

# Leisure-Time Activities Including Children with Special Needs: A Research Overview

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**Abstract:** In Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries children are offered a curricular based combination of care and teaching before and after compulsory school hours. These leisure time centers, so-called *fritidshem*, are offered to children aged between 6 and 12 whose parents' study or work, as well as to children that require special development support. The aim of this systematic literature review was to investigate how similar activities are described in international research. The focus was on children aged 6-12 who have been assessed to need special support. The initial step in this literature survey was the reading of 108 abstracts from academic articles. The second step included 21 articles that were read in their entirety. Fourteen of them met the sampling criteria and were included in the result section. The Nordic model combines care and curricular activities before and after compulsory school hours. In other countries activities taking place after school hours are separated into activities meeting children's need of care and activities supplementing school. Another result that became clear in this research is the need of further studies to map pre- and after-school activities where children are simultaneously offered development support and care, with special focus on children in need of extra support.

**Key words:** after school activities, leisure time activities, leisure time center, special needs

## Introduction

Children's leisure-time activities, or what children do before or after school, form the focus of this research overview. The Nordic model is unique in that it combines traditional day-care and education (Rauch, 2007). In Sweden, children's leisure activities are often organized by the municipalities in close connection with the school day. These activities are organized by leisure centers – so called "*fritidshem*". They are part of and have to abide by the Public-School Act (Swedish Education Act, 2010: 800), which specifies that children whose parents work or study have the right of access to participation in leisure activities as well as how leisure-time activities should provide for children in need of special support. The charge for participation is based on the total household income and on the number of children involved. This cost is subsidized by the state. The leisure centers also abide by the

national curriculum (The National Agency for Education, 2016), where some sections apply to all elementary school curricula, while a separate section describes the purpose, mission and goals of leisure centers. Against the background of the Nordic model, this study offers a systematic literature survey whose aim is to study how pre- or after-school activities are described in international research. The primary focus of this survey is on children between 6 and 12 who have been assessed to need special support.

Swedish primary school is compulsory from the year the child turns 6. This means that when they enroll in primary school, many children also enroll in voluntary leisure-center activities before and after school. According to the Swedish National Agency for Education survey from 2018, there are slightly more than 4,250 leisure centers in Sweden. Most of them are operated by municipalities, while some are state or privately run. Participation increases annually, amounting in 2017 to 484,400 registered attendants, which corresponds to about 85% of all children aged 6–9. About 900 children are enrolled in other pedagogical care, partly provided by people who receive children in their homes (daycare) and other independent activities. All children, regardless of whether they need support (such as having been identified as having special needs or children whose first language is not Swedish), have the right to attend both school and leisure center, according to the School Act (Swedish Education Act, 2010: 800). These leisure centers play a vital role in helping students perform up to the expected standard, which according to Yong and Ping (2008) is important as “children who fail often run the risk of giving up in school and worse, their own learning. This is particularly detrimental when it happens to students who are still in their elementary levels.” (Yong & Ping, 2008, p. 521).

The leisure centers are further expected to supplement the education the children receive in preschool and elementary school. Their purpose is to support the development and learning of the children from a holistic view of education (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014). The Swedish Education Act (2010: 800) describes how special education support is to be provided by the municipalities. This is often referred to as a compensatory assignment in education. The report further states that teachers and leisure center staff should work together to support and create a sense of security for each individual child. The mission of the leisure center is further to “endeavor to offset the differences in the students’ prerequisites for acquiring the education” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014, p. 20). It is the responsibility of the principal to consider the children’s age and different needs when planning the size, composition and staff density of leisure groups (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014).

Two reviews of research on how to promote the achievement of learning goals for children in need of special support addressed various support measures affecting learners’ goal fulfillment (Almqvist, Malmqvist, & Nilholm, 2015; Göransson & Nilholm, 2015). Almqvist et al. (2015) drew attention to collaborative learning as one successful method but noted that further research was needed in order to find other possible ways of working to achieve this goal. Göransson and Nilholm (2015) focused on children in need of additional and special education support in their learning as well as in their social situation in preschool and school (excluding the leisure center). Their findings indicated that this group of children did not differ with regard to social affiliation or of being at risk of becoming marginalized, isolated or excluded by their friends. However, some shortcomings in the research were high-

