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Leisure-time teachers’ reflections on systematic quality work: approaches and challenges

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ABSTRACT
In times of global tendencies on governance of the public sector, ‘quality’ has become a keyword, an ideal. In Sweden, all municipalities, school heads and teachers are required to carry out systematic quality work to meet the demand on goal attainment. Working with documentation is a crucial aspect of this process. The Swedish leisure-time centre aimed for younger school children has goals to strive towards but not goals to attain. This study aims to gain knowledge of leisure-time teachers’ reflections on their work with documentation. Based on written reflections from 22 groups of leisure-time teachers engaged in a continuing professional development course, the article call for a discussion on meanings of ‘quality’ and what effect systematic quality work has on views of valued activities, content and professional skills, and on the holistic notion of pupil’s learning and development.

Introduction
Neoliberal tendencies on the governance of the public sector have led to significant changes to the educational system. Global concurrence has actualised the development of international measures of knowledge, which has thus entailed national control systems with an impact on curricula and standards for measurement. The previously centrally regulated Swedish education system became goal-oriented and decentralised in the 1990s, and since then, while municipalities are responsible for recruiting staff, organising schools and allocating recourses, they remain accountable to the central government for their schools’ attainment of national educational goals (Johansson, Lindgren and Montin, 2016). In Sweden, all municipalities, local authorities, school heads and teachers are obliged to carry out systematic quality work aimed at planning, following up and developing the education to attain the goals formulated in the curricula. The leisure-time centres (LTC) aimed for younger school children hold goals to strive towards in areas of democracy, norms and values, pupils’ knowledge and skills-related development and learning, as well as participation and influence, but they do not stipulate goals to attain (SFS, 2010:800; Skolverket/National Agency for Education, 2016).

LTC is a common aspect of many Swedish pupils’ childhoods. As many as 84% of all pupils aged between six and nine years are enrolled in this tax funded and heavily subsidized type of education, and the number increases in other European countries such as Germany and Switzerland (Felfe, Lechner, and Thiemann, 2016). The main tasks of the LTC are to stimulate the pupil’s emotional, intellectual, physical and social development and learning, offering pupils meaningful leisure and
complementing school in terms of time and content. In most cases, the Ltc is located in the school building, which enhances the possibilities for collaboration between leisure time teachers (LtTs) and teachers with other educational backgrounds. The majority of LtTs carry out their work not only in the Ltc, but they are also engaged in preschool class and school activities. Employment in an Ltc requires a qualification as an LtT, but due to the difficulty recruiting staff with such educational background, the workforce is quite diverse and not all LtTs hold higher education qualifications or education directed towards working with children (Skolverket, 2017). The aim of this article is to gain knowledge of LtTs’ reflections on their work with documentation. The following two questions are asked:

i How do LtTs approach demands for documentation in relation to Ltc aspects and activities?
ii Which challenges do they describe due to these demands?

Quality in educational settings

European politics on education and welfare have changed rapidly, highlighting virtues such as self-responsibility, participation and freedom of choice. State intervention in childhood is not a new phenomenon, but in times of neoliberalism, holding keywords such as decentralisation, efficiency and flexibility, ‘the state intervenes in a binding way in the making of a “good” childhood and a “good” parenthood’ (Strandell, 2013, p. 270). The dominant discussion on early childhood generates questions regarding how to measure quality, which criteria the measurement require and how to attain the goals set. Such questions are viewed as a call for standardization, predictability and control. According Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2011) the avoidance of various perspectives and diversity imply a wish for a pure and well-organized world without confusion and complications. The authors state that the quality concept is widely used, but seldom defined, making the concept meaningless. Nonetheless, the concept has had such an impact that it can hardly be questioned. ‘Mostly, it is taken for granted that there is something – objective, real and knowable – that is called quality’ (Dahlberg et al., 2011, p. 6, author’s translation). Still, the authors strongly recommend documentation as a tool for developing educational settings. They claim that ‘instead of relying on some standardized quality measure, as in the quality discourse, documentation makes it possible for us to take responsibility for creating our own meaning and reach a conclusion of what is happening by ourselves’ (Dahlberg et al., 2011, p. 217, author’s translation). In a similar way, Lenz Taguchi (2012) argues that pedagogical documentation can be used in order to understand documentation as something that make practice material to us, which might enhance staff’s engagement in practice even more. Thereby, staff in educational settings are provided an opportunity to be more involved in practice.

