Rachel Aldred

Welcome to the Active Travel Academy podcast. I’m Professor Rachel Aldred, Director of the Active Travel Academy. Today I’m really pleased to be introducing a podcast recorded by my colleague Dr Tom Cohen who is a Reader in Transport. Tom interviews Dr Asa Thomas for the podcast about Asa’s research into school streets. School streets are interventions that restrict motor traffic outside schools at the start and end of the school day. Asa’s recently been awarded his PhD. He was based at the Active Travel Academy and funded by Cross-River Partnership. I was Asa’s Director of Studies, together with Tom and our colleague Dr Jamie Furlong co-supervising. I’m sure I speak for all of us in saying it was an absolute pleasure to supervise Asa’s work, to learn more about school streets and to collaborate on research articles. Asa is now working at the UWE Centre for Transport and Society in Bristol. ATA and the Centre for Transport and Society have collaborated already on various projects and I’m sure will continue to do so. Asa’s PhD project was mixed methods – qualitative and quantitative. It included stakeholder interviews, and statistical analysis of secondary data. It contributes to the literature both in measuring actual impact of school street interventions and in better understanding the motivations, context and policies shaping their introduction.

Tom Cohen

Welcome everyone to the Active Travel Academy podcast. I am Tom Cohen, a member of the Active Travel Academy, and I'm delighted to have with me today another member of the Active Travel Academy, Asa Thomas, who will tell us a bit about himself, what he's been doing, his research, and what he's doing now. And hopefully it will be an enjoyable and damage-free conversation for all concern. Asa, welcome.

Asa Thomas

Thank you very much, Tom. Nice to make my active travel podcast debut. It's only taken 3 and 1/2 years.

Tom Cohen

And it's in fact, my Active Travel Academy podcast debut as well. So you know, we'll be excused having a little bit of nerves, but I'm sure that we'll settle into it. So, I first met you when you joined the Active Travel Academy in 2020, and I hope it's not unreasonable to point out that you don't sound as if you're from these parts. So could you start by saying a little bit about Asa Thomas before he became a member of the Active Travel Academy?

Asa Thomas

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. So, yeah, I'm from Canada originally, although I think the accent maybe is maybe slightly unearned because I've been here for a very long time. I grew up partially in Sussex and then moved to London for university and kind of have not really left since. And so I studied at London School of Economics and then Masters in urban studies at UCL and I slowly made my way north-west over to Westminster for the PhD.

Tom Cohen

And when you say north-west, we're talking relatively small distances here. Your educational footprint in London is probably not more than a couple of square miles.

Asa Thomas

Yeah. Yeah, it's it's walking distance for sure.

Tom Cohen

Sure. Well, and I suppose that might lead to your interest in active travel. So, out of interest because I think when I first met you, you already had been awarded the studentship. You were hawking around for a doctorate or you happened to learn of the Quintin Hogg Trust opportunity or what?

Asa Thomas

I was interested in doing a doctorate and I knew I wanted to study something to do with urban policy and I was looking for something that had a kind of a really tangible and kind of policy focus and to and finding out about the active Travel Academy and at that particular time I it seemed like a really perfect kind of kind of combination of my own personal interests. I was personally interested in cycling and walking and active travel in the city, and it was something that was increasingly part of, yeah, personal interest and it seemed that I could connect it up to some of the kind of knowledge that I'd gained from my masters and it really felt like a kind of a nice confluence of events. Seeing the the kind of yeah studentship advertised and I applied. Was very well, felt very lucky to get it.

Tom Cohen

It was fate, and it's worth saying that you were one of three people who joined at that point, and I think I'm right in also saying that you're the 1st to have concluded, well, maybe we'll get on to that. You're not quite there yet, but you're very close to having finished your doctorate. OK, so you arrived and you had some sense straight away of what the project was going to be. So say what you were expecting to be doing.

Asa Thomas

Yeah, I mean it was a really interesting project. It was it was in collaboration with an organisation called Cross River Partnership and they had a project running and this was, I think, funded in part through the Mayor's Air Quality Fund and the project was called Healthy Streets Everyday and it was focused on, I guess, providing support to about half of London's boroughs who were involved in the project to implement small streetscape schemes, events like car-free days and kind of air quality awareness events, and this programme had this, you know, doctorate attached to it, doctoral funding attached to it to research something. And then beyond that, the framing of it from a research perspective was to kind of build on some work that my other supervisor, Rachel Aldred, had been working on around trying to find kind of easy ways to measure the impact of small-scale changes to streets and how they’re accessed. So, kind of modal filters or sometimes I think in in the particular case of this, it wasn't modal filter, but using it to estimate methodologies to estimate whether there is actually a kind of impact on transport behavioural change. Or whether any kind of changes that we observe are rerouting from routes that would have already been done by an active mode, and so really kind of understanding the relationship between, yeah, streets and travel behaviour. And that was kind of what I had to go off and that seemed to me a a really kind of interesting and technically quite difficult question to get my head around and so I really kind of jumped at that.