lighted by the researchers who suggested that more research was needed on children's social situation in school environments. This should be characterized by different working methods, group structures and group processes. In the present study an overview is made of previous research in the field of after school activities and children with special needs, to get a clearer picture of the research situation. Unlike Göransson and Nilholm (2015), Persson (2009) pointed out that children requiring special education support who lived in high-risk areas ran greater risks of not receiving the support they needed. According to Karlsudd (2012), the number of students enrolled in special education classes had changed over a twelve-year period. "Staff reported that children from the school for the intellectually disabled more seldom took part in the after-school activities" (Karlsudd, 2012, p. 48). In a fourth systematic review of literature (Kremer, Maynard, Polanin, Vaughn, & Sarteschi, 2015), a meta-analysis was conducted of after-school programs and their effects on children's attendance and cognitive development in school. Its conclusion was that there is no research showing the importance of after-school programs for children's cognitive development and behavioral problems.

Leisure centers in Sweden and the other Nordic countries have evolved from having primarily functioned as daycare centers for children when parents are at work to increasingly turning into an educational institution supplementing work done in school. The present study focuses on how similar activities are presented internationally.

## Research Focus

In the light of the Nordic model for leisure activities, the aim of this systematic literature survey is to generate knowledge of how corresponding activities are described in international research. The primary focus was on children between 6 and 12 years old who are assessed as being in need of special support. The main questions guiding the analysis were:

- What characterizes research on leisure activities for children aged 6-12?
- How are leisure activities described in places where children in need of special education support participate?

## Background

In the introduction to this text, leisure center activities were described with regard to their mission and to the children who have access to their activities. A further explanation is required to determine which children can be assessed as being in need of special support and how special needs education can be perceived and explained. What stands out about Swedish research is that it has largely focused on children in preschool or school and not on the practice of leisure center activities.

References to children in need of special support may be applied generally to children with any sort of difficulty. For various reasons, children may be in need of extra support for a longer or shorter period. In a study of teachers' view of working in special needs schools, Linikko (2009) wrote that "pupils in need of special support are described by teachers as individuals living in the now who need immediate satisfaction" (Linikko, 2009, p. 81). To be ensured access to special support, school authorities usually demand that the children should have been given a diagnosis by someone outside school. A correct diagnosis is nec-

essary to cater to their problems in the school context (Befring, 1997; Gadler, 2011; Magnússon, Göransson, & Nilholm, 2015). Gadler (2011) also wrote “what pupils are assessed as needing special support as well as what support is provided varies from one municipality or school to another” (Gadler, 2011, p. 59). Researchers claimed that a blindness for cultural transfer exists and that teachers share the responsibility for the attitude or blindness vis-à-vis children in need of special support (Lundqvist, Westling Allodi, & Siljehag, 2018; Siljehag 2007). According to Statistics Sweden (Statistics Sweden, n.d. -a), about ten percent of all comprehensive school children receive special support, but the percentage of children receiving such support has decreased by half since the 1992-1998 period, when measurements started being documented in *Student panels for longitudinal studies* [*Elevpaneler för longitudinella studier*] (Statistics Sweden, n.d. -b). The most common support was given in the form of special teaching by special needs teachers or pedagogues during certain hours every week, supervision by a special pedagogue within the existing classroom structure, teaching in different group constellations less than 50 % of the school hours, or by giving children access to an assistant or extra teacher resource in the class (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). According to Alkahtani (2016), the teaching may also involve helping children to do their best, develop their abilities and participate to the full in society. Magnússon, Göransson and Nilholm (2018) described how the need for support cannot be exclusively looked for in individual problems confirmed by diagnoses but may be a consequence of teaching and/or school organization. Williams and Bryan (2013) described how pupils living in vulnerable areas can, after all, achieve academic success through collaboration between society, school and family.

In contrast to discussing the need of support, Vehmas (2010) questioned what needs were, and who were actually entitled to talk about needs. What made somebody perceived as being in need of support? Do not everybody have needs? Is it not educational or social norms that draw the borderline for what should be and what should not be regarded as a need? An accessible society, the right of belonging to it and a feeling of being part of the context are important aspects for both school and society.

## Methods

In a systematic literature review, it is necessary to present what data is available for the subject content during research. Hence, peer-reviewed academic articles were selected for investigating the possibility of creating a synthesis of previous data within the field (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). In this research, the focus was on children in need of special support in leisure activities (see Table 1).

