Promoting social learning in the Swedish leisure time centre

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ABSTRACT

Swedish leisure time centres (LTCs) are included in the Swedish Education Act and are used by almost every pupil in the age range of 6–9 years. They are governed by national policy documents with a certain emphasis on social learning. This article aims to highlight the LTC staff’s perspectives on their work of promoting social learning in the Swedish LTC. The article is based on a qualitative study, with data from group interviews with 21 LTC staff. The data are analysed with an abductive approach, with Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems theory as a theoretical point of departure. Our results show that the work is directed both by the staff’s beliefs and by the structural conditions of the activities, which the staff seldom feel able to influence. This causes frustration among staff and, owing to a lack of didactic reflections, social learning among pupils is not optimised. We argue that the LTC needs to be further explored, at the municipal and local management levels, to enable optimised social learning for pupils in the LTC.

KEYWORDS

Leisure time centre; social learning; leisure time centre staff; bioecological theory; teaching profession

Introduction

This article focuses on the Swedish leisure time centre (LTC), considering the youngest pupils aged from 6 to 9 years. Our interest is in how social learning is facilitated in LTCs according to the staff. Social learning is here understood as the individual’s development of social competences, morals and values, and the understanding of group processes (Saracho & Spodek, 2007a). Previous research on the LTC is not very extensive, although there has been an increased number of studies in recent years. However, regarding the perspectives of the staff, with a focus on social learning, we identified a research gap; that is, the research is limited. The LTC staff are responsible for the LTC activities and their perspectives direct the activities, which is why it is important to expand the knowledge base. The aim of this article is therefore to highlight the perspectives of the staff, regarding what they consider to be important in their work with social learning in the LTC.

LTCs in Sweden were formed in 1965, when the leisure time teacher training programme was started on a trial basis. The leisure teacher education and the LTC practice were initially influenced by preschool practice and took a social pedagogical path (Rohlin, 2012). Nowadays, the LTCs are integrated in schools, governed by the Education Act (SFS, 2010:800) and the Curriculum for the Compulsory School, Preschool Class and the Leisure Time Centre (National Agency for Education, 2016).
During the years 2006–2016, the number of pupils enrolled in LTCs increased by more than 45%, while the number of employees increased by 28% (National Agency for Education, 2017). LTC activities are voluntary, yet they enrol 84% of pupils aged 6–9 years, before and after school hours. From that perspective, the LTC is an important setting for pupils’ learning. However, what pupils are supposed to learn in LTCs has changed over the years.

The LTCs’ task has changed in recent decades, now being more closely linked to school activities. As a result, LTCs have gained a more pronounced role in supporting the pupils’ knowledge development, thus contributing to increased goal achievement. This has been described as a shift from a care discourse to a knowledge discourse (Haglund, 2009; Hjalmarsson, Löfdahl Hultman, & Warin, 2017; Närvänen & Elvstrand, 2014). In addition to the assignment to provide meaningful leisure time before and after school hours, the LTC’s primary task is to be a complement to school, concerning pupils’ learning (National Agency for Education, 2016), with a specific emphasis on social learning. As described in the curriculum, the task of the LTC is to strengthen the pupil’s ability to develop a safe identity, and the skill to understand others’ perspectives and values. The ability to take responsibility should be developed, and the LTC should prepare pupils for life in a democratic society. Furthermore, relations between pupils are emphasised as important and group-oriented work should be the basis for the LTC. In the same vein, the national policy guidelines concerning LTCs (National Agency for Education, 2014) stress that pupils’ socialisation and development should take place in groups, where social norms and values may be tested and developed in the community. It is centrally held that the leisure time group ought to enable pupils to develop the ability to reason and argue based on different views, and to act and communicate constructively and respectfully in different situations (National Agency for Education, 2014).

Furthermore, in policy documents the importance of leisure time staff who are active and aware of their task is emphasised, along with adapted premises and a functioning organisation (National Agency for Education, 2011, 2014). In most cases, the LTC shares premises with the school, and the duties of the LTC staff include collaboration with compulsory school teachers. For staff, this implies an unclear boundary between the work in the LTC and the work in the school and may cause difficulties in the assignment, among other things because the LTC is often subordinated to the school (Andersson, 2010, 2014).

