6
ONE-SIDED GEOGRAPHIES?
THE INTERPLAY AMONG YOUTH, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND SCHOOLS
ABSTRACT

This paper draws on the literature and a small-scale study of youth in Amsterdam to explore some of the conceptual and methodological challenges in researching and measuring ‘neighbourhood effects’ on young people. I argue for a shift in attention from focusing on direct and independent effects of neighbourhoods, to taking into account the reciprocal relationships between people and place and the multiple and varied neighbourhoods that many youth inhabit and spend time in. I suggest that neighbourhood effects research could better link up with the geographical literature of place and space. Linking up with this literature would compel neighbourhood effect researchers to ask not only how neighbourhoods influence young people, but also how young people influence and interact with neighbourhoods, including how they come to be in particular neighbourhoods, and how they interpret, imagine, draw on and give meaning to these places. To throw light on these issues, I examine youths’ residential histories, how they interpret the boundaries and structure of their neighbourhoods, and how youth are active in shaping their encounters with place, including their role in choosing their secondary schools.

A shorter version of this chapter has been submitted for review.
6.1 INTRODUCTION

The notion that neighbourhoods have effects on the social outcomes of the children and youth that inhabit them has been a powerful one in social science research, urban policymaking, and everyday life, for instance, in the residential decisions of families in search of a ‘good’ place to raise children. A significant part of the scholarly interest in the impact of neighbourhoods on young people has taken the form of neighbourhood effects (or area effects) research. This field of research is concerned with how much and in which ways neighbourhoods matter for individual educational, health and behavioural outcomes (see Leventhal et al., 2009; Sampson et al., 2002; Small and Newman, 2001). Despite this long-standing interest, there remain significant challenges to understanding the meaning and role of the neighbourhood in young peoples’ everyday lives and longer term social outcomes. While some of these challenges stem from the methodological difficulties inherent in trying to determine the influence of complex social contexts, they also include conceptual issues concerning the definition and interpretation of ‘neighbourhood’ and the conceptualization of the relationships between people and place.

In this paper, I focus on how we view and research neighbourhoods and especially how we view their relationships with, and effects on, young people. I argue that neighbourhood effects research would benefit from better linking up with the (mainly geographical) literature on place and space. Linking up with this literature would compel us to ask not only how neighbourhoods influence individuals, but also how individuals influence and interact with neighbourhoods – that is, how individuals come to be in particular neighbourhoods, and how they interpret, shape, draw on and give meaning to these places. I argue that the neighbourhood effects framework could be enriched by thinking more explicitly in terms of overlapping and reciprocal relationships running between (multiple) neighbourhood places, places of education (e.g. schools) and young people, with these relationships embedded in a wider system of institutional and social practices.

Drawing on the literature and a small-scale qualitative study of youth in Amsterdam, I highlight three interrelated issues in the study of neighbourhoods and young people: the multiplicity of neighbourhoods and neighbourhood places; how the school fits into the schema of ‘neighbourhood effects’; and the mutual relationships between people and place, including how youth are selected and sorted into neighbourhoods and schools and how they are active agents in shaping their encounters with these places.
Research and policy interest in neighbourhood influences on young people exploded over the last two decades in the US (Ellen and Turner, 1997; Jencks and Mayer, 1990; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000), Western Europe (Garner and Raudenbush, 1991; Kauppinen, 2007; McCulloch and Joshi, 2001; Oberwittler, 2007; Sykes and Kuyper, 2009) and elsewhere (e.g. Oliver et al., 2007; Oreopoulous, 2003; Overman, 2002). This reinvigorated interest was spurred in large part by the work of scholars, most notably Wilson (1987), on the social consequences of concentrated urban poverty. One of the main thrusts behind this work has been the notion that young people face more risks and constraints for social mobility in poor neighbourhoods than in economically better-off areas, due to such factors as peer influences, stigmatization by institutional, state or market actors, role modelling, social norms, the presence, quality and accessibility of institutions and public services, and levels of crime and safety (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sampson, 2008).

While qualitative and quantitative research has demonstrated multiple ways in which the neighbourhood has meaning for people’s social outcomes, the framework of neighbourhood effects has not been without criticism (see Bauder, 2002; Gotham, 2003; Lupton, 2003; Lupton and Fuller, 2009; Martin, 2003; Venkatesh, 2003; Wacquant, 2008). Concerns have been raised over the narrow view and potentially damaging effects of the neighbourhood effects discourse and the urban policies this discourse might support (cf. Bauder, 2002; Fallov, 2010; Lupton, 2003; Lupton and Tunstall, 2008; Venkatesh, 2003). Much of neighbourhood effects discourse emphasizes the ‘negative effects’ of living amongst the poor due to presumably bad role models, a lack of conventional norms and values, and deviant work ethics, and thus focuses on presumed deficits and pathologies (cf. Bauder, 2002; Lupton and Tunstall, 2008). There is a risk that too much responsibility is assigned to neighbourhood composition – and thus to neighbourhood residents – at the expense of neglecting wider structural inequalities (ibid.; Venkatesh, 2003; Wacquant, 2008).

Other issues raised include the lack of attention given to relational geographies, space and the specificities of place. Despite frequent use of spatial concepts (neighbourhood, segregation, place) and spatial metaphors (white flight, concentration effects, place effects), it has been recognized that space and spatial considerations are often neglected in neighbourhood effects research (Gans, 2002; Gotham, 2003; Martin, 2003). It is anticipated that neighbourhoods offer differing social opportunities and life chances (e.g. some present more
‘risks’ or offer more ‘opportunities’ than others), but how neighbourhoods and their social structures are produced and maintained, is, to a large extent, taken as given. Wacquant (2008: 284) asserts that the ‘thematics of neighbourhood effects’ “conveys a falsely depoliticised vision of urban inequality, in which spatial processes appear self-evident, self-generated, or left unexplained…”.

Gans (2002) points out that the operational definition of ‘neighbourhood’ used in research is not always specified or justified. He remarks that “[a]lthough neighborhood effects researchers are working with a spatial concept, they do not always define neighborhood or report who and what in the neighborhood actually produces effects” (ibid.: 334). Commenting on the neighbourhood definitions used in quantitative neighbourhood effects research, Lupton (2003) writes:

> [t]he reduced versions of neighbourhood that are used in practice hardly do justice to the understanding built up through qualitative work, and in many ways represent a backward step, defining neighbourhoods as poor or non-poor, with fixed boundaries, and with similar impacts for individuals regardless of who they are and how they are connected. While some reductionism is, of course, inevitable for quantitative work, it should not be accepted uncritically, especially if the result is that policy is founded on weak results.

Another challenge, and one of the main concerns of this paper, is that the framework of neighbourhood effects does not adequately capture the reciprocal relationships between neighbourhoods and the people that inhabit, and in turn, shape them. Although the neighbourhood is seen to affect individuals, how individuals shape the neighbourhood tends to be given little attention (cf. Furstenberg and Hughes, 1997; Gans, 2002; Gotham, 2003; Lupton, 2003; Smith and Easterlow, 2005). The idea of a neighbourhood effect conveys a mainly one-way relationship between ‘place’ and ‘individual’, even though many of the proposed channels through which the neighbourhood is thought to affect individuals involve mutual interactions between individuals and neighbourhood residents, institutions and other neighbourhood features. As Smith and Easterlow (2005: 176) remark, commenting on the field of neighbourhood effects and health inequalities, much of this research stops short of embracing the mutuality between people and place, the fact that “people make places, just as places make people”. Thus, they argue that this field of research has produced “a strangely one-sided geography” (ibid.).

This issue is widely acknowledged in the neighbourhood effects literature (e.g. Buck, 2001; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sampson et al., 2002),
yet still tends to be underappreciated. In their review of neighbourhood effect studies on children and youth, Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000) explain that “in studying context, an important issue is the simultaneity problem, as addressed by transactional models of human development. Interactions between children and families are bidirectional in nature (Sameroff & Chandler, 1975). Those between families and neighborhoods may be as well”. Likewise, discussing challenges in neighbourhood effects research, Buck (2001: 2256) writes that “[t]he problem is in effect one of simultaneity. People are influenced by their context, and at the same time, influence that context”. Thus, as Lupton (2003) asserts, “there needs to be some mechanism for reflecting the interactions between people and place, in order not to identify neighbourhood effects that really arise from individuals, or vice versa”.

