

# 'I don't think that it's play. Because we *have* to play'. Norwegian six-year-old children's understandings of play when they start in primary school

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore how Norwegian six-year-old children talk about and show their understandings of play when they have just started primary school. The research design is a focused ethnographic fieldwork, reporting on participant observations and group interviews with children in the first year of primary school, and interpreted through a thematic analysis. The analysis indicates that the children consider play as important to the transition process and their everyday school life. They express and show their understandings of play in various ways, thematized as freedom of choice, resistance, and community. The article suggests that children's joint play can be understood as an *underlife* in school and introduces the term *playful (re)production* as a theoretical approach for exploring children's understandings of play. The study raises awareness of the role play has for children's well-being, agency, and relationships with peers in the transition process and in general activities in school.

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## Introduction

The timetable shows station work, and the children sit in groups around the classroom. One station is called 'play'. This day the play activity is Lego. I walk over to the children sitting around the Lego table and ask them if they are playing. One girl answers 'Eh ... yes. Because ... look! It says here that Lego is play!' She shows me an instruction manual which says something completely different. A boy says, 'I don't think that it's play.' 'Okay,' I reply, 'why not?' 'Because we *have* to play' (Fieldnote, 7 September 2020)

When Norwegian children start school at the age of six they already have a lot of play experience, but the terms and conditions for play in school can differ very much from those in kindergarten, and might give children limited opportunities to play (Haug, 2019; Lillejord et al., 2015). In Norway and other Nordic countries, play has an important position in the kindergarten tradition. Play and learning are viewed as connected and

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intertwined, and the pedagogic work is often not divided into play activities and learning activities. On the other hand, the typical primary school day consists of periods of learning activities led by the teacher and breaks or recess (Haug, 2019). A majority of Norwegian children in year one of school also attend out-of-school-hours care (SFO), which provides care, supervision, and activities outside the regular school hours, and where play also has an important position (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2021). The material in this study is limited to the time children spend in school, but other studies show that children connect their understandings of play in school and SFO (Moir & Bruncker, 2021; Pálsdóttir, 2019).

In 1997, six-year-old children were required to attend school for the first time. Prior to this year, kindergarten lasted until children turned seven. The political intention in 1997 was to combine the practices from kindergarten and school and make play an important part of the pedagogic work for the youngest children. Although it has proven difficult in practice (Haug, 2019), there still seems to be broad agreement amongst politicians and pedagogical researchers that it is important to let children play in school (Lillejord et al., 2018). Play is listed in the general part of the curriculum (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017), both as valuable for the youngest children's well-being and development, and as a method for creative and meaningful learning.

In this article I aim to explore children's understandings of play when they have just started primary school. I consider their understandings in light of their recent transfer from kindergarten, where play is a central part of the content, to year one in school, where the formal emphasis on play has decreased considerably. While there is comprehensive research and discussion on play, both generally and in kindergarten, play in school has not historically been given the same attention (Hølland et al., 2021; Lillejord et al., 2018). As lack of playtime is a major concern for children when they start at school (Corsaro & Molinari, 2005), this merits being a topic of discussion in research that explores children's points of view.

I understand the transition to school as a complex and ongoing process that is not limited to the time just before school starts (Corsaro & Molinari, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2007). I argue that even though they have started school, children are still in a transition process during which they are adapting to school and their new positions as pupils. As I have limited my research to exploring play in school, I do not know whether the participating children's understandings of play have changed from when they were in kindergarten. But the cultural context changes (Corsaro & Molinari, 2005; Lillejord et al., 2015), and with it may follow a need to redefine or reproduce what play is or could be. Even though play is claimed to be a continuity promoting activity in school (Ackesjö, 2014), the new context will, in some way or another, affect the children's possibilities to play (Lillejord et al., 2018), and may also affect the content of their play. The question then is how this new school context affects children's play, according to the children themselves. To focus on children's different forms of expression, I use observations and interviews to explore *how children who have just started in year one in school talk about and show their understandings of play*. A thematic analysis of the material (Braun & Clarke, 2006) points towards understandings of play being related to freedom and resistance, and to social activities with peers. Before I present and discuss my analyses, I will give an account of previous research on play and transition informing

the present study, followed by a description of the theoretical and methodological perspectives I have used to guide me through the research process.

