URBAN EXPLORERS 2018-2019

CHILD ENGAGEMENT IN PLANNING

FINAL REPORT

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PART I

'WHAT WE DID'

Urban Explorers

The Urban Explorers program builds on decades of research and experience from the Child Friendly Cities and Growing Up in Cities initiatives taking place internationally. The program was developed by researcher and planner Ildiko G. Kovacs under the Society for Children and Youth of BC's (SCY's) Child and Youth Friendly Communities projects. Urban Explorers delivers the Participatory Planning Pedagogy (PPP) based environmental and sustainability education (ESE) curriculum, joining a critical-constructivist pedagogy with a participatory planning approach.

Urban Explorer's main objective is to provide opportunities for child and youth participation in urban planning and is delivered in close collaboration with various departments at the City of Vancouver; most significantly the Department of Planning, Urban Design & Sustainability, and the City's Board of Parks and Recreation.

During the 2018-2019 school year sixty Vancouver School Board students participated in the Urban Explorers program. Participants' ages ranged from 9-12 (grades 4-7), and the two participating schools were located in East and South Vancouver. Over the course of 16-20 sessions the sixty students learned about city planning and the urban sustainability challenge, explored the City of Vancouver, then developed ideas and recommendations on how various social and environmental challenges can be addressed with the city's Broadway Plan Project, and the Park Board's VanPlay vision of an Interconnected Green Network. Student ideas were developed into design-models, photo-voice posters and one stop-motion-animation, and these projects were presented back to planners and city staff at a final showcase event.

The Urban Explorer's PPP Curriculum: Activities and Implementation

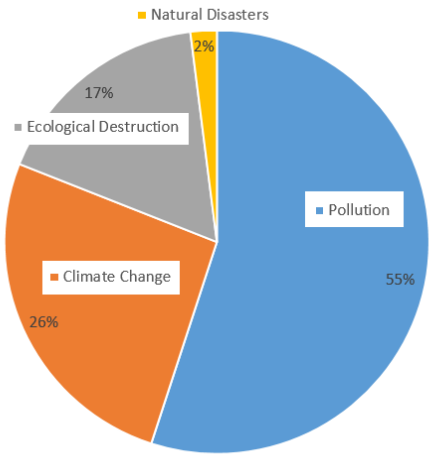
Session	PPP Curriculum
1	**PART 1: Intro/Background** • City on the Wall • Collab. Issues-Mapping • Timeline Game • Guest Lectures • Video documentaries • Human needs & rights
2	
3	**PART 2: Student-Led Inquiry** • Neighbourhood Mapping • Neighbourhood walk with Photo-documentation • City and/or park assessments • Guest presenters' workshops • Peer/peer-mentor discussions (of issues, consequences) • Online/Library research
4	
5	
6	
7	**PART 3: Projects** • Group Models and/or posters • Visioning essays/artwork • Peer/peer-mentor/expert discussions (of solutions) • Final Showcase • Reflections
8	
9	
10	
11	
12	

PART II

THE CITY TODAY

A) SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES

Collaborative Issues-Mapping: We asked students to identify sustainability challenges in the initial part of the Urban Explorers program in order to take a baseline measurement of their group knowledge and to guide the student-led inquiry. The challenges students listed were divided into a matrix, grouping environmental and social issues, and global and local concerns separately.

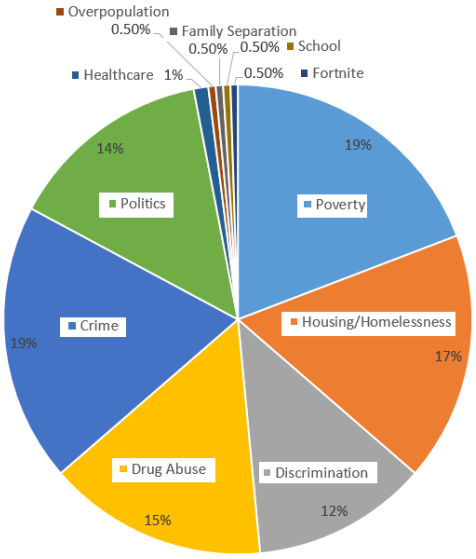


Summary of Environmental Challenges:

Students' environmental sustainability concerns were coded into four main overarching categories, **Pollution, Climate Change, Ecological Destruction**, and 'Natural Disasters,' with the following results:

⇨ An overwhelming number of students are concerned with the extent of pollution taking place globally and locally – (55% of responses). This concern spans across all varieties of resource misuse resulting in contamination of air, land, and water. Within this overarching category students showed a very significant concern about plastic pollution most specifically as a major problem in our oceans. Food-waste was also a significant concern. Litter and garbage in parks or public spaces was seen as a major local issue.

