

Children's Own Perspectives on Participation in Leisure-time Centers in Sweden

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Abstract This article presents a study conducted at two different leisure time centers (LTCs) in Sweden. LTC is a voluntary after-school setting that according to the national curriculum should support for example development of values and children's social skills. The analysis is a part of a larger action research project comprising various research issues relating to LTCs. The present article focuses on the democratic objective of LTCs. The Swedish educational system, of which LTCs form a part, is considered to be rights-based with reference to the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child. The national curriculum stresses citizenship education, and both schools and LTCs are considered venues where children should have the opportunity and ability to practice democracy in their everyday activities. The point of departure in the theoretical framework is children's participation and agency. This article focuses on data gathered through 'drawing and talking with children' that reveals children's perspectives as to their own participation at LTCs. A total of 19 children participated in the study and were asked to draw a map of their LTC and describe their experiences of participation at the LTC. The results show that children clearly favored activities that, at least to some extent, could be carried out with less adult supervision, such as free, unstructured play. Opportunities to participate were described in terms of formal proceedings such as voting or writing suggestions and depositing them in the suggestion box. The children also described their participation in terms of opportunities to make individual choices in accordance with their preferences. When asked to name obstacles to participation, the children mentioned rules that were decided on by adults, and fixed routines that structured the children's afternoon hours in terms of both time and space.

Keywords: participation, leisure time center, agency, children's perspective, democracy

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1. Introduction

In this article we draw on data from a larger project on leisure-time centers (LTCs) in Sweden. The larger project is conducted using multiple methods and embraces pedagogues as well as children in LTCs. In this article we focus on data gathered through 'drawing and talking with children' that reveals children's perspectives on their own participation within LTCs. Research on children's participation within the educational context is most often conducted in school, and there is still a lack of research on younger children's perspectives on participation, especially concerning LTCs. After-school activities in LTCs in Sweden are offered to children ages 6–12 as a complement to school, but attendance at the LTC is voluntary even though LTCs have been successively integrated into the comprehensive school through school reforms that have taken place since the beginning of the 1990s [1]. Because the majority of children (83% in the year 2014) ages 6–9 attend LTC [2], the LTC is an important arena for

children's participation. The Swedish education system, in which the LTC is incorporated, is considered to be rights-based with reference to The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In the national curriculum, citizenship education is stressed, and both the school and LTC are considered arenas where children can practice democracy in their everyday activities [3].

The interest on children's participation as a research issue has increased ever since the Rights of the Child were declared by the UN. The UNCRC has also commonly been used as a point of departure in research on children's participation because the UNCRC emphasizes the child as a subject with individual rights, including participatory rights. However, how the UNCRC is adapted and to what extent it is implemented varies between nations, and even within nations when it comes, for example, to different welfare institutions [4,5]. Consequently, the mere ascription of being in possession of rights does not ensure that children are able or allowed to act in accord with these rights [5,6,7,8]. The implication is that children's participation needs to be studied in different contexts in

children's everyday lives and that children's experiences of participation at the local level must be taken into account [5]. Because the issue is about exercising rights to participation, which is also emphasized in the Swedish national curriculum, participation is understood in this work in terms of opportunities (and constraints) to make a difference, and this also means that participation is related to children's agency. The aim of this article is to contribute to knowledge on children's participation in terms of children's experiences and interpretations of constraints and opportunities to make choices, in taking part in decision-making, and otherwise influencing their daily lives in LTCs. The contribution of this study is to show how children themselves interpret their own opportunities to participation in extended education settings such as the LTC compared to school but also that relational aspects are of outmost concern with regard to participation. The specific research questions in this article are 1) How do children describe their opportunities and constraints to participation in decision-making processes in the LTC's? 2) What activities are preferred by the children and how do they interpret their opportunities to make choices in accord with the preferences? 3) How are children describing the meaning of social relations with other children and with adults in the LTC's with respect to opportunities to participation?

