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“You know that we are not able to go to McDonald’s”: Processes of
Doing Participation in Swedish Leisure Time Centres

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“You know that we are not able to go to McDonald’s”: Processes of Doing Participation in Swedish Leisure Time Centres

This study aims to answer the question of how pupils’ participation is acted within the context of Swedish leisure time centres (LTCs) through the analysis of ethnographic material from five different LTCs. The analysis took a grounded theory approach, and the results show that pupils’ participation in LTCs can be seen as an ongoing negotiation and that participation is something that needs to be worked with in everyday interactions. We identify three important processes for doing participation in LTCs – participation by negotiating, participation by initiating, and participation by choosing. Different aspects of formal and informal ways of doing participation are also of importance, and while pupils can have a greater influence in informal negotiations, this requires certain negotiating skills that not all children possess.

Keywords: Participation; Children’s rights; Leisure Time Centre; Sociology of childhood

Introduction

This study aims to answer the question of how pupils’ participation is done and acted in the context of Swedish leisure time centres (LTCs). Questions about younger pupil’s participation in different educational settings is of relevance to the exercising of children’s rights and providing children with the ability to influence their own lives and their situations in school. These are values stated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 2017, November 15). Sweden, like most countries, is a signatory to the UNCRC and is committed to achieving the goals stated in the UNCRC. An important question, then, is how to ensure that these rights are enabled and enforced. How is children’s participation actually done in everyday life and in institutional contexts by those who have promised to comply with these values? We take our starting point in a childhood sociological approach, in which children are considered actors worthy of attention in their own right (Mayall, 2000). Children are seen
as “participating co-constructors of childhood and society. Hence, children are not passive objects of institutional or adult purposes” (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2009, p. 31). In this study, it is assumed that pupils themselves and their interactions with each other and with adults are what construct the level of participation that is possible within a particular context. At the same time, the interactions within the context play a major role in determining what kinds of participation the pupils can engage in.

Participation can be understood in different ways and can be studied from many different perspectives. In this study, the focus is on processes of doing participation. A major premise is that participation processes take place through the interactions between the actors within a specific context, in the case of LTCs the interactions between the pupils and the teachers. The concept of participation is further developed later in the text, but in short, participation is viewed as a complex process in which questions about social belonging and formal decision-making concerning the child are of importance (Elvstrand, 2009).

We have chosen to place this study of children’s participation in the context of LTCs because they have a tradition of working with children’s participation and because the Swedish curriculum (which also regulates LTCs) clearly states that LTCs should be a democratic arena where pupils should learn about democracy and practice participation (National Board of Education, 2017). In Sweden, the LTC has a long tradition as an educational setting and for about the past twenty years has been an official part of the educational system. LTCs are regulated by the School Act (SFS 2010:800) and are included in the school curriculum, in which LTCs are treated in a special section (National Board of Education, 2017). About 85% of Swedish students aged between six and nine years attend an LTC before and after school hours and during school holidays (National
Board of Education, 2017, September 11). Overall, this means that LTCs play an important role as an educational arena in Swedish society, not least when it comes to education's social and democratic task. In this regard, LTCs have an assignment to work with pupils’ leisure, their choices, and their right to influence the conditions affecting their situation in the LTC. These assignments entail that LTCs have a tradition of working with pupils' own activities based on the notion that the time in the LTC, more than the time spent in school, is the pupil’s own time and that they should have influence over how it is spent (Lago & Elvstrand, forthcoming; Rohlin, 2001). Group activities are typical for LTCs, and surveys and studies show that free play, having a choice between different activities, and engaging in activities voluntarily are common characteristics of the LTCs (Saar, Löfdahl & Hjalmarsson, 2012; Swedish School Inspectorate, 2010). The pupils should have a genuine possibility to exercise influence in their daily life in the LTC, and the education in the LTC should be based on the pupils’ experiences and interests (National Board of Education, 2017).

