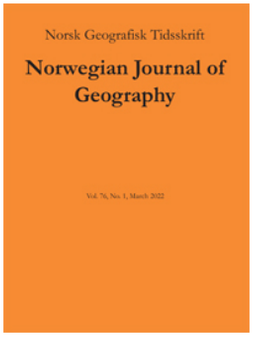


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# Walk a mile in someone else's shoes: The difficult school route and how it was managed during the emergence of the Swedish *folkskolan*, 1840–1930

**Annika Strandin Pers, Maja Lagerqvist & Annika Björklund**

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# Walk a mile in someone else's shoes: The difficult school route and how it was managed during the emergence of the Swedish *folkskolan*, 1840–1930

Annika Strandin Pers [1], Maja Lagerqvist [2] & Annika Björklund [1]

[1]Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University, Sweden;
[2]Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University, Sweden

**ABSTRACT**

In Sweden, common elementary schools (*folkskolan*) were introduced in the 1840s. As a consequence, children started walking to and from school several days per week. The school route, as both place and practice, impacted society and families; it created new ways and needs in everyday life. From a time-geographic perspective, the article investigates children's mobility in everyday life in order to understand what walking to school encompassed. Moreover, whereas the common narrative of school routes in the past emphasizes distances and challenges of the journeys it often omits the adult world's comprehension and involvement. The aim of the article is to increase understandings of the school route as a phenomenon and its meanings in everyday life from a historical perspective. Through qualitative analysis of memoirs and societal discussions, the authors focus on the difficulties (conceptualized as "weights") that the school routes could entail and how the adult world tried to manage them (conceptualized as "reliefs"). One conclusion is that society and families were aware of, and tried to deal with, those hardships, and a second is that the school route was more than a distance. In this regard, variations in families' geographical and socioeconomic positions and the physical landscape played crucial roles.

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## Introduction

Memories of childhood school routes are often strong. The following quotation shows how one person who went to school in southern Sweden in the 1920s remembered his school route:

> Like most of my friends, I had a long route to school […] it was about half a mile [five km] […]. It was merely a footpath through the forest with significant height differences, which meant I had to 'climb' over a smaller mountain range to get to school. Only the last kilometer I reached the road. […] mostly [I] walked alone. It was only the last kilometer, from the village Kjettestorp, that I sometimes had company with a couple of children from there. I remember from early school that I had to stay at home because I was missing shoes […] I cannot remember that I stayed at home because of the weather, but I do remember that when we started the spring term, February 15, I went one or two days in advance and carved a trail in the snow through the forest, just hoping it wouldn't snow again. (Memoir from the region of Östergötland in the 1920s (DFU 36962))[1,2]

Everybody attending school has memories of a specific route to school. Few other experiences are shared to this extent between rich and poor globally. Fascinatingly, we also share these experiences with those who lived in the past. Historically, the introduction of a school system in which all children were included was the start of this common experience of a school route. In the Global South, this did not happen until after 1950

**CONTACT** Annika Strandin Pers annika.strandin.pers@humangeo.su.se
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[2]Memoirs were collected from the Dialectology and Folklore Research (Dialekt– och folkminnesarkivet i Uppsala, DFU) archive at Uppsala University, which contains descriptions of school memories. We refer to them by their DFU accession number.

(Hollingsworth 1986, 249–250; Alhebsi et al. 2015), but in most countries in the Global North the introduction took place in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Oreopoulos 2005; Zinkina et al. 2016). In Sweden, common elementary schools (*folkskolan*) were introduced in the 1840s. Before the introduction of the *folkskolan*, elementary education mainly entailed homeschooling, though there were also traveling teachers and various forms of permanent school (Fredriksson et al. 1940). With the 1842 school charter, it was decided that each parish would constitute a school district where there would be at least one permanent school. The charter stated that the school building would be located in advantageous proximity to the school board's chairman (i.e., the parish priest), who would supervise the activities. As the parish church was usually located in the parish's central area, the school was usually erected there, too. While the 1842 charter made education compulsory, a new charter in 1882 made schooling (i.e., education in an actual school) compulsory (Westberg 2014). In time, it became a duty for both rich and poor to send their children in the age range 7–14 years to school (Johansson 1972). With this, the school route was established as a general phenomenon.

The children's everyday walk to and from school was, and is, not only a distance to travel. The school route—a phenomenon we see as consisting of both place and practice—has had greater significance for people's everyday lives and society at large than may first appear. In this article, we cover the period between 1840 and 1930, which spans the introduction of *folkskolan* to the time when the state started to introduce subsidies for school transport activities in Sweden (Gummesson 2003). Accordingly, the article deals with a time when it was common for children to walk, not be driven, to school.

Today, Swedes by and large believe that routes to school were long and challenging in the past. However, retellings of self-perceived long and arduous school journeys, as in the quote above, risk omitting the adult world's comprehension of the "way to school" in the past. The narrative can be seen as a way of marking differences in children's living conditions between "then" and "now." This prompts a couple of reflections: Were there many discussions and concerns among parents and authorities regarding children's school routes, like there are today? Were the school routes even considered a problem?

Both in research and in society at large there have been extensive discussions worldwide about the risks and opportunities of children's school routes (McDonald & Aalborg 2009; Fyhri et al. 2011; Porter et al. 2011; Carver et al. 2013; Yu 2015; Koekemoer et al. 2017). The discussions have often concerned how children should travel, the dangers of traffic and strangers, and how parents worry, interfere, optimize time, and drive their children to and from school.