## Previous research

Over the last few years research on the transition to school in Norway and other Nordic countries has increased (Ackesjö, 2014; Ackesjö et al., 2022; Bjørnstad et al., 2022; Christensen, 2020; Hogsnes, 2016; Hølland et al., 2021; Lillejord et al., 2015; Schanke, 2019). With this has come a renewed focus on the importance of play (Lunde & Brodal, 2022), and how to implement a play-based pedagogy in school (Becher et al., 2019; Lillejord et al., 2018; Møller et al., 2018; Øksnes & Sundsdal, 2020). However, the view of what a play-based pedagogy entails is not clear. A common view among educators and researchers is that play is an activity that can be arranged or constructed, and that it is possible to plan for specific outcomes of play, often related to children's individual learning and development (Schmidt & Slott, 2021). Consequently, different play-based programs are designed for and implemented in both kindergarten and school (e.g. Broström, 2019; Rege et al., 2018). Certain forms of play are preferred and highlighted by educators, often at the expense of other, more chaotic, and noisier, forms (Skovbjerg, 2018). But according to several play researchers, planning and forming the content of play is not without problems. On the contrary, bringing an 'adult agenda' into play may actually disempower children and turn their play into something that is not play (Canning, 2007; Saugstad, 2017; Smith, 2010; Toft, 2018).

In recent years there has also been an increasing awareness of and interest in giving voice to children's views on matters that affect their lives, including play (Einarsdottir, 2014; Nicholson et al., 2014; UN, 2005). Previous research on the transition to school shows that it is crucial to highlight children's perspectives if the transition is to be perceived as positive and safe for children and to give them opportunities for involvement and participation (Christensen, 2020; Dockett et al., 2019; Hogsnes, 2016; Schanke, 2019). However, fewer occasions for participation in school compared to kindergarten limit children's opportunities to take their own initiatives (Schanke, 2019). This also means that children are both seen, and see themselves, as more competent in the last part of kindergarten than in the first part of school (Perry, 2014). The importance of having someone to play with to make the transition to school a positive experience for children has been pointed out in research (Dockett et al., 2019). Studies show that children rate playing with peers at the very top of what is important for them in kindergarten (Einarsdottir, 2014), and having to end some of their old relationships from kindergarten and try to create new ones generally appears to be children's greatest concern in the transition (Ackesjö, 2014).

## Theoretical perspectives on play

Based on the research question, my theoretical perspectives will concentrate on the concept of play and children's perspectives on play, related to starting school.

The term play is used to describe a vast number of different, and often contradictory, activities and conditions (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Despite all the differences in nuance, common characteristics of play are that it is fun and voluntary, self-initiated, and that

it represents something else than the ‘real’ world (Einarsdottir, 2014; Henricks, 2020). The fun and voluntariness in play can be connected to what is described as the intrinsic value of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997), which means that play is not justified or characterized by external and predetermined goals. Play is initiated by its participants, and the reason to play is the play itself. One could even claim that play is something that just happens, or that the participants are drawn into play (Gadamer, 1975). The benefits from play are not only to be realized in the future, but are just as much immediate, for example well-being and joy, reduction of stress, and belonging to a community (Pellis & Pellis, 2021). Play is ‘make-believe’, with its own rules, which allows the participants to take on different roles and make different choices than they would have in their everyday life (Huizinga, 1949).

