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Let's hide it! – Unfolding Play and Peer Culture in a Danish Prep Class

Abstract

This article focuses attention on how children in a Danish prep class do, unfold, and expand play and peer culture as an aesthetic practice. Play is always framed, and play in school settings attaches to the school's structure and schedule and to rules made by adults. The present study focuses on play scenes taking place outside and inside between 8:00 am and noon. The article analyses and exposes the intentions from the children's perspectives and the different strategies and intentions behind doing and protecting play. The study draws on notions of play from cultural and aesthetic perspectives and how children *do* culture aesthetically through play. The study is part of a larger collaborative work undertaken in one school and involving three researchers. As a result of Covid-19 restrictions, the research design implies focused ethnography with short, intensified fieldwork and creating fieldnotes, video recordings, photos, drawings, and interviews. In addition, reflective workshops with the teachers involved were developed.

Keywords

prep class; play; peer culture; aesthetics; children's perspectives; play tools

The bell rings: Play, prep-class, and pupils

The bell rings. The break outside is over.

Nicklas, who was a police car tank in a game of tag with five other kids, carefully hides his wooden stick in a corner behind the door.

He looks around, checking that he isn´t being discovered.

Then he runs inside

(Fieldnotes, 16 September 2020).

In an interview with two boys (all names have been fictionalized), we watch a video clip showing their play outside with the dark earth they have been digging up from the sandpit. The children call it »clay«. We talk about how they put their clay figures in a corner of the playground.

Me: Why do you put them over there?

Nicklas: To hide them, so no one takes them!

Allan: We hide them, because the bell always rings exactly when you're in the middle of good play – then we can continue the play

(Interview, 26 May 2021).

The examples above emphasize the work done by children to try to protect the continuation of their play and the play's content by hiding their play tools (the wooden stick and the clay figures). This work also speaks to how fragile play and play conditions are in school and other institutional frames and settings. The bell not only sends a signal to stop play activities but also cancels the established play contract among the children; that same play cannot easily be established later. New positions and roles must be negotiated – and maybe the play tools will have disappeared.

Prep class, also called preparation class or class zero (*børnehaveklassen* in Danish), has existed in Denmark since 1962 and became part of Danish compulsory education in 2009. In the year they turn six, children attend prep class as a prelude to »real« school life; it is often characterized by a bridge metaphor (Huser et al., 2016; O´Kane, 2016) or transition term (Christensen, 2019; Hedegaard & Fleer, 2019; Odgaard, 2018, 2020). Prep class builds a bridge between the institutionalized everyday life of kindergarten based on play and the primary school setting, with its more formal teaching directed towards specific learning objectives. The time in prep class is a transition or turn from the child's well-known everyday in kindergarten to an unknown school culture and more structured everyday with new demands, new social communities, and new working forms. This turn is shown, for example, in the language used in school content and texts, with the child becoming exposed as a pupil. In prep class, the pupil is part of a school structure, logic, and rhythm and has to be confident in this role. However, play is still embedded within the context of prep class, so teaching in prep class must not only include play but also consciously keep play in mind:

Play is a fundamental element in the teaching emphasizing play as intrinsic value (value in itself) and as learning through play and playful activities.

(Bekendtgørelse om undervisning i børnehaveklassen/Contents and goals for børnehaveklassen, §2)

This quote positions play as straddling two classic but divergent approaches in institutional settings: as intrinsic value (Blomgren, 2019, 2021; Mouritsen, 2002; Skovbjerg, 2018, 2021; Toft, 2018) and as learning value (Hujala et al., 2010; Walsh, 2019). As a learning value, play mainly becomes a pedagogical tool for teachers *»...to meet specific and situationally relevant educational goals«* (Hujala et al., 2010, p. 98). Beyond divergent approaches to play, play in the early school years is often connected to the transition metaphor: as *glue* in the transition between kindergarten and school (Becher et al., 2019), as a *main road* in that transition (Broström, 2013), or as a *way to »smoothen«* children's transition between preschool and primary school (Ackesjö, 2017).

