Learning Environments in Swedish Leisure-time Centres: (In)equality, 'Schooling', and Lack of Independence

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to describe and analyse how teachers perceive the internal learning environment at Swedish leisure-time centres and set it in relation to steering documents. The empirical data is based on a comprehensive web-survey of 4,043 leisure-time teachers in Sweden. The methodological approach is a qualitative directed content analysis. The results show large differences and inequalities in the quality of leisure-time centres' premises, an educational form characterized by integration with school and therefore to some extent lost autonomy. Activities in leisure-time centres combine individuality and social community in creative forms of play and social relationships. Because of this there are complex requirements for premises and dysfunctional premises reduce the opportunities to create good learning environments. The existing conditions for the majority of leisure-time centres do not correspond to the intentions in the steering documents concerning good learning environments. Leisure time centres have started to reproduce the (environmental) logic of 'traditional teaching premises' and to ignore their own (environmental) potential, which is even prescribed in specific steering documents. These results have implications for policy decisions and educational development.

Keywords: comprehensive survey, internal learning environment, leisure-time centres, Sweden, teachers' perceptions

Introduction

Leisure-time Centres in Sweden

Leisure-time centres (LtCs) are a large and comprehensive arena for student's learning, available to children from 6–12 years. Eighty percent of Sweden's 6 to 9 year-olds are enrolled (Statistiska Centralbyrån, 2014) and 20% of students aged 10–12. In total there are approximately 444 400 participating in 4200 LtCs in Sweden (Skolverket, 2014). According to Boverket's (2015) investigation, one quarter of these are independent of school and pre-school buildings and the others are fully or partially integrated. LtCs are part of the school system and are controlled by the Education Act (SFS, 2010:800), the School Ordinance (SFS, 2011:185) and the curriculum plan (Skolverket, 2011). The LtCs mission is to complement education in pre-school and school, to stimulate development and learning and to provide meaningful leisure and recreation. Children should be offered training in their leisure time as required with regard to parents' work or study, or the student's own needs. Student

groups should be of an appropriate size and composition and students shall otherwise be offered a good learning environment (SFS, 2010:800). The focus should be on the students' desire to learn, their needs, experiences and knowledge, and be adaptable to both the students and to different conditions. Their goal is to support the social and general development of students and to extend and deepen their knowledge and experience, as well as offering meaningful leisure time (Skolverket, 2015). Students should also receive practical training in democracy, influence and responsibility. Important elements of this educational form are play, movement and creative work (Skolverket, 2011, 2012).

Criticism Concerning LtC

The steering documents state that an LtC should provide a good learning environment, motivating the desire to learn, and that everyone – students, staff, and parents – will have the opportunity to be involved, and to influence the physical environment (e.g. space, areas designated for play, art) (Skolverket, 2011, 2007). Widespread criticism from various groups, including parents, staff, and the school inspectorate, has emerged in recent years, focusing on the extent to which learning objectives in LtCs have been fulfilled, analysed, and developed to meet learning goals (Lorentzi, 2012; Skolverket, 2001, 2012; Skolinspektionen, 2010, 2012). The critiques emphasise, for example, that the educational goals must be taken more seriously, more variety is needed to stimulate every child, and the importance of all staff being familiar with the steering documents, as well as having a leadership familiar with this educational form and its mission. The number of students has increased and long-term staffing levels have reduced.

Criticism of LtC internal learning environments has focused mainly on misaligned space for activities, large groups of students, few academically educated personnel, insecurity, and a lack of quality in the educational activities. As an example of the substandard buildings and excessively large groups, in 2012, there were around 20 children per full-time staff member and about 40 students on average per unit (Statistiska Centralbyrån, 2014).

Critics have usually noted the lack of sufficient premises (Boström, Hörnell, & Frykland, 2015), even though the law emphasizes a healthy environment. With regard to the regulation of the environment, the new Education Act clearly states, 'The head shall ensure that student groups have the appropriate composition and size, and that students are also otherwise offered a good environment' (SFS 2010:800, Chapter 14). Similar, but more detailed descriptions are available from the National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2007, 2015). These results also revealed that LtCs that are separate from the school premises (a minority of all LtCs) are perceived to offer better learning environments than those that are integrated into the school.

The School Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen, 2010) conducted a national review that mostly agreed with the earlier criticism. However, it directed even sharper criticism at activities in LtCs. It made significant recommendations regarding the learning environments, including specifying the volume, congestion, stress, opportunities for peace and quiet, and focused activities. The National Agency for Education

(Skolverket, 2007) outlined the quality of learning environment in terms of *should* but not *shall*, which was insufficiently strong, according to the staff in LtCs. The learning assignments for LtCs were not fully clarified in the National Agency for Education 2007 report, (Skolverket, 2007) but have been clarified in the Education Act (SFS 2010:800). Along with the sharp criticism from the School Inspectorate, this has meant that in many places development work has started to focus on learning tasks and the learning environment in a new and different way.

