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SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE

“Roleplay Is Like the Rainbow; Without Roleplay, the World Becomes a Dark Place”

Fourth Graders' Perspectives on Roleplay in School

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates Norwegian fourth graders' experiences of roleplay, drawing on field notes and participatory observations conducted prior to group interviews. The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, which identified three themes: freedom to decide who to be and what to do; friendship and participation; and play and learning. Our findings indicate that roleplay provides opportunities for joy, delight, subject learning, and the development of relationships. The children in our study stress the importance of roleplay and link it to the building of friendships. Moreover, the teacher's scaffolding offered structure while maintaining child-directed choice. The authors discuss these findings in relation to existing research, theoretical perspectives on play, and Biesta's concept of formative education.

Keywords:

play, roleplay, formative education, academic learning

Introduction

Play is fundamental, as stated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, § 31 (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013), which advocates for children's right to play. In Norway, play has experienced a revival in the lower grades after a decade focused on academic learning. This shift is a result of the latest curriculum reform (LK20), implemented in 2020 (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020). The reform places greater emphasis on children's need for play, recognising its intrinsic value for well-being and its role as a gateway to enhancing motivation for learning among the youngest pupils. This new curriculum follows several years during which researchers argued that opportunities for play in school had become more limited (Haug, 2019; Lillejord et al., 2018; Øksnes & Sundsdal, 2020) than intended by the 1997 reform, which lowered the school starting age from seven to six years.

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Numerous researchers have found that play and roleplay are essential to learning (Broström, 2019; Pramling et al., 2006; Løndal & Greve, 2015; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Sørensen, 2011). Roleplay, a form of play often characterised as free and child-oriented, is, according to Guss (2015), centred on the imaginary aspects of play. In roleplay, anything is possible: people, objects and actions can transform into something entirely different from their original purpose. Greve et al. (2023, p. 18) further describe roleplay as a form of dramatic play that involves playing with objects and figures, using the body to express oneself, and engaging in make-believe.

Play and roleplay are associated with key aspects of childhood: the essence of being a child, growing as a human being, and developing as a subject within society (Hui-zinga, 1963; Gadamer, 1989; Vygotsky, 1978, p. 96). Drawing on Broström (1996, p. 94), roleplay is understood as expanding into frame play, in which the teacher and children plan the play activity together, creating a shared understanding of the imaginary situation. Nevertheless,

it remains important to create space for the free and child-oriented form of roleplay within frame play.

According to Olofsson (1989), interaction and participation in roleplay provide the foundation for children's development and learning. Sørensen (2011) builds on this, highlighting the potential of roleplay for social inclusion. She also refers to research (e.g. Olofsson, 1989; Folkman & Svedin, 2004) arguing that children who do not participate in roleplay face challenges in developing symbolic forms of communication, imagination and social skills. Children who do not engage in roleplay may become lonely, unhappy and experience stigmatisation (Sørensen, 2011).

Despite the importance of play for children, Bjørnstad et al. (2022) reported that teachers devote only a small amount of time to play, including roleplay, in first grade. Becher's (2018) research further supports this, finding that the physical design of first graders' classrooms offers almost no opportunities for bodily movement, play corners or child-initiated activities.

When asked, children express that play and friendships are the most important aspects of school (Bjørnestad et al., 2023; Broström, 2016; Schanke & Øksnes, 2022). This supports research drawing attention to children in fourth grade as “experienced” players (e.g. Clark, 2017; James, 2007; Schanke & Øksnes, 2022).

In this study, we interviewed fourth graders who have been engaged in roleplay since first grade with a teacher highly dedicated to roleplay. Our aim is to explore how children’s experiences with roleplay contribute to their perception of school and learning. We address this aim through the following research question:

- 1 How do children in fourth grade experience roleplay as contributing to participation in school?
- 2 How do children in fourth grade experience roleplay as contributing to learning?

Theoretical Framework

Play as part of children’s formative education

Political and educational philosophy assert that education in democratic nations should provide opportunities for children to develop as individuals with internalised capacities to live in society, participating in and contributing to the development of both themselves and society in a social and democratic manner (Biesta, 2015; Dewey, 1990).

We maintain that Biesta’s three dimensions (Biesta, 2014, 2015)—namely socialisation, subjectification, and qualification—underscore the breadth of these formative processes. Qualifications can be understood as competences in both academic and practical domains. According to Biesta, socialisation relates to adaptation to prevailing traditions, cultures, values, and practices. Subjectification is a particularly interesting concept in education and in our work, as it concerns questions of freedom. Biesta (2020, p. 1) explains that subjectification: “has to do with the existence of the child or student as subject of her or his own life, not as object of educational interventions.” Biesta reminds us that the qualification domain has been strongly prioritised in recent years. He also clarifies that the subjectification domain is not about unrestricted freedom.

