Lifeworld Experiences of Pupils during Play

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Abstract

Situations in which pupils play freely can promote interaction about their lifeworld. According to Flitner (2009), social issues can be better addressed in play situations and pupils can open up their own peer-cultural and meaningful aspects in play than in school lessons (Flitner, 2009; Heimlich, 2023). Games are didactically convincing because cognitive aspects are promoted in a motivating way. Nevertheless, it should be noted that less importance is attached to free play in particular than to guided play, although it is favoured by the children (Ceglowski, 1997; Jäger, 2011). This article looks at free play and asks how lifeworld experiences are used for interaction. To this end, it examines a play situation during break time in which pupils are engaged in construction play. Video material from my doctoral project is used to present initial findings from an inclusive primary school, analysed using the documentary method (Martens & Asbrand, 2022; Bohnsack, 2021). In this way, verbal and non-verbal interactions as well as spatial and material aspects are included in the analysis. The situation shows that there is a connection between lifeworld references and non-verbal behaviour during play. Despite the different orientations of the players, there is agreement about their social roles. Lifeworld experiences and references are used as a connecting element in play.

1. Introduction: Theoretical Perspectives on the Activity of Playing

For Dewey (1916/1993), play is a central form of school activity that should not be reduced to a form of recreation or amusing distraction. Rather, it is an engagement with the environment that serves as a basis for experience (Dew-

ey, 1916/1993). Caillois (1960) also describes play as a free activity in which mimicry underlies every game. By this he means that an illusion or fiction, i.e. "a reality beyond reality" is assumed or feigned for a certain period of time (Caillois, 1960). Thus, although as-if games and imitations represent a disguise or mask, they always draw on life and its experiences(Caillois, 1960). According to Wulf (2016), play resembles a ritual in which collective experiences and practices are performed and practised. Games can be both community-building and shape cultural and social differences (Wulf, 2016). According to him, play performatively expresses the construction of reality (Wulf, 2016) and through a repetitive character, playful practices are practised and incorporated (Weiß, 2020). Playing thus shows an engagement with the lifeworld, i.e. what is taken for granted in everyday life (Schütz & Luckmann, 1975/2017), by relating one's own experiences to play, other actors and experiences. In the school context, a positive framing of play is evident in two respects: on the one hand, play is considered to be conducive to learning and, on the other hand, the reference to the world of life is seen as important for linking school and extracurricular knowledge. Free play understood as an internally motivated activity (Dewey, 1916/1993) thus offers the opportunity for pupils to create their own references to their lifeworld. However, free play is a rarity in school discourse and is often only thematised in pre-school education. For school learning, guided play, i.e. a guided form of play, is seen as a way of acquiring subject-related skills through play. The start of school in particular marks a turning point in which free play is seen as less central and devalued against the background of learning (Leuchter, 2013; Weißhaupt & Campana, 2014). Leuchter (2013) sees the reason for this in the fact that free play does not harmonise with the goal-oriented view of knowledge transfer. This leads to a separation between learning and playing, whereby other forms of knowledge transfer are seen as more relevant. However, the reference to the reference to reality as a criterion of play is also evident in the school context (Flitner, 2009; Heimlich, 2023; Oerter, 2007). This transformation of reality is seen as a way for children to react to their own needs and emotions in their environment and to solve problems that they cannot manage in everyday life (Oerter, 1999) or to distance themselves from the everyday world (Weiß, 2020). Play therefore always represents a confrontation with one's own world and enables the development of new experiences through

active engagement. By imitating or playing pretend, children utilise and incorporate practices from their living environment and are also enabled to transform and shape them (Weiß, 2020). Play can provide an opportunity to try out new things and transform relationships with the self and the world. (Weiß, 2020). Play situations can therefore be seen as favouring lifeworld interaction. In summary, it can be said that the activity of playing is seen as a central aspect of socialisation that encourages children to engage with their own world and deal with it productively. However, the implementation in everyday school life is less consistent here, in which the teaching of skills is prioritised at the expense of play due to school enrolment. The fact that free play is also relevant for everyday primary school life can be seen, for example, in break times or free learning times. It remains unclear how lifeworld references are made by pupils in play situations.

2. State of Research on Playing

Above all, studies in developmental psychology in particular attribute positive effects to play for children's development and learning processes. For example, it has been shown that children interact and verbalise more in play situation and develop a higher level digree of cognitive distance than in supervised situations (Lesemann et al., 2001) and that free play promotes motivational, social and cognitive aspects in preschool (Stipek et al., 1998). Wegener-Spöhring (2011) shows that historically, school learning and play were constructed as opposites and that it was only over time that the potential of play for teaching and learning contexts were understood. It is evident that there is a paucity of contemporary research in this area.

