Confessing the will to improve: systematic quality management in leisure-time centers

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this article is to analyze the systematic quality management of educational settings the way it is present in Swedish leisure-time centers. The study explores how the production of both systematic reporting and documentation works through self technologies in this discursive practice. The analysis will illustrate and discuss how the systematic quality work viewed as a discursive practice is expected to be both self-scrutinizing and transparent, but also how this process is supposed to be made with a certain `correct´ attitude—what can be described as the ‘will to improve’. Moreover, it interrogates how the systematic quality management operates strategically and politically to exercise power on and through the personnel working at leisure-time centers. In the empirical material discussed, an ongoing subjectification appears, which takes the form of confessional practices. This can be said to be primarily about constructing a free but loyal collective subject, who produces systematic quality work in line with what the educational authorities want to happen. Such a process of subjectification gives rise to a collective subject, which is regarded as having unavoidable responsibility for an infinite need of quality improvement through confessional acts of ‘truth’.

KEYWORDS

Confessional practices; governmentality; technologies of the self; systematic quality work; leisure-time centers

Introduction

In this article the systematic quality management in the educational setting called leisure-time centers will work as an example of a widespread global social phenomenon that has been described as a performance measurement society (Bowerman et al. 2000). This phenomenon emerges across a huge range of social institutions in relation to a need for productivity and effectiveness, and requires a great deal of linguistic production. Verbalization, in a sense that includes oral accounts, written accounts and self-scrutiny, is in this a commonly and normalized method through which people make themselves visible to oneself as well as to others (Fejes & Dahlstedt 2013, Rose 1989/1999, 1998). Building on this the study will explore what form of governance the demand of verbalization implies, through a reversed analysis of power. That is, from the inside out perspective of governance rather than from the top down. Thus, how can
we understand the increased amount of discursive work in social institutions such as leisure-time centers? One way is to consider it as a confessional practice (Foucault, 1988).

Contemporary researchers drawing on Foucault’s work on confession emphasize the confessional act of disclosure as practices that can be regarded as governing the conduct of people (Cruikshank 1999), and through which people can become “objects that can be calculated, assessed, scrutinised and compared, and by processes of subjectification, people come to understand themselves as certain types of subjects with certain types of capacities” (Fejes and Dahlstedt 2013, 6). Furthermore, researchers have highlighted how this confession technology is linked with the promise to help us live a better life and to become a better version of ourselves; the subject can and need always do more in order to be better. Through confessional practices the autonomous subject positions itself as a self-disciplined object of self-improvement (Edwards 2008, Fejes and Nicoll 2014, Rose 1998). In the words of Foucault the self is not given to us and so “we have to create ourselves as a work of art” (Rabinow 1984, 351).

In line with this aforementioned research are studies that examine confession as a process of subjectification, processes which occur with school performance assessments (Breidenstein and Thompson 2014). Other researchers seek to use Foucault’s concept of confession in ways similar to what I intend here, namely an investigation into confessional processes that are “not face-to-face processes between individual subjects, but as discursive and political processes going on between collective subjects” (Olsson, Petersson, & Krejsler, 2014, 95).

**Systematic quality work in leisure-time centers**

In Sweden (like elsewhere) the education system is built around the concept of school development and to related terms like ‘cost efficiency’, ‘goal fulfilment’ and ‘quality improvement’. This concept holds for a number of standard narratives using school development as a rhetorical resource e.g. school development to achieve a more sustainable society or school development to make more effective the public sector (Börjesson 2011). Given this and due to recent and intense educational reforms, the leisure-time centers (henceforth LtCs) has undergone an organizational transformation. Prior to its remodelling, the LtC could be considered a rather self-sufficient and locally-bound practice. Now, however, it is seen to be an integral part of an evolving coherent school-system. These structural changes are a consequence of massive policy production, in which for instance a new Education Act along with a new curriculum for a more coherent education system that incorporates LtCs and new general recommendations addressing LtCs were issued. According to the so-called reinforced educational assignment (Skolverket 2014), the practice of an LtC is now depicted as an education managed by national objectives and as responsible for the provision of teaching, primarily with the purpose of assisting schools with their performance achievements. Therefore, LtCs are expected to contribute in the delivery of curriculum goals (Andersson 2010).