**Children’s participation**

In the last few decades, there has been a lot of research and debate about children’s position in society and how the UNCRC guarantees children’s rights in a wide range of aspects, especially in terms of their right to participation (Henaghan, 2017). As part of this debate, the children’s rights perspective has been criticised for emphasising individual aspects of participation, rather than participation as a social and co-constructed process (Horgan, Forde, Martin, & Parkes, 2017). The perspective of doing participation is thus helpful because it focuses both on the individual as a competent actor and on the social and institutional context of participation. In everyday life, both formal structures as well as informal and social interactions are viewed as important in the doing of participation. This starting point is of importance for this study where pupils are
recognised as social actors, which means that we have to see them as active participants who have, as MacNaughton, Hughes and Smith (2007, p. 460) state, "valid ideas, values and understandings of her/himself and of the world". Alternatively, Bosisio (2012, p. 142) argues that the focus must shift from the discussion of whether to listen to the child to how to listen to the child.

Participation is a complex concept, and different aspects of participation need to be considered. Thomas (2007) writes that it involves mainly two aspects, where the first is about social participation, which includes aspects of “being a part” and belonging, and the second is more connected to influence and the ability to having a say and could be described in terms of political participation. Elvstrand (2009) describes the forms for children’s influence in terms of negotiations. “Negotiations for influence” can be described as an ongoing process between children and teachers. Such negotiations occur on many different occasions and can be more or less frequent, and some children and teachers negotiate more than others do. This is an ongoing process and can be seen as something that characterises the talk between teachers and pupils, and both the social and political aspects of participation are clearly connected to processes of negotiation.

To understand the processes of participation, the starting point is to see the participation as something that is done in interaction between actors, including both children and adults who are socially independent from each other and their surroundings (Elvstrand & Närvänen, 2016). With this approach, children’s participation is not exclusively about individual decision-making. Furthermore, it is important not to unilaterally focus on maturity or age, and instead it is one’s experiences that matter the most. Närvänen & Näsmann (2007) describe how agency is always a work in progress and involves “acting and making choices, reflexively interpreting the present situation and the opportunities and constraints at hand in light of what is already known (beliefs, norms,
etc.), i.e. the past, and in light of the future in terms of desires, wants and anticipation of consequences” (p. 232). Furthermore, the authors point out the importance of understanding agency as being situational and relational.

**Research about children’s participation**

Since the UNCRC was introduced in 1989 and highlighted children’s right to participation, several studies in various contexts have been conducted and different initiatives to support participation have been studied (Percy-Smith, 2010). Some of the studies have worked with so-called child-centred methods, where the aim has been to invite children to participate in the research process by, for example, giving them the opportunity to raise questions that are important to them (Horgan et al., 2017; Lansdown & O’Kane, 2014; Sinclair, 2004). Studies that have investigated educational practices are limited, but formal settings like school councils have been studied where the overwhelming majority of the results show that children’s possibility to have influence, despite good intentions, is limited (Pedder & McIntyre, 2006). Research conducted in schools also shows that pupils are often invited to make decisions about issues that are not seen as being of high importance (Pedder & McIntyre, 2006; Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012; Wyse, 2001) and that children themselves value the informal aspects of having influence on a daily basis (Clark & Percy-Smith, 2006). Connected to aspects of informal influence, a British research project showed that the children themselves pointed to an understanding of participation as “one which is grounded in dialogue, listening and interdependency, no matter what the chosen method of involvement. Participation is therefore understood as an ongoing and everyday process of communication and interaction between adults and young people” (Parnell & Patsarnika, 2011, p. 472). Devine (2002, 2004) showed the importance of relations between children and adults as a way to participation for pupils. In a Norwegian study, Bjerke (2012) showed that the
children themselves did not necessarily ask for more independence, but they valued shared decision-making processes where they could make their voices heard. Horgan et al. (2017) showed how children see adults’ view of the children’s age, maturity, and competence as something that restricts or enables them to engage in participation. Further, they showed how relations and everyday interactions rather than formal structures for influence are more important to achieving participation from a child perspective.

Anderson and Graham (2016) conducted a multi-method research project linking participation and influence to student’s wellbeing. They showed that it is important for students to feel that they have a say about their situation in school and that the feeling of being taken seriously, being cared for, and being listened to is important. Their conclusion was that being able to influence one’s situation and thus practice participation helps students to feel well in school. Results from other studies have also emphasised the connectedness between wellbeing and the possibility of having a say in one’s daily activities (Simovska, 2004).

