. Example of an emoji map completed by a girl aged 10 in Black Mountain Action Group.

Other comments from participants highlighted that parks were often vandalised, which resulted in them being closed with the children subsequently not being able to use certain equipment or the entire park. In [Figure 7](#), the participant expressed sadness at ‘the park being closed at 6’ as ‘the things can get damaged’ while also highlighting anger at the treatment of the larger park because ‘things are always getting burned’. These types of incidents also affected children’s independent mobility because in some cases parents did not then allow their child to go to a certain area near the park because of cases of anti-social behaviour.

The participant who completed the emoji map in Figure 8 easily pinpointed their local landmarks.

They expressed emotions 'fun' and 'happy' on their local community centre and park although he identified that he was 'mad' at a derelict pocket of space beside the local shop and when questioned as to why, the participant answered;

It's ugly, after the shop we stand here sometimes but it's really ugly and annoying and just makes me mad.

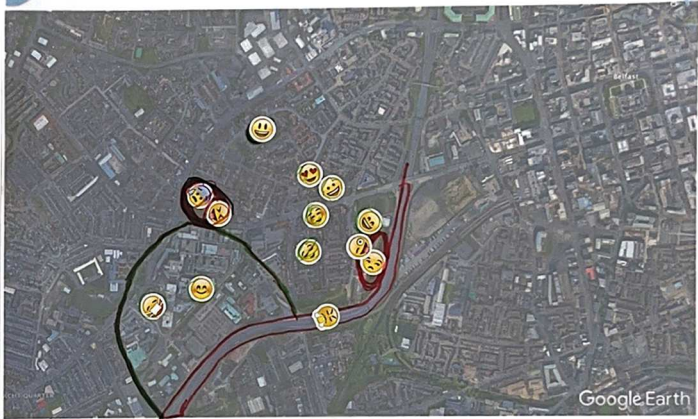
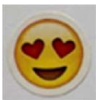

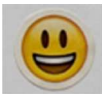
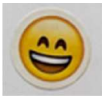



Figure 5. Example of an emoji map completed by a girl aged 10 in Grosvenor Community Centre.

Table 3. Catalogue of the emojis used in the research; positive emotions.

Emoji	Times used	Places	Emotions/comments
	16	Home, mini park, Dunville Park, Springfield Park, Russell's (shop), food shops (Greggs, Subway, Chinese), Grandparents houses, Nursery, Community Centre, local playing space (back fields)	Shop where I get breakfast Fun Mostly fun Great Love Walk to Greggs (shop) on a Sunday Love playing on swings & scooter
	16	Home, Shop, Park, Dunville Park, local playing space, food shop (Chippy), hairdressers, school, hospital, pitch	OK Fun Park has been updated but more for little kids than older Shelby's the only chippy Got my hair done here for my Communion Happy Safe
	15	Club (community centre), Springmartin Park, Schools, Shopping, Family, Hospital, cul de sac, chapel, local playing space (back fields)	Fun Good Friend's house for play All my friends live here Hospital (helps people) My BFFs house Play
	12	Park, local play space, school, Arellian Nursery, Charter (community centre), friend's house, chapel, Falls Park, community centre, hospital	Good OK My house because I can sleep Love Like Love the club I like school
		Cool (apartments), not my favourite (school), Sweet Treat shop is amazing, swimmers because I can swim, Greggs, shops, Swimmers, Nursery school, home, school, park	Cool Not my favourite Amazing Because I can swim Love Love sleeping in bed Happy

When talking to another participant (boy aged 9) he was asked about travel outside of the community and he stated;

My mum doesn't let me go anywhere near the city centre or Botanic. (a city centre park) If we're going shopping, we drive to Boucher or Abbey Centre (Out of Town Shopping Complexes).

This was very telling when considering that the neighbourhood in which this child lived was located close to the city centre. This dislocation from Belfast city centre and its amenities was echoed by the participants of Grosvenor Community Centre. Despite being situated no less than a 10-minute walk away from the city centre, they indicated that they remained on their neighbourhood side of the Westlink boundary.

