

Learning Environments at Leisure-Time Centres in Sweden: A Comprehensive Survey of Staff Perceptions

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to describe and analyse how leisure-time teachers perceive learning environments in general and especially the premises at Swedish leisure-time centres. Data are based on a national, comprehensive survey of all leisure-time teachers' perceptions. The theoretical framework is based on research on leisure-time centres and learning environments. The methodological approach involves both a descriptive statistical analysis and a qualitative content analysis. The results show a fragmented and paradoxical picture in terms of learning environments at leisure-time centres. On the one hand, the physical environment is characterised by small rooms, in some cases outdated and not suited for the purpose, to large groups of students and, in many cases, shared premises with the school. On the other hand, a majority of the staff say that learning environments are actively used to teach children social skills, how to establish good relations, friendship and equality. Parents' and children's opportunities to influence these learning environments are not regarded as a high priority. The main conclusion of the study is that activities housed in the school context and on its terms face congestion and many of these physical learning environments are in need of major improvements, especially considering all the policy documents and research on good learning environments. For Nordic educational research, this is an extremely important knowledge supplement since this field lacks ample research. For activities at leisure-time centres, these results have implications for policy decisions and educational development.

Keywords: Leisure-time centres, environments, leisure-time teachers, perceptions, comprehensive survey

1 Introduction

In this article, we present a study about how leisure-time teachers (LtTs) perceive learning environments in general and especially the premises at Swedish leisure-time centres (LtCs). The study is based on a comprehensive survey of staffs' perceptions about learning environments in LtCs. The background to this study is widespread criticism in recent years from various sides, including parents, staff and the school inspectorate, all focusing on how learning objectives in LtCs have been fulfilled, analysed and developed to meet learning tasks (Lorentzi, 2012; Skolverket, 2001; 2012; Skolinspektionen, 2010, 2013). These critiques emphasised, for example, that the educational mission must be taken more seriously, more variety is needed to stimulate every child, the

importance of all staff being familiar with the steering documents and the deficiencies in the physical learning environment. The latter has a direct repercussion on the children, the staff and LtC's missions.

LtCs are supposed to complement other forms of education in which students fulfil their school attendance, and it involves both care and learning. The curriculum should certainly apply in LtCs, but it has been written with schools as the base (Skolverket, 2011), though the LtCs have their own guidelines, (Skolverket, 2014). This also means that an LtC, its business and its staff are in a complex situation. Since research in this area (LtCs and learning environments) is extremely sparse, if not non-existent, we wanted to find out what the situation was in Sweden. Therefore, we designed a web survey sent to 11,109 LtTs in LtCs in Sweden during the winter of 2012–2013. This article presents partial results of this web survey with a focus on staffs' perceptions of learning environments in general and premises in particular. Before presenting the empirical data, we want to contextualise the study by giving a background about LtCs, the steering documents concerning learning environments and previous research.

2 Background

To contextualise the topic, the following section provides the LtCs' mission and purpose, the steering documents, as well as a brief summary of the current criticisms of their activities and environment.

2.1 *About Leisure-Time Centres*

The LtC is a pedagogical group activity for Swedish schoolchildren up to 12 years of age. Activities at the LtC can be run as free-standing group activities, usually to varying degrees. Activities should encourage the development and learning of children and provide them with meaningful leisure and recreation. Approximately 80% of all children in Sweden between the ages of six and nine and approximately 10% of all children between the ages of 10 and 12 are enrolled in an LtC (Skolverket, 2014).

The LtCs' historical origins are from 'working cottages' in the 1800s where poor children were given an opportunity to work and train in more practical and craft areas. This changed in the 1930s to afternoon homes as part of welfare development. The modern school leisure centres were created in the 1960s and 1970s as part of the continued expansion of welfare, but also as a necessity since women entered the labour market and families needed daily care of their children. LtCs came under the same management and control as the schools in 1994 and this resulted in most LtC teachers having dual roles (Rohlin, 2013). Besides being responsible for leisure activities in the afternoons many LtC teachers also began to teach or provide additional resources to schools. Since 1977, these teachers have been educated at universities or colleges. Primary teacher education with a specialisation in LtCs requires three years of study. Then they will be competent to teach in one or more practical-aesthetic subjects. The rest of their studies are focused on context and didactics in leisure

centres. The other primary teacher training programs have a greater focus on the schools' subjects.

Today, LtCs are strongly attached to the schools and physically integrated into them. They open at about 6:00 a.m. and close at 6:00 p.m. The fee for these centres is income-based, and most municipalities have a maximum rate. If the parents' incomes together are more than 4,581 Euro/month, then the fee is approximately 92 Euro for one child.