Children’s participation in LTCs has been investigated in a few studies. In a Swedish study by Närvänen & Elvstrand (2014) with a focus on LTC teachers’ views on participation, the results showed that the teachers have divergent ideas and interpretations of what children’s participation comprises. Their result also showed that participation was not a concept the teachers had discussed to any extent, which means that they might act in very different ways in relation to the children. Haglund (2015) highlighted children’s opportunities to choose activities and to participate in decision-making as a way to have influence in the LTC. The results showed that children’s opportunities to participate were limited, but also that children did not usually ask to be involved in decision-making, which might be an expression of their dissatisfaction with their subordinate role in the prevailing structure. In a quantitative Australian study, children were asked about what
they like to do in their after school care, and the children pointed to the play and relations as important values (Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015). Elvstrand & Närvänen (2016) obtained similar results in a Swedish study, but also found that children emphasise the importance of free space in the LTC and that the teachers treat them fairly.

**Method**

A constructive grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) has been used in the study to help us focus on how participation processes are made in interaction between the actors within the specific LTC context. This approach is characterized by data collection and analysis being considered simultaneous processes, and the analysis aims to formulate categories that explore the central processes of doing participation.

The data consist of ethnographic fieldwork at five different LTCs. Focus in the observations was pupil’s social relations in LTC. During the fieldwork we observed various activities in the LTCs, both teacher-led activities and activities where the pupils themselves chose what to do. During the fieldwork, processes of doing of participation were observed as a vital part of the interactions between pupils and between pupils and teachers in LTC. Something that is analysed in this article.

As mentioned, five different settings are part of the study – these LTCs are called Saturn, Earth, Mercury, Pluto and Neptune. Each setting where studied between 5-10 days each using participant observations and informal talks with the participants. The different LTCs were located in two different middle-sized Swedish cities. The Saturn and the Pluto is both located near the city centre while the Earth, the Mercury and the Neptune are all located outside the city centre. The size of the schools varies as well as pupil’s composition according to age, gender, social status and ethnicity. The different LTC also differ in working methods, pedagogical ideas and size of the pupil groups. This means that we have material from LTCs with varying conditions, which provides a wide and
varied material. In all LTC works teacher’s with relevant teacher education (for work in LTC) together with staff who has no formal education for the work. The educational level in comparison with a national cross section is quite high, which means that a majority of the staff in the studied LTC has a required formal education. The pupils’ in the studied LTC are between 6-9 years, but a majority of them are between 8-9 years old.

In line with the new sociology of childhood, we used what Mandell (1991) terms a least adult-role in our fieldwork. We avoided any position of authority by not behaving like teachers or someone in charge (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000; Thorne, 1993). We also worked in an active way to interacted with the pupil’s and asked for their opinion by using informal conversation. We used an approach in our interaction with the pupils that said that we were genuine interested in their experiences and that they know something special we were interested to understand (Davis, 1998). Observations and conversations was written down in form of field notes. We have followed the ethical principles of the Swedish Research Council (2017). All the participants, both pupils, guardians and teachers, were informed about the study and its overall aim of studying social relations in the LTC and they have been given the opportunity to give their consent to participate. Furthermore, information such as names (pupils, teachers and LTCs) has been changed to protect the integrity of the participants.

The qualitative analysis of the fieldwork data was performed using procedures influenced by the grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014). In practice, it means that we have worked in different steps with the analysis, where the first step was to conduct an open coding, based on incidents from the observation data. Secondly, in the next step, the different incidents were compared with a focus on similarities and differences and categories where created and finally these categories and the properties of them was integrated with the overall focus on the doing of participation.
Results

The focus in this article is the processes of doing participation in LTCs. The results are organised into three categories all connected to how different forms of participation are exercised. These categories are (1) Doing participation by negotiating for influence, (2) Doing participation by initiation, and (3) Doing participation by choosing.

Doing Participation by Negotiating for Influence

Participation is something that is constantly constructed and reconstructed in LTCs through the everyday interactions between pupils and adults. An important part of these interactions that constitute more informal ways of doing participation – that is, these activities are not designed by teachers to enable pupil participation – is what Elvstrand (2009) describes as negotiations of influence. Here follows an example of negotiated influence from the LTC Earth.