Play in institutional settings is never free play; it is always framed by adults (whether present or not) and restricted within existing institutional settings, logics, and possibilities (Ackesjö, 2017). This framing represents institutional logics carried out as routines and habits – handed over and created as obvious ways of acting and doing (Gulløv, 2004, 2017). The very fact that the bells rings, like the scheduling of the day as a whole, is an expression of the inherent institutional logics of *doing school*.

The present study continues the path taken by Ackesjö (2017), who elucidates play and play categories in a Swedish prep class. Ackesjö and I are both concerned with how play is used, conditioned, and described in prep classes, but while Ackesjö is occupied with play and education and how to create categories about play that are also woven into a learning context, I am interested in creating knowledge about how play is framed and what actually happens in play as an aesthetic practice. In addition, my study is sensitive towards children's perspectives (Albon & Rosen, 2014; Sommer et al., 2010). However, my intention is neither to identify and analyse types or categories of play nor to imply that play equals learning. Rather, I explore the following question:

How do children unfold play as peer culture and aesthetic practice within the institutional logics and rules in prep class – and with what kind of intentions?

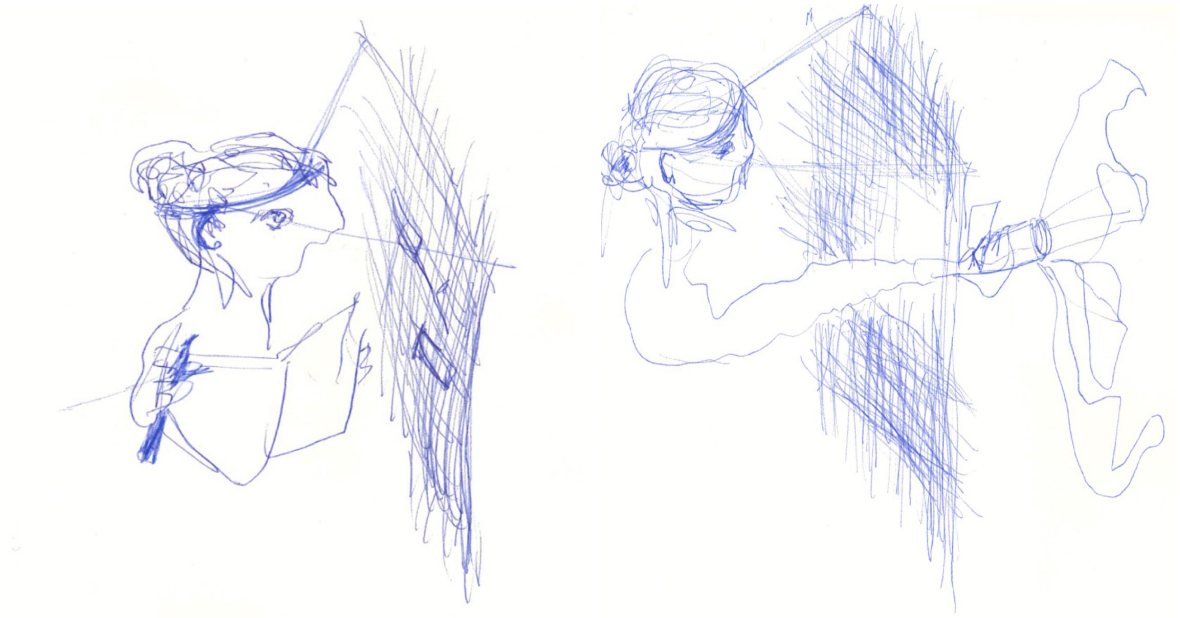
Research design, methods, and empirical material