The neoliberal tendencies in education and the focus on standards for measurement and learning outcomes impacts the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in various ways. While the standardized ECEC services that have characterised recent policies in many countries might be viewed as an ideal goal for safeguarding all children’s rights to high quality settings, they might also be viewed as problematic because of the difficulty involved in transferring ‘best practice’ from one context to another (Karila, 2012). During the last decade, ECEC has been an educational setting of importance on the policy agenda, but often ‘relegated to the “readiness for school” role’ (Moss, 2010, p. 8). Van Laere, Peeters, and Vandenbroeck (2012, p. 227) stressed the ‘schoolification’ that affects policies and practices within the field, implying a notion of ECEC as merely preparation for compulsory schooling and its didactics. To ensure that young children acquire literacy, numeracy and scientific skills, standardized measurements have been adopted and used to evaluate children’s performances. Other features of schoolification are actualised by Loyd and Penn (2014), who argued that the possibility for children in the United Kingdom to enter primary school at the age of four – one year earlier than usual – that was introduced in 2011 mirrors a lack of acknowledgement from the government of the value of ECEC. This development has met severe criticism because of the neglect of social, affective and physical aspects of children’s learning and development that the emphasis on language and cognitive skills implies. The caring dimension in ECEC settings tend
to be moved to the background and thus affects the holistic notion of children (Van Laere, Vandebroek, Roets and Peeters, 2014). As Lollich and Lynch (2017) stated: Managerial principles originated in a commercial context focus output and profit which ‘are often antithetical to the caring that is at the heart of good education’ (p. 117). Urban (2014) confirmed that the predominantly English-language research literature on ECE often directs interest towards a narrow conceptualisation of education in terms of formalised learning at the expense of aspects of care and the link between these two aspects of practice. The described tendencies have resulted in significant changes to notions of professionalism within this field. In some countries centrally specified professional standards have been formulated, which Hordern (2016) claimed might be used to discipline practice. However, in the context of United States afterschool programmes, Huang, La Torre Mantrundola, and Leon (2014) stressed the need ‘for a checklist strategy in assessing [afterschool programmes] to meet quality-based standards’ (p. 20). They claimed that despite the identification of quality-based indicators, ‘the research community still lacks a concrete and easily accessible system that can be provided to the afterschool programmes for the purpose of self-improvement’ (Huang et al., 2014, p. 39).