1.1. Leisure-time Centers in the Educational Context

The history of organized after-school activities for children in Sweden reveals several discursive turns. The development of organized after-school activities took place chiefly after the Second World War. The changing conception of childhood, developmental ideas of children's needs, and the growth of the welfare state were important catalysts for changes in the Swedish school system during the first decades of the twentieth century. After-school activities were discussed in terms of recreation, but most of the initial activities at the new afternoon centers were about preparation of schoolwork.

The afternoon center was replaced by the LTC during the 1960s. Women's increasing participation in the labor market outside the home is seen as one main reason for the development and extension of LTCs as well as for their extended opening hours. The idea of the LTC as a socializing agent and a complement to socialization by the parents was pronounced, as was the idea that activities in the LTC should primarily be recreational [9]. The idea that the school and LTC should cooperate to develop children's practical capabilities and cognitiveskills was introduced in the mid-1970s [9]. During the 1980s, the guiding ideas concerning LTCs were once more revised, this time proposing a separation between the LTC and the school. Consequently, the activities in LTCs were not supposed to focus on preparation or other tasks related to school [10].

From the 1980s to today, school reforms reclaimed the idea of the need for cooperation between the school and the LTC, and since 1994 LTCs have been governed by the National Agency of Education and the Education Act (SFS 2010:800) and are included in the national school curriculum [11]. The school reforms of the last two decades have emphasized integration of the LTC with the

school, and the LTC is now seen as a complement to the school [12]. The pedagogues who work in LTCs are also supposed to work part-time in the school during the morning hours, and this means that they have become a part of the practice and culture in the comprehensive school [13]. The practices in the LTC should, according to the curriculum, also contribute to the achievement of the educational goals of the school [14], and this means that during the last decade the LTC is also seen to have an important learning assignment [12]. Other goals in the curriculum for after-school care embrace the development of social skills, informal learning, and offering children a meaningful leisure time.

When it comes to participation, the national curriculum asserts:

The democratic principles of being able to influence, take responsibility and be involved should cover all pupils. Pupils should be given influence over their education. They should be continuously encouraged to take an active part in the work of further developing their education and keeping informed of issues that concern them. The information and the means by which pupils exercise influence should be related to their age and maturity. Pupils should always have the opportunity to take initiative on issues that should be treated within the framework of their influence over their education [[11], p 17].

It is clear, therefore, that in the latest curriculum (2011) the children attending school and LTCs are ascribed far-reaching rights to participate and to exercise influence in issues that concern them. Participation is not about merely being listened to or seen as a bearer of rights, but it also requires being able to exercise these participatory rights and, consequently, being able to make a difference. When it comes to LTCs, new guidelines were decided upon by the Swedish National Agency of Education in 2014, again stressing children's participation rights and participation as a concrete enactment. Also, the importance of conducting consequence analysis before major changes are implemented in the LTC was pointed out, i.e. taking into account how the proposed changes would affect the children [12].

Research on children's participation within the Swedish education system has mainly focused on pupils' influence with an emphasis on studies of older children and teenagers' views on participation or their possibilities to have a say in school [15,16,17,18,19]. Another research interest has been on so-called deliberative democracy and how it can be used as a democratic working tool in the classroom [20,21]. Research that highlights participation in school with a focus on younger children's perspective is limited, with the exception of few ethnographic studies [22,23,24]. These studies show that children's possibilities for participation are limited, and children's participation is often described in terms of pseudo-democracy where children's voices are not respected or acted upon in a serious way [23,25,24]. These results are in line with international research on children's participation in school. Results from several studies show, that children's possibility to influence is limited and that pupils often are invited to make decisions about issues which are not seen as of high importance [26,27]. Some research has also highlighted the importance of informal influence on daily basis as an aspect that children themselves value [28], as

well as shared decision-making processes where children can make their voice heard [29].