Tom Cohen

Sure. And would you say that exactly the word I was going use is technical, that it's not a straightforward business measuring travel behaviour in the round is challenging enough and then trying to measure things like displacement is that much more difficult. But that appealed to you. It's not necessarily what you had been doing, prior to that point, in terms of your educational background, so it would have represented something of a disciplinary shift.

Asa Thomas

Yeah, absolutely. I mean I think it was a shift, I mean, in terms of research, research skills, my background was in qualitative research with a sprinkling of spatial analysis in there. I was quite interested in my Master’s in combining interviews and GIS to look at. I was looking at churches in London and churches and kind of industrial spaces, particularly in South London. Predominantly West African Pentecostal churches and but beyond that it was definitely moving into transport kind of data was a big kind of leap for me technically, but I was interested in taking on that kind of challenge and definitely improving my kind of quantitative research skills as well. I kind of like the idea of doing something that was, you know, out of my comfort zone at the time and whether, whether I actually really got into all the technical, you know, details of of kind of managing transport behaviour data is is another question but I think yeah that at the time that seemed to me to be a really kind of appealing challenge.

Tom Cohen

Well, I suppose that does lead rather naturally to observing that in March of 2020, relatively early in your doctoral journey, we experienced the beginning of the pandemic and all the associated restrictions, and you were one of many researchers whose work was profoundly affected by the restrictions that were imposed so say a little bit about what that meant in terms of how you had to alter your approach and maybe more fundamentally, the research questions that you expected to answer.

Asa Thomas

Yeah, so prior to the prior to the initial lockdowns, I had kind of already decided what I wanted to focus on, which was the school street closures in London, of which there were 60 or so at the time in London and I felt that they represented kind of a really novel, small streetscape scheme that could be, that could be a kind of a, I guess, a convenient focus for that kind of larger research question about transport behaviour, while also kind of filling a a kind of practical research gap because no one had really looked at them significantly from an academic perspective.

Tom Cohen

If I may just interrupt you for a second, Asa. A school street for those who aren't familiar with the concept is…

Asa Thomas

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. So a school street is temporary closure generally speaking to a street directly outside of a school. Usually these closures are for an hour in the morning, an hour in the afternoon at pick up and drop off times. And they’re usually enforced by either kind of temporary barriers and volunteers creating a kind of car-free space in front of the school. Or by traffic cameras and PR. So that's automatic number plate recognition cameras that will issue a fine to transgressing drivers entering that space. And so these schemes had been piloted in a couple of London boroughs from about 2016, I believe. And Camden was the first in London to have one, and they'd kind of slowly expanded over the kind of the intervening years. And around 2020 they were increasingly on the sort of agenda of of a of an increasing number of boroughs in the city, yeah.

Tom Cohen

I'm sure we'll come up to the whys and the wherefores so school streets you had selected as being the thing you wanted to look at. And as you say, there were 60 or so already in London by the time you started your research and then?

Asa Thomas

And then and then it became. I mean the the method I was interested in using was to kind of be on the street and to interview or survey people moving through that space and understand where they had come from, why they were on this specific street and then hopefully working more closely with residents and pupils at the school of themselves to kind of, yeah, get a a real sense of of how the behaviours were changing in relation to this relatively small scheme and small change to the street. This obviously became completely untenable. So yeah, it was. I probably spent the first couple of months of of the PhD or maybe six weeks kind of writing a pilot study plan, and I think I submitted it or was about to submit it for ethical review and then you know it was just almost instantly not tenable. So I I kind of had to change tack slightly and I kind of at the recommendation of you and Rachel and Andrew Smith, who was a supervisor at the time, to just kind of interview some practitioners who are involved in these schemes and and kind and sort of scope out their view of why these schemes might lead to some sort of travel behaviour change. And that's sort of that's what I started doing. So in doing this in the height of lockdowns, I think by mainly in May and June of 2020, I e-mail lots and lots of council officers, people involved in, you know, nonprofits who are kind of working in this area and a few other people. And I talked to them about their ideas around school streets, how they're implementing them, crucially, in this kind of constrained environment of the pandemic and also what their view is on how these things actually work. How do how does temporarily closing the street lead to someone choosing to walk and cycle rather than drive the child to school? And try and get at that kind of background conceptual sort of mechanism of change that was happening with these schemes. And so that's that was the first kind of adaptation to the to the COVID pandemic that that kind of took place with the research.

Tom Cohen

And what's interesting was that you had to make this change, as you say, because the original plan was essentially gone up in smoke, but you're having to do that coincided with a massive explosion in activity, not just in London but particularly in London, where things such as school streets, which had been done to a limited extent, were suddenly being done on a much wider scale because of this perceived opportunity to take advantage of the huge drop in traffic. So you were talking to officers at a time when they were well, presumably both excited, but under considerable pressure and maybe, I don't know, maybe it was a good time to be asking them. Did you feel that? As you were interviewing them?