Problem Area

With policy document regulations, increased pressure on LtCs and criticism of this form of education from different directions, we see a gap in the research concerning how the staff feel that they can enforce policy documents guidelines in the available premises (internal learning environments). A constructive learning environment makes it easier to engage staff to make changes in culture (values and norms), which in turn can improve teaching and learning (Evanshen, 2012). In this study, we wish to analyse how leisure-time teachers (LtTs) perceive and describe the LtC premises at a national level. Because the study is based on a socio-cultural and didactic perspective, the research approach responds to the gap of knowledge about LtCs and their activities identified by Hjalmarsson (2014) and the School Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen, 2012). That is, the paradox between interpreting, and understanding leisure-time pedagogy (LtP), and evaluating the outcomes of learning, even as the number of students increases and the number of staff decreases in the premises. Furthermore, the study will give substance and nuance to the criticism of current learning tasks and provide an empirical basis for the development and improvement of LtCs.

The purpose of this study is therefore to describe and develop an understanding of LtTs' perceptions of Swedish LtC internal learning environments that is the premises, in relation to the steering documents. The premises, which have not previously been studied, are the foundation of and a prerequisite for the activities of the LtCs. This study is relevant for several reasons. Firstly, LtCs have a special position in relation to other school activities. Secondly, LtCs must meet both the curriculum objectives and their own specific objectives as formulated in the Education Act (SFS 2010:800). Thirdly, the personnel themselves are left to interpret and implement the learning task, without specific detailed legal directives. Fourthly, there has been sharp criticism of how goals are fulfilled, analysed, and developed to match the learning tasks. Finally, the international and national research on LtCs is sparse, particularly regarding educational practices. These reasons motivate the overall stated aim, to investigate and analyse how the premises are perceived by LtTs in Sweden at the national level.

Concepts and Limitations of the Study

Since the concept of learning environments is complex, we have narrowed the focus in this study to include only the internal learning environments, which is framed

by the existing premises. This is one limitation of the study. Another concept is leisure-time pedagogy (LtP), which covers the social development, education and learning of students in relation to LtC activity. LtP is a generic concept and the closely related practical concept is the general didactic, which includes the environment where the teacher can build a context that stimulates both the group and individual. Another limitation is that the methodology is based on a qualitative, directed content analysis, which does not deal with quantifying of the categories.

Previous Research: Leisure-time Centres

This section is a summary of previous LtC research, and research on learning environments and school. The concept of learning environments can be broad. For example, it may be aimed at both the outdoor environment and the indoor environment of social relationships and learning resources (Ahlberg, 1999). In this study the concept of learning environments is applicable to the premises, that is, the internal learning environment. What we are studying is the premises the students work within, for example classrooms, handicraft rooms, dining rooms and playrooms.

Research on the Swedish Leisure-time Centres

LtP covers the students' social development, education and learning in relation to LtC activity. This area has emerged in the interaction between schools and LtCs to create a context for the child throughout the day. The knowledge areas of LtP include informal learning that can be planned, but just as often is about unlocking the educational situations that arise from a child's play and interaction (Andersson, 2013).

Literature shows that research on LtCs in Sweden has been marginal, with only about 15 licentiates and doctoral theses (Persson, 2008). These have mainly highlighted the impact of LtCs' integration with school on activities and staff. The corresponding image is reproduced in two surveys of LtCs, which also includes evaluation research (Skolverket, 2012). Research on Swedish LtCs is dominated by qualitative studies, broadly divided by subject into the recreation profession, the educational form, and learning.

Research that directly addresses LtC professionals reveals a number of dilemmas that the group has had to face during educational policy reforms and the transfer to the school sector, together with the encounters and collaborations with the school's teachers that followed these reforms. Status differences and differing social goals complicate these meetings (Haglund, 2009) and teachers tend to set the framework (Andersson, 2013). LtTs assert their pedagogical knowledge and skills even in school contexts, but this is related to local control and the collective staff facilities available in the school (Andersson, 2013; Hjalmarsson, 2010).

The National Agency for Education's report (Skolverket, 2011) shows, however, that LtCs are largely unknown to politicians and have had their resources reduced,

especially when those resources are needed for schools, such as to improve students' performance on national tests.

Research on learning in LtCs shows that they boost students' confidence but make no difference to school results. Informal and social learning emerges as central to this form of education (Johansson & Ljusberg, 2004). LtCs also tend to entrench a local culture's socialization and traditional gender patterns in students. Saar, Löfdahl and Hjalmarsson (2012) problematize and develop the notion of teaching as the teachers' ability to control their students' learning of predetermined knowledge. The National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2012) says that there is a real need to increase research-based knowledge of learning and development within LtCs. This study would help to meet this need.

Learning Environments in LtCs and Schools

LtCs have been identified as a haven where the interests of students have been cherished (Lorenzi, 2012). Design of an LtC educational environment has, however, been unfairly ignored (Boström, Hörnell, & Fryklund, 2015). School is dominated by formal learning and the LtC by informal learning, though both forms of learning exist in both environments. According to steering documents the LtC should complement the school's learning environments, inspire the students, focus on their complementary goals and not compensate for school (Nordin, 2013).

