

# What is Participation? Pedagogues' Interpretative Repertoires and Ideological Dilemmas Regarding Children's Participation in Swedish Leisure-time Centres

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**Abstract:** The aim of the article is to explore how pedagogues in Swedish leisure-time centres interpret and make sense of what may be meant by children's participation. We also focus on ambivalences and competing interpretations of participation and how pedagogues argue for or against divergent interpretations. The material consists of 18 digitally recorded reflection meetings in 6 leisure-time centres. The analyses reveal three interpretative patterns, or in other words, interpretative repertoires of participation, these being 1) formal democracy, 2) making individual choices and 3) responsibility. Ambivalences and competing interpretations concern, in the first place, the interpretation of participation as individual choice versus adult governance and compulsory activities. The arguments used refer to cultural values such as the value of countryside experiences, children's developmental needs, professional commitment and children's best interests. The severity of the clashing ideas is obvious as no working consensus is achieved.

**Keywords:** leisure-time centres, children's participation, interpretative repertoires, ideological dilemmas, inhabited institutions

## Introduction

Children's leisure-time centres (LTC) in Sweden offer activities to children of ages 6–12, both before and after school hours. Since the school reforms of the early 1990's the LTC are incorporated in the Swedish education system, and also included in the comprehensive school curriculum. Consequently, the LTC are now compelled to practice the prescribed overarching values provided for the school. As Sweden, along with most countries, has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the curriculum – and the entire education system – is described as rights-based. Democratic values and citizenship education are emphasised in the steering documents. The Swedish Education Act (The National Agency for Education, 2010) and the comprehensive school curriculum (Lgr11) not only stress the importance of children as holders of participatory rights but also that children

should be given the opportunity to actually influence the circumstances that concern them in school:

“The democratic principles of being able to influence, take responsibility and be involved should cover all pupils. Pupils should be given influence over their education. They should be continually encouraged to take an active part in the work of further developing their education and kept informed of issues that concern them. The information and the means by which pupils exercise influence should be related to their age and maturity. Pupils should always have the opportunity to take the initiative on issues that should be treated within the framework of their influence over their education” (The National Agency for Education, 2011, Lgr 11, p. 17).

Even though the curriculum seems to offer children far-reaching rights to exercise participation and to make a difference with regards to “issues that concern” them in school, a review of research on children’s participation in Swedish comprehensive schools reveals that children’s participation is often subject to certain conditions and thus limited. Elvstrand (2009), for example, shows that children’s participation is restricted with respect to what kind of issues children are allowed to influence. Participation is not often recognised as a democratic right which, for example, means that participation is seen as something that has to be earned by good behaviour. The results of Tholander’s (2007) study on participatory education in secondary schools also show complex patterns of interplay between undemocratic and democratic aspects between teachers and students as well as among students. Also, some recent studies on children’s participation in school show constraints and limited opportunities with respect to practicing democracy and participation rights (Aspán, 2009; Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012). The results from the Swedish studies are in line with international research on children’s participation in compulsory education (Alderson, 1999; Pedder & McIntyre, 2006; Raby & Domitrek, 2007). Both Swedish and international research on children’s participation in compulsory education shows that children’s opportunities to participate are severely restricted. A predominant result in international studies is that children’s participation in school is considerably limited when it comes to opportunities to influence issues that concern them (Raby & Domitrek, 2007; Varnham et al., 2014).

The results from studies on participation in comprehensive schools are, however, not directly applicable to LTC. Most of the research on participation in school has been conducted with older children. What is more, the specific policy documents for LTC also prescribe that the activities should be seen as complementary and beneficial to school (The National Agency for Education, 2014). According to these documents the activities in LTC should above all offer meaningful, stimulating and varied leisure-time activities, time for free play, and activities that enhance social skills. The guidelines and the somewhat more loosely scheduled organisation of the daily activities in LTC compared to school may be seen as grounds for participation.

