

# Governance and Voluntariness for Children in Swedish Leisure-Time Centres: Leisure-Time Teachers Interpreting Their Tasks and Everyday Practice

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**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to explore and discuss the tension between certain aspects of governance and voluntariness for children in the context of Swedish leisure-time centres meant for younger school children. The data consists of interviews with leisure-time teachers in five settings. The results show that there appears to be a paradox in that not offering children organized activities may be interpreted as childminding while at the same time the leisure-time teachers emphasize the importance of letting the children choose which activities they wish to be involved in. This may be a question of how the leisure-time teachers interpret and understand the concept of leisure and its consequences in everyday practice. In absence of a task to evaluate the learning outcomes of the children, the leisure-time teachers need to find other ways to describe and show the high quality of the activities offered. Working with carrying out quality reports may be such a means.

**Keywords:** Leisure-time centre, leisure-time teacher, quality, children, voluntariness, governance, teacher professionalism

## 1 Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore and discuss the tension between certain aspects of governance and voluntariness for children in the context of Swedish leisure-time centres meant for younger school children. It is voluntary for children to be enrolled in leisure-time centres, but in practice children often lack the option of deciding whether or not to participate, due to their parents' work situation or studies. Today leisure-time centres are in demand for the parents of approximately 85 % of the younger school children. Leisure-time centres are governed by the Education Act (SFS 2010:800) and the Curriculum for the Compulsory School, Preschool Class and the Leisure-time Centre (Skolverket, 2011). The primary task is to complement the school by offering a different kind of pedagogical content, promoting children's physical, social and intellectual development and learning, and offering children meaningful recreational or leisure-time activities. None the less, in contrast to the school, leisure-time centres only have goals to strive for according to the curriculum,

not ones they are required to attain. The concepts of *leisure* and *meaningful leisure time* in the context of leisure-time centres are not defined or discussed in the Education Act (SFS 2010: 800) or the curriculum (Skolverket, 2011).

Henceforward the concepts 'leisure-time teacher' and 'leisure-time centre' will be abbreviated as LtT and LtC are used.

## 2 Conditions of Leisure-Time Centres

During the past decade there has been serious criticism of LtCs in evaluations, inspections and mappings, not least during the last few years. The Swedish National Agency for Education's (2000) 'Evaluation of Quality in Leisure-Time Centres' points to negative factors like large groups of children, poor facilities and staff lacking an adequate educational background and knowledge about the task of the LtC. The evaluation highlights the importance of children learning how to create meaningful leisure time for themselves, how to behave in relationships with others and how to compromise. The LtCs included in the evaluation were to find ways to be able to handle these aspects, but they only partly, or not at all, managed to live up to their task as formulated in the policy documents. The full title of the evaluation includes the question 'Do Leisure-Time Centres Exist?' and the author of the evaluation puts forth that the answer to this question depends on one's definition of LtC. The answer is 'yes' if your definition is of a place where are given the opportunity to play with each other before and after school. But the task embraces several other aspects, for example supporting children's physical, social, intellectual and emotional development. To give LtCs a reasonable chance to fulfil these tasks, the number of children per group has to decrease.

Results of an inspection by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen, 2010) of 77 LtCs indicate that the majority to a larger extent have to manage to contribute to children's development and learning but also support them with tools to use when they have become too old for LtCs. Most of these LtCs do not base their pedagogy on the fact that every child is unique, with his or her specific interests and experiences. At some of the LtCs the afternoon activities are not planned but static and perfunctory, with the children mostly engaging in play and games initiated by themselves. The absence of pedagogical ambitions among the staff is explained as a consequence of the fact that they spend a great deal of time and energy in the school, with the LtCs paying the price.

The delineated picture is rather gloomy. It is obvious that not all LtCs live up to the task as formulated in policy documents. This may be discussed as a tension between ideal and reality. Johansson (2011) explains that the picture of LtCs is created in two arenas. In one arena formulations in policy documents of the task of LtCs shape the ideals of 'good' LtCs. The other arena is where the everyday practice of LtCs takes place. The ideals should be guidelines for quality, but the reality is affected by conditions such as the specific group of children, the educational background and work experience of the staff, economic realities and parents' expectations and comprehensions. This means that the relationship between ideal and reality may be

problematic, which is confirmed by the referred to evaluations, inspections and mappings.