One type of research relates to value issues and whether the view of students affects the learning environment. Environments can be didactic tools but LtTs rarely explain them as such. With the environment as didactic tool, the teacher can build a context that stimulates both the group and individual (Hippinen Ahlgren, 2013).

Play is central in the LtC, especially free play. Many LtCs have developed their learning environment to provide good play environments. Play has always been indispensable to training for LtTs. Jensen (2001) emphasizes that the LtC didactic should start from the varied environments that support different learning content. Qvarsell (2013) emphasizes that different environments suggest meaning-making activities, as confirmed in other studies, and that learning processes in LtCs should be cultural and contextual. The premises for LtC activities can range from classrooms to well-adapted, remodelled residential premises that have a strong focus on LtP.

LtC environments and work with social relationships involve a very important learning process (Ihrskog, 2011; Johansson & Ljusberg, 2004). Thus, the social community becomes central and the environment a didactic tool for LtCs' most important task. Kane (2013) argues that an important didactic starting point is to reflect on both relational and physical conditions to provide space for play, as is best done when LtCs' premises are not based on the formal school.

A learning environment is a social environment with didactical and pedagogical reflection (Evanshen, 2012). When people interact with the physical and social environment they influence it and are influenced by it (Björklid & Fischbein, 2011). Understanding of individual differences and similarities in learning lets students become fully immersed in learning environments (Evanshen, 2012). Hence,

good learning environments are important in all kind of learning and working places (Knoop, 2006).

School learning environments include approach, behaviours, attitudes, premises, and a classroom's characteristics (Ahlberg, 1999). The architecture of new schools has aimed at a modern era and a new way of thinking. However, we still have remarkably little knowledge of the interactions of students with the physical frame of a structure (Björklid, 2005; de Jong, 2011; Dranger Isfält, 1999).

In summary, research suggests that environment in LtCs is an essential element for students from a variety of perspectives. The LtTs are working with both traditional and new forms of control, which puts tension on their attitudes, vocations, and learning environments (Andersson, 2013). LtC premises should be adjusted to support students' development of social relationships, play, and work that complements traditional schoolwork (Kane, 2013).

Steering Documents and Learning Environments

The objectives of LtCs, which are supposed to complement other forms of education in which students fulfil their school attendance, involve both care and learning. There are different steering documents to regulate different activities. The Education Act (SFS, 2010:800) and School Ordinance (SFS, 2011:185), decided on by the Government, contains the fundamental regulations concerning leisure-time. The head shall ensure that student groups have an appropriate composition and size and that students also generally have a good environment (SFS 2010:800, Section 14). For corresponding but more detailed descriptions, see General Advice, quality in school (Skolverket, 2007, 2015). Curriculum Activities (LGR 11) in LtCs have the same curriculum as the pre-school class and compulsory school. The first two parts, "Fundamental values and tasks of the school" and "Overall goals and guidelines" – apply to the pre-school class and the LtC (Skolverket, 2011). In General advice (Skolverket, 2007, 2015) there are a number of relevant references to the LtC's learning environment and the connections between learning and a good learning environment for students in the LtC are also clearly stated.

A similar picture among researchers is that students, who in their early years are given a stimulating learning environment with opportunities for interaction and play with peers and with knowledgeable and interested adults, have more opportunities to develop and learn than students who did not have access to these environments (Skolverket, 2015, p. 13).

The curriculum should certainly apply in LtCs, but has been written with schools in mind (Skolverket, 2015). This means the LtC staff risk being left themselves to interpret and put into practice guidelines written for a different activity.

Given the widespread criticism and the context of LtC learning environments, it is important to examine what the policy documents express about learning environments in LtCs. The concept of a learning environment was not part of the curriculum for primary schools, pre-school classes (LGR 11), or the LtCs (Skolverket, 2011); nor were concerns for the quality of LtCs (Skolverket, 2007). In contrast, the con-

cepts of environment, school environment, and work environment were explored in the curriculum plan (Skolverket, 2011).

The curriculum plan (Skolverket, 2011) had no concrete pedagogical connection to the LtCs as an arena for learning. By contrast, the curriculum included LtCs, their staff and the LtC objectives in an abstract sense. However, various implicit formulations can be linked to the learning environments for LtCs. For example: teaching can never be the same for all students; students should develop their opportunities to communicate; play is very important for students to acquire knowledge. Under the heading, 'A Good Environment for Development and Learning', the curriculum emphasizes the importance of 'a vibrant social community that provides security and a willingness and desire to learn' (p. 10). Its aim will be to create the best conditions for students' education, thinking and knowledge development' (p. 10).