This article aims to increase understanding of the school route as a phenomenon and its meanings in everyday life from a historical perspective. We want to show how the governmental decision to establish *folkskolan*, and the mobility that this development came to entail, went on to affect the whole of society and the everyday lives of all families with children in Sweden. Therefore, the article is guided by the following set of research questions: *What difficulties, here conceptualized as weights, could the school routes entail? How did the adult world, through what we call reliefs, try to manage this?*

Both Swedish and international scholarship lack significant research regarding the historical school route. The question falls through the cracks between the literature on schools in history, where little attention is given to the routes to school (Ramirez & Boli 1987; Burton & Baxter 2018; Westberg et al. 2019), and studies of present-day school routes (Fyhri et al. 2011; Andersson et al. 2012). However, we want to highlight the work of Pooley et al. (2005), who looked at differences and similarities in distance, means of transport, and choices regarding school journeys in England in the period 1940–2000. They emphasize continuities over time, such as the need to get to school, the family's influence, and the social significance of the walk to school for friendship and play. These matters are also highlighted in studies covering more recent times, and our study is informed by this more recent research with regard to what children actually do on the way to school (Mikkelsen & Christensen 2009; Kullman & Palludan 2011), the importance of children's active school travel (Westman 2017), and the effect of families' socioeconomic situation and resources on the movements of children (Barnes 2007). In recent decades, the literature on the geographies and mobility of children and young people has expanded, although mostly it concerns contemporary times (Holloway & Valentine 2004; Murray & Cortés-Morales 2019).

Motivated by this growing interest in children's geographies and mobilities, and the scarcity of analyses regarding this historically, this article focuses on school routes in the past. Our study seeks to contribute to the earlier discussions by providing a time perspective and context that shows both differences and similarities in the walk to school today and in the past. The article shows that some of the influences on, and concerns about, children's school routes that are discussed in society today have existed since the introduction of mass schooling in the 19th century. The article also clarifies the significance of taking into account the various

and uneven everyday geographies and living conditions in order to understand the school route.

Through the analysis of memoirs and societal discussions about children's school routes, we first analyze their descriptions of the weights that children encountered and show the complications of the *folkskolan* for families and children. Second, we analyze and discuss the extent to which societies and families were aware of and attempted to deal with those weights through reliefs. Third, and finally, we analyze the interplay between various weights and reliefs, and conclude how this might have affected the everyday lives of children.

## Theoretical framework

This article is based on an interest in children's mobility in everyday life. We utilize a time-geographic perspective (Hägerstrand 1991; Ellegård 2019a) to understand what walking to school encompassed in terms of what was needed in space, time, actions, and materials to accomplish that project and what difficulties and opportunities there might have been. Time geography tells us that all activities (projects) that people do in their everyday lives need to take place somewhere and take a certain amount of time. Moreover, all individuals only have 24 hours per day in which to do what they need to do. The embodiment of these simple truths, "time-space," is a unit that connects the time and the space needed to realize a project such as attending school, which includes the central activity of traveling there and back. Time geography centers on such time- and space-bound activities that make up our routines in life. These routines are the framework and conditions for what we can do in our daily lives. By considering the school route as a time-space, it also became clear to us that the school route was not just about navigating the distance between home and school. The journey would have created new conditions that could have both hindered other activities and created space for new ones.

Thus, for a functioning school, children need to be present in school and at the same time as their fellow pupils and teacher. However, the actualization of the project of getting to and being in school is shaped by various difficulties and chances that children meet in time-space (Hägerstrand 1991). To analyze these difficulties and chances, and how they were managed in the past, we use the analytical concepts of weight and relief. In a study of mobility practices and experiences from a gender perspective, Friberg et al. (2004), building on the work of Østerberg (2000), employed these concepts to analyze how built infrastructure influences everyday life. Following Friberg et al. (2004) and Lagerqvist (2019), we use the concepts to grasp how different situations or phenomena, material or social, either burden and limit everyday life or ease and relieve its hardships. We use them instead of the more commonly used terminology of "constraints" and "enablers." Within the time-geographic literature, three kinds of constraint are used to "specify what hinders human individuals from performing activities in their strivings to achieve the goals of their projects," as time-geographer Ellegård (2019a, 8) explains. The first kind relates to limitations in terms of an individual's capability to perform activities, such as their abilities, resources, and knowledge. The second, authority constraints, has to do with limitations because of rules, laws, and arrangements set up in society. The third kind, coupling constraints, refers to the need for individuals to couple with other individuals, tools, and materials in time-space in order to perform an activity successfully (Lenntorp 1976; Ellegård 2019a). Compared with the often-used concept of constraint (e.g., Ellegård 2019b), weight and relief as a pair of concepts provide a less absolute and more open-ended, gradated, and diverse way of understanding situations and phenomena. We perceive the weight and relief concepts as a way to add nuances to the constraint concept and shift the focus slightly. Experiences and situations can add weight to one's day-to-day life without being insurmountable or hindering. From this perspective, relief does not necessarily mean that a project is entirely conceivable, possible, or easy, just that there is some measure of respite. There is also more fluidity and "stackability" to these concepts. A situation or an object can confer some weight and some relief at the same time, or shift between, and several weights and/or reliefs may pile up. In our analysis, we are interested in grasping the various big and small difficulties of the school route and how they may come together, as well as how they were perceived and managed, rather than only identifying full constraints of various kinds.