With more defined requirements included in LtCs assignments, it follows that desirable quality must be complied with and guaranteed at all times. The government has thereby taken measures to ensure that LtCs (alongside other educational institutions) are
obliged to carry out systematic quality work (SFS 2010, chapter 4, 2-6§§), something that can be regarded as a re-centralization of the school system. According to the general recommendations about systematic quality work produced by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket 2012), the aim is to meet the national targets for education and to create participation and dialogue about the achievement of these goals and on the causes of all possible shortcomings. More specifically, the general recommendations directed exclusively towards the LtCs state that:

When planning the activities, the personnel shall assume the mission as stated in the Education Act and in the curriculum, and based on an inventory of the current group of pupils’ needs and interests. Working in such a way provides opportunities to carry out a practice based on systematic quality work. This work involves, in brief, to systematically and continuously follow up activities, analyze the results, and based on that plan and develop the education (Skolverket 2014, 12).

With this in mind, I shall start by problematizing what Swedish educational authorities requests by questioning how these educational directives are staged. It is to ask the more general question: in pursuit of which objectives and through which kinds of strategies does political power seek to shape citizens’ conduct, in this case in the LtCs, with the intention of achieving certain ends? Based on a view of democracy as a discursive resource for governance (Rose 1999), I will look at how employees at LtCs construct discursive accounts when producing systematic quality work as part of maintaining the idea of democracy and empowerment in the context of LtCs. As stated earlier, the systematic quality work will be considered as a confessional practice. Usually a confession involves one person eliciting a confession from another. Here, instead, I widen the concept of confession, in order to explore how LtC personnel talk about their work in terms of a ‘we’ and by this constructs a collective subject. This implies an analytical interest in discursive practices with respect to requirements placed on today’s LtCs. For instance, how are the descriptive accounts built up and put together in order to serve certain purposes, what discursive activities are used in confessional practices and how are children involved in these with respect to the fact that they are entitled to influence? This particular problematization revolves around three empirical questions: (i) towards what/whom are the confessions addressed?; (ii) which discursive resources are used in order to constitute the confessions? And (iii) how are children participating in the LtCs used as discursive resources in confessional practices?

The purpose is merely to analyze the logic of the discursive practice in systematic quality work, hence there is no claim to investigate understandings, intentions or cognitions. Accordingly, emotions or willingness is not studied cognitively. The focus lies in how these kinds of expressions are discursively displayed in organizational accounts, i.e. how the personnel are doing display (Potter 1996).

Material and procedure

The empirical material are viewed as examples of the discursive practice that constitute systematic quality work and consists of 77 documents from approximately 30 LtCs, all of which are expected to work with the same joint municipal planning template (sw. planeringsmall). These planning templates are designed at management level and are
constructed exclusively for the LtC. They are based on four municipal-wide objectives, developed from the national assignment of the LtCs and linked to the current curriculum. The objectives include, inter alia, the development of pupils’ knowledge and learning on the basis of the curriculum aims; the development of pupils’ ability to handle social situations; the development of pupils’ ability to participate in physical activities with delight and joy, and finally the expectation that pupils should feel safe and comfortable within the LtC environment. The planning documents consist of six sections, comprising of the following headings: ‘objectives’, ‘activities’, ‘preparations’, ‘realization’, ‘evaluations’ with the pupils and lastly evaluations from the personnel. Under each heading, space is allotted for the insertion of shorter reports. Even though the templates are filled out by one, or more, person(s) from the current personnel at a given LtC, all personnel are expected to work with this document regardless of professional title or level of education. The primary function of these templates is to assure the quality of the LtCs’ activities and thus to produce a collection of ideas for personnel to be inspired and helped by. Beyond that, the templates are also filed in order to form a material for quality assessment.

Aside from the planning templates, this study also draws on activity reports (sw. verksamhetsredogörelser) from personnel in 33 LtCs. The LtCs belong to the same municipality that uses the aforementioned planning templates. The activity reports are designed at management level and are based on the Swedish School Inspectorate’s basis for assessment in quality reviews, the Education Act, the curriculum and the general recommendations about quality in LtC’s from the Swedish National Agency for Education, which thereby constitute the principal measures by which the Swedish School Inspectorate assess quality. These reports are filled in once by the personnel of particular LtCs, serving as a basis for a municipal quality review. The reviews themselves consist of 55 questions, sorted under 23 headings surrounding the LtCs’ assignment.

The templates, as well as the reports, have been completed and collected as part of a municipal review and quality assessment of LtCs in the mentioned municipality. The documents have thus been collected for the municipality’s own use at management level, then they have been handed to me – with informed consent – to form empirical material for my analysis. The selection and delimitation of case material is therefore interlinked with the local quality reviews, and is thus not a process that has involved the researcher in any way. All the LtCs in the municipality submitted activity reports and nearly all of them submitted at least one planning template. This kind of material and discursive practice is generally used as part of a national trend, although these particular documents are locally produced.