The Swedish context

Similar to the Swedish preschool, LtCs should not evaluate the individual’s performances but they should assess the quality of the educational settings. However, the governing principles of the school, which comprise these educational settings, require results to be presented in relation to national goals and demands on systematic quality work. The schools are supervised by the Schools Inspectorate which has the power to use two main sanctions – rewards and penalties – in case schools fail to fulfil the demands set. These sanctions can be financial, legal and/or reputational and relate to individuals, units within an organisation or the entire organisation (Johansson, 2016). The National Agency for Education’s (Skolverket, 2015) support material on quality work in practice is structured to mirror the process of such work and is divided into the following phases: Where do we stand today? Where are we heading? How shall we do? and How did it turn out? It is stressed that before commencing any development work, knowledge needs to be gained on the needs, challenges and problem areas. This knowledge needs to be put towards the local goals in relation to the national goals and the demands formulated in the Education Act (SFS, 2010:800) and the curriculum (Skolverket, 2016). Further, the results should be connected to conditions, work processes and the organisation of the education. The National Agency for Education maintains that all effective work of development starts with a complete description of the present situation. To anchor and meet the pupils’ and the educational setting’s needs, a consensus regarding the present situation is essential. Follow-up results and goal achievement require that information has to be collected and compiled. The description of the present situation comprises ‘pupil results of both quantitative and qualitative character’ and ‘documentation on goal achievement regarding the overall goals in the curriculum, how the education is organised, which working methods that are used and approaches and learning climate’ (Skolverket, 2015, p. 9, author’s translation). The Education Act (SFS, 2010:800) stipulates that all phases in the systematic quality work shall be documented. In preschools, pedagogical documentation is used as a basis in the systematic quality work, (Vallberg Roth, 2012) and as a tool aiming at creating a communicative practice, holding a crucial role in a discourse of meaning-making (Dahlgberg et al., 2011). Drawing from their study on systematic quality work in preschools, Sheridan, Williams, and Sandberg (2013) noted that the documentation in preschool has changed as result of changing societal intentions and government policy. Owing to an enhanced awareness of the intentions of the curriculum, the preschool teachers have developed approaches that have enabled them to not only describe the activities carried out but also describe the children’s learning in relation to curriculum objectives. However, although the staff should not evaluate the children’s learning outcomes, some preschool teachers discuss the objectives they need to attain. Viewing documentation to recognize and confirm their competence as professionals supports Löfgren’s (2017) study, which shows how preschool teachers consider themselves more professional when working with
documentation. However, the study also stresses the ambiguities concerning increased documentation in preschool, which more specifically is an issue about what the preschool teachers should document and how this work should be carried out (Löfgren, 2017). While systematic quality work primarily connects to formal school knowledge, LtCs rather associate it with social learning. Lager’s (2015) study on systematic quality work in LtCs reveals tension between the individual and the group. While planning and carrying out activities, the LtTs have an individualistic perspective; however, in their documentation and evaluations, they reconstruct a social pedagogical tradition based on LtC group activities. According to Lager (2015), this pattern makes visible the tension between a structuring and controlling quality discourse and a social pedagogical discourse with a focus on developing quality. Tensions also emerge in Hjalmarsson’s (2013) study, showing LtTs’ ambiguous notions related to aspects of voluntariness and governance in the LtC activities. The LtTs seem to navigate between encouraging the children’s initiatives while conferring with each other about the suitability of certain activities in which the children engage. The LtTs struggle to describe how activities such as drawing and painting meet the LtC’s complementary function in relation to school and how these activities enhance their possibilities of reaching the goal. Questions Hjalmarsson raised concern which activities can be noted in reports on LtC quality and whether a gap might exist between the activities that actually take place and the activities reported. This discussion relates to the unique position of LtCs in school and the LtTs’ efforts of handling a – to some extent – perceived subordinate position in the groups of colleagues, a position that LtTs both confirm and resist (Hjalmarsson and Löfdahl Hultman, 2015). Similar patterns occur in Hjalmarsson, Löfdahl Hultman, and Warin’s (2017) study, indicating that LtTs take up various positions when navigating between aspects and tasks in work that connect to external auditing and internal valuation. In diary notes written by LtTs, ethics of care emerge as crucial to their everyday practices, while other LtTs’ verbal accounts challenge the notion of ethics of care as fundamental to the LtC quality, emphasising neoliberal politics and policies.

**Theoretical strands**

This article is positioned within a critique of neo-liberal influences in education and draws on education policy theory. Ball (2003) claimed that the new governance of the public sector has staked out neoliberal tendencies, which implies that while focusing on quantitative, measurable outcomes, soft elements tend to be moved to the background. The concept quality, which is strongly manifested in this discussion, emanates from a philosophical paradigm and from the political-economic regime neoliberalism. ‘For “quality”, being about “human technologies” that can assure high returns on social investment, is part of neo-liberalism’s instrumental, calculative and economic rationality’ (Moss, 2016, p. 12). Measurements and rankings create individuals that fit into the governance system, making them and their work organizations accessible for inspection. Such setup places demands of performance on the individuals, which Ball (2006) described as ‘a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation’ (p. 692). Performances conducted by individuals or organisation function as a measure of productivity or ‘quality’. Drawing from this reasoning, the LtTs are both policy subjects and policy actors, when enacting policy ideas through their actions, talk and writing (Braun, Ball, Maguire and Hoskins, 2011). Such perspectives include a notion that the LtTs are positioned differently, and position themselves in various ways, in relation to policy (Ball, Maguire, Braun and Hoskins, 2011). Ball (2006) stated that while some would argue that demands on increased visibility of individuals and organisations might lead to a more transparent and understandable society, he suggested that this would encourage the creation of a sort of virtual image. These fabrications that individuals and organisations create ‘are selections among various possible representations – or versions – of the organization and person’ (Ball, 2006, p. 96). The purpose is not to provide truthful versions of individuals or organisations, but effective ones. Demands on performativity chafes against authenticity and commitment, and might in that sense be considered an act of creating plasticity. In a similar manner, Wrenn (2015) reasoned about the conflict between
demands on individuals to be accountable and the individual’s responsibility towards others. She argued that self-interested and atomistic individuals that put their own agendas first, erode the basis for collectivism (Wrenn, 2015). The neoliberal ‘ethics of self-interest’ risk to ‘[c]rows out an ethic of care’ (Wrenn and Waller, 2017, p. 499), which is fundamental to ECEC settings.