The present study is part of a larger collaborative work involving three researchers undertaken within one school (different grades in the early school years). The large school was located in the eastern part of middle Jutland. Contact with the school and the study as a whole took place in the turbulent period of Covid-19 lock-downs, openings, and a general awareness of social distancing, hand washing, and other strictures. The process of obtaining access to the school began in the early months of 2020, and fieldwork began in September-November 2020 and continued in April-June 2021. As researchers, we were all subjected to pandemic-related restrictions and were more or less limited to short-term field visits. In that context, we anchored the project in focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005), which is characterized by short-term field visits and the use of audio-visual technologies for data collection (Knoblauch, 2005). This approach supports and explains our use of visual methods like video recordings, photos, and drawings (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2011; Pink, 2021; Pink et al., 2017).

The fieldwork in the prep class took place during school hours, from 8:00 am to noon. The photos and video recordings focus on inside and outside play (in the classroom and on the playground, respectively) but also contain scenes of pupils working with educational and planned tasks (drawing, practicing letters, reciting days and months, etc.). Video recordings were also used in children's interviews and reflective workshops with the professionals: two primary school teachers and the prep class teacher, who is referred to below as simply »the teacher«. Repeatedly viewing video recordings during the analysis made it possible to get closer to micro-level processes and relations (Raudaskoski, 2020). An overview of the design process, methods, and empirical material emerges in the following set-up:

February–June 2020	**September–November 2020**	**April–June 2021**
Contact with the school *Discussing access, frames, classes, obtaining informed content* ***Interview with prep class teacher*** *Audio file (25 minutes)*	***Focused ethnography (Four days)*** *Video recordings, inside and outside (89 minutes)* *Photos (143)* *Fieldnotes (27 pages)* ***Reflective workshop*** *Video recording (120 minutes)*	***Focused ethnography (Three days)*** *Video recordings inside and outside (158 minutes)* *Photos (198)* *Fieldnotes (7 pages)* ***Reflective workshop*** *Video recording (120 minutes)* ***Three interviews with seven children in groups of two and three*** *Video recordings (81 minutes)* *Children's drawings (7)*

The empirical material includes drawings made by children in interviews and my sketches in the fieldnotes book. Sketching serves as a way to reflect on my position as researcher – pandemic restrictions and my agreement with the school meant that I had to keep some distance from the children and wear a clear face shield. This limited my possibilities, and I became more observer than participant; I certainly never became a co-player. Inside the classroom I had »my« corner but was still able to move between tables when the children were sitting on their chairs and working. As to the inside and outside play settings, I was allowed to move around and follow the play practices, but only at a distance.



Reflections about my researcher position and – possibilities – wearing a face shield (Fieldnote sketches, 14 April 2021).

As the sketches above show, I struggled with seeing and sensing through the visor. In that moment – doing fieldwork – the visor created a layer of threads or noise between me and my surroundings and enforced a distance from what was happening. In the post-fieldwork analysis, the video recordings were able to diminish this layer of distance when they were viewed repeatedly.

Play and peer culture as cultural and social practices and as aesthetic endeavours

The present study fuses play and peer culture as interwoven cultural, social, and aesthetic practices. To approach children's play and peer culture in an air of aesthetics is fruitful because play, above all, *is* culture (Huizinga, 1950/2014; Sutton-Smith, 1997) and aesthetic (Blomgren, 2021; Mouritsen, 2002; Rüsselbæk Hansen & Toft, 2020; Toft, 2018, 2019). My position, though, views play as of intrinsic value and not merely a tool for learning. The term »children's peer culture« was coined by William A. Corsaro, who defines it as »*...activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that kids produce and share in interaction with each other«* (2003, p. 37) and as generally collective and performative in character (2015). Corsaro does not explicitly attach aesthetics to children's peer culture, but highlighting *values* and *artefacts* that *children produce and share* in interaction with one another makes it relevant to emphasize how children's ways of being in the world are embedded in aesthetic agency; that is, in their sensitive awareness of others, objects, their surroundings, and materiality in general (Blomgren, 2021; von Bonsdorff, 2009, 2018). Against this background, I understand children's aesthetic agency as implicit features in and practices of children's peer culture.
Play as a cultural and aesthetic phenomenon is »*...a universal human activity with its own purpose ... and* [a] *mood practice*« (Skovbjerg, 2021, p. 10). In addition, Toft (2018) emphasizes the three interwoven systems of play: as an *experience* of, as *significance* for, and as *relations* to. These three systems describe and analyse the creations of experiences and knowledge that take place in and between children in a given cultural situation. As to