When another participant described that he was allowed to go to the shops on his own, his friend had interjected and said,

He's lying ... his ma doesn't let him go to the shop on his own. (B10)

illustrating that there is always the possibility of misleading or conflicting information being provided by the children when using the emoji mapping process.

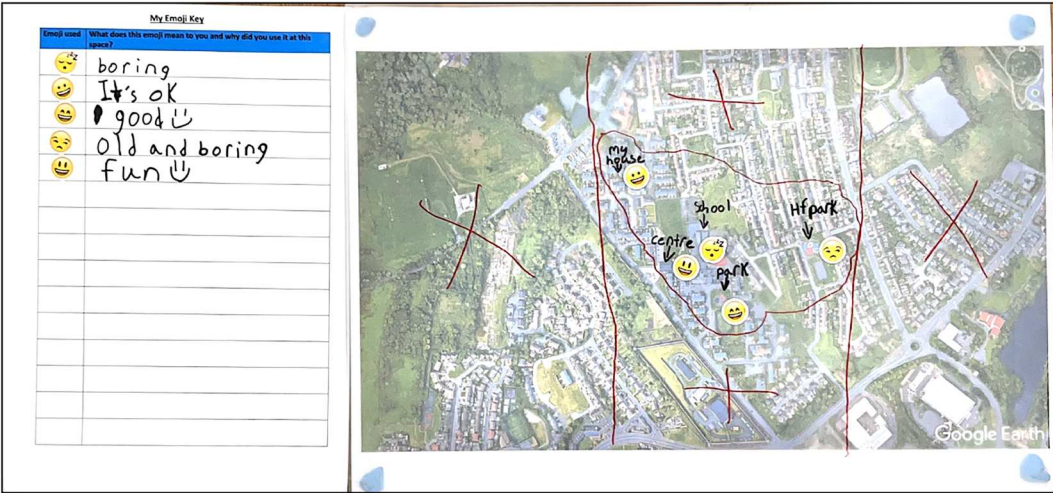


Figure 6. Example of an emoji map completed by a girl aged 9 in Black Mountain Action Group.

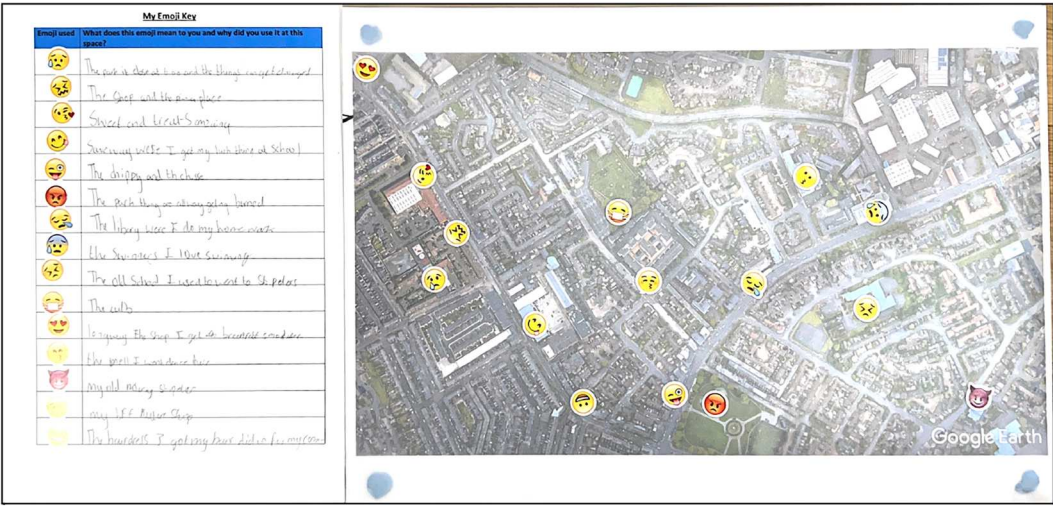


Figure 7. Example of an emoji map completed by a girl aged 11 in Clonard Monastery Youth Centre.

The use of emojis illustrating negative feelings varied, at times it was linked to a personal memory or experience and in other instances was linked to the physical space. Table 4 illustrates the top five most used emojis associated with negative feelings towards their specific place.