### 3 Leisure in the Context of Leisure-Time Centres

Children's 'leisure' has been affected by perceptions and norms of the ideal childhood. Central aspects seem to be the relationship between the children's possibilities to shape their own leisure versus adult's governance of children's leisure. Haglund (2009) discusses a number of overlapping perspectives of the concept of leisure. From one perspective it is seen as interesting to investigate *the individual's experiences* of leisure and to what extent the individuals value their power to handle recreation time as they wish. In this matter, leisure may be described as a mental condition that depends on the individual's comprehension on the possibilities to act and participate in the activities chosen. From another point of view leisure can be defined as *time remaining* when commitments connected to family life and work is completed. Leisure is in this sense to be seen as quantity of time that may be separated from other segments of time. Further, leisure can be viewed as *time for activities* chosen by the individual during his or her leisure time without an explicit ambition that the activities shall be developing to the individual. Linked to this understanding is leisure as time for *useful activities*; useful to the individual and/or to society in general and imply a possibility to achieve socially desired goals. This definition highlights the question how leisure is used. Haglund clarifies that the previous policy documents did not state which definition of leisure the LtC activities were supposed to be based upon. He explains that an understanding of leisure that focuses on the *individual's experiences* should imply that children at LtCs are free to choose how to spend their leisure time and which activities they would like to engage in. If leisure, on the other hand, is defined as *remaining time* LtCs run the risk of being viewed as a kind of storage unit, where children are kept during the time between when school ends and other activities, such as sports, begin. The interpretation of leisure as *time for activities* chosen by the individual would in the context of LtCs mean that the children's play and activities has a value in its own right and is motivated by an inner motivation of the individual. The definition of leisure as time for *useful activities* would imply significant demands on the staff's educational background and professional competence and their contribution to children's development and learning.

Children enrolled in Swedish LtCs should feel free to choose whether they wish to participate in the organized activities or not. Otherwise, Haglund (2009) states, the children may view leisure in LtCs as a space of time they can not influence. According to the policy document the activities should be meaningful to the children and stimulate their development in various ways. Results from an action-learning project (Hjalmarsson & Söderström, 2012) show that while the LtTs take it for granted that the children have a similar comprehension of everyday practices to the one they have themselves, various and differing understandings may exist.

A study by Saar, Löfdahl and Hjalmarsson (2012) shows that the LtTs strive to offer the children a variety of activities. Their ambition is to present planned and organized activities which are more or less voluntary to the children every day. The

work of the LtTs deals to a large extent with planning, organizing and presenting these offers. The selection of potential offers is related to certain ideals, in other words comprehensions of what should be viewed as appropriate and developing activities for children. A factor of importance is the accentuated focus on quality and reports of this quality. The LtTs dwell upon the increased work of writing quality reports and state that this work supports professionalism and makes the purpose of leisure-time activities clear. It seems as if being goal-orientated may be more important than the content as such. Aspects that previously were part of core content have now been transformed to a vital goal.

## 4 The Empirical Data

The data consists of interviews with nine LtTs working in five settings in a small municipality and a middle-sized town in a rural part of Sweden. These LtCs were selected with the purpose to contribute to breadth and variation in the data material regarding aspects such as locality, organization of the daily work and the number of children per group.

Through the research process the ethical requirements and recommendations of research formulated by the Swedish Research Council has been taken into consideration (Vetenskapsrådet, 2011). Contact was initially made with the LtTs via their head teachers. Everyone involved received information about the study in advance, including the voluntariness of their participation and their right to discontinue participation at any time without questions. All of the LtTs gave their verbal consent.

The length of the LtTs' work experience varied. Some of them had received their certificate ten years ago while others had more than thirty years of work experience. The LtTs were interviewed individually but also in focus groups. The partially structured interviews took place at the LtCs and were digitally recorded and transcribed word for word. The themes discussed dealt with the task of the LtC and the daily work of the LtTs, as well as aspects of freedom, leisure and voluntariness in the centres' activities. Each interview took between 45 and 90 minutes. For the purpose of this article the transcripts have been translated from Swedish into English and during the translating process the aim has been to depict the everyday talk of the LtTs to as high a degree as possible. The data material is not seen as representing 'facts' about the world, nor authentic experiences, but as having been mutually constructed in the interplay between me the researcher and the LtTs in the interview situations (Silverman, 2006). Guided by the various definitions of 'leisure' discussed by Haglund (2009) the themes elaborated in the article have been extracted from the empirical data, and analyzed and discussed in relation to quality and teacher professionalism.