Similarly, research on the influence of games on elementary school children has predominantly concentrated on the learning-enhancing or motivational effects of games (e.g. de Freitas, 2018, Einsiedler, 1999; Sylva et al., 2007), while the playing habits of this age group have received comparatively less scrutiny.

The motivational aspect of games, which should be used didactically to achieve positive cognitive effects, is also more popular. In didactics, for example, the motivating aspects of leisure games or game-based learning or

gamification approaches are used to promote learner motivation.Game-based learning and gamification approaches in particular are becoming more popular. While greater attention is also paid to social processes, e.g. group dynamics (social play) during play in the preschool sector (e.g. Robinson et al. 2003), there is a gap in research into social learning content and the reduction of learning to subject-specific skills in the school sector (Hainey et al., 2016). Guided play is more effective than free play when it comes to acquiring subject-specific skills (Pianta et al., 2009; Fuller et al., 2017). However, social effects can also be observed in free play. By focussing on promoting performance in play, play is also subject to a school logic that can also be viewed critically. Wegener-Spöhring (2011) criticises the pedagogisation and didacticisation of play, as free play should also have its place in school and be developed independently by the pupils. It has also been shown that guided games are less associated with play by pupils (Ceglowski, 1997; Cooney et al., 2000; Walter-Laager & Pfiffner, 2009; Sylva et al., 2007) and that children prefer free play to guided play (Wiltz & Klein, 2001). Children talk about play when it is a freely chosen activity (Ceglowski, 1997; Jäger, 2011), while learning environments initiated by adults are perceived as work (Ceglowski, 1997). In the school context, play is primarily used to engage with peers (Jäger, 2011). Compared to kindergarten, pupils perceive the challenge of organising their play within the temporal and spatial structures. Free play generally shifts to the spaces in between the school day, especially during breaks (Jäger, 2011). Lesemann et al. (2001) found, for example, that the children's co-construction in free play is more differentiated than in a guided craft lesson. Beyond this, however, there are only a few recent studies that deal with the free play practice of primary school children without focussing on the effects of games. One of the few examples is the study by Nentwig-Gesemann (2010), which looks at the behavioural practices of 5- to 10-year-olds in relation to their communication, coordination and communitizing processes. She reconstructs various forms that can be described as rule-led, habitual and actionist play (Nentwig-Gesemann, 2010). Overall, it can be stated that the nature and type of free play in school, in particular the theoretical assumption that free play favours the confrontation with life-world experiences, is hardly considered empirically.

3.   Research Design

There is a paucity of studies that address the social practice of free play in the context of everyday school life. The role of references to the pupils' lifeworld in play situations and their potential for facilitating problem-solving is rarely considered empirically, particularly in the context of primary education. In this study, play practice is now to be considered in relation to the interactions with reference to lifeworld of primary school pupils in free play. Therefore, the research question arises as to how they interact in school play situations via lifeworld experiences. The data to answer my research question is taken from my doctoral project "Lifeworld as a dimension of School Teaching and Learning". The data was collected from two primary schools with different profiles and a special school for intellectual development. Different teaching and learning situations were videotaped, such as group work, morning circles and play interactions. The video recordings were analysed using the Documentary Method (Martens & Asbrand, 2022; Bohnsack, 2021). The high degree of contrast between the samples allows for the differentiation between various situations. While this article focuses on play situations in a mixed-grade primary school class and reconstructs orientations of lifeworld interaction, a comparison can be made below between other lifeworld interactions that occur in other school cultures or other teaching and learning situations. As an example, a free play situation of two pupils is interpreted here and then discussed in terms of how lifeworld interaction is shown in comparison to didactically structured situations.

4.   Reconstruction of a Break Situation

The situation takes place during a long break, when pupils can choose to stay indoors, play in the playground or to have lunch. There is also a period of two hours in which they can organise their time freely. The following pupils (school beginners) first spend time in the classroom and then in a break room where they play with Lego bricks.

4.1   Sequence 1: Different Building Projects

Elena and Luca are sitting on the floor in a play corner in the classroom. Both children are engaged in construction activities with a Lego board in front of them. As will become clearer in a moment, Elena is building a house and Luca is building a tower. There is a toy box of Lego bricks between them. On Elena's Lego board, two walls have been constructed together from bricks of varying colours. The interior of the walls contains a table, a chair, and a door. In front of Luca is a tower, which is constructed from a variety of coloured bricks. Additionally, there are some unassembled components in front of him. The pupils are sitting almost diagonally opposite each other, but spend most of their time looking at their construction.