There are only a few studies conducted in LTCs that have focused on children's perspectives on their participation. In these studies, a central finding is that children themselves value the opportunities for decision-making and free play [30,31,32]. Haglund [33] has highlighted children's opportunities both to choose activities and to participate in decision-making as a way to have influence in LTCs. The results show that children's opportunities to participate were limited, but also, that children did not usually ask to be involved in decision-making, which might be an expression of their dissatisfaction with their subordinate role in the prevailing structure.

1.2. Children's Experiences and Perspectives on Participation – Moving Beyond the UNCRC

As discussed by many authors, the declaration of children's participation rights does not ensure that the rights are respected. There is a need, according to these voices, to elaborate upon the understanding of children's participation by relating the issue of participation to wider concerns on children's agency and citizenship. This might be seen as a pronounced emphasis on a political conception of participation by focusing on the circumstances in which children are – or are not – able and abled to make a difference in issues that concern them in their everyday lives as well as in society as a whole in large [4,5,7,8,34,35,36]. According to Wall and Dar [35] it is necessary to understand what children themselves conceive of as meaningful participation. These authors also discuss the need to make a clear distinction between participation as understood in terms of individual autonomy on the one hand and as an expression of interdependence on the other (Ibid.). Participation should, then, not be seen simply as independent individuals making rational decisions independent of others or independent of the circumstances, but rather as involvement, which necessarily embraces social relations and interdependency with others and with a particular set of circumstances. The social interdependency with others and with the surroundings is not seen here as applicable only to childhood and children, but instead characterizes all social relations among children and adults alike [5,7,8,35,36].

In addition to the interdependency between people and the need to take into account children's perspectives on participation, several authors discuss the significance of experience in relation to participation. As Bacon and Frankel [8] argue, competence to participate is not simply linked to age and maturity but, rather, to experience. Accumulated experiences as a condition for the capacity for participation is as claimed "ever-present when we try to engage in participatory practice, and must also be borne in mind whenever we theorize about participation" [[8], p. 212]. Inherent in the notion of 'accumulated experience' is a temporal dimension pointing out the importance of not only present experiences, but above all past experiences of participation with respect to agency [cf. 4]. These issues, which are elaborated upon later in this section, are

therefore also important when discussing participation in relation to agency because participation enhances agency.

The recognition of the importance of research on children in their own right, and acknowledging that children are active actors in and, thus, co-producers of their everyday lives, is not new. It has been a core idea within the sociology of childhood since the early 1990s, and it has resulted in a rich collection of studies on children's agency in various contexts that show how children can influence their circumstances by negotiating, resisting, opposing, and questioning them [34,35,36,37]. However, there are also some critical voices with regard to research on children's agency that argue that such a focus could result in limited understanding of the limits and restraints of children's agency [38]. Despite this criticism, the results of many empirical studies have revealed that there is some space for agency in many social spheres in children's everyday life and that there are also situations in which children's agency is severely limited [5,6,36]. What is more, the criticism might be a consequence of unspecified and atheoretical uses of 'agency' where the meaning of 'agency' is taken for granted [cf 7].

Agency, as we see it, should not be understood by only focusing on possibilities to exercise participation or modes of participation, and there needs to be the recognition and understanding of factors that constrain and limit opportunities for participation in various contexts. According to Närvänen and Näsman [4], agency refers to "acting and making choices, reflexively interpreting the present situation and the opportunities and constraints at hand in light of what is already known (beliefs, norms, etc.), i.e. the past, and in light of the future in terms of desires, wants and anticipation of consequences" [[4], p. 232]. Furthermore the authors point out the importance of understanding agency as situational and relational [4], [cf 39].

2. Methods

The data analyzed in this paper were gathered at two different LTCs and were collected as part of an ongoing action research project [cf 40]. In this analysis, we have focused on children's perspectives of their opportunities to participation in their LTC. To understand children's perspectives, we have tried to involve children and give them tools to formulate what is important for them in an LTC with a focus on participation. The study is explorative in the sense that we have used 'drawing and talking with children' as a data-gathering method.