As previously outlined, the curriculum and national guidelines emphasise the LTC’s task of supporting pupils’ learning, with a specific focus on social learning. Thus, the educational content regarding social learning should be didactically conscious and rooted in the curriculum, like any educational content. However, results from previous research (Haglund, 2015; Pálsdottír, 2014) indicate that pupils’ social learning is supposed to “happen by itself” and that teachers have difficulties incorporating curricular goals concerning social learning in a didactic and conscious way (Lager, 2015). Thus, it is important to explore how staff in LTCs experience the conditions provided for pupils’ social learning.
**The LTC**

The terms used in research describing leisure time practices vary. For example, “after-school activities” and “post-school programmes” are terms used internationally, as well as “recreational centre”. These terms denote especially the time after school hours, which is usual in an international context (Palsdóttir, 2014; Rhodes, 2004). In this article, the term “leisure time centre” (LTC) is used to describe the practice in focus.

Since the research field on LTCs is relatively new, research on LTCs is scarce. In recent years, research in the field has been on the rise, but the staff’s perspectives regarding their work with social learning remains to be researched. In this section, we present research on social learning from a broader perspective and research that is linked to the work in LTCs.

**International after-school care in comparison**

The Swedish LTC practice is based on a social pedagogical tradition (e.g. Ackesjö, Nordänger, & Lindqvist, 2016; Andersson, 2014; Lager, 2015; Rohlin, 2000), where the group and its functioning has been in focus, in addition to an emphasis on pupils’ free time. During the past few decades, the LTC has gradually been linked to the school’s activities and goals. The focus has moved to a greater extent towards enabling pupils’ learning and supporting their knowledge development in school. Comparing the Swedish LTC to American after-school programmes, Haglund and Anderson (2009) found the construct of the activities to be similar. In both contexts, the after-school care was seen as a complement to school, and thus subordinated to the school’s activities. Both activities are also expected to contribute to children’s development and to provide families with social support.

In a European context, there is a great variety in after-school services, and only a few countries offer after-school care as a part of the education system, although there is a great demand (Plantenga & Remery, 2013). Among these are the Nordic countries, where there is an explicit pedagogical discourse in the LTCs (Pálsdottír, 2012), focusing on children’s overall development, although the legislation, aims and staff qualifications differ between the countries. As reported by Plantenga and Remery (2013), Denmark, like Sweden, has special teacher training directed towards the LTC, while in Norway and Iceland there are no specific qualification demands. Norway and Denmark, like Sweden, regulate the activities with specific documents, but these countries, along with Finland, are more focused on play, recreation or individual competences and development (e.g. Pálsdottír, 2012; Strandell, 2013).

**The work in LTCs**

Previous research has shown that LTC staff emphasise pupils’ well-being, free play and the possibility of free choices in and between different activities. For example, Lager (2016) reports that pupils’ social learning is emphasised through the opportunity to make new friends. By focusing on the pupils’ individual choice of activities, new peer constellations are created among them. Haglund (2015) highlights the staff’s efforts to ensure pupils’ well-being as a basic concern, with the emphasis on free play, that is to
say play initiated by pupils, which is considered by the staff to provide learning opportunities through natural interaction. Similarly, Palsdóttir (2014) describes the staff’s emphasis on pupils’ interaction in social activities and their actively participating in the peer group as important. However, social learning is presumed to occur without involvement by the staff.

Hjalmarssson (2013) has identified a polarisation between leisure time and organised leisure time activities. She concludes that leisure, to some extent, becomes a contradiction between control and children’s free choices. In organised activities, pupils are given the opportunity to make a choice, but at the same time this could limit the pupils’ leisure (Hjalmarssson, 2013). According to Hjalmarssson, offering activities that children desire may be a way of contributing to their well-being as well as a way of promoting learning. At the same time, organised activities, governed by the staff, can be seen only as a strategic way of managing the large number of children in the leisure time group (Hjalmarssson, 2013). The polarisation she identifies may be a reason for the focus on free choice and free play.