experience, children (participants) sense and experience their bodies, feelings, and moods – they are in affect. Significance implies that a situation becomes loaded with importance and something that is sensed as valuable to do in a way which contributes to the play; it thus underlines play as a cultural and aesthetic form that creates practice. Relations support how cultural-aesthetic practices involve role distributions and ways to create and uphold social relations among participants (Toft, 2018, p. 36).

Overall, play and establishing a play mood requires artefacts, objects, or tools of various kinds. Skovbjerg (2021) argues for a holistic approach to tools as play media; anything goes as long as it consists of qualities that become visible to or meaningful for the players in the context of the play. Things must work and be meaningful in order to create play: sometimes that is a digital tool, and sometimes it is a wooden stick. According to Corsaro, the toys and materials used for play in institutional settings are communally owned and thus require children to recognize the joint ownership of objects used or produced in play – and to protect both play and objects from the intrusions of others (2015, p. 126).

The overall research project and the present paper can be fruitfully viewed in relation to Corsaro's (1985) fieldwork in and research on nursery schools, in which he studied children's reactions and adaption to adult rules and described an *underlife* created by children as a way of getting around the rules. Evoking the work of Erving Goffmann, Corsaro called the strategies used by children as »secondary adjustments« that could be unfolded in a number of ways (1985, p. 254), such as a concealment strategy *»...to evade the rule about not bringing toys and other personal objects from home to school*« or to violate *»...the rule about moving play objects... from one area of the school to another*« (1985, p. 258). In addition, Corsaro presents the theme of *clean-up time* to show how children try different strategies in an attempt to prolong play sessions instead of cleaning up when they are told to do so (p. 261). Even when my study covers some of the same themes and strategies as those in Corsaro, we are not on the same errand. Overall, Corsaro is occupied with children's social development, whereas I am focused on play in peer culture as an aesthetic practice. Nevertheless, I use Corsaro's study as a backdrop in the following analysis of framing play and then in the analysis of selected play scenes.

In the prep class studied, play is restricted to the so-called *play hour*, which is (mostly) *inside* the classroom and *play as leisure time* during breaks *outside* on the playground. In the framing of outside play, the prep class teacher draws the play media and area possibilities on the whiteboard. For example, the children can choose the swing sets, the sandpit (with its shovels and buckets), the tower (with a slide), or drawing with chalk on the flagstone outside. In inside play, the teacher assigns play groups (i.e., who is playing with whom) and designates play tools, toys, and media possibilities (e.g., plastic animals, magnets, bricks) for the various groups. On Fridays, children are allowed more freedom as to with whom and with what to play.

