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Do they have a choice?: pupils’ choices at LTCs in the intersection between tradition, values and new demands

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ABSTRACT
This article investigates the question of making choices at Swedish LTCs. The theoretical framework draws on symbolic interactionism and the concept of inhabited institutions analysing teachers’ meaning-making and interactions between teachers and pupils at the LTCs. Because of changing policies, a tension between new demands and an LTC tradition of activities being voluntary has emerged. When teachers try to make sense of the tension between demands and tradition, choice becomes an important issue and teachers try to balance pupils’ free choices with teacher-led activities. The results show that pupils are often given the opportunity to choose, but even though teachers value pupils’ possibilities to choose, pupils’ choices are limited rather than free. When the teachers try to make sense, of pupils’ choices they oriented towards both traditions and values (choice is important), and towards new demands (choice should be visible). Choices are thus highlighted and made measurable in specific ways in LTC practice.

KEYWORDS
Leisure time centre; pupils’ choices; policy demands; inhabited institutions; grounded theory

Introduction
This article examines Swedish leisure time centres (LTCs), a concept that has a mission in the intersection between education and leisure. LTCs have a long tradition in the Swedish education system, and have an assignment to support pupils’ leisure time while also to providing care and learning. Central values at LTCs are social relations, participation and freedom of choice. In recent years, the LTCs’ assignment has shifted towards teaching and learning leading to tensions between traditions, values and new demands. In this article, the focus is on how teachers understand traditional values in relation to new demands – choice – and how choices are made in everyday interactions between teachers and pupils. In order to provide a background, the article starts with a description of the traditions, values and assignments of the LTCs.

LTCs are a type of schooling that is organized in connection with compulsory school. LTCs are a voluntary type of schooling that takes place before and after compulsory school and during school holidays, often in the same premises as schools. Children can attend LTCs between the ages of 6 and 12. However, the vast majority of children attending are aged between 6 and 9. In this age group, about 85% of all children attend LTCs (Swedish
National Agency of Education, 2017). Swedish LTCs have a long tradition, stretching back more than 150 years, as a pedagogical institution with the aim of caring for and educating children during their leisure time. Children’s influence has been an important value and LTC hours have been recognized as a part of children’s free time (Haglund, 2015). In recent decades, LTCs have been incorporated into the Swedish national education system (Swedish National Agency of Education, 2018) and the assignment of LTCs has shifted from care to learning. LTCs can be described in terms of school-age educare and are supposed to stimulate pupils’ learning while at the same time also offering meaningful leisure time. The education at LTCs should take pupils’ needs and interests into consideration and give them the opportunity to influence the activities carried out (Swedish National Agency of Education, 2018). In the autumn of 2016, a new chapter aimed at LTCs was added to the Swedish curriculum for compulsory schools and LTCs. This new policy with national goals added issues such as the specified content of knowledge to the agenda. In the curriculum, it is stated that education at LTCs should take its standpoint in the “needs, interests and experiences of the pupils” and that “the education must continuously challenge as a way to inspire pupils to make new discoveries” (Swedish National Agency of Education, 2018, p. 24). The education at LTCs should be adapted to suit every individual child’s needs (Swedish National Agency of Education, 2018). This policy is part of a bigger change that focuses increasingly on learning at LTCs. In relation to this, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2018) emphasized in a report that the LTCs must stimulate children’s learning and development to a greater extent and not only use free play as the main activity. Because of changing policies, LTCs are facing new requirements to make their activities more measurable and goal-oriented. This educational change can be seen as a part of a global change where higher demands are placed on teachers to make their teaching more visible and evaluable (Hjalmarsson & Löfdahl Hultman, 2015; Lager, 2018).