The empirical data

During one school-year, 207 persons working in LtCs, representing 14 municipalities within a certain geographical region in Sweden, were involved in a continuing professional development course. The goal was that staff in LtCs would develop and deepen their knowledge on LtC pedagogy and its importance for pupils’ learning and development. The aim was that the staff would meet, reflect upon and critically discuss various aspects of the LtC’s tasks based on the research presented to develop certain aspects of the LtC context. The course was a cooperation between the Regional Centre for Development (Regionalt utvecklingscentrum, RUC) at the local university and collaborative municipalities in the region.

The course comprised three main elements: (1) gatherings at the university, where the participants attended lectures on topics of relevance to their profession and work; (2) practical work in groups at the LtTs’ local LtCs on a certain activity or task on a certain theme formulated by the lecturer; and (3) gatherings at the university for the LtTs holding group leader positions for leading the discussions. In some municipalities, groups of LtTs were organised within the schools, whereas other municipalities chose to set groups of LtTs working in different LtCs. All of the groups were led by an LtT elected by the school head. The leader’s task was to set the rules for the discussion, focusing mainly on creating curiosity for others’ reflections, encouraging the use of various perspectives, allowing all participants’ opportunities to speak, reflecting on patterns emerging through the discussions and documenting the processes. The only instructions in relation to the documentation asked the LtTs to provide written accounts that would be understandable for others. An email list was provided for leaders to share documentation with other groups. The group leaders met at the university four times during the course to practice various structured methods of discussion to strengthen their role as leaders of discussion in the groups at their local setting. As project leader, I held a lecture and followed the entire process by participating in the lectures and gatherings with the group leaders, and I read and reflected upon their documentation.

The empirical data consist of documentation from 22 groups representing 11 of the 14 municipalities involved. The documentation embraces the groups’ reflections on which aspects and activities of the LtC are present in the LtC’s local document they created and how these aspects and activities relate to pedagogy and care. The analysis process followed Thornberg and Forslund Fyrkedal’s (2009) guidance for coding, which means that categories were drawn from the content of the empirical data based on which categories were most frequent in the LtT’s written reflections that actualised systematic quality work. The following categories resulted: goal attendance, efforts for visibility, measurement and evaluation, work with documentation, lack of measure methods suitable to LtC aspects and activities.

All groups were given the opportunity to participate in the research on aspects of LtCs and LtTs by approving the use of their documentation for research purposes. The LtTs were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason. The LtTs were also informed that their identities and the names of the schools and municipalities would not be shared in any presentation of the research results. All the groups gave their permission to use their documentation. With the purpose to safeguard their anonymity, in the presentation of the results the groups are denominated with the letters A to V.

LtTs on working with documentation

This section presents the results of the study starting with the first research question concerning how the LtTs approach the demands for documentation in relation to LtC aspects and activities.
Thereafter, the second research question regarding the challenges they describe due to these demands is discussed. Quotations from the group’s written reflections are presented in italics.

**Approaches to demands for documentation**

Most of the groups created LiC-related documentation. However, one of the group’s (5) written reflections were of such a nature that it was impossible to determine their approaches to the demands for documentation, and have for that reason been left out of the discussion.