Elena	just a moment there are two windows in there these this one dosen't go out (4) it says invitation blah blah blah. blah blah oh yeah yes yes (2) here comes mine ( ) (3) like this (2) here's another one ( ) (4) here's the window (7) look Luca it looks like the Ukrainian colours	
		#00:01:04-0#
Luca	yes	#00:01:05-3#
Elena	look at that	#00:01:07-1#
Luca	yes that's it	#00:01:10-4#

Figure 1 – #00:00:32-22#

Elena holds a Lego figure in her hand and lets it walk through her building by tapping it several times on the Lego plate. Subsequently, she removes a block of Lego bricks from the constructed house, shakes it back and forth and articulates that the bricks cannot be removed. Luca observes her construction for a moment and then directs his attention back to his tower. She takes one of the Lego bricks in front of her and holds it in front of the Lego figure's face. Subsequently, she places additional bricks on the exterior walls of her structure. She situates the brick, which she has designated as the invitation, on a table (comprising several Lego bricks constructed into a block) at the centre of her construction. Then she builds more bricks on the outer walls of her house. She takes a blue brick and places it on the yellow brick base. She reaches towards the box, then cancels the movement.

Figure 2 – #00:01:04-08#

She points to the stones that have just been added and addresses Luca, pointing out that the stones look like the Ukrainian flag. She then looks at Luca, who in turn observes the wall she has shown him and confirms her observation. Elena turns her house around so that the wall with the Ukrainian-coloured stones is directly in his line of vision and repeats that Luca should look. He replies and confirms that it is the Ukrainian flag.

Elena's play shows parts of a construction and role play that merge into one another and are reciprocal contexts for one another. She creates a material environment that she uses as a backdrop for her role play. An "as-if game" takes place in which she ascribes a meaning to Lego bricks and symbolises this. Elena's soliloquy shows an associative game in interaction with the objects. An everyday topic also becomes relevant in this role-play interaction - the practice of receiving and understanding the invitation. It can be seen that an everyday practice is transferred to the character and the reference to the lifeworld is made by playing with the material. The play and the material are the occasion for dealing with a lifeworld topic. In the further course, Elena uses her building as an occasion for a conversation on a current topic that has a strong media presence. Here, Elena is the person who sets the scene, opening up a reference to the lifeworld through a conversation about the material. Elena shows an orientation towards interactive play by linking her play with lifeworld references - playing already has a lifeworld realisation for her. Luca is constructing his building and shows brief moments of reference to Elena's play and her discovery, initially through glances, then through short answers.

The following situation then occurs:

Luca	mhm (3) building a tower all the time ( ) and it fall- breaks (1)	#00:01:24-7#
Elena	I don't know either	#00:01:27-1#
Luca	it falls over there all the time	#00:01:29-2#
Elena	what falls over all the time?	#00:01:31-8#
Luca	└the pro-tect tower	#00:01:33-3#
Elena	ah	#00:01:33-6#
Luca	that is going to be a protection tower okay (8)	#00:01:38-5#

Figure 3 – #00:01:30-10#

Luca begins to rebuild his tower. To do this, he removes some bricks and puts them back in another place. Elena looks over at Luca's building as she asks, but then looks back at her building.

In Luca's building process, it becomes clear both verbally and non-verbally that he has difficulties putting the bricks together to form a tower. He verbalises this by describing the process as lengthy. This documents a sense of purpose in his building process. This also shows typical developmental characteristics of a construction game, such as striving for a specific goal. He shows a situational reaction to the current challenges of the construction process. His lifeworld references "tower" and "protective tower" are linked to the naming of the objects, i.e. they are part of his construction process. Unlike Elena, Luca's focus is on the activity of building, i.e. on the construction process as an independent and complete process. A different type of play is documented, to which they refer and to which they attribute different meanings. In the joint activity of building, the pupils show different or divergent orientations, in which the game largely takes place in parallel. In terms of lifeworld interaction, it becomes clear that the game and the material are used to enter into a thematic exchange with each other. In both cases, the building symbolises an object from the lifeworld and the lifeworld context is part of their play or is immanent to the game. Elena also uses the game and her material to address current topics and initiate a conversation.