Previous research

In recent years, research has focused on the changes and shifts in the mission of LTCs. As Saar (2014) emphasizes, the values of a child-centred approach can come into conflict with demands for documentation and measuring quality at LTCs. A study by Hjalmarsson (2013) shows similar results where the interviewed LTC teachers described a tension between different conflicting values such as striving for activities planned and organized by the LTC teachers or a focus on more child-centred activities. These conflicting perspectives of different values have also been identified in Hjalmarsson and Löfdahl Hultman’s (2015) study, where they interviewed LTC teachers. The results show that the teachers adopted an underdog position where the school context was the norm when they dealt with the array of new policies and quality demands. In a more recent study, Lager (2018) explores this tension between different discourses and how these are enacted when policy is interpreted by LTC teachers at a local level. She shows how the strong tradition of a social pedagogical discourse is enacted by the teachers in their interpretative work and that they tend to highlight curriculum content relating to social relations rather than content relating to education and learning, even though the latter is strongly articulated at policy levels. Lager (2018, p. 10) describes this as a “tension between formal school and social and relational discourse in a social pedagogical tradition”. 
In a study by Andersson (2013), the interviewed LTC teachers embraced different roles as a starting point for how they described themselves as LTC teachers. These roles were based on how they defined the LTC’s mission. Haglund (2015) conducted an ethnographic study at LTCs during the time when the educational reforms that emphasize learning were discussed. The results show that despite the new demands, the teachers highlighted “traditional LTC values” such as supporting children with good care and stressed the importance of free play. Research has also shown the necessity of having time and an opportunity for deeper discussion about leisure time pedagogy among LTC teachers (Närvänen & Elvstrand, 2014). Other studies have explored what is characteristic for LTCs and point to the specifically educational context offering special pedagogical possibilities where the focus is on processes (Saar, Löfdahl, & Hjalmarsson, 2012).

These kind of changes can be seen in other educational setting within the Swedish context (Lago, Ackesjö, & Persson, 2018) as well as in other countries. In several countries, different kinds of “all-day schooling” have been developed and adopted during recent decades. In relation to these changes, the discussion of the aim and purpose of extended education is central (Fischer, Theis, & Zücher, 2014; Pálsdóttir & Kristjánsdóttir, 2017).

This article investigates how the new orientation processes at LTCs with demands of learning and quality as shown above, are manifested in relation to the central task of working with pupils’ participation and their own choices. The research questions asked are (1) “Which tensions arise in relation to pupils’ choices in the interaction between pupils and teachers in the LTC practice!” (2) “How do teacher’s talk about these tensions?”

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework in this article draws on the theory of symbolic interactionism (SI) and the concept of inhabited institutions. A central standpoint of SI is that people are seen as active actors who create meanings through their interactions and by interpreting these interactions (Blumer, 1969). The concept of inhabited institutions is an approach that tries to combine Chicago-style interactionism with the new institutionalism organizational analysis (Hallett & Meanwell, 2016), and takes its starting point in the interaction between institutional rules and how people in organizations act according to them (Hallett & Meanwell, 2016). Hallett and Ventresca (2006) point out that, on the one hand, institutions provide material conditions and guidelines for social interaction (e.g. “inhabited values”) and, on the other hand, the actors construct the meanings of these institutions through their social interaction. Hallett and Ventresca (2006, p. 213) argue that “Institutions are not inert categories of meaning; rather they are populated with people whose social interactions suffuse institutions with local force and significance”. This can help us to understand the processes of institutional work and how teachers interpret, for example new demands, and can help us to understand the inconsistency between institutional rules and what teachers actually do in their daily practice. As Everitt (2012, p. 205) points out (and this is a central idea in SI), “people interpret change in their institutional environment based on how they have defined their prior experience within that environment” (also Weick, 1976). How people act is connected to how they define the situation (Blumer, 1969), and as
Everitt (2012) points out this is an ongoing process. In the study, this perspective is used as a tool to understand how teachers at LTCs handle new policy demands, like making LTC activities visible and evaluable, in relation to practice at LTCs and the tension between what can be described as different values. Some of these core values can be derived from tradition (core values) while others can be attributed to policy changes and new demands on LTC teachers (new values).

**Methods and setting**

This study builds on observations of LTC activities and group conversations with LTC teachers from three different LTCs (Lake School, Forest School and Urban School). The observations and interviews were conducted in parallel and the two types of material are used to study the LTC practice and how the teachers understand this practice. All the LTCs were located in school premises, as most Swedish LTCs are. The LTCs were selected for participation in a larger action research project. An important aspect of the selection of LTCs was varied selection regarding student composition and geographical location. This variation aims to ensure a varied material since different local conditions may be important for LTC practice. The Lake School is located in a small village outside a larger city, the Forest School is located outside a larger city, while the Urban School is located quite centrally in a city. A total of 230 pupils, aged between six and 8-years old, attended LTCs at the three schools, as well as 15 LTC teachers. The observations included about 60 pupils. All teachers took part in both the observations and the group conversations. The observations at each school were carried out over shorter periods of time (4 to 6 days at each LTC). The large number of pupils made it impossible to follow all activities; instead, we observed some activities more closely. We observed a variety of activities to include a wide range of LTC activities. The observations were primarily documented with field notes in which events and statements were written down and described. Participant observation is about taking part in someone’s everyday life to obtain knowledge about what is going on in that setting (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