The National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2015) made a series of more recent references to the LtC learning environment. It stated that the premises must be appropriate in terms of size, design, air, light, and sound, but also for good educational activities and processes. It also said the environment should provide space for different kinds of activities; on the other hand, a natural integration with a school is not always desirable. Premises and the outdoor environment should be 'transparent and facilitate contact between staff and children' (p. 21). Also, the students should learn about the local environment and its resources. In addition to the leisure activities, the learning environment should offer varied elements, such as music, the visual arts, design, drama, and excursions. Furthermore, it states that learning environments in the LtC should be founded on the concept that 'children's development and learning takes place at all times and in all contexts, and is characterized by the perception of students as active co-creators of their own development and their own learning' (Skolverket, 2007, p. 23). Ample space should be provided for the students to be involved and to have influence.

The steering documents conclude that the LtC should provide practical training in democracy, equality, and other values. Therefore, the environment should be transparent and facilitate contact between staff and students. Its design and size should admit suitable levels of air, light, and sound, giving students and staff the possibility to communicate and develop a vibrant, secure community that promotes the desire to learn. Students should also be active co-creators of their own development and learning (SFS, 2010:800, SFS, 2011:185).

Socio-cultural and Didactic Framework

To describe and develop an understanding of the LtTs' perceptions of the Swedish LtC's internal learning environments we use a general didactic theory, and socio-cultural theory as framework. Considerations for general didactic aspects entail an interest in the teacher's "responsibility for teaching objectives and content" (Kansanen et al., 2011, p. 44), which implies "a focus on the teaching process" (p. 32) and "its related elements and circumstances" (p. 44). The starting point in general didactic theory makes it possible to study the realisation arena from the LtTs standpoint. The

knowledge discourses of schools and LtCs differ, and the didactics of the LtC is sometimes referred to as potential didactics (Saar et al., 2012), partly because of its dualism and process orientation. Here, we apply the term "general didactics", since we mean that there is a general didactic core in leisure-time operations (cf. Kansanen et al., 2011). Against this background, it is important to study the internal learning environment as one of the basic frame factors of the LtC.

We use the socio-cultural theory in order to explain the relationship between the general didactic aspects and LtTs attitudes. Socio-cultural theory emphasises the connectedness between participation in social practises and intellectual and physical tools.

> The individual acts on the basis of their own knowledge and experiences, and of what one consciously or unconsciously perceive[s] that the environment requires, permits, or makes possible in a given activity (Säljö, 2000, p. 128).

This provides opportunities to understand, identify, and examine the content of learning and its pedagogical implications, which specifically can provide understanding regarding the work and value patterns among LtCs from several perspectives (Johansson, 2011).

Three key aspects can be linked to the socio-cultural perspective: mediation, context, and power. Mediation highlights how LtTs perceive the individual phenomena and events they encounter, through the intellectual and physical tools they are encouraged to use in those situations and the wider context in which these phenomena and events are included, for example, with respect to the frame factors. In this context, general didactic theory is valuable in a planned and thus professional way for analysing the operations, in terms of overall objectives, framework factors, and practical work (Uljens, 1997; Jank & Meyer, 1997).

Our study will specifically pay attention to LtTs' practise-oriented focus on the premises of the centres. Physical, cognitive, communicative, and historical contexts are therefore particularly relevant for analysing how teachers think about pedagogical activities in different contexts (Säljö, 2000). The relevance lies in that teachers and students, as well as the activities they gather around, are also part of the physical environment, logical thinking, and interpersonal relations, along with comparisons between "present and past".

Power is exercised in cases where individuals or groups perceive themselves as being prevented or kept away from the possibility or premise of acquiring an adequate perception and understanding of the world. In this context, power is actualized when LtCs' activities and the personnel's planned activities are hampered by the outside world in some way, such as the premises.

With the help of general didactic theory, and socio-cultural theory, combined with the analysis of LtTs attitudes concerning the premises in relation to the steering documents, we can better and more efficiently analyse one of the critical aspects of the Swedish LtC.

Method and Aim

The aim of this study is, as earlier mentioned, to describe and analyse the perceptions of leisure-time teachers concerning the Swedish LtC internal learning environments that is the premises, in relation to the steering documents. The research will answer the following questions:

1) How do LtTs describe premises in LtCs, which form a significant part of the internal learning environment?
2) How do LtTs describe the LtCs learning environments in relation to cooperation with the schools?
3) How do LtTs perceive the existing conditions for the LtC to correspond to the intentions in the steering documents dealing with good internal environments for development and learning?

This study is based on a Web survey, sent in winter 2013 to all members of the Swedish Teachers' Union registered as LtTs with a higher education, approximately 11,000 people. Approximately 20% of these were dropped because they did not work in LtCs. After a reminder responses were received from 4,043 people. The response rate was 36%, which can be considered as satisfactory. In table 1 the key sample characteristic is presented.