As mentioned in the Introduction, few studies have examined children's school routes in the past. In Sweden, historical school studies have generally dealt with the establishment of the education system, the role of school at an institutional and national level, its pedagogical development (Fredriksson & Sörensen 1942; Gerger 1972; 1974; Boli 1989; Richardson 1992), and the construction and architecture of school buildings (Westberg 2014). In these writings, difficulties in getting to school are a familiar theme, and though some causes of the difficulties are mentioned, they are mostly listed in passing. Poverty, parents' reluctance to send children to school or their need for them to work at home, laxity among school councils, and long distances on bad roads are all mentioned generally.

Longitudinal micro-level studies of children's spatial and social life cycles in relation to schooling in Sweden during 1847–1965 have established home location in relation to school as an essential factor for school attendance (Gerger 1978; Gerger & Hoppe 1980) (for similar findings, see also Johansson 1972 and Boli 1989). However, the school route has been treated only as a distance between home and school calculated from a bird's-eye view. Studies also indicate that socioeconomic status, albeit to a lesser extent than distance, shaped children's school attendance (Gerger 1978). So far, there have not been any in-depth analyses of how poverty could affect, or be related to, the school route. Consequently, early school routes, including their effects and individual experiences of them, have received limited attention. One exception is a few in-depth descriptions of children's ways of getting to school during the 1940s (SOU 1943:7). Much of the previous school research suffers from the same problems as many transport studies. It regards the distance between A and B as a neutral and uncontextualized distance. Therefore, we are influenced by the more recent mobility research, often referred to as the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry 2006), where mobility is understood as the movements of bodies in a social and physical world, instead of transportation in an abstract vacuum. Importantly, studies make clear that matters of gender, class, and ethnicity shape how people move through, and are fixed in, space, and their experiences in that respect (Hutchinson 2000; Cresswell 2006; Bissell 2016; Holton & Finn 2018), for example by adding weights and reliefs to everyday life (Lagerqvist 2019). This interest in the corporeal and social aspects of movement in everyday life has quite a lot in common with time geography's interest in the everyday spatial and temporal trajectories of moving (but always situated) human beings, although the new mobilities literature has less often been interested in historical analysis. Taken together, these perspectives provide us with a way of conceptualizing the school route in the past as more than a neutral distance. Embedded in the local material and social landscape, it is a phenomenon constituted by both place and practice—a part of everyday life.

## Methods

This article is based on an analysis of three sources. The first source was inspectors' reports, most often published in volumes at five-year intervals and covering the period 1861–1910, with each publication organized by dioceses (Eckleastikdepartementet 1865–1912).[3] In 1861, a number of school inspectors were appointed to control how the *folkskolan* functioned throughout the country. Their reports in the following years made it evident that schooling was uneven and rife with problems (Fredriksson & Sörensen 1942). To provide geographical and temporal context, we refer to each report by the diocese name and period (e.g., '(Strängnäs 1899–1904)') (see footnote 3). A total of 8000 pages of inspectors' reports resulted in 340 excerpts concerning school routes. The second source consisted of 430 excerpts from newspaper articles (published 1840–1920) discussing school routes.[4] Most of the articles were written by journalists, but there are also posts from school inspectors, teachers, parents, priests, and the general public. The third source was written records of experiences of school routes as remembered by people who were children between the years 1860–1930 (see footnote 2 for an explanation). We extracted 77 memoirs.

In this article, the term 'memoirs' refers to empirical material consisting of writings and recordings from individuals (based on their memories of their past) that museums and other institutions have collected to document Swedish folklore and cultural history. Memoirs as a source are much discussed in, for example, ethnological research, especially in terms of the emergence of the source as a way of knowing (Lilja 1996; Skott 2008). When analyzing such material, one needs to be aware that individuals' memories are selective. Described memories may be shaped by the experience, the recording, and the stories of others (Thurén 1986). Moreover, everyday events are more subtle and may not be remembered or written down at all (Frykman 1990). We approached this by combining a contextual assessment of the individual stories with the aim to understand the purpose behind the recollection and an analysis based on different sources that highlight recurrent examples of experiences of the school route.

We conducted a qualitative content analysis of all the texts (Boréus & Bergström 2012) in order to perform a subsequent thematic analysis in several stages. The approach entailed reading all texts in order to pick apart and analyze selected parts identified as meaningful. In this article our analysis focuses on what difficulties and adaptations appear in the texts regarding children's school routes and which actors were involved

[3]The diocese is named after the relevant urban center but includes urban and rural parts. In the case of quotations, each quotation refers to one inspector's experiences of all the schools within the named diocese.

[4]The newspapers were obtained from the Royal Library digital database, Digitala Dagstidningar (search terms: *till skolan* (to school), *skolvägen* (the school route), *skolväg* (school route), and *skolvägarna* and the older spelling form *skolvägarne* (the school routes)). Details of the newspaper articles are provided in Supplementary Appendix 1.

in that discussion. In this fashion, the article studies daily school routes between home and the local *folkskolan*.

School districts could include both urban and rural settlements and have schools located in both urban and rural areas. However, most of the discussions in our sources regarding school participation and school routes concern the rural population. Consequently, our analysis focuses mainly on *folkskolan* in the countryside. Sweden was mainly a rural country during the studied period, and the rural population dominated up until around 1930 (Öberg & Springfeldt 1997, 96). The article does not discuss concurrent boarding schools, near-school accommodation, or homeschooling. Moreover, we do not aim to provide a comprehensive description of the broader school system.

## On the route to school

Problems, or weights, linked to school participation have been repeatedly listed in the literature on schools of the past. In the following sections, we review our empirical sources and dig deeper into their descriptions of the weights that children encountered. By having a geographic perspective, we can make visible the breadth of the weights repeatedly mentioned and pinpoint how different weights could interact with one another. Thereafter, we focus on reliefs and shed light on how the various actors discussed and tried to manage the weights in question. The following sections are formed around the content and structure of the sources. Some themes are intertwined, like the web of everyday life, and some are more explored extensively, as they are discussed more thoroughly in the sources.