The material also consists of data from reflection meetings that were conducted with the LTC teachers at each school. In total, the reflection meetings consist of 12 tape-recorded meetings with 15 LTC teachers who work at the same LTCs where we carried out the observations. The tape-recorded reflection meetings were part of a larger action research project that aimed to develop LTC activities from different aspects. During the reflection meetings, the LTC teachers had good opportunities to raise issues that were important to them. The question of voluntariness was not always a specific focus in reflection meetings, but we can see that it is a recurring question during these meetings.

This study takes a constructivist grounded theory (GT) approach. GT is rooted in SI and this methodological approach is well in line with the theoretical starting points but contributes analytic tools. A central standpoint in GT is the agent’s perspective in terms of the so-called main concern of the participants according to their interactions with a focus on LTC teachers’ daily practices at the LTCs (cf. Charmaz, 2014). Early in the data sampling process and the initial coding, we found that the issue of “freedom of choice” was something that was actualised by the LTC teachers themselves as a source
of tension at the LTCs. This initial analytical finding from the empirical material highlighted the importance of investigating this issue further.

During the research process, we adopted the ideas of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014), which means that we worked with the gathering and analysis of data as an ongoing process where initial findings led us further in the data sampling process during the field work. As mentioned earlier, there was also a focus on the actors’ main concerns. In constructivist GT, the researcher sees that “data and theories are not simply discovered but constructed by the researcher and participants” (Thornberg, 2016, p. 357). Coding is thus both a matter of interpretation and related to the participants’ actual interactions and main concerns. During the analysis, we first worked with each items of data material separately to get an overview. We then conducted the different steps in the GT process of initial coding, after which we continued to the next step, so-called focused coding. This analytical process was characterised by constant comparisons between aspects of the data material. The analysis is constructed in a GT model, the doing of making choices in relation to a new orientation process where the main categories and their mutual relationships are shown.

**Ethical considerations**

Pupils, parents and teachers received information prior to the study and gave their consent to participate in the action research project as well as observations in connection with this. Parents gave their written consent while teachers and pupils gave their consent verbally. We have also tried to obtain consent from the participating pupils continuously by being responsive to whether or not they wanted to be observed in their activities (cf. Skelton, 2008). That means, for example, that we reminded the pupils about our presence at their LTC. We also tried to pay attention to their expressions in different situations like when pupils said they “want to play alone”. The ethical guidelines from the Swedish Research Council (2017) have been taken into account; for example, all names of people and places used are fictitious.

**Results**

In all the settings, the changes in the LTCs’ mission were a topic that was discussed in the group conversations and were something that the LTC teachers paid considerable attention to. These discussions could be described in terms of uncertainty about how to interpret the LTCs’ changed mission and as a new orientation process where traditional values were questioned. This kind of change in educational practice has been described in previous research as something that requires an active process of understanding new demands in relation to existing practice (Haglund, 2015; Lager, 2016, 2018). These processes raised the questions of what LTCs are and what they “could be” in the future. This was mainly visible during the group conversations, where different pedagogical issues were on the agenda, but it could also be seen in the different interactions between teachers and pupils in the LTC practice. These processes can be understood in terms of interpretation and handling new policy demands. This new orientation process, where the LTCs’ core values were debated, also led to pedagogical conflicts about how teachers...
should handle this change or the direction in which LTCs’ teaching demands should be turned. The new orientation process thus creates a tension between core values and new values/policy demands. In these processes, the actors create meanings in different ways.

The analysis shows two central categories that both take their standpoint in so-called “different rationalities of values”, which means that LTC teachers can have different attitudes towards pupils or the LTCs’ assignments (cf. Granström, 2003, p. 22). The first category focuses on the tension between choice versus mandatory and the second on the tension between demands on teachers’ versus children’s perspectives. Both these tensions are present in the figure that depicts the doing of making choices in relation to a new orientation process (Figure 1). Based on these tensions, pupils’ choices at LTCs are central and are analysed further in the following section.

The doing of making choices

In this part of the article, the results of the analysis are presented in relation to the categories that emerged from the categorisation of how the LTC teachers talked about pupils’ choices at LTCs and how choices were made in LTC practice in interaction between teachers and pupils. In these categories, core values of pupils “free” choice are set against mandatory activities or formalized choice situations. These processes can be understood as actions where the actors creates meaning according to their experiences.