In research on play, it is striking how much emphasis is placed on the individual. This relates to the fact that most research input has come from the psychological research field (Henricks, 2020). Consequently, the notion of play as intrinsically motivated and developing on an individual level has dominated the field. However, understanding play as intrinsically motivated is not entirely compatible with the fact that play is largely a social activity (Henricks, 2015). Children usually play with other children, which means that they must adapt to the others who are participating and the cultural conditions that surround them (Sutton-Smith, 2008). Play gives its participants possibilities to open for multiple and conflicting voices inside a community (Cohen, 2015). Joint play also creates possibilities for a variety of new expressions and understandings that have not existed previously (Mouritsen, 1996). These perspectives point out that the social and cultural value of play is as important as the psychological value.

Participation in a community gives children the possibility to play together. When children get together, they establish and develop *local peer cultures* that childhood sociologist William A. Corsaro (2017) describes as local, child-established communities where relations, friendship, belonging, and exclusion are confirmed and developed primarily through play and other child-directed activities. Corsaro further explains that in their peer cultures, children develop a so called *underlife* in school.<sup>1</sup> This is something that exists alongside of, and in reaction to, organizational and teacher-led rules and activities. Through their own initiated behaviours and activities, including their play, children can contradict and challenge the official norms or rules laid down by the organization and its staff and thus gain a certain amount of control over their lives in this setting. Alongside the lack of playtime, a major concern for children when they enter school seems to be the extensive increase in rules (Corsaro & Molinari, 2005). Clear rules are valuable in educational institutions. Without them, it would be difficult to have something to show playful resistance towards and thereby create experiences of freedom (Øksnes, 2017, with reference to Foucault). But too many rules and regulations can be an obstacle for children. Peter K. Smith (2004) refers to the implementation of play-based pedagogies in pedagogic institutions as an example of the ‘rationalization’ of play in modern society and pedagogical institutions, where the aim of play is then to help children adapt and submit to the established social system. If children’s freedom and agency are reduced in school (Perry, 2014; Schanke, 2019), a consequence may be that they must adjust better to the institutional system. They may also need to express their resistance in new ways, for example through their joint play.

Children are not always allowed to play in school, but sometimes they defy the rules and play anyway. This so-called *illicit play* may enable children to escape responsibilities

and limitations and enact alternatives to the dominant social order (King, 1987). Through play, children can contribute to creating their own lives in school by producing alternatives which open for new thoughts and perspectives on established practices. Children's playful resistance can in that sense serve as concrete 'everyday' experiences of freedom, and as democratic participation in the community, not necessarily with the aim of disobeying or being freed from an oppressive adult power (Øksnes, 2017).

Even if children, as well as adults, have different perspectives on play, they seem, when asked, to have a clear idea of when they play and when they do not (Howard et al., 2006; King, 1987). Children's definitions of play are not necessarily connected to the type of activity but rather to who initiates and makes decisions during play (King, 1987). This means that the same activity can be perceived as play or not, depending on the context. I connect how children express their understandings of play to Corsaro's theory on *interpretive reproduction* (2017), which explains how children interpret the established social structure around them, both adapting to it and contributing to constructing or shaping it in their own, local peer culture. The process of interpretive reproduction is always present but may become particularly apparent in a transition process where children go through big changes in their life (Corsaro & Molinari, 2005). In the tension between adjusting to a new context and reshaping or reproducing it there lies a potential to resist and challenge the established rules and systems. Drawing on interpretive reproduction, the new cultural context surrounding the children in school, consisting of peers, adults, institutional and social structures, can affect both their possibilities to play and the content of their play. On the other hand, their play can help to influence and shape their school culture.

### Structure of methods and analysis

The research design underlying this article is a focused ethnographic fieldwork (Knoblauch, 2005). The material consists of group interviews and written logs of participant observations collected in a medium-large primary school in a Norwegian city. For a period of two months in 2020, from September to November, I visited the first-year class and took part in their everyday school life. The class consisted of about 60 children, aged 5 and 6, divided into three groups with an even distribution between boys and girls. Some of them knew each other from before because they went to the same kindergarten or were neighbours. Others did not know anyone else when they started school.