## "Weights" of the routes

School route difficulties are discussed in all source material. It is challenging to write about these weights separately. Repeatedly, the combination, or stacking, of weights appears to be central. For this reason, we often return to the connections between the weights.

### *School routes in the landscape*

As previous research has made clear, children with long distances to school generally had lower school attendance. Thus, long distance is a weight already known, though fairly ambiguously described. Therefore, we want to dwell on distance and highlight the shape, character, and other features of the school route's geography.

In numerous excerpts, long distances are highlighted by inspectors, parents, and others as a difficult problem. Distance is above all discussed concerning rural school routes. Urban school routes do not seem to have been as treacherous as rural ones and most are addressed as a contrast to the countryside (Strängnäs 1899–1904). There was also a striking level of variation between northern and southern Sweden. Northern Sweden was characterized by long school roads on a completely different scale from the south (Luleå 1899–1904). Furthermore, large differences in distances to the school were pointed out in general by inspectors, who compared plains on the one hand and areas with forest and more scattered homesteads or a lot of water and mountains on the other hand (Växjö 1861–1863; Karlstad 1872–1876; Linköping 1887–1892; Skara 1899–1904; Härnösand 1905–1910).

It is important to emphasize that it was often poorer families who lived in the smallholdings and dwellings located on more marginal lands away from the central area of a parish (Lagerqvist 2011). Therefore, those families frequently traveled long distances to the parish's principal locales, such as the school (cf. Gerger 1978).

In many inspectors' reports, we identified links between poverty and children's journeys to school. The connections are not always explicitly expressed. However, some reports emphasize that poor children often had long routes (Göteborg 1887–1892; Uppsala 1893–1898). Others state that poverty had the most significant consequences for children who had long school routes and bad roads on which to travel (Växjö 1877–1881). In 1892, a school inspector compared two schools in different parts of the same district and found that schooling was exemplary in the schools where the population was more affluent and children had a shorter and better route to school compared with in the less populated part of the parish, where the population was comparatively poor (Göteborg 1887–1892). Also, the memoirs specifically detail the more challenging conditions for the children of crofters (a type of tenant smallholder) because of their longer routes to school. One woman who was a schoolchild during the late 19th century said: "The worst thing was that some children had such long distances that schooling became unequal. Many children had [to walk] five kilometers to school, and some had longer still. They came from crofts far away in the forests" (DFU 18516).

In addition to being longer, the roads or trails to the more remote homesteads tended to be in a worse state, as outlined in descriptions of the shortcomings of proper roads to crofts and other far-off dwellings (Göteborg, 1861–1863; Uppsala, 1861–1863). Another revelation about the impact of varying socioeconomic conditions on roads to schools was highlighted in a newspaper article, in which parents are reported as

having asked why, during the new school's construction, the municipality had only connected the road from the school down to the country road, but not the road that went in the other direction. The parents had wondered whether this had to do with the fact that the wealthier children went to school via the country road, while most poor children came from the other direction (*Umebladet* 1896).

Children's routes to and from school depended not only on where their families lived but also on the quality of the roads and the rest of the landscape. Mountainous areas and wetlands were particularly challenging, thus making school routes in such areas more difficult than in other areas.

### Families' lack of resources

Long and bad quality roads could be an even greater burden if the family lacked various resources. That is evident in the following inspector's description of difficult school routes:

> During the winter, the smaller village roads […] become so soft that children cannot use them. On these occasions, the parents who have horses use carriages to transport their children to and from school, but those who do not own horses have to let the children stay at home. (Lund 1861–1863, 8)

Parents' daily time- and space-bound routines also played a role. A man who grew up on a croft at the end of the 19th century recollected that "we, the children from the crofts, were seldom picked up by carriage because most often our fathers were [working] at the manor" (DFU 18670). Socioeconomic differences regarding school routes were also noted in newspapers; for example, they revealed that children with wealthy parents were given rides while children of poor families did not even have sufficient seasonal clothing to protect themselves against the elements on their journey to school (*Östgöta Correspondenten* 1894).

In all three types of sources, there are many descriptions of parents who could not afford to provide their children with food for the school route and to eat during the school day (Uppsala 1867–1868; Härnösand 1869–1871; *Aftonbladet* 1875; Växjö 1877–1881). In such cases, it was above all the children who lived far away, and who could therefore not go home and eat during a break, who needed a food bag to get through the day. An in-depth article on parenting points out that children should receive milk upon arrival at school (*Mariefreds Nya Tidning* 1900). The proposal is understandable in light of the lack of breakfast noted by a school inspector in Västerås diocese. A survey showed that ca. 10% of the children went to school without having eaten anything and might only have had some coffee (Västerås 1905–1910). Many newspaper articles also explain that children with long distances to walk rarely had time to eat cooked food with the family and lived only on cold food and food bags from morning to night. The authors concluded that the diet weakened children's physical and intellectual strength (*Smålandsposten* 1906; *Kalmar* 1915).

Thus, it is evident that the families who had resources, such as time, horses, and a surplus of food, could help their children with getting to school, even when distances, roads, and weather were precarious. Those resources were less common in poor families, which created situations where the stacking of weights could have led to an overall weight that was more oppressive in combination—a whole larger than its assembled parts. Thus, the distance alone was not decisive. The cost of walking a long route without sufficient food for the day was greater than walking the same distance with a full stomach.