I will highlight examples (anonymized due to ethical considerations) from the documents in my reasoning, helping me thereby to explore firstly how moral claims get articulated alongside how a will for improvement is expressed and used, and additionally providing me with the possibility to examine how documentation and reporting, as part of systematic quality work, operates as discursive confession practice. The procedure followed in my analytical work is to focus on the normative aspects of the material; how one confesses to the ideology of systematic quality management. In order to clarify how a confession is to be recognized, and how I intend to deconstruct this confessional theme, I will investigate the different discursive resources out of which
a confession practice is constructed in systematic quality work. I will further use these
discursive resources to categorize my analysis in discussing how personnel in LtCs
produce a collective subject.

Theoretical and methodological considerations

In this discourse analytical frame theoretical and methodological starting points are
coherent, the theoretical concepts will guide the analytical work. I will outline five key
concepts that will be used as a basis for the empirical analysis; governmentality,
verbalization, technologies of the self, confessional practices and collective subject.
These concepts will be of a theoretical and methodological character.

Systematic quality work as technologies of power and technologies of the self

Since the interest concerns technologies of power and technologies of the self, I have
chosen Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality to guide my analytical approach.
The merit of Michel Foucault’s work lies in its attention to the historical, institutional
and discursive conditions that account for how our own present societies have come to
be so (Olsson, Petersson and Krejsler 2014, Walters 2012). In this article, governance is
understood “not as a set of institutions, nor in terms of certain ideologies, but as an
eminently practical activity that can be studied, historicized and specified at the level of
the rationalities, programmes, techniques and subjectivities which underpin it and give
it form and effect” (Walters 2012, 2). Building on this I will now put forward some
theoretical arguments regarding the discursive practice in systematic quality work as
technologies of power and technologies of the self.

Here, technologies are regarded as a range of multiple tactics “imbued with aspira-
tions for the shaping of conduct in the hope of producing certain desired effects and
averting certain undesired events” (Rose 1999, 52). Foucault outlines primarily two
types of technologies:

[T]echnologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to
certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject […] technologies of the self,
which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain
number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being,
so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity,
wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault 1988, 18).

The technologies of power concerns the objectifying mechanisms through which the
self is shaped, and the technologies of the self includes the means by which the self
constructs itself as a subject. They both imply modification of individuals and are
frequently linked together. The encounter between them is what constitutes the concept
of governmentality (Fejes and Dahlstedt 2013).

Systematic quality work viewed in the light of a governmentality perspective implies
that performance measurement is intended to function through reviews that are carried
out at a physical distance, but in virtual proximity, to those institutions subject to
assessment. It is on this basis that one encounters the paradoxical motto of ‘supervised
trust’. Accordingly, public institutions, such as the LtC, need to be built around and
constructed upon the idea of being formally auditable, that is, an evaluation of documentation which is intended to ensure high quality (Power 1997, Åsén and Vallberg Roth 2012). The concept of a “performance measurement society” can be described as a regime that includes virtually any type of information retrieval, which serves to control, measure and improve public services. Total visibility is required in this normative framework, in order to define the (economic) value of institutions such as the LtC (Bowerman et al. 2000, Triantafillou 2012). This allows normalizing comparisons involving both systematic measurement and comparison of activities and operations with the purpose of improving individuals and institutions (Hall and Löfgren 2006, Triantafillou 2007). By implication, political power is not merely about imposing constraints upon citizens, but rather to administer to citizens a kind of regulated freedom. Personal autonomy works as a key term when exercising this form of power, since even if individuals are not explicitly the subjects of power they nevertheless play their part in its operations (Rose and Miller 2010). This means that these forms of power “tie the subjectivity (conscience, identity, self-knowledge) of the individual to that individual’s subjection (control by another). The subject is one who is both under the authority of another and the author of her or his own actions” (Cruikshank 1999, 21). Thus, the systematic quality management works as a governing machinery consisting of technologies of power and technologies of the self, and which combined can be described in terms of governmentality.

I shall now turn to my view of how the discursive practice in systematic quality work can be considered as a confessional practice.

Confessional practices and collective subjects

Here I will sketch out a conception of confession that contains within it aspects of Foucault’s understanding of the technology of the self, and that developed out of his own analysis of confessional discourse. Foucault’s perspective holds up an ironic lens that focuses our attention on previously taken-for-granted paradoxes within which confessional practices operate (Trethewey 1999).