While research on comprehensive schools has gained much interest, there is still a lack of research on LTC in Sweden. It seems, though, that the school reforms of recent decades have not quite succeeded in enabling children to participate in line with the values stressed in the curriculum. Research on school reforms also reveals that school reforms are not a guarantee of change. Steering documents prescribe goals and guidelines but these are formulated vaguely and consequently subject to interpretive practices in schools. Shared values and objectives are seen as critical

for transformation of schools (cf. Abawi, 2013; Hemmings, 2012; Moliner & Garcia, 2013). The emphasis on meaning-making processes in social interaction and in understanding interpretive practices is here in line with the ‘inhabited institutions’ approach (Everitt, 2012; Fine & Hallett, 2014; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett, 2010), presented in the section ‘theoretical frame’. We assume that the teachers in schools and pedagogues in LTC are important actors in interpreting the steering documents and deciding how they could be put into practice in the daily activities. Consequently, the interpretation of what is meant by goals such as increasing children’s participation is a focal issue in understanding children’s opportunities to practice participation in these contexts.

How the pedagogues in LTC in interaction with each other construct what may be meant by children’s participation, and what dilemmas emerge in the discussions of participation, is the focus of our analysis in this article. Even though the case here is children’s participation in Swedish LTC, the results of our study are of relevance for other extended education settings, concerning whether extended education settings could offer distinct opportunities for children to exercise their right to participate in their education and what dilemmas this creates for pedagogues.

The material analysed consists of digitally recorded group meetings with pedagogues in 6 LTC. Children’s participation is, as the results reveal, a contested issue amongst the pedagogues.

## Previous research

LTC in Sweden have been developed successively since the 1940’-s as a part of welfare policies. The aim has been to offer children organised activities before and after school hours and also to enable parents to take part in the labour market (Haglund, 2009, Saar, 2014). The proportion of children of ages 6–9 years old that attend LTC has increased successively. In 2014 the proportion was over 80% of all school children in this age range (The National Agency for Education, 2014).

Research on LTC in Sweden is still lacking, the rather long history of organised leisure-time activities notwithstanding (cf. Klerfelt & Haglund, 2014b). There are some studies on the ideological changes over the decades as regards the goals and aims of activities at LTC. After the 1980’-s, and up until today, the need for cooperation and integration between school and LTC has been stressed. Some studies with a focus on children’s perspectives on the activities in the centres has pointed out that children themselves value the opportunities for decision-making (Klerfelt & Haglund, 2014a; Pálsdóttir, 2012). Haglund’s (2015a) study shows that children’s opportunities to participate may vary depending on the type of activity. Not surprisingly, free play was an activity where children were able to make decisions of their own, while thematic activities, most often planned by teachers, offered less such opportunities. However, children in the study did not ask for more opportunities to make decisions and be involved in decision-making processes.

When it comes to the pedagogues’ perspectives on LTC, they emphasise the voluntary nature of leisure-time activities, that is, children are allowed to choose

to participate in various activities that are offered to them (for example free play, sports, arts, board games) (Saar, Löfdahl, & Hjalmarsson, 2012; cf. Saar, 2014). Also, they describe the activities as distinct from those offered at school, and more loosely structured than school (Saar et al., 2012). Some studies also show that the staff at LTC may have varying views on the degree of freedom the children have to attend specific activities, as well as on children's opportunities to influence the contents or the planning of diverse activities (Haglund, 2015b). Such ambivalence may be seen as mirroring the descriptions of LTC in steering documents that embrace both the recreational activities, free play and children's development. Haglund's results reveal, for example, that thematic activities, which are designed to enhance children's development in specific respects, were grounded in adult perspectives, i.e. planned by the staff to meet certain developmental needs or goals in line with the curriculum and other steering documents. An interview study with pedagogues at LTC in Iceland shows that they described the children both as active and as lacking competencies which in the long run affect children's opportunities for participation (Pálsdóttir, 2012).

Previous research thus suggests that pedagogues at LTC may interpret children's participation differently. What is also shown is that the organisation of everyday activities in LTC is not as strictly scheduled as in comprehensive schools and this could enable and enhance opportunities to participate.

## Theoretical frame

We have argued that an understanding of pedagogues meaning-making processes is of importance to the issue of children's participation. Such meaning-making emerges in social interaction (Blumer, 1969). How people interpret the situation (or issue at stake) in which they participate, and how such meanings may be negotiated, opposed to or altered in interaction with others is of importance here. These are important building blocks in the approach 'inhabited institutions' (Fine & Hallett, 2014; Everitt, 2012; Hallett, 2003; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett, 2010;).