The efforts to make visible the LiC activities and aspects that manifested in the texts from several groups: We are good at making visible thematic work, outdoor activities, sports and play using picture documentation and information to parents on a regular basis (T). Group G reports that their work has been documented, evaluated and made visible to our politicians and ourselves. The increased demands on documenting, making visible and relating the aspects and activities to the goals formulated in the curriculum are mirrored in the empirical data. Several groups pay attention to their planning and evaluation work in relation to the overarching goals of the LiC. According to group A, their LiC-related documentation comprises planning and evaluation of our guiding principles and goals while group D states that their visible documentation is mainly the evaluation that connects to the curriculum. Text from other groups include Our documentation is based on evaluations of our goals (O). It is obvious in the documents that we connected to the policy documents (L) and The report on quality, including the LiC goals and how we work to reach these goals, is our main documentation (C). To enhance equity, the LiCs in the municipality within which group F works use a common form for the work plan, the monthly reports and the quality report. Group H stresses that their local pedagogical planning is grounded in our policy documents, the Education Act, the curriculum and The Convention of the Right of the Child. In our document, we have emphasised recurrent activities which are the backbone of the LiC. We have connected the document to the goals and the central content of the policy documents. According to these LiTs, documentation is important when making the LiC visible to ourselves, our colleagues, the parents and the local authority. For group K, the Schools Inspectorate’s critique on the systematic quality work in the LiCs in their specific municipality led to carrying out a goal document including planning for the school year with specified periods for documentation. Other LiTs emphasise that the work with documentation enables them to involve possibilities that afterwards highlight occurrences and situations (A).

The LiTs use various methods to meet the demands by showing the LiC aspects and activities to others. Some groups apply approaches that are common in this educational setting, such as parent meetings to reach the parents and possibilities for describing the work carried out in the LiC. We make the LiC visible by talking about it and showing pictures. Every week, we give the parents written information to describe what we do in the LiC. We have drop-in coffee for parents when the children show what they do at the LiC. Sometimes we have organised exhibitions on different projects (C). Others use electronic and virtual sources as a Facebook page and text messages with photos to parents to show what their children have experienced (V). Some LiTs think in new lines entirely: Our suggestion is to make visible and document our work in the doakroom in a conspicuous way (R). According to group J, the efforts of using documentation to make LiC aspects and activities visible have had a good effect in terms of a strengthened professional role (M) and increased status. Now we are a natural part of school and the group of staff.

**Challenges in the work with documentation**

Several groups of LiTs reflect upon challenges in their work with documentation: We have always had a hard time describing our activities, what we do and why (J). Similarly, other groups stressed that to them, documentation and evaluation is an area of improvement (G) and that they their goal is to get better at documenting and following-up on activities carried out (I). Corresponding reflections on documentation emanate from group P, which reports that they are good at planning and deciding what to
do, but seldom do we take time to discuss, reflect upon and evaluate the activities. The difficulties might be because the LtTs’ professional competence and pedagogical considerations in everyday practice are not evident to others: It is hard to make visible the work we do. Sometimes it might be understood as us just ‘hanging around’ when we actually observe an ongoing conflict and provide space for the children to solve it by themselves(M). Group I suggests that due to the lack of goals to attain in LfCs, this setting has been kept in the background. Hopefully, we will be able to create measuring instruments to make visible LfC content that is not currently present in the documentation. Likewise, group N reflected upon the lack of good measurement methods in the work with making the LfC aspects and activities visible in the local documents. Especially the pupil’s social development is hard to measure; Group Q states.

Some groups highlight that they conduct various documentation, some of which are directed towards school heads and the municipality, such as reports on quality, yearly plans, statistics on the pupil’s attendance and documents provided in case of an accident. Yet, we lack feedback on our documentation from school heads. The documents we write are seldom followed-up (B). Aspects of feedback are also evident in group B’s reflections, which describe that once a year they send questionnaires to the pupils to gain knowledge on their comfort and security at the LfC. We would like to give the parents some feedback and a compilation of the results to make them visible. Others have noted that they do not lift themselves in the documents, and for that reason, they are anxious to make visible our professionalism, which requires improved skills for observing each other (E).