It is outdoor break. All pupils are outside, taking part in different kinds of activities like playing football or chasing each other in the climbing structure. The teachers are outside and circle around the pupils. Polly and Emma, two girls in the first grade, run up to Vesna, one of the teachers, and says, “Can we go to the other side of the schoolyard, please?” Vesna says, “Girls, you know that we have rules about boundaries and you know that first graders are not allowed to be over there without supervision.” “Please, Vesna!” the girls say while they hug her and tell her that they really want to use the “friend-swing” on that side of the schoolyard. After a while, Vesna says, “If you really want to go there I can come with you for a short while before we go inside. But then I want you to help me to put all the bicycles inside the storehouse.” Example 1, LTC Earth

In this example, the girls challenge the teacher when she – by referring to school rules – denies them what they want. By challenging the rules that limits the mobility of the first graders in the schoolyard – first graders are not allowed to be in some parts of the schoolyard without supervision – they are able to influence their situation and get what
they want. They do not break the rules, but they negotiate with the teacher and get her to change her position. Using their arguments and imploring the teacher's compassion – they are “extra kind” to her and give her hugs – Polly and Emma succeed in getting what they want and are thus able to use the “friend-swing”. This example shows how pupils can participate in negotiation with the teacher by using arguments or appealing to the teachers’ good will in order to bend, broaden, and influence the use of school rules in order to get what they want. This is done in interplay with the teacher.

Negotiation is something that takes place all the time, and it can be about space and place, like in the example here where one is allowed or not allowed to be in a certain place. In some negotiations, the boundaries between pupils and adults are strict, and in others the common space is more negotiable. In one of the observed LTCs (the Sun), the pupils are allowed to answer the telephone, and they have been instructed on how to do so. This is an example of boundaries that are not that strict, and the teacher described how the LTC is a place where both pupils and adults take responsibility. In this LTC, the managing of everyday routines – like answering the phone – becomes a common task making the child/adult responsibilities and possibilities more negotiable. The possibilities to exercise participation are also influenced by the fact that some teachers are more open for negotiation than others. The possibility to negotiate and challenge routines and rules is also dependent on the situation, and the teachers might be more likely to negotiate if the pupils "behave" or if they, as above, appeal to the teacher's compassion. In the following example, room for negotiation is created with reference to "good behaviour".

A group of pupils are in one of the classrooms. They are playing Just Dance on the Smartboard. Many of them are very active and are discussing what the next song should be. Perimilla, one of the LTC teachers, comes in and says, “We have planned to go outside, and it is time to go!” The pupils immediately argue: “We want to stay, we are
playing so nicely.” Pernilla answers, “Does everyone want to stay inside?” “Yes!” “Ok, you know the rule is to go outside. Only today, because you all are behaving very well, you are allowed to stay indoors. If anyone feels that they need to go outside, please do so. We don’t want to have a rowdy afternoon because you have stayed indoors.” Example

2, LTC Earth

In this example, the pupils are allowed to break a rule that in most observed cases is considered very important in the LTC – that everyone has to go outside for some part of the afternoon. In the negotiation, the pupils point to the fact that they are doing something good and behaving according to other norms of the LTC – that they should play together in a calm and inclusive way. By referring to the fact that they are involved a "good" activity, they create a space for negotiation and can thus influence their opportunity to continue the desired activity. The example shows that rules can be set aside and that the use of LTC norms about what constitutes good activities can be used as a resource when the pupils negotiate about place and activity in order to break other norms in the LTC. In such cases, the teachers’ different approaches to rules and norms of the LTC are of importance, as are the pupils’ different abilities in negotiation, which is further highlighted in the following example.

Siv, who is a teacher in the LTC, and Nils, an eight-year-old boy, are sitting alone at a table in the canteen. All the other pupils have had their snacks, but Siv has told Nils that she wants to talk to him when it has become quiet. Nils wants to leave, but Siv says that he has to stay. She starts talking about a conflict that Nils was involved in the day before. Nils is quiet at first, but then looks at Siv and says, “Its okay now, can I go and play?” Siv says, “No, we will go outside like we do every day.” Nils says that he does not want to do that and says that he would rather stay indoors. Siv shakes her head and says, “But we do that every
day, and it is not fun to stay indoors alone. So go outside now.”

3. LTC Earth

In the example, the pupil Nils is not allowed to stay inside even though he wants to. This can be linked to argumentative ability – unlike the pupils in example 2, Nils does not point to any particular reasons why he should be allowed to stay inside. Opportunities to negotiate influence over one’s activities can also be linked to the situation. In example 2, the pupils have an ongoing and visible activity, while Nils' request comes after a formal conversation. Nils also has no friends to refer to in the situation. Staying inside would mean that he breaks both the rule of being outdoors and the norm of being with others.