Institutions, such as schools, are seen as inhabited by people, who actively engage in sense-making of what counts as goals, rules, values, etc. The need to understand relationships between institutional goals, institutional environments and local production of meaning is emphasised. Schools, for example, are governed by the Education Act, but the enforcement of this law is a product of local interpretive practices (cf. Everitt, 2012). How the goals are interpreted and put into practice is a question of local sense-making within the staff and between the staff and children. Seeing this relationally as well as contextually, it is obvious that there might be different interpretations of the meaning of participation, and how it should be carried out in practice, both within staff and children and between different grades.

The inhabited institutions approach stresses the significance of understanding social organisation and meaning-making processes in local cultures. Local cultures are shaped by past experiences and definitions of what is valued and, what norms and rules are guiding expected conduct. Local cultures are thus significant for inter-

pretations of opportunities and restrictions for action (cf. Coburn, 2004; Fine, 2010; Hallett, 2010). ‘Inhabited institutions’ as an approach “focuses on *meaning*, not only in terms of macro-logics such as “bureaucracy”, but also in terms of the interactions through which the contours of these logics are negotiated to create different meanings and lines of future action at the micro-level, actions that have consequences for the situation (or organization) in question” (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006, p. 231, italics in original). Negotiation points here to the significance of meaning-making processes in interactions between actors, but also that actors may be unequal with regard to power to define the situation (or the issue at stake) (Strauss, 1978; Hallett, 2003). This even implies that there may be competing definitions of a given situation or issue at hand (Fine & Hallett, 2014; Hallett, 2010).

Understanding how pedagogues interpret what is meant by children’s participation in LTC is the focus of this article. This is, of course, a somewhat limited focus with respect to the inhabited institutions approach, and does not embrace all the complexities of meaning-making processes in the daily activities. Instead, we focus here on how pedagogues talk about children’s participation with each other, and thus construct various meanings of participation.

The notion of children’s participation is a complex issue. Children’s participation may for example be understood in terms of voice and the need to listen to their voices, or in terms of individual autonomy, but also as political participation, by which is meant that children are able, and should be allowed, to make a difference and exercise participatory power (cf. Wall & Dar, 2011). The notion of political participation is related to issues on democracy and citizenship, and consequently to issues of power relationships between adults and children (Bacon & Frankel, 2014; James, 2011). Of interest here is, for example, what forms of democratic participation are created for children’s participation within LTC, whether or not such forms may differ from forms of participation in compulsory education and how pedagogues describe the purpose of different forms of participation, for example participation in democratic structures or making individual choices.

## Methods

In this article we draw on data gathered within a larger research project on LTC that started in 2013 and is to be finished during 2016.

The project has a strong participatory element. An important point of departure in the study was that the staff who take part in the study should voluntarily engage in the project. A commitment to engage in the project was required in the form of an application. Other criteria were also employed – such as the LTC being located in areas characterised by different socio-economic conditions. Six LTC were included in the project. Four of the centres were located in urban areas and two in small communities. We also stressed that the ideas of development were to be grounded in the desires and experiences of the pedagogues, and not initiated or proposed by the researchers. A third point of departure was that the project should not, as its starting

point, be based on a concrete problem, but instead start with visions for a desired future.

We were inspired by several ideas from various action research approaches that emphasise the idea of learning through reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1999; Postholm, 2011; Schön, 1987). The idea of dialogue and equality in meetings between researchers and pedagogues as well as the explicit future orientation in the meetings were central guidelines (cf. Aagaard Nielsen & Nielsen, 2006). As researchers, our role was to lend structure to the process by arranging a round of reflection meetings with the pedagogues in each LTC beginning with visions, then moving on to reflections about obstacles and possible courses of action and then to concrete action plans. Having started developmental activities, the reflection meetings focused on the specific projects that each of the LTC worked with. Our role in these meetings was, in the first place, to orchestrate turn-taking amongst pedagogues and to maintain the focus on the subject under discussion. In this sense the meetings were to be seen as focused interaction described by Goffman (1961), sustaining mutual cognitive attention in communication.