Other challenges raised by the LtTs relate to their notions of the meaning of the documentation work. Group D might be considered to implicitly resist working with documentation when questioning for whom do we document? What is the purpose? Such resistance also occurs in reflections from group U: Of course, it is not at all fun to sit down and note that we have no documentation to work with …. We have had to search with a magnifier to find documentation that has actually been conducted. Although all LfCs are required to conduct documentation, this group has not done that. Nevertheless, their reflections show their willingness to fulfil these requirements: Now we have a golden opportunity to come to an agreement about how to document. Shall we document everything that happens or shall we hold some things back? What is reasonable to manage? How can we make the documentation work equally for the whole school? How can we unite so many contending wills in a unified effort?

Conclusion and discussion

The LtTs show an awareness of how the demands for documentation enhance LfC quality when they relate and refer to the policy documents. In line with Ball’s (2006) argumentation, the LtTs seem to be in agreement with demands on increased performativity and visibility of individuals and organisations. Most groups seemed to relate to the notion of quality as something objective and real (Dahlberg et al., 2011). They did not question the emphasis on measurement, but rather expressed their need for suitable methods of measurement. To use the reasoning from Braun et al. (2011), the LtTs might be viewed as trying to interpret the demands on systematic quality work expressed in the policy documents, while simultaneously relating these demands to the conditions at the local LfC, which actualize the process aspect. Further, similar to the preschool teachers in Sheridan et al.’s (2013) study, the LtTs seem to have moved from merely conducting descriptions of the activities offered to connecting these with the goals. Sheridan et al. (2013) and Löfgren (2017) found that preschool teachers consider that working with documentation improves their professionalism. Drawing from the LtTs’ reflections, it is not possible to claim that they view documentation as a way to improve their professional skills; however, several groups emphasised that this work had a positive impact on the status of their profession and on how colleagues with other educational backgrounds view the LtTs role. It seems as if the documentation work per se, not the aspects and activities the LtTs carry out and document, have contributed to this change. To use Ball’s (2006) argumentation, these LtTs seem to have presented fabrications - versions of themselves -and the LfCs that have
been effective in helping them move towards gaining equal status with other groups of teachers in school. In that sense, the documentation work can be interpreted as a conscious means of resisting the lower-ranking position discussed by Hjalmarsson et al. (2015). One might wonder which potential versions of the LTs and LCs were deserted.

Only one of the 22 groups explicitly took a sceptical approach towards working with documentation. To use the reasoning from Ball et al. (2011), these LTs positioned themselves evidently different to policy compared to the other groups. According to Braun et al. (2011), policy enactment needs to be understood in relation to situated, professional, material and external contexts. Without having detailed information about the LCs, their locales, histories, values, teacher commitments and experiences, budget and degree of support from local authorities and other aspects of importance, it would be fair to assume that these circumstances differ. According to Lolich and Lynch (2017), claiming the distortedness by applying managerial principles that focus output and profit in care-orientated contexts, the LTs might have difficulty measuring some of their care-orientated work and the professional considerations included. This difficulty actualises the tension between a controlling discourse of quality and a social pedagogical discourse (Lager, 2015), and the LTs’ navigation between tasks that connect to internal valuation and external estimation (Hjalmarsson et al., 2017). Further, one could argue that the demands for working with documentation mirror the schoolification of ECEC settings (e.g. Urban, 2014; Van Laere et al., 2012) due to the evident focus on measurement and evaluation. The article holds a critical perspective towards the neoliberal tendencies in educational settings in general, and in ECEC settings more specifically. Such perspectives wish only the best possible conditions for pupils’ learning and development and the most optimal conditions for all teachers to develop their professional skills in different aspects. Documentation work might be useful – to use the National Agency for Education’s (2015) words – to gain knowledge on the present situation and from there take a point of departure in developing the educational setting. However, it is also essential to start discussing meanings of ‘quality’ and what effect systematic quality work has on views of desired and valued activities, content and professional skills.

**Disclosure statement**
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes on contributor**

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