The data were gathered at two different LTC units, that we call LTC A and LTC B. The LTC A is located in a middle-class suburb, and the LTC B is located in an urban area characterized by mixed socioeconomic conditions. The children were interviewed in groups. In the LTC A, two groups of children in grade 2 (a total of 9 children, 8–9 years old) were interviewed, and in the LTC B four groups in grade 3 (a total of 10 children, 9–10 years old) were interviewed. The children were first asked to collaborate by making a drawing of the LTC and to describe the map (places) while drawing. The children were then asked to point out places that they preferred or liked by drawing happy smiley faces and places they did not like by drawing sad faces. While the children were

drawing the maps and smileys the researchers also posed questions about activities in different spaces or places, whether or not there were rules about the activities or being in places and if the children had opportunities to influence activities or rules. The method was inspired by so-called 'participatory-maps' and can be seen as a way to visualize different topics [46] but also as a way to give due weight to children's own experiences and what they want to focus on during the interview [41,42]. The map-drawing activities were recorded digitally, and every group interview took about 30 minutes.

We used the methods that are common in the analysis of this kind of data, including identifying common recurring patterns through reading and rereading and coding the material [43]. Our analysis of the material resulted in four analytic themes: Defending free play and free time as the core idea of the LTC; Schedules and rules – obstacles for participation; Participation and experience – when you are bigger, you have more influence; and Participation should be fair – even among children.

Ethical awareness guided the research with regard to the children's voices and free will to participate as well as finding ways to overcome obstacles to participation such as lack of language skills [44]. The project was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board.

Transcription notation:

[...] material omitted by the authors

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

R refers to researcher. C refers to child. C1, C2 etc. is used to clarify turns in conversation between the children.

3. Results

3.1. Defending Free Play and Free Time as the Core Idea of the LTC

In the beginning of the interviews, the children were asked to draw a map of their LTC. They could decide themselves what they wanted to include in their map. Some of the maps portrayed the whole school with the schoolyard, while others just drew their own department. The map-drawing activity showed that the LTC is often located either nearby or in the same classrooms where the children spend their school hours. Thus in the drawings the children did not always make a distinction between the school and the LTC. When they drew a smiley face on places where they "like to be", this could sometimes involve traditional school activities like math as well as free play in the LTC.

The children compared the LTC with the school. In these comparisons, the school was described as more demanding and it was also associated with work – "You have to work all the time" – while the LTC was "free" and associated with play – "You can play there". These descriptions might, at least in part, be understood in terms of activities that are preferred by the children (play versus work). The LTC was clearly associated with play and some freedom of choice, while school was associated with learning:

"In the leisure-time center, you can play and everything and take it easy."

"You can play much more freely in the leisure-time center, but you don't learn so much in the leisure-time center."

In comparing the LTC with school, the LTC was described as more free than the school. Free play and free time are expressions of being able to make choices among activities that are in line with one's preferences, but they also allow interactions and relations with peers who also make similar choices. The participating children defended the idea that activities in the LTC should be free and that the children should be able to influence what they do in the LTC. They did not like to be forced to do things. For example, one boy said, "Like crafts-work. I hate it. I hate it."

Even if free play was seen as an important activity, the children also pointed out that they sometimes "don't know what to do". In relation to this, the children also mentioned that it could be difficult to know what to do because there are so many children in the LTC. One girl said:

"Some days you just have to take care of yourself and just go around and it is boring sometimes."

Because the activities and the playmates during free play are chosen and organized by the children themselves, it might be that some children are left outside the activity or that the peers with whom they usually play are absent.

The activity of free play is though highly appreciated by the children because within certain limits the children are allowed to make decisions about activities as well as which peers to play with.

3.2. Schedules and Rules – Obstacles for Participation

Not everything is a question of free choice for the children in the LTC. The children described, that there are certain overarching rules and routines, as well as the temporal duration of these routines that are decided by adults and are not seen as negotiable by the children. Rules that are interpreted as non-negotiable were described by the children as rules that apply to all children with no exceptions.