Asa Thomas

Yeah, absolutely. It was a really kind of right time, right place with the interviews I think because. Well, there was a certain novelty, I think to, you know, taking a Teams call or a a Zoom call at that time and I think people were more willing to take an hour out of their day and sit down as you know, for an interview with an academic at that particular time. I think simply because of the novelty and the ease of of kind of digital communication at that time and there's been some, yeah, interesting kind of retrospective academic work on the kind of methodological flexibility that that people undertaking and the the kind of online interview really opened up an opportunity for contacting a much wider pool of people, much more quickly for whom hopping on a call for about 45 minutes was all of a sudden a lot easier. They're already sitting at their computer and they could just click the link and and talk to me and it made scheduling a lot easier as well. But I think that context as well as you mentioned was was hugely import. I think one of the kind of key graphs in my I'm going to describe a graph on a podcast that's really great.

Tom Cohen

Well you could refer listeners to page 2 of the accompanying document. Sorry listeners, there will be no accompanying document. Asa will describe this with words.

Asa Thomas

But yeah, and this graph is just the number of school streets installed every month for the last few years and the the number of school streets that were installed in London in September of 2020, so the first full school term back was roughly 200 schemes, and so that's much more than all the ones that had been previously installed in London. And now we're close to what we're over 600 schemes in the city. So that's nearly 30% of all state funded primary schools in the city. So this explosion in the number of schemes was really, really quite significant and some boroughs like Hackney had committed to over the summer of 2020 installing a school street at every single primary school that was able to have one and this is kind of a key kind of factor factor around school streets is that they're really only suitable or in their kind of current configuration as I described at the beginning are only really suitable for streets where there's a relatively low level of existing level of traffic, but nonetheless that's a huge number of schools for local government officials to to kind of implement. And so there was a sense of excitement, I think. And also there is a unique moment to be to be speaking to people, and I think that helped with the willingness to talk, but it also meant that there were some new research questions that could be answered as well, and it's probably worth highlighting that with this change both in the methodology that I was able to use, but also the context that I was working in all of a sudden, yeah, all these new research questions. So how do you adapt your method of implementing these schemes when you're trying to install 50 of them at once, or when you can't really do kind of meaningful engagement and you have to stretch a budget to get as many as you can as possible. And so there all of a sudden, in addition to this question about travel behaviour, there was the pandemic threw up a whole set of questions about policy implementation as well and the policy process that was underway in London at that time, that kind of cover also pop up cycle lanes, pavement widening, low traffic neighbourhoods and all these other schemes that were happening as well.

Tom Cohen

You didn't really have the opportunity to mourn the method that wasn't because you were so immediately thrown into doing something different. So whilst we’re on method why don't we go ahead and talk about the other things you did together with the interviews in order to gain a fuller picture of the school street story?

Asa Thomas

Yeah. I mean, I think in some ways my methodology is, taken widely, it was kind of quite opportunistic. If it's maybe, I'm sure there's a longer kind of work to make that sound… pragmatic, yeah.

Tom Cohen

No, I think opportunism is now an accepted good thing. It's not, it's not the bad term that it used to be.

Asa Thomas

I think yeah: pragmatic opportunism. But yeah, so I was able to work with some data that is collected by Transport for London around travel to school, so they conduct hands up surveys. So these are surveys which are collected with pupils at a large number of schools in the city. And this is a bit of a patchy data set. But they essentially ask schools to report how every child got to school on a given day, once a year. And so that was data that was offered to me to to kind of work with to sort of maybe answer that behavioural question, but I think starting even before that, one of the the most crucial bits of data gathering for this project was actually just trying to understand where all the school streets were and when they went in and started to kind of operate in the city. And this was a really difficult question. A surprisingly difficult question because there's there is no sort of central recording of this. Transport for London were not tracking this initially and each borough had different ways of maybe keeping track of this. And so we worked with the charity Mums for Lungs who have done a lot of campaigning around air quality and particularly air quality about schools and children. And they were they were very helpful in working together to collate this database of of schemes in the city where they were and when, crucially, when they when they started. And then there were some kind of parallel activities from Sustrans were also working on a similar project and eventually I was able to collate that into what I thought was a pretty good picture of all the schemes in the city at a given moment in time and and I realised there was actually a lot of other stuff that that could be looked at with that sort of information. And crucially, with this explosion in schemes, I felt that we were moving from a position where these were a series of isolated experiments in different parts of the city to a situation where they were almost sort of *de facto* provision within kind of education and transport policy around children's travel in the city, and I felt that this kind of introduced a series of other important questions around where these things are located, which boroughs were particularly adapted into into implementing these schemes, but also which populations in the city might be benefiting or part of the schools the the city student body, which of these were benefiting more than others, perhaps from this kind of quite significant investment in children's travel and so I spent a lot of time when I was at the ATA [Active Travel Academy] looking at the equity implications of the distribution of school street schemes in the city based on this data set of the locations. And so these are some of the different kind of paths I was able to take piecing together the the bits of sort of secondary data I guess that were emerging at the time, and also they're able, there's a kind of analytical lens that was possible with the rapid expansion of them that all of a sudden you could say “what are the impacts of school streets on the city scale?” rather than trying to understand the behavioural element on this scheme-by-scheme basis, which was the initial plan. So I started…sort of London School streets became my subject of or object of study, as opposed to these two case studies as I was kind of initially planning.