Through their perceptions and approaches, the staff influence the activities of the LTC (Närvänen & Elvstrand, 2014). Thereby, they also affect the opportunities for pupils’ social learning and how social learning is promoted in the LTC. However, research (Haglund, 2015; Palsdóttir, 2014) shows that although the staff consider social learning and development as important aspects of leisure time activities, social learning is emphasised as being informal, and therefore good relations and social learning are not planned for. Neither do staff regard themselves as crucial for activating learning processes; rather, they situate themselves on the periphery of pupils’ activities, neither participating in them nor conducting them. In an Icelandic study (Palsdóttir, 2014), the staff expected social learning to occur in interaction between peers in the child group. However, most of them had no strategy for this in their work and clearly stated that teaching is not for the LTC. The view of leisure and learning can thus constitute a didactic obstacle, and may thereby limit the activities and the learning outcome.

With the school and LTC as a standpoint, a pedagogical practice can be defined as a context with both traditional knowledge development and socialisation processes. The choices of content and working methods can, to varying degrees, promote relations in a group. Therefore, these choices must always be questioned critically, using the question “Why?” (Ihrskog, 2006). Furthermore, it is the responsibility of LTC staff to facilitate the development of personal, intellectual and social abilities in their pupils (National Agency for Education, 2016). This points to the importance of a conscious didactic approach in the LTC concerning social learning.

**Social learning**

In early childhood education, social learning is related to the areas of social competences, morals and values, and the understanding of group processes, all of which constitute practical knowledge of how to live and work with other people (Saracho & Spodek, 2007a). Corresponding to this, social learning is particularly important regarding children’s ability to work in a democratic society, since this promotes understanding and acceptance of the differences between people (Saracho & Spodek, 2007a). Moreover, being socially competent is context dependent, especially in everyday
situations, and is also related to different expectations, for example what is expected of a person in a given context or situation (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Interaction with others is important, and in the LTC the peer group is a natural starting point for this learning. However, in addition to this, guidance in interaction is required.

Children’s social learning takes place not just through interaction but through understanding of the meaning of their own behaviour. Through feedback on their acts, pupils can learn to understand both themselves and their surrounding environment, as well as their relationship to it (Saracho & Spodek, 2007a, 2007b). This underlines the importance of ensuring that pupils’ perception of their influence is realistic, which clarifies the need for adult supervision in social learning as well.

The bioecological model as a theoretical point of departure

The theoretical point of departure for this study is Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 2005) bioecological system theory. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2005) describes the theory of the bioecological model, in which LTC teachers’ perspectives on everyday practice, regarding pupils’ social learning, can be understood as a result of ongoing processes on interrelated system levels.

The microsystem is the level closest to the individual, and includes teachers and peers in the LTC group. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2005) explains the microsystem as a pattern of roles, relations and activities between those included in the context. Roles are expectations and behaviours related to an individual’s role in society. They affect actions as well as thoughts and feelings, based on how one is being treated. Thereby, other individuals are involved, which leads to the development of relations. In relationships, reciprocity is of great importance for increasing the complexity of the interaction, especially in that children benefit from an adult’s guidance in the development. Furthermore, activities involve behaviour in processes with a specific goal and continuing over time. These factors interplay, which, in turn, enables what Bronfenbrenner (2005) calls proximal processes, emphasised to have the greatest impact on learning and development. Characteristics of the microenvironments can lead to both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes in terms of functioning.

The next level is the mesosystem, which consists of the relations between the different microsystems, for example the relation between family and professionals, between pupils and staff in the LTC or between management and staff groups. Further away is the exosystem, which affects the individual indirectly. In this study, it comprises the number of children in the LTC group, besides the staffing and the working conditions. The most distant system is the macrosystem, which functions on a societal level, affecting the individual indirectly through laws, culture and the societal climate. For example, the way in which social skills are described and valued in the curriculum for the LTC mirrors how social skills are valued in society. The curriculum also guides the attention of staff to focus on “the right things”, and thus can have implications for how the days are organised at the LTC, what activities are planned and how they are carried out. This illustrates how even distal factors move across the system and have consequences for the everyday activities in the LTC. The chronosystem is the aspect of time which surrounds all the other systems. With regard to the LTC, the aspect of time has an influence over both the short and the long term, such as a day or a week, one or several school years or, historically, through sociopolitical changes in society concerning the LTC.
For this study, the bioecological theory provides an opportunity to view the LTC didactically, with a focus on the staff’s perspectives of their work, which will affect the choices they make in the activities. This, in turn, will affect the opportunities and conditions for social learning in the LTC. The study of the processes and conditions that contribute to change over time, in terms of an individual’s development and learning, is what Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) define as human development science. In this, they emphasise that the most interesting thing is what can shape humans to what they can become in the future, rather than finding out why they are the way they are. The explanation exists in both the past and the present, and therefore it is important to reflect upon what opportunities occur for those who stay in the LTC, based on the environment offered.