2.2 *Mission, Purpose and Need for Improvements*

LtCs are an extensive arena of social relationships and recreation. Children's stays at LtCs will undoubtedly influence contemporary and future society. The steering documents provide that an LtC should be a good environment for learning, and that all stakeholders should have the opportunity to share responsibility for and to influence the physical environment. A widespread criticism from various stakeholders including parents, staff and the school inspectorate has emerged in recent years (e.g., Rohlin, 2012; Skolinspektionen 2010, 2013). It is therefore important to examine the learning environment that the children are in as well as the staffs' perceptions.

Criticism of the environment in the LtCs has essentially focused on poorly adapted facilities for leisure-time activities, large groups of children, few college-educated staff, unsafe environments and the lack of quality in the educational activities. Statistics from 2012 show, that there are around 20 children per full-time staff member and about 40 children on average per section (SCB, 2013). The focus is often on the bad physical environment despite legislation that emphasises a healthy environment. As for the environment in the new Education Act, it is clearly stated: 'The operator shall ensure that groups have the appropriate composition and size, and that children [are] also otherwise offered a good environment' (SFS 2010:800, §.9). For a similar, but more detailed description, see Skolverket (2014).

The Schools Inspectorate conducted a national review 2010 that concurred with the earlier criticisms and included a stronger criticism of leisure-time activities. One of the areas where powerful recommendations were suggested was the environment, including sound/ voice volume, congestion, stress, opportunities for peace and quiet and focused activities.

In the latest Education Act (2010), LtCs have a chapter that clarifies the mission. The general guidelines (2014) are projections, but framing them as what 'should' be done is insufficient, according to the leisure-time centre staff. The LtC learning assignments are discussed only partially in the general guidelines, but they have been clarified in the act. This, together with the national inspectorate's sharp criticism, has meant that, in many places, work development has been started and the learning environment has come into focus in a new way. The situation today is that sharp criticism has been presented and development work has begun, but the question is: Where is the national and international empirical research into LtC learning environments?

2.3 *Learning Environments and LtC in Steering Documents*

Given the widespread criticism that has emerged, it is important to examine what the governing documents express. The concepts of learning environments are not mentioned in either Curriculum for Compulsory School System (LGR 11) (Skolverket, 2011) or General Recommendations for Leisure-Time Centres (Skolverket, 2014). However, there are the concepts of space, school and work in LGR 11 (Skolverket, 2011). The LGR 11 has no link to the LtC as an arena for learning. But the LGR 11 covers LtCs and their staff and clarifies the mission for these centres. However, there are different formulations that can be linked to learning settings about leisure. For example, teaching can never be the same for everyone, students developing their ability to communicate and play is important for the children to acquire knowledge. Under the heading of Good Environment for Development and Learning, the LGR 11 emphasises the importance of 'a vibrant social community that provides security and willingness and desire to learn. The aim will be to create the best conditions for students' education, thinking and knowledge' (Skolverket, 2011, p. 10).

In General Recommendations and Comments for Leisure-time Centres (Skolverket, 2007), there are references to the LtC learning environment. These include that the physical environment must be appropriate, such as size, shape, air, light, and sound, and there must be good material for educational activities. The environment should provide different kinds of activities and local integration with the school is not always desirable. The premises and the outdoor environment should be 'transparent and facilitate contact between staff and children' (p. 21). The children should learn about the local environment and its resources should be highlighted, and the LtC should offer various activities such as play, drama, music and art design.

This advice emphasises that activities should be structured so that the 'children's development and learning takes place at all times and in all contexts, and is characterized by the perception of children as active co-creators of their own development and their own learning' (p. 23). Moreover, the children should be involved in establishing the guidelines. Children should affect the contents and take responsibility for their own actions and the LtC environment. Other references that can be applied to the learning environment include democracy, equality and civic values to be translated into concrete actions.

The Education Act (SFS, 2010:800) and the School Regulation Act (SFS, 2011:185) don't mention the concept of the learning environment. However, there are references to the environment in The Education Act entitled Security and Study Environment: '3§ The training will be designed in such a way that all students receive a school environment characterized by security and study'.

3 Learning Environments – Previous Research

What follows is a summary of past research on learning environments in general and for LtCs in particular. The concept of a learning environment is described from a broader perspective that narrows the focus of this article to the premises.