Forty pedagogues took part in the study. The data analysed for this article consists of 18 digitally recorded reflection meetings. The recordings were transcribed for analysis. Each meeting lasted about 2 hours and the number of pedagogues that attended the separate meetings could vary between 3–12 depending on circumstances, such as the number of pedagogues working in a LTC, sick-leaves, holidays, etc. As our interest in this article is on how pedagogues interpret and construct meanings of children's participation, only the sequences in which children's participation was the subject for discussion were chosen for analysis.

## Analysis

As we are interested in pedagogues' interpretations of children's participation, we use two analytical concepts in order to shed light on how they characterise participation when talking about it (i.e. what is participation?), and if they come to shared understandings or competing definitions of participation. The concept interpretative repertoire is derived from discursive psychology and refers to "relatively coherent ways of talking about objects and events in the world" (Edley, 2001, p. 198). Ideological dilemmas refer to lived ideologies, "composed of the beliefs, values and practices of a given society [...] its common sense" (Edley, 2001, p. 203). Lived ideologies are not coherent, but may even be contradictory. The interest here is not only how people talk about an issue but also what resources they use when arguing for a specific point of view.

It should be noted that our interest is not on linguistic issues, but on how participation is characterised, and whether the ideas of what participation consists of are seen as contradictory. Furthermore, we are not focusing on separate LTCs or on individual pedagogues. The unit of analysis is discursive practices, that is, the *kinds* of interpretations that can be identified across the data. The assumption is that there is a variation of interpretations: "When studying repertoires, variability is a starting

point. People do not only use one repertoire, but many, activated in different situations” (Juhila, 2009, p. 130).

In our analysis the first step was to identify variation in what is meant by children’s participation. The craft in thematic analysis in this early phase is similar as in many other types of qualitative analysis (Wertz et al., 2011). The transcriptions of the meetings were read and reread to identify prevailing patterns of data. In the second step we moved on to conducting an across-case analysis, searching for commonalities across cases, i.e. descriptions of the phenomenon under study that are common to the participants’ accounts (cf. Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafel, 2003; Hökkä, Eteläpelto, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2010). The analysis focused on the contents of the characterisations of participation, which revealed a variety of repertoires. The kinds of interpretative repertoires we identified are representative of the entire data analysed both within and between cases.

The third step was to analyse the data with respect to competing or contrasting discourses on children’s participation, and what arguments the pedagogues used when talking about various kinds of participation, specifically when arguing for or against a specific mode of participation (revealing ideological dilemmas).

Transcription notation

(-) material omitted by the authors

[text] material admitted by the authors for the sake of clarity

P refers to pedagogue, R to researcher. P1, P2 etc. is used to clarify turns in conversation between the pedagogues

## Ethics

The participants in the study received information on the project before they applied to take part in it (before writing their application). Before the start they were invited to an information meeting. The information was repeated when the researchers met the staff in the centres separately. Also, during the recurring reflection meetings the project was discussed and it was clearly emphasised that participation in the project was voluntary. Separate information was received by parents and children. The ethical approval was received from the regional ethical committee for research ethics.

## Results

### *Interpretative repertoires*

During the reflection meetings with the pedagogues it was obvious that participation was understood in several ways by them. The interpretative repertoires used by the pedagogues when they talked about children’s participation were:

- Repertoire of participation as formal democracy
- Repertoire of participation as making individual choices
- Repertoire of participation as (conditioned by) responsibility

### Repertoire of participation as formal democracy

This repertoire represents accounts in which children's participation is described in terms of practicing formal democracy. In Sweden a school council is mandatory in compulsory school, but not in LTC. Four of the participating centres have, though, voluntarily chosen to organise LTC councils, where both pedagogues and children are represented.

P1: But these activities are to a great extent governed by the children themselves because every Thursday we have the LTC council. There are, in total, five groups [of children] in a system of rotation so a group attends every fifth week and has LTC council. One part of their role is first to evaluate the week. How did the activities work? What worked well? What didn't work so well?