![Figure 1. GT theory model of a new orientation process showing the tensions between different traditions, values and new demands in LTCs](image1)

![Figure 2. GT theory model of the doing of making choices in relation to a new orientation process](image2)
and how they define the situation (Blumer, 1969). The categories presented are Have a possibility to make a choice, Make a choice even when you have no choice, Make your own choice and Make the right choice (Figure 2).

**Have a possibility to make a choice**

The analysis shows that LTCs’ traditions of giving the pupils an opportunity to have an influence over their time at LTCs is a central standpoint in the group interviews with the LTC teachers. In all the observed LTCs the pupils have a possibility to make choices to some extent. On a daily basis, the pupils are given the opportunity choose what to do, who to be with, whether they want to participate in a certain activity and so on. Observations and conversations with the LTC teachers have shown that giving the pupils the opportunity to exercise influence by making individual choices was an important part of how the LTC teachers viewed influence, but this is also recognized as a central aspect of LTCs. LTC teachers described pupils’ different choices as a way to influence the activities as important, and organizing the afternoon at the LTCs by offering different kinds of activities is a common practice. The excerpt below shows how an LTC teacher describes the way in which they organize their daily activities in a group conversation:

Excerpt 1 – Urban School

Moa: The pupils arrive at two o’clock, and they go inside and say hello to us. We register their presence and see how many want to be with us. We deal with these technical matters. Then our goal is to have two activities per day that should be voluntary for the pupils to participate in. These will be activities where we as adults participate and support. And if you don’t want to take part you are able to choose to make beads or do whatever you want instead.

In this example, the LTC teachers point to the voluntariness of the activities in terms of bring something the teachers offer to the pupils to do – a smorgasbord of activities where pupils are given the possibility to choose what they want to take part in. From this perspective, pupils’ freedom of choice is important and the LTC teacher states that no one should be forced to take part in the activities since they always can “do whatever [they] want instead”. In a group conversation at the LTC at the Lake School, the teachers talked about pupils’ influence as something that they wanted to work with and how pupils’ choices was a part of this.

Excerpt 2 – Lake School

Anna: We try to take their thoughts and ideas into account as much as we can.
Monika: Yes.
Anna: Just like ...
Monika: What they want.
Anna: Even if we have certain set activities, like we go somewhere away from school one afternoon each week or woodwork tomorrow. But they should take part in the decisions and we really try, like, to find out what it is they want to do, for example, when we’re in the gymnasium and where do they want to go.
Monika: And you have been very good at, very good at checking off, like, when that pupil or child, when their activity [gets done]. Now it is done, now we can show this.

In this example, the question of influence is clearly linked to the pupils’ possibility to make choices about the activities at the LTC. The LTC teacher argues that the pupils need to be heard and this possibility is linked to pupils’ influence over the choice of activity – as Monika emphasized, the activities have to be “what they want”. The choice of activity is linked in the teacher’s statement to pupils’ individual choices. It is the pupils as individuals rather than the group of pupils that should be given the opportunity to influence the activities at LTCs, as can be seen in Monika’s statement about checking when each pupil’s choice of activity is carried out. A choice is made and described in terms of an important part of pupils’ influence. In this example, the influence is a limited choice of activities.

In the group conversations, the question of choice and mandatory activities is something LTC teachers often discussed. This can be seen as a conflict in the national policy documents since LTCs are talked about in terms of both education and achieving goals, but they also recognize LTCs as a part of children’s leisure time (Swedish National Agency of Education, 2014, 2018). This is an example of the tension between traditional values and new demands. The new policy demands is something the teacher adjust and reflect over in relation to their own practice (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). It also shows that new policies are negotiated between the different actors, in this case between LTC teachers and pupils. Pupils’ possibilities to have a say and a child-centred perspective are recognized as things that traditionally characterise LTCs, a core value (Elvstrand & Lago, 2018; Saar, 2014), but can also be seen in this new orientation as tension (Hjalmarsson, 2013). Some activities, like institutional routines, have always been mandatory, such as snack time or outdoor breaks, but now with higher demands in terms of explicit and measurable activities. At all schools, there are certain mandatory activities every week. At the Urban School, the LTC teachers discuss this in the following way:

Excerpt 3 – Urban School

Pernilla: Sometimes we also have mandatory activities. It depends. Sometimes it can be activities you have to participate in.