We argue that play is connected to subjectification through processes initiated and driven by children, where goals and outcomes are of lesser importance and where

the children themselves determine roles, content, and activity, with guidance from professionals.

In this article, we draw on phenomenological and socio-cultural perspectives on play. We understand play as a phenomenon observable in humans and animals from an early age, as a natural part of existence and likely necessary for normal development and survival. Reaching consensus on a definition of play has proven difficult (Eik, 2022; Lillemyr, 2011; Sutton-Smith, 1997). However, researchers and philosophers agree on certain characteristics, clarified below, that can be associated with play.

Characteristics and perspectives on play

The most important characteristic of play is that it is free, child-directed, and valuable for its own sake (Eik, 2022). This aligns with Huizinga (1963), who argued that play is voluntary and essential for children’s development in general. Another characteristic is that play is not part of “real life.” Even very young children may move easily between “the real world” and the “fantasy world” (Eik, 2022, p. 18). Greve et al. (2023, p. 37) refer to Guss (2015, p. 30), who regards pretend play as drama play. A third characteristic highlighted by Huizinga (1963) is that play is not useful in daily life. It does not satisfy any observable needs, yet it recurs constantly and thereby brings indispensable colour, joy, and meaning to life and culture. Huizinga (1963) also raised a question relevant to schoolchildren and their opportunities for play in school: can children live *without* play?

According to Winnicott (1971), play serves as a mediator in the development of social skills, as he draws attention to the emotional aspects of empathy and reciprocity, which are crucial for understanding others. Both Winnicott (1953) and Vygotsky (1978) maintain that play is driven by a need for acceptance and belonging to a social group (Öhman, 2020, p. 148). The subjective experience of being included in various groups and friendships is important to children. Children make themselves “playable,” positioning themselves and behaving in ways they consider socially attractive based on their experiences.

The imaginary space of play offers children the opportunity to fulfil their needs, as well as a place where they can develop their fantasies and imagination, according to Vygotsky (1978, p. 93). Thus, a world of “make-believe” where fantasy and imagination are embedded, is created. Here, children develop the skills to predict and imagine the consequences of different scenarios.

Dewey (1990, p. 182) appears to regard play as an inherent aspect of human interaction. Children explore, experiment with, and practise life experiences within a world of imagination, where make-believe, symbolism, and the unreal are natural elements. Dewey (1990, p. 183) adopts a holistic perspective on play, making no distinction between play and learning.

Researchers from Sweden (e.g., Pramling & Wallerstedt, 2019) and Denmark (e.g., Jørgensen & Skovbjerg, 2020; Skovberg & Sand, 2022) have emphasised the role of professional pedagogues in play. Professional pedagogues approach play from the child's perspective, both understanding and participating in it. Moreover, they continuously reflect on how all children can be included in play and playful learning (Skovberg & Sand, 2022).

Roleplay

According to Vygotsky (1978), humans are born with the desire to play, highlighting play as an arena for children's development. Play offers a zone of comfort where children can experiment with different social roles, norms, and values alongside others. Within play, children negotiate and adapt, practising roles and functions they will encounter as adults in society, free from the control of parents or teachers "outside" play. Play can provide children with a sense of mastery over their own lives.

Roleplay is perhaps the most evident form of play in which many of the characteristics described above can be observed. Children relish the freedom to develop and pursue their own ideas and fantasies, negotiating with one another about the play and various roles (Broström, 1996). They enter a world that is not "real", where unexpected events may occur. Nevertheless, there is a certain "order" to which they must adapt, depending on how their playmates guide the process or allow the "to-and-fro" motion to dominate the play (Gadamer, 1989). When a defined "frame" for the play exists, it shapes the content of roles, themes, events, and activities that are considered relevant. The props and requisites available also play a significant role, stimulating the imagination of the children involved (Broström, 1996).

Roleplay within a frame, such as "our street", "hospital", "hotel" can provide safe arenas for experiencing and exploring social and real-life scenarios. It is also a space where children can connect what they learn in school with real life. Broström (1996, p. 92) refers to this as expansive play.

The theories discussed here—on formative processes, philosophical perspectives and the characteristics of play, as well as sociocultural understandings of socialisation and learning—are pertinent for illustrating our empirical findings. They will contribute to the discussion of how we can understand fourth grader's experiences of roleplay as fostering both freedom to participate in school and learning through roleplay.

Methods

To investigate children's experiences of roleplay, we conducted group interviews. The children have had the same teacher since first grade and have engaged in roleplay within the frame of a hotel since then. This playtime is scheduled, but not linked to any specific subject. Each time the class participates in roleplay, the teacher uses circle time to introduce the activity, reminding the children of the frame and settings. Circle time is also used to summarise the roleplay afterwards.