The mutual relationships between people and place are a fundamental fact of human life and of substantive interest in some fields of study – people, place and space are always reciprocally interrelated (Massey, 1994). While this mutuality does indeed pose a significant challenge to measuring the ‘effects of neighbourhoods’, it suggests that we might look at the question of neighbourhood effects from a different perspective: not only how neighbourhoods affect people, but also how people affect neighbourhoods (including how they choose, are selected into, excluded from, shape and interact with neighbourhoods). To this end, Smith and Easterlow (2005) offer the complementary approach of compositional geographies, which turns the question of neighbourhood effects on its head and explores how the personal circumstances and outcomes we research (health, in their case) shape residential careers and the geographies of everyday life. Based on qualitative research, they show how peoples’ health histories and conditions influence their neighbourhood and residential careers, and thus, that health itself is drawn into the structuring of society, space and place. As they assert, “health histories and conditions are powerfully entangled with people’s trajectories into, within and out of, different spaces and places” (ibid.: 185). Although specifically dealing with neighbourhood effects on health, their comments ring true for neighbourhood effects research more broadly (cf. Hanson Thiem, 2009, for a discussion on education).

These comments touch upon two important and related issues in the study of neighbourhood effects; first, as mentioned above, the often-neglected mutual interactions between people and place, and second, the well-known issue of ‘selection effects’ (or ‘selection bias’), which refers to the fact that people are not sorted randomly into neighbourhoods (or schools or other social contexts). As Sampson et al. (2002) assert, “the issue of selection bias is probably the biggest challenge facing neighborhood-level research. How do we know that
the area differences in any outcome of interest, such as adolescent delinquency, are the result of neighborhood factors rather than the differential selection of adolescents or their families into certain neighborhoods?”. Although most neighbourhood and school effects researchers acknowledge that individuals are not sorted randomly into these places, such selection is often treated as a statistical nuisance rather than a fundamental social process and something of substantive interest (but see Doff, 2010; Sampson, 2008; Smith and Easterlow, 2005). It is exactly this ‘non-randomness’ and unequal access to and selection of neighbourhoods and schools that underlies much of the research on school choice and admissions (Ball et al., 1996; Saporito and Lareau, 1999), residential choice and mobility (Croft, 2004; Mulder, 2007; Zorlu and Latten, 2009), gentrification and discriminatory institutional practices such as redlining (Aalbers, 2005), and other gatekeeping practices that help to allocate and determine who has access to valuable urban resources and facilities (Noreisch, 2007). Selection into neighbourhoods and schools is far from arbitrary and this is of substantial importance for how we understand and research the meaning of these places.

Taken together, the comments above encourage neighbourhood effects researchers to broaden the lens through which neighbourhoods and their relationships with people are viewed, and to examine both sides of the person–place relationship. In the case of young people, as I hope to show below, this means acknowledging that there are multiple neighbourhood places that they frequent, and that they are actively engaged in discovering and interacting with these places. They make decisions, some more constrained than others, about where, how and with whom they spend time, and these decisions in turn shape their experiences and interactions with – and the potential effects of – their neighbourhoods.

6.3 THE CURRENT STUDY AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

The data presented in this paper are part of a larger doctoral research project (Sykes, 2009; Sykes and Kuyper 2009; Sykes and Musterd, in press), which uses a longitudinal Dutch study of secondary education to investigate the associations between the educational outcomes of around 18,000 youth in the Netherlands and the social composition of their neighbourhoods and schools. In this paper, I draw on in-depth interviews that were carried out in November and December 2009 with 16 youth who grew up and currently live in Amsterdam (ages ranged from 18-24 years, the median age was 21 years).
The interviews were semi-structured and dealt with the themes of residential history, school career and school choice, recreational activities and friendships, and home life. Through narratives and maps, the youths chronologically described their residential and school careers – for example, where they lived while growing up, how many times they moved, which schools they attended, why they attended particular schools or avoided others, and what role they played in choosing their secondary schools. Their primary and secondary schools were mapped in relation to their places of residence. They explained and often drew what they considered to be their neighbourhood and how this changed (or not) as they grew older, places they liked to go to or avoided, their spatial range as children and teenagers, their routes to school every day, and where, how and with whom they spent time in their neighbourhood and the wider city. They explained where they knew their friends from during primary school, secondary school and today – to what extent did these friends come from the neighbourhood and school and did this change over time? They were asked to evaluate their neighbourhoods and schools – for example, what did they feel were good and bad aspects of these places? How would they describe the neighbourhood to someone who had not been there before? How did they think their neighbourhood and school were viewed by others?

Respondents were recruited through posters, email lists and flyers at local colleges, universities and community centres. All interested respondents replied to me by telephone or email to express their interest in the interview and 18 youth who varied in gender, ethnic and educational background and neighbourhoods of residence were selected. A time, date and place for the interview were mutually agreed upon. Two of the interviews did not occur due to cancellation on the part of the respondents and a lack of interest in rescheduling. All of the respondents were given the option of carrying out the interview in Dutch or English; for the nine who specified no preference between the two languages, I carried out the interview in English; the remaining interviews were carried out in Dutch by two research assistants, who carried out four and three interviews each. The three interviewers were females in their mid-20s. All respondents were given a €15 gift certificate in appreciation for their time. The interviews lasted between 1 and 2.5 hours and were recorded and transcribed in full. The transcripts were later coded to establish patterns around the themes presented above (e.g. neighbourhood history, school choice, friendships) and a number of sub-themes. All names of youth in this paper are pseudonyms.

The 16 youth interviewed had diverse social, ethnic, residential and educational backgrounds. Because this is a small sample, I do not attempt to draw patterns in the paper in terms of youths’ backgrounds, but I give a brief description here.
Half of the youth were second-generation migrants with one or both parents born in Morocco, Turkey, Suriname, India, Egypt, Italy and Indonesia; both parents of the remaining eight youth were born in the Netherlands. When I refer to youths’ ethnic backgrounds in this paper I state, for example, ‘Turkish-Dutch’ or ‘Moroccan-Dutch’ for the second-generation immigrant youth, and ‘native Dutch’ for the youth born to two native Dutch parents. As gauged by their parents’ levels of education, occupations, employment status and youths’ self-descriptions, just over half had a low-income or working-class background and the remaining youth had a lower-middle- or middle-class background. Four youth completed the highest ‘Vwo’ track of secondary school, nine completed the medium ‘Havo’ track, and three completed the lowest track, ‘Vmbo’ (these school tracks are described below).

Amsterdam has a population of 756,000 inhabitants. Around half of the residents were born abroad or have one parent who was born abroad and are referred to in official Dutch statistics and in the public realm as allochtonen. The share of young people (under 20 years) with an immigrant background is higher, at around 63 percent (Dienst O&S, 2010). The largest minority ethnic groups are Moroccans, Surinamese and Turkish. The youth interviewed for this paper lived in a variety of relatively low-income and medium-income neighbourhoods in four city districts of Amsterdam: Noord (n = 3), Zuidoost (n = 2), Oost (n = 3), and Nieuw-West (n = 8). These district names correspond in English to North, Southeast, East and New-West respectively, and are used throughout the paper. In addition to these four districts, reference is made in this paper to the other districts that make up Amsterdam, namely, Centrum (Centre), Oud-Zuid/Zuid (Old-South/South), and West.

While most neighbourhoods in Amsterdam can be described as ‘mixed income’ due to the moderate overall levels of socio-spatial segregation and the nature of the housing stock, there are relatively low-income and stigmatized areas and government programmes to reduce segregation and promote greater levels of neighbourhood income mixing (Latten, 2005; Musterd and Ostendorf, 2008). Six of the youth interviewed grew up and currently live in neighbourhoods

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1 Allochtonen and its opposite autochtonen (autochthonous in English) are terms widely used in the Netherlands to signify ‘immigrant/foreigner’ and ‘native/indigenous’, respectively. Because this status is defined by parental birthplace, the second generation is also considered to be allochtonen. In this paper, I translate allochtonen and autochtonen as ethnic minorities/immigrants and native Dutch, respectively.

2 West and Nieuw-West are two different city districts; the youth interviewed all lived in Amsterdam Nieuw-West but referred to it in the interviews simply as ‘West’.

3 Amsterdam’s housing stock consists of 50 percent social-rented housing, which has historically served a wide range of income levels. Of the 16 youth interviewed, 13 grew up in social-rented housing and three in owner-occupied housing.
that have been selected as ‘priority areas’ by an area-based programme of the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Neighbourhoods and Integration programme, which aims to improve the conditions in what it sees as the 40 most socially troubled neighbourhoods in the Netherlands.

Part of this paper deals with youths’ school experiences, so it is important to provide some key details of the Dutch school system. School choice is an important and widely debated issue in the Netherlands. Families are granted, in principle, open school choice, both at the primary and secondary level. There is a diverse supply of schools, including public schools run by the state and schools established on the basis of specific faiths (e.g. Catholic, Protestant, Islamic) and pedagogic principles (e.g. Montessori, Steiner), which are run by the associations or foundations that set them up. All schools, regardless of faith or orientation, receive equal status and funding from the government. Most faith-based schools (particularly the Protestant and Catholic schools) serve culturally heterogeneous populations and religion no longer plays an important role in school admissions. There are a small number of Islamic, Hindu, Orthodox Christian and Jewish schools, where religious or cultural identity does play a role; for example, in the (one) Islamic secondary school in Amsterdam, 98 percent of students have a non-Western background, and naturally it attracts Muslim students (Karsten, 1999; Karsten et al., 2006).