Karin: You have to show the child what it is they choose.

Pernilla: And then I think it is important that we check who’s taking part in the activity and who’s not taking part. Like, say, there is a child who never chooses to take part. Or the child chooses to take part in certain kinds of play … Even if we vary the activities and don’t play the same way, like playing war. It can be playing horses or anything.

Simon: I think the most difficult thing is to involve the children who don’t want to take part in the activity. That is the hardest part.

This discussion can be seen as a tension between demands placed on teachers and the children’s perspectives. The curriculum emphasizes that the teaching at LTCs should be based on the children’s own interests, but the teachers should also encourage the pupils to discover new experiences and to work with specific subjects which are prescribed in the curriculum (Swedish National Agency of Education, 2018). The teachers here point to a central tension. Should they encourage pupils to make choices they do not know so
much about, e.g. encourage them to try new activities like “playing horses or anything”? The reasoning here can be interpreted as pupils not choosing freely if they are not offered knowledge about new activities. Their choice is then seen as limited and they do not get as involved as they could. The teachers’ comments also show that some pupils resist these mandatory activities and are described as being difficult to involve. The tension raised by the teachers revolves around the degree of force that can be used to get pupils to participate. The fact that this becomes a tension can be understood against the background of LTCs’ tradition of allowing pupils to make their own choices. The mandatory aspect is then referred to in terms of keeping track of who is attending, offering and encouraging participation.

Make a choice even if you do not have a choice

Another common practice was to let the pupils choose whether they wanted to participate in a pre-planned activity. These kinds of offers can be understood in the light of free choice and controlled activities. In these cases, the pupils were given the choice to participate in a certain pre-planned activity or to not participate in the activity and instead have “free play” or participate in other pre-planned activities. This idea of choosing between pre-defined activities can be understood as a way to make choice visible in the LTC practice and is thus seen as a way to live up to new demands of highlight quality. This brought other limitations on pupils’ choices. In this example, the pupils are asked if they want to go on a fishing trip.

Excerpt 4 – The Lake School

It is the summer holiday and the leisure teachers have gathered the pupils in the first grade group on the sofa to tell them about the upcoming week. “On Tuesday, you can go fishing in town if you wish”. The teacher Anna asks: “Did anyone do that last summer?” She says that each group has a limited number of slots. The first grade has six slots, which is how many first graders can take part. “Who wants to go fishing?” The teachers let the pupils talk one at the time and say whether or not they want to go. “Do you want go fishing?” Most pupils answer yes to that question. “I’m not here next week so I will not go,” says one boy. “Nah, that’s right, you’re on vacation,” Anna says. “And you’re not here next week either,” she says to the next child. Not being present means that they cannot go fishing, and the pupils who will not attend LTC the following week do not get a say in whether or not they want to go fishing. “I want to come,” says Jonna. “But you’re not here next week?” The teachers look at their papers. “It says that you’re not here?” “I am!” says Jonna. “Mmm, we have to check that when you’re picked up,” Anna replies. Altogether, five or six pupils (depending on whether Jonna attends) want to or are able to take part in the trip to town.

In this example, the pupils are given a choice and a possibility to make a choice about what they want to do, or rather whether or not they want to go fishing. However, the choice was in many ways a limited choice. There are a number of things that limit pupils’ opportunities to make individual choices in cases like this. First, to have the possibility to go fishing they must be present the following week. The limited number of slots for the first graders also limits the choice. Although there were not very many pupils who would be at the LTC the following week, it would not have been possible for everyone to go. Whether or not everyone who wanted to go could take part depended on some of the pupils making the choice not to go. In this situation, the pupils were
given potential influence over their own activity, but the possibility was also dependent on the context of the LTC. We can see this in many similar situations. In these cases, there were rules to be followed like a limited number of participants or other limitations imposed by the educators. As shown above and in excerpt 3, there are tensions between offered activities and free choice. The inhabited value of pupils’ choice thus becomes formalized and measurable at the same time, and the practice of choice is limited. This type of formalized choice practice can be understood as a way of both defending the value of choice and adapting choice practice to new requirements for visibility. Choice becomes a mandatory practice where pupils have to make a choice.

**Make your own choice**

The act of choice and participation is turned into a question for the individual pupil. The LTC teacher states that it is important for every pupil to be able to influence the activities at the LTC. For all pupils to feel involved, they all need to be allowed to choose activities at some point. The choice situation is seen as something for each individual pupil rather than a social activity, which the following example illustrates.