Mobility and boundaries

Clonard participants who were generally older, noted more freedom of movement, reflecting trust and familiarity with their neighbourhood. Many described food establishments as places of enjoyment and independence. Although one of the participants aged 10 did state that she was not allowed near the bottom of the Dunville Park due to it being ‘dangerous’ referring to the possibility of anti-social behaviour there.

Children from the Grosvenor community often drew the M1 Motorway, also known as the Westlink, as a boundary. This was acknowledged as a barrier that restricted them in being able to move

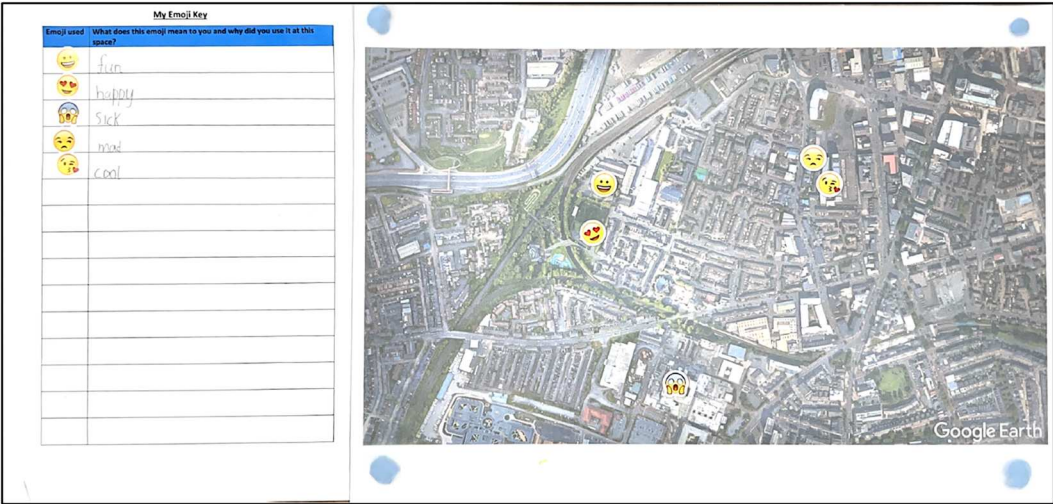







Figure 8. Example of an emoji map completed by a boy aged 10 in Charter Youth Centre.

beyond this. The children also showed awareness to the community being ‘different’ at the ‘other side’ of the motorway with one participant expressing,

I hate bonfires ... it makes the place ugly but people still burn stuff here. Themins burn stuff on their side too (indicating at the opposite community) and it smells. Fires just aren’t nice! (G11)

Relating back to the use of lines one participant aged 10 incorporated both red and green to illustrate where they were allowed and not allowed to travel independently. This is shown in Figure 9

Table 4. Catalogue of the emojis used in the research; negative emotions.

Emoji	Times used	Places	Emotions/comments
	8	School, park, local playing space (back fields), road, motorway	Park equipment always getting burned My old school because I had to learn Too much traffic Been in hospital too many times Annoying traffic Bonfires
	6	School, hospital, motorway road, chippy (food shop)	My old crushes house because I can't believe I liked him Scared Not allowed Afraid of motorway
	6	Nurse school, derelict site, chapel	My old nurse I was stupid Nurse school where I was a baddie Where they build bonfires on other side of the wall Because a certain boy goes here (school) They're devils (competitor school)
	4	Swimmers, Park, motorway	Love Bad men Scary Big Afraid
		Shop, fast food shop (pizza), hospital, park	Too much fires Needles