Children, like adults, are different and express their understandings in different ways. Some find it easier to talk about their understandings, while others express themselves more easily through their actions. By combining participant observations and interviews, the intention was to include different expressions, capture the complexity of play, and gain a deeper understanding of the children's perspectives (Einarsdottir, 2014). Through interviews and informal conversations, I have tried to approach and bring forth the children's interpretations of and perspectives on the events I observed (Fangen, 2010). Children are traditionally in a subordinate position of power compared to adults, which requires extra responsiveness and sensitivity on the part of the researcher. The researcher is responsible for empowering children as research participants (Johansson, 2003). In addition, interviewing children can be challenging because they often relate to something other than what the researcher is asking about (Rasmussen

et al., 2017). By interviewing children in groups, I aimed to equalize the power relationship between me and the children and give them greater influence over the content (Corsaro, 2017), even if it for me involved coping with the unpredictability and occasional chaos of the interview situations. In the formal interviews I obtained a good grasp of the children's general view of play, and in the informal conversations during my observations I gained insight into more personal and immediate reflections on the meaning of play, as I often had the opportunity to talk to the children when they were engaged in play and other everyday activities. Throughout the fieldwork, I strived to take on the role as a 'different or atypical adult' (Corsaro, 2003, p. 14), without the authority adults in school normally exercise. The children brought me close to their *underlife* by accepting me as a different adult, telling me their secrets, and including me in their playful approach to and resistance towards the organizational and teacher-led norms and rules.

In my observations and informal conversations during school hours I tried to capture what the children were engaged in. I specifically looked for situations where they engaged in play and when time was set aside for play by the teachers. I made fieldnotes during my observations or afterwards if I was involved in the interaction. The group interviews enabled me to follow up on the observations. The children were selected to participate in the interviews based on whether their parents had consented and whether they then wanted to participate. In a total of eight audio recorded group interviews with 17 participating children I asked the children in all three groups about what was important for them in school, what they remembered from kindergarten, and how they viewed play. Through their different input, the participating children to a great extent defined both my interview questions and what I focused on in my observations. In the analysis, I consider both the interviews and the informal conversations to be equal parts of the fieldwork, and do not always specify where the text extracts have been taken from.

To analyze the material, I followed the steps in a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where the intention is to identify patterns or themes in qualitative research material to interpret and create meaning. This method gives the researcher the opportunity to construct common thematic elements across research participants and the events they report on or contribute to. First, I transcribed and familiarized myself with the material, followed by a coding process where I coded and re-coded the material in several rounds until I had identified all the material I needed to provide answers to my research question (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). I constructed three themes based on the understandings of play the children expressed. The themes derived from the analytical process are interconnected but highlight different aspects of play. While analyzing the material, I discussed my choices of themes and extracts with colleagues, and the preliminary analyses have been presented at conferences.

The study has been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Written information about the project and consent forms were given to all parents. All names used in the examples are fictional. To secure consent from the children, I informed them that they could ask me to go away if I disturbed them, or if they wanted to play alone, and told them to let me know if they did not want me to write down what they said. The role I took on as a different adult led to a blurring of the distinction between being an observer and a participant. As I gradually became well acquainted with the children, it was important for me to be able to balance my role as a researcher with that of a

private person and not exploit the children's trust in me, such as not passing on what was told to me in confidence.

Even if the children I got to know included me in their community in many ways, I could never fully grasp how they understood their own lives through my observations and conversations with them. Despite that limitation, I can still present what the children expressed so I can discuss what I interpret as their understandings.

## Presentation and discussion

The children in my study clearly define play as something that belongs to them and not to the teachers. However, children's play in school does not exist in a vacuum but is connected to, inspired by, and dependent on the teachers and the institutional culture of the school (Corsaro, 2017). In my observations, I noticed how through play and playful approaches the children strived to adjust to each other and to the school culture, but also how they actively resisted, stretched, and crossed limitations and rules imposed by the teachers and the institution.