Tom Cohen

And I suppose might be a little cliched to talk of crowd sourcing, but your collaboration with Mums for Lungs meant that you were developing a database, perhaps not in the conventional sense of writing to all 33 London authorities and chasing those who haven't filled in the questionnaire, but you actually pieced it together through that crowd sourcing, as I said. Did you triangulate with government as well or did you take as read what Mums for Lungs told you?

Asa Thomas

Yeah, there's a bit of triangulation going on. I triangulated with TfL had a kind of list and then they were drawing from another list from Sustrans who were kind of embedded in all the London boroughs. And I thought that each list had its benefits and its drawbacks. Actually, I think the Mums for Lungs list was by far the most extensive. But yeah, I was able to validate them against each other and get what I thought. Also with a couple of tactical Freedom of Information requests to round off some particularly interesting gaps, but yeah.

Tom Cohen

Making you a school streets archaeologist; the forensic scientist. What's the the TV show? CSI school streets. That's what you would do.

Asa Thomas

Exactly.

Tom Cohen

So that's good and that's not all, because if I remember correctly, you're also looking at camera data to a degree to understand the microscopic end of people's behaviour in the vicinity of streets.

Asa Thomas

Yeah, it's. Yeah, it's interesting. This is, yeah, I've kind of. I I think about this aspect of the work a little bit less because it actually didn't end up in the in the thesis in the end. But there was a project working with the the funders of the project. So looking very specifically at two school streets in Hackney using the VivaCity cameras. So these are machine-learning powered cameras that essentially turn visual information so cars, cyclists, pedestrians passing the field of view of the camera into numbers and data and counts. But of all of all modes, but also the path and where they where they move across the the sort of streetscape. So I did of a small quick project which was eventually a report for them called making schools, *Making school streets healthier*, looking at how the school street changed the the sort of dynamic there, how many people were walking down that street, how many people are driving down the street for some of the dynamics within those specific closure times. Yeah, as you say on the very micro scale. And there's some interesting interesting things that came out of it. The the site that we picked had some trouble with transgressing drivers and also quite a significant kind of list of exempt vehicles. And so there was actually quite a bit of residual traffic which made for kind of an interesting case to think about because although the number of vehicles decreased dramatically during the closure times than before, there was still this residual traffic. And when I did an analysis of the how much time pedestrians or how many, how many, how much distance pedestrians were covering in the roadway as opposed to on the pavement as tracked by the the camera, I found that there wasn't actually a significant change in this before and after the introduction of the school street, although there was, you know, a significant reduction in traffic and I think this is because the scheme was still very much, they were trying to figure out how to get the kind of number of exempt vehicles down to a reasonable number and and it seemed that that residual traffic had had not dropped to a point at which people had started to kind of take over the space differently. So that was an interesting aspect of that, but it found generally that, you know, the significant reduction in the just the amount of vehicles in that in that space and also kind of interesting uptick in the number of cyclists using it in that closure time, which wasn't something I would necessarily have expected. But that there were perhaps people incorporating it into their roots. Or more children cycling, but it's difficult to tell from that kind of data that what was actually going on so this is again, why that behavioural question is, is still so important.

Tom Cohen

And still challenging, despite these technological advances, and I find myself wondering, given what we said earlier about the project you thought you were going be doing when you started, maybe that camera work is a kind of vestigial element of the method that at some point in the future you can revisit. Perhaps that, the more detailed behavioural question of what happens in the wake of a school street being implemented could be studied through, as you were saying, interviews and maybe a bit of observation on street and then a certain amount of passive data collection through these clever cameras.

Asa Thomas

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I've I feel like there is, I've got a whole other parallel PhD in my head about how I how I conducted and I’m hoping I’ll be able to kind of get at some of that in the future and answer some of those research questions, yeah.

Tom Cohen

Let me take you back to something you said earlier and I think you said that school streets were a small intervention, maybe used an adjective like that and this is something I know that you and I have debated on occasion. In what way do you think of school streets as small as compared with, well, with what? What? What makes them as compared with, well, with what? What makes them small and what is big relative to a school street would you say?