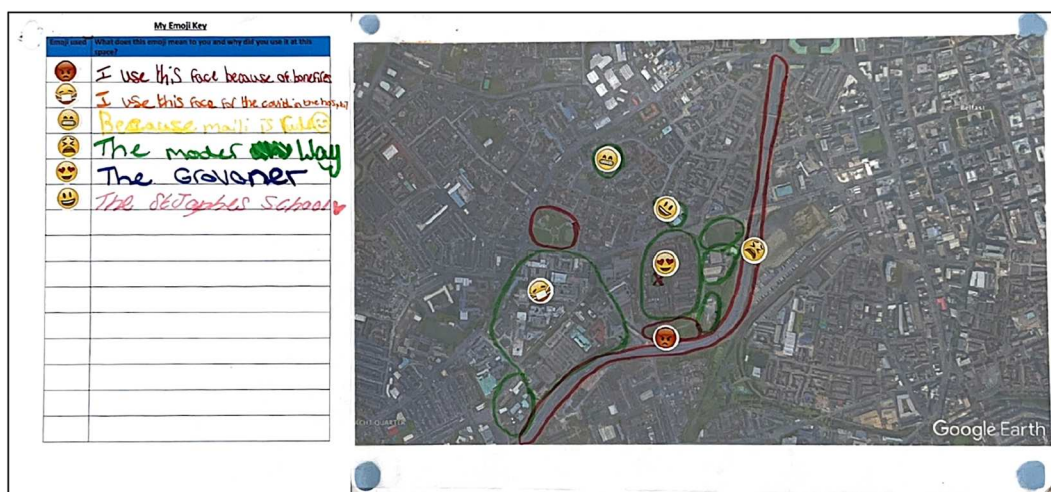


Figure 9. Example of an emoji map completed by a girl aged 10 from Grosvenor Community Centre.

with the Dunville Park (which is the participant's local park) highlighted in red showing that she was not allowed to travel here without parental supervision. This was similar to the example shown from the CMYC participant from the Clonard community highlighting how anti-social events at this site have created negative parental perceptions that in turn, can impact on the child.

The participant who completed the emoji map in **Figure 10** illustrated in red, the extent to which she was allowed to travel independently. Children from the same area produced similar outcomes highlighting the lack of exploration outside their local neighbourhood based on parental or guardians' guidance. She also asked the question 'whose side is it on?' when referring to the Police Station. This was due to it being situated behind the interface wall but still located on the main road entering their community, which caused some confusion as to community ownership of it.

When overlaying the tracing paper from participant's emoji maps, both the Black Mountain area and the Grosvenor area had similar elements in terms of children's travel boundaries. The main difference between the two was that Grosvenor is confined by an infrastructural boundary

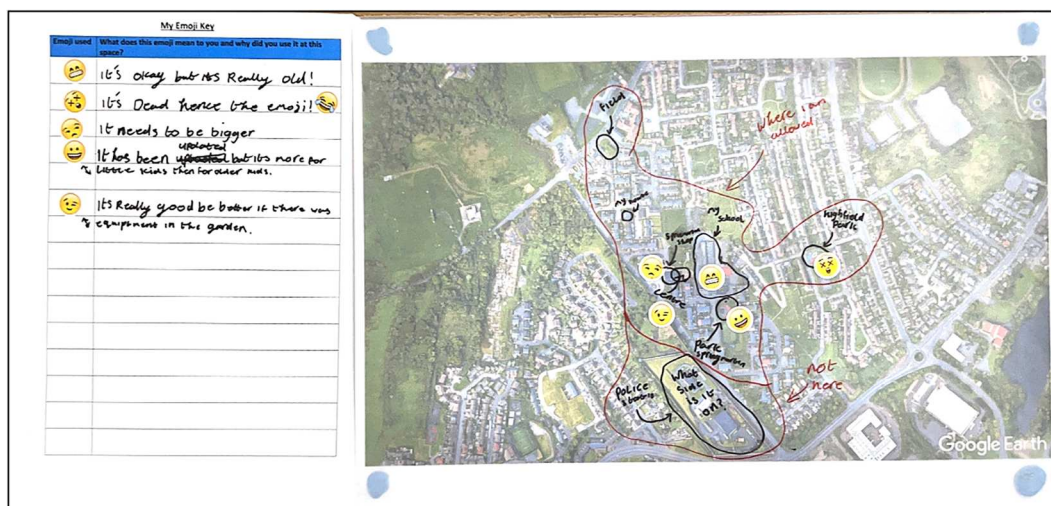


Figure 10. Example of an emoji map completed by a girl aged 11 in Black Mountain Action Group.