### School routes in all weathers, all seasons, and all types of clothes

With the introduction of *folkskolan* and the daily walk, a general and inevitable need for seasonal clothes and shoes was created for all schoolchildren in a family. It was notable how the winter especially, or other cold and wet weather, made the school route difficult for most children in the country, from north to south (Strängnäs 1864–1866; Härnösand 1882–1886; Göteborg 1887–1892; *Östgöta Correspondenten* 1894; Härnösand 1905–1910; *Svenska Dagbladet* 1906). This was particularly the case among those who lived far away from the local school and therefore already had difficulties getting to it (Västerås 1877–1881; Härnösand 1889–1893; Göteborg 1893–1898; *Söderhamns Tidning* 1913). For example, a west coast newspaper describes how children from an island were taken into police care when their hands and feet froze because of long school journeys in severe weather (*Göteborgs Handels-och Sjöfartstidning* 1895). Also, the weight of darkness during the winter months is often highlighted in connection with long school routes (*Söderhamns Tidning* 1900; *Svenska Dagbladet* 1916; *Dagens Nyheter* 1919).

More specifically, many reports from around the country highlight families' lack of necessary clothes for children who walked to school. The cold winter months and otherwise harsh weather made it even harder for the children of poor families to attend school, as they often lacked sufficient wintertime garments and shoes and a change of clothes for rainy or snowy days (Växjö 1861–1863; Uppsala 1877–1881; Härnösand 1887–1892).

In this regard, children of contract farmworkers (*statare*) and tenant smallholders such as crofters were particularly vulnerable (DFU 37076).

Children with broken shoes are a recurrent theme in the sources, as shown by the following description by a school inspector in a district in northern Sweden:

> During tough days and severe snowstorms […] one must not marvel at children staying home, especially when the route is long; many times I have been surprised by their attendance at school on such days and their brave journey on snowy trails. It is often a lack of shoes that keeps the child at home; because when the toes stick out, the foot soon bleeds on frozen and rocky grounds. (Härnösand 1887–1892, 93)

It is apparent that long distances to school led to a greater need for good shoes, a packed lunch, and transport assistance. Furthermore, long distances affected the amount of time the children were at home and could help.

### *The struggle for time: school, work, and play*

Failure to attend school was often explained by the great need of the labor force that the children could provide "in the struggle for existence" (Skara 1882–1886, 35) instead of being in school. In particular, "the oppressive poverty" among families of crofters and contract farmworkers was mentioned by the school inspectors and in newspapers (Uppsala 1861–1863; 1877–1881; Strängnäs 1877–1881; 1905–1910; Linköping 1893–1898; *Hallandsposten* 1901; *Göteborgs Dagblad* 1919).

The work done by children played an essential role in pre-industrial agrarian society and early industrial society in Sweden. Children could do chores at home, on the farm, or in its vicinity from about the age of eight years. In more impoverished families, they could also be sent to work for others (Rosander 1979). It is worth mentioning that child labor (for children under 12 years) was phased out in industry during the latter part of the 19th century in Sweden. However, children's efforts in agriculture continued into the 20th century (Sjöberg 2008). Around the turn of the century in 1900, there was a legal and social reformulation of what childhood should be: it should be a time of schooling and play, not of being useful (Sandin 2003). However, families' different living conditions determined the extent to which the newfound idea could be realized.

The need of children as a source of labor to support poor families affected not only the children's attendance at school but also their walk there and back. In the memoirs, the school route is described as an opportunity to play with other children. Children could choose to leave the paved, faster, road and instead take a slower trail to keep company with other children or they could pause on the way to share what remained in their food bags (DFU 37140; 37138; 18747). By contrast, children who had more responsibility for work at home described how instead they had to hurry home. One woman recalled that when she was a child "[we] had fun on the way home, at least when the weather was fine. And then you got cursed when you came home, because back then children had to help at home" (DFU 37076) (for similar examples, see DFU 37794; 36936; 36833).

When children started to attend school, and therefore spent time getting there and back, the amount of time they spent working (or just being) at home decreased vastly, particularly if the route to school was long. The time-geographic key point that all individuals only have 24 hours per day should be borne in mind. The studied sources tell stories of how long distances intensified the need for children to get up very early in order to have ample time to work in the morning, set off for school, and arrive on time. Moreover, children with long distances to walk became hungry early in the day and needed to eat the contents of their food bag during the first break, which generally was short. Therefore, they did not always have time to eat as well as to play and use the privy (*Falu Kuriren* 1906).

Thus, in time-geographic terms, the school route interfered with other projects such as working and helping at home, which often were central to children's everyday lives. However, it also created opportunities for new projects, such as a time-space where the children could socialize and play with schoolmates who shared their route.

Time after time, the school inspectors listed the reasons for shortcomings in school attendance. In addition to poverty and challenging school routes, they highlighted parents' indifference to sending their children to school. However, this critical attitude toward school seems to have diminished during the surveyed period. Absence from school—often attributed to careless parents at first—was increasingly explained by long distances and living conditions, as in the following excerpt: "When you get to know the poverty prevailing in homes and the often long and difficult school routes, it gives you joy that the school is visited as properly as it is now" (Kalmar 1893–1898, 28–29). Importantly, the excerpt also points to the fact that children struggled but went to school despite distances and poverty.

## "Reliefs" for the school route and its weights

At this point in the article we turn to how the adult world discussed and tried to deal with the weights described thus far in this article. What reliefs are made visible or suggested in discussions and

descriptions of the children's situation of getting to school? We differentiate between different actors, from parents and teachers to parish and state, to see at what level the reliefs were implemented or discussed. Here, as in the section on weights ("Weights of the routes"), families' living conditions were critical for the forms of relief that could be given.