Young people are more segregated in schools than in neighbourhoods, and family school choices and institutional features of the school system are known to reinforce this segregation (Karsten et al., 2003, 2006). As in countries such as Germany, the Netherlands has a ‘selective’ secondary school system, in which students are divided into different educational tracks, differentiated by curricula, prestige, years of duration and possible destination. There are three main tracks: vocational secondary education (Vmbo), which lasts 4 years and is further divided into four sub-tracks; senior general secondary education (Havo), which lasts 5 years; and pre-university education (Vwo), which lasts 6 years and is further divided into Gymnasium (which includes Greek and Latin languages) and Athenaeum (without classical languages). At the end of primary school, students are given a recommendation as to the most suitable secondary school track to follow based mainly on their performance on a standardized test (Cito test) and their general skills, motivation and interests, as assessed by their teachers. This recommendation is a critical factor in youths’ secondary school decisions, because not all schools offer every track. Moreover, at the schools that do offer
multiple tracks, students’ recommended track level determines their place (i.e. their first year class type) within the school. 

6.4 DEFINING NEIGHBOURHOOD: A MULTIPLICITY OF NEIGHBOURHOODS

In both research and everyday life, neighbourhoods are defined and understood in numerous ways. Neighbourhoods are ‘multiply constructed’; they may be defined and named by officials, but are also defined, interpreted and imagined in multiple ways by different groups and individuals (cf. Gieryn, 2000; Martin, 2003). The flexibility and slipperiness of the neighbourhood concept and the constraints in defining and operationalizing it for empirical research are widely recognized (e.g. Gotham, 2003; Martin, 2003; Lupton, 2003). While neighbourhoods are always understood to be geographical areas, how these areas are defined in research varies depending on the research questions and topics of investigation, and often, data availability. Some studies adopt census tracks or other administrative units, others construct ‘micro-neighbourhoods’ or bespoke neighbourhoods delineated by the area encompassed within a certain radius of a respondent’s home, and others ask respondents what they perceive to be their neighbourhood and explore and compare these interpretations (e.g. Andersson and Musterd, 2010; Lee and Campbell, 1997).

Individuals’ perceptions of neighbourhood and neighbourhood boundaries also vary widely. Two people living on the same street or even in the same house can have a different view of what constitutes their neighbourhood (cf. Burton and Price-Spratlen, 1999; Lee and Campbell, 1997). Moreover, one’s spatial sense of neighbourhood may expand and contract over the life course and vary depending on the activity in question (e.g. using local facilities versus greeting neighbours) (Lee, 2001). People also inhabit multiple neighbourhoods, both sequentially over their life course due to residential mobility and neighbourhood change, and for some, simultaneously. Based on their ethnographic research, Burton and Price-Spratlen (1999: 86) note that many children and youth call a multiplicity of residences their homes – “that is, they may be members of families who simultaneously co-reside across multiple households located both within and across a variety of neighbourhoods”. In their study, one third of the children simultaneously resided in 2 to 4 households across several

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4 Depending on their performance, students can transfer upwards or downwards in track level, or transfer to a higher track after successfully completing a lower one, and many do so. Some schools also delay the choice of school track with a ‘transition year’ in the first year.
distinct neighbourhoods, as they spent different days of the week with parents, grandparents and other carers.

The 16 youth that were interviewed for this study detailed their residential and school histories. When asked what they considered to be their neighbourhood, both now and when they were growing up, their answers revealed both the flexibility of the neighbourhood construct and the multiple neighbourhoods that many had inhabited due to residential mobility. Of the 16 youth interviewed, six had what might be considered a ‘conventional’ neighbourhood and school career – attending one primary followed by one secondary school, living in one neighbourhood at a time and moving house infrequently (i.e. once during childhood) or not at all. The others had much more varied experiences. Eleven of the youth moved house at least once (and up to seven times) while growing up, with nine of these constituting moves between different (administrative) neighbourhoods, and the others within the same neighbourhood. Vincent (21 years, native Dutch) had lived in three neighbourhoods and attended four primary schools and three secondary schools. Four of the youth spent time regularly at both of their (divorced or separated) parents’ homes while growing up, which were located in different neighbourhoods. Lukas (22 years, native Dutch) had moved four times by the age of 18; he explained his residential history:

I was born in a shared-housing community [woongroep], on the Frans Street, it’s a real nice neighbourhood. I was born there, in like a pretty big house, but of course, people have children so you have more conflicts I guess, so we moved out of that neighbourhood and then I was about, I guess five, and we moved to the Indische Buurt, it’s in Oost, it’s here (points to map), we were on the Grijze Street, it was more like, ah ghettoized, it was a big difference. Then I guess my parents had a little bit more money, but not that much more, so we went to a different neighbourhood where you could play outside, that was near Rozen Street, it’s called Zonnen Street, it’s right here (map). After that we went here (map), then when I was about 13 we went to live over here. My father still lives there. When I was 18 years old I squatted a place on the Pijp Street, so that’s here (map), close to the police station there, but only for about a year, then I lived…

Street names have been changed to protect the youths’ anonymity. Texts from Dutch interviews have been translated into English by the author. In the interview text, the youth often refer to ‘here’, which indicates their reference to a map during the interview.
Residential histories not only provide interesting details in the lives of these youths, but are important when trying to understand the meaning and role of the neighbourhood in the lives of young people. As Furstenberg and Hughes (1997: 28) comment,

residential mobility is a key means by which parents choose the environment experienced by their children. Because of changes in residence, a child may be exposed to a variety of different neighborhoods while growing up. The impact of a particular community on a child will likely depend on the child’s duration of exposure to the characteristics of that community, the ages at which it occurs, and, perhaps, the types of neighborhoods that precede and follow it.

Residential mobility not only played a part in determining which neighbourhoods the interviewed youth were exposed to, and thus, the people and places they came into contact with, but also in their identity formation and subjective feelings about and attachment to their neighbourhoods and Amsterdam. For example, Lukas (above) considered almost all of Amsterdam to be his ‘home’. He had lived in several parts of the city, had been granted a lot of freedom and autonomy to travel around the city when he was growing up, and had friends “really, from all over Amsterdam”. He felt a strong attachment to Amsterdam, and even got “a bit homesick” when he went to Utrecht (a neighbouring city) briefly for college, but felt no special connection to any of the specific neighbourhoods he had lived in. In contrast, Melissa (22 years, Indonesian-Dutch) lived with her mother in one apartment in Amsterdam West for her whole life and for her, that neighbourhood “is home, like my real ‘home town’. That’s my place”. She spent time in other parts of Amsterdam, but preferred to be close to her home neighbourhood and wanted to continue living there after she moved out of her mother’s house. We were in Amsterdam Oost at the time of the interview and she explained,

I come here sometimes, but it’s not my place to be, and I don’t feel comfortable on this side of the city. This (points on the map to her neighbourhood) is really my part of the city, I like this. Here (map) is also the park and this is a big pond where we hang out. Oost is not my location. And with the bicycle at night, if I have to bike in Amsterdam Oost I feel a little bit scared because I don’t know the neighbourhood, but at the same time [of night] in my own part of the city, then I feel that it’s ok, then I’m not scared at all.
Vincent lived in the same neighbourhood for fourteen years and knew “almost everyone” on his street. He explained that because he had switched schools several times (he attended four primary schools and three secondary schools), most of his friends came from outside school, in his words, “from the neighbourhood, basically the boys that were always outside”. He explained:

I went to a lot of primary schools. So actually, I never had real friends from school. I just had friends from outside school, that I knew from the street. We played together, and then when you’re 10 or 11 [years old], you go more to the street and then you get to know more boys who do that too. That’s actually how I know all of my friends until today. Since I was 12 or so.

For most youth, their neighbourhoods ‘stretched out’ as they grew older; as Matthews and Limb (1999: 72) note, “[t]he routine world of a six-year-old is no more than a ‘spatial bubble’ within the world of a young teenager”. Esther (19 years, Italian-Dutch) described her neighbourhood when she was younger: “so my neighbourhood was really this (points to map) and I was allowed to play three streets from mine, not further, so just those three streets were my neighbourhood when I was little and when I got a bit older I could go around all the places”. The respondents described their neighbourhoods during childhood as “my street”, “just in front of the door”, “my street and the street behind me”, or a larger block, usually marked by tram tracks or a busy road that formed temporary boundaries, inscribed by their parents.

