How 20 minute neighborhoods are about more than proximity

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The desire to reduce car dependence is about promoting health, well-being and social equity and cohesion as much as it is about transitioning to a zero-carbon economy.

Among other things, high-level aims and objectives typically focus on promoting local living through easy access to daily needs via active and public transport and limiting longer distance commutes to no more than 30 minutes each way.

The focus is increasingly on so-called 10-, 15- or 20-minute neighborhoods to meet local needs, framed in policy diagrams by a 400–800 meter radius of walkable or cyclable areas from people's homes.

Intuitively, this makes sense. We have been trained by years of car-oriented transport planning to think about how we travel in terms of minutes of travel time. A 20-minute round trip to the shops, or to take the kids to school aligns with everyday experience, hence the appeal of such proximity-based policies.

Schools are at the core of most of these local living strategies and the communities they aim to strengthen.

Children's access to good education during primary and secondary school has long been a central tenet of Australian culture and policy, with the expectation that schools are essential elements of local neighborhood life. And in many ways, they remain so, but increasingly Australian children, however local their schools may be, are driven to school at some of the highest rates in the OECD.

For example, in Australia active transport rates for primary school trips only constitute around 25% of total trips, compared to children's active transport rates of 98% in Japan, 87% in the Netherlands and 52% in the U.K. This has been allowed to happen despite long-standing evidence that cognitive development and emotional well-being are better with higher levels of children's active mobility in society, especially when they access schools via active modes such as walking, cycling and public

transport.

Due to the complexity of most children's (and adults') lives, if the school run becomes car-based, then a key anchor for local living policies becomes unmoored, leading to the erosion of other elements necessary for a child-friendly urban ecosystem.

However, there is a strong alignment between the ideals of local livability, child-friendly urbanism and children's use of active transport to get to school. Rather than purely being about proximity and travel time, it is necessary to understand the situation in a more sophisticated way that can tackle the complexities around school travel. Otherwise, we run the risk of continuing to thwart our goal of increasing sustainable transport and reducing our reliance on cars.

A simple inclusion of a school within a 20-minute neighborhood—as a key community facility—will not necessarily fix the Australian families' reliance on cars for daily trips. This is because proximity to a service does not directly translate to equitable access. Schools, while often expected to be local, are not always locally accessed due to many factors influencing families' decisions on school travel.

School journey as part of a chained trip

A key dimension of these complexities around travel to school is the presence of extra-curricular activities that populate the before and after school hours of most Australian school-aged children. These extracurricular services (such as sports clubs) often operate from a point where the spatial and temporal constraints of automobility apply and become a factor contributing to high rates of private car usage to access schools regardless of distance.

Therefore, proximity to sports facilities, particularly for school-aged

children, again [does not necessarily lead to accessibility](#) due to factors such as venue switching for matches or individual preferences. Car-based transport is in fact the norm for extra-curricular activities, allowing for non-localized arrangements for sports, drama, dance, music, entertainment and recreation.

School zoning

Schools also come in many shapes and forms, unlike the uniform way it is depicted in the 20-minute policy diagrams. Not every school is sited and served as a local school, with choice also coming into play, with schools often having specialized programs that may be desired and so in these cases the location might not be a factor.

School zoning is another factor as it doesn't exist for all schools (or is enforced), especially in the context of private schools. More importantly, school zones are not always based on the active or public transport network, but instead based on as-the-crow-flies distances. Thus, the mere inclusion of a school within an as-the-crow-flies 10-minute catchment is no guarantee that children will even enroll there, and if they do, that they will arrive using their own agency.

The choice factor

The Australian education landscape is characterized by multiple education providers with 31% of [primary school](#) students and 43% of secondary school students attending private schools (Catholic and independent) according to the [2021 Census](#).

A recent [study](#) on the relationship between the school type and travel mode in Queensland found that there was higher private car usage to access private schools, with an additional 71,000 kilometers for primary

schools and 266,136 kilometers for secondary schools.

In addition, the emergence of "super schools" where a number of small government (and sometimes non-government) schools are amalgamated to form centralized schools with much larger student cohorts (in some cases more than 2,000 students across Years 7 to 12) and catchment areas represents a clear clash against the local school concept as depicted in the local living policies.

Social traps

Across WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic) countries, we have been seeing the changing parental ideals and social norms which make individual parents responsible for protecting their children from traffic-related dangers. These Western ideals of parenting dictate that family is the discreet social unit to control children's everyday movements, usually by private means of transport. While most Australian local living policies include social goals such as social inclusion and cohesion, these are not easy to achieve without dismantling these social traps around individualist and parent-centered approaches to children's safety.

But wait, there's more!

Several other social, cultural and emotional factors influence the travel behavior of families with school-aged children. Amongst these are the non-instrumental factors of comfort, affective, and social aspects. For example, the parents' perceptions of the social and built environment as well as the perceptions of their children's place within the emotionality-maturity continuum and their capacity to cope with any hazards.

The over-emphasis of instrumental aspects such as distance also undermines the importance of bodily practices associated with active

modes of transport and children's social and cultural experiences in the form of sociality, narrativity, and playfulness, when moving around their local environments. In the absence of safe conditions that genuinely facilitate these experiences, the assumption that proximity will be a key factor in leading to active commuting to school is rather ill-fated.

Land use and transport integration seems to be a key principle of how most Australian local living policies are conceptualized. Though not a newly adopted concept, Australian cities are yet to overcome several challenges to achieve land use and sustainable transport integration, rather than the land use-transport integration for cars and trucks that currently exists.

Schools indeed would offer unique opportunities to test the success of any policies aiming at land use and sustainable transport integration, but will require a holistic approach that extends beyond proximity.

Unfortunately, Australian local living policies, compared to international examples, lack these specific and fine-grained actions.

If we are serious about making schools locally accessible services, we need to start thinking beyond proximity and develop more conceptually informed policies that are truly in tune with these complexities in play.

Against the less favorable currently-existing conditions like entrenched car culture, Australian local living policies would greatly benefit from the recognition of the multifaceted nature of school travel. These insights then can be applied to other community infrastructures as the other building blocks of 20-minute neighborhoods.

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