Asa Thomas

Yeah, I think that's I mean I think one of the terms that I use in the thesis is quasi infrastructural, quasi regulatory, they sort of they're a road sign, often, with a regulation about access at a given time to certain vehicles, but they their purpose is really a change in state on the road itself. And to create a space that is more amenable to walking and cycling, and in that way there is a kind of, I think quasi infrastructural aspect to their their goals. And I think they sit in this ambiguous position between traffic regulation and active travel infrastructure. I think there's smaller in terms of maybe not impacts. I'd like to think that they and this was something that was often repeated to me in the interviews and that they are a relatively modest investment on the part of local authority in comparison to, say, producing a protected cycle lane or pedestrianising a town centre, or maybe other kind of interventions that we might think about in terms of walking and cycling in the city. But they were felt to have a significant outsize benefit, win, win, win, sort of situation for local authorities and this was in part because school travel represents a sort of particular problem for transport planners, and that you have a trip attractor that is doing so at a very, very specific points in time. So everyone showing up at the same time to get their kids to school and at least in you know, a lot of UK cities schools are sited in places which are not necessarily set up to handle large volumes of vehicles and lots of small kind of Victorian streets. And so this even a small number of people driving their children to school in these sort of situations can create significant road safety problems and barriers to active travel by introducing all of these vehicles into one place, a highly constrained spatially and temporally situation. And so by removing the traffic it would seem that a lot of these problems were were tackled via a relatively simple and small financial outlay and on behalf of the local authority. And so this idea of, I guess, of small intervention is, is also kind of represents a sort of a targeted intervention and that was something that was emphasised to me extensively and I think I took great interest in because I think from yeah kind of a larger sort of theoretical level this idea, there's an ingrained need in local government to always be looking out for what is the I thing that we can get kind of maximum results from with with low investment and in a kind of political context of chronic under local government underfunding these sorts of interventions have a have kind of great cachet I think within within the government to be able to sort of say we're solving a problem with this neat trick and this targeted intervention very much fits within a kind of narrative of sort of smart governance within the city. I found that to be quite an interesting narrative around that as well. So not just are they a small intervention in kind of a physical sense, but the way that being a small intervention fit within wider narratives within local government and and arguably kind of governance in itself since 2010, perhaps longer in the UK, was an interesting narrative point that that came up often in the in the interviews.

Tom Cohen

Yeah. And I will come on to this, because I'm very interested to know more about what your interviewees said. So we're saying small, but evidently there's quite a lot beneath that work because there's small in terms of the kind of keyhole surgery approach to governing transport or mobility. There's small in terms of not sufficiently large as likely to excite very strong opposition, which we know certain interventions reliably do. Somehow we've managed to get school streets to happen in large numbers in London without anything like the same fight that, say, local low traffic neighbourhoods have generated. But small and, at the same time, not small because of the small investment big return, which as you say is a a huge draw from the perspective of cash-strapped authorities. So, much to pick at in the the story of the school street and I suppose I'm slightly defensive of them in that well the reason why I returned to this word small is that I want us to give them their due as an intervention, which is really punching above its weight. And has all these selling points, it seems to me. OK, they're not going to solve all the problems on our city streets. Let's not pretend. But they're very definitely part of the solution, it would seem. Well, let's see, as we need to find, find out what impact, if any, they have on behaviour. But let's just go back to your interviewees whom you were asking, “so why are you doing this”? Not just how but the the why and what were the typical answers given as to the motivations of your average London authority for expanding their school street schemes or just starting up if they hadn't already been doing them?

Asa Thomas

Yeah, it's very interesting the rationale for the school street varied quite significantly, and it really depended on who you spoke to. And I I think this speaks to the the difficulty and opportunity that comes with interventions that have potential to give benefits in multiple different domains. And so in some areas this was seen very much as an air quality intervention, so for some boroughs children's exposure to air quality was particularly pressing and something that was expressed extensively around by parents and boroughs were under pressure to do something about in other boroughs that was perhaps less the emphasis and more the emphasis on travel behavioural change. So this is kind of part of an active travel policy. One mentioned climate and the kind of declaration of the climate emergency being the framing…structuring frame with which the school travel school street policy emerged. And others came through much more sort of a road safety role within the Council of Road Safety Officer, seeing that as their remit, having already done work within the school, that was often done around road safety education and organising maybe bicycle training and and the kind of activity that is that has gone on in schools for quite some time, this was kind of grown out of that, and so it was a very diverse set of rationales that that came that that kind of reflect the different priorities the political priorities within each within each borough and I have one or two others speak to me about how the rationale could be perhaps manipulated, maybe manipulated is the wrong word, but could be, you know, shifted depending on the audience of who you're speaking to.

Tom Cohen

Reframed.

Asa Thomas

Reframed. Yeah. And if a councillor, they knew a councillor that needed to be convinced on this was particularly interested in air quality then that could be emphasised The public health benefits maybe in terms of physical activity increases, if that was something that that was important to another crowd and and they mentioned even speaking to parents about about this often air quality was really something that that was increasingly important to to parents in the city. And so this was the sort of the, the rationale itself is, yeah, subject to these, these these sort of different dynamics.

Tom Cohen

I'm struck that one thing that you haven't mentioned so far, which may not be that it wasn't brought up, but it just wasn't dominant, is the idea of clogged streets in the vicinity of schools? To what extent is that the motivating factor amongst the people you interviewed.

Asa Thomas

Clogged streets?

Tom Cohen

Clogged streets, as in all of these cars that are jamming the streets in the immediate vicinity of schools and thereby, you know, possibly creating congestion or obstructing other people who have different places they needed to go etc.

Asa Thomas

Yeah, I think that was that was the background or there was a sort of, yeah, experiential sense of the school, the, the the experience of the school run was was extremely negative in a lot of in a lot of places, and that and that this just sort of solved that by removing the cars from the equation for this particular stretch of street was that was definitely something that that came up, but I think a lot of the rationale sort of fell into these categories of, you know, air quality, active travel, road safety and I guess that kind of perhaps relates more most generally to the clogged streets element, but there was a sort of sense that this was a a kind of a problem in need of in need of a solution. The situation in front of London schools for all these. Different reasons.