## Sampling

The SPICE (Social context, Perspective/s, Interest or Intervention, Compilation and Evaluation) tool is used in the selection of articles for this systematic literature review (see Table 1) (Ericsson-Barajas, 2013; Kallio, et al., 2016). This is a modified version of the PICO (Population/problem, Intervention/exposure, Comparison, and Outcome) tool which has become a fundamental tool in both evidence-based practice and systematic reviews as it ena-

bles researchers to define their quantitative research questions and search terms in a systematic search strategy (Booth, O'Rourke, & Ford, 2000; Schardt, Adams, Owens, Keitz, & Fontelo, 2007). However, as the PICO tool does not currently accommodate terms relating to qualitative research or specific qualitative designs, it has often been modified in practice (Methley, Campbell, Chew-Graham, McNally, & Cheraghi-Sohi, 2014).

*Table 1.* Sampling according to SPICE

SPICE	Inclusive criteria	Exclusive criteria
Social context	Leisure activities Children aged 6–12 Children in need of support Child perspective	Children younger than 6 or older than 12 years Leisure center statistics
Perspective	Description of leisure or similar activities for children in need of support	Teacher perspective alone Parent perspective alone Parent programs Leisure center manual
Interest	Activities taking place at least one semester and more frequently than once per week	Programs shorter than one semester Fewer meetings than once per week
Compilation	In order to obtain a holistic view of research a compilation is made of article contents	
Evaluation	The focus of the survey is on a synthesis rather than on an evaluation of the research	

## Search Strategies

The key words in the peer reviewed papers from 2000-01-01 to 2018-10-01 described words for leisure time centers such as: leisure education, extended school days, after school education, after school programs and child care, as well as words for related services in special education such as: special needs students, disabilities, individual needs, gifted, individualized education programs, special education, behavior modification, educationally disadvantaged, student needs and inclusion. Since the leisure time center is a relatively new phenomenon, we delimited the literature search to the 21st century. Another delimitation in selected articles was children in lower secondary school, primary school, elementary education, Grade 1, 2, 3 and 4.

With the help of a librarian, the search words and limitations gave the following results. In the database *Eric* (an online library of education research and information), a combined search using words dealing with leisure centers and children in need of special support gave 53 hits after limiting for age, time period and language. In the database *PsykInfo* (a resource for abstracts of scholarly journal articles, book chapters, books, and dissertations in behavioral science and mental health), the combined search using the same words resulted in 27 hits, of which two articles were duplicates. In order not to overlook Swedish research, a search using the Swedish word [*fritidshem*] was made in in the database *SwePub* (a national database for scientific publication at Swedish universities). The outcome was 29 hits involving academically published articles. Adding the Swedish words for special support in *SwePub* gave one hit. However, the article was rejected as it did not correspond to the aim of this survey. After the search was concluded, 107 (53+25+29) titles and abstracts

were read by two different assessors. During this stage, 21 articles met the sampling criteria for full-text reading. Seven were discarded for one of the following reasons: a) parent perspective alone b) intervention study c) compensating for lack of school knowledge. Fourteen articles remained, comprising 11 from the USA, 1 from Australia, 1 from the United Kingdom and 1 from Norway. The articles included in this literature review are presented in Table 2.

*Table 2.* Articles included in the study: authors, publication year, title, country, aim and search words

Study	Authors	Title/year	Country	Aim	Search words
<b>Quantitative studies</b>					
No. 1	Knoche, Lisa; Peterson, Carla A; Edwarsa Carolyn Pope & Jeon, Hyun-Juo	Child care for children with and without disabilities. The provider, observers and parent perspectives (2006)	USA	A secondary analysis of data from the National Survey of America's Families was conducted to explore the use and quality of child care of a nationally representative sample of low-income school-aged children, stratified by disability status and family structure.	child care, quality and inclusive settings, children with disabilities, parent perceptions, early childhood workforce
No. 2	Hunt, Lucy & Ehrmann, Yoshida	Linking Schools of Thought to Schools of Practice (2016)	USA	There are parallel purposes to the creation of other progressive educational programs and Project Linking Learning. One of the main purposes for creating Project Linking Learning was to create a program that nurtured and created access and equity for diverse gifted learners.	differentiation, gifted education, identification, instructional strategies, underserved populations
No. 3	Tannenbaum, Sally Cahill & Brown-Welty, Sharon	Tandem Pedagogy: Embedding Service-Learning into an After-School Program (2006)	USA	The purpose of this study was to begin to explore the value of embedding service-learning into after-school programs.	service-learning, after-school programs, experiential learning
No. 4	Parish, Susan L. & Cloud, Jennifer M.	Child care for low-income school-age children: Disability and family structure effects in a national sample (2006)	USA	A secondary analysis of data from the National Survey of America's Families was conducted to explore the use and quality of child care of a nationally representative sample of low-income school-aged children, stratified by disability status and family structure.	after care, child care, children with disabilities, family structure
No. 5	Haney, Kanathy; Mesiah, Sarah; Arheart, Kristopher; Hansson, Eric; Diego, Allison; Kardys, Jack; Kirwin, Kevin; Nottage, Renae; Ramirez, Shawn; Somarriba, Gabriel & Binhack, Lucy	Park-based after-school program to improve cardiovascular health and physical fitness in children with disabilities (2014)	USA	The effect of a structured after-school program housed in a large county parks system on several obesity-related health outcomes among children with disabilities was examined.	disability, children, obesity, prevention, physical activity