3.1 *Learning Environments and Schools*

The term ‘learning environment’ describes environments, facilities, communities, activities and different approaches that contribute to learning. A traditional classroom is a learning environment, but there are many other learning environments. Characteristic of a learning environment is that it is a social environment with didactic and pedagogical aspects (Evanshen, 2012; Ivarsson & Boström, 2013). People interact with the social and physical environment and are affected by it (Björklid & Fischbein, 2011). Good learning environments are important in preschools, LtCs, universities and at work (Knoop, 2012). People are different and learn in different ways. Therefore, understanding these individual differences and similarities in learning provides opportunities to meet the kids in the school environment on their terms (Boström, 2004, 2007; Evanshen, 2012). Learning environments are partly about the physical space, but they are also a pedagogical and social arena. Within this arena, the task is to find variations and focus on the activities that promote different kinds of learning (Carlgren, 1999).

Learning environments can include many different perspectives about learning and its complexity. More concretely, learning environments can include approaches, attitudes, premises and the classroom’s physical characteristics – all of which are important factors that can help to create good conditions for all students to feel fully involved (Ahlberg, 1999). The external environment affects us all the time and, if it is positive, it creates favourable constructive learning. A model to create a good learning environment is at the foundation of the environment and is described by Evanshen (2012). When the foundation is firmly based, it can more easily engage staff to change culture and consequently to improve teaching (Boström, 2009). When it comes to buildings, new schools have been built in recent years with the aim that they will be more suited to a modern era and a new way of thinking. However, there is astoundingly little knowledge of how the interaction between children and the physical frame is shaped (Björklid, 2005; de Jong, 2011; Dranger Isfält, 1999). It seems that the physical environment as a resource has been neglected, even though children stay there for years and for a large part of their waking hours (de Jong, 2011).

3.2 *Learning Environments and LtCs*

The LtC staff is working in the field of tension between tradition and new forms of control, and this has repercussions for their profession, concrete activities and LtC

learning environments (Andersson, 2013). LtC staff work with social relationships that involve an important learning process (Ihrskog, 2011; Johansson & Ljusberg, 2004). Hippinen Ahlgren (2013) poses the question: 'How is the child in the existing environment?' (p. 103) and wants to see a discursive perspective on leisure activities. Hundeide (2011) also discusses this and describes how children are included in contracts through negotiations with other children and adults and with the environment of different situations. The social environment is portrayed as central and it becomes a didactic tool since LtCs traditionally consider this to be their most important task. Jensen (2001) emphasises that the leisure pedagogy should start from the varied environments that lead to different learning content. Qvarsell (2013) places an emphasis on different types of environments to provide meaningful activities, which is also confirmed in other studies, and the teaching-learning processes in leisure should be seen as cultural and contextual. The premises for recreational activities may be only classrooms, but they can also be well-adapted, reconstructed premises that have a strong focus on leisure pedagogy.

The LtC will complement the school's learning environment, according to the steering documents. Nordin (2013) argues that LtCs should focus on their complementary missions and not continue to *compensate* (our italics) for the schools. 'Children's learning should focus at complementing, not on school subject teaching' (p. 53). LtCs will complement school through practical learning what the school theoretically conveys. The school has always been dominated by formal learning. Leisure-time centres, however, have been dominated by informal learning. We find the two forms in school and leisure-time centres. But many stakeholders agree that one of the LtCs' strengths is informal learning, variations in the teaching, and the voluntary nature of creating motivation and the desire to learn.

Hansen Orwehag and Mårdsjö Olsson (2011) highlight three starting points about LtCs' complementary relation to the school: a) an environment where children can rest and relax from school, b) a content that supports the work of the school and c) that LtCs support and connect children's lives and learning outside of school to schoolwork.

Play is central in LtCs and, in particular, free play. Many LtCs have developed their learning environment by considering a good play environment. Play has also always been an indispensable part in the various forms of teacher training for LtCs. Kane (2013) argues that an important didactic starting point is to reflect on relational and physical conditions to allow space for play and see it as part of the leisure-quality work. This becomes problematic if the LtC has premises that are designed by the school (Hjalmarsson, 2014).

Another type of research is attributable to value issues and the question is whether children's perception affects the learning environment. Does the environment create problems for the child or is the child the problem in the environment? The use of environments as didactic tools exists, but it is not articulated in leisure-time teachers' work. With the environment as a didactic tool, the teacher constructs a context that stimulates the group and the individual (Hippinen Ahlgren, 2013). There is a tension between facilitating an environment for children's play and learning and personnel limitations in their attitudes (Kane, 2013). In conclusion, a learning environment is essential for children in many different aspects.

4 Aim and Methodological Approach

The purpose here is to describe LtTs' perceptions about learning environments in LtCs in Sweden. We assume the perception of the learning environment in a broad sense, but also the physical learning environment. The study is based on the following research questions:

1. How do LtTs generally perceive the learning environments in Swedish LtCs?
2. How do LtTs feel about the facilities, which are a significant part of the physical learning environment?
3. Are there special rooms for special activities, age adjustment and play, and how are these organised?