Foucault analyses how a technology of the self – the individual subject – is involved in circumscribed forms of confession. Throughout history, people in the West have been involved in various technologies of the self; in Ancient Greece, the preponderant concern was with self-mastery and with the care of the self, and then in Christianity, as confession grew stronger, the overarching aim was to purify the individual (Foucault 1978). Confessional practices has over the years been encapsulated within science, especially with the emergence of the human sciences and psychological knowledge, with an aim of creating new and better selves. The confession in our present time is concerned with thoughts as a material for scrutiny rather than with actions, what we can call a bureaucratization of confession. No longer does it just contain a simple enumeration of misdeeds, instead it involves the rhetorical insertion of an account that can anticipate and explain such misdeeds (Tell 2010). A bureaucratic, professional and rational confession that must constantly be practiced is also interwoven with a psychotechnology. We find a therapeutic governmentalization operating, in which “the relation to oneself is itself folded in therapeutic terms – problematizing oneself according to the values of normality and pathology […]” (Rose 1998, 192). Here the confession
operates as a way to discipline and control the individual as well as populations and whole societies (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982).

One’s willingness to verbalization has become a key requirement for an individual to understand oneself as a subject. Today confession seems to be naturalized in the individual’s everyday lives as an understanding of ourselves; people seek to fashion the productive self in order to ‘perfect’ themselves by working with their self-presentations. Confessional practices are now routinely apparent in a variety of institutional and organizational discourses, such as education, medicine, psychiatry and justice. The obligation to confess has become common sense to such an extent that we no longer consider it as a constraining power. Everywhere in society we are invited, encouraged and fostered to disclose things about ourselves and to judge who we are (Edwards 2008, Fejes and Nicoll 2014, Trethewey 1999). Foucault stresses that an important part in this confessional technology of the self is the conviction that the truth about oneself can be discovered through confessional self-scrutiny alongside the guidance and help provided by experts (e.g. physicians, judges, teachers etc.). Furthermore, confession, when it is combined with techniques of external examination, constitutes an effective subjectifying technology. Since it is through such a procedure that the subject is capable of orienting oneself into an appropriate and desirable discourse (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982). In this way “[t]he truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power”(Foucault 1978, 59). Accordingly this verbalized confession technology directs people to exercise power of the self on the self and thereby to shape and work on the self in specific ways. Here a profound paradoxical irony is exposed: confessional technologies are not often perceived as instruments of power, but as sources of liberation (Trethewey 1999). Confession predominates in the production of truth today and as governing it comes to have the status as a regime of truth, even if the practice of confession is not identified as powerful. Thus, there is only one way of acting, that is to follow the discourse rules because: “It is always possible one could speak the truth in a void; one would only be in the true, however, if one obeyed the rules of some discursive ‘policy’ which would have to be reactivated every time one spoke (Foucault 1972, 224).

When studying confessional practices and the procedures of introspection and self-examination it entails, not only do I intend to adopt the power/knowledge framework, but I shall also make use of the more operational pair of government/truth. This is linked to the interest in those ‘acts of truth’ that the confessional practice demands as well as the securing of permanent obedience by and through the subjectification process of the individual (Landry 2009). Furthermore I will set up my own contextualization in which this conception of confession will be tried out on my material, which includes a subject that consists of a ‘we’ and not a ‘self’; which is to say, it is not an individual subject who is doing the confessing, but the personnel in the LtCs that confesses as a collective subject. The discursive practice of systematic quality work in the LtCs will be used as an example of how one might go about studying the emergence of collective confessional practices in relation to the need for systemic productivity and effectiveness, which, in this case, takes place in and through self-evaluations. Foucault’s thoughts provide useful resources to examine how governing is done through confessional practices in the LtCs, in particular, as well as in education, and ultimately in society, more generally. Hence my task here will be to explore and illustrate in detail how a
collective subject is shaped and administered through subjectifying mechanisms within confessional practices. Here, dealing with confessions is therefore not a question about cognition or attitudes. The object of study is how people display their accounts. The handling of the empirical material is thus about examining how this is built up discursively in the planning templates and activity reports.

Using the theoretical key concepts governmentality, verbalization, technologies of the self, confessional practices and collective subject, I will now deal with the aforementioned empirical questions (i) towards what/whom are the confessions addressed?; (ii) which discursive resources are used in order to constitute the confessions? And (iii) how are children participating in the LtCs used as discursive resources recruited in confessional practices?

Confessions as discursive resources in LtCs

In this section I will move closer toward the reflective ‘acts of truth’ that the LtC personnel are engaged in and that constitute the discursive practice of systematic quality management. The interest lies in investigating how speaking about the LtC practice in the production of systematic quality work brings about a certain subjectification of the LtC personnel through confessional practices (Breidenstein and Thompson 2014). Since, in my present conjuncture, systematic quality work always is apparent in professional education, such work shapes the personnel as a specific kind of collective subject. An important aspect of this is the role of language within these practices (i.e. the entitlement to speak in particular ways). To examine how the shaping of a confessing collective subject is constructed in documentation and reporting, for illustrative purposes, the analysis will be drawing on examples from the documents.