One main relief to the burden of long school routes was the establishment of more schools. There were constant discussions about building and locating more schools. However, whether more schools could be erected was also dependent on the school district's economy. Parents also tried to change their children's school routes by enrolling their children in more conveniently located schools in other parishes (*Hallands Tidning* 1906) (for further detailed examples, see Strandin Pers & Björklund 2019).

### Winter as a problem or an opportunity

Stories from school inspectors across the country point to uneven schooling with regard to the seasons. In general, most people preferred schooling only during the lighter and milder time of the year. Especially in places where the school routes were long and arduous, this seems to have been considered to be the best time for the children (Linköping 1867–1868; *Västmanlands läns Tidning* 1881). This thinking led to proposals for adaptations and implementations in which schooling for all children or just for the younger ones was avoided either wholly or in part during the winter (Uppsala 1864–1866; Härnösand 1867–1868; Västerås 1877–1881; Göteborg 1882–1886; Linköping 1887–1892; Skara 1887–1892). For example, the school year could be divided so that the older children were schooled during the more difficult seasons and the younger ones during the better times of the year (Lund 1867–1868; Strängnäs 1867–1868; Uppsala 1882–1886; Västerås 1882–1886). Elsewhere, the general start of the spring term was moved to April or May instead of March, when winter still had a tight grip on weather and roads (Härnösand 1867–1868; Göteborg 1887–1892; Lund 1887–1892; Skara 1893–1898; *Hallandsposten* 1906). This relief could also be provided by parents who perceived their child's school route as inappropriate for the child's age (Västerås 1882–1886) or when the weather in winter was too cold (Göteborg 1887–1892; Karlstad 1893–1898; Linköping 1893–1898; Växjö 1893–1898). In one memoir, a man remembered the start of the term in the winter of 1888 when he was eight years old as follows: "Me, this little wretch, went a few days in early February, but then I stopped. It was impossible to let such little ones out that winter" (DFU 18670, 69).

School organizers made other relieving efforts, too. During the 1880s, much attention was paid to starting the school year in early autumn instead of spring. The shift was implemented in many places around the country. As a result, the youngest children enjoyed the most comfortable possible school start when the weather was mild and the roads better compared with in the cold and dark winter months—a time when parents were very reluctant to let their youngest children be outside (Uppsala 1887–1892; Göteborg 1893–1898; Skara 1893–1898; *Hallandsposten* 1906). In Sweden today, the school year still begins in the autumn.

By contrast, the winter was sometimes considered to be a better time for schooling, as the landscape could be easier to travel and children were not occupied with looking after grazing animals (Härnösand 1864–1866; Västerås 1864–1866; Falun 1867–1868). Winter meant that the children could take other routes, which made a distinct difference for children who could walk across frozen lakes rather than around them (DFU 18747; 36885; 37872). The snow also simplified the school route for many, and skiing was described as the best way to get to school in both the southern and northern parts of the country (DFU 32216; KA00365; 36885; *Arbetet* 1906).

### Walking together

Some parents did not want the school terms to be different for younger and older children because then the older ones could not be able to accompany or look after their younger siblings. According to some memoirs, siblings accompanied each other to school, and younger children waited until their older brothers and sisters finished their school day so that they could return home together (DFU 27821; 18670). This emphasis on companionship also seems to have influenced how schools were organized (Härnösand 1867–1868) or how parents wanted them to be organized (Uppsala 1877–1881; *Kalmar* 1913). Thus, especially during winter, the younger children were considered to need the company of older children on the way to school. Even though the number of reading hours and the length of breaks were regulated in the school charter, many schools adapted the length of the school day to enable the younger and older children to walk together. For example, the break for the older children was shortened so that they could go home with the younger ones, who had shorter school days (Göteborg 1882–1886; Lund 1882–1886; Uppsala 1887–1892). Other individual adjustments were made, too. For example, some children began their education early, as they had older siblings in school. Others waited to start school until their

younger siblings were old enough to join them there. For these reasons, some schoolchildren were older or younger than their peers (Göteborg 1887–1892; Kalmar 1893–1898; Västerås 1893–1898; DFU 25299). Thus, children walked together and were part of joint relief, as they helped one another and kept each other company through part of the year when there was snow and the amount of daylight shortest (DFU 37076; *Dalpilen* 1905; *Upsala Nya Tidning* 1906).

### The school road and the school week

In discussions on the number of school days per week, familiar themes repeatedly emerged: the weights of long school routes and the relief that the adult world tried to provide to children. For example, around the turn of the 20th century, the change from five school days per week to six was heavily discussed. The six-day school week soon became standard, but the five-day school week continued to prevail for years in many rural areas, especially in regions where children had long or difficult school routes. The arguments in favor of the five-day school week focused on avoiding children becoming exhausted (Linköping 1899–1904; Skara 1899–1904; Strängnäs 1899–1904; *Gotlands Allehanda* 1889; *Enköpingsposten* 1901; *Dalpilen* 1901; Skara 1905–1910). Meanwhile, parents also argued for shorter school days. They contended that children with long school routes should not have to leave home at seven o'clock in the morning, be at school until five o'clock, and not come home until seven o'clock in the evening (Kalmar 1899–1904; Härnösand 1905–1910).