This study is based on a web survey conducted in early 2013 that was sent to all employees at LtCs in Sweden, about 11,109, with a reminder. The survey was constructed in the software Netigate and distributed by the Teacher's Federation via a link in an e-mail message (Netigate, 2014). Responses were received from 4,043 persons (36% of all respondents, 45.9% of LtTs¹). The respondents represented 289 of Sweden's 290 municipalities. Against this background, the study can be characterised as a census survey. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The questionnaire consisted of 21 questions about the LtC learning environment. Some questions could be answered only by set responses, while others were open-ended questions allowing relatively long written statements. The survey generated numerical and qualitative data in the form of free text. This study includes the analyses of five issues that affect staff perceptions primarily about the physical learning environment. The construction of the questions for the survey consisted of a systematic operationalisation of the theoretical concepts that guided the study, results of previous research in the area, as well as aspects of the organisation of LtC environments that we considered relevant. In order to initially secure the study's validity and reliability, the following actions were taken: multi-item scales covered the various aspects of the study's content, the survey questions were reviewed by the research team and they were evaluated through a pilot test. The Research Council's rules for ethical research in the humanities and social sciences (<http://www.codex.vr.se/texts/HSFR.pdf>) were taken into account.

To answer the research questions, we analysed five of the web-survey questions.²

To be able to answer the first research question, we analysed question 8 in the web-survey, which reads as follows: *What is the learning environment like at your leisure-time centre?* The participants commented on 14 statements about the learning environment through a five-point Likert scale (see Appendix 1), and then they could comment on their positions.

1 The questionnaire was distributed to all members of the teachers' union who were registered as an LtT and have a higher education (about 20% did not work at recreation centers). They did not respond to the survey, i.e., a part of the falling off.

2 See the original questions in Appendix 1.

To be able to answer the second research question, we analysed question 7 (*What are the facilities like at your LtC. Try to describe them in five to 10 sentences!*) and the comments in question 8). Finally, to be able to answer research question 3, we analysed the following questions: 10. *Have special “rooms” been created, ex., studios and reading rooms, at your leisure-time centre?* 11. *Are there adapted rooms for both older (10–12 year) and younger children (6–9 years)?* 18. *Are there special environments for “free play”?*

The study is based on an integrative design, which means quantitative data to qualify and qualitative data to be quantified can be combined (Polit & Beck, 2008). The methodological approaches are a descriptive statistical analysis and a qualitative content analysis. The descriptive statistics reveal outcome statements, content analysis and open-ended responses to three questions. Since the survey was intended to obtain a complete picture of LtTs' perceptions, the mean value of each claim is reported by descriptive statistics.

The operation of the content analysis is that we systematically and incrementally classified data to better identify patterns and themes and the goal was to describe and highlight specific phenomena. The study attempts to shed light on the content, what is directly expressed in the text, and to analyse the latent contents, which means that an interpretation of the meaning of the text is made. Content analysis involves quantity contained and examined methodically, with texts interpreted incrementally and data classification for easier identification of patterns and themes. The content analytical model allows finding clear distinctive categories, narrowing them and making them specific. Traditional content analysis can be divided into three stages: selection of the focus texts, coding and interpretation of results (Auhiva, 2008). During the second step, problems can arise mainly with connotative interpretations, requiring expertise, and therefore it is best in such studies to involve at least two researchers. Reviewers must continuously conduct discussion of key issues and balance their categorisations to achieve consensus (Krippendorff, 2004) and build the credibility and generalisability of the results reported by a methodical approach, categorisation and analysis.

The process for the analysis of texts was as follows: reading of the entire text (analysis unit) repeatedly to get a feel for the whole; finding meaningful themes relevant to select issues; and condensing, coding and grouping into categories that reflected the core message. These categories represent the manifest content. When we quote respondents, we use the abbreviation r (x).