Tom Cohen

And the other thing that is striking is that and we saw the same with low traffic neighbourhoods, there was an extent to which this was definitely the policy in vogue. All of a sudden, lots of authorities got the bug, as it were, was this an idea whose time had come, do you think, or was it more a case of almost copycat policy development, from authority to authority? Is that something you were able to gauge from speaking with the actors involved?

Asa Thomas

Yeah, I think there's a lot of things that came together; a lot of different factors that came together for the reason why this was so successful in London. I think, in part the availability of funding specifically for this was a a huge part of it. So we have the the sort of emergency active travel fund that came in: school streets were explicitly mentioned by the Minister for Transport Grant Shapps at the time in one of the early sort of statements from central government promoting the use of temporary flexible closures or access restrictions to streets to help kind of deal with some of the predicted demand issues around COVID-19 and and secure the benefits to streets longer term that had been seen by the reduction in traffic. So there was a perhaps an even, yeah, unprecedented interest in this sort of scale of implementation from central government and funding to do so, and this was channelled through Transport for London, who had a great deal of kind of expertise in supporting boroughs in delivering all kinds of different sort of temporary streetclosure type measures and this has been something that had been going on in London for some time. London had been operating with a framework called the Healthy healthy Streets Approach, which had been governing a lot of the activity at Transport for London in terms of street redesign and and part of the documentation around this explicitly spoke about schemes like school streets and so there was a I guess sort of within the the larger apparatus of of policy apparatus around them there was a not only a willingness to pursue these kinds of schemes, but also a sort of technical expertise around how to deliver them. The London Borough of Hackney had developed a a toolkit for policymakers even prior to the pandemic, which was really to help sort of spread and evangelise around these these schemes and and and provide other local authorities with the the kind of model for how to how to get these off the ground. So there's a lot in the water already before the pandemic and and the kind of availability of funding, the the political weight behind central government’s endorsement of this sort of methodology of urban change, I think all contributed to what was what was a really rapid expansion. And I think perhaps also coinciding with low traffic neighbourhoods, which received much more controversy, I think in some ways perhaps helped school streets to be seen as “well maybe we don't, we don't want this, but this is fine” and I think there is perhaps less opposition to them because of the sort of distraction around that that that was coming around the opposition to low traffic neighbourhoods, which I think definitely took a lot more volume.

Tom Cohen

Prompting me to wonder whether what we need to do is create something that much more draconian than the low traffic neighbourhood in order to have the same effect with school streets. Low traffic neighbours become acceptable because we couldn't possibly accept that even worse thing, that's a policy speculation and nothing more. We should talk a bit more about what you learned from your analysis of the data on people's journey to schools, which as you say you've got from Transport for London, these so-called hands up surveys which they’re hands up surveys, or maybe you have other data sets as well.

Asa Thomas

Yeah, the so they’re hands up surveys, that's what they’re called. There were, I mean, a whole number of…it's done as part of the scheme called STARS. And this is a an accreditation scheme that schools can sign up for, and they can be given bronze, silver or gold Stars accreditation and it essentially reflects their engagement with their with active travel within the school, promoting active travel to school and part of the accreditation process involves submitting a travel survey and these are generally done roughly around the same time of year, not always, and not all schools do them every year. So there are a few kind of complexities to working with this kind of data, but there were the sort of advantage of of this data set is that it is, it is for some schools at least, a fairly solid longitudinal picture of how, at least at the school level, mode share changed year on year. And when I started looking at it I determined that there are about 500 schools that had enough surveys to be kind of included in the dataset And this also the again COVID-19 rearing its head, this had a bit of complexity because they had to have to be included, I thought, they had to have a survey before COVID so something, you know, in 2019 or 2018 and then one after, which was, I guess any time, and there was almost none taken in the school year 2019-2020, and so there had to be a survey in one of the following two school years after and then so they and then anyone that had a school street would have to have be after that and after a school street. So by structuring it this way, is sort of a quasi experimental study structure, so there was about 100 schools that actually have school streets implemented in that time for which there was before and after data, and then around 400 other schools that didn't have a school street installed that had data on either side of the kind of COVID-19 period. So everything was straddling that period and yeah, it was interesting to to look at this and there was I found to be I think a sort of surprisingly clear picture of a when taken taking kind of the whole data set into consideration. So looking at exposure as well as to how long after the implementation of the school streetthe survey was taken. Looking at that there is roughly sort of a 4% decrease in private motor vehicle use associated with the school street or at the school-street schools against those that didn't have a school street and around the same 4% increase in active travel at those schools.

Tom Cohen

Allow me to be properly pedantic about this, Asa, but I know that our listeners will care. When we say 4% is that percentage points or are we talking about? If there were 100 car trips before, there might be 96 car trips after.