What Besma (19 years, Moroccan-Dutch) considered to be her neighbourhood shrunk between her childhood and teenage years. While drawing a map, she described her childhood neighbourhood in great detail: “here we had a church, then here some houses for seniors. And here an apartment building where seniors were cared for, but now it’s a hotel. And here you had a day care, with a small playground. I played there a lot, with swings and stuff. My street was here. So that was my street, and here was another street...”. When describing her neighbourhood of today, she explained, “[y]eah, now it’s just my street. Not really more”. Once she entered secondary school she spent little time in her neighbourhood because her school was located in a different district of Amsterdam and her schoolwork took up more of her time; as she explained, “then it was really just work, school and you go back home to sleep or do homework”.

Some youth had adopted entirely new neighbourhoods. After explaining what she considered to be her neighbourhood in Amsterdam West, Ava (18 years,
native Dutch) added, “but, from the moment I went to [secondary] school, at the Amsterdams Lyceum, that was really more my neighbourhood. I never really went home, and I was not at all with the children from the neighbourhood”. Although she did not live there, she considered the area of her school to be her neighbourhood because she went there almost every day for school, many of her friends lived there and she also felt “more at home” there. She had described her own neighbourhood in negative terms (“boring”, “anonymous”, “no real special features”, “really closed [people]”). As soon as she was a teenager, she preferred to spend her time in the city centre, in the Oud-Zuid neighbourhood of her school and in the neighbourhoods of her school friends.

Many of the youth described their neighbourhoods in relation to what it was not and by referring to other places (“it’s poor, but not like the Bijlmer6”). Esther juxtaposes her neighbourhood with a neighbouring area that “you didn’t want to be part of”:

This (points to map) is called IJplein and that was really my neighbourhood because on the other side of the road, you got Vogelbuurt and that was really bad, that was even worse than my neighbourhood. It was, I think it was three or four years ago it was the poorest neighbourhood in all of the Netherlands. And there are children there with hunger, they don’t go to school with breakfast, so yeah, the schools give them breakfast. So you didn’t want to be part of that neighbourhood. And you know, there was always trouble, because there was this really nice playground [in the other neighbourhood] with a lot of things and we didn’t have that in our neighbourhood so we went to the other one, and they [kids from the other neighbourhood] were always fighting, and getting us girls away, and hitting us, cause we were not allowed to play there. So that’s really the worst part of the neighbourhood, so my neighbourhood was really this (points to map).

The youth were attentive to the social differences and inequalities across neighbourhood spaces and many drew on these in their descriptions. Mirak (19 years, Egyptian-Dutch) explained that his neighbourhood had “two parts”, one with social housing and another with single-detached, owner-occupied housing; “[y]ou had this area that was social rented and that area that was separate [single-detached] housing, so you had more rich people there and well less, well

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6 The Bijlmer is a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Amsterdam with the most well-known housing estates in the Netherlands, infamous for its reputation of neighbourhood decline and social problems (see Aalbers, 2010).
poorer people here”. He lived in the social housing part, but because he attended a primary school in the other part, he spent a lot of time and “pretty much grew up” there. He elaborated:

it [the neighbourhood] actually had two sections, the apartments, the flats, that’s where I lived, it was social rent, and the other side was separate housing and I went to primary school there…So, it’s like there are two parts. I pretty much grew up in that other part, well I lived here (map), but when I visited my friends I always went to the other part.

This division was relevant for him; as he later described the recent social problems in his neighbourhood (“it’s really going downhill”), he explained that this occurred in the “social housing part” of the neighbourhood, not the other part. The childhood friendships he maintained today were also with people from “the other part”.

Melissa also referred to the type of housing in the area around her home to contrast where she lived (in social housing) to where her boyfriend lived nearby in a “good neighbourhood”:

Tim lives in a good neighbourhood. It’s also in the same area, because I live here (map) and he lives here. So it’s not far away, but these are big houses, family houses, and I live in a flat, and that’s different. And it’s quiet over there, and they have a park over there, and so it’s different…they are not far from each other, but different.

Youths’ reports of their residential histories and interpretations of neighbourhood boundaries underscore the multiple neighbourhoods that young people inhabit and the different ways in which they define these places. As Lee (2001: 33) remarks, although “we cannot fix the elastic nature of the concept, we should at least take it into account”. Several of the youth juxtaposed their ‘home neighbourhood’ with the neighbourhood of their secondary school, as apparent in Ava’s comments above, which brings up an important issue: how does the school fit into the schema of neighbourhood effects? And vice versa, how does the neighbourhood fit into the notion of school effects?
6.5 NEIGHBOURHOODS AND SCHOOLS:
INTERCONNECTED PLACES

Children and youth allocate much of their time between their neighbourhoods
and schools and these places overlap as places of learning, socialization and where
friendships are made. As Karsten (2010) points out, schools and neighbourhoods
are among the most important places where young people have the opportunity
to extend their social networks. She suggests that the “relationship between
children’s social networks at school and in the neighbourhood is seriously under-
researched. Do children develop school friendships after school by inviting
schoolmates into their neighbourhood play groups and do children get to know
neighbourhood children without attending the same school?” (ibid.: 4). In the
interviews, several youth referred to their “neighbourhood friends” and their
“school friends”. As one youth explained, “I’ve got a couple groups of friends.
So, like one group is from my high school and we’re still together, and one group
is from my hobbies, and one group is from the neighbourhood. And they’re not
mixed”.

The connections between youths’ neighbourhoods and schools also have
implications for youths’ spatial ranges and familiarity and understanding of the
social and spatial realm. Lukas explained where he knew his friends from when
he was younger and how this changed when he entered a secondary school that
was located in a different “more high-class” neighbourhood:

Most of my friends were from around [me], a bit from Oost and close
to the centre. Of course there were different types of people, some
were more rich and some more poor, it was really different. I had
more friends from the neighbourhood who were also not that rich,
and it really changed when I went to the Montessori Lyceum, because
it’s a bit like, the cultural elite is at that school, so a lot of people
are quite wealthy there, but some people aren’t of course. This [his
neighbourhood] was more lower-class and this [the neighbourhood of
his school] was more high-class and it’s a different culture, so when I
went on my bike from here to here (map), cause first I still lived there
when I started at that school, you saw the difference in the cars and
the people and it got nicer.

Esther grew up in a low-income neighbourhood in Amsterdam Noord, but
attended the same Montessori Lyceum as Lukas, in the Oud-Zuid neighbourhood
of Amsterdam. She also commented on her experience going to that school:
In high school I had these friends and they grew up in the grachtengordel and they were real chic, they were real different people, they spoke differently, I had this slang from the street and they didn’t. So yeah, it was different and they didn’t grow up with different cultures, so until I was 12, I had one Dutch friend and that was it and the rest were all mixed from all different kinds of countries, but not the Netherlands.

Mirak explained that attending a high school closer to the centre of Amsterdam meant that he now had friends from that part of the city, and thus spent less time in his home neighbourhood in Amsterdam Zuidoost: “well in the last three years, I pretty much go to the city for everything that I do, because all the friends I got to know from high school and their friends, that’s pretty much my friend group right now, and they live scattered around the centre...So I don’t stay in my neighbourhood, only to sleep and eat”.

Thirteen of the youth attended a primary school in their (immediate) neighbourhood, located between a three and ten minute walk away. These youth travelled to primary school on foot, and when they were older, also by bicycle. The other three youth attended the closest primary school to their house, but which was located somewhat further away (approximately 25 minutes by foot). At the secondary school level, the distance between home and school was much larger. Many did not have a suitable school in their home neighbourhood, and thus had to leave their neighbourhood to attend school. Others preferred to attend a school in another neighbourhood, despite having a school closer by, because it offered a special focus or feature; special school characteristics that the youth mentioned included Montessori education, Gymnasium, Spanish language classes, Islamic education, and multiple school tracks at the same school.

Several of the youths explained how they and their neighbourhood and primary school friends went in different directions once they entered secondary school, because they made different school choices and had different track recommendations. Melissa had always walked to primary school with four girls from her street. She explained that in secondary school “it changed, because everybody has a different recommendation, someone has Vmbo, Havo, Vwo... So then it changed, and then it changed the friendships also”.

The majority of schools offer multiple tracks, thus, internal or within-school segregation also exists, due to the large differences in students’ social and ethnic backgrounds across the different tracks. Students with a low socioeconomic

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7 The grachtengordel (canal belt) of Amsterdam refers to the streets along the canals in the city centre, which are among the most affluent areas in the city.
status and from minority ethnic backgrounds are over-represented, on average, in the lower tracks and under-represented in the higher tracks (Herweijer, 2009). In the interviews, I was interested in whether the youth had friends from different school tracks, and their answers suggest that school tracking does reinforce same-track friendships and within-school segregation, as has been found in other studies (cf. Hattie, 2002; Schofield, 2006). Mirak attended the highest secondary school track, called Gymnasium, at a school which offered multiple tracks; he recalled that “Gymnasium felt like a separate part of the school, we didn’t really mix with the others”. When asked whether he had friends who did a different level than him in secondary school, Louis (24 years, Antillean-Surinamese-Dutch), a Mavo\textsuperscript{8} student, explained:

Yeah, usually you hang out with your own level. Because people at the Gymnasium, I didn’t know them, I saw them, but they weren’t my friends. We didn’t really hang out together, it’s like those people, they look for each other, you know. And I think there’s also a different mentality, like, you know, they rather go home and study or they go in the library of the school and study over there. And people from Mavo, I mean I don’t say that they are not smart, but they have different interests, you know.