Study	Authors	Title/year	Country	Aim	Search words
No. 6	Finnvold, Jon Erik	School Segregation and Social Participation: The Case of Norwegian Children with Physical Disabilities (2018)	Norway	This study explores the conditions that limit social participation for children with physical disabilities, and in particular, how school segregation practices affect participation in formal and informal after-school activities. This study analyses factors that enable or constrain participation in two specific arenas: organized leisure activities, and children visiting each other in their own homes after school.	inclusive education, social participation, physical disability
<b>Qualitative studies</b>					
No. 7	Hamida Amirali Jinnah & Zolinda Stoneman	Parents' experience in seeking child care for school age children with disabilities - where does the system break down? (2008)	USA	The purpose of this study was to examine the process through which families of school age children with disabilities seek care and to identify the points in the process where the system fails families.	school age child care, disabilities, after school care, access to child care, childcare barriers, problems with child care
No. 8	Meade, Whitney W. & Jason O'brien	To Play or Not to Play: Equitable Access to Afterschool Programs for Students with Disabilities (2018)	USA		special education, special education law, inclusion
No. 9	Rah, Yeonja	Leadership Stretched over School and Community for Refugee Newcomers (2013)	USA	The FAST (Families and Schools Together) project might be a good tool to address the needs of these newcomer families.	distributed leadership, school integration, refugee education,
No. 10	Souto-Manning Mariana	On Children as Syncretic Natives: Disrupting and Moving beyond Normative Binaries (2013)	USA	Given the importance of fully inclusive education, this article seeks to understand the ways in which young multilingual and multicultural children take up issues of educational success and inclusion through trans-linguistic oral narratives.	multicultural education, multilingual children, diversity, young children, narrative, syncretic natives, syncretic immigrants, fully inclusive education, normative education binaries
No. 11	Tay Lee Yong & Lim Cher Ping	Engaging Academically at Risk Primary School Students in an ICT Mediated after school Program (2008)	Australia	It is proposed that the use of a three-dimensional Multi-User Virtual Environment (3-D MUVE) in an after-school program may engage academically at-risk students in learning tasks, especially given that the 3-D MUVE has several game-like elements.	after school programs, virtual classrooms, educational environment, all risk students, educationally disadvantaged, case study, influence of technology, learning activities, interviews

Study	Authors	Title/year	Country	Aim	Search words
No. 12	Shauna McGill	"Extended Schools": An Exploration of the Feelings, Beliefs and Intentions of Parents and Teachers (2011)	United Kingdom (Northern Ireland)	Its salient purpose is to investigate and examine the feelings, beliefs and attitudes of teachers and parents involved in the development of the Extended Schools project in Northern Ireland.	extended schools, research, feelings, beliefs, attitudes
No. 13	Cegłowski, Deborah Ann; Logue, Mary Ellen; Ullrich, Annette & Gilbert, Jaesook	Parents' Perceptions of Child Care for Children with Disabilities (2009)	USA	The aim of this work is to develop theoretical, not statistical generalizability; that is, how do these interviews with families help us to understand the experiences of other families who seek child care for their children with disabilities?	child care, parents qualitative research disabilities
<b>Mixed Method</b>					
No. 14	Good, Annalee G.; Burch, Patricia Ellen; Stewart, Mary S.; Acosta, Rudy & Henrich, Carolyn	Instruction Matters; Lesson from a Mixed-Method Evaluation of Out-of-School Time Tutoring No Child Left Behind (2014)	USA	The central purpose of this study is to understand whether and how providing students with academically focused out-of-school tutoring in reading and mathematics contributes to improvements in their academic performance, specifically in reading and mathematics.	tutoring, educational indicators, federal programs, federal legislation, after school programs