Table 1. Demographic information

		N	Percentage
Answers		4043/11000	36 %
Gender	Female	2904	79,6%
	Male	742	20.4%[1]
Working in LtC	0–5 years	490	13,7 %
	6–10 years	436	12,3%
	11–15 years	771	21,5%
	16–20 years	541	15.1 %
	21–25 years	578	16,1 %
	26–30 years	402	11.2%
	31–35 years	280	7,9%
	more than 35 years	125	3,7 %
Sections at the LtC	1	977	27,6%
	2	824	23,3%
	3	688	19,4%
	4	566	16,0%
	5	275	7,8%
	6	210	5,9%
How many children in each department?	less than 20	138	3,7%
	21–40	307	7,7%
	41–60	443	12,6%
	61–80	466	13,2%
	81–100	462	13,1%
	101–120	588	16,7%
	more than 120	1176	33,4%

The questionnaire's introduction describes the study and notes participation is voluntary and anonymous. It consisted of 21 questions (see Appendix 1) about the learning environment in LtCs. The first three questions concern background variables such as gender, age, number of teaching years, school size and educational level. These are followed by 18 questions about different aspects of the learning environment. Some questions are multiple-choice, while others provided space for relatively long written statements. Thus, the survey generates both numerical and descriptive data. This is a follow-up of another sub-study (Boström et al., 2015), which found that there were not sufficient or functional premises and that the lack thereof suppresses some learning activities. The sub-study reported here analyses authorities and collective base available in the school (Andersson, 2013; Hjalmarsson, 2010). The first question asked about LtC learning environments in general, the second asked for specific descriptions of the LtC premises, the third described different activities in different rooms and the fourth was about rooms for different age groups.

The design of the questionnaire is based on a systematic operationalization of the theoretical concepts (learning environments, and leisure-time pedagogy) that guided the study, results from previous research in the field, and aspects of LtC environments we deemed relevant. The study considered the Research Council's rules for good ethical research in the humanities and social sciences (Hermerén, 2011).

The goal of data analysis was to highlight both the manifest content of the answers, that which is directly expressed in the texts, and the latent content, detailed interpretations of the text. The methodological approach was qualitative content analysis of open answers to four questions. In the analysis, we systematically and incrementally classify data to identify patterns and themes and describe and highlight specific phenomena. The content analytical model enables us to construct and refine distinct categories, narrowing them as appropriate.

A directed content analysis is characterized by a more structured process (compared with an unbiased encoding) where the initial coding is based on theories or previous research. This form of content analysis are for example a way to compare results from previous research, as well as a way to discuss the results from different theoretical perspectives (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Qualitative content analysis can be divided into three stages: selection of the focus texts, coding, and interpretation of results (Auhiva, 2008). During the second step, problems can arise with connotative interpretations, requiring expertise; involving at least two researchers minimizes this. Researchers need to continuously discuss the survey's key issues and balance their respective categorizations to achieve consensus (Krippendorff, 2004) and build credibility and generalizability of the results, method, categorization, and analysis.

We read the entire text repeatedly to be able to see the whole picture, picked out meaningful themes relevant to the query requests, then condensed, coded, and categorized our results to reflect the core message. The categories represent the manifest content. We gave quotations respondent (R) designation in parentheses, followed by a number (Rx).

We estimate internal validity high because we have tried to operationalize the relevant concepts and theoretical framework. The credibility is considered high since the research process is transparently described and the aim and research questions are answered. The process of dual measurement improves its credibility. In the par-

tially qualitative approach, researchers interpreted the results independently and then discussed the plausibility of each other's interpretations. The generalizability seems to be high because this is a comprehensive survey. However, we are aware that the empirical material could be analysed and interpreted by other methods. The Web survey could have been extended to other and further questions. The results show that we have made new findings, and new implications can therefore be demonstrated.

Results

The following section presents the teachers' descriptions of LtC premises and their analysis of how those premises meet the requirements set out in the steering documents, and the LtT attitudes about the LtCs premises in relation to cooperation with schools. The result is divided into following sections; Inequality and LtC/School relationships.

Inequality in Sweden Against Premises

Two of the research questions concerned the LtTs' perceptions of the premises and their relation to steering documents. As these issues are tangent to each other, we give a thematic response to them entitled inequality. Generally speaking premises in LtC can cover various types of smaller rooms, such as movement rooms, cushion rooms, table tennis rooms, building rooms, rest rooms, workshop rooms, studios, dance and music rooms, and theme rooms. Rooms can also be divided into different 'corners': doll's corners, reading corners, table games corners, cosy corners, and corners for Lego, Kapla, craft and dressing. Halls and other larger rooms also exist. This category is divided into three themes; insufficient, sufficient and good premises.