**Methodology**

**Data collection and analysis**

The study is qualitative, with people’s verbal descriptions in focus (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Group interviews were conducted in a medium-sized Swedish town with staff from three different LTCs. The study is based on a convenience sample (Bryman, 2016) since a random sample was not possible for various reasons. Principals at 23 LTCs were contacted initially, but because of, for example, the staff’s lack of time or an already high workload, the contact resulted in the participation of three LTCs. The participants were a mixture of men and women with different educational backgrounds, such as child minders, LTC pedagogues, early childhood education teachers and preschool teachers. The individuals in different professions are referred to as “staff”, regardless of their educational background. The staff are considered as equal workers in the LTC, with common responsibility for the activities. In total, 21 participants were interviewed in four groups, on one occasion per group, for 60–75 minutes each. To facilitate the informants’ participation, the interviews were performed at a time that they had chosen, which, in all cases, was during their scheduled planning time at each school.

The group interview was chosen as a data collection method to elicit both individuals’ personal thoughts and their common perspective on their work with pupils’ social learning through their interaction in the interviews (Bryman, 2016). The intention was also to enable knowledge-producing dialogues that could benefit both individuals and their joint work in the LTC. The interview was thus considered as an opportunity for possible collective learning, through common reflections on the common mission.

The interview questions were open, and based on social learning, the curriculum, and planning and implementation of the work in the LTC. With the starting point of considering the interview as an interaction between the participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008), supplementary questions and in-depth questions were asked based on what emerged in the interviews.

The analysis was inspired by an abductive approach. It took its starting point in collected data, and through an exchange between these data, previous research and the theoretical concepts, the intention was to understand the activities of the LTC based on the staff perspective (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Bryman, 2016). During the transcript
of the interviews, the first step in the analysis was that the recordings were thoroughly listened to repeatedly to create an analytical focus (Gibson & Brown, 2009). The transcripts were made verbatim and mostly unconcentrated, that is, with little regard to how something was said but with a focus on what was said. The transcript was read through at the first stage without attempting to interpret and without taking notes. In subsequent reading, content related to the leisure time staff’s perspectives of work on social learning was highlighted, based on the research questions. These transcripts were then summarised to brief descriptions, to highlight similarities, and codes, in the staff’s statements. The codes emerged from the data and were not defined in advance (Gibson & Brown, 2009). In further reading of the codes, the content was compared and, based on this, the themes were aggregated. For example, statements concerning the staff’s descriptions of difficulties in promoting social learning, such as large child groups, lack of time or inadequate premises, generated the theme “Challenges”. In total, four different themes emerged: “How to promote social learning”, “Intentions to promote social learning”, “Challenges” and “Pedagogical leadership”. Furthermore, the analysis was undertaken with the aim of identifying the components of the microsystem: roles, relations and activities, in the staff’s perspectives of importance regarding promoting social learning. Their perspectives were also analysed to identify the bioecological system’s different levels, to reveal factors with an impact on LTC governance.

**Ethical considerations**

The participants were informed, in writing prior to the interview and orally during the interview, that participation was voluntary and that they could decide at any time to withdraw their participation, and that all data would be made anonymous and used only for research purposes (Bryman, 2016; Swedish Research Council, 2011, 2017). In presenting the results, the LTC departments are named with fictitious names. All participants gave informed consent to take part in the study, which, in its process, was guided by the ethical outlines formulated by the Swedish Research Council (2011, 2017). The data revealed perspectives of staff that in some cases may be interpreted as being critical of their organisation, yet at the same time seemed important for them to express. Therefore, the ethical aspects of the research process are especially important, not only to ensure confidentiality for the participants and careful handling of the data, but also to highlight the perspectives that emerged during the interview dialogues. In this way, the abductive approach can help to expose deeper structures in the LTC based on the patterns emerging from the material (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009), thus interpreting the staff’s motives for the activities as a result of the structures that create their working conditions. However, we emphasise that we do not in any way aim to generalise the results; the intention is to understand the activities of these LTCs, based on the context described by the staff.