Excerpt 5 – Urban School

It is circle time at the LTC at the Urban School. The pupils are gathered in a circle on the round rug in the middle of the room. The LTC teacher Sofia tells them that today they will discuss what kinds of activities they want to do during the study day next week. Sofia says that they have the whole day at the LTC and it is a fun day to do something special. Sofia then gives the pupils sticky notes and instructs them to write one suggestion for what they want to do. She also instructs them to give reasonable suggestions because we are not able to “fly to the moon or go to an amusement park”. Some of the pupils start to talk with each other and two of the boys, Kalle and Adrian, show each other what they have written to each other. Kalle says “Yes! We have written the same, our suggestion will win!” Sofia goes up to the boys and says “This is an individual task, write your own suggestions, no talking right now.” When most of the pupils are done with the task, Sofia gathers all the notes and then starts to put them on the white board in the classroom. The pupils have many suggestions about what to do: play, have a disco, go to the public swimming pool and watch a film. When Sofia reads from the different notes, many of the pupils express what they feel about the different suggestions like “No I don’t like that”, “It’s boring” or “Yes”. Sofia says that all the suggestions are equally good, but now they have to choose and they should make their choice by voting. Sofia goes on by saying: “It is important that you choose what YOU want to do and not what your best friend likes to do. Therefore we will do the voting in secret.” Sofia instructs the pupils to lay down on the rug and put their heads down and close their eyes. When she reads the different suggestions, each of them should raise their hand when they hear the suggestion they want to vote for. Sofia ends the instruction by saying: “Before you vote, think carefully what you like to do and don’t peek at each other.”

Here we can see that the individual choice is what the teacher sees as a proper choice. Sofia emphasizes that the pupils should vote for what “YOU want to do and not what your best friend likes to do”. The choice of activity is turned into a question of personal choice, something that is more authentic if it is done without interacting with others. The consequence when individual choice (your own choice) is seen as more “real” than a choice made with others is a particular view of the pupils’ choices and participation. Participation becomes individualized rather than being seen as a collective process.
When Sofia instructs Kalle and Adrian not to talk to each other about their choice of activity, choice and the ability to influence the LTC practice become individual rather than social processes. Participation is individual and democratic processes relate to individuals’ individual choices rather than negotiations and discussions in social settings. This is reinforced when Sofia makes the voting a closed process where the pupils are carefully instructed not to look. In this case, participation at the LTC is limited and the work with collective aspects of participation is not a priority. The signal to the pupils is that their common and relational choices are not worth as much as their individual choices. This kind of democratic training is far from deliberative democracy, which highlights the importance of discussion (Roth, 2000). In this example, the pupils have an opportunity to make choices, but not always in the way they want to. In this and similar examples, the focus is on the choice of activity or content rather than on social choices. In these situations, pupils are not given the opportunity to choose and thus build relationships with each other. This example also points to the tension between different values that are acted out in the pedagogical practice. Traditionally, the LTC has focused on group-oriented activities and pupils’ social relations have been important. The new demands that highlight the importance of the educational outcome for every single pupil conflicts with the traditional values of group orientation and social interaction. In this case, this means that pupil’s relations are not valued but their individual choice is.

**Making no choice is not a choice**

In the process of making choices, more forcing elements were also visible in the data. The pedagogical idea of choices can also be understood in terms of what is mandatory. Pupils who did not make any active choice were seen as problematic, which the following excerpt shows.

Excerpt 6 – The Forest School

A group of five pupils are sitting together on the sofa. They are making jokes together and doing funny drawings, writing love letters that they laugh at. Stina, one of the LTC teachers, enters the room. She looks at the group and says: “This is not okay. You can’t just hang around. You have to decide what to do. This is not a good way to spend your afternoon at LTC.” Then Stina points to each of the pupils and asks: “What do you choose to do right now?”

In this example, the choice not to choose – that is, to just “hang around” – is not an acceptable one. Here, as in excerpt 5, pupils’ relations are not valued as a good enough choice: activities, such as “hanging around” (or talking and laughing with friends), were dismissed as non-choices and the pupils were asked to make a proper choice: “What do you choose to do right now?” This strengthens the interpretation that there are local norms that “free” choice must be held against when pupils choose what they want to do. In the local context, some activities and choices are considered as “proper” while others are not. This reveals a tension between demands on teaches versus pupil’s perspectives. What is valuable LTC time and for whom? These “proper” activities can be understood
in relation to ideas of quality and visible learning. The choices and participation at LTCs are thus not “free”, but rather limited and controlled.