4.2 Sequence 2: Joint Construction Process

The following sequence shows another play situation for the two children. They had to change rooms due to a break regulation and are sitting in a break room. They both start building new constructions. Elena builds another house and also a pool, while it is not clear what Luca is building. Later, they build the house that Elena started together. This situation shows a construction play, but in contrast to the previous one, on a shared object. There is an increased process of rapprochement, which now takes place in both a structural and a lifeworld form. I have described the following scene as a "joint construction process" and should be used as a comparison to the construction process of two buildings.

| Elena	a sto::ne is missing here	#00:32:49-0#
Luca	like this	#00:32:49-5#
Elena	no no no not here, hold on a minute (5) he:::re (4) and now (6) we have to (7) and another very small block ˚has to go in there˚ (.) shit (.) I will find one quickly, ok?	#00:33:23-1#
Luca	you don't have to anymore, already build	#00:33:27-6#
Elena	here I already ha-, oh well @ (.) @ (7) that looks really co::::ol, or Luca?	#00:33:40-4#
Luca	˚yes˚ (.) if it collapses, I have build something else here	#00:33:45-6#
Elena	yes that is good (7) but it still has to go all the way up here (.) all the way to the top	#00:33:58-8#
Luca	I know something	#00:34:00-0#
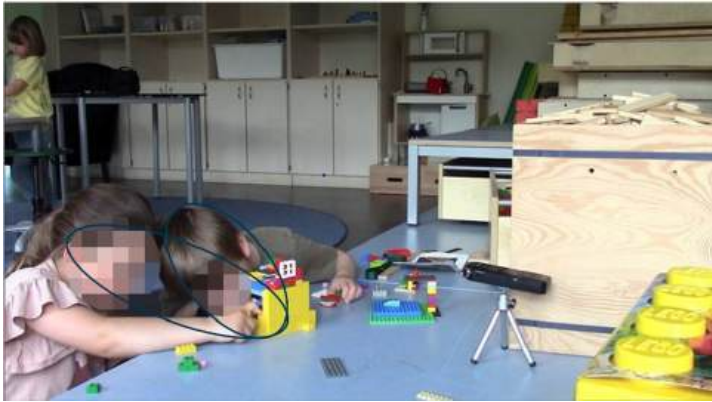
Figure 4 – #00:33:53-03#

Both are sitting with their upper bodies bent over the building, fixing stones to the house. The children are rebuilding the previously collapsed house and adding stones at the building. Elena gives instructions that stones are missing in a certain place, while Luca attaches the missing stones to the building. Elena removes the upper part of the house and gives it to Luca, while she adds more stones to the exposed base. Elena realises that one more stone is missing and gets up and goes to the box with the Lego bricks and rummages through it. Luca interrupts her search and Elena sits back down.

This sequence shows that the children take on different roles in the construction process, such as "holding" the building or "searching" for a stone. In the context of meta-communications, instructions and verbalisations of action steps can be seen, which can be understood as an approach to a joint construction process. The forms of building and problem-solving here take the form of a division of labour. This shows that Elena is also the initiating person here, who structures and instructs the building process - i.e. assigns roles, but also acts as an opinion seeker and reassurer, e.g. by asking whether she should look for the stone. There is also an acknowledgement of Luca's work on the building project. Luca's announcement that he has already built and thus found a solution to the problem shows that Luca frames himself as the construction manager because he has "already built". Luca also demonstrates his expertise in building through his foresighted behaviour (if this collapses, I've built something else here) and knowledge (he knows that it

still has to be built to the top). The two students building show a common point of view and focus on the construction project. The rapid action through the house in danger of collapse leads to hectic and actionistic, situational behaviour. The approach process is shown here via the building and not via real-life interaction.

The following interaction continues to take place in the joint construction process.

| Elena | be::cause whenever I sleep in my room, I always play in secret. | #00:36:45-2# |
Luca	how secretly? so what do you play?	#00:36:48-3#
Elena	└so that mum and dad do not notice	#00:36:51-2#
Luca	they what, how do you play?	#00:36:54-4#
Elena	└well it is like this, I pretend to be asleep	#00:36:57-3#
Luca	okay	#00:36:58-5#
Elena	then I get up (.) and then I just play	#00:37:06-5#
Luca	with this, with your toys?	#00:37:09-4#
Elena	yes	#00:37:10-7#
Luca	mmm	#00:37:10-8#
Elena	do you do that to::o?	#00:38:13-8#
Luca	nope I just go to bed and get up again, (usually inside)	#00:37:19-3#
Elena	└do you even have a bunk bed?	#00:37:20-1#
Luca	no, but I have a normal bed.	#00:37:22-9#
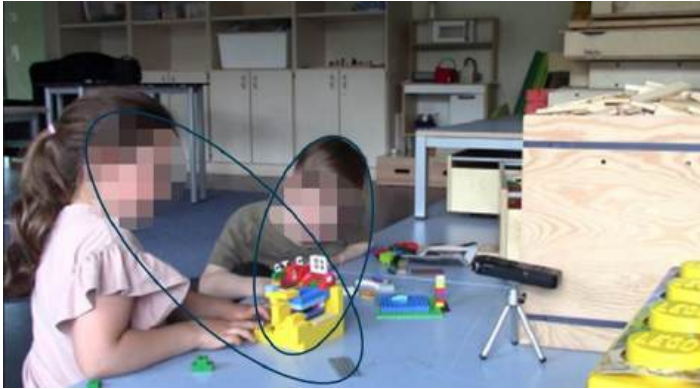
Figure 5 – #00:36:46-12#