In neighbourhood effects research, the school is sometimes implicitly thought of as (part of) ‘the neighbourhood’ (e.g. Ainsworth, 2002), while in other studies it is contrasted with the neighbourhood. The interviews demonstrate these as two important, but often very different, social environments for youth. Entering secondary school usually meant a new peer group, a new neighbourhood and a new marker of identity (e.g. being a ‘Gymnasium’ or ‘Vmbo’ student). Mirak grew up in the Zuidoost of Amsterdam in a low-income neighbourhood and attended the same school as his older brother closer to the city centre, but they attended different tracks within the school. I asked him to explain the backgrounds of his friends to me:

Well, because I went to Gymnasium at high school my friends were pretty much white, and high educated and their parents were pretty rich and stuff. I had a few friends that were from another ethnic background and I don’t really see them anymore, but the people I

\textsuperscript{8} In the school year 1999/2000, ‘Mavo’ was merged with another track into what is now called ‘Vmbo’; Louis began school before this merger.
do see from my time in high school are really in the upper, upper class, you know, because they were from Gymnasium, well actually that doesn’t mean from what background you are, but it did actually. It is related, and so, my friends are pretty much all white, but when I look at my brother who went to Havo at the same high school he has a lot of mixed friends. So it’s really funny because, because I did Gymnasium I have all these friends that are from rich families and because my brother did Havo he has a really mixed friend group… It made me more white than my brothers, having done Gymnasium, because of the way I talk, it’s more like higher, and my brother’s more ghetto, like street talk…

Thinking about youth situated in school tracks, schools, and neighbourhoods, which are dynamic (e.g. youth switch schools and move house) and overlapping, reveals some of the complexity that comes with trying to measure the effects of neighbourhoods and other social settings. Young people’s geographies are complex, and while the neighbourhood may be an important place in their everyday experiences and longer term development, they have a wider range of socio-spatial experiences, which are also shaped by, and in turn shape, their neighbourhood experiences. My aim is not to suggest that neighbourhood researchers should try to capture this entire web of social and spatial connections, but rather to highlight some of the ways in which a consciousness of these connections affects the way in which we think about neighbourhood effects, and young people’s experiences in neighbourhoods. In the next section, I consider how young people shape their orientation towards their neighbourhoods and schools.

6.6 CHOOSING PLACES

As outlined above, considering how youth are selected into neighbourhoods and schools has importance for understanding the effects of these places. Writing from the US, Duncan and Raudenbush (1999: 36-37) explain:

The contexts in which children develop are not allocated by a random process…A child’s immediate neighborhood and, to a somewhat smaller extent, schools also have an element of parental choice. The propensity of individuals to choose higher or lower quality child care
or to move to better or worse neighborhoods or schools depends on background characteristics and current circumstances...substantial effort is required to model these propensities as a precondition to drawing conclusions regarding the causal nature of context influences.

If we want to understand the influence of place, we ought to explore how places and their geographies are produced and how people are sorted and sifted across place. This would include looking at the choices and constraints surrounding residential careers and school choice decisions, and would also include young people's voices. While youths’ parents clearly are the primary people engaged in residential decisions, youth typically play quite a large role in deciding which secondary schools they attend and they can (purposefully or non-purposefully) shape how oriented they are towards their school and neighbourhood settings, through their decisions and actions concerning the friendships they maintain, their activities, the places they visit and hang out in, and so on. While youth and their families can and do make these kind of decisions, they result from the interaction of preferences, constraints and opportunities. Schools and neighbourhoods, and the places within them, are not equally accessible to everyone.

There are many reasons to stretch the notion of selection effects beyond just a parental decision and the choice of residence – as often is the case in neighbourhood effects research – and to consider young people’s role in the selection of schools and other places. The selection of these different places are related (e.g. residential decisions affect school choice decisions), but also, the selection of and orientation towards one place impacts upon the selection of and experiences in another place. For example, in Ava’s comments above, her school neighbourhood became her ‘home neighbourhood’, as she preferred this place over her (residential) home neighbourhood and most of the friends she made at school lived there. Oberwittler’s (2007) study of neighbourhood effects and youth in two German cities offers an empirical example. He found that the spatial location of youths’ schools in relation to their home neighbourhoods had a relationship with the spatial distribution of their friendship circles. As would be expected, youth attending schools further away from their home had a greater proportion of friends from outside their neighbourhood than their counterparts who attended neighbourhood schools. He suggests that any kind of ‘neighbourhood effect’ is thus likely to be contingent on the spatial orientation of youths’ peer groups and their routine activities, and his results of neighbourhood effects on youth delinquency appear to support this view. As he correctly points out, this kind of finding highlights how the impact of people’s social contexts involves an element of self-selection, which encompasses more than just the
initial selection of a context (e.g. residential choice), but also that which shapes peoples’ embeddedness in and exposure to their neighbourhood, such as where and with whom they spend time and where they attend school.

Young peoples’ ‘choice’ of place is guided and constrained by a number of factors, including access to money and transport and the rules laid down by their parents and other adults who control space (e.g. through curfews, policing, legal ages of entry into establishments and other spatial restrictions on the basis of age) (cf. Valentine, 2003). Peoples’ spatial range and the experiences of inhabiting places are known to be shaped by factors such as gender, age and social class (Reay and Lacey, 2000b; Massey, 1994; Mathews and Limb, 1999; Valentine, 1997). Work in the field of children’s geography has shown that girls tend to be granted less autonomy and territorial mobility than boys and that their outdoor behaviour is subject to stronger parental interventions (cf. Matthews and Limb, 1999). Despite the constraints they face, studies shed light on the power young people have to discover, choose and shape the places in which they spend time (Thomas, 2005). Even small children are active in discovering, selecting and interacting with the places they come in contact with, although usually under the supervision of adults. As children get older, they become more autonomous in choosing the places they encounter. They learn how to navigate places, gaining familiarity with their surroundings and learning which places feel dangerous, safe, fun and comfortable (Thomas, 2005; Wridt, 2004). They develop affinities and aversions to places and their experiences build on past encounters with places (Hollingworth and Archer, 2010; Reay and Lucey, 2000a). The recognition of this agency adds a layer of complexity to the notion of neighbourhood effects; the effects of place are not uniform across individuals, but interact with how individuals perceive these places, their past experiences of place, and how and for what reasons they use these places.

The youth interviewed played an important role in choosing the places they inhabited growing up, consciously and unconsciously, through their decisions about which secondary schools to avoid and attend, their hobbies and activities, preferences for indoor or outdoor play, decisions about how often they would live at each (separated or divorced) parents’ home, and the friendships they maintained. For example, while some youth said that they were “always outside playing” as children and knew “almost everyone” from their street, others said that they were not really “an outdoors kid” and preferred to play inside their house. Vincent commented, “I was always outside. Basically, always. From, I think from the time I was 8 years old or so, I was always outside, except to eat and sleep”. Tamir (19 years, Turkish-Dutch) was also outside a lot “playing football, catch, hide-and-seek”. Some older boys in his neighbourhood organized mini-
football tournaments that he often participated in. Both he and Vincent knew many of their neighbours; Vincent estimated around 15 people by first and last name and Tamir estimated over 20. This was less the case for the youth who said they preferred to play inside, or for the two females who were expected by their parents to stay much closer to home and estimated that they knew about 3 neighbours. Besma played outside with other children, but recalled that her and her friends’ parents would sometimes “get anxious”: “well, then they [people in the neighbourhood] kept saying ‘there are kidnappers in the neighbourhood’ and then we had to stay in front of our house or at the back. You were kind of limited, we couldn’t go far because the parents would get anxious if we stayed away too late, too long. I didn’t really like that”.

One place that many youth played a role in choosing was their secondary school. School choice research focuses almost exclusively on the choices and preferences of parents, rather than the preferences of children and youth. Reay and Lacey’s (2000b) research on the school choice perspectives of 10-11 year olds, as they were selecting and applying to secondary schools in inner-city London, shows that the children played a central role in the school decision-making process and were often seen by their parents as the ‘expert’ on the local schools. Inside and outside of school, the children also generated peer group discourses about secondary schools, in which certain schools were described as ‘popular’, ‘good’, the school ‘everybody wants to go to’, in contrast to those that were less desirable.

Of the 16 youth that were interviewed for the current study, all recalled being central actors in their secondary school decision-making process, and many felt that they had had the final say in the decision. As one youth explained, “[f]or secondary school, I was free to choose. I had my own say. I discussed it with my parents. But I had my own say”. Just one of the youths felt the secondary school decision had been entirely her own, with no real input from her parents. Karima, a 22 year old Moroccan-Dutch female, moved with her family to the Netherlands from Morocco when she was an infant. She is the eldest child in her family and thus the first to navigate the Dutch school system.