Outside play scene: Moulding and hiding clay figures as aesthetic practice

This play scene takes place outside and is about the group of children who chose to play in the sandpit with shovels and buckets. It involves three interwoven features: digging up the clay from the bottom of the sandpit, moulding the clay into figures and forms, and finally hiding the figures. I video recorded the moulding and hiding for about 21 minutes; it shows how clay is not just a material or medium suddenly called into use – it *is* the play practice and essential to creating a play mood (Skovbjerg, 2021) and a fictional contract, which emphasizes that the significance created is not real but aesthetic (Toft, 2018). The moulding is an example not only of play and peer culture but also of aesthetic practice because it involves sensing and experiencing the clay, its materiality, and its texture. Furthermore – and most importantly – exactly *how* to handle it becomes significant to the play; how the moulding should be carried out matters a great deal (cf. Toft, 2018). Here, Nicklas becomes a play leader because, with his particular way of pressing and crushing it while shaping it against the wall in front of the children, he becomes a role model for how the other children handle the clay and continue their own moulding. They observe him and consult him, and he demonstrates and gives advice. It is also Nicklas who through his aesthetic agency shows a sensitive awareness of the others and their figures by looking at what they are creating and eventually saying, *»Did Bo make this chair?«*and *»Are you done?«* (cf. Blomgren, 2021; von Bonsdorff, 2009, 2018).

The play mood in the moulding implies an introverted practice with devotion and repetitive rhythm, but shifts to excitement and enthusiasm (Skovbjerg, 2021, p. 123) in the hiding, which Nicklas initiates by saying, *»When all our forms and figures are finished, we put them over there [in the corner behind the elevator shed… but they will probably be taken anyway«*. He shows the others what to do by being the first to place his figure there and then encourages each of them to do the same. The hiding in the corner creates a mood with more extroverted, uplifted energy and communication about where to put the figures in relation to one another. The hiding is more than a social act – it is creative and aesthetic because it requires imagination to discover or invent places for hiding, and it requires a sensitive awareness to know *when* to introduce the hiding without destroying the play. Nicklas is sensitively capable of that and of looking forward – knowing that the bell will ring – and he incorporates this intervention of the prep class routine into the fictional play world as a practice which is actually fruitful for the play and contributes to the way the play practice creates meaning for its participants. He cares for the play and the possibility of continuing it later and for the play relations that have been established.

Moulding the clay: Allan (in the background) shows a mobile phone he has made out of clay to Ada, who is sitting next to him (Photo, Henriette Blomgren, 27 April 2021).

At the beginning of the hiding behind the elevator shed; Nicklas shows the way to the corner (Photo, Henriette Blomgren, 27 April 2021).

The findings connected to the play practice of moulding with clay provide knowledge about how to hide becomes a subtle part of the play itself; it is incorporated in the play. It becomes part of the play´s structure as a feature that the children implant and of which they are conscious. This is aesthetic practice because it requires sensitive awareness to what is

