



# 'Being on the move': Time-spatial organisation and mobility in a mobile preschool



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## ABSTRACT

The mobile preschool, a form of preschool practice in a bus, is a new and growing phenomenon in Swedish preschool education. Combining theories of time-spatial organisation and mobility, we critically investigate the implications of transforming traditional stationary preschool practice into a mobile preschool. Our findings show that the social order of the mobile preschool is 'being on the move' and that the travelling shapes the time-spatial organisation, with major implications for daily routines and activities. In our analyses we show how constant travelling characterises the mobile preschool as a social practice with (i) logistics and choice of place prevailing over daily planning, (ii) creation of time and space for embodied habits, (iii) teachers as attendants and children as passengers, and (iv) walking in lines. However, mobility and time-spatial constraints are also co-constructed and intimately connected with the participants' agency, since both children and teachers are actively 'doing time' and 'creating space' within the dominant structure of 'being on the move'.

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## 1. Introduction

In urban societies in Sweden and elsewhere, children's mobility is changing. Urban childhoods are becoming more common. However, processes of densification and neoliberalisation mean that spaces for children—including (pre)school yards—are shrinking (Karsten, 2005). This, along with changing lifestyles, has resulted in children spending more time indoors and less time playing in the street and in urban green and open spaces (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Kyttä, 2004; van der Burgt and Gustafson, 2013). In particular, young children's access to the outdoors has increasingly come to rely on, for example, parents' chauffeuring; Karsten (2005) has called this trend the rise of the 'back-seat-generation'. A lack of outdoor activities is regarded as detrimental for children's physical and mental health (Bundy et al., 2011), in particular within the Scandinavian traditional view of nature as symbolising an ideal childhood (Halldén, 2011). Within this societal context, we want to draw attention to a new phenomenon in Swedish early childhood education: the mobile preschool.

The mobile preschool refers to a form of preschool practice in a bus that, on a daily basis, travels to different locations in and

around the city. Originating from Denmark, the mobile preschool was introduced in Sweden in 2006 to solve acute space problems in existing preschools and address emergencies (such as lack of space or mouldy, unhealthy indoor environments), as well as to provide access to the outdoors (Hellman and Sunnebo, 2009).<sup>1</sup> After initial scepticism and protests from preschools and parents alike, mainly owing to traffic safety concerns, the mobile preschool is now an established phenomenon in about a dozen Swedish municipalities and considered an option in others.<sup>2</sup> The mobile preschool has increasingly gained in popularity amongst parents because it allows access to urban and semi-urban green spaces and enables children to access the outdoors and engage in physical activity. However, in this article we argue that there is a need to critically discuss the implications of accommodating preschool practice in a bus. In terms of planning new preschools, accommodating preschool practice in a bus requires fewer investments in the built

<sup>1</sup> Even so, in Sweden there is also a discussion about non-child-friendly cities and the need to protect the tradition of having school yards and playgrounds with a varied design and materials, including natural and loose materials, which benefit the quality of children's free play and mobility (Jansson and Persson, 2009; Ånggård, 2015; for an international discussion see e.g. Bundy et al., 2011; Brown, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> However, so far systematic evaluation or research on the mobile preschools in Sweden is lacking and there is a need of knowledge regarding geographical spread, organisation, children's backgrounds, educational quality, choice of destinations, etc. as well as how different urban and rural spaces are used for learning and interaction. This case study is part of a forthcoming project, including national mapping and ethnographical fieldwork.

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environment and is therefore a more flexible and less expensive alternative than building new premises.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Scandinavian preschools differ from childcare facilities in other countries in that they not only function as care institutions—children attend every weekday—but also have curricula (*Curriculum for the Preschool*, Lpfö 98, revised 2010) that give precedence not only to learning goals but also to children's understanding of society and democratic values. Hence, regarding matters of quality in early education, it is crucial to understand how accommodating preschool practice in a bus and using the bus for frequent travel shape time-spatial organisation of mobile preschool practice and affect children's mobility, as well as educational and other activities in the mobile preschool.

In this article we specifically analyse the time-spatial implications of a preschool bus that travels to different locations on a daily basis (see Photo 1). Using ethnographic material from an explorative pilot study, we show that the constant travelling shapes the time-spatial organisation of the mobile preschool practice, resulting in major implications for daily routines and activities. Our results show that logistics and choice of place in daily planning put constraints on children's mobility and caring activities, and also restrict educational opportunities.