Doing Participation by Initiating

Negotiation can be seen as an informal and situational form of participation. In LTCs, there are also more structured forms of work to ensure pupils’ participation. In this theme – participation by initiation – the focus is on processes where initiating becomes important for pupils’ possibilities to practice participation. Initiating is linked to the formalised arenas for participation where pupils can raise questions about their concerns, thus initiating activities, changing the rules, determining the LTC content, etc. Such initiation is then is subjected to negotiations between pupils and teachers. A common form of formalised democracy in the LTC is some kind of LTC council. We have observed that these councils can be organised and function in many different ways. In this example, the LTC council is used as an actual democratic arena where both the pupils and the teachers have a common task to solve.

Every week the pupils in the LTC Saturn have an LTC council. During the councils, they are able to give suggestions about what to do. They also have the opportunity to discuss common issues like rules in the schoolyard or if they want to have something special to eat during their
afternoon snack. The oldest pupils in the Saturn LTC sometimes have access to computers during the afternoons. For the younger pupils, gaming and computers is not an option. At this particular LTC council meeting, the teachers raise the question of how to solve some problems with the computers. How much time an individual pupil should be able to use a computer is a recurring problem brought up by the pupils. One teacher states, “I will not be a guard. Can we solve this in another way?” The pupils have many ideas, and it is obviously important to them to be able to use the computers. They also talk about playing together with their friends as something important. The teacher writes all of the ideas on the white board, but this issue is not resolved during this council meeting. Some weeks later, the pupils report that they have solved the problem together. Every single pupil has one hour of computer time per week, and they have put together a notebook where they can keep track of the time they have used the computer. Example 4, LTC Saturn

The pupils in the example play an active role because they initiate the discussion and address something that is important to them. The question about computer time can be understood as a main concern to the pupils, and the fact that they raise the issue and return to the discussion about computer time shows its importance. The rules about computer time are perceived as unclear, and the pupils want to change this. Both the teachers and the pupils contribute to the negotiation process when they give suggestions of how to organise the computer time. The example also shows that it is a tricky question when different values and perspectives might conflict with each other. The teachers want to ensure that the pupils are not only playing with computers – they need time for other activities too, hence the limited time – and it is also a question about limited resources – the number of pupils is greater than the number of computers. Thus the pupils have to share the computers in some way. In this example, the pupils highlight the importance to
them of having access to the computers and being able use them together with friends, and they are offered a formal structure for participation in order to negotiate the rules in this regard. This kind of democratic process takes time, and some weeks later the pupils show the notebooks where they note the time they have used the computer

The LTC council can also be an arena where the actual possibilities for pupils to have a say, regardless of the item on the council’s agenda, is limited.

The suggestion box where the pupils can drop notes describing what they want to do during the afternoons in the LTC is placed where everyone can see it. In the daily routines, the teachers often refer to the suggestion box. When a pupil asks, “Can we do this or that?” the teacher often answers, “Put a note in the suggestion box.”

Every week there is a meeting with the pupils where a permanent activity is to open the box. Today it is Milo’s turn to open the box. There are several notes inside. Milo’s task is to tell all the pupils in the circle what is written on the different notes in the suggestion box. Some notes are difficult to read, and the teacher Cathrin helps him. There are different suggestions about activities like “go into town”, “eat hamburgers at McDonald’s”, and “do something fun together”. Cathrin says to the pupils, “You already knew that some of these notes are ridiculous, you know that we are not able to go to McDonald’s or into town. I will take away these notes and then we’ll discuss what we can do at the drop-in evening for parents.”

Example 5 LTC Earth

In this example, the suggestions the pupils have put in the box are not recognised as valid. There is no discussion about these suggestions, and the teacher immediately dismisses the proposals as not feasible. This example shows that there are often norms and circumstances that limit what kinds of suggestions the pupils can initiate. The initiatives of the pupils are only taken seriously if they fall within these norms, and this
highlights the power relation between the pupils and the teachers where the teacher has the final say. Rather than taking the pupils’ suggestions seriously, the teacher shifts focus and introduces another subject. In this example, the pupils are not given a proper chance to have a say, rather the LTC council is used as an arena for the teachers’ questions. The formal structure of the suggestion box is not necessarily a way of participation for the pupils.