Confessing one’s subordination to what is sacrosanct

In this part of the investigation it is time to explore the directions in which confessional practices tend. Toward what and/or whom does the collective subject confess during a process of systematic quality management?

Claims of discursive rationality are quite common in the activity reports and planning templates comprising the quality assessments of LtCs; they reveal that the collective subject is doing what it is obliged to do and that no deficiencies need to be declared. In the discursive practice of systematic quality management we see clarifications of ideal rational behaviour in relation to the steering documents, such as when personnel report on how they relate regulations to their activities in the LtC:

These texts are guiding principles in our work with children, and provide a red thread through which our work is carried out (R. 14).

Since we just finished our teacher training, we have these two law books at the spine of our thinking […] (R. 29).

Rationality is a value considered by societies today worthy of striving towards; the systematic quality management in LtCs is no exception. In virtually every situation the personnel is expected to intentionally follow a discursive rational logic, that is to say, the common rule of rationality. Every action must have a purpose
consistent with the regulatory documents, otherwise it is considered as defective. First, we see that the collective subject is acting in the confessional practice here. It is a ‘we’ that speaks, and it is the same we that describes its collective work. The confessional activity here involves both a confession before the regulatory documents and entails also a confession to the discursive rationality of these regulatory documents.

Descriptions and reporting are both powerful and persuasive forms of narration. An expected objectivity is meant to show itself by keeping intact the ‘reality’ through written documentation. If, as one report described, the regulations form the spine of one’s thinking, then it would seem that the outcome could be nothing other than an intentional and rational practice. Such a claim makes clear what the obvious precondition is for the collective subject to work in the desired rational manner. In their display the personnel unquestioningly subordinate themselves to what is deemed as sacred principles regulating conduct. Confessions take as their starting point a set of sacrosanct principles and directives; these unquestioned principles and directives are not solely derived from references to the given regulatory documents, they are considered sacred in a wider and more generally applicable sense too:

We connect our activities to the best interest of children and focus on the children’s perspective (R.6).

Declaring one’s deference to ‘the best interest of the child’ principle as well as to upholding the importance of the children’s perspective – something that is most sacred in the present Swedish educational context – is a common way to display happy submission to the practice of quality assessment.

A common way of proclaiming that a specific LtC is rational and is meeting the requirements put forward in the regulatory documents is by using the terms ‘every’ or ‘all’. This is the case, for example, when personnel write about how daily work is focused on the pupils’ development and learning, and how national targets – another displayed sacred principle –, are met:

To each activity a joint municipal planning template is written with the objectives of the activity clearly formulated. All activities are created for the pupils and in such a way that creates beneficial conditions for their development and learning (R. 21).

All activities aim to meet the objectives (R. 26).

When everything you do serves to satisfy the requested tasks, you can simply settle with the statement that “yes, we have established a flawless educational institution.”

This is about establishing a relationship between the guiding principles of modern sanctities and the concrete practical activities of a given LtC. The latter are driven by people of flesh and blood. The subordination, however, of the concrete human practices to unquestioned ideals evokes an image of willing souls who dutifully, discursively, recognize the rationality of an order transcending them, an order that involves claims of loyalty to the Education Act as well as other regulatory documents and principles, such as the child’s best interest. What the collective subject produces in these examples is, as previously stated, a deference to what is sacrosanct and to its rationality.
Improvement confessions

I shall now move on and make visible the discursive resources that help to constitute the confessional practices. In the following examples I will introduce statements about the systematic quality management of LtCs that emphasize in what ways the collective subject must do better:

We plan, and when time permits we plan by using the templates and the curriculum. These planning templates are inserted in a folder together with all weekly plans. On the whole, the documentation feels okay, but we could be better at evaluating and following up the pupils on an individual level (R. 4).

Weekly planning and evaluation. We can become better at this, and need to document more (R. 19).

Highlighting how one is working systematically with the quality criteria also requires a rhetoric that bespeaks how one can still do better, since there seems to be, in the nearest, compulsory to have a will to improve. Another common way to put it, is to point to a need for improvement:

Planning templates are written for the activities we do at the LtC. The evaluation work needs to be improved. We also need to improve how we talk to the children about the planning schedules (R. 24).

It is even possible to declare that at the present time there is no system in place ensuring quality of outcomes, as long as such a confession is coupled with an expressed need for improvement:

We have no permanent systems or procedures for this, this we need to improve (R. 20).

In these excerpts we have a recurrent use of the terms ‘better’ and ‘improvement’. As a consequence, LtC practices are neither described as good nor as best, but rather as things that are stuck in between. This implies a constant striving toward something more. While terms such as ‘good’ and ‘best’ point to the completion and fulfilment of a task, ‘improvement’ implies no determinate end. This line of reasoning can be compared to Foucault’s (1977) argument about how power can be exercised through mediation of time in certain ways; “Exercise [...] does not culminate in a beyond, but tends towards a subjection that has never reached its limits” (162).