5 Results

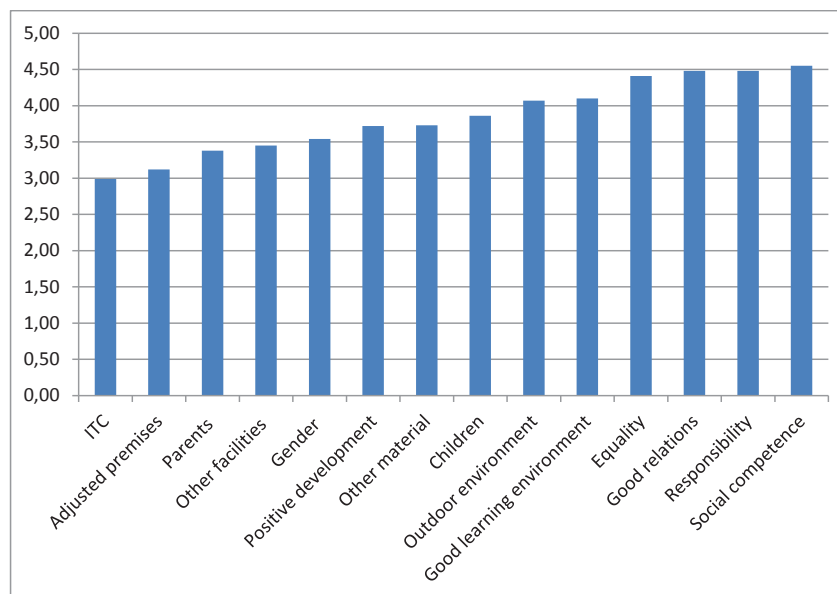
The following section presents the teachers' perceptions of the learning environment in general, followed by descriptions of the premises and ultimately answers to the questions of special rooms designed for different activities, different rooms for different age categories and space for free play. The open-ended responses to each question are reported based on content analysis.

5.1 Perceptions of the Learning Environment

Teachers' perceptions of the learning environment at the Swedish LtCs clearly show that the skills developed and strengthened can be attributed to 'soft skills'. Overall, it is believed that LtCs provide a good learning environment for children. Figure 1 shows a ranking (mean) of claims where it is clear that the soft values are the estimated maximum in the learning environment. This was done in order to get a clearer picture of LtTs' estimations of the important aspects of the learning environment. Figure 1 shows these estimations based on the five-point Likert scale, and the "soft values" (eg social competence, responsibility, good relations, equality) is estimated maximum in the learning environment

Above all, the LtTs state that the learning environments at LtCs are actively used to teach children friendship, good relations, equal treatment, social skills, responsibility and caring. The answers also show that the outdoor environment works well as a learning environment, but the premises are not as widely adapted. Furthermore, the influence of the children and parents is stated as lower, and ICT doesn't seem to be a central part of the learning environments.

Figure 1. Estimates of different claims about the learning environment at the LtCs – averages



The opening remarks described mostly the premises and lack of adaptation, which is presented below.

5.2 *Large Groups, Cramped Rooms, Too Few Staff and Schooling*

To answer the second research question, namely, how the staff perceives the premises at LtC, the responses to the open comments to the above question and the open question of *What are the facilities like at your LTC* were examined. An underlying theme in the open comments on this estimation is primarily that large groups of children are in cramped spaces with too few staff, making the learning environment worse and difficult to develop. With the larger number of children's groups, it is difficult to meet all the children's needs. Some experience a stressful learning environment with a high noise level. Another aspect that hinders the learning environment is focused on the increasingly reduced planning time.

Another theme is the so-called 'schooling'. Most LtCs are housed on school premises, which create problems with design, materials and activities. The school structure is strong and it seems like a teachers' culture has prevailed. The feeling of leisure-time 'borrowing' the premises of the school was described as: 'The learning environment starts constantly from school standard and then it is difficult to profile the LtC learning environment' (r. 18).

Respondents indicated difficulties interacting in the classrooms where LtCs are used so differently and that classrooms are not designed for LtC needs. No materials can be left lying around because they distract the students during school lessons. It is difficult to affect the environment in the classrooms. The commentary describes the frustration and even powerlessness to influence the learning environment on the school premises. 'The premises are not at all suited for leisure-time activities. On holidays, we take place and rearranging and adapting rooms and surfaces to what kids want' (r. 250).

Schools and LtCs on the same premises are problematised by some respondents. They suggest that some children do not want to be in a classroom when they stopped for the day and that it comes to finding what's common and different based on a focus on children's needs. 'The difficulties are with how we differ while interacting with the school. Therein lies the big challenge, to find balance and to remember children's free time' (r. 2589).

Some respondents chose to comment on the social aspects of the learning environment. A telling quote is as follows: 'The social child can and will work anywhere regardless of where we are' (r. 56). Some even commented on the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) having a relatively low amount of equipment, as there was not much technical equipment, and they want to offer other activities compared to homes where most people have a computer.

Descriptions of LtC Premises

The buildings are also different – old houses or new houses with open floor plans and custom squares from which each LtC originates. The quality of the premises reveals a large range from totally worn out and non-functional facilities to newly built and clean rooms. A clear picture in the description, however, is that most LtCs are undersized relative to the number of children. The word 'crowded' occurs frequently in the descriptions.