One of the main concerns for the children when they talked about their LTC was a desire to make more decisions about their afternoon activities. The time in the LTC was more or less organized in a fixed schedule with recurrent activities like "outdoor break", "circle-time", or "snacks". When describing the LTC, the children often complained about the fixed time and space routines that limited their freedom to decide about what kinds of activities they would do and when and where they would do them. They stressed a desire to be able to have more influence over the time and place for activities as well as to be able to choose specific activities. One rule children in the LTC complained about was the obligatory outdoors hour that was perceived as inflexible:

"If the adults decide that everyone must go out, and you do not want to, then it's a bit boring."

"It is not funny when the 'outdoor-breaks' are too long. It will be too hot and there is no shade."

Many of the children perceived fixed routines as overriding and complained with arguments like, "You are never able to play in peace". Any activity could be disrupted due to the scheduling during the afternoon hours,

and these disruptions were not within the scope of the children's influence. The importance of being able to make individual choices was emphasized by the children:

"I should be able to choose so that I am able to do almost nearly exactly what I want. I also might choose if I should be indoors or outdoors."

To be able to make individual choices was stressed. Because the outdoors hour in the LTC was often seen as mandatory, the child quoted above was making a point that the possibility to make an individual choice should even apply to the rules that are justified by the pedagogues as embracing all children and thus not negotiable. However, sometimes the possibility to choose to play outdoors is an option. Because the indoor area is restricted, there is a rule that forbids running indoors: "You are not allowed to run indoors because we are too many children and can bump in to each other." The rule that children should not run indoors because it might endanger themselves and others was not questioned by the children. Also, the option between running outdoors or staying indoors and doing other things was described as a choice in this case and was not contested.

When the children marked places that they disliked, they described places "where there often is often some kind of fighting." The children described several situations where some children were making a fuss and fighting with each other, for example, in the entrance hall when it was crowded and everybody was putting on their jackets and bumping into each other. The situations and places where conflicts easily occurred were described with emphasis because they were experienced as unpleasant. However, the children did not say that these situations should or could be improved in any way.

The children stressed the opportunity to make choices, and they disliked some of the rules in the LTC. Rules that might be justified in general terms, such as all children have to go out, and thus are not optional are questioned by the children, while rules that are general (children are not to run indoors) but qualified by an explanation (too risky) and that have an option that enables a choice (to go and play outside instead) are more likely to be accepted. It should also be noted that situations that are disliked, for example, because of the risk for conflicts between children are not necessarily described in terms of change or influence but just as 'the way things are' in the LTC; in other words, these are seen as circumstances that are taken for granted.

3.3. Participation and experience - When you are bigger, you have more influence

When the children drew the map of the LTC, some of them draw just the inside facilities while other children put a lot of energy into drawing a blueprint of all of the buildings and the whole schoolyard. The children in both LTCs were the oldest children in the unit, and this meant that they were allowed to move more freely in the area outside the schoolyard.

When drawing the maps, they described different rules that are related to age, but they used the terms "small" or "big" instead of age. Older children at the LTCs have access to outdoor spaces that are forbidden to the younger children, and they are able to expand upon the space for play and the spaces that are not under constant adult

supervision. They often mentioned that the advantage for older children is the freedom to move more freely outdoors compared to younger children: "We are there alone and there are no adults there [...] we can do it but not those in Grade 2. They could get into trouble". In this common example, the children described themselves as more reliable and that they had the competence to solve different kinds of situations – like fighting – than the younger children did.

It should also be noted that the children could interpret the possibility to move outside the schoolyard differently and that they did not always agree on what the rules prescribed, for example, how far you could go without adult supervision or where different games could take place in the schoolyard. Some of the children described how a specific place outside the schoolyard was allowed as a playground while others claimed that it was only allowed after having consulted or informed the pedagogues.