## 5 Leisure-Time Teachers Interpreting Certain Aspects of Governance and Voluntariness

During the interviews the LtTs discussed the task of the LtC as well as the pedagogical content of the activities in the everyday practice. The discussions actualize certain aspects of governance and voluntariness and relate to comprehensions on quality and teacher professionalism. With the purpose to present the everyday talk of the LtTs' excerpts from the interviews is shown in *italics*.

### *Interpreting the Relation Between the Tasks and the Realities of Everyday Practice*

When the LtTs discuss the commissions of leisure-time centers some of them refer to the commissions described in the Education Act and the Curriculum:

Elisabeth: *The activities of the leisure-time center shall be based upon scientific ground and well-tried experience, or how is it formulated? Our commission is also to foster the adults of tomorrow so they are comfortable enough to create a good life for themselves and be good members of society. Oh, that sounded charming (ironic smile)...*

Birgitta: *I think of encouraging children to try different activities...*

The LtT's using direct formulations of policy documents may be viewed as a way to make clear that they are familiar with their commission. Highfaluting and well-known concepts may underline the need and importance of their daily work, but combined with an ironic smile it is reasonable to interpret Elisabeth as that she indicate a disharmony between the formulations of the policy documents and the realities of the everyday practices of the leisure-time center. The LtTs give examples from the everyday practice, which may be understood as a way to highlight a sort of clash between the ideals and realities of leisure-time centers. Malin argues:

*The head teacher emphasizes increased quality and status of the leisure-time center. But my commission is to cover up where I am needed the most/.../ During the mornings I am engaged in a specific child and during the afternoons I am responsible for the activities at the leisure-time center, but in reality it doesn't go that way. To get the children to eat and avoid a great chaos, that is my priority.*

The organization and division of work tasks and responsibilities as well as the specific group of children affect to what degree the LtTs view themselves as fulfilling the commissions of the policy documents and high quality activities. They are aware of the expectations on themselves as LtTs but at the same time aspects in the daily work condition their actions in practice. There seems to be a paradox revealed in Malin's statement when she on one the hand refers to a wish on increased quality of leisure-time centers initiated and discussed by the head teacher, and on the other hand reports that in her daily work she is often assigned to shoulder an assistant role to a specific child at the expense of the quality of the leisure-time center activities.

### *Interpreting 'Leisure' in the Context of Leisure-Time Centres*

The LtTs have a hard time deciding whether the time children spend at the LtC is to be seen as their leisure time. Malin describes how it is her '*goal to accept the children's suggestions and wishes. But it's not really free none the less*'. The LtTs often emphasize that they offer children certain activities, some of which are only almost voluntary:

*Birgitta: It is important that we offer, that the children are allowed to decide, they shouldn't be forced to participate in the organized activities.*

*Annie: And at the same time, our task is to help stimulate the children's interest in trying different activities. They lack frames of reference and knowledge about what possibilities and options there are.*

There appear to be fluid limitations to what should be seen as compulsory and voluntary to the children in LtCs. Some activities are compulsory for the children to participate in. As a way of legitimizing the fact that the children are only allowed to a certain degree to decide what they should engage in during their time at the LtC, the LtTs refer to their task but also to the limited knowledge of the children as well as the LtT's ability to widen the perspectives of the children.

The LtTs seem to handle a kind of tension between voluntariness and the task to contribute to children's development and offer meaningful leisure time. When they are asked if the organized activities at the LtCs are important they seem to hesitate. Lena answers: *Well, yes and no, one needs to be flexible. The children want to be on their own, which isn't strange. They are engaged in so many things during the school day.* It is obvious that the LtTs not only relate to leisure-time activities that the children are engaged in during late afternoons but also to the demands they face in school when trying to handle aspects of voluntariness and governance in the context of LtCs.