The claims are about what should be done in the LtCs and how the collective subject intends to improve itself. The collective subject positions itself as a particular kind of professional, that is, a professional personnel that can never reach a state of completion. This might be due to how power works through the process of quality management. Integrated in the regulatory documents, as well as in the reports and planning templates, is a demand for continuous improvement. It is this directive that governs the mentality of the personnel: the national objectives can – and must – always be met and fulfilled in more and better ways. What makes improvement and reform so central here is the emphasis placed on active regulation of ones’ own actions and behaviour. The collective subject must actively achieve a more professional identity through this never-ending process of self-improvement (Hall 2012). This shows us how confessional practices bring forth needs for self-regulation, self-improvement and self-development. These at the same time construct the collective subject as productive
and autonomous, albeit participating within a quality management system that already regulates and governs the actions of those participants (Edwards 2008). In the descriptions above, the self constantly holds itself accountable by its willingness to improve, as well in defining what improvements it needs to make to its own situation. Thus the subjected and productive collective body becomes a force in the process of delivering on systematic quality management (Nicoll 2014).

Implied by the autonomous collective subject is the capacity to identify one’s own deficiencies:

We find out what our deficiencies are and what improvements need to made. At the beginning of the year we had controlled activities and when following-up we understood that some children refused to participate in some activities. This resulted in non-controlled activities, where the children may choose for themselves what activities they want to participate in (R. 27).

The most prominent discursive resource in these examples are the references to one’s collective work efforts and also to a lack of knowledge due to skills shortages. A commonly used claim revolves around how, through further rational organization, one is trying to ensure that a given LtC can be of even better quality. This involves self-initiating interventions on aspects of the self, which until now have remained insufficiently regulated, and which are described as “the super-highway to empowerment and self-change” (Edwards 2008, 30).

What we see here is a subjectification where responsibility is built in to transparent systematic quality management, enabling new forms of power relations. Here, the ultimate goal with improvement is not to reach a certain level of quality or of knowledge; rather, this constructs a certain mentality in the collective subject. Once again, the school development discourse is abundantly present; the collective subject must confess an unrelenting ambition to evolve.

**Confessing deficiency**

Here I continue my discussion in making visible the discursive resources comprising the confessions, but I shall now adopt a slightly different focus.

Confessions cohere around a concept of trying. This confessional category is closely related to the need to improve, consisting of descriptions of what is being done in the LtCs constant striving towards meeting higher standards. The collective subject must nevertheless be aware of its own shortcomings in the work because of its imperfections in comparison with the quality required in the governing regulations:

The most correct strategy would be if, together with the children, one evaluates after each activity. But we can not say we actually do this because of the large number of children in our department. Having said this, more often than not one often gets responses from the children themselves after an activity. That ”What fun this was, can we do it again”, or ”This was not fun, let’s hope we don’t do that again” and so on. When working with the activity, one experiences first-hand whether the activity is stimulating or not by the interest of the children (R. 2).

When discussing how an LtC finds out whether pupils find activities stimulating and enjoyable, the collective subject emphasizes that one knows what the most correct and
ideal way to ascertain this would be, but at the same time admit that one does not actually work in this way. Instead the confession is about how it is really being done – that is, in an imperfect but still quite functional way.

There is a requirement to explain why one has chosen this way of acting instead of other desired possibilities. The confessional practice in the reporting and documentation also compel the collective subject to recognize its professional obligations, and here the collective subject positions itself as inadequate (Edwards 2008). In addition to the inadequate subject and to confessions about LtCs being less than perfect, the personnel of LtCs will commonly advance statements clarifying that one is striving to be perfect, namely to satisfy the conditions of ‘best practice’ in relation to the Education Act and the curriculum. This is evident, for example, in how personnel talk about their use of the planning template:

We try to be as good as possible (R. 30).

We try to use it as often as possible, when there is time (R. 31).

Another way to talk about the planning template is with explicit recognition of deficiencies when reporting how the LtC works with varied activities on the basis of each individual pupils needs, circumstances, experiences and thinking:

We try to satisfy each individual, but the truth is probably that we rather work at a group level (R. 3).

The collective subject begins its account with the concept of ‘trying’ but there is more going on in this last example. After establishing its attempt to be perfect there follows the revelation of a truth about itself. Again we see a confession about what is really being done, although it lets us know that the collective subject recognizes that what it is doing is not conforming to the desired procedures. The disclosure is here about a subjection that differs from the overarching political objectives (Edwards 2008): working with pupils only at a group level is not considered completely professional.