Another form of structure for formal participation is when pupils have the opportunity take part in organising different kinds of activities in the LTC. One example of this is when the LTC Mercury was deciding on what to do during their weekly time in the gymnasium. The teachers described how there had been many discussions among the pupils about what they should do that afternoon. Some games were very popular, but some pupils had said that they thought it was boring to be in the gymnasium. As a solution, the teachers had decided to let all pupils who so desired to help plan for one afternoon in the gymnasium. From this thought, they had formulated an idea together with the pupils that the pupils should each take a turn planning the activity for each week.

Today it is the second graders Tyra and Ellen who have the responsibility to plan the LTC hour in the gymnasium. Together with their LTC teacher, they have decided what they want to do and written it down on a piece of paper. They seem to be very excited and ask Maja, the teacher, several times when the activity will start. When they come to the gymnasium, all the other pupils sit in a ring on the floor. First, it is Tyra and Ellen’s responsibility to tell the others what to do. The have decided to play a game where the pupils are on different teams and need to protect a treasure. When they present the idea, most of the pupils seem to like the game. When they start the game, the teacher says to the pupils that they should ask Tyra and Ellen if they have questions because they
are in charge. After a while, the teacher talks to Tyra and Ellen and asks them if they need to change the game because the same team wins all the time. After their talk, Tyra and Ellen change the teams for a new round. After the activity, when they have come back to the LTC, the teacher, Tyra, and Ellen evaluate the activity. The written plan and the evaluation are put in a binder labelled “Pupil-run activities”. Example

6 LTC Mercury

This kind of pupil-planned activity can be understood as a formal way of influencing the activities at the LTC. Compared to the examples of informal participation, the influence in these kinds of formally arranged activities is distributed among the group making it possible for all pupils to take part. Because every pupil has their turn, participation is not subjected to individual ability but rather is part of the planning of the LTC activities. This way of organising pupils’ participation is derived from the idea that participation allows each pupil to have the opportunity to get to decide, initiate, and carry out the activities they want – to be able to initiate an activity and see it put into action. In this form of participation, the teachers have designed a path for formal influence in collaboration with the pupils.

Doing Participation by Choosing

The observations from the LTCs revealed that a common form of participation is when the pupils have the possibility to make choices of different kinds. Often the activities in the afternoon are organised as a wide range of offerings where the pupils can pick activities they like to participate in. The pupils themselves often highlight the importance of individual choices, as when one pupil from the LTC Pluto said, “Many days it’s free play, watching a movie, colouring flags, making dollhouses, or playing on the soccer
field. I hate when you are not able to do what you want.” At the same time, the choice can be very formal like in this example from the LTC Earth.

When the pupils enter the LTC Earth, they first go to what is called the “check-in desk”, which is a table in the hallway of the LTC. At the table, there are lists where the pupils’ expected attendance time is written down. At the check-in desk, the pupil puts a mark beside their name to indicate that they have arrived at the LTC. When they have checked in, they go off to the LTC room. The LTC teachers often welcome them and ask them, “What do you want to do today?” Many of the pupils seem to have a clear idea of what they like to do during the free time at the LTC. Some of the pupils have decided together with friends what to do beforehand. The pupils can chose rather freely what they want to do but the spread of activities is often the same each day, e.g. draw, play with Legos, make crafts, or play board games. *Example 7 LTC Earth*

In this excerpt, the pupils at the LTC start their LTC time by checking in and then choosing the activity in which they want to participate. The free choice and the free time is put into play when the pupils start their LTC time. This example shows that choice might not be entirely up to the individual because a variety of factors influence the choices that are available, and the pupils have to adapt their choices to this. For instance, activities are often similar from one day to another and can be understood as a show of local norms of what one should choose "freely". In this case, this means it is particular kinds of activities that are possible to choose. Such norms can be connected to the local peer culture or to the offerings that are provided by the teachers. The act of choice can be understood as a social activity, but to become a matter of influence the choice of activity needs to be made visible to the pupils. Pupils’ choices lead to participation when the pupils are made aware that their choice is also treated as part of the educational practice.
At the LTCs, a common practice is to let pupils choose activities such as what they want to do or play. To choose activities can include “free choice” or choosing between some predefined activities. The previous excerpt is an example of this, and in these cases the pupils are seen to have influence over their activities and relationships because they can do what they want and be with whom they want. Pupil choice is an important part of good LTC practice, and the teachers expressed that it is important that students are given influence over their setting and their activities. For the teachers, this is connected to the LTC being the pupils’ free time and that they must be allowed to pursue whatever they want and to be with their friends during “their own” time. The pupils’ free choice can thus be connected to the LTC mission and tradition of working with pupils’ leisure time.