An even greater adaptation, and discussion, concerned the question of having school every day or every other day during a school week. In many sparsely populated areas, and the countryside in general, the latter was considered more appropriate, or even necessary (Linköping 1887–1892; Göteborg 1887–1892; Göteborg 1893–1898; *Motalaposten* 1900; Linköping 1905–1910; *Svenska Dagbladet* 1906; *Kalmar* 1915). Although attending every other day made the terms longer, it appears that parents and teachers sometimes preferred this type of teaching in rural areas. Parents and others argued that attending school every other day was critical for children with long school routes, as it provided a day of rest that was needed to do their homework. According to statements, children with long routes fell asleep over their textbooks in the evenings (Göteborg 1899–1904; Linköping 1905–1910; Strängnäs 1905–1910; Växjö 1905–1910). It was also believed that the children became ill if they had to walk long school routes daily (*Trollhättans Tidning* 1902). Other adults highlighted the impossibility of expecting a seven-year-old child to walk up to 10 km daily to school (Linköping 1887–1892) and called such routes "child torture" (*Göteborgs Aftonblad* 1910). One teacher declared that those who opposed every-other-day schooling in the countryside "should themselves for some time have to experience the difficulties that the little ones have to overcome" (*Svenska Dagbladet* 1906).

Although inspectors in some districts shared the parents' views, especially when school routes were long (Linköping 1887–1892; Göteborg 1893–1898; *Motalaposten* 1900; Linköping 1905–1910), the central school authority advised schooling every day (Strängnäs 1905–1910; Växjö 1905–1910). The debate on these temporal schooling alternatives was extensive and noticeable in newspapers and inspectors' reports throughout the studied period. The tone was often sharp regarding those who disagreed, and the long school routes in rural areas had a significant role in the argumentation.

In 1919, a new curriculum determined that attendance at school every other day would only be an exception. However, the actual introduction of everyday schooling varied from school to school, and exceptions remained in the countryside during the 1930s (SOU 1935:58).

### Food to cope with school and long journeys

There was an awareness among the adult society of the importance of food in order to attend school, and to walking there and back. Various attempts were made to compensate for the shortage of packed food. Those attempts at relief were primarily aimed at poor children with long distances to walk, as they were considered in extra need of food to cope with their long school days. The attempts were both public and private initiatives in the form of taxes and charity. For example, during the winter and spring months, hot food or milk was given to poor children in some schools, who, due to the long school routes, had to stay in school during the lunch break instead of walking home to eat (*Köpings Tidning* 1893; *Hjo Tidning* 1906). In one region, a dog tax revenue was used to finance breakfast during the winter for poor children with long school routes (*Dalpilen* 1893; *Falu Kuriren* 1894). In the 1930s, state support for school meals was introduced in Sweden (Lundmark 2002).

### Clothing the children

Teachers addressed the problem of lack of suitable clothing for schoolchildren by starting associations, holding charity bazaars, or writing to newspapers and asking readers to donate clothes and shoes to needy schoolchildren (*Falköping Tidning* 1896; *Stockholmstidningen* 1903).

The memoirs describe how teachers helped cold and wet children to dry their clothes when they arrived at school (DFU 32187). Some schools also provided assistance by letting children who lacked shoes borrow them from the school, as well as by lending slippers. In that way, children in need of an extra pair of shoes did not have to sit in wet shoes in school (DFU 30845; *Trollhättans Tidning* 1904).

The studied sources also show the private commitments of individuals who wished to relieve the children's suffering. For example, one wealthy woman donated porridge and slippers to those with long school journeys (*Vänersborgsposten* 1904). Other examples include a grandmother who recalled warming the children's shoes with glowing coal before they went out in the cold winter, and an older woman who let children into her cottage to warm up and dry their gloves on the way to and from school (DFU 27169).

Advocates of the proposal in favor of school attendance every other day defended their stance by pointing to the limited availability of clothes and shoes. Children who walked from distant homesteads and got wet and cold while en route needed a whole day to dry their clothes and shoes. This was of notable importance for poorer families with fewer resources, who only had one set of clothes and shoes (Göteborg 1899–1904).

### Transporting children to school

Parents could lift the weight on their children by transporting them to and from school in carriages or horse-drawn sleighs (DFU 31999; 18670; 36870; 30845). The sources indicate that parents mainly provided transportation in severe weather conditions. On such occasions, children who lived along the same road might have "hitched" a lift. One woman recalled her school route in the 1920s, and how "in bad weather we got a ride. Someone's parent lined up with a horse and a coal crate" (DFU 36884; for more examples see DFU 23355 and DFU 36875). Another woman remembered that in the 1910s, the family members rarely stayed at home due to "small obstacles" and that someone's father would bring a big sleigh, drawn by a horse, to take all the children to school (DFU 37008). While most transportation was offered due to harsh weather, the sources also tell stories of children who were transported more often, such as those of wealthier parents or those with physical handicaps (DFU 32522). Although it is in the memoirs that parents' help with transportation is mentioned most often, there are a few cases in which school inspectors noted it too (Lund 1882–1886). One newspaper from 1899 reports on parents who collectively paid someone to transport younger children over long distances to school (*Gotlands Allehanda* 1899). However, that seems to have been an unusual solution. The sources rarely describe examples of organized school transport.

### Walking on new ice and meeting children in the dark

Parents provided help in more than one way during the winter. Newspaper articles and memoirs tell stories of parents who walked with their children to school or met them halfway when there was severe cold, snow, and wind (DFU 36811; *Jönköpingsposten* 1892). Parents and grandmothers brought lights and met the children on long routes or when it grew dark outside (DFU 36872; *Eskilstunakuriren* 1899). Also, relatives and parents came to the rescue when children could not get home because of snow-covered or flooded roads (DFU 37698). Some sources report memories of how parents and older siblings followed children on the first day of school or marked the route in advance so that they could walk alone thereafter (DFU 27169; 36885; 18670). There are also records of memories of fathers who tested the strength of the new ice, walking on it over lakes and streams to ensure that children could cross them safely (DFU 18747; KA01221).