(Westlink Motorway) and Black Mountain is confined by a peace wall boundary (on Springmartin Road). This highlighted that despite boundaries being of a different nature, they still have a similar effect on children's mobility within their neighbourhoods (Figures 11–14).

The findings from the emoji mapping exercise suggest that, for many children living in interface communities, the boundaries created by interface barriers are not merely external obstacles but have been internalised as part of their cognitive and emotional geographies. One of the most striking findings from the emoji mapping exercise was children's almost complete absence of reference to the 'other side' or opposing neighbouring community. Despite the proximity of adjacent communities, children focused almost exclusively on their own neighbourhoods illustrating internalised barriers. The spatial insularity suggests that interface divisions are not merely physical but have been deeply internalised, shaping children's mental geographies from an early age. In many

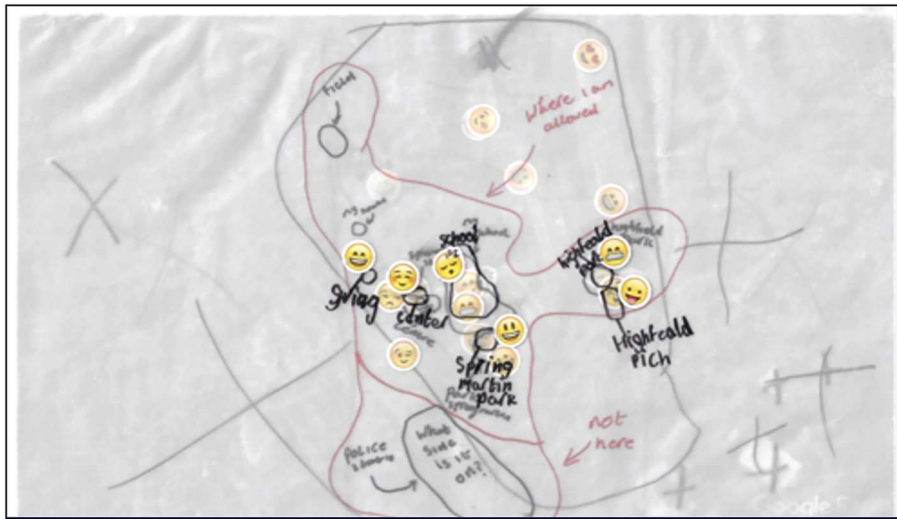


Figure 11. Layered map from Black Mountain Action Group.



Figure 12. Black Mountain Action Group boundary map.



Figure 13. Layered map from Grosvenor Community Centre.

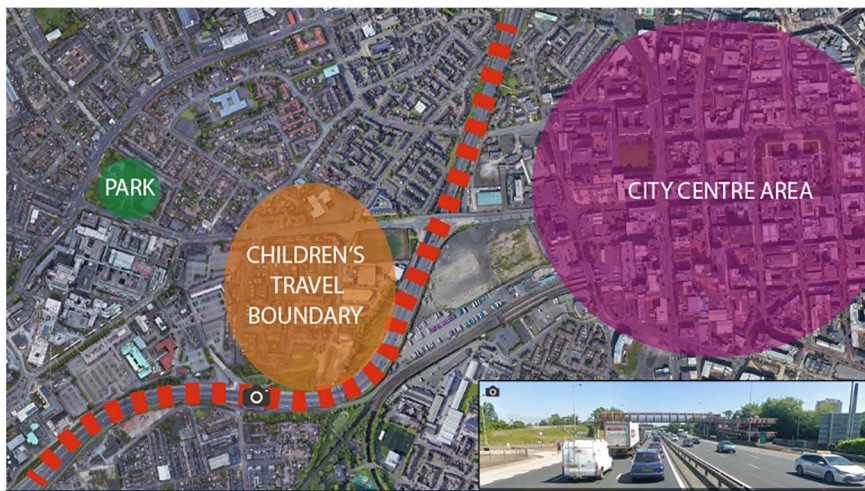


Figure 14. Grosvenor Community Centre boundary map.

cases, the boundary appears not as a contested or negotiable space, but as a taken-for-granted limit to everyday life and mobility. Interfaces, therefore, are not only physical structures that restrict movement but also psychological frontiers that shape children's perceptions of belonging, safety, and possibility. Understanding this internalisation is crucial for interpreting the limited spatial horizons and emotional attachments revealed through children's maps.