I will now present and discuss the three interrelated themes that I have identified as *freedom of choice*, *resistance*, and *community*. They highlight different aspects of play and gave me different insights into how the children define play according to what they value in their play. The discussion is supported by text extracts from interviews, observations, and conversations with the children.

### Understanding play as freedom of choice

Some of the time in school was set aside for play and children's self-initiated activities. Over a few weeks I observed a group of children repeating a special play theme. They were pretending that some of them were baby tigers and baby lions, and others were animal caretakers. In an open area in the back of the classroom the children set up mattresses vertically to form a number of small rooms that could be bedrooms, kitchen, living room, school, offices, or grocery stores. Many children took part, going in and out of the activity. Some brought in new material, like dolls or building blocks. It could at first glance appear as if they were playing with different things, but they all still seemed to be part of the same fiction including the tigers, lions, and caretakers. Some of the children took on leading roles, while others appeared more in the background, and they switched between who was in charge. (Fieldnote, 30 September 2020)

The observation describes a child-initiated play activity. With some variations, the children repeated the same play theme over a long period of over three weeks. They referred to this play as the *baby tiger play*, and they could say to each other: 'Let's play baby tigers!'

When the children told me about what play meant to them, it became clear to me that freedom of choice seemed to be very important for their understanding of whether or not an activity was play. They explained that this freedom involved choosing who you wanted to play with, what to play, where to play and for how long, and what sort of character you could be. One boy, *Kevin*, explained to me that 'play means to have fun, and to have a good time and free time and stuff. And to have ... you know, kind of do something cool ... and also a little nice.' *Alice* expressed it like this: 'Play means to have fun, and then you really just do what you want.' The baby tiger play opened for a variety of

roles which the children themselves could define. They could choose to be the sensible or strict leader, the wild or the cute and shy tiger or lion, the observer, or perhaps the mother, little sister, or shopkeeper. The children's statements on play as freedom of choice emphasize the connection between fun and freedom. They describe play as a pleasurable motivated activity, which agrees with research that finds intrinsic value (Sutton-Smith, 1997), fun, and well-being as immediate benefits of play (Pellis & Pellis, 2021). Some of them also mentioned that there was no advance planning of the play activity. When I observed the children's play in school, it often seemed to be something that just happened spontaneously, without being discussed or agreed upon. Many of the children seemed to move almost seamlessly from one play activity to the next. *Astrid* explained that 'I just walk around and supply myself with play', which points to an understanding of play as something that is not predetermined, but rather spontaneous (Sutton-Smith, 1997), something that just happens and that you get drawn into (Gadamer, 1975).

The teachers also arranged 'play activities' of different duration during teaching hours. An example of such an activity was *station work*, where children in groups of three to four worked with different activities located at different places in the classroom, switching to a new activity after 15 min. One station was often called 'play', and the children were told to play together with specific material, like cars or building blocks. One of the teachers told me that the intention behind this activity was to establish and develop relations between the children. Even if many of the children said that they liked these teacher-initiated play activities, for the most part they did not define them as play, even though there was some uncertainty about this among them. The reasons they gave were similar to what I observed in the example with the baby tiger play, only the opposite. They could not choose if they wanted to participate. 'We *have* to play,' as the boy in the first fieldnote extract put it. They could not choose with whom to play, what theme or material they could use, how involved they should be and in what ways, and for how long they could play. The timeframe seemed to limit some of them from letting themselves to become involved in play. When I asked a girl why she did not want to join an ongoing play station activity, she replied: 'There's no point. We're almost finished anyway.' In sum, teacher-initiated play did not match their criteria for freedom of choice. I interpret the children's statements about teacher-initiated play activities as expressions of what Natalie Canning (2007) refers to as the disempowerment of children. Without the power to choose themselves, the 'play activity' is turned into something that is not play. Even if the children tried to adapt to the school system, it did not seem to affect their definitions of what play was. This then relates to studies showing that who initiates the activity is more defining than the type of activity they engage in (King, 1987).