LtC facilities can include various types of smaller rooms such as aesthetic rooms, quiet rooms, table tennis rooms, Lego rooms, resting rooms, movement rooms, play rooms, workshops, studios, dance/music rooms and theme rooms. Rooms can also be divided into different corners for reading, table games, Kapla and crafts. But even larger rooms such as halls exist.

When we analysed the descriptions of LtCs across the country, a clear picture of the so-called 'schooling' emerged in the sense of the physical environment. A large majority of the descriptions are about LtCs housed in the schools where the classrooms are used for both leisure and school activities. This describes classrooms, study rooms and corridors. It is difficult to make the rooms available in the way that the children would like during leisure time. Descriptions such as 'parts' and 'borrowing space' of the school, are frequently given. School activities seem to have prevailed with regards to the physical environment. An appealing description is as follows: 'Classroom environment with tables. No opportunities to save work from the day before, everything has to be put away every night' (r. 452). 'As you can imagine, they look like a classroom' (r. 65).

Many LtCs use gymnasiums, handicraft classrooms, home economics kitchens, music rooms, libraries and hallways. Some LtCs integrate their activities in the same room, such as reading and lunch. Many descriptions mention a perceived low quality of LtC environments, such as long corridors where leisure activities are squeezed, too-small rooms, lack of a kitchen pantry or a sink for creative activities, few toilets, a miscellany of furniture, no room large enough for a collection of children's material, temporary partitions for rooms, noise, and the need to have rooms where children can be undisturbed. The most telling quotes were as follows: *Too narrow. Poorly planned. Ineffective. Good location. Good outdoor environment* (r. 876). *Poor kitchen. Leisure time in the classroom. The outdoor environment is asphalt. Not enough room for everyone. Children cannot get peace and quiet* (r. 4002).

When both integrated and non-integrated LtCs use classrooms, the respondents pointed out the differences. One description:

A school building that is used for LtC, hard to arrange a good environment because of tables and chairs in the classrooms. A local used solely to LtC, the venue is easier to decorate and will be a great afternoon environment for the kids, a calmer atmosphere. (r. 2341)

Newly built schools have different solutions for leisure, (e.g., open floor plans with squares each group is based on). Some LtC are situated in preschools that have no problems with material congestion and furnishings. The following quotation may illustrate this: 'Good premises. Preschool and LtC share a site, but it works well' (r. 2006).

There are, however, descriptions of LtCs that stand out in a positive sense. Some are available on the school premises and are considered 'well-suited for leisure-time activities, even though we are in school' (r. 965), but the vast majority are not integrated with the school premises; instead, they are located in a building next to the school. Also important is the teachers' participation in the design and layout of the premises, and then it seems the premises are more suitable. The most positive images of leisure homes are when they are separated from the school premises. The following quotation illustrates this:

We have excellent facilities for both games and other creative activities. We are housed in a charming old school with two floors. In the garret, we have a large play-room, a studio, and access to a library. On the ground floor, the LtC has a room where you can play, draw, etc. We also have access to a music room and movement room where kids like to dance. We eat breakfast and snacks in the 'kitchen'. We also have access to some smaller rooms and two classrooms. We have at our disposal a number of computers. The decor is slightly worn but fully functional. I am very pleased with our facilities. (r. 2556)

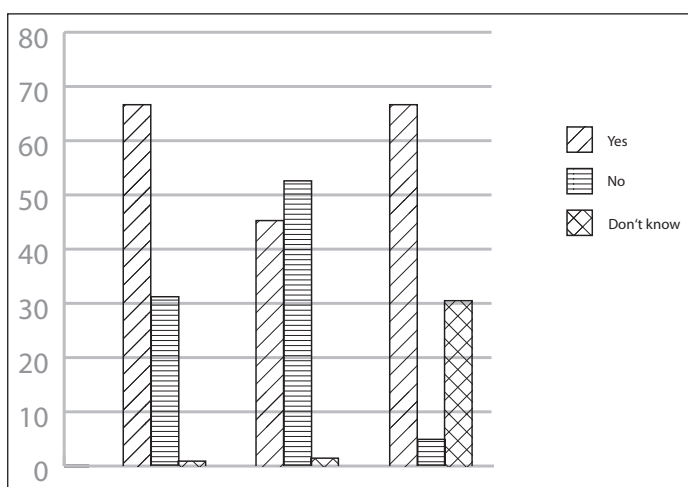
In conclusion, LtC premises show large variations in rooms, physical solutions and activities. However, when the situation involves an activity that is largely housed in the school context and on its terms, then congestion and many physical learning environments are in need of major improvements.