Asa Thomas

It's percentage, it's percentage points. So it's yeah. So it could be relatively and this is the, yeah. So the average effect at at at each school. So that in many, yeah, in many cases that in some cases that would not be, you know, a significant change: in many of these schools, there aren't very many people driving, but in others that would represent kind of big change. And there's there's a variety of outcomes. It's it's important to say that in some a much sort of smaller set of changes take place and others there are quite dramatic shifts. And so the kind of error bars on this effect are very wide. But it was interesting, I think, given some of the sort of the drawbacks of this data in some ways that was interesting to see that there was something there and that I wasn't actually convinced prior to conducting the research, that there would necessarily be an observable behavioural effect on that scale. I was viewing the benefits primarily in terms of the experience of being in the space and what that does for, as a kind of normative benefit to the the place and and the benefits around air quality which other research has sort of shown that there are kind of significant benefits and and road safety weere were perhaps maybe more salient than travel behaviour?

Tom Cohen

So why did you not expect or why were you not perhaps too sure that you would see a substantive, I think we can call it a substantive, behavioural change?

Asa Thomas

So yeah, I mean my sense was and this is based on more of a hunch than anything else was that the the kind of it represented only a sort of small change in someone who is driving their they could only really they only had to drop their child off at school slightly further away and that that might not really. If the car was already tied into patterns of mobility that were already set, so onward travel to work and so on, that this would likely not be a significant enough inconvenience to change that pattern, you know for where. But maybe it reflects that there were patterns of driving to school that were more easily switchable than I had imagined, and especially I mean it's a it's a that was a bit of a hunch, but it's also drawn on a whole lot of research on the sort of social dynamics of of of what determines school travel. Parental availability is a huge factor in that. And and people's kind of working patterns. And obviously that changed dramatically in COVID. And I think there's a remaining, you know, piece of research to be done about how the school trip changed in terms of during COVID in general, not just in relation to an intervention, because I think there are kind of two ways you can look at it in one ways if more people are working from home then perhaps they have more time in the morning to walk with their child to school, but then also, perhaps in London, at least they might not be then having an onward public transport journey that they would have had before. Maybe that actually makes driving more of an option in a way that it wouldn't have been if they were going on to work. And so I think there's all these kind of complicated underlying factors to do with the changing working patterns that are really difficult to pick apart from this, but that was the kind of the the way in which kind of existing literature on, you know, if you have X number of people driving their children to school, how many of those journeys are actually meaningfully changeable without considering the wider dynamics of distance from school, which is in all studies, pretty much the number one thing that determines whether a child is driven to school or not. And then, after that, what are the kind of demands on their schedule in terms of going to work or onward journey and all of that, yeah.

Tom Cohen

I must at this point make the the rather predictable observation that the comparison set is all important for any of you evaluation wonks out there. Don't be going and judging and debating change without having some sense of what would have happened in the background without the intervention which these other schools, your 400 non-intervention schools gave you. Maybe at some point we can talk again about that, but you you mentioned 4 percentage point increase in active travel. Point taken about error bars, but how much more is known about what proportion of that might have been cycling, what proportion walking, and maybe scooting for that matter.

Asa Thomas

Yeah, I mean, that's the I felt that given the given the sort of scale at which I was operating, I actually I I haven't looked into breaking it down by mode. So I I took active travel as a as a total thing, but I think my I imagine that walking would have been the biggest, the biggest, biggest boost. But it would be interesting interesting to see that I think. I had a little bit of interpretation about how walking and scooting would be categorised and how whether they would be there was a separate field for scooting, but I wasn't sure how consistently that would have been collected given that it was self-reported data from the schools. So I had a little bit of hesitation about… I figured it would definitely be an active trip, but being able to say for sure whether walking or scooting in particular happened. So I I kind of lumped it all together. To stay safe, you know.

Tom Cohen

Very sensible, pragmatic and already said pragmatism is written through your doctoral research and, and rightly so. And I think we we have to acknowledge that you were working with a very welcome data set, but a data set which is not one of your design and no doubt if you had been able to stipulate exactly what you were going to get, you would have been able to derive more in the way of findings, but we’ll also say in passing, as someone who described himself as largely qualitative before he began his journey at Westminster, you got to develop your statistical chops as part of this journey as well, which no doubt was interesting and hopefully enjoyable.

Asa Thomas

Yeah, there are a few long head scratching evenings trying to figure out how to how to kind of how to get this to all work and how. But I think. I really enjoyed that process and I found particularly working in this mode of experimental data to be really satisfying, and there's something quite, you know, quite parsimonious about using an intervention control before or after research, study and and and the process of using and trying to work with secondary data to do what I've been calling I guess and I'm sure others have used this term as well, but as sort of retrospective quasi experimental study. And the idea that this can be done by looking at data that's collected as a matter of course to think about how emergency changes in these really rapid changes can be measured with yeah, what is on hand afterwards and the sort of statistical methods that we can use to pick that apart. I really enjoyed that learning process and found it very intellectually stimulating and it's worth, it's worth saying that this was really actually important because there was actually no serious effort to monitor and evaluate school streets as a whole in London, despite what I think is a, you know, one of the more significant financial investments in school travel. But also what is actually a sort of significant change to the kind of urban vernacular of the city. Even you know, these are signs that didn't exist, you know, or barely existed, you know, three years ago and are now all over the city, when you walk around. My partner is very tired of me pointing out that we are on a school street.