- ⇨ Climate change (and related issues) are the second main concern (26% of responses), and most students are aware of both global and local consequences of changing weather patterns: namely, the growing prevalence of wild-fires, droughts, floods, and mudslides. Wild-fires and ongoing fossil-fuel dependence were major local concern, with the Indigenous student population showing most awareness of this issue and its relationship to First Nation's sovereignty on unceded native land.
- ⇨ The third main concern, coded 'Ecological Destruction,' included wildlife extinction, habitat and biodiversity loss and deforestation and made up 17% of the responses.
- ⇨ Only a very small number of students (2%) were concerned with natural disasters.



Summary of Social Challenges:

Social sustainability concerns of young people were grouped into the following ten broad categories: **Poverty, Housing/Homelessness, Drug Abuse, Crime, Politics, Discrimination,** Healthcare, Education, Family Separation and Overpopulation.

- Poverty, Crime and Housing/Homelessness were the top three major concerns followed closely by Drug Abuse, Discrimination and Politics.
- Within the 'Poverty' category food-insecurity was a top concern for students both globally and locally, and general concern with high prices and lack of affordability in Vancouver was highlighted as another local concern.
- Sexual abuse and harassment, bullying, gun-violence and kidnapping were listed as major local concerns within the 'Crime' category. This ties in with the 'Discrimination' category where sexual discrimination was a top concern, followed by racism both globally and locally. One student pointed specifically to the issue of how 'black and white [people] are separated."
- Students listed homelessness as a main local concern within the 'Housing' category, and highlighted related issues with evictions and unaffordable housing prices.
- Within the 'Politics' category war was a top concern on a global scale, while locally Pipeline politics and governments in general were highlighted as a social challenge. The local issue of urban development and resource extraction on "stolen land" was added anonymously to the board, and became part of group discussions within two of the three classes.
- Smoking and addictions were major concerns in the 'Drug abuse' category.
- Healthcare was only a minimal concern (1%), listed by two respondents, and the issue of overpopulation, family separation, "schools," and Fortnite were also of least concern (each listed only one respondent).
- Following neighbourhood and Broadway area field-trips, the "Issues Map" was expanded with two **additional concerns**:
  - ⇨ **Fun:** Lack of adequate outdoor safe and fun play-areas available for children.

⇨ **Amenities:** Lack of adequate number of regularly dispersed free public washrooms and water fountains. (Tim Hortons, Starbucks and McDonalds are the 'to-go' places for a cup of cold water and a washroom.)

Selected Sustainability Challenges

At the initial stage of the program students selected (i.e. prioritized) one or more sustainability challenges to focus on in their project work. The majority of students focused on housing-homelessness, (lack of) fun (e.g. play-spaces), resource waste, poverty, drug abuse, crime, habitat-loss, and/or climate-change.

B) IMPORTANT ACTIVITIES, PLACES & FIELDTRIP HIGHLIGHTS

Children's after-school and weekend activities

THE CITY & NEIGHBOURHOOD

Favourite Activities in Vancouver*:* Students were asked to list, then map out their favourite afterschool and weekend activities. By far students spend most of their after-school and weekends at home, the majority of it **indoors** playing **videogames**. In fact, one student even commented how they never get to play outside except for school recess and lunch. When **outdoors**, children's most favourite activity is to **play in the park with friends**. The other most highly preferred activities are basketball, swimming, and shopping.

Children's after-school and weekend activity places

Favourite Places in Vancouver*:* For the three groups (one in South Vancouver and two in East Vancouver) favourite areas of the city were the local neighbourhood **parks, community or friendship centers**, and the **school yard**. This was followed by shopping malls, then friends' houses, Playland and Science World. Streets, back-yards, and laneways were not reported as important spaces for young people in the current city.