Using the concept of ‘trying’ appears to act as a way of mitigating those circumstances that have prevented an actual LtC from successfully reaching the required standards. This can be illustrated by the following example, which depicts how personnel ensure the supervision of all children in a LtC:

We try to keep track of the attendance list but sometimes it is deficient (R. 3).

This can also be illustrated when talking about planning, follow-ups, development and documentation of LtC practice:

We store and follow up our weekly plans when the week is over and try to evaluate the week in order to develop and improve. However, no substantial documentation is available at the moment (R. 33).

It is also possible to adopt an inverted strategy, according to which one begins with a confession of deficiency and then proceeds to the statements about trying. In the following example we find a response that attests to how the given template for documentation is excellent – with respect to the personnel plan, the follows up and the development of the LtC through systematic documentation:
We have a somewhat inadequate documentation. We plan the activities for the week, evaluate them if time permits. We try to use the planning template, which is a good document. We know that we are obliged to use it. We think we will develop our LtC through pedagogical discussions and support of the work team (R. 3). What we see here is the requirement to reflect upon the collective subject’s sense of self and the performances of this identity. Invitations to this confessional form are supported by pedagogical discourses of reflective practice, which are themselves consistent with the school development discourse. When undertaking these reflections the collective subject is most certainly being governed as well as it is governing the pupils. Importantly, though, we see in what ways it also comes to govern itself too. When speaking through systematic quality management, a subjectification within a political field is produced (Edwards 2008, Nicoll 2014). The collective subject is expected to confess its ‘sins’ with respect to the quality management ideal as well as to acknowledge its responsibility for improved quality. This is achieved through the concept of ‘trying’. By this the organizational subject makes the systematic quality work a part of its self-understanding and thereby engages in self-discipline so that it can strive towards the ideal (Hall 2012). Significant in this is a need to always be aware of one’s own deficiencies, and not least, to be humble before them. The collective subject is expected to struggle with itself. Even though it might be inconvenient and troublesome, this subject always takes up the fight of trying because it is not permissible to be indifferent.

**Children as discursive resources in evaluations**

In this final section I will explore how children participating in the LtCs are used as discursive resources in the confessional formulations. This is a different form of confessional category, including the collective subjects’ use of its own and its pupils’ emotions as a quality measurement. The confessional practice here is directed toward a central part of the documentation. The systematic quality management system would not be complete without the children participating in the LtCs, since this system – with it’s fundamental ideology about children’s agency – implies that all parties involved in the organization are expected to take an active part in the verbalization processes and through the evaluations. As a part of the systematic quality management process, children are inducted into these confessional practices. The following examples include claims that the children emerged as willing confessors:

Super fun, comfortable, relaxing. The children just love it! (Pt. 1).

The pupils were very glad, proud and happy. They think that the task was fun and different. Everyone thinks the meatballs tasted good (Pt. 4).

I heard that the children did not like doing self-portraits when I first presented the activity. When they heard about the method, the children however, became curious. The children enjoyed the activity. I saw it as the children became eager to work and heard them when, while working, they said that this was fun (Pt. 13).

It seems possible to describe an adequate quality in LtCs by emphasizing how good and suitable an activity is, built on descriptions of how happy and satisfied the personnel and/or the pupils were in evaluations. The appeal to children’s happiness in the form of positive feedback works both as confirmation and as a receipt of their satisfaction.
Recruiting children’s voices in the evaluations then becomes an effective rhetorical device; the children function as an extension of the collective subject. In the following descriptions happy pupils tend to equal good quality, and good quality implicitly equals professional work. It can be argued that the collective subject uses evaluations from the pupils in order to assert professionalism through asking questions about the children’s experiences. If the pupils admit that an activity was amusing, the personnel must have put in some good effort:

It was the right activity towards the objective. It was an amazing experience to see a shape emerge and experience the unique result. To create with your hands by sculpting in clay was a REAL TREAT! The pupils felt proud (Pt. 17).

The pupils worked very well together. They were happy with the result. The activity was carried out exactly as planned, with good results (Pt. 64).

This kind of confessional practice can also contain explicit speech about an activity’s relation to the curriculum:

The comments from the pupils: -Pretty fun, -crap, good, -it was great fun, -we were given a task that was consistent with the curriculum, -fun to paint two worlds.

The pupils reached the objectives when they were allowed to fantasize about two worlds that respectively told us about their situation. I evaluated with the pupils by asking about how they felt about the task and this was consistent with the curriculum while they were doing the task (Pt. 19).