Tom Cohen

The travails of being with a doctoral student.

Asa Thomas

But you know there, there was. Yeah. It was surprising in a way. And this is in part because of the distributed nature of, you know, transport governance in London. The fact that for each individual borough, these schemes represented relatively.. each scheme itself represented relatively small investments. That need for significant monitoring evaluation was not always felt to be the priority and so there was a lot of, yeah, retrospective and it's not to say that no boroughs did this I'm sure some did and I know before the pandemic there were some good efforts to monitor these schemes but on the whole and from the from from the you know the the the the level of the Greater London Authority or Transport for London there was a really kind of a serious practical research gap in terms of in terms of this and and there's you see this in the monitoring and evaluation of low traffic neighbourhoods, which is something I've also looked at. There's a lot of efforts to retrospectively figure out what happened given previous bits of data that were collected, comparing them to things that were collected contemporarily and then yeah, data sets that are collected as a matter of course and trying to pick apart changes from these very inadequate or not necessarily inadequate, but unideal datasets.

Tom Cohen

Yeah, and it it obviously prompts one to fantasise if that isn't the wrong word about being able to do what you originally thought of doing, which is being able to understand in fine grain detail what people did in the wake of the school street. Did they continue to drive but stop somewhere else? Did they alter their journey altogether? So understanding not just the journey to school, but that journey within the wider system of people's mobility, I think, would be very interesting to know better so that the project you can add to your list.

Asa Thomas

Yeah. To add to that, I think one of the key questions that I came to that, I mean, I think I realised quite soon on, was a bit ambitious but was to I thought there was a bit of a research gap around these and I'm not the first to point this out by any means, but around the the the actual sort of mechanisms between these interventions and any kind of resulting behavioural change, what is the stuff in between that? What is this…the the bit that's leading to this, to this change and and that's something that you're not able to look at, you can say, well, we associate this percentage average change associated with the school street versus the control group. But we have no idea what's behind that and, I mean, seemingly neither do a lot of you know there's a lot of different competing ideas about what's actually going on there. And you know, that's also something that I, you know, one of my kind of main regrets is that that's not really a question that's answered. It's…it's, it's pondered in the in the thesis, but it's not answered by any means, and I think serious work more in fact more qualitative work, I think, directly with parents asking about how these sorts of changes do actually intervene in their daily lives and by by extension, their mobility choices, is something that's really important and. And work that needs to be done.

Tom Cohen

Well, I'm glad that we can conclude more research is needed because it would be very worrying if that weren't the the closing thought of any Active Travel Academy podcast, but I don't want to finish quite there. The bringing us up to date involves your submitting your dissertation, being examined on it and passing with minor corrections, so you're very close to being done with your dissertation. And that's not all, because whilst you are still a member of the Active Travel Academy and will do continue to be until your dying day, you have, it's fair to say moved on spatially if not spiritually to other grounds. Tell us more.

Asa Thomas

Yeah. So I’ve just started a role at the Centre for Transport and Society at the University of West of England in Bristol, and so I'm working actually perhaps maybe on some of these research gaps that I’ve highlighted, which is very handy. I've just started working on a project with Kieron Chatterjee about school walking buses, which is in collaboration with several other partners including Leeds and Lancaster and Glasgow. And our part of this project is looking very carefully at what are some of the barriers to walking to school. Specifically walking to school and. And I'm really hoping that we can look at some school streets in this as well. And these little, yeah, kind of in depth qualitative work with parents and children. And I'm hoping to sneak some of these questions in to to. Yeah, build up a bit of a larger picture of how some of these interventions have led to changes in in in in some of these decision making processes as well. So in, yeah, I’m very lucky to be able to continue some of that, that research now and go into to yeah new interventions and yeah, so I've been enjoying, you know, working there so far. It's been a really, yeah, great experience.

Tom Cohen

And this would be an instance of research opportunism which we would of course condone because it's good and important work. And it's nice that you're working with friends of ours at UWE who are doing cognate work. Bristol being a different and an interesting comparison to London and you perhaps looking beyond Bristol as well. So we will look forward to being kept informed and clearly, as this podcast demonstrates, you continue to visit the metropolis now and again, which means that we will keep up to date with you. I think we will have to leave it there other than to thank Asa very much for his time and for sharing the story of his doctoral journey and the main findings of his work. Thank you very much to everyone who's listened to the Active Travel Academy podcast, and we will be with you again soon with another story and interviewee.

Rachel Aldred

So that was Dr Asa Thomas discussing his PhD research with my colleague Dr Tom Cohen. I hope you found it interesting and are moved to look up the publications that Asa has led and been involved in. School streets are attracting national and international interest and I’m so pleased Asa has been able to contribute so strongly to what is otherwise quite a small evidence base. Do check the ATA blog for the shownotes and links to Asa’s work and to the transcript. There are plenty of other ATA podcast episodes out there to listen to. In the last episode, my colleague Dr Harrie Larrington-Spencer interviewed Professor Aimi Hamraie about their research on disability design and the built environment and there’ll be more coming out in 2024. See you soon.