5.3 Different Rooms for Different Activities, Ages and Free Play

To answer the third research question of whether there are rooms for special activities, ages and playing, the three questions that addressed these specific issues in the web survey were examined. "Free play" is mainly about children using their imagination and desire to learn in an environment where adults do not control the content (Pihlgren & Haglund, 2013). The children develop social, emotional, and cognitive and language skills but also physical skills in free play. At the same time, free play can also have a limiting role in children's development and learning when the free play will take too much space.

The respondents stated whether such physical rooms were in each LtC and to comment on the answers. Figure 2 summarises the responses and shows that two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they had special rooms for different activities and space for free play. Half of the respondents indicated that they had room for two age groups.

Figure 2. Specific rooms, age appropriate rooms and space for free play



When asked about whether specific rooms were created at the LtC, for example, studios and reading rooms, about two-thirds answered that was the case and 2% percent of the respondents did not know. The picture shown in the empirical material shows that, according to the staffs' perceptions, the Swedish LtCs show a great variety of different rooms called office, reading room, workshop, doll room, play hall, study, music room, resting room, Lego room and library.

The answers describe the creation of different learning environments in different rooms. There is no standard for how the rooms in the LtCs should look and what functions they should have. They also describe that many LtCs create different corners in different rooms and that they have rooms housing play boxes. From the category that does not have special rooms for different activities, the following quote is typical: 'Lack of space that slows the activity and learning environment, we have the expertise to provide it' (r. 1899). 'We have LtC in the classrooms, and then we have no studio or reading room' (r. 2330).

The answers point out that there are not sufficient or functional premises and that the lack thereof suppresses the activities in the learning environment. Regarding the question of whether there are special rooms for both older (10–12 years) and younger children (6–9), 46% responded that there were, while 53% said there were not.

Leisure time rooms for different age groups divide operations for preschool to grade 2 and grade 3 to 5 or 6. The most important reason for this separation is to keep the older kids in the LtC. Over half of the LtCs, according to teachers' perception, have mixed ages in the same room and this clearly shows the need for space. However, staffs try to offer appropriate activities for the two major age groups. Some LtC are just young kids and some are older. In some LtCs, they offer the older children the opportunity to participate in a special leisure club.

Free play is mentioned as an important activity in leisure-time activities by virtually all respondents. An overwhelming majority of respondents (68%) answered that there are special environments for free play. Many respondents mentioned play boxes or activity boxes in conjunction with free play. They mention the fact that the kids then do not move to a specific place; instead, they can use the space available and then the contents of play boxes become more important than the environment itself. Some say that free play is mostly outdoors.

Some of the teachers believe that free play is more prevalent during the holidays when the kids are at LtCs throughout the day and may play for a long period of time without interruptions. Respondents who answered that they did not have any special environments for free play said that the free play may take place anywhere and did not need a special environment.

Some of these respondents also mentioned play boxes that children can use virtually anywhere in free games. Of the respondents who answered 'do not know', there are some who say they did not understand the question because they believe that free play is everywhere. The others mentioned that the children play where there is space.

6 Conclusions and Discussion

In this final chapter, the findings and methodological approaches are discussed followed by the educational implications of the study and further research.

6.1 *Results Discussion*

A positive external learning environment is the foundation for constructive learning (Andersson, 2013; Evanshed, 2012; Knoop, 2012), allows individual learning for children (Björklid & Fischbein, 2011; Bostrom, 2004) and is a prerequisite for making meaningful activities (Qvarsell, 2013). Although a school's governing documents provide for the right of children to a good learning environment and the importance of this to develop and learn, this study, based on about 4,000 responses from LtTs, provides a gloomy picture of the physical learning environments at Swedish LtCs. Previous research and evaluations from school authorities confirm this study.

The structural conditions for running qualitatively good work are not optimal, according to Hansen Orwehag and Olsson (2011). The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2010) speaks of flaws in the 'crucial components, staff ratios, group size, physical environment and the organisation' (p. 33) and argues that LtCs do not reach the intentions of the governing documents. Criticism is also directed toward municipalities that do not take full responsibility for the environment, group size, staff education and monitoring objectives and guidelines in the policy documents.

The study clearly shows that the social and relational aspects of learning environments at LtCs are prized and the staff provides a positive image and is proud of their centres, but the majority of the employees are dissatisfied with their premises. The physical learning environments seem to be different from extremely poor to good ones. The responses indicated schooling at LtCs is a big problem to create good learning environments. Other obstacles cited include large groups, reduced space and reduced staff as previously described by researchers and the Schools Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen 2010, 2013). Another problem scenario is LtC occupancy on the schools' premises. The importance of play is often reduced in these environments. The question then becomes whether the free play will be free or organised by the staff. One consequence of this is how much learning and development leads to free play.