Furthermore, there were collective parenting initiatives. In 1914, in a rural small town area in southern Sweden, parents organized a school strike in protest against the difficult school roads that their children had to walk along—ca. 10 km on unpaved forest paths (*Aftonbladet* 1914). Teachers sometimes helped children by accompanying them from school through darker woodlands (*Dagens Nyheter* 1919). The accounts show that although children were assisted by adults, it was more common for them not to receive help on a daily basis.

## Conclusions

The aim of this article is to provide a better understanding of the impact of school routes on the everyday lives of children, their families, and contemporary society from a historical perspective. We have explored the difficulties that the school routes could entail, conceptualized as weights, and how the adult world tried to manage them through what we term reliefs.

### A changed everyday life

The long walking distances were not the greatest change in the lives of families during the advent of *folkskolan*. We already know that children during that time walked long distances without the company of adults in other

contexts (Strandin Pers & Björklund 2019). Instead, the specific difficulty of school routes was embedded in Swedish society's new demands for regular attendance and routines, which, without much regard for weather, geography, or resources, required children to participate in the time-geographic project of both getting to school and attending school. This everyday ordeal took place in a time-space consisting of the home, the school, the roads between them, and the time needed for the project. Significantly, it was not an individual project. Time and spatial coordination were required, something that "time geographers" (i.e. geographers who specialize in time geography) term "coupling" (Ellegård 2019a). Generally, all children were to be in school at a specific time, regardless of where they lived and how easily they could get to school. The decision to establish a public school, and how this was done, created new situations in the lives of children and parents. How the children moved through time-space was based on where they lived, family resources, weather, the landscape, and the roads—or, as "time geographers" term it, various "capacities" (Ellegård 2019a). This created difficulties and opportunities in the children's everyday lives. While some difficulties were total capacity constraints, such as stopping a child from walking to school for a period, many were less absolute but just made the everyday walking to school harder or longer, especially for some. The implementation of the public *folkskolan* seems to have made society's preexisting unequal conditions very tangible, critical, and sharpened.

### Socioeconomic conditions, uneven geographies, and the stacking of weights

In this article we have shown how children's school routes were to no small extent, and in several ways, marked by their family's socioeconomic situation. While this might not be entirely surprising theoretically, it is still important to highlight and empirically show the various ways that socioeconomic positions and inequalities in society affect everyday life for all members of a family. The geography of a parish (e.g., where different strata of the population live, which roads are paved, where the school is located) is not a coincidence. As Katz (2008, 16) points out, "Geography is always socially produced." As shown in our examination of children's school routes, this production—the lay of the land—has social consequences. Children who lived far from the central area and therefore had a long and often bad road on which to travel to school, and hence longer days spent in connection with their education, as well as a greater need for good shoes, more food, and more time to spare, and so forth, often seem to have been the poorest. They were chiefly children of contract farmworkers, craftsmen, workers, and crofters. Such families had little or no time or horses for transporting children. Thus, in addition to the fact that poor families had a greater need for the children's labor and lived farther away from school, their poverty entailed a lack of the resources needed to relieve the school day and route. Accordingly, geographical and economic marginality were often tied together, even though there were also poor families living in the central parts of some parishes. We have shown how the financially disadvantaged often faced a stack of weights and a lack of reliefs, which shaped everyday life and further hampered the possibility of schooling. These findings add historical depth to what the literature on present-day mobilities often highlights: how people, old and young, move through space is shaped by economic and social conditions and positionings (e.g., Cresswell 2006; Holton & Finn 2018).

### The adult world dealing with the issue of the school route

Besides being a part of childhood memories, the route to school was a matter involving parents and society in general. It was seen as a problem at the time (i.e., 1840–1930), especially for the poor and those living far away. Teachers and parents, but also school inspectors, encountered up-close the difficulties that children met every day. Impoverished parents generally lacked opportunities to improve conditions significantly for their children's well-being. Nevertheless, many parents got involved by meeting or transporting the children in the dark or in difficult weather, and by calling attention to the problems by writing to newspapers and attending school debates. Many teachers, priests, and others in the adult community also tried to improve the children's schooling conditions. This resulted in upgraded roads, and adapted school hours and school terms. Thus, different actors tried to relieve the children's weights in various ways throughout the investigated period.

In the decades around 1900, the concerns for children's welfare and the dangers of school routes were not of the 'stranger danger' variety or the heavy traffic concerns of today's parents (Fyhri et al. 2011; Carver et al. 2013). However, in the commitment to, and concerns about, children's school routes in relation to time—which were also about space—there seems to be some continuity between our study and today's school route discussions. Our findings reflect those of Pooley et al. (2005), whose study illustrates that schooling in recent times, as before, is a significant everyday activity in which parents strive for control and time

minimization, while children identify opportunities for increased independence and play. As Pooley et al. (2005), Barnes (2007), and others have noted, much of children's mobility in the recent decades has been shaped by parents' and siblings' activities, conditions, needs, and preferences. The starting point for the study by Pooley et al. (2005) was the 1940s. As we have gone further back in time, we have demonstrated that similar influences on, and discussions about, children's school routes have existed since the introduction of mass schooling in the 19th century. Even though society has shifted in many ways, the school route, as a place and practice, has persisted.

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## ORCID

*Annika Strandin Pers* http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5300-4855
*Maja Lagerqvist* http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0586-2297
*Annika Björklund* http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1124-4946

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