## Results

A range of different themes characterized the content: social exposure, reasons for support, the relation to disability and the child's perspective, i.e. the tendency of grownups to talk about children in terms of their needs, but also a few articles making the child perspective visible by pinpointing their material and voices. Various forms of collaboration between social institutions, including collaboration with parents, recur in the articles.

### Social Vulnerability

The social vulnerability of children in *low-income families* was a recurrent theme in a number of articles. In general, these children were given the opportunity to participate in such afternoon activities that were supposed to supplement school work. Four of the articles dealt with the issue of increasing the level of knowledge (McGill, 2011; Rah, 2013; Souto-Manning, 2013; Tannenbaum & Brown-Welty, 2006). In another article, the strongest emphasis was on the need for care, including social vulnerability and functional disability (Parish & Cloud, 2006). *Gifted* or highly talented children were held forth with a view to give children in exposed areas the chance of showing their talents in fields that were not usually supposed to affect the way schools assess giftedness (Hunt & Yoshida-Ehrmann, 2016).



## Need for Special Support

The need for special support, for those with or without various functional disabilities, was an area described as affecting children's access to different school programs. The needs were related to different types of functional disabilities. The studies included both motoric disabilities and behavioral problems, but their main concern was intellectual disabilities or poor receptivity to teaching. The children may have had a pronounced diagnosis and been assessed as needing extra teaching based on various knowledge measurements made by the school. One child was refused access to afternoon activities because of motoric weakness (Meade & O'Brien, 2018). Children's need for care in combination with their functional disabilities recurred in four articles (Ceglowski, Logue, Ullrich, & Gilbert, 2009; Jinnah & Stoneman, 2008; Knoche, Peterson, Edwards, & Jeon, 2006; Parish & Cloud, 2006). In two articles, children in "low-income families" were described as being in need of special support, as they did not attain the school's knowledge requirements (Souto-Manning, 2013; Tannenbaum & Brown-Welty, 2006). Children who were in danger of not reaching these requirements were offered after-school activities where virtual classrooms and 3D players were used (Yong & Ping, 2008). In one of these after-school programs, children with functional disabilities and obesity were offered physical activities (Haney et al., 2014).

## The Child's Perspective

The child's perspective, in the sense of grownups' efforts to familiarize themselves with the feeling of being a child, was mentioned in practically all articles. In some of them, this was done by making parents describe their child's possibility of receiving care (Jinnah & Stoneman, 2008; Knoche et al., 2006; Meade & O'Brien, 2018; Parish & Cloud, 2006) but also by investigating how children with disabilities and their participation in leisure activities were affected by whether or not they were included in school or after-school activities (Finnvold, 2018). Another way of approaching a child's perspective was to describe how a child's interest could form the basis for learning by providing special pedagogical tools that supplemented school pedagogy practice (Hunt & Yoshida-Ehrmann, 2016; Souto-Manning, 2013; Tannenbaum & Brown-Welty, 2006; Yong & Ping, 2008). One article discussed the ability to read, write and count (Good et al., 2014), while another touched upon how obese and functionally disabled children could be stimulated to physical activity and wellbeing, which in turn affected their ability to take part in various leisure activities (Haney et al., 2014). The child's perspective and voice were discussed in two articles with children as actors (Hunt & Yoshida-Ehrmann, 2016; Yong & Ping, 2008). Both articles described children who were activated by participating in after-school programs intended to benefit their learning and cognitive development at large. The program involved making children use their whole repertoire of abilities. In both articles the activities were carried out with a clear pedagogical idea that supplemented the school curriculum, an idea which could, in the researchers' view, be easily included in the school framework.