The emotional cartographies produced by the children thus highlight the lasting effects of spatial segregation on social imaginaries, illustrating how material barriers are mirrored by psychological ones. Understanding this phenomenon is critical for post-conflict urban planning efforts, which must account for the layered entrenchment of division, even among younger generations with no direct memory of the Troubles. This silent acceptance of separation highlights the need for planning interventions that not only physically reconnect divided spaces but also address hidden social and emotional barriers that continue to limit integration.

Reflection

The use of emoji mapping proved effective not only in capturing children's emotional responses to their environments but also in revealing how deeply their everyday geographies are shaped by the realities of segregation. While some children identified positive associations with local spaces, many mapped tightly constrained patterns of movement, with emotions clustered around very specific and familiar places. The absence of references to the 'other side' of the peace walls or infrastructural boundaries highlights a strong internalisation of spatial division, the boundaries are not merely external, but part of the children's lived experience and understanding of place.

This finding reflects broader arguments within emotional geography that emotions are deeply entwined with place, memory and identity (Bondi 2006; Caquard and Griffin 2018). Children's mobility or lack thereof was not solely dictated by physical obstacles like walls or roads but was also influenced by inherited fears, community narratives and parental restrictions. These intangible emotional and social barriers contribute significantly to the shaping of children's environmental perceptions and independent mobility.

Moreover, the complexity of emotional attachments uncovered through the emoji mapping, for example, where a park could simultaneously evoke feelings of happiness, fear and frustration challenges simplistic binaries of 'positive' and 'negative space'. Instead, children's experiences of place are layered, shifting, and context-dependent. Recognising this complexity is crucial if urban planning is to move beyond purely infrastructural solutions and toward creating environments that foster genuine social connection and emotional well-being.

This reflection also suggests that emotional cartography, when child-centred, can surface subtle but powerful insights into how post-conflict urban landscapes are inhabited. Future participatory methods could build on this by encouraging even more child-led creation of symbols, narratives and mappings, helping to surface the emotional 'in-betweenness' that often remains invisible in traditional urban analysis.

Limitations

When distributing the A3 maps to the children, it was decided to attach an A3 piece of tracing paper to the front of each map. This was for two reasons, firstly, to aid the researcher in making comparisons by overlaying individual sheets at a later stage. Secondly, it was felt that the children might feel more at ease because if they made a mistake, they could easily remove the A3 tracing paper without compromising the map. This did have a drawback as 3 of the youngest participants (aged 7–9 years old) reported that they did not like using the tracing paper as it made it more difficult for them to identify places in their neighbourhood. Where this was the case, the children were simply allowed to remove the tracing paper. A further challenge for some of the younger children was the scale and extent of the maps. In addition to being able to identify their Community Centre, the younger children found it helpful to be able to identify their own home. When this was not the case, they struggled compared with the older children.

Overall, the use of emoji mapping allowed for the extent of children's movements and opinions of their local neighbourhoods to be identified. For younger children, the exercise could be made inclusive by simply using larger maps (A2 or A1) with local landmarks clearly identified. It would also be ideal to ensure the use of pen and marker so that it transfers more clearly when scanned digitally for data input.

To take this method one step further, work with children could be undertaken to agree and create their own set of icons to represent how they feel about certain places in their neighbourhood. This could potentially add further depth to the analysis, this process could help children to create their own symbols linked to their lived experience which may differ from generic emojis, thus making them even more place specific and encouraging the child as the 'expert'.

It is also important to note that emoji mapping still assumes a level of spatial orientation that may vary among participants, as some children find map reading challenging (Lobben 2003; Mohan and Mohan 2013). In addition, the study's sample included a higher proportion of girls than boys, which may have influenced how freedom of movement was described, given that children's mobility is often shaped by gendered expectations (Roulston et al. 2017). These factors should be considered when applying this method in other contexts.