Since previous research studies clearly pointed to the learning environments' importance of LtCs for children's learning (e.g., Ahlgren, 2013; Hunheide, 2011; Jensen 2011), meaning (Qvarsell, 2013) and social development (Ihrskog, 2011), we ask ourselves what consequences for the children and staff will come from a longer societal perspective. Hippinen Ahlgren (2013) has asked, 'What about the kids in the existing environments?' (p. 112). Maybe this leisure time will be counterproductive, despite all the good intentions in the governing documents? Another important question is how the staff can continue work in a difficult environment.

Because many children leave LtC at the ages of eight to nine years old, we wonder if this is due to fewer good environments, increased children's groups and re-

duced staffing. To cater to the age group requires various organised spaces, rooms or activities. A concrete sign of this may be the special play boxes available on shelves in the rooms. Is this a solution when the spaces are reduced? Or is it that things are more important than the premises? From a kid's perspective, perhaps this is most important because they have the ability to focus on the activities in the present moment. On the other hand, one may ask how learning could be developed with better environments. Many respondents in this study expressed that their educational ideas could be developed better if the premises were improved.

The so-called schooling of the LtC seems to be an obstacle to optimising learning environments and problematic for many of the staff. To this may be added that the LtC that exists in its own building offers more opportunities to exercise activities. An examination of the integration school premises would therefore be desirable.

6.2 *Methodological Discussion*

In order to enhance the study's validity and reliability, the survey questions were built on empirical research and proven experience and a pilot study was conducted. A response rate of 43% is deemed as satisfactorily high for the generalisability since this is a comprehensive survey with an exploratory purpose. Since the survey was based on multi-scale items, it covered various aspects of the survey content. We can see the consistency of the results between the different parts that address the same research question, e.g., the premises at leisure homes. Thus, we can assess that the study has high internal consistency reliability.

Three researchers have used the same methods and theories to identify the same aspects. As for reliability, we can ask if two measurements that would measure the same thing would give the same result since we used a partial qualitative approach with interpretations. On the other hand, we met the requirements of content analysis as we are three scientists who load and interpret text coherence, which enhances reliability. However, we are aware that the empirical material could have been analysed and interpreted by other methods. In retrospect, we realise that the web survey could have been extended to other further questions. After all, the results show that we have discovered something new, so that new implications are evident.

6.3 *Educational Implications*

An important implication of this study is that politicians and local authorities should take a greater responsibility for LtC learning environments. As the guidelines are clear in the policy documents, LtC educational foundations could be implemented in a better way. In other words, the physical environment, in general, should be improved qualitatively and quantitatively. The staff should have opportunities to achieve policy documents goals and guidelines. LtCs have a good potential to complement schools in terms of learning.

Another implication is reviewing LtC learning environments at the national level from an equivalent perspective. The study shows that there are great differences

between the LtC and municipalities in Sweden. How will the LtC provide an equivalent complement for the whole country?

6.4 Further Research

Because the field is especially unexplored, we see many new areas of research. First, we would like to examine children's views about learning environments. Second, we would like to conduct a longitudinal study of children's experiences of their LtC stays and the potential influence on their learning from different perspectives. Researching factors for good learning environments at LtCs are also of great interest to us and to immerse ourselves in the tension between social and relational learning environment and the physical learning environment.

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Appendix 1.

Original questions from the web-survey.

7. What are the facilities like at your leisure time centre? Try to describe them in five to 10 sentences! (Open-ended question)
8. What is the learning environment like at your leisure-time centre? How well do you agree with the following statements?

Not at all	Not so much	Neither or	To a certain extent	Very much
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1. The learning environment is developing positively at our LtC.
2. The premises are adjusted for the business.
3. There are other premises outside school centre that we use.
4. LtC is a good learning environment for the children
5. Outdoor environments serve as a learning environment at our LtC.
6. In our LtC there are educational materials that are not available at the school
7. ITC is a key part of our learning environment.
8. The children can influence the learning environments.
9. The parents can influence the learning environments.
10. When we designed the learning environment, we have actively been using a gender approach.

11. The learning environment is actively used to teach children the camaraderie and good relationships and social skills.
12. The learning environment is actively used to teach children equality.
13. The learning environment is actively used for teaching children social skills.
14. The learning environment is actively used to teach children the care and responsibility.
10. *Have special "rooms" been created ex. Studios and reading room, at your leisure?* (Open ended question)
11. *Are there adapted rooms for both older (10–12 years) and younger children (6–9 years)?* (Open ended question)
18. Are there special environments for "free play"? (Open ended question)