Interviewer: Did your parents want you to go to a school nearby?
Karima: No, that had nothing to do with it. That was my choice, I made it myself. I also had another school that was closer by, but I didn’t want to go there. Because I thought, yeah, ‘this isn’t the school that is going to motivate me’. So, I went to the other school. I just registered myself there. I did it all myself.
Besma had the final say in her secondary school decision, though she sought the input of her “parents, friends and family”. After attending an Islamic primary school in her neighbourhood, she decided to attend the Islamic secondary school in Amsterdam, located in a different district. She explained how her school choice was made:

Well, actually that was my choice, because I saw that all of my friends were going there and I saw that it was an Islamic school, so I thought it must be a nice school. And yeah, based on that, I went there. And my parents also thought it was good. They were like, ‘yeah, just go, better’. When you hear stories about other schools, then I think, yeah they smoke in front of the school and so, it can have a bad influence on you. My parents thought so too, so they really stood behind me and motivated me to go there.

Tamir explained why he avoided the same secondary school, which was near his neighbourhood:

Interviewer: Were there any reasons to avoid some schools?
Tamir: Yes, for example the ICA, I didn’t want to go there and my parents didn’t want me to either.
Interviewer: What’s that?
Tamir: That’s the Islamic College Amsterdam. That’s too much [to do] with faith and belief, really, and like faith and school should be separate, I think. Because you go there to learn and not to… [unfinished sentence].

For Ava, school choice was a means to get out of her neighbourhood on the west side of Amsterdam. She avoided a school closer to home, which her father wanted her to attend, because she wanted to be closer to the city centre and wanted “a new beginning”. She had been “teased a lot” by other children during primary school and many of them would be going to the school close to her home. She chose a secondary school in the Oud-Zuid district of Amsterdam, several city districts away from her home, in an area that she was really fond of. She commented that now, she feels “actually more at home” in Oud-Zuid than in her own neighbourhood. She explained her school choice:
My father wanted me to go to [neighbourhood school], but then I thought that was nonsense. I wanted to go to the city, because, you know, if you are already there, then you go can go more often to the city, and I wanted to be there all the time, I don’t know why. I always went shopping with my mom in the city. And I found it much more fun than [her neighbourhood], I found that quite boring...And that [neighbourhood] school just seemed to me like nothing [special]. Because really everyone from my neighbourhood was going there. And I just wanted a kind of new start.

In secondary school, she made new friends that lived in different areas of Amsterdam and began to spend more time with them in their neighbourhoods, in the city centre and “hanging out around the school”. By the time she was in secondary school, she did not maintain any of the friendships from her neighbourhood and was “hardly ever at home”. She explained what attracted her to the school in Oud-Zuid:

It was actually on the posters up at my [primary] school and I thought it was just really nice and they also had Spanish, which I thought was very nice. And then I went there to take a look [during an open day] and I thought it was such a beautiful school and then it was basically just, I belonged at that school, period.

While youth played a role in choosing their social and spatial environments, some places also ‘chose’ them. Because students must attend a school that offers at least their recommended track, and not all schools offer every track, their track recommendation is a crucial factor in their secondary school decisions. After not meeting the test score requirements for the first school she visited, Karima later explained that she opted for another one, in large part because it offered Vmbo, which was her level. Before knowing the results of her Cito test, Suus (19 years old, Hindustani-Surinamese-Dutch), visited four secondary schools during open days. As she scored higher on the test than she had expected, two of those schools were automatically ruled out because the tracks they offered were too low for her.

Youths must find a school that offers their appropriate track, but some had anticipated switching tracks in the future, and thus wanted to find a school with multiple tracks. Sabine (24 years, Hindustani-Surinamese-Dutch) explained her school choice:
I made that choice myself. Of course with a little bit of help from my mother. I visited several schools. In Amsterdam Noord the choice, well I wanted the opportunity to do Mavo/Havo, and it was basically the only school that you could go from Mavo/Havo to Havo/Vwo, still in the same building. And you didn’t have that at other schools. That attracted me…and how everybody interacted, the teachers, the atmosphere.

Vincent started secondary school in Amsterdam at the Vwo level. After some problems at home he had a hard time concentrating at school: “I really couldn’t concentrate on school. It actually didn’t matter at all to me. In those two years, I actually did nothing for school”. He was then transferred to Vmbo and decided to go to a school in a small city outside of Amsterdam. He was looking for a school that offered all three educational tracks: “Then I thought, I’ll just go to Weesp, it’s pretty easy to get there...In Amsterdam there actually aren’t so many schools with Vmbo, Havo and Vwo. And there’s often a lot of immigrants [allochtonen] at those schools. I didn’t really want that, and neither did my parents”.

Youth were not asked whether the ethnic character of the school was a factor in their school choice, but two mentioned that it was when recalling their school choices. For Suus it was an extra reason to attend the school, and for Vincent it was a reason to avoid the schools in Amsterdam. Suus explained that she avoided one of the schools in her neighbourhood because “it was mainly native Dutch students there and I just wanted a mixed school, and that was definitely this school [that she attended]”. She had “heard bad things” about the other school and “didn’t even go there to look at it because I had already decided that I wouldn’t go there”. She ended up choosing a school that was a 15 minute bike ride from her house and about half of the students in her classes there had a minority ethnic background. She explained that her sentiments about school mix had been shaped by her primary school experience where she was “one of the only dark kids in class” and felt “discriminated against”.

Youths’ and their families’ preferences are part of the school choice process, but school factors also play a role. A number of formal (e.g. school tracking, school choice policies) and informal institutional arrangements and practices work to attract, exclude and sort students across and within schools and thus determine their place in the educational system (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Warrington, 2005; Noreisch, 2007). As Schofield (2006) points out, these arrangements are so much a part of the lived experience of members of society that they are often taken for granted.
Karsten et al. (2001) note that schools adopt strategies to improve their reputation or position in the local market, with one such strategy being to ‘regulate’ school intakes. While this is most noticeable in schools that have the official means to do so (e.g. private schools), studies also document gatekeeping practices in the public school sector (Gramberg, 1998; Noreisch, 2007; Warrington, 2005). As Noreisch (2007: 1324) writes, “[e]specially in schools in very heterogeneous neighbourhoods, ‘certain types of students become more sought after’ (Ball, 2003: 45-46”). Karsten et al. (2003) surveyed parents in the Netherlands and interviewed the headteachers of 43 primary schools located in 11 neighbourhoods, which were pre-selected because they had schools with ethnic compositions that diverged sharply from that of the school age population in the surrounding neighbourhood. In addition to finding evidence that parental school choices reinforce school segregation, they found indications of a number of forms of gatekeeping on the part of the schools, including, “asking for a very high parental fee⁹, using waiting lists for certain groups of pupils, limiting the number of children who do not speak fluent Dutch…advising parents to go to another school ‘because they will probably feel more at home there,’ …” (ibid.: 469).

In a study highlighting the intricacies of school choice and admissions in a socially and ethnically diverse district of Berlin, Noreisch (2007) demonstrates how the school admissions system is kept ‘intentionally non-transparent’, in order to maintain flexibility. Although headteachers do not officially have the authority to decide whether an application is accepted or not, she finds that they “often cast the deciding vote” (ibid.: 1307). Based on her interviews with school officials, she comments on the admission process: “it is clear that certain exceptions are made and even here [in the interview text] it is admitted that in some cases it is necessary to please those parents who are already showing an increased interest in their child’s schooling by engaging in the application process and are therefore also likely to be involved once their child begins school” (ibid.: 1323).

While the youth interviewed could not comment on how their primary schools were chosen or on the perspective of the schools, it was clear that they (and their families) had made school choices differently. Some had parents that seemed to be more directly engaged in the school choice processes than others, for example, by taking the youth to multiple secondary school open days and giving them advice on schools. One youth claimed that his father “knew someone in the school inspectorate” and thus was aware of which schools “were good”. Others, like Karima above, choose their schools mainly without parental input.

⁹ Although compulsory education is free in the Netherlands, some schools can ask for a parental fee for extra-curricular activities.
This was not a sign that their parents did not care, rather, some of the youth explained that their parents trusted that they could make a suitable choice or wanted to give them the freedom to choose. As Lukas explained, “my mom actually tried to get me into a Gymnasium, cause she did it. But I didn’t feel like it…it was actually kinda my decision, how strange that might seem, because you’re only 12 or something, but I thought like ‘I want to go there, I definitely want to go there’, so I went there”.