The descriptions of LtCs' premises are approximately one-third negative, eg. insufficient premises. Complaints can apply to both old and new buildings. They include overcrowding in the cloakroom, a lack of room for peace and quiet and for major leisure-time activities, general difficulty with activities, poor ventilation, and insufficient room for movement: 'Totally improper for the business at hand. Cramped and noisy rooms' (R2331). Respondents' descriptions show a perceived low quality of LtC premises. They provide clear descriptions of how the steering documents cannot be followed due to the design of the premises. LtTs point out that it is difficult to meet the goals of "good communication and a vibrant social community" (c.f. LGR 11) within the available premises. Many LtTs see the ability to create an optimal learning environment for the students in these existing premises as a utopian dream, and thus important goals of the policy document cannot be fulfilled. Some LtTs describe the LtCs as providing "storage of children" rather than providing good learning environments. However, many answers show that staff do put the students' safety first and so meet the policy documents "security requirements". Other respondents testified to inadequate and dysfunctional premises:

> Boring! Rigid, institution-like bars on the windows due to the burglary risk and partly in a basement with a smaller window. Bright, very corridor-like space that is difficult to manage. Run-down, worn and poorly furnished. The room is used for pre-school during daytime. A small, poorly fitted cloakroom which is totally inadequate. No common entrance with the other departments, crowded and problematic. Old squalid lavatories and too few of them. (R1562).

The empirical data also include descriptions of premises customized for LtCs but still overcrowded. 'I think the premises are too small to pursue leisure activities with such large groups of students. It doesn't much matter how many educators we have, if there's not room for the students!' (R450). The premises are suited to the activities but not to the size of the group. The descriptions make it clear many premises are being changed or improved. Some are housed in temporary buildings, others are about to be, and others are waiting for redevelopment. Such internal environments are described as debilitating for both teachers and students.

One-third of the descriptions were fairly neutral, sufficient premises, with accounts of the number of rooms, split between school or pre-school and the LtC, and descriptions of the activities housed in different rooms, 'Three fairly large classrooms and a larger kitchen, a small workshop and two small spaces for Lego and ballgames. To some extent, one can sit in the hallways too' (R889).

The remaining third were positive, *good premises*: 'well-suited for leisure-time activities, even though we are in school' (R965). The next comment is about an integrated LtC and school and one feels that the premises are well suited to the number of students. It is important that the LtCs and students can participate in the design and layout of the premises.

> Large spacious rooms. Several separate rooms for crafts, others for peace and quiet, and role play. Ample space. Extensively adapted for play. Students have been involved in design. Furnished as required, for the group size and equality (R3401).

This describes a creative and effective physical learning environment. Some LtCs in pre-school premises have few problems with material, overcrowding and furnishings: 'Good premises. Pre-school and LtC departments share a site, but it works well' (R2006). The most positive descriptions of LtC premises are of those not integrated in the school premises but using independent, separate premises.

In summary, the LtC premises in these descriptions vary widely, ranging from fully integrated into a school or pre-school, partially integrated or completely independent. Our results show that according to the LtTs the LtCs which are in independent buildings seem to offer students a better learning environment in the premises, compared to those integrated in school buildings. The buildings also vary from turn-of-the-century buildings to new buildings, from open floor plans to custom 'squares' that each LtC group originates. Some are worn out and dysfunctional, while others are newly constructed with easily accessible activities. All in all, though, a lot of LtTs find their premises undersized: the word *overcrowded* occurs very frequently in the descriptions. Thus, the intentions of the steering documents which prescribe space for the students' individual needs and participation are not fulfilled for many LtCs, according to the LtTs.

LtC – School Relationships and the Perception of Adequate Premises

Another factor emerging in our empirical data was that LtCs that share school premises have difficulties using LtP and fulfilling the intentions of the steering documents. How the needs of the schools prevail in relation to the LtC's premises is clearly described and leads to what is called "schooling", namely that the LtC is highly affected by the structure of school. This is shown in three themes; common classrooms, borrowed spaces and the attitudes of students.

Although two-thirds of LtTs, according to our data, indicate they have special rooms for different activities, the structure of the school is perceived as pervasive. Many LtCs use sports halls, craft rooms, home economy kitchens, music rooms, libraries, and corridors. In some cases all activities are in the same room, for example reading and eating. This has led to comments about the need for continuity and the lack of flexibility in the internal environment. When both integrated and non-integrated LtC activities take place in the classroom, respondents point out the difference:

> It's hard to provide a good environment in a school building that is also used for as an LtC, due to tables and chairs in the classrooms. Premises used solely by the LtC, are easier to set up and give a better environment for the children, a quieter atmosphere (R2341).

LtCs differ from schools but easily become entwined in the school and its environment: 'As for the premises, I think it is beneath contempt having to be in a classroom!' (R1542). In addition, LtTs perceived that using common areas restricted creativity in many cases, in different ways: 'We can never save anything made by the students during the day and there is no homely atmosphere' (R1542). Some argue that the needs of the school dominate and they struggle to fit suitable LtC activities into classrooms with tables and chairs. As one respondent describes '… it is not LtC adjusted. We are guests in the school' (R452). The feeling of 'borrowing' premises designed for schoolwork is prominent.