BROADWAY AREA

Pre-Broadway Fieldtrip Survey:

- Results of a brief pre-fieldtrip survey and discussion highlighted that about **half of East Vancouver students frequently visit the Broadway corridor area**. The majority of this group gets here by transit, about a quarter walk and another quarter take a car with family. None of the students bike (or roll) to the area.
- **South Vancouver students rarely**, if ever **come to the Broadway Corridor** area, although they may drive through on their way downtown or to other parts of Metro Vancouver. For this group the main form of transportation to or across the Broadway area is with the family car.
- Once at Broadway both groups of students walked around the neighbourhood. When asked about using the bike-share students commented on how it is not affordable nor accessible for children, hence it is not an option for them to use. Students' most preferred mode of transportation in the area and in general is walking, followed by equal preference for transit and car-use.
- The highlight of the Broadway area for all young people is shopping, restaurants, cafes and other food sources, and where available, parks for play. One group also mentioned how they like the community centers and libraries in the area.

Children's Transportation and Activities in the Broadway-Corridor Area

Neighbourhood	How do you get there?	How do you get around there?	Favourite/preferred mode of transportation?	What do you do there?
East Vancouver	55% by transit 23% walk 22% by car	Walking	Walking/Driving	Shopping Food-Restaurants Play-Recreation - Library
South Vancouver	90% by car	Walking	Walking/Driving	Shopping Food-Restaurants

Post Broadway Fieldtrip Group Input: Group discussions of highlights of Broadway area walk were recorded and are summarized in the following list:

- **Play**: Play affordance is the number one factor that makes areas child-friendly. Any public space that provides an area for various forms of outdoor play (be it social, nature-based or adventure/risky play) is considered a fun space by young people. Areas on route that provided climbing opportunities were positively assessed. The False Creek Elementary School's shared public playground's treehouse was a highlight, as were any other play-structures with elements of adventure/challenge/risk (height or speed) such as ziplines, swings or tall slides.

- **Social**: Opportunity at False Creek Elementary to meet children from other schools and (for some) to play basketball together was a major positive and fun experience. Other opportunities to be social and rest or play – for example in the two small intersection parks (one a green-space the other with a water fountain and benches) were greatly appreciated.

- **Animal friends**: Wildlife and urban pets were received with excitement

- **City Hall**: One major highlight for all students was the opportunity to visit City Hall and go into Council Chambers. The green-space outside of City Hall was an inspiration as well – both the Helena Gutteridge Plaza with its seating where students had snacks, as well as the community garden with its abundance of interesting plants, flowers, and climbable trees.

- **Water**: Ponds, the seawall, and all water-fountains were much enjoyed by children. Drinking water fountains were a special (and unusual) highlight!

The following table lists all major highlights of fieldtrips reported by the three groups of students. These are coded as "Risky/Adventurous Play,' (RP) 'Social Play,' (SP) 'Nature Play,' (NP) 'Other Health/Wellness,' (OHW) and 'Environmental Sustainability' (ES). (Note: the first four categories can be grouped under Health/Wellness or Social Sustainability and include aspects related to physical and mental health, such as nutrition, social connectedness and active lifestyles).

Children's City Assessment Highlights

Fieldtrip Highlight	Social & Environmental Sustainability				
PLAY EQUIPMENT	RP	SP	NP	OHW	ES
Ziplines	✓				
Swings	✓				
Sandbox		✓			
Slides – especially giant and 'unsafe' ones	✓				
Pool (with slides)	✓				
Tree house (at False Creek Elementary)	✓	✓			
Climbing wall	✓				
Double see-saw	✓	✓			
Big bouncy horse	✓				
Ropes & trampoline	✓				
Basketball court/Playing basketball with other school's kids		✓			
Old car to play in	[✓]	✓			✓
Fire-pits		✓	✓		
Indoor playgrounds		✓		✓	
Skate-park	✓	✓			
Parkour area	✓	✓			
NATURE	RP	SP	NP	OHW	ES
Parks, green-spaces, pocket parks		✓		✓	✓
View of waterfront				✓	
Seawall	✓		✓		
Bridge over pond	✓		✓		
Wildlife in parks (animal 'therapy')				✓	✓
Moat	✓		✓		
Trees to climb	✓		✓		
Trees for shade-air-aesthetic (nature therapy)				✓	✓
Bench-seating		✓		✓	
Dog park (animal 'therapy')		✓		✓	✓
Community garden		✓	✓	✓	✓
OTHER AMENITIES	RP	SP	NP	OHW	ES
Shops		✓			
Cafes		✓			
Rain shelter		✓		✓	
Food (esp. affordable street food)		✓		✓	
Free/Accessible Health and Dental care				✓	
Public Art: climbable	✓			✓	
TRANSPORTATION	RP	SP	NP	OHW	ES
Electric cars					✓
Bike-lanes					✓
Walkable areas					✓
Skate-skooter-roll areas	✓	✓			

PART III:

STUDENT VISIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS for BROADWAY 2050

Student models and their verbal or written descriptions were analyzed together, and student input was grouped into the following five categories: Housing; Public Spaces; Form & Environmental Design; Transportation; and Culture.