P2: Did we achieve our basic goal? Have we worked successfully towards our goals?

P2: We also look at [children's suggestions in] the suggestion box we have here at the LTC and think about what kind of activities we should do next week. (-) Then on Friday when the children come they can see what is planned for the following week and decide what things they want to be involved in.

In the first phrase above, the pedagogue emphasises children's opportunities to govern activities through the council. The system of rotation, according to the pedagogue, offers the children equal opportunities to participate in the council. The second pedagogue agrees by offering further examples of what is discussed at the council, with reference to the goals for LTC. In the last phrase the relationship between individual choices, decisions and the council is considered.

The council is seen as an arena for making choices about the children's suggestions for preferred activities for the coming week, as well as for evaluation of past activities. These suggestions may be proposed by other children to the child representative before the council, or in other cases written down and put in the suggestion box, which may be done anonymously. When the members of the council disagree on an issue, voting is used in order to obtain a majority decision.

In this repertoire the pedagogues refer to the need for practicing formal democracy, in line with the curriculum. The LTC council could be composed in various ways, but the general idea was that the participating children represented the child collective which they belonged to (age-grade or unit), and had to prepare for the council with the other children as well as to inform them after the council. Voting was not only practiced in the councils but also in other situations, such as afternoon meetings, when children had to choose between various possible activities. Practising formal democracy was not only seen as a form of participation but was also related to citizenship education in accordance with the curriculum. In some cases the council was formed after the LTC was assessed by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, which had criticised the opportunities children had to influence their activities.



### Repertoire of participation as making individual choices

This repertoire portrays the idea that participation is about making individual choices. “Free play” is traditionally seen as a common activity in LTC, which means that children can, to some extent, choose what they want to play and with whom they prefer to play. When the pedagogues refer to participation as making individual choices they often stress that children have substantial opportunities to influence the form and content of free play.

R: In which situations do you think the way you act with the children, is guided by a democratic idea you have had?

P1: It's like when they [the children] have had a break and come indoors. It is when you sit with them and talk [and say] now we will be indoors for one hour. What do you want to do?

P2: You ask every single child.

P1: Yes you really ask every child individually.

P2: Then they can have an influence over their day. (-) Sometimes there are three activities they can choose from and sometimes they have a totally free choice. It is very different. But you can pose these two questions: What do you want to do today? How can I help you so that you will have a good day?

In the excerpt the researcher initiates the issue by asking about democratic ideas and ways of working in accordance with such ideas. The first pedagogue picks an example in which children are asked what they would like to do. The point of asking each child individually is later stressed by both pedagogues. The child is asked to express a preference for a particular activity or to choose among a few available activities. The idea that the time children spend in LTC is owned by the children and should be free is even more stressed in the next excerpt:

Then, they [the children] own their time at the LTC. Here we offer things but you [a child] don't have to, you take part in those things you want to. And there is a lot of freedom here. That is one way to give children influence. (-) if a child comes and asks if we can do something, we would rather say “yes we can” than “no we can't”. That was what we said before, to seize the moment (-) to find possibilities together with the child and to help to achieve the child's objectives.

That the child owns his or her time is here put in relation to the child's opportunity to choose to take part in an activity or to just drop it, i.e the individual choice is described as individual autonomy. In both excerpts the pedagogues also describe a pedagogical approach oriented to the child's desires and to understanding the child's perspective in the first place.

### Repertoire of participation as (conditioned by) responsibility

In this repertoire participation is either closely connected with a child's competence and ability to take responsibility or in fact accounted for as taking responsibility. This repertoire is related to the two other repertoires. In this respect the repertoires are somewhat overlapping. However, as the idea of responsibility is not only described as a prerequisite for participation, but also equated with participation, we have chosen to categorise this repertoire as separate but related to the others. Responsibility

is also associated with learning progression, competency and experience. A child's capability to take responsibility is most often seen as a necessary condition for participation. Responsibility could refer to capability and willingness to accomplish various tasks in the centre, instructing or leading other children in various activities, informing others of decisions taken in council and obtaining other children's opinions before the council:

P1: They [the children] take it seriously to present all opinions and we have talked about that.