Although 46% of LtTs indicate there are special rooms for both older (10–12 years) and younger students (6-9) (Boström et al., 2015), some problems remain. LtTs think it's often difficult to interact with schools about classrooms, since LtCs and school have such different needs. It is difficult to influence the internal environment of classrooms, no materials may be used between LtC visits that may distract school students during their lessons. There are many comments that the needs of the LtC are secondary when it comes to the shared premises. The observations described frustration and a powerlessness to influence the learning environment in the school: 'The premises are not at all suited for leisure-time activities. During the holidays, we can take over, rearranging and adapting rooms and surfaces to what kids want' (R250). Descriptions such as 'sharing' and 'borrowing space' from school are used frequently. The school's activities seem to have prevailed on the internal learning environment: 'Classroom environment with tables. No opportunities to save work from the day before and everything has to be taken away every night' (R452).

Putting school and LtCs on the same premises is also problematic from the students' perspective. 'As you can imagine, they look like a "classroom"' (R65). Students do not want to be in the classroom when they have finished school for the day,

just as adults do not want to spend their free time at work. You therefore need to find both what is common and what distinguishes between the two forms, focussing on the needs of students when sharing premises. 'Difficulties lie with how LtC and school activities differ, when we interact with school. Therein lies the big challenge, to find the right balance. And remember that the LtC is children's free time' (R2589).

LtC activity should stimulate learning in a different way compared to school, according to many answers in the survey. This is really important for students who are unsuccessful in school. Many responses said that LtC activities should provide learning in a different way to that in school, especially for those children who do not enjoy school, or do not succeed there. A large part of LtP involves informal learning, but the influence of the avaliable premises means that for a majority of students, it will often be the same kind of learning in the LtC as in school. One LtT gave this comment:

> How much fun is it for children who do not enjoy school to move on to an LtC in the same premises and in addition to work with the same type of exercises, like homework, using the same methods as in school? More of the same - but not better ". (R 566).

From the students' perspective, the school premises may even be counterproductive for lifelong learning. LtTs ask themselves how they can meet the intentions of the curriculum, to work with informal learning and to pursue their own specific LtP, using shared premises.

In conclusion, LtC premises exhibit a very wide variation in rooms, physical solutions, and activities. However, overcrowding is common and many premises are in need of major improvement. There should be space to store the work of students overnight. In some cases, all traces of activity are taken away every day. No material can be left in place because it distracts the students during school lessons. Priority is given to the needs of the school, rather than those of the LtC, which prevents the LtC from achieving their goals in many cases, and can in some cases be counterproductive for student learning.

The results in this study are evidence that premises, especially those that are integrated into the school, seems to be an obstacle to fulfilling the intentions of the policy documents.

Discussion and Conclusions

The final chapter analyses the findings in the study in relation to previous research and policy documents. This is followed by our conclusions, pedagogical implications and our ideas for further research.

In-depth Criticism

Many LtCs have lost their purpose-built premises and moved into traditional teaching premises. This article, based on steering documents and previous research, de-

scribes the perceptions of LtTs concerning Swedish LtC premises as a learning environment for the students.

The steering documents are based on the goal of turning democracy, equality, and other values into concrete action (Skolverket, 2011). This requires premises with security, good communication, and a vibrant social community, which promotes the desire to learn. Such an environment is the foundation for constructive learning, (Andersson, 2013; Evanshed, 2012), enables individual learning (Björklid & Fischbein, 2011) and is a prerequisite for meaningful activities (Qvarsell, 2013). Many LtCs, however, are based within a school and research shows that differences in status between the LtC and the school can frustrate LtTs (see e.g. Andersson, 2013).

Our data on how LtTs describe LtC premises reveals a large variation. Some are fully integrated, some partially integrated, some independent of school and preschool (cf Boverket, 2015). Even planning differs radically from one to another. The substantive and pedagogical quality of premises also varies widely, from obsolete and dysfunctional to newly constructed and designed for suitable activities. Many LtTs say their premises are undersized for their number of students.

"Schooling" of the LtC seems to prevent, in many cases, the creation of good internal learning environments. The location of LtCs within school premises has created problems. They seem to benefit from a relatively sedate individuality, while both older and younger children show a strong need to combine intellectual and physical and individual and social activities. The learning environment is therefore in many ways not optimal for an LtC based at a school, with large groups of students and few premises specialised for the LtC. The premises called 'good' are the ones that make it possible to combine the needs of younger students for simple play with the needs of older students for more complex leisure activities.

In a socio-cultural sense, this is a case of a power relationship where the LtTs perceive themselves prohibited from creating well-functioning premises. The implication is that LtCs activities depend on the school. The school and the teachers set the framework and, therefore, prevail over traditional LtC activity and LtTs (cf. Andersson, 2013). One clear theme in the descriptions of the LtTs is the problem of two different activities accommodated within the same premises. Most LtCs are housed in school premises, which creates problems with too few special rooms for special activities. Many LtTs feel the absence of their own base: the premises are not suited to their planning, materials, and activities. Previous research shows that LtTs attitudes and interactions are crucial for the development of the students' self-reliance, social relationships and social order (Hippinen Ahlgren, 2013; Knoop, 2012; Saar et al, 2012).