The children both look at the building and add bricks. Elena's posture is slightly open towards Luca. Luca looks at his building during the conversation.

Figure 6 – #00:36:57-05#

Elena pushes herself up on the gallery with her hands so that she is squatting on her lower legs, looks at Luca and begins to report. Luca continues to look at the building. Elena sits back down on her lower legs and looks at the building again.

Elena initiates a conversation about her secret playing at night. While Elena creates moments of rapprochement by talking about situations and later asking questions, Luca creates moments of rapprochement by asking questions. It becomes clear that Elena's stories represent something new and different for him. While what Elena plays at night and whether she does this with toys is central for Luca, it is relevant for Elena that she does it secretly without her parents noticing. Elena also documents the importance non-verbally by pushing herself up, making herself taller and looking at Luca. Luca's "okay" or "mhm" frames the topic as finished. Elena continues to initiate the conversation. While Elena's question "Do you do that too?" initiates a community-building moment, Luca's denial reveals a divergence. With regard to the lifeworld interaction, it can be seen that the circle of topics is changing; the topic is no longer an immananet part of the concrete building process or the material used. Communicated experiences move away from the building process. In the joint construction process, separate lifeworld experiences become apparent beyond the construction process. Here too, the divergent experiential spaces of the players in relation to the lifeworld interaction become visible. Elena shows a conversational orientation, while Luca frames the conversation as secondary. Nevertheless, it can also be shown that in the performative practice, the players have a shared orientation framework, which is demonstrated by the harmonious play, in the unity of the social roles.

5.   Conclusion

In the play situations, different developmental psychological processes, such as an as-if game, the role-playing and construction game (or a mixture) and the parallel game, became visible. There was also a shift to the meta-level of play. Moments of rapprochement were documented by assigning roles and verbalising actions. Spontaneous and actionistic behaviour (especially in relation to the construction process) was also demonstrated. Nentwig-Gesemann (2010) was able to demonstrate spontaneous and actionist behaviour as the creation or re-establishment of a shared practice in a conjunctive, habitualised game. At the level of performative play practice, an orientation framework is also shared here, which is shown by actionistic but joint play. How-

ever, this does not manifest itself at the level of lifeworld references, which show divergent spaces of experience for the players. Returning to the question of how lifeworld interactions manifest themselves in play situations, different aspects can be reconstructed. The first situation shows that the play and the material give rise to lifeworld interactions that are part of the play or immanent to the play. While in shared play, lifeworld references emerge beyond the play and other experiences are communicated. Self-initiated play can be described here as a lifeworld practice in the context of school and is not just an opportunity for exchange. The realisation of lifeworld practice plays a central role both in the construction process and in the interaction. It can be seen that an orientation framework is shared at the level of performative practice, which can be seen in the harmonious coexistence and interaction as well as in the unity of social roles. At the level of lifeworld references, however, there are divergent spaces of experience. Playing enables socialisation despite divergent lifeworld orientations. The fact that play situations can emphasise lifeworld experiences differently and more freely (Flitner, 2009) can be shown in the two play situations, but can also be enhanced by the fact that play situations themselves are also lifeworld references in the school context. They show themselves through communication and performance as two levels of social events. It is characteristic of a didactic lifeworld reference in the classroom that it tends to be at the propositional level, i.e. thematic. This can be seen, for example, in morning circles in the sequence of everyday life experiences in which the lifeworld references are adapted to the lesson structure and show a strong rhythmisation. There are also repeated ambivalences in various teaching settings between lifeworld references and the didactic course and objectives of the lessons. While references to the real world are also evident in the performance when playing, they often remain at the thematic level in classroom settings. It is often the case that pupils only pick up on selected moments from their lifeworld and adapt them to classroom expectations (Brenner & Martens, 2025). A free exchange of life-world experiences is rarely found in lessons and is often labelled by the teacher as a disruption to the lesson (Brenner & Martens, 2025).

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