P2: And it is good that they take it seriously that I [the individual child] have to talk on behalf of maybe 50 children (-) [It is] a bit cool that they take the responsibility.

In the excerpt above children's capability to take responsibility in accordance with what is expected from a child representative in LTC council is discussed. To represent a child collective is to take responsibility. The interconnectedness between responsibility and influence is also described in the excerpt below:

P1: One would like to be part of and develop that they [the children] can be with us and plan for and to carry out activities.

P1: (-) we could let them have small planning groups where they can take responsibility.

P2: Where they take decisions.

In the first phrase the pedagogue describes her preferences for new ways of engaging children in planning activities and thus increasing the children's opportunities to influence them. She then goes on to relate the planning to responsibility. In the last phrase the second pedagogue clarifies that the groups may have a mandate to take decisions.

### *Ideological dilemmas*

#### Governed by the adults or children's free choices

In the reflection meetings discussions about children's free choices versus activities governed by the adults is a recurring subject. How much scope for individual autonomy in terms of free choices that should be allowed to children is an issue that is seen as, to some extent, contradictory to the pedagogical role of the staff and to the educational work in line with the curriculum. These demands can in some ways come into conflict with activities children would choose if they were free to make choices and take decisions of their own:

How can you make them choose something they don't know is good for them? We also have a commitment to introduce new things for the children. (-) The children must have participation and exercise influence and put forward their own suggestions. But then it must also be the way that we GIVE suggestions on things that we see are IMPORTANT and say are good.

The pedagogue poses a rhetorical question to begin with, to introduce the issue of how to make children make right choices, by which is meant that the children do not have knowledge of available choices or alternatives that, in some way, can be seen as good for them. She then turns to a description of her professional role as educator and what is expected of her. The two last sentences clearly reveal what is

seen as contrasting ideas: On the one hand the demand for children's participation and the professional judgement on what children should do on the other. Further on children's choices, if free, are problematized in terms of "not making good choices" and if they are given an opportunity to decide there is a risk that they make bad decisions like "just want to stay indoors" or "just want to play". The pedagogues describe these dilemmas in terms of "different perspectives". On one hand they have the children who prefer certain activities because they are fun and on the other hand the pedagogues embrace the values of professional commitment and the demands to follow the curriculum and to document the on-going learning.

The ambivalence between the idea of children's free choices versus adult governance is also obvious in the next excerpt, a discussion between two pedagogues about making an excursion to the forest and whether or not such an excursion should be mandatory for all children or not.

P1: There are so many who want to go to the forest but there are really many children who don't want to go. From my perspective I think it is really important that, okay, we make groups of those who want to go. Small types of free groups and for those who like to go to the forest it will be more fun for them. And the others maybe like more to do craft-work. I think in this way about leisure-time activities. For me the LTC is more like free time. For the children, there is so much structure in school.

P2: I feel a little bit ambivalent about this. I don't think it is black and white. I actually think it is the way you say it. But I think that everyone needs to get out, to be honest. Some of them are just sitting at the computer and are never outdoors, in our beautiful forests and countryside practicing motor skills. (-) Then it is also as you say. It is an aspect. Leisure-time activities should also be a free choice.

In the first phrase the pedagogue initiates the discussion by a notion of two different preferences amongst the children concerning outdoor activities, such as an excursion to the forest. She then emphasises the importance of free will and the option of organising separate groups for children for separate activities in line with their preferences. She also defines the free choice as a core idea for children's activities in the LTC.

The second pedagogue contests the idea, announcing his ambivalence but also pointing out that the first pedagogues' statement is not nuanced enough. He then moves on to claim children's need to play outdoors by referring to the beautiful countryside, and even motor skills. The talk about beautiful countryside refers to the high cultural value ascribed to the countryside and forests in Sweden, while motor skills refers to development. In the last sentences he then also approves the core idea of LTC activities as a free choice.

The excerpt above is a sequence of a discussion of whether or not the children should have a say when it comes to going outside or staying indoors. The divergent ideas are even more pronounced in the next excerpt:

P1: But I can't let the children always decide because they are never outdoors. And it is for the best interest of the child, they are just sitting at the computer playing games otherwise.