This study confirms, with greater depth and precision, previous research and the evaluations of school authorities. The structural conditions for good work are suboptimal (see Hansen Orwehag, & Olsson, 2011). The School Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen, 2010,) speaks of flaws in staffing, group size, internal environment and organization' and says that the LtC does not achieve the intent of the steering documents. Criticism is also directed at municipalities which do not take full responsibility for the environment, group size, staff education, and monitoring of policy documents' goals, and guidelines. This study indicates that, according to many LtTs it seems to be difficult to implement the goals of the policy documents with regard

to the creation of good learning environments. It also appears that the format of the LtC becomes similar to that of the school with its formal learning. This will of course also affect the didactic basis of the LtP.

Conclusions

Since previous research on LtTs' environment unequivocally pointed to the importance of students' learning (Ahlgren, 2013; Jensen, 2011), meaning (Qvarsell, 2013) and social development (Ihrskog, 2011), we ask ourselves what consequences substandard physical environments may have on society in the long run. In Hippinen Ahlgren's (2013) words, 'What becomes of the child in the existing environments?' Maybe their time in the LtC is counterproductive, despite all the good intentions in the governing documents? How can the staff work in a difficult environment in which they often cannot use their specific expertise?

Against this background and because this comprehensive survey shows large differences in the quality of LtC premises, we want to raise the question of national equality. Activities for younger students seem divided from those for older students, which may bring with it an inequality between age groups. The school's premises invite more passive and individual activities to the detriment of both age groups. The young are hampered in their need for physical movement and combinations of individual and social activities. The older students are at risk of having both their school environment and their schoolwork extended into their leisure time. Against this background, we conclude that students in the LtC are forced into adult behaviour when it comes to distinguishing recreational activities from school activities in the same premises but at different times of the day, and this before many children's age-specific mannerisms have had the opportunity to challenge both personal and social boundaries. The study shows that the LtC seems to have started to reproduce the (environmental) logic of 'traditional teaching premises' and to ignore their own (environmental) potential, which is even prescribed in specific steering documents (cf. Skolverket, 2011; SFS, 2010:800).

Educational Implications

One important implication of this study is that politicians and municipalities should consider taking more responsibility for the application of existing guidelines for LtCs' learning environments. Since the guidelines are clear in the policy documents, they should be simply implemented. In other words, the premises need to be reviewed both qualitatively and quantitatively. In addition, LtTs should have the opportunity to achieve the goals and guidelines of the policy documents. Leisure centres have, after all, a good potential to supplement school in terms of learning.

Further Research

An important area for further research would be to deepen the analysis of the empirical material with a quantitative content analysis. Another research area would involve the children who use recreation and hearing their voices concerning the premises within schools, or independent centres, and the impact on their desire for learning and development.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. The questionnaire of the web-survey

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1. **Age** _____

2. **Municipality** _____

3 **Gender**

□ Male □ Female

4. **What is your highest completed education?**

□ Secondary School □ Upper secondary school □ College/University □ Other

5. **How long have you been working in the business?**

□ 0-5 year □ 6-10 year □ 11-15 year □ 16-20 year □ 21-25 year □ 26-30 year □ 30-35 year □ 35 -

6. **How many departments are there at your LtC?**

□ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5 □ 6

7. **How many children are enrolled in total?**

□ -20 □ 21-40 □ 41-60 □ 61-80 □ 81-100 □ 100-120 □ 140-

8. **What are the facilities like at your LtC? Try to describe them with five to ten sentences!** _____

9. **How does the learning environment look like at your LtC?** _____

10. **If you wish to comment any of the above statements, please do so here.** _____

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11. Have special "rooms" been created at your LtC, for instance studios and reading room?

□ Yes □ No □ Don´t know. Please explain! _____

12. Are rooms for both older (10-12 year) and younger children (6-9 year)?

□ Yes □ No □ Don´t know. Please explain! _____

13. Is the learning environment used for visualizing and promoting informal learning?

□ Yes □ No □ Don´t know. Please explain! _____

14. Is the outdoor environment used to promote informal learning?

□ Yes □ No □ Don´t know. Please explain! _____

15 a). What are the LtC´ intentions behind the current learning environment? Give some concrete examples. _____

b). **What thoughts are the basis for the design of the current learning environment?** _____

c). **How consistent are your personal beliefs?** _____

d). **Are there plans for changing the learning environment?** _____

16. Who is responsible for developing the learning environment at your LtC? _____

17 a). How is your leadership in the learning environment? _____

b). **How would you like your leadership to be in the learning environment LtC?** _____

18. What type of expertise needed among staff in order to create good learning environments in leisure? _____

19. Are there special premises for the activ "free play"?
□ Yes □ No □ Don´t know. If YES, how and when are they used? _____

20. Have you developed common learning environments in collaboration with the school? If so, describe this. _____

21. Is LtC a complementing to school in different subjects?
□ Yes □ No □ Don´t know. Please, explain your answer. _____

22. Please write a few final thoughts! _____