**Results**

In this section, we present the four themes that emerged in the analysis. The themes illustrate a polarisation between two perspectives regarding the perception of conditions and opportunities for promoting social learning. These perspectives are also highlighted by the quotations. A more problematising perspective is recounted by three of the
groups, whereas one group in particular differed in the sense that they expressed a positive perspective concerning the conditions and opportunities for promoting social learning. This polarisation is, above all, visible in three of the four themes: “Intentions to promote social learning”, “Challenges” and “Pedagogical leadership”. The first theme to be presented, “How to promote social learning”, showed an overall alignment in perceptions both among and between the groups.

**How to promote social learning**

The LTC staff groups talked about certain activities considered to promote social learning, for example being in the gym, as a way of learning how to interact with others through ball games and physical exercise. Drama, guided play and free play were other well-considered ways of social learning. Furthermore, the groups stressed working methods that promote and demand cooperation as being useful.

The participants emphasised the importance of building a good relationship with each pupil. This, in addition to being able to pay attention to and to talk to each pupil every day, was described as an important part of the work with social learning.

… the everyday dialogue of how we treat each other is the most important, to continuously talk to the children. (The Clover)

The quotation highlights the description of the dialogue as a tool for promoting relationships and communication in all activities.

**Intentions to promote social learning**

The results show a similarity in the LTC staff groups’ main intention, to base the activities on the interests and wishes of the pupils. All groups emphasised that the pupils’ development and learning are dependent on social learning, and that it is the group of pupils and its needs that govern the work with social learning in the LTC. An idea of being role models for the pupils appeared in their descriptions, which indicates that social learning is somehow considered and guided, mostly with the dialogue as a tool for daily communication and reflection. Also emphasised is the importance of endurance, and always continuing the work with value-based issues.

However, different starting points were described. Although all groups defined everything in the LTC as concerning social skills, and that all activities are based on social skills and characterise the way of working, differences arose in their perspectives. Either they said that they arranged all activities around social learning or they said that they did not plan for it at all when preparing the activities. The latter was explained somewhat differently by the three groups; social learning was, on the one hand, described as a topic that does not need to be talked about. The staff stressed that their shared values guide their work, which was why they considered that they do not need to discuss how to facilitate it. This was highlighted in the following quotation:

Somehow I think that … about social skills training, I don’t know, we usually do not talk about it. Instead … I think it’s simply there. Like everyone has the same intention with it ….

(The Dandelion)
On the other hand, time for the staff’s collegial dialogues was described as lacking, which they felt decreases the opportunities for other than practical discussions.

We have talked about having pedagogical discussions more often, but there seem to be so many other things that we need to discuss. (The Bluebell)

The quotation above shows the view of not having enough time for discussing how to facilitate the activities, because of discussions about practical needs.

How the curriculum was described as being related to LTC activities also appeared from two perspectives. From one perspective, it was described as the basis for the overall planning at the beginning of the school year, as well as to continuously clarify parts of the work and to check that it had been accounted for in the activities.

From the other perspective, the staff stated that they would rather seek alignment with the curriculum in retrospect, when activities are evaluated and during quality work. Nevertheless, the curriculum was considered to be controlling the activities and the goals of the practice. This view corresponds with a basic belief that activities should be based on voluntariness:

Since all activities should be based on voluntariness, the big challenge is to enite them to want to participate, besides having time to plan anything. [...] You cannot say that everyone must join, but you can invite them to. [...] Therefore, it is not that easy to claim why in advance, when it is actually done afterwards. What is the link to the curriculum through this activity? (The Daisy)

This excerpt highlights the staff’s view of the importance of the pupils’ leisure and free choices, which also seems to vindicate the staff to be non-controlling in terms of LTC activities.

**Challenges**

The staff groups expressed several challenges with their work related to structural conditions, such as large groups of pupils and work conditions, which, to some extent, appeared to prevent the implementation of activities to promote social learning. The large number of pupils in the group seemed to be the predominant reason for not planning activities. This was also articulated as being the most obstructive factor, regarding creating and maintaining good relations with the pupils.