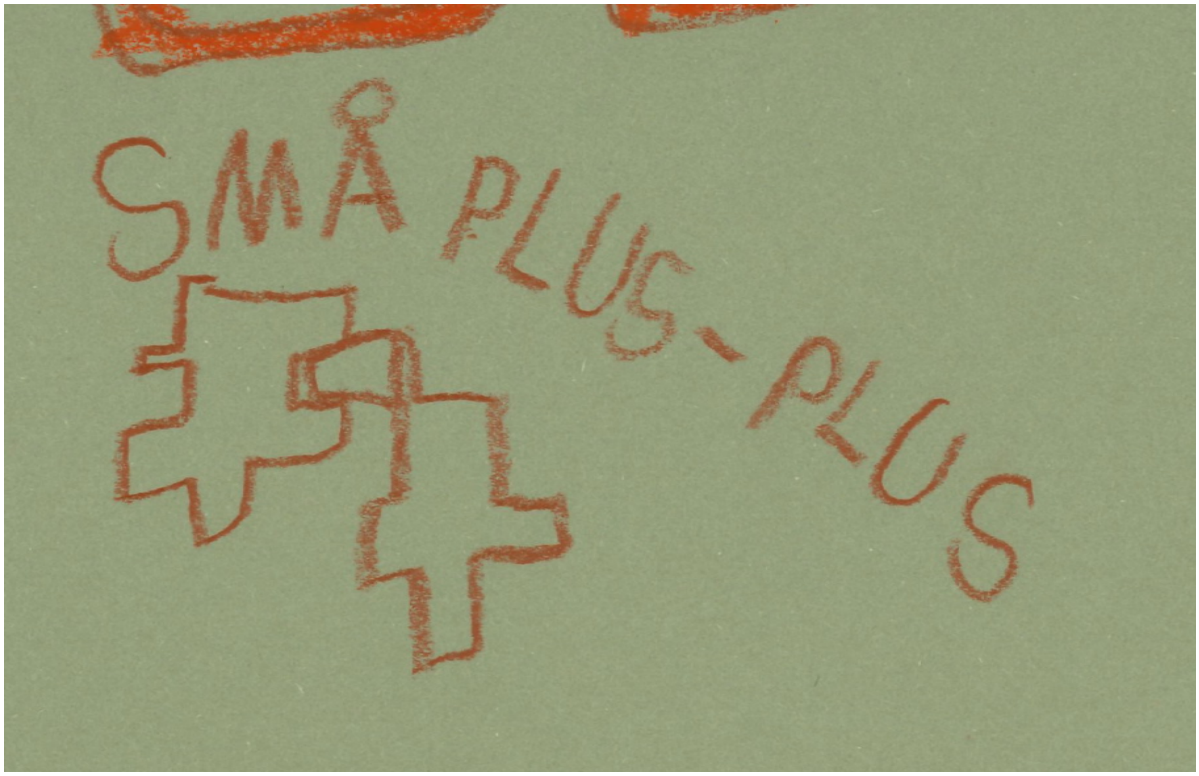
valuable to do in order to contribute to prolonging the play. Furthermore, hiding becomes a way to create and confirm friendship and to be a good friend who protects the play and the possibility of its continuing. The act of hiding becomes a way to secure the contents of the play, which is inherent in the tool–play media and, with reference to Corsaro (1985), is an example of an underlife created by children and a way of doing secondary adjustment in order to *work the system* – to get around the rules and institutional logics existing in the school system (p. 258). About a month after this play scene, I interviewed Allan and Nicklas, who told me that they returned at the lunch break and re-hid the figures. This implied moving the figures from near the elevator to a more secure location behind a drainpipe on another playground. Again, this illustrates the underlife and strategies that children use to prolong their play and get around the frames for play imposed by adults.

Another kind of hiding took place outside, after the bell rang. The scene unfolds around the door from the outside to the corridor and involves Ada (who is part of the moulding play) and Bida, who has been involved in play on the tower, just behind the moulding team and still in the sandpit. Apparently, Bida has played with or has intentions of bringing some clay inside. Ada stops her and goes outside with Ada to help her in hiding her piece: *»Come on – I'll show you«,* Ada says, and she finds a nearby location useful for exigent hiding. While holding hands, they run and jump all the way to the classroom. This kind of hiding has another character because the hiding is neither planned nor incorporated but appears as an interruption of the real play or as a more sudden incident. I expand on this point in the following section, concerning play inside the classroom.

Inside play scene: Creating and hiding machines and objects as aesthetic practice

This inside play scene is about creating fantasy machines and artefacts out of *plusplusser*, colourful plastic bricks that can fit into one another. When asked in interviews what they like to play with inside, four of seven children chose plusplusser, and two of them even took the initiative to write it.

Nicklas (seven years old). »Plusplusser – you can build anything«
(Drawing from interview, 26 May 2021).



Allan (six and a half years old): »You can do a lot with them«
(Drawing from interview, 26 May 2021).