According to the children, different rules applied to children of different ages. This was exemplified by the children when they talked about rules for the use of computers. When drawing the maps, the places where computers are placed were specifically marked with happy faces. For many of the children, using a computer was marked as an attractive activity. Only the oldest children in the LTC were allowed to use computers by themselves, and there were restrictions with respect to what the computers could be used for as well as the time for the use of a computer. In the LTC B the children had, through a decision by the LTC-council, devised a new system for the use of the computers. According to this system, every child got 1 hour of "computer time" per week. In the interview, the children discussed this new rule:

"But the adults think it is better that you use all your time in one day. They make you reserve it [the computer]. If you have not reserved the computer, you are not allowed to play on it for a week. So you have to take responsibility."

As described above, freedom, in this case using computers, is closely connected with responsibility. In addition to taking responsibility by remembering to reserve the computer, they also have to note in a special book the amount of time they have used the computer.

As shown in this section, some of the rules in LTC were interpreted differently by different children, which may be consequential for their actions. We also show that rules, such as computer time, is accepted by the children as they are represented in the LTC-council and are taking part on the decision-making.

3.4. Participation should be fair – even among the children

When the children talked about their opportunities for participation, a central theme was how opportunities and decision-making are distributed among the children themselves. It was emphasized that some children's opinions and decisions count more than others. Two girls gave an example of this experience when they described a situation where the children in their LTC were supposed to give suggestions of activities they would like to do:

C1 "It is two girls who always decide the whole time."

- C2 "I know!"
- R "Two in your class?"
- C1 "Yes, they're the ones who make the most proposals. They think that everything is good."
- C2 "It is Melissa and Trixie, shit, what they are talking about?! They really like to make suggestions like 'Can we go to the zoo, swimming lessons, a museum'? Even though we have been to the same place ten times, they want to go there again."
- R "They always make proposals? But, do they always get what they want?"
- C3 "Sometimes."
- C2 "For example, they take a little slip [and write a suggestion] and, yes, we go to the swimming hall."
- C1 "And then we vote for things."
- C2 "Sometimes we vote for things we can do. If most want it, then maybe we can do it."
- C3 "Soccer stuff."
- R "But you don't make proposals [turning to C3]?"
- C3 "No."
- R "Why not?"
- C1 "No, he [pointing to C3] is usually with his friends and [they] write proposals. So he doesn't want to write one himself."

The example above highlights how participation is also a relational process both between pedagogues and children and among the children. Some children can gain a lot of influence and others less. The girls refer to two other girls in the LTC who actively propose activities that they prefer themselves. Being active and talkative in making suggestions results in their suggestions often being approved. Voting for a majority decision can also be used when there are many suggestions. Here participation is connected to the ability to make suggestions. Several children expressed difficulty in figuring out what they can make suggestions about. Some children let others make suggestions and to accept them if they are in accord with their own preferences. In other cases, the children have made the same suggestion repeatedly but without success, and this has resulted in frustration:

- R "Do you put suggestions in the suggestion box?"
- C "No, not so often."
- R "Do you remember something you have put [in the box]?"
- C "To play computer games, and computer games, and computer games, and computer games, and iPad, and computer games."

Success with suggestions and in making decisions was described as being uneven according to the children. Sometimes it was described as deserved. For example, a child who is very good at soccer might get to decide on the teams, and this was interpreted by the children as fair. In other situations, however, competition could arise and the way that one could influence the situation could be considered unfair:

- "Sometimes we play Let's Dance on YouTube [a dancing game that is projected onto an interactive whiteboard] and we can dance. But then there can be trouble when one person is running the computer but another person wants to run it."

In the example above, a boy describes a dance activity where the children disagree about who is in charge of the

computer. In such situations, there is no legitimate reason that the children would accept another child's desire to take over the computer. On the contrary, the urge to be in charge is interpreted as illegitimate.