The groups are far too large. It is a bit frustrating not to have enough time, which is why I don’t have a relation with each pupil in this group. (The Bluebell)

This quotation is an illustration of an insufficiency the staff described, due to the large groups. Another example concerns the premises and whether everyone can be indoors at the same time, which means that the activities must take place outdoors regardless of the weather, thus being decisive for possible activities. Furthermore, related to the number of pupils, the staff considered that their qualifications from university education are not used adequately, as stated in the following quotation:

... it is not very inspiring having been educated three years at university and feel that you are more or less a Storage General. (The Daisy)
The staff also problematised various workforce issues. They expressed an expectation always to be available as supply teachers, when teachers are absent owing to illness. That contributes to a perception of being “a service to the school”.

And just look at us leisure time teachers, we are like ping pong balls who are bounced in and out wherever needed. (The Dandelion)

The quotation above reveals the staff’s experience of not being able to influence their work situation. In addition, for leisure time staff who feel exhausted when their main activities take place after school hours, the work situation was described as affecting the activities concerning both supply and quality. As a result of reduced planning time, the staff often apply what they termed “corridor planning”. That is, planning on the go, just before the LTC activities start, which they said causes the activities to become unreflective and sporadic.

Furthermore, covering short-term absences in their own staff group was also seen as a problem, as it decreases the total staff number in the unit. The staff argued that it is a matter of security for both pupils and staff; if there are two staff members per 50 pupils, it is not possible for one of them to deviate from the child group in order to plan. The staff emphasised that there is a dilemma in the situations described; on the one hand, they have to be there for both teacher colleagues and pupils, while, on the other hand, they have to “stand up for” their own activities and their own profession.

All staff groups described their work situation similarly concerning structural conditions. Nevertheless, a contrasting perspective appeared regarding the view of challenges in working with social learning. A clear distinction between the perspectives of the staff’s perceptions of working with pupils’ social learning was that one group highlighted the need for planning for social learning and taking social learning into account in their everyday practice. This was despite the fact that they, like the other groups, were struggling with large pupil groups, inadequate premises and other structural challenges. Within this perspective, the staff expressed satisfaction with work done and the activities offered to the pupils.

**Pedagogical leadership**

From the two above-mentioned perspectives, further distinction emerged in the results, which concerned staff descriptions of how their pedagogical leadership is perceived. One perspective included a view of managing the LTC activities adequately, with distinct anchoring in the curriculum through continuous collegial discussions, as well as descriptions of having a participatory principal:

Our principal participates every other week, always. That’s really good! […] At some time she was ill or something, so she didn’t join [in] and that was noticeable. […] Our principal is very responsive. […] She is kind of better at pedagogical guidance than concerning practical issues. (The Clover)

This quotation highlights the continuity in the principal’s participation in collegial meetings, and that it is preferred by the staff that the principal takes part. It also highlights the staff’s view of the principal as a pedagogical leader as being crucial for their work.
On the other hand, the perspective that shows a view of the structural conditions more as obstacles for working with social learning is also associated with a pedagogical leader who participates less.

... the principal is supposed to be our pedagogical leader, but is never available. [...] I think she stands up for our questions, she wants to be responsive. [...] But not being here, that’s a different matter. (The Dandelion)

This excerpt reveals both the staff’s opinion of the importance of having a pedagogical leader and the difficulty with having a non-participating leader. It also reveals a more critical view of their own activities, along with a less predetermined basis in the curriculum.

Discussion

The results show a common point of departure for the activities and the work with social learning in the LTC. The basic belief among the interview groups is the peer group being considered important for social learning (National Agency for Education, 2014; Saracho & Spodek, 2007a). This relates to both roles and relations in the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005), including the development of pupils’ behaviour as well as the relations between the pupils. The staff’s beliefs are in the same vein as the traditional social pedagogical approach described in previous research (e.g. Ackesjö et al., 2016; Andersson, 2014; Lager, 2015; Rohlin, 2000), where a relational approach is indicated by the staff’s view of themselves as role models. There is also an emphasis on their own guidance in social learning, in which the dialogue is highlighted as important. The dialogue can be viewed as an activity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005) expected to develop over time for pupils to learn to communicate with increased independence. The results thereby show a perspective with the microsystem, the LTC group, in focus, highlighting the interaction between the components roles, relations and activities, and stressing the continuity over time (chronosystem).