As the boys explained while drawing, the plusplusser are attractive because they can turn into all kinds of constructions. In the play that followed, three boys (Bo, Felix, and Nicklas) sensitively and subtly frame the play and a fictional contract about creating objects which are not real; rather, they invent them and soon change them by using creativity and imagination. At the beginning of the creation of the objects, the mood is introverted (cf. Skovbjerg, 2021) – each of the boys occupied with his own object and sensitively trying out different shapes, qualities, and characteristics. Bo carefully and with dedication creates an airplane, which then turns into a car that can fly through the air. It has special exits and extended guns, »*... and here the drone comes out*«, as he proudly explains to me. The construction play continues in its quiet, repetitive rhythm but implies a sense of following – saying yes to the things suggested and presented (Skovbjerg, 2021, p. 123):

Felix: Nicklas, I am going to visit you now [he moves his body and his entire vessel-building project towards Nicklas]. I am fetching some water!
Nicklas: This (the object) is just making a pipeline.
Felix: Yes, just do it.
...
Nicklas: The jacuzzi is as deep as the ocean
Felix: Where we can be naked [he smiles archly]
(Fieldnotes, 20 November 2020).

Their imagination drives the play forward into new constructions and dialogues as a creative interplay with the bricks and each other. The play is carried hither and thither and is unpredictable and uncontrollable (Rüsselbæk Hansen & Toft, 2020). However, it is significant to the players to uphold the play contract about creating objects that can turn into something new, and it requires their aesthetic agency – a sensitive awareness of the things and ideas suggested by the others – and an attentiveness towards *when* and *what* to suggest to drive the play forward.

Boys in play: An airplane, a vessel, and a jacuzzi (Photo, Henriette Blomgren, 20 November 2020).

The boys are absorbed in play, but suddenly it is clean-up time. I write in my fieldnote book:

It is 10.50. The intern orders the children to clean up. Felix approaches her and asks carefully, »Must we separate it?«
[Pause] »No«, she replies.
The three boys all breathe a sigh of relief and carefully place their »machines« made out of plusplusser in the big box.
With a happy voice, Felix says, »How easy this was!«
(Fieldnotes, 20 November 2020).

A few days later, a similar situation occurs:

A group of children play with plusplusser, creating different kinds of objects.
The teacher enters the room and says: »Everyone must clean the place up«.
A girl runs to the teacher and asks if they really need to separate take them [the bricks] apart?
The teacher answers reluctantly, »No, you do not need to – not today«.
The children clean up, taking care of their creations
(Fieldnotes, 23/11/2020).

The hiding of the play tools (plusplusser) inside differs from the hiding in the outside clay play, as the children do not seem to incorporate the hiding. Inside, the teacher (the adult) becomes the bell, the intruder who interrupts the play and directs the children to clean up. This sudden interruption of the play forces the children to use another hiding strategy, that of appealing to the adult: *»Do we really need to separate it?«* It is a fragile moment for the children, who have quickly developed deep affections for their created objects. The power lies in the hand of the teacher, who is not a co-player with insider knowledge of the subtle fictional world established. It does not appear that the teacher is aware of this and how significant it is to the children to be able to hide or keep their artefacts intact. The hiding implies a wish to keep the machines intact in order to continue the play later that day or the next – or simply to have the pleasure of seeing the artefacts once more because they are valuable to the children. The effort and imagination put into the making and playing makes the artefacts important to the children, and they want to protect not only the artefacts but also the play and the affect related to it. The appeal strategy is a way of getting around the rules and demands of cleaning up during a pandemic because it is necessary to clean each brick and all the other play toys to avoid contamination. I see the strategy as the creation of an underlife (cf. Corsaro, 1985); it may not do as imaginative and creative as the clay hiding, but the frames are also more restricted inside, with the teacher walking around the classroom and observing their clean-up efforts. The children are fully aware of that and do not see the possibility of secretly hiding their creations in corners or behind doors. So, in order to work the system (cf. Corsaro, 1985, p. 258) and avoid the destruction of their carefully crafted machines, they turn to a verbal appeal strategy.