Nevertheless, the teacher-initiated play activities could sometimes, but not always, lead to 'real' play. The children explained that it depended both on whether they wanted to play and on how much freedom they had within the activity. This also varied a great deal between the children. Some of them told me that they played very much during play sessions when the activity they could choose from the start was something that they liked and by chance wanted to do. They sometimes had the opportunity to choose between three or four different activities. *Daniel* told me that 'I'm so lucky. Because I like colouring. And we can often choose colouring when it's playtime.' Other types of play were not selectable, based on the teachers' wishes as to which play



should be given space. Examples of this were climbing to the top of the trees, running indoors, play fighting, and loud voices. The children knew what kinds of play were not wanted or were rationalized away (Smith, 2004) in school because the teachers often reminded them. One day, before playtime, the teacher told the group: ‘When we play indoors, what level should our voices be at?’ Some of the children answered ‘low’. ‘That’s right,’ said the teacher. ‘When we play indoors, our voices should be low.’

### *Understanding play as resistance*

Aisha and Peter are sitting together at the Lego table, and Aisha takes on a ‘strict’ voice and says: ‘Peter, you’re always making noise. And now you’re making a fuss with your Lego. You must stop that noisy behavior!’ She laughs. Peter slams the building blocks hard on the table and shouts ‘Noisily noise!’ They both laugh. (Fieldnote, 7 September 2020)

When the children described the teacher-initiated play activities as something other than play, I understood it as a form of resistance, or a need to gain control over what play in their peer culture is and should be. The children protected their play and their definitions of play by resisting the adult’s constructions and definitions of play. It could seem that by refusing to play, as I observed on several occasions, the children also demonstrated their power to define play as an activity belonging to themselves and their peer community or underlife. One example of this is the girl who told me that it was no point in playing since the activity was almost finished anyway. Another time, a group of children were told to play with cars on the floor in the classroom play area. Two of the girls brought their cars up on the windowsill, behind the curtain. Afterwards one of them told me: ‘We were not really playing, just pretending to play!’

All in all, I was left with the impression that the children were eager to adjust to the new systems and rules they encountered in school. In their play I often saw them confirm with each other and with the adults the ways in which they were expected to use the area and the toys and in what ways they should include each other. They constantly reminded each other of the rules set by the teachers, and it seemed that most of the time the intention was not to accuse anyone of breaking the rules, but rather to help and support each other. During my observations they also stretched and challenged the same rules. For example, at the end of the play station session, the children often hid away half-finished building projects for later use, even though the teacher told them that everything had to be put back in the basket so there would be enough materials for the next group. Two boys told me: ‘We *have* to hide them [the half-finished Lego cars], we just put them on hold.’ When I asked them why, one of them said: ‘So we can play with them *for real* later, at SFO.’ This tension between adjusting to and resisting the system was something that seemed to characterize the children’s play and everyday school life. Explained through interpretative reproduction (Corsaro, 2017), the children interpret the school’s rules and structures and reproduce and produce them into their own lives and into the new peer community they have become a part of in school. I view this process as an adaptation to the new school context, but also as a search and need for empowerment and agency. The tension between adjusting to and resisting the system was clearly visible in what the children talked about and what they did.

I also observed that in their own play the children repeated the rules and restrictions voiced by their teachers, but in a playful, and often ‘teasing’ manner, as in the observation