However, despite the view of social learning as the basis for pupils’ overall learning and development, an unexpected view appears concerning social learning in collegial discussions. The staff declare social learning as a topic that is not required to be discussed, and explain their opinion with the idea that their shared values guide the work. Maybe this view, on the one hand, can be explained by the results reported in previous research (Haglund, 2015; Palsdóttir, 2014), showing that teachers explained social learning as informal and as a by-product of the interaction between pupils. On the other hand, in the light of the staff’s view of continuous dialogue as important when working with the pupils, this appears to be a surprising contradiction. We would have expected the dialogue to be more prominent as a tool for controlling their shared work with social learning as well. Furthermore, the view may be problematic in daily practice, resulting in the staff basing their work with pupils’ social learning on assumptions rather than shared reflections. Another point of view is the description of the curriculum being related to the activities in retrospect. This is also a possible consequence of the non-talking approach, in this case refraining from seeing the curriculum. The results above are interpreted as a subculture of the LTC with a foundation in the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005) yet being formed in the microsystem of the staff.
However, it is important to consider why these beliefs appear. The results indicate that they are a consequence of the structural conditions (exosystem), so that the everyday practice is prioritised, with no space for reflection during the day. Furthermore, the staff talk about the structural conditions as being obstructive to both the planning and implementation of the activities. In contrast to previous research indicating that organised activities represent a way of handling large groups (Hjalmarsson, 2013), the statements from the staff in this study reveal that the large number of pupils mostly means that the staff do not conduct activities at all. Thus, one possible consequence of large groups can be a practice with increased free play, which corresponds with previous research (Haglund, 2015; Lager, 2016). As it stands, the structural conditions have didactic consequences in the implementation of the activities. Nevertheless, it can be argued that if aspects of social learning from the curriculum (“What?”) are clarified, the need for didactic discussions will also appear more clearly, enabling us to reach the didactic starting points of “Why?” and “How?”

With a standpoint in the above, the pedagogical leader, the principal, as the link between the management and the staff group, is highlighted. This is in addition to showing the importance of the communication (mesosystem) between the two micro-systems they represent, in order to interpret and implement the curriculum in the activities. Furthermore, the principal can be viewed as a part of the staff’s microsystem, as a person with an indicative role concerning the educational work (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005), significant to guide the staff in developing the work in the LTCs, by initiating and leading the discussions in the staff groups.

Similar to the complexity of the bioecological system, the LTC as a pedagogical practice appears as a complex pattern of the interaction between various, proximal and distant, factors. Therefore, it is important to consider the LTC as a practice, not solely based on the perspectives of the staff, but also as a didactic consequence of the surrounding structural conditions.

**Reflections upon this study**

The conclusions from this study must be viewed in the light of its possible limitations. The results are derived from a small sample, and there is no attempt at generalisation. Rather, the aim was to describe the perspectives of a limited number of teachers working in the LTC. Using another sampling method or including other leisure time teachers may have given a different result. Another limitation is related to not having observed what the staff actually do in practice. Their opinions guide their decisions, but it is not obvious that their actual actions reflect what they say. In the group interviews, there appeared to be an open dialogue between the participants; however, it is unclear what results may have emerged with individual interviews.

Abductive reasoning is applicable when the interplay between theory and data is used to reveal patterns from the individual parts of the results. The abductive approach is sometimes described as finding and handling surprising data (Bryman, 2016), which, in this study, can be identified as the effects that structural factors have on the teachers’ perceived opportunities to teach social learning in LTCs. These results were not initially expected to be so dominant in the data, but since the participants clearly stated the importance of structural issues, it became an interesting result to report, having relevance to the didactics of the LTC practice.
This study contributes knowledge about LTC staff’s perspectives on their work with pupils’ social learning in the LTC. The implication of the results is that LTC practice needs to be further discussed didactically, not only from a staff perspective, but from both a management level and a municipal level. Thereby, the LTC could move towards optimising the conditions for social learning, which, in the long term, would provide good results for the entire development and learning of pupils.

Therefore, future research should incorporate the perspectives of municipal and local management concerning social learning in the LTC. It would also be interesting to highlight pupils’ perspectives on the social learning environment in the LTC.

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