Choosing can also be done in a restricted form, and in the following situation the pupils are given the possibility to choose activities during free play, which is a common practice in many LTCs. Here the aim is to encourage pupils to make new choices. In the example of “Lottery of play”, the pupils have been able to give suggestions for different activities they like to do.

It is nearly summer. The school day has just ended, and it is time for the LTC. Today the teachers have decided to choose the day’s activity from the “Lottery of play”, which means that pupils pick a note from a box, and on the note it is written what the pupils should do for an hour. The different group activities are organised by the different notes. All activities during this afternoon are outdoor activities. When all of the groups of students have drawn their notes, the activities get started. It is very hot at the schoolyard. Three girls have the activity of playing Twister. They are tired, it is very hot in the sun, and the girls are playing without enthusiasm. Bella is lying on the ground and says, “I can’t take
it!” Her friend Mia answers, “Come on, this is like the lesson when you cannot work, but you have to, and we have to keep going.” They play some more rounds of the game but then lie down on the ground again.

**Example 8, LTC Neptune**

In this example, the pupils’ possibilities to influence their activities are limited. They have been able to give suggestion for things they like to do, but when it comes to actually taking part in the activities the pupils have limited possibilities to decide what to do. Examples 7 and 8 show that pupils’ participation takes place in an arena with complex and sometimes contradicting values and assignments. While some of these values promotes pupils’ participation – e.g., that the LTC is a place for pupils’ free time – there are other values – such as encouraging pupils to try new activities – that limit the pupils’ participation.

**Discussion**

The results in this article show that pupils’ participation in the LTC takes place in a complex and multi-layered context where different aspects constitute possibilities and limitations for pupils’ participation. The results show that pupils can engage in participation in the LTC using resources like arguments, appealing to teachers’ good will, or using the LTC’s norms and values to make their case (as in examples 1 and 2). At the same time, pupils’ possibilities to participate in decision-making can be limited by other values.

What can be said about formal and informal ways of participation is that the informal ways of engaging in participation are based more on the students' own questions and concerns. Earlier research shows that children value this as an important aspect of participation (Clark & Percy-Smith, 2006; Horgan et al., 2017). The informal negotiations seem to give pupils the opportunity to practice this important part of participation. The
informal ways of participation thus are dependent on the individual pupil’s ability to argue and negotiate as well as on the relations between pupils and teachers. This is in line with Devine (2002, 2004) who argues that relations between children and adults are crucial determinants for children’s possibilities to participate. For the individual pupil, the possibility to engage in participation often depends on their having good relations with the teachers who are present. In contrast, the formal way of giving pupils the opportunity to participate is more controlled by the adults. How much participation is possible and, in particular, what the pupils can influence is negotiated in these cases as well, but the teachers’ power to limit pupils’ participation is more visible here. For example, the teachers can limit the possible activities by referring to circumstances (example 5) or to the LTC’s assignment (example 8). As the results show, sometimes the pupils do not enjoy the influence that they are entitled to within the structure of the LTC because the teachers reject their proposals. In other cases, pupils have the opportunity to raise their own questions or to have a real influence over various aspects of the LTC (e.g., choosing what activity to do, as in example 6, or changing the LTC’s rules to suit their desires, as in example 4). In the formal ways of participation, the individual’s skills and abilities are not as crucial; instead, the LTC is organised such that all pupils have the opportunity to speak. In contrast, the informal ways of participation are more dependent on individual ability and on the relationships between the pupils and adults. In both forms of participation, the pupils participate in the process through interactions between children and adults and between children. Thus it can be argued that there is a tension between the child's agency and the power of adults, and how the pupils’ competences and skills are valued in the LTC are important aspects to enable participation.

Different forms of democracy give different experiences. Democracy is something one has to practice and learn. Because different values (e.g. free time vs.
learning new activities) can strengthen or limit pupils’ participation, reflective and continuous work with these issues is important in the LTC. Overall, the results of this study show the agency of children in the processes of doing participation, and how participation is done when children and adults act together (compare with Närvänen & Näsman, 2007). The results of this article show that, if given the opportunity, pupils are capable of exercising and negotiating for participation. Participation is not a given ability, but rather something one learns by practicing it.

References


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