P2: (-) I think that for me it is not in the best interest of the child to force them to go out if they don't want to. It is in the best interest of the child if they want to play with some friends in a corner. For me it is completely okay, and for me if I force them to go out it's not because it is in the best interest of the child. Maybe it's the best to do for the group. I don't know.

P2: I don't know, I don't totally agree with you.

P3: I don't agree.

P1: I don't agree because it can't be in the best interest of the child because they don't understand what it is.

In the first phrase the pedagogue announces that he will not always allow the children to take decisions on playing outdoors as they would drop out of the activity. He then goes on and refers to the idea of working for the children's best interests as the children risk choosing wrong activities (computer games).

The second pedagogue challenges the interpretation of the child's best interest and stresses children's free will. The first and the third pedagogue take a stance against the idea of free will and in the last phrase the issue is closed by the first pedagogue who now refers to children's lack of understanding of what may be in their best interest. In this sequence the issue is not solved in any way, the contradictory and ambivalent ideas remain. Even the notion of a child's best interest, which is used in the argumentation, is interpreted differently by the pedagogues.

### Competent or not for participation

On one hand the pedagogues often described children in terms of "the competent child" able to take responsibility, but on the other hand descriptions of children's lack of competence with regard to participation are common. As discussed below, taking responsibility is closely linked to competency. Children's age is often referred to when pedagogues describe obstacles for implementing, organising or conducting various activities in the daily life at the LTC. In the example below one pedagogue describes children's opportunities to propose new activities that would make an excursion to the forest more appealing and fun for the children:

They are just children, and they do not have so many [new ideas of activities to choose].

Being just children is used as an explanation in its own right, i.e no further explanations are necessarily needed. The reference to age seems here to refer to lack of knowledge of new options, and thus lack of competency with respect to participation in terms of influencing the content of activities or proposing new alternatives. Also children's lack of language skills and other communicative skills are described as obstacles to participation.

In the reflection meetings with the pedagogues an ongoing theme and obstacle for children's influence is, according to the pedagogues, children's incapacity to act in a responsible way. In the following example the pedagogues discuss the difficulties that arise with the "children of today" as they don't take care of the material in the LTC and are not interested in cleaning up. The example is about putting bicycles back in the bicycle racks after being outside. Children are, according to the pedagogue, not willing to do it and instead argue that they have not even touched a bicycle and should not need to put it back.

P1: I understand after that this has happened a hundred times that we [the pedagogues and the children] are a long way apart on this matter. And I ask: Who owns this problem? Because a child may think I don't care about this. (-) I feel that we can't discuss and give the re-

sponsibility to the child. It is not possible. Then even with the best intentions, to ask the child, it is not possible. Just decide [for them]! It is a question of values.

P2: That is one option and then you can ask, what has the child learnt by that?

P1: But you have let them be involved so many times.

In the excerpt above, the first pedagogue opens the discussion of who is to decide by referring to her experience that children repeatedly ignore some rules or try avoid their obligations in LTC. She then continues the argumentation based on such experiences and comes to a conclusion that under these circumstances the adult has to take the decision, in this particular case a decision of who is to take the bike back to the bicycle rack. The second pedagogue contradicts the issue by posing a question that points out learning through activities. The first pedagogue refers again to her experience and the discussion is closed without resulting in a shared understanding.

## Discussion

The aim of our analysis was to explore what interpretative repertoires could be identified regarding how pedagogues in the LTC interpret and make sense of what is meant by children's participation. Also we were interested in which ways such concepts were understood as contradictory or ambivalent.

The repertoires identified embrace the repertoire of participation as 1) formal democracy, 2) individual choice 3) and participation as (conditioned by) responsibility.

Interpreting participation in terms of formal democracy, organised in LTC councils or other similar arenas, and letting children vote for majority decisions was justified by referring to the curriculum, the goal to increase children's participation and also to citizenship education. As the Swedish Schools Inspectorate control the LTC the fulfillment of the goals is of utmost importance to the centres. The implementation of forms for formal democracy may in this respect also be seen as imposed by, or as an adaptation to, demands from the institutional environment (cf. Everitt, 2012), as voting procedures and council meetings are easily documented and thus accountable forms of participation. This repertoire was not contested in the material, even though children could be less interested in, for example, participation via the council. The implementation of LTC councils may in part be a consequence of the integration of LTC within the compulsory school in that the model for participation is copied from the school.