The children should be given the opportunity to exercise influence on the time they spend in the LtC. But at the same time it is important to the LtTs to plan and organize activities that the children can take part in if they want to. Some children protest against being part of for example the assembly that takes place every afternoon, but Annie interprets this circumstance as a protest not against the activity as such but against the governing in general. She says: *These particular children bear an inner conflict and they feel a need to maintain their right of self-determination. Actually, they want to participate but they feel a need to demonstrate that they aren't participating just because I tell them to.* The LtTs do not want to force children to participate in the leisure-time activities and as a way of motivating their actions while still expecting all the children to be part of the assembly, an alternative approach is for them to refer to all children's desire to be included in the fellowship. The attitude of the LtTs may be linked to a view of leisure, as discussed by Haglund (2009) as a time to be engaged in *useful activities* and as a means to attain socially desirable goals as well as a way for them to underline their power as LtTs and adults and show their ability to gather the group of children to take part in a certain event.

It seems that the LtTs try to plan and organize activities that the children will be tempted to join, but at the same time they also try to be sensitive to the children's alleged wishes to be on their own. These ambitions are affected by certain condi-



tions, like the actual group of children and staff-related resources. As Malin explains: *Sometimes we say that everyone is expected to participate in an organized activity in the gymnasium. It is a bit calmer when activities are governed by the adults.* In other words, doing activities planned and organized by the LtTs is also a way of handling large groups of children and creating a calmer environment. The situation described may be linked to Saar, Löfdahl and Hjalmarsson (2012) showing that some activities offered in LtCs border on voluntariness, implying that the children are *almost* free to decide whether to participate or not.

### *Interpreting 'Meaningful Leisure' in the Context of Leisure-Time Centres*

The LtTs were asked to describe how they interpret and understand the concept of meaningful leisure in the context of the task of offering it to children in LtCs. Elisabeth explains: *It means that you offer different activities that are appropriate for the group of children at hand! ...! A smorgasbord of activities, kind of...*

By offering a 'smorgasbord' of activities all children can find an activity that appeals to them. Further, the discussion about the need of varying activities may be a response to the strong criticism directed at LtC activities over the past decade, implying that there is a lack of quality in what the children are offered (Skolinspektionen, 2010; Skolverket, 2000). It seems as if the LtTs want to protect the possibility for children to decide how to spend their leisure time. At the same time it may be difficult to view children 'just hanging around' as part of meaningful leisure. In this case leisure would, in line with Haglund (2009), be synonymous with *remaining time*, implying a risk that the LtC would be viewed as a kind of storage or childminding, with no pedagogical objectives or ambitions. In turn this would impact on the views of the professional skills of the LtTs as well as on the status of the profession. The LtTs may wish for the children to be involved in something but at the same time they stress other aspects as perhaps more important. Lena maintains:

*I really struggle with myself on this. Meaningful is maybe interpreted as doing something. But me, I focus on their playing, on their being creative. They are controlled in other activities, in sport and so on. They need freedom under guidance by adults.*

The interpretations and understandings by the LtTs of meaningful leisure seem to be influenced by the fact that many children today are engaged in controlled activities, such as sport, during late afternoons. Lena's statement may be understood as that she as a LtT tries to create space for unplanned activities initiated by the children. In this sense meaningful leisure in the context of LtCs may be seen as a period of time where the children are set free from pressure and demands to produce and perform, but also from the governance of adults. Indirectly Lena is safeguarding *the individual's experiences* of leisure and leaving it to the individual child to govern its leisure as he or she wishes (Haglund, 2009).

According to the LtC teachers, drawing and painting is a popular activity for many children, but the LtTs may wonder if this is an activity that is appropriate to spend a lot of time on. Lena handles the dilemma by trying to find positive aspects of the recurrent activities that she does not view as stimulating and challenging in their

own right: *They tend to choose such occupations. Should they just sit there, drawing and drawing, day after day, one might wonder. But they do communicate while they draw.* It seems as if the LtTs on the one hand try to be in tune with the initiatives of the children but on the other hand question whether certain activities correspond to meaningful leisure in the context of LtC activities. In other words, the question deals with whether drawing and painting should be seen as *useful activities* (Haglund, 2009) tied to the leisure of the children.