6.7 INTERPRETING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Gotham (2003: 723) argues that although neighbourhood effects research places considerable importance on the significance of spatial location, it has underemphasized the meanings of space and place (see also Gans, 2002; Martin, 2003). He suggests that considering space and place in neighbourhood research would shed light on the dynamic interplay between human agency and place. In the geographical literature, space and place are understood to be mutually dependent yet distinct concepts (Agnew, 2005; Merrifield, 1993). Space can be understood as the field in which places are embedded. Space as a whole “takes on meaning through place; and each part (i.e. each place) in its interconnection with other parts (places) engenders the space of the whole” (Merrifield, 1993: 52). Martin (2003) suggests examining the neighbourhood through Agnew’s (2005) three meanings of geographic place. Accordingly, the neighbourhood would be seen as (1) a location or objective geographical area in space, defined by broader economic, political and social processes, and connected to other locations through interaction and movement; (2) a sense of place, that is, the subjective feelings, identification, symbolic meanings, representations and values attached to a place; and (3) a locale or setting where everyday life activities take place – “[h]ere the location is no mere address but the where of social life and environmental transformations” (ibid.: 89). Examples of such neighbourhood locales could be playgrounds, the schoolyard or street corner. Agnew (2005) writes that any attempt at putting place and space together should bring at least two of these meanings of place together. Thus, we could relate neighbourhood as a ‘location’ (geographic area) to ‘sense of place’ through how it is experienced by the people that inhabit it.

As Martin (2003) points out, this conceptualization of place captures many of the aspects of neighbourhood identified in the literature, but which are not always captured in neighbourhood effects research – for example, how people
project feelings on and invest places with meaning. Indeed, she asserts that much of what gives neighbourhoods salience are the “individual and group values and attachments” associated with them, which “develop through daily life habits and interactions” (ibid.: 365). Understanding how people give such meaning to neighbourhoods, and how, when and for what purposes they then draw on this meaning (e.g. in identity formation, claiming their turf, gentrification disputes, neighbourhood stereotyping, ‘reading’ place), is thus an important part of neighbourhood research.

Place is seen as a constitutive component of human agency, social action and identity (Bauder, 2001; Gotham and Brumley, 2001; Massey, 1994). As Gotham and Brumley (2001) assert, “[u]rban spaces shape and condition how individuals and groups think and conceive of themselves, cultivate and develop personal and collective identities, and contest as well as reinforce prevailing meanings of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other social inequalities”. While the rapidly growing literature on children and youths’ geographies examines many of these issues (e.g. Reay and Lucey, 2000a; Thomas, 2005; Valentine, 2003), this literature remains largely distinct from that which examines neighbourhood effects on young people.

In describing their neighbourhoods, the youths were perceptive of how they thought others viewed their neighbourhoods and how they thought their neighbourhoods had changed over time. In both describing their neighbourhoods (“what does your neighbourhood look like?”, “how would you describe it?”, “what people live there?”) and how they had changed over the years, the ethnic composition stood out as a distinguishing feature. This was also the case for their schools. Mirak explained that his neighbourhood in Amsterdam Zuidoost “really went downhill”, but that when he “grew up there it wasn’t like that”. When giving his impression of how his neighbourhood had changed he referred to the ethnic makeup of his older brother’s class: “like when you look at my brother, he had like 50 percent white kids in his class and only one of them remains [in the neighbourhood], that’s pretty much a good example of what happened in the community”.

Youths’ descriptions of their neighbourhoods (and in some cases schools) involved references to things they had heard through the media or to the fact that their neighbourhood was a target area for government programmes. Martin and Miller (2003: 148) comment that “[t]he meaningful construction of places by capitalists, planners, communities, social groups, religious institutions, and media shape place-specific notions of fear, safety, comfort, and belonging”. One of the youths explained that “the mayor of Amsterdam said it [his neighbourhood] is a crisis area right now, a problem area, and it wasn’t like five years ago, it wasn’t
labelled as such, but now it is, so it has really gotten worse in a short amount of time”. Another youth explained that by the time she was finishing secondary school, her school had gotten “a worse reputation. It also came in the news and police reports. Now that I’m no longer at the school, the students who are still there tell me that a lot of bad things are happening there”.

Several of the youth were critical of media representations of their neighbourhood (and, in one case, their school). Louis commented about his former neighbourhood, in Zuidoost: “[y]ou know, there’s a lot of crime, I mean too much, but sometimes I think people also exaggerate you know, because when you look in the news you see like a lot of black people, and it’s like ‘ok, all of them are like that?’, you know, it’s sad” (his emphasis). Several of the other youths also expressed remorse about what they perceived to be ethnic discrimination in the media, and sometimes specifically in their neighbourhoods and schools. Commenting on how she thought the Moroccan male youth in her neighbourhood are viewed, who are increasingly associated in the media and elsewhere with causing neighbourhood problems, Melissa said, “it’s really sad because not every Moroccan is like that and I think it’s sad because some people look bad to others, but they are good people”.

When asked how she thought her neighbourhood was viewed by outsiders, Besma was somewhat reluctant to elaborate:

_Interviewer:_ How do you think your neighbourhood is seen by outsiders?

_Besma:_ Yeah, I wouldn’t really know. A deprived neighbourhood [achterstandswijk] or something.

_Interviewer:_ Yeah?

_Besma:_ Yeah, it was really just a neighbourhood with people with middle- or low-incomes and big families and mainly ethnic minority children were there. So.

_Interviewer:_ But did you feel that it was (deprived)?

_Besma:_ No, not really. It was nice and friendly [gezellig] and as long as I had fun the rest didn’t matter to me.

Later on in the interview, it was apparent that Besma not only dealt with negative stigma attached to her neighbourhood, but also to her school. She was among the first few cohorts of students to attend the Islamic secondary school in Amsterdam, and explained that:
it was a new school and being a Muslim school, it was badly portrayed in the media several times...From outside, people look in, like, ‘Oh you go to the ICA, that’s a really bad school, worst school in Amsterdam!’ But I barely noticed, and look, now I’m at HBO, second year, so, if it really is such a bad school...

She explained that attending that school taught her, among other things, to be more critical of the media: “[f]or me, it was a good school. And it taught me things that I’m glad about, in terms of faith, in terms of others things – like that you can’t only look at what the media says”.

A number of studies have examined how representations of place have an impact on young people’s identity constructions (Bauder, 2001; Hollingworth and Archer, 2010; Wriedt, 2004). Based on interviews with 21 youth in San Antonio, Texas, Bauder (2001) argues that cultural representations of neighbourhood and place-specific ideologies intervene in the formation of inner-city youth identities. Labels of ‘deviancy’ and ‘social pathology’ are inscribed on neighbourhoods and affect how youth formulate their identities. Drawing on the work of Lefebvre, he asserts that identity and ideology cannot be seen as aspatial – “ideological structures are represented in and through space and place” (ibid.: 281). Smith (1999: 139) also suggests that

[i]t may only be meaningful to consider identity, and therefore also difference, with reference to particular places at particular times. Place matters if we want to understand the way social identities are formed, reproduced and marked off from one another. Where identities are made is likely to have a bearing on which markers of difference – class, gender, and ‘race’ and so on – are salient, and which are veiled (quoted in Martin and Miller, 2003: 147, emphasis in original).

In their research on children who live in inner-city London council estates that have been “pathologised in both the national and local media”, Reay and Lucey (2000a: 415) comment that “if, as Thrift asserts, ‘place and identity are inexorably linked’, then the places in which these children live present them with a dilemma”. During their research, the research area had been described in the press as ‘drug ridden’, ‘full of problem families’ and ‘hot beds of crime’. Consequently, they explain, “the children we interviewed were often caught up in dominant imaginary constructions of the urban poor at the same time as they tried to convey their own different, locally constructed realities” (ibid.).
Melissa explained how she thinks her neighbourhood *Slotervaart* is viewed by outsiders:

Melissa: They see it like the ghetto.\(^{10}\)

*Interviewer: Really?*

Melissa: Really, and that comes, because in the news, there are a lot of things in the news, bad news, and that’s because there are a lot of immigrants [*allochtonen*] living there and they make trouble, a lot of trouble. Sometimes I say to people ‘Yeah, I live in Slotervaart’ and I’m very excited about it, and they say, ‘You live there? In that neighbourhood? Are you not scared to go alone on the street?’ So people think it’s very bad, that the neighbourhood is bad, but it’s ok.

I asked her whether she thinks anyone would judge her for living there, trying to understand if, in her view, the bad reputation would possibly have a negative impact on her. She was quick to answer:

Oh no, no, no. That’s because, I’m white, I think they [other people] see me as white. Because I’m an ethnic minority too, because one of my parents is born in Asia, so I’m foreign also, but they see me as a white girl, so they think, ‘Oh poor girl, do you live there, in that neighbourhood?’ and I think ‘Yeah, it’s ok there, there’s no problem at all!’.