of the two children *Aisha* and *Peter*. They play with the rules and boundaries set by teachers in school and appear to playfully interpret the demands and rules that they experience in the school culture they have become a part of. At the same time, they seem to mark their distance to the teacher-led culture when they mimic their teachers. This way of showing resistance does not seem to be negative or ‘aggressive’, but rather playful and fun. I associate the children’s actions to what can be called concrete experiences of freedom (Øksnes, 2017). In their play, Aisha and Peter adapt to what is expected of them in school, but they also contribute to forming their own understandings of how to relate to the rules and regulations given by teachers and form their own understandings of what play in school is and could be. Through their joint playful approaches to the rules and systems of school, the children also seem to strengthen their relationship with each other. I observed a playfulness and spontaneity in the children, which suggests more that they are creating something new rather than reproducing what is already there. While the term *interpretative* in Corsaro (2017) is occupied with how children interpret the adult culture, I also want to highlight and further explore other and more creative and irrational aspects of what happens when children come together in play. Not everything in children’s play could (or should!) be explained rationally. Drawing on interpretative reproduction (Corsaro, 2017), I suggest the term *playful (re)production* to describe and explore how the children express their understandings of play and of the school culture. The term can explain both how they reproduce the established social culture by adapting to it or challenging it, and how they together produce or create something entirely new through their own play.

### *Understanding play as community*

A group of children are playing outside in the schoolyard. They are pretending to have a circus, where some of them are the audience watching the others perform various arts. I am allowed to participate as an usher. Two boys, Carl, and David, sit in the audience, when Carl, sounding a bit nervous, leans over to David, and asks him: ‘Do you want to be my friend?’ David looks at him, smiles and says ‘Yes. I’ve been your friend for a long time already’. ‘You have?’ says Carl and smiles widely. ‘Yes, of course!’. (Fieldnote, 4 September 2020)

At the same time that the children marked their distance to the adult culture in their play, I observed that they created their own, unique peer community. Together, they seemed to playfully reproduce and produce their own peer culture, based on their different understandings of the norms and rules of the established school culture, and based on what spontaneously happened between them when they played together.

During the fieldwork it became clear to me that the community between the children was a key part of their play. Even if some children mentioned playing alone or with teachers as something they liked to do in school, they mainly seemed to understand play as a social activity between peers. In fact, some of them explained that playing meant being with other children. Getting to know other children, having someone to play with, and making friends appeared to be of crucial importance to the children I observed and talked with, and it seemed to take up much of their time and energy in school. According to the children, the main way to belong and make new friends was to get to take part in play. ‘You make new friends if you learn to play with them,’ *Alice*

claims. *Kevin* confirms: 'Yes, and if you're kind.' Play could in that sense then be seen as a 'gateway' to the peer community. To be able to change and develop a peer culture, you must participate in it. At the same time, the children's sense of belonging seemed to be strengthened when they participated in changing and developing the culture. The children both produced their peer communities through play and learned to be participants in a peer community through play.

The children were clearly concerned with the social continuity from kindergarten to school (Ackesjö, 2014), and stressed the importance of getting to belong to the peer community. Corsaro (2017) claims that it is not crucial to have friends to take part in the peer community, but if you are friends, it makes the community stronger. According to the children, you both get to be part of the group and acquire new friends through play. The understanding of what a friend is, and when you are friends with someone, seemed to differ from child to child, as in the observation of the two boys *Carl* and *David*. Still, and resonating with previous research (Corsaro, 2017; Einarsdottir, 2014; Greve, 2009; Olafsdottir, 2019), there seemed to be broad agreement among the children that it is important to have friends if you want to take part in play. *Astrid* described the joy of making a new friend as going 'a little cuckoo in the head and then you start playing'. *Kevin* explained that 'it's really important to learn how to play to make friends', and in that way be included in the community of children. But to be part of social play, it is an advantage if you already have friends in the group. 'You need friends to play,' *Peter* told me in one of the interviews. It can be difficult to take part in play if you do not already have a friend, and this was expressed as a challenge by some of the children, especially those who did not know anyone in the group when they started school. Some of them talked about the fear they had of not having anyone to play with when they started in school. Early in the fieldwork, *Silje* told me that she still had not made any new friends: 'I mostly sit and watch other children when it's play-time.' Other children expressed a strong longing for their friends from kindergarten.