## Cooperation

Cooperating and organizing various activities in society to benefit children's chances of cognitive development were discussed in six articles. Rah (2013) described how school and

leisure could be organized in cooperation between various actors, in this case school and municipal service. Tannenbaum and Brown-Welty (2006) described how a child's life world, i.e., the society surrounding the child, could be interwoven into leisure activities as a pedagogical idea. In their opinion, this would positively affect children's performance and desire for learning in school. McGill (2011) suggested that by adding afternoon activities to school hours in vulnerable areas, children's learning and wellbeing would benefit. McGill explores teachers' and parents' emotions, convictions and attitudes to develop an increasing school project in Northern Ireland. Cooperation between parents, school and society was a subject recurring in various shapes. In some cases, it was a question of obtaining qualitative care for the child during the hours the parents worked (Jinnah & Stoneman, 2008; Knoche et al., 2006). Parent cooperation was also emphasized to increase children's chances of cognitive development in school, in accordance with Parish & Cloud, 2006; Rah, 2013 which found that school and parent cooperation supported integration into society.

### Leisure Activities

Organizations running leisure activities were presented through various activities involving children who took part to improve their learning or wellbeing (Good et al., 2014; Haney et al., 2014; Hunt & Yoshida-Ehrmann, 2016; Souto-Manning, 2013; Tannenbaum & Brown-Welty, 2006; Yong & Ping, 2008). It was also a matter of presenting a program that supplemented school and society to support children's development from a holistic perspective. These programs, which aimed at preparing children to become functional citizens, often included their parents (McGill, 2011; Rah, 2013). The studies described frequently involved some ethnic minority and/or affiliation with the lower classes in society. These were located in areas where children were considered to be at risk of being unable to explore their capacity for learning (McGill, 2011; Rah, 2013; Souto-Manning, 2013; Tannenbaum & Brown-Welty, 2006; Yong & Ping 2008). In her study, Souto-Manning (2013) pinpointed that teachers might not always have managed to discern children's capacities in the regular classroom situation. The researcher wrote: "because their syncretic practices were not recognized as valid and perhaps not understood by syncretic immigrant teachers, their sophisticated language and literacy practices went unnoticed – or at the very best did not align with the expected language and literacy practices" (Souto-Manning, 2013, p. 18). Another article in this survey (Rah, 2013) pointed out that cooperation between social services and school benefits children's development and continued: "The FAST program was a tool and resource that they (the staff) could utilize to help the Hmong refugee children adjust themselves to a new school life" (Rah, 2013, p. 73). Activities presented in the articles of the survey strongly emphasized children's cognitive development in combination with their interest in and desire for learning through cooperation between home and school (Tannenbaum & Brown-Welty, 2006). Another important aspect was the ability to offer alternative teaching methods (Souto-Manning, 2013; Yong & Ping, 2008).

### Learning and Care

It was hard to find a combination of care and learning similar to that of the Swedish/Nordic context in the articles included in this survey. What clearly emerged is that the purpose of

the after-school work was to supplement school by offering activities to remedy children's knowledge gaps or stimulate their cognitive development (Good et al., 2014; Hunt & Ehrmann, 2016; Meade & O'Brien, 2018; Souto-Manning, 2013; Tannenbaum & Brown-Welty, 2006; Yong & Ping, 2008). In some cases, the children had been assessed and found to have a diagnosis (Meade & O'Brien, 2018) or were considered to be especially gifted. The selection of children had then been based on using aspects like humor, motivation and attitude as criteria of intelligence rather than high performance in school examinations (Hunt & Ehrmann, 2016). It was also evident that it was teachers' assessments that formed the basis for offering children a special learning program after school (Hunt & Ehrmann, 2016). However, in Souto-Manning's (2013) article, children's abilities were not assessed by their school teachers.

It emerged from the studied articles that it was difficult to scrutinize the quality of activities whose clear mission was child care. One reason stated was the impact of teachers' knowledge manifested by education and/or experience as well as their own view of their mission (Jinnah & Stoneman, 2008; Knoche et al., 2006). It further appeared that parents' costs differed widely and that single parents found it hardest to combine work and parentage. Some children were left to take care of themselves, risking developing antisocial behavior (Parish & Cloud, 2006). There were also organizations that refused to admit children in need of support to their afternoon activities (Meade & O'Brien, 2018), pleading that the children failed the eligibility requirements, were deemed unable to function in the learning environment with its current teacher density, or that there was disagreement about where the responsibility lay.