4. Discussion

The aim of this article was to understand how children, when they describe activities in the LTC, interpret opportunities and constraints for participation. As a tool, we chose to use drawing and talking about activities and places in the LTC to get closer to an understanding of children's preferences as well as the issues they would like to talk about concerning participation and agency. As Rubinstein [45] discusses, understanding desires and preferences is essential to understanding agency. We did not try to persuade or probe the children to talk about participation, but rather we let the children describe their everyday lives in the LTC and we asked questions on participation when appropriate with regard to the children's descriptions. In this way the children were allowed to set the agenda during the drawing and talking activities [42,43,44,45,46]. Based on our experience the method was useful, especially when talking about children's preferences. We could, however, have posed follow-up questions on participation on several occasions, which might have resulted in a more focused discussion on the issue. This is, however, a question of balance between having respect for the children's agenda on the one hand and the research agenda on the other.

When it comes to children's preferences for activities, they clearly favored activities that could, at least to some extent, be carried out with less adult supervision such as playing soccer, free play (which provides the opportunity to decide both activities and peers), playing computer games, and doing crafts. Some of these activities, such as soccer, could be conducted outdoors and outside the schoolyard, while others, such as craftwork, could be carried out in separate small rooms or other separate spaces (such as the computer room with the computers placed in the corner behind a screen). These activities were also in line with how children interpreted the core idea of LTC, i.e. these activities were associated with free time, recreation, and free play. This is consistent with previous research in LTCs where children also pointed out the importance of having more loosely organized activities compared to school activities [30,31,32].

Opportunities to participate were described in terms of formal proceedings such as voting, writing suggestions for the suggestion box, and decisions taken by the LTC council where both children and pedagogues were represented. Such modes of participation might be seen as derived by adults [cf 5], but they were highly approved by the children and they were not questioned or interpreted as controversial in any way.

While the decisions taken through formal modes of participation included all children, other decisions that also applied to all of the children were opposed during our interviews with the children. These decisions were, according to the children's interpretation, taken by adults only (for example, some mandatory activities), and these were not interpreted as legitimate. A justification that a rule should be followed just because it applied to all

children was not necessarily approved by the children but depended on the circumstances. The children also described participation in terms of opportunities to make individual choices in accord with their own preferences. This was also emphasized when the children described rules that were decided on by adults and that the children interpreted as non-negotiable. Non-negotiable rules were understood as obstacles to participation and agency together with fixed routines that scheduled the afternoon hours for the children in terms of both time and space. The ordering of activities in time and space was interpreted by the children as imposed on them because it disrupted activities such as free play. Haglund's [33] recent research in LTCs reveals that the children do not ask for more influence, and this can be interpreted in terms of subordination. These results are partly in line with our study because the children expressed that they were dissatisfied with some rules that they interpreted as overarching and that such rules were impossible for them to change. In our study, however, the children did express a wish to influence such issues as the schedule, or obligatory activities. Also, the limited opportunities to participate might, in some respects, be taken for granted as part of the social order in the LTC.

The children who participated in this part of our larger project were the oldest in the LTCs. They had some accumulated experience on participation as well as the obstacles for participation both from school and LTC. They related increased opportunities to age in comparison to younger children, but they were also accustomed to formal modes of participation. When they described their opportunities for participation, these were closely connected with taking responsibility. This is in line with the notion of accumulated experience as a condition for understanding participation [47].

Our results also reveal the importance of relational aspects when discussing children's participation and agency. Children are aware of their relation to adults as well as of relations among children themselves and how such relations may offer opportunities to participation but also constrain participation. Children acknowledged the inequality of power between adults and children, and also among the children. Our results in this respect are in line with Parnell and Patsarnika [48] for example in that the children in their study understand participation as "one which is grounded in dialogue, listening and interdependency, [...]. Participation is therefore understood as an ongoing and everyday process of communication and interaction between adults and young people" (p. 472). The way how children in our study oppose or question some of the overarching rules that are justified by the notion that such rules apply to all children and are obligatory, may be seen in this light, highlighting the need to have a dialogue and listen to the children on issues that concern them.

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