I asked her about the ‘trouble makers’ and whether they actually do make trouble and if it affects her. She explained,

they really make trouble. Young boys, between 12 and 16. They are hanging out on the street, they destroy cars, or talk to girls that don’t want to talk to them, that kind of stuff, sometimes with weapons or they fight each other, with a bad ending, really, like somebody stabs each other, or with a pistol…Of course, you also have Dutch bad boys, not only Moroccan bad boys.

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\(^{10}\) It should be noted, that several of the youth use the term ‘ghetto’ very freely. There are in fact no ghettos in Amsterdam, although several referred to their neighbourhood or other neighbourhoods as ‘the ghetto’ or ‘kinda ghetto’.
She explained that despite this, she really likes the neighbourhood and thinks it is a good place to live. She knows her way around and she knows the youth who cause trouble and they don’t bother her: “[t]hey don’t bother me though. Because I’ve lived there now for 20 years, they know me, so they leave me alone. It’s a good neighbourhood, really”.

Overall, the quantitative analyses of the larger project (Sykes and Kuyper, 2009; Sykes and Musterd, in press), and students’ descriptive accounts in the interviews reported here, suggest both the subtle – and even incidental – and more complicated ways in which their neighbourhoods have meaning for young people. Several youths, at age 21, still had the same best friends who grew up down the street from them. Some of them made their secondary school decisions together with their neighbourhood friends. Nearly all attended the closest primary school to their house, and remembered well the journey to school every day. They were perceptive of how the image of their neighbourhood was seen by others. Some expressed a positive identification and attachment to their neighbourhood – it was their favourite place in Amsterdam and where they really felt at home and safe in the city. Some expressed the desire to remain living in their neighbourhood, even after they moved out of their parental home, suggesting the way in which residential location is often reproduced in families (cf. Mulder, 2007). Others expressed a dis-identification with the neighbourhood. Louis was tired “of the mentality” of the people in his former neighbourhood, which had “changed a lot” over the years and was glad to have left it. Mirak was also tired of the problems in his neighbourhood and he and his mother were looking to move out. After he had a close call with “five guys in their 20s” who tried to hit him with a brick while he was on his bike, he said, “that really got to her [his mom], like ‘Ok, this is not a good area to live’”. He said the neighbourhood was “peaceful” when he was growing up, but that it had changed a lot and his mother and him often spoke about it:

there’s a lot of crazy things going on right now. There was, at the exit of the subway station they did a random check of people, and over the course of a week they found like 10 pistols, 3 sub-machine guns or something, pretty crazy. Two weeks ago there was a shooting at [the] shopping mall and there’s robberies almost every month there, so she [his mom] has the feeling that maybe it’s time to go.

However, many of the ways in which their neighbourhoods seemed relevant to the youth, and the diversity of experiences within even this small sample of youth, are not captured in most neighbourhood effect analyses. Several drew upon their
experience of living in multiple neighbourhoods. Louis lived in Zuidoost until he was 15 years old, then moved with his parents to Amsterdam West, and had also worked part-time at a sneaker shop in the city centre (Centrum) of Amsterdam. He was happy to have left Zuidoost and commented, “to be honest, you got a little bit tired about how things were evolving in Amsterdam Zuidoost, it has a bad name, but you know when we moved over there it was like quiet, not a lot of drugs or violence you know...everything was totally different”. He made several references to the different “mentalities” he perceived in different parts of the city (especially contrasting Amsterdam Zuidoost and the city centre). Referring to Zuidoost, he explained:

My parents got a little bit tired of the mentality people have, you know, going to Kwakoe11 all the time, I mean, there’s more to life than going to Kwakoe. You know, but I have to say that because I grew up in different parts of the city, I’m more, I see things from a different perspective, you know. I had the chance to get to know other people, because people in the sneaker scene who live in the centre of Amsterdam, they know nothing about Zuidoost, but I do, I know the mentality of these people (points to Zuidoost on the map), and these people (points to West), and these people (points to Centrum). You know, so combined, I think I know more about Amsterdam than people who grew up only in Amsterdam Zuid, you know. Because we have friends from Amsterdam Zuid, like rich people, you gotta have a good income to live there, you know, I also talk to those people, so I think in the end, it was good for my development [to grow up in several neighbourhoods], because I think if I had lived just here (Zuidoost) I would be a totally different person.

Several of the other youth also interpreted different ‘mentalities’ or read different ‘attitudes’ off the places they lived and other parts of Amsterdam. They often made reference to the ethnic diversity of their neighbourhoods (and sometimes schools), and how they thought this affected them. As mentioned above, Esther grew up in an ethnically diverse part of Amsterdam Noord, but later attended a Montessori school with a predominantly (80 percent) native Dutch student body. She reflected on her experience:

11 Kwakoe is a well-known summer festival, located in the Bijlmer neighbourhood of Amsterdam, which “has become the major focal point for celebrating “Black culture” in the Netherlands” (Aalbers, 2010: 10).
So [growing up] I’d go to Moroccan parties, like marriages and stuff like that. So that’s what I knew. Then I had these friends [in secondary school] who were Dutch, and they took me to their parties and I didn’t understand anything of it, so plain and dull, and ‘why is no one dancing?’ and they would say ‘well that’s the Dutch way of partying’, so yeah that’s different. I have a different view on immigrants and Islam for example, because I grew up with it, so I can relate to it, I don’t believe in it, but I know a lot about it, and that made me different, and I can see it still. So now I study, and it’s a real white study, we have like four black girls and they’re all from Suriname, and nothing else, the rest is Dutch, and they really don’t understand the Islamic people or the Surinamese people…That’s really different, the understanding and tolerance.

6.8 CONCLUSION

In this paper I have drawn attention to some of the challenges and opportunities involved in researching neighbourhood effects on young people. I have argued that in order to understand how neighbourhoods are relevant for young people, it is necessary to appreciate how youth interact with neighbourhood places (e.g. how they choose, discover, understand, and interpret their neighbourhoods) and how neighbourhoods relate to other places (e.g. schools) within and beyond the neighbourhood. Neighbourhoods are experienced in different and complex ways by young people. These experiences are shaped by a number of factors, including how young people perceive or interpret their neighbourhood, the others places they spend time in, and perhaps also their gender, social class and ethnic background. One of the factors that I have highlighted in this paper is young people’s schools.

I have suggested a shift of attention from focusing primarily on (direct, independent) effects of neighbourhoods, and instead thinking about the influence of neighbourhoods as the product of many interconnected factors, which cannot easily be ignored in the study of neighbourhoods and people. This includes issues widely recognized in the neighbourhood effects literature, such as the non-random sorting of populations into neighbourhoods (i.e. selection effects), but also notions more common in the geographical literature on place and space. As others have suggested, the study of neighbourhood effects could be more ‘place-sensitive’ by acknowledging the uniqueness and specificity of neighbourhoods.
and the multiple meanings of ‘place’. The ‘neighbourhood effects’ that might exist in one place could well be the function of local specificities, rather than the result of a generalizable relationship. Moreover, youth deserve a more prominent role in the discussion of and research on selection effects. It was clear from the interviews that youth not only played an important part in choosing their secondary schools, but school choice factors that have been researched with respect to adults – such as the ethnic mix of schools – were also relevant for them.

How we view neighbourhoods and their effects on people has both intellectual and societal implications. A number of scholars have suggested that the emphasis on neighbourhoods as a source of social problems and social disadvantage has helped to support policies aimed at finding ‘solutions’ to these problems in the neighbourhood, for example by promoting social mixing, community cohesion and neighbourhood social capital, even though these initiatives fail to challenge the root causes of the problems or deliver the expected benefits to low-income households (Amin, 2007; Bauder, 2002; Fallov, 2010; Lupton and Tunstall, 2008). The idea of a one-way neighbourhood effect on youth bears little resemblance to their actual experiences in multiple neighbourhoods and the everyday realities of most youth growing up in a city. Neighbourhood effect research might gain from paying more attention to what a neighbourhood actually means in the lives of young people. Moreover, bringing together research on young people’s geographies, school experiences and neighbourhoods could be useful in broadening the framework of neighbourhood effects.

It was evident from many of the interviews that youth are highly aware of the discursive representations of their neighbourhoods and schools, especially those related to ethnically diverse and majority-white schools (termed ‘black’ and ‘white’ schools in the Dutch discourse) (cf. Paulle, 2002). In understanding the impact of place, it makes sense to consider how these external influences also affect youths’ experiences in and interpretations of their neighbourhoods and schools. Neighbourhoods and schools do not operate independently of their external context.

As Lupton (2003) describes, there are tensions between the conceptual and methodological approaches of quantitative and qualitative neighbourhood effects research. This paper highlights some of these tensions, not in an attempt to privilege one methodology over the other or to engage in a discussion of methodological orientations, but in an attempt to demonstrate some of the challenges that need to be addressed in order to further our understanding of the role that neighbourhoods – and more broadly, spatial segregation and socio-spatial inequality – play in the lives of young people.
REFERENCES