HOUSING

- '**Free housing**:' Given that housing affordability and homelessness were identified as a priority concern for the students, it is not surprising that the majority of models included a homeless shelter. Many students labelled this 'free housing' and also added necessary supports in the vicinity of this building such as hospitals "for immediate medical support," food bank, 'free store,' 'pay-as-much-as-you-can' cafes and shops, job-support, and one group also added a police station.

- '**Low-income housing**:' The next most common recommendation was to build housing that is affordable for low-income families and seniors. The majority of students suggested that these be mid-rise apartment buildings, with some recommending co-operative townhome housing, and a few suggesting high-rise mixed-use buildings to accommodate this need. Only one group had single family homes in their models, and another group suggested building a cluster of tiny homes.

PUBLIC SPACES

- **Mini-Parks:** The majority of residential or mixed-use buildings had a **plaza** or small **green-space** in their immediate vicinity. Following in-class and field discussions about the City's limitations in acquiring more parkland, students explored various other ways of creating safe and fun public spaces. A most common recommendation was to close off parts of smaller side-roads, or intersection areas. One group labelled this a "Stop Block hangout space where cars can't go." Another main recommendation was to create small 'pocket-parks' next to residential buildings, or court-yards enclosed by residential mid-rise apartments.

- **Play – Nature – Socializing**: Students had abundant creative ideas to make these spaces fun, welcoming and inclusive for all. A major suggestion by the majority of groups was to plant **more trees**, followed by ample **seating**, for example, 'café-like tables and chairs.' Every public space included some type of **play equipment**, and the most popular were giant slides and basketball hoops, followed by treehouses, ziplines and swings.

- **Public Art:** Art and entertainment were also central to students' recommendations and included outdoor theatres, climbable public art (or art for seating), and a graffiti wall.

- **Water element:** Almost all public spaces had at least one water element, the majority either a fountain or a pond.

- **Animal friends:** were included by many, either in the form of pets (dog-parks), wildlife (ducks and fish), or petting-zoos with "donkeys, goats and other cute animals."

- **Amenities:** Finally, **food** stores and a variety of other **shops**, as well as some **libraries** and one **community centre** surrounded the public spaces. **Affordability** is a top priority for this population who do not yet participate in the cash-economy. Free or very cheap stores and community-centre programming were therefore recommended.

- **Inclusivity:** An overarching theme was that these spaces need to be welcoming and habitable by all humans – younger and older children, teenagers, adults, elderly, those with different abilities, those with different incomes, LGBTQ identified people – and for non-human animal and plant-life as well.

Children's Recommendations for Broadway-area Public Spaces

FORM & ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN:

- **Mixed-use medium density** design was the top choice expressed in student models. The majority of buildings were mid-rises, with a few townhomes, some high-rises and very few single-family homes. Many of the buildings included residential, office and street-level store areas, with one group adding the subway station underneath. Children suggested that buildings be **more colour**ful, and one group even added a King Kong art-piece hanging off the side of a high-rise to "make it look more playful." As highlighted above, all residential buildings had a fun and car-free public space in their immediate vicinity.

- **Environmental design** elements included transitioning to **renewable energy** sources by using solar panels, wind turbines, a **rainwater collecting** system and **green**-spaces, all on **roof**tops. Inspired by Italy's 'Bosco Verticale,' one group created a vertical high-rise garden in their model.

TRANSPORTATION:

- **Walkability** and **safety from traffic** were top priorities, with students recommending wider bike-lanes, roads and side-walks in order to decrease crowding and congestion. Despite this however, most student groups included numerous roads and many also added parking-lots in their models, with one group suggesting that the motor vehicles 'use a different fuel.'

- **Traffic calming measures** included more traffic lights, crosswalks, street boulevards and cul-de-sacs on side-roads (which may or may not be an outcome of car-free mini-parks created at intersections).