### *Interpreting Quality Reports as an Issue of Teacher Professionalism*

The LtTs are not only expected to offer activities that boost the goal attendance of the pupils and promote and stimulate their intellectual, social, physical and emotional development, they are also expected to offer activities that appeal to the children, to assure that the LtTs can document and show quality in their LtCs. The conditions of the daily work of the LtTs limits their possibilities to put their pedagogical ambitions into practice, which may be stressful due to the demands to show and report high quality. Heidi maintains:

*It's been more and more [so that] now we're expected to describe and formulate the goals of our work, what we do. Goal descriptions and such work, taking photographs to show on the homepage of the municipality and marketing so much, showing and putting words to what we do.*

Heidi says that this development is partly positive because the LtTs have to carefully consider their work and the activities they offer, which is important due to the fact that parents are now free to choose which school they want for their children. Stella confirms that working on carrying out quality reports has helped her colleagues and her to *'formulate goals, describe what we want to accomplish, our prioritized goals...you get better self-esteem'*. The conscious work of achieving increased quality may contribute to the professional self-confidence of the LtTs as well as being a reason for them to reflect upon the activities offered. Anna puts it thus: *This year we have restructured the goals. Previously it has been so easy...we scrawl down something about what we're doing this week, but we haven't given much thought to why we do what we do...* When Anna is asked if she works in a different way due to the quality reports, she says her way of working is still the same, but that she *'thinks differently now...much more about how it should be displayed in the text'*.

Working with quality reports may also be viewed as a kind of submission of evidence of meaningful activities being carried out at the LtC as well as a way of showing the professionalism of the LtT profession. Heidi says: *It's a way of calling attention to our profession so as to avoid people thinking that "in LtCs they don't accomplish anything, the children just hang around till it's time to go home"*.

The LtTs seem to be anxious to show the pedagogical value of children being enrolled in LtCs. Peter emphasizes that *'everyone knows that children learn all day long, but now we aim at putting it down on paper, what the children learn, and giving it to the parents. There should be a pedagogical ambition in all activities, but sometimes there are none, but...it's pure recreation, but you always learn something.'* The quotation is linked to various understandings of the concept leisure that Haglund



(2009) discusses; Peter stresses the leisure-time activities as being both developing and *useful* to the children, but does also open up for a view of leisure as pleasant *activities* that are carried out on the basis of an inner motivation of the individual.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

The ambiguity of the LtTs revealed when they discussed aspects of voluntariness and governance in LtC activities may be seen as a tendency of friction between the goals of the policy documents and the fact that these goals should be strived for during the children's leisure time. In this way leisure in the context of LtCs can be described as an institutionalized leisure, sometimes governed by the LtTs and sometimes, to varying extents, created by the children themselves. The initiatives and activities of the children are observed and evaluated by the LtTs, and it has been shown that the LtTs sometimes confer with themselves on whether certain activities are suitable for children during the time they spend at the LtC. It would seem as if it may be difficult for the LtTs in the present study to describe how certain activities, such as painting and drawing, complement school activities and contribute to the goal attendance of the children and promote their development in various ways.

To offer children activities planned and organized by LtTs, and the teachers' efforts to make the children willing to join, may be seen as a willingness on the part of the LtTs to contribute to the well-being of the children and to boost their feeling of solidarity, as well as a striving to guide the activities of the children and thereby at least to some extent their learning. But it has also been shown that organized activities governed by the LtTs can be viewed as a strategy for handling large numbers of children in the LtC group, which has been highlighted as a critical aspect to the quality of LtCs (Persson, 2008; Saar, Löfdahl & Hjalmarsson, 2012). Moreover, there appears to be a paradox in that not offering children organized activities may be interpreted as childminding while at the same time the LtTs emphasize the importance of letting the children choose which activities they wish to be involved in. This may be a question of how the LtTs interpret and understand the concept of leisure and its consequences in everyday practice (Haglund, 2009).

In absence of a task to evaluate the learning outcomes of the children at the L+C, the LtTs need to find other ways to describe and show the high quality of the activities offered. Working with carrying out quality reports may be such a means. A question of importance in this context is which initiatives by the children are encouraged and supported by the LtTs and which activities are questioned or even forbidden. Another issue is which activities are allowed to 'pass by' in the presentation of the LtCs in the quality reports. There may be a gap between the actual activities in the everyday practice of the LtC and the picture that quality reports aim to show. Skolverket (2000) asks 'if LtCs exist' and one could go further and ask '*Which pictures of LtCs are allowed to exist?*' This question is critical, particularly in relation to the fact that the large degree of free play at LtCs has been subjected to strong criticism (Skolinspektionen, 2010) and therefore may run a risk of being toned down in quality reports.

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