Conclusion: toward emotionally inclusive urban futures

Research methods should be inclusive so that they do not undermine attempts to misappropriate the voice of participants (Beazley et al. 2011; Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, and Bottrell 2015). By combining the use of emoji stickers and maps, with the opportunity to add explanations on a pre-prepared template sheet, participating children were enabled to communicate their thoughts and perceptions on their neighbourhoods. If employed more widely as a research method, the authors contend that it could better inform research on local neighbourhoods by including children.

Participatory practices should be employed when contextualised knowledge is sought out, when specific knowledge on certain places is needed or when changes have been suggested to environments that children use and relate to. (Cele and Van Der Burgt 2015, 27)

The historic failings of not engaging children in urban planning have negatively impacted their quality of life (Wood 2015). Many aspects of the urbanisation of space inherently fail to provide healthy environments (Nordström 2009). This is particularly evident in disadvantaged communities where children rely more heavily on their immediate space for affordances (McCorie et al. 2021). Gaining the perspectives of children in interface communities needs to reflect their specific relationship with their urban environment, rather than focus on the binary and limited categories of 'us and them'. The similarities of issues identified during the emoji mapping workshops in the four Community Centres suggest shared class and social impacts worthy of much deeper study. This is important, as existing research suggests that affordances within the local and wider community area are not as easily accessed by children in working class communities and that binary ethno-religious identities can explain only so much about growing up in a post-conflict city (Murtagh and Murphy 2011).

Understanding how children truly perceive their spaces is crucially important in the regeneration of local areas. One example being that adults often create parks as play spaces under the assumption that this is simply what children want. Conversely, as elicited during the emoji mapping exercise, the children expressed deeper views as to the actual quality of parks, types of equipment, safety, access and utility. Thus, when children were given the appropriate platform to express their views, they did so and included practical input as to the quality and sustainability of the traditional play parks in their neighbourhoods.

Children living in interface areas have to live and grow up in communities which are disconnected. Yet children find ways to use local spaces and have innovative ideas on how such spaces can be improved. In order to express those views, they require understandable engagement processes. Participants indicated limited mobility outside of their area and a disconnect from city core, indicating a need for city planners to enhance child-led participatory processes in view of wider city planning. Pánek (2018) eloquently describes the benefits of mapping as a community-based methodology, stating;

Creating a map within a community has an empowering effect because members of the community have the opportunity to think spatially about their environment and literally put their community, their perceptions and their emotions on a map. (19)

The findings from this research underline the importance of developing research methodologies that authentically capture children's perceptions of their environments. By combining emotional

mapping with child-friendly tools such as emojis, the project demonstrated that participants could articulate complex emotional geographies, mapping both the affordances and barriers they experience daily. This method highlighted not only physical constraints on children's mobility but also the emotional and psychological boundaries embedded in Belfast's divided urban landscape.

Importantly, the research shows that for children living in interface communities, spatial divisions have become internalised and normalised. The limited acknowledgment of neighbouring communities and the restricted patterns of mobility revealed through the mapping exercise suggest that efforts to physically dismantle peace walls must be accompanied by social, cultural and emotional initiatives aimed at rebuilding shared urban futures.

From a planning perspective, these findings have clear implications, urban regeneration and city-making processes must move beyond infrastructural solutions to address the social and emotional realities of spatial division. Meaningful child participation should be embedded at all stages of planning and development, not merely as a tokenistic exercise but as a vital tool for uncovering local knowledge. Methods such as emoji mapping, particularly when adapted to be even more child-led, offer promising avenues for ensuring that the voices of children from marginalised communities inform the creation of more inclusive, connected and sustainable urban environments. Recognising the emotional geographies produced by urban landscapes is essential not only for understanding children's experiences, but for imagining urban futures grounded in healing, belonging and connection.

Ultimately, reimagining cities like Belfast requires understanding to the emotional landscapes that young citizens inhabit. If future planning efforts are to genuinely support post-conflict reconciliation and social cohesion, they must begin by listening creatively, respectfully and genuinely to uncover how children feel and experience the places they call home.

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