## Discussion

To a great extent, the articles included in this research discuss some form of vulnerability as a reason for taking part in an after-school program. These programs are viewed as an alternative to school teaching, and the articles included in this study show that children's performances can be increased. According to these articles, this may be due to teaching methods, to contents, and to teacher involvement in children's cognitive process. In a meta-analysis (Kremer et al., 2015) of after-school programs it was described how they are planned as a supplement to school in order to support children's cognitive development. At the same time, the researchers point out that no clear effects of these programs can be discerned. One reason may be that providing care to children when their parents are at work is part of the mission and tradition of leisure centers. Another reason is that assessing or mapping children's cognitive development does not form part of leisure center teachers' duties. However, a shift can be discerned from statements in the Swedish School Act and its directives that leisure centers should at a higher degree than previously teach children in accordance with the goals of the curriculum. A further unclarity may derive from a lack of consensus about how to interpret policy documents, which is a decisive factor in children's rights to participate in teaching (Gadler, 2011). The researcher writes that an organization must have "an insight into what knowledge, skills and experience are required to implement the task as well as organizational flexibility" (ibid, p. 146). At the same time, Finnfold

(2018) adds the importance of child's participation in regular teaching to obtain meaningful leisure time together with those of the same age.

Children in need of support are in one way or another referred to in all the articles, partly due to search words related to this particular group. One interesting aspect is that the researchers of the articles selected do not focus on childrens' individual diagnoses. Their diagnoses do not seem to be what contributes to their need for special support and there are other assessments leading to children's participation in after school programs as a supplement to extra teaching. A prominent feature is the importance of childrens' life conditions for their need to take part in after school program activities. This was in agreement with Persson's (2009) description that children who grow up in vulnerable areas run a higher risk of failing to reach the goals in school. This was in contrast to the views of Göransson and Nilholm (2015), who did not make the same connection between vulnerability and the need for support. Magnússon, Göransson and Nilholm (2018) pointed out that the searchlight was usually related to individual problems, even though these might be sought for in the teaching situation. It feels essential to reflect on who or what counts as a need and what norms prevail over people's right to behave in such a way. Vehmas' (2010) philosophical thoughts about who or what can be counted as a need could form a useful contribution towards further discussions. The subject of the need for support can also be linked to issues of cooperation between home, school and society. Williams & Bryan (2011) found that children in high-risk areas benefited from a good collaboration and participation in various organizations which contributed to their academic success despite poor upbringing. Alkahtani (2016) emphasized that the child needs support in order to fully participate in society and that teachers need to know their students' individualities and experiences, which is in line with the ASPs presented in articles included in this overview. An issue that can be raised, on the basis of the Swedish leisure center model, is whether teachers understand their role in society and how important the collaboration is for the students' academic and social development. In this context, it is also important to ask questions from the student's perspective. In what way do the students describe their everyday life and how are their experiences being used? By listening to the children in preschool, preschool class, leisure center and the first years in school, their voices can contribute to the formation of their education. It can thus increase their participation and provide an opportunity for equal education (Lundqvist et al., 2018). Alkahtani (2016) emphasized that a child needs support to be able to participate wholeheartedly in society. The researcher also emphasized the necessity for teachers to know their students' characters and experiences, as evidenced in the after-school programs presented in the articles included in this survey. This raises the following questions; to what extent do Swedish/Nordic leisure centers function? Is it possible to combine care and cognitive development? What does supplementing school work mean? In our view, the research presented in this survey gives clear indications that there is a need for more research on leisure center activities that goes into greater detail to examine the effects of these organizations' teaching and their goal fulfilment.

## Conclusions

Activities taking place after school hours directed towards children aged 6-12 years are in international research separated into activities meeting children's need for care and activities supplementing school, as opposed to the Nordic model which combines care and curricular activities before and after compulsory school hours. There are examples of activities supporting cognitive development based on children's interests and abilities. At the same time, criticism is levelled at regular school activities for not being flexible enough in their teaching methods. An obvious conclusion is the need of more research for mapping, scrutinizing, understanding and developing the Swedish (Nordic) leisure center model to meet the variety of children taking part in its activities as well as enable the combination of child care and the requirement to supplement school.

## Limitations

Drawing parallels between the studies presented here and the Nordic leisure center model is complicated as the manifestations of these activities differ among the countries included in the survey (with the exception of Norway). Discussing child's needs for support or special needs pedagogy in leisure centers is another difficulty since more research has to be conducted in this area, as concluded by a number of experts in the field. The aim of this study has been to make a presentation of the articles included that will, as far as possible, be recognizable to their authors.

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