## 2. Literature

To the best of our knowledge, apart from some student essays, no research has previously been conducted on mobile preschools of the Scandinavian type, i.e. buses that transport children amongst different locations on a daily basis. Besides Sweden, mobile preschools exist in Norway and Denmark. Offering children in poor inner-city areas the opportunity to experience nature was one reason for launching the Danish mobile preschool in the 1970s. They also exist in other countries but are used differently. In Australia, for example, 'mobile preschools' are buses with preschool teachers and equipment that travel to indigenous communities to provide support to local teachers with a view to promoting health and further schooling (Nutton, 2013). The Swedish preschool bus is linked to an existing base preschool and functions as its extension. At the mobile preschool studied, the bus accommodates some 20 children (aged four and five) and is on the road between 9 am and 3 pm, starting and ending the day at the base preschool. While on the road, the bus travels to different locations (day camps) within half an hour's drive from the base preschool.

In a broader perspective, there is very limited research on the mobility of preschool-aged children, apart from a range of studies on how outdoor play in green environments improves children's health and boosts their physical activities (Boldemann et al., 2006; Bundy et al., 2011). Here, for example, ways of exploring children's mobility include measuring their steps and assessing their opportunities to climb, jump, run, balance and other activities with a bearing on their development and health.

In the past few decades, research on children's mobility in general has often focused on school-age children's declining independent mobility on foot or by bicycle and decreasing outdoor play, especially in urban environments, owing to fear of traffic and 'stranger danger', increased use of digital devices and indoor play, and organised leisure (Christensen and O'Brien, 2003; Karsten, 2005; van der Burgt, 2009). However, Mikkelsen and Christensen (2009) criticise the 'independent' element in independent mobility and argue that children usually use, experience and make sense of places *together*, with other children or animals rather than by themselves, i.e. independently (Mikkelsen and



Photo 1. Children embarking on the bus.

Christensen, 2009). There are also some studies discussing children's mobility in relation to learning during transport in cars and other vehicles. For example, studies by Dowling (2000), Tillberg (2001), Laurier et al. (2008), Lareau (2011) and Kraftl (2013) show that situations when children are chauffeured by car are often used for discussions about school and for socialising within the family. Sahlström (2012, page 160) shows how, during a car journey, parents and children construct what he calls *teaching in the family car* while explicitly relating it to places they pass by. Gustafson et al. (2011) show that children who commuted on school buses used the settings they passed in their identity work and peer-group interaction within the vehicle. Regarding interaction, Laurier et al. (2008) showed in detail that seating in a car is crucial for interaction. It matters, for instance, whether you sit in the front or back seat and are audible and visible to others.

This study on the mobile preschool contributes to the literature on children's mobility studies by focusing on several aspects of children's mobility during their everyday preschool life. Examples are the movement of the bus and the mobility of teachers and children during the day in relation both to the transports and to the places visited. We show how the mobility of the bus affects the mobility of the children inside and outside the bus.

We also place our study within the literature on geographies of education and contribute to this field by focusing not only on the mobile preschool's educational practices related to socio-cultural processes (Hanson Thiem, 2009; Cook and Hemming, 2011) and the children's future, but also on the children as subjects in their current lives (Holloway et al., 2010). In addition, there is a need to include children's agency and perspectives in research with not only primary and secondary school children but also preschool-age children (Holloway et al., 2010; Kraftl, 2013). We add to the field of geography of education through a focus on not only parents' or teachers' perspectives (e.g. Holloway, 1998; Schwanen, 2007) but also the preschool children themselves.

Previous research in preschool settings has demonstrated the dominant role of daily routines in structuring social practice at preschool (Persson, 2008). Such routines as circle time,<sup>4</sup> meals and resting always occur in a certain way, at the same time and in the same place. These structural conditions are used in diverse ways, as adult-child and child-child interactions show, and are regulated by teachers' skills and traditions, social and physical spaces and also aspects of time. In terms of children as agents, these structuring conditions are also negotiated and (re)constructed through children's participation and peer-group interaction, and preschool routines

<sup>3</sup> Sweden's local authorities are obliged to offer children preschool places from the age of one year. From time to time, this involves an acute lack of space in preschools, and offering the older children places in mobile preschools to release space for younger ones has recently become a means of solving this problem.

<sup>4</sup> Circle times, where pedagogues gather the children—who often sit in a circle on the floor in ordinary stationary preschools—for educational activities, reading, storytelling and singing, are part of daily routines in Swedish preschools. The Swedish preschool has its own curriculum (Lpfö 98, revised 2010) with learning goals intended to influence the preschool practice as a whole, but educational activities are often especially related to the circle times.

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