Participation was also interpreted in terms of having opportunities to make individual choices, which also means that the individual child may decide on the issue at stake. In some cases the individual choice was described in terms of individual autonomy. The emphasis on describing the importance of the child's perspective and letting the children make choices in accordance with their preferences is in line with other studies on how pedagogues describe the activities in LTC (cf. Haglund, 2015b). It is also in line with the traditional view that LTC should offer complementary activities that are associated with leisure time compared to school. However, the steering documents for LTC now stress the double mission for the LTC in terms of recreation

and a complement to school which should contribute to the accomplishment of educational goals. The emphasis on recreational activities, free play and making choices may, in first place, mirror the preservation of traditional LTC culture. This is an issue that needs further research using single case analysis (cf. Fine & Hallett, 2014).

The third repertoire, responsibility, is partly related to both of the previous repertoires and to learning progress. Capability to take responsibility is described as a condition for participation but also as participation. Responsibility was discussed in terms of willingness to carry out tasks, instruct and help other children, take part in LTC council and behave according to the expectations and rules in LTC. The core idea was that participation (influence, taking decisions, representing a collective) is responsibility.

When the form and content of what was seen as participation were described there seemed to be a high degree of agreement within and between the cases. When participation was discussed in relation to concrete activities in the LTC, for example how to organise certain activities and groups of children, or what activities should be mandatory, the ambivalences and competing ideas became obvious. The issue of children's free will versus activities governed by adults was a recurrent subject in the meetings. Limiting children's scope of free choice was justified by professional commitment, or the need to work in accordance with the curriculum, that both are related to the institutional environment. Other discourses that were used as resources in the arguments referred to children's developmental needs and also to the notion of children's best interests. Even traditional cultural values such as experiencing the countryside were used to legitimise mandatory outdoor activities. It was also obvious that competing or conflicting understandings were not solved at the meetings, not even in terms of reaching a working consensus. Again the results reveal the need for further studies within the cases. Our results are in line with the notion of competing definitions of the situation and that there are various interpretations of what, in our case, participation is, and how the LTC may work with the issue of participation (cf. Hallett, 2010). We need also to understand what the consequences of such ideological dilemmas are in local cultures.

We also have to take a close look at the issue of age as a basis for assessment of the children, for example consequences of the assumptions of children's individual and collective development and opportunities to participate related to age in various situations. Further, our results so far also indicate that there is a need for further research on issues of power relations between children and the pedagogues and even between children themselves, in order to understand children's opportunities as well as the obstacles to participation. The idea of free will is emphasized by the pedagogues, but, as discussed by Wood (2014), the idea of free choice should not be idealised or equated to children's agency. The choices may embrace power relations between children that advantage some children and disadvantage others.

Our results reveal that pedagogues have divergent ideas and interpretations of what children's participation embraces and even more of what scope of influence should be allowed to the children. Such ambivalences may hinder the task of creating new forms of children's participation, especially if divergent ideas are not openly discussed and a working consensus achieved within the staff. A working consensus is, as previous research on school reforms and development shows, of utmost im-

portance for success in local settings (cf. Hemmings, 2012). This should apply even to extended education settings. What is meant by participation can't be taken for granted. Such a discussion might also enable new, creative ideas of how to enhance children's opportunities to participate. School councils may not be a proper model to copy in extended education settings. Formal arenas for influence, such as the school council, have limitations and don't offer children substantial opportunities to influence issues that concern them in school (Wyness, 2009). If, for example, representational democracy is already practiced in compulsory school to meet the educational goals, the LTC or other extended education settings need not to implement just another council. What is more, the forms of participation as discussed by the pedagogues were grounded in adult perspectives (cf. James, 2011). As LTC are more loosely structured than schools there should be possibilities to enhance children's participation with children's experiences and ideas of what is meaningful participation as a point of departure, even engaging children in the task of creating forms of participation.

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