Covid-19 does interfere with play and the opportunity to keep the same toys from day to day, because it is necessary to clean the bricks and other toys to avoid contamination. Nevertheless, when I show the video clips and fieldnotes regarding the children's hiding in the reflective workshops, the teachers reinforce the point that play toys are communally owned and that children must learn to share. The teachers do not venture into reflections on how they provide possibilities for protecting the play and objects from the intrusions of others, as Corsaro had mentioned (2015). The teachers note that they struggle with organizational decisions and facts about sharing the classrooms with school leisure hours in the afternoon. Without doubt, the lack of space and volume inside the classroom makes it difficult to hide or retain all the children's artefacts. The teachers´ attitudes towards the children's hiding of play tools nevertheless reveal an inherent school logic concerning the possibilities for play in school, a logic that may have been strengthened and expanded by pandemic regulations.

Around and about the findings

The play scenes concerning strategies of hiding create knowledge about the features of children's collective and aesthetic agency in play as a creative peer culture. As the play scenes analysed above show, two kinds of hiding take place. Outside, in the play practice with clay, the hiding is infused into the play; it becomes part of the play itself. That episode also shows how hiding can develop into re-hiding to protect the play tools and figures and – thus the play itself – for later. In the inside play, which corresponds with the initial fieldnote quotation about the boy who hides his wooden stick outside, hiding arises as a sudden solution to the fact that play has been interrupted by the teacher. Still outside, the boy quickly hides the stick behind a nearby door, while inside the children make a verbal appeal to the teacher to keep their play artefacts alive so that they can continue the play later. In both strategies, the importance the children place on the hiding and continued play, and the great efforts they go to protect both, are obvious. The seriousness that children put into the play and that the play itself constitutes for children does not always correspond with institutional routines, order, and logic, of which the professional teachers are a central part. There appears to be a tension between school logics and play logics. Doing play in school is embedded in a strong tradition and the inherent logics carried out by the teachers.

The hiding not only constitutes the children's friendship and peer culture but also reveals how the present moment of play is not enough. Researchers often promote the temporal present of play and how valuable that is – the child as a being in the present now. The findings in this study show, however, that from the children's perspectives, the play moment and the present now are neither adequate nor satisfying. The moment and play mode with its content, relations, and affects must be able to continue.

When play, as Ackesjö (2017) has noted, is regarded as a way to »smoothen« the transition from kindergarten to school, it is thought-provoking to experience how little this *doing play in school* supports ways for children to continue their play. What this research shows is that children in many ways solve this problem themselves, but the situation is still fragile because the artefacts and play tools *»…will probably be taken anyway«,* as Nicklas puts it. The fragility is enlarged when the teachers do not support the hiding, but that may occur simply because they are not aware of it. When viewing video recordings about their hiding in reflective workshops, the teachers were surprised by the children's efforts to hide and did not know that this was happening. Perhaps the teachers were not aware because they never become co-players, which is another theme in my study. My empirical material shows that the teacher and pedagogues involved in the hours from 8:00 am to noon are never inside the play. Being a co-player appears not to be a part of the routines and habits of a teacher. The interviews with the children reveal that they do not find it positive to play with the teachers because *»… they will talk to someone else all the time… and it [the play] will simply be ruined«*, as Allan says (Interview, 26 May 2021). When the teachers represent and uphold the school logic approaches and never step into the play logic, they are – in the eyes of the children – not attractive play partners; furthermore, teachers do not obtain insider knowledge of what is valuable for children in play and for its continuation.

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Biography

Henriette Blomgren (f. 1969), Ph.D. and Senior Lecturer, is employed at VIA University College (DK), Pædagoguddannelsen Aarhus. She has a vast interest in aesthetics and pedagogy, children's perspectives, children's play culture, field work, action research, and visual methods. In 2019, she defended at University of Southern Denmark her PhD dissertation, which explores aesthetic processes in day care facilities. Presently, she investigates partnerships between artists, cultural institutions, university colleges, and day care institutions in the Danish anchored national project named LegeKunst (PlayArt). Furthermore, she participates in the VIA research programme Childhood Well-being, where she studies children's play and well-being. Additionally, Henriette has published in International Journal of Education and the Arts and Educational Action Research.