- **Bike-sharing:** The current Mobi bikeshare was generally not popular because of the barriers children have to accessing these (price, age-limit, need for account and credit card). One group however suggested that if these **bike-shares** were available **for 10-year-olds** and **accessible with compass-cards**, then they would be perfect for children.

CULTURE: INDIGENEITY & MULTICULTURALISM

- **Indigenous Land:** Although models rarely included culturally relevant design, the topic was an important part of classroom and field-trip discussions. The issue and concern of how Indigenous unceded territory was developed and urbanized based on colonial Euro-centric values, and how traditional land use, governance and cultural practices are now generally invisible in mainstream urban environments in Canada was expressed in the informal dialogues and through side-comments and anonymous notes. However, there was hesitation from the groups to present these ideas in formal dialogue with the city and with SCY staff. A major question was raised on various occasions: "What is the City doing about stolen land?"

- **Visibility of Cultural Diversity**: At City Hall's Council Chambers the students were impressed with the Indigenous art and relics, as well as the flags of the three local Indigenous nations. They were curious to know why the three First Nations' flags were not also next to the Canadian and British Columbian flags outside of City Hall building. In South Vancouver the neighbourhood walk took

place during the preparations for a major Sikh cultural festival. Many students discussed how they appreciate and enjoy these events and wish for more. The majority of students in the Urban Explorers groups were of diverse Indigenous and ethnic backgrounds, with only a small number coming from European backgrounds. All three groups covertly expressed a desire for more culturally relevant events and art or design in the city in order to better reflect the true diversity of Vancouver. These ideas however were omitted from the group projects.

SCY SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

#1: FOCUS ON THE MOST VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

Child and youth friendly city planning benefits the entire community. The majority of recommendations and ideas from these young citizens echo green-urbanist compact and walkable city planning goals. A sustainable city is one that works for the least privileged and most vulnerable within its population. When the needs of these groups are addressed then the entire population will benefit tremendously. Children are not only a more vulnerable and often marginalized group – they are also a highly compassionate, aware and a very 'no-nonsense' or straightforward sub-population who understand – through their everyday lived experiences – what it means to be powerless and invisible in society. Children are also less desensitized to major social concerns in urban environments – most specifically the growing inequity in major Western urban centers. The street-involved populations and minors therefore have more things in common: not only are they most highly dependent on many of the increasingly overcrowded public spaces in cities to meet their needs, they also share vulnerability and powerlessness in society. This may be the reason why in all my child and youth engagement work the majority of young people have very high concerns for the street-involved population**. In order to achieve the City of Vancouver's health and sustainability goals this major concern of homelessness and drug abuse – both rooted in poverty and marginalization – must be thoroughly addressed.**

Recommendations:

- **Permanently re-house street-involved populations** and ensure that all neighbourhoods have adequate medical, social, and cultural supports.
- Create **more low-income family and senior housing** because the current development trend in Vancouver privileges the needs of middle and high-income families.

#2: SUPPORT OUTDOOR PLAY WITH DESIGN

Children's acitivity mapping highlights a major issue of contemporary urban childhoods: the increase in sedentary behaviours, highly associated with screen-time. Outdoor group play has been replaced by indoor generally individually played computer and video-games. The health impact of this shift is highly concerning: decreased outdoor physical activity is tied to increasing prevalence of childhood obesity and diabetes. In British Columbia the Middle Years Development Index data from children ages 8-12 shows that more than two hours of daily screentime is significantly associated with children's sense of disconnectedness from community, and that childhood anxiety and depression are on the rise especially for children exposed to these higher levels of screen-time. Within this same survey the majority of children

report wishing to spend more time outdoors with friends. This desire is similarly expressed by the Urban Explorers participants in their models.

Recommendations:

- Designing **mini-parks** akin to the ones built in Vancouver's West End neighbourhood can address the current park/green-space and play-area deficits prevalent in the Broadway corridor. A mini-park or pocket greenspace should be available within 5 minutes walking distance, and ideally on every block or two.
- **Child-friendly public spaces** do not need to be play-grounds or elaborate play-structures. The three main features that can bring children outdoors are: **safety from** motor-vehicle **traffic**, addition of a fun **play element** (e.g. climbing, interactive art, free book or toy library), and the **socializing element** (e.g. other people, especially other children), which is easily supported with public seating and shared eating opportunities.