The personnel ask the pupils if the activity was consistent with the curriculum and they receive the answer that “yes, it was”. Here again, the pupils’ evaluation is used to certify that a desired professional quality is present. In addition, recruiting children also serves as evidence in the collective subject’s confessions about being loyal to democratic procedures – and provides another example of how one must show loyalty to what is sacred – in the LtCs by offering the children the possibility of exercising influence through their evaluations. Furthermore, in these examples we can discern how the process of subjectification is itself an educational operation. The children are taught to understand the link between the curriculum and the educational objectives and are then expected to consider their opinion in relation to this.

Further, in this section we can see the presence of a psy-technology in systematic quality management. In these examples we have ethical scenarios in which emotional attention adds something to the collective subjects’ sense of self, that is, to “the contemporary psychological machination of the human being” (Rose 1998, 195). Here, the subjectification operates through “evaluation of personal experiences, emotions, and feelings in relation to psychological images of fulfilment and autonomy” (ibid.). The ‘truth’ about the quality in the LtCs activities is then, accordingly, produced with psychological explanations. When children are recruited for this purpose it is not a competent and rational child that is staged, but rather an emotional child who needs to be taught about those sacrosanct principles. This positions them as emotional subjects, which further contributes to the construction of the collective subject, consisting of the professionalized adult personnel. The willingness of the child to open up and verbalize how they feel becomes once more a confirmation of the confessional logic.
Concluding remarks

When dealing with this relatively new discursive practice of systematic quality work, LtC personnel need to construct transparent and credible accounts of their educational practices in order to demonstrate legitimacy, professionalism and adequate quality in relation to what the regulatory documents portray as ‘best practice’. Accompanying this demand for transparency is the LtCs’ need for legitimacy; to a large degree this is staged with an emphasis on rational processes. Something that are apparent in the examples, where the confessional activity involves not just a confession before the regulatory documents but also entails a confession to the discursive rationality of these regulatory documents; every action must have a purpose consistent with the regulatory documents, otherwise it is considered as defective. Institutions in general need to continuously work to prove their legitimacy. This is especially the case for public services, such as the LtC, which are expected to represent our society (Börjesson 2011). However, these rationalistic watchwords do not seem to be sufficient; various types of confessions and moral aspects are also added. A credible position thus seems to require something more – elements about one’s own insufficiency and how one plan to overcome it, driven by a school development discourse. This is an argument built on the examples in which the collective subject is expected to confess its ‘sins’ with respect to the quality management ideal as well as to acknowledge its responsibility for improved quality. Displayed through the concept of ‘trying’ and by self struggle.

The descriptive language deployed in reports and planning templates work as part of a truth building activity in the shaping of a confessional collective subject. Furthermore, through this language activity power is being exercised (Nicoll 2014). The subjectification process present in the empirical material can be said to be primarily about constructing a free but loyal collective subject that produces systematic quality work in line with what the educational authorities want to happen. The collective subject’s confession is always directed toward the collective gaze, as shown in the analysis. Confessional practices bring forth needs for self-regulation, self-improvement and self-development in a subjectification where responsibility is built in to transparent systematic quality management, enabling new forms of power relations in a system of governing at a distance. Aware of this ever-present collective gaze one confesses loyalty to the quality management system, and, to a large degree, to the performance measurement society too. This free but loyal subject has thus embraced the ‘correct’ attitude that includes willingness for an unavoidable responsibility for an infinite need of quality improvement in the LtCs. This is something that becomes visible when the personnel position themselves as a professional collective subject that can never reach a state of completion. To act in this way is the only possible way for the collective subject to be in the ‘truth’, namely a truth in terms of a dominant school development discourse. Being in this truth means an opportunity for legitimizing the LtC as an institution that is both rational and professional. This is also why we hardly find any satisfaction in the templates and reports; it is simply not suitable if one wishes to remain in the truth.

Being free but loyal has by all means a paradoxical and ironic edge. The more standardization, the more confessions, and the more independent autonomy, the more supervisory controlling processes. Also, irony is present in this process of rationalization since rationality is not enough on its own. A number of moral aspects need to be
added: the insights of one’s own inadequacy, improvement opportunities, and the sincere willingness to work with oneself. I have in this article seen this discursive order in four aspects of confessions. The contradictory role that irony plays is central in framing the gap between aims and results. Quality management is something carried out with great trouble, with repeated efforts, and with aims that can never be fulfilled.

The prize of being a free subject is here, contradictory: to obey certain positioning and subjectification – and to become a permanent administrator of the self in this never-ending project. Or, to put it another way: being a free subject is something predefined but not something optional. The reflexively autonomous agent is part-colonized and must provide confessional accounts of the self, using a bureaucratic rhetoric made available by the disciplinary and normalizing systematic quality management (Brown and Lewis 2011).

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