Just as the children seemed to have a strong sense of what was and was not play, they also expressed a strong understanding of play as something that belonged to and could only be created in their own peer culture. In that way, they seemed to connect their play to what I interpret as their underlife in school and protect it from adult intervention. Their descriptions of play as something that is created, or happens, between peers in joint activity, points to an understanding of play as a collective, contextual, and cultural activity (Henricks, 2015; Sutton-Smith, 2008). In the above-mentioned baby tiger play, the participants had to agree on and follow certain shared rules (Henricks, 2015; Howard et al., 2006). Still, the play did not seem to have a common-consensus goal. On the contrary, and in line with cultural perspectives on play (Cohen, 2015; Mouritsen, 1996; Sutton-Smith, 2008), the children's playful (re)production seemed to open for multiple and ambiguous understandings and expressions *within* the community of children. I especially noticed how it allowed restrained and shy children to take an active part and be included, without being verbal or taking on leading positions. The different understandings of play the children expressed did not always match up to each other. For instance, they both emphasized individual freedom of choice and the community with peers as important aspects of play. This does not mean that some expressions are more truthful than others, only that play, and the understanding of it, is complex, ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory (Sundsøl & Øksnes, 2021).

## Understanding playful (Re)production in school

Through an analysis of participant observations and group interviews, I have explored how children talk about and show their understandings of play when they have just started in school. Using the three themes where I connect the children's understandings of play to freedom of choice, resistance, and community, I show that the children both strive to adapt to and develop and change play in their new peer culture. The analyses point to understandings of play as something that belongs to the children and their community. When teachers enter play, the children often stop defining the activity as play because they no longer seem to have the same freedom to choose the content and frames of the activity.

Children continuously construct or (re)produce the frames for their joint play. They adjust to and challenge established norms and limitations provided by teachers, structural factors, and even by themselves. The context that surrounds the children affects both their possibilities to play and the content of their play (Corsaro, 2017). But this can also be turned around: The children's own play influences and shapes their school culture. I found that children's play is contextual and that children adjust their play to their new school context, but they do not give in to teachers' constructions or framings of play, at least not at this early point in their school careers.

Through play and playful approaches, I observed that children's peer culture is strengthened, and is something separate and something else than the relations children have with their teachers. In using the term playful (re)production my aim is to describe how children use their play and playful approaches to adapt and contribute to change and reshape how play is, and could be, understood in their new school culture. Children do not simply imitate adult cultural and institutional models in their role-play. Rather, they continually elaborate on and embellish cultural models to address their own concerns (Corsaro, 2017). Through their play, children have the opportunity to challenge what they might understand as an established and teacher-led school culture. By replacing interpretive with playful, my aim is to highlight the moments when the children are absorbed in play, regardless of the input of adults and others. This aspect of play often seems to be underestimated in research on play and pedagogic practice (Schmidt & Slott, 2021; Sundsdal & Øksnes, 2021). My findings indicate that the playful element in adapting to and creating a peer culture should be given more attention and be further explored in research on the transition to school.

Despite narrower frames for play in school than in kindergarten, it seems that unstructured and child-initiated play still finds its ways into children's school life, and that play is of crucial importance for their transition to school. According to the children, play is something that belongs to them and their own culture, and something their teachers can never fully grasp, understand, or take control over. Through their playful (re)production, the children can create their own underlife where teachers never get to take full part, and where the children's own culture can exist alongside, and sometimes in reaction to, the adult-led culture. This does not mean that they do not welcome teachers into their play, or that teachers should not be concerned about what happens in their play, but teachers will never be able to define or completely understand what play is for children.

Given the increasing focus on the individual in education, both generally and in children's play (Biesta, 2006; Henricks, 2015), this study argues for the need to regain

perspectives on community in play and in school, in future research, policy and practice. The study points out the importance of children's peer culture (Corsaro, 2017), and the fact that it is created through children's joint play and playful (re)production. Children's perspectives on play underline the importance of giving children time to play to make friends, enjoy school, and take active part in contributing to their transition process and everyday school life.

## Note

1. Corsaro's use of the term *underlife* derives from Erwing Goffman (1961).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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