When you have made a choice, it is also recognized that it is important to stick to the choice:

Excerpt 7 – the Forest school

Kicki: I don’t know, but we think anyway that it is important that you hang on to an activity for a longer while. So you get a proper choice of the activity you have chosen.

In the discussion above, the LTC teachers point out the importance of pupils having an opportunity to choose between things the teachers describe in terms of “good” and something valuable. Another central value in relation to choices is about practising endurance where pupils should be encouraged to hang on to their choices. The LTC teachers are struggling with two values that they find, to some extent, contradictory: pupils’ rights to influence the activities and the need to engage them in “approved” activities. As in the example above (Excerpt 5), it is apparent that certain activities are approved while there are other activities that are considered less good. LTC teachers also associate pupils’ participation with a risk of more “bad” activities. The choices must therefore be controlled and participation limited – all in the best interests of the pupils. Choices can at first glance be seen as something voluntary, but choices are also surrounded by different values and normative assumptions of what an appropriate choice is.

Conclusions and discussion: to choose or not to choose

How can the practice of making choices and the teachers’ statements of the importance of choices be understood? This article shows how teachers are struggling to handle the new demands in the policy documents and at the same time hold on to central traditional LTC values and how pupils’ choices become an example of these tensions since this is a main concern for the teachers. This article show how the doing of making choices is made in the tension between traditional core values and new demands in a few specific cases by analysing teachers’ discussions and everyday interactions with pupils. Although the study is based on a limited number of cases, there is reason to believe that the results are also relevant for other similar practices, as previous studies point to similar types of tension (cf. Haglund, 2015; Lager, 2016, 2018). What becomes a tension, however, can differ between different contexts and it is important to further study LTC practice to gain further knowledge.

The results show that even though teachers value pupils’ possibilities to make their own choices, these choice are limited rather than free. There are limitations to how choices can be made and what the pupils can make choices about. To make pupils’ choices visible in LTC practice, these choices are both formalized and individualized. This can be understood as a way to handle new demands.

To understand why pupils’ choice is of importance, this needs to be understood both as a core value and as something that is highlighted in the LTC’s curriculum where pupils’ perspectives are central. The LTC teachers are also managing new demands to show goal achievement for – in this case – pupil participation through choice. The analysis shows that at this crossroads between an important value (choice) and policy demands (to show goal
achievement), the teachers focus on choice as a visible but limited aspect of participation. In this context, “free” choice can even be mandatory. Choice is not free, nor is it an unproblematic way to convey pupils’ participation. In this way, pupils’ choices and the possibilities for participation they bring are dependent on the specifics of the LTC practice and the LTC teachers’ ideas of what a proper choice is. A proper choice is, from the teacher’s point of view, something that is done independently of others and can overshadow other democratic values like discussions together in terms of deliberation (cf. Roth, 2000). This is shown above when the teachers try to make sense of pupils’ choices both in relation to traditions and values (choice is important) and in relation to new demands (choice should be visible). Choice is thus both dependent of the conditions on the institution and at the same time negotiated in interaction (cf. Hallett & Ventresca, 2006).

On other occasions, the policy demands are brought more to the foreground when teachers emphasize the visibility of the choices, and it is important that it is visible to the pupils that they get the opportunity to choose “what they want”, that is choice is made into both a checklist and an individualized practice. This contributes to limitations and – sometimes – more formalized forms of choice. As Everitt (2012) points out, this is an ongoing process, which means that change, preservation, new demands and traditional values coexist in the LTC practice. In these tensions, different core values (cf. Granström, 2003) become important. In the case of pupils’ choice, demands on teachers to make their work with participation visible and evaluable comes into conflict with children’s perspectives on participation and choice creating a tension that the teachers need to address. This poses a pedagogical conflict about what LTCs are. We argue that when the teachers in this study manage tensions between values and tradition and new policy demands, choice becomes important but at the same time limited to something which can be “checked” for each individual pupil. Choice thus risks being transformed from the social and group-oriented tradition of the LTC into an individualized practice.

Note
1. The Swedish term is “fritidshem”. This is translated in different ways by different authors. We use the translation “leisure time center” since this is in line with the Swedish emphasis the “free” and informal aspects of LTCs.

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