Participants and data

The researchers adopted an informal approach, taking field notes and making participatory observations prior to the group interviews. Three researchers visited the roleplay sessions three to five times each, with at least two researchers present on each occasion. Our field notes from these participatory observations formed the basis for questions in the semi-structured interviews. Glenn et al. (2013, p. 189) support the use of an informal approach combined with group interviews.

The participants in this study were seven fourth graders. The children were selected for interviews in collaboration with their teacher, who chose them based on their comfort with speaking. There was one group of four children (group 1) and one group of three children (group 2), and all children expressed their willingness to participate in the group interviews (see Table 1).

We conducted two semi-structured group interviews with the children following a session of roleplay. Each interview was held in a different room at the school and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Group interviews offer the advantage that children can support one another and expand upon each other's responses (Einarsdottir, 2007).



Table 1: Describing the participants in the group interviews

Group 1	Group 2
Ann	Bill
Ava	Theo
Mia	Olivia
Iris	

Interviews

The two researchers who conducted the interviews were already familiar to the children, having previously participated as observers during the roleplay sessions.

Recognising that an interview can be an unnatural situation, we prioritised creating a safe and comfortable environment for the children. We were mindful to adopt a humble approach and to emphasise that it was the children’s experiences that were of interest. To foster

a sense of security and acknowledge the fourth graders’ responses, we offered both verbal and visual encouragement, such as nodding and saying “yes” (Tjora, 2021, p. 131). In interviews, the fourth graders might have tried to comply with what they thought we wanted them to discuss. To counteract this power dynamic, we asked open and neutral questions about the previous lesson involving roleplay. To help the fourth graders feel at ease and to encourage them to build on each other’s contributions, we chose to conduct group interviews. Nevertheless, group interviews can make the interview situation more challenging and unpredictable (Olsson, 2023, p. 326). Children may also discuss topics other than those raised by the researcher during the interview (Rasmussen et al., 2017).

During the interviews, the children readily recalled sequences and moments from the previous lesson featuring roleplay. They waited their turn to speak and were careful not to interrupt others.

The children’s responses in interviews appeared thoughtful and well considered, and they articulated their own points of view (Christensen & James, 2017). However, at times we

could hear echoes of their teachers’ voices when introducing and framing the roleplay. For example, Bill said, “All are different, all are the same but different. You are who you are” (Gr. 2, 6), which reflects respect and tolerance for diversity among their peers. This led us to reflect on the unequal distribution of power not only between teachers and children, but also between researchers and children during interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 20). To support the interviews, observations and field notes were used to provide contextual understanding.

Analytical approach

We undertook a reflexive thematic analysis of the material, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). Throughout both data collection and analysis, we held frequent meetings and discussions to ensure a shared understanding of the data. The steps in this analysis were not linear; we moved back and forth as we worked to conceptualise the themes. We began by familiarising ourselves with the material, reading through and gaining an overview of the data. Initially, the interviews were transcribed in Norwegian by two of the researchers, after which all three researchers read the transcripts to become acquainted with the data.

Next, two of the researchers individually coded the material, generating initial codes. We then discussed and revised these codes, using colours to distinguish between them, before settling on preliminary themes.

We subsequently revised the themes and initial codes to ensure they worked in relation to each other. Using these new codes, we jointly re-analysed the material. We redefined the themes and assigned them names, as shown in Table 2. In the final step, we identified excerpts that represented the material and translated these from Norwegian to English before writing up the results (Kvale, 1996). Interpreting the children’s expressions in the interviews and then translating them into English is recognised as a challenge and a potential weakness in presenting the material. In presenting the results, the excerpts are given consecutive numbering.

Table 2: Description of themes and codes

Themes	Codes	Description
Free to decide who to be and what to do	Fun to play roleplay	The children express that roleplay is fun and that they enjoy it.
	Look forward to	The children express that they look forward to play.
	Choice	The children express that they have multiple choices in roleplay.
	Freedom	The children have freedom in roleplay.
	Different identities	The children can change who they are during roleplay and be “someone else”.
Friendship and participation	Adapt new themes and roles	The children express that they help each other during roleplay.
	Make friends	The children make new friends during roleplay.

Play and learning	Using language	The children use different languages during roleplay.
	Using counting and subtraction	The children talk about using mathematics during roleplay.
	Safe space	The children express that they can fall back on interacting with the teacher if they do not quite know what to do.
	The teacher facilitates and supports	The teacher observes and helps with equipment and roles when needed to support the continuation of roleplay.

Ethical challenges

Different legal considerations were addressed, and the project was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT). In addition, several discretionary assessments were made in accordance with the rules of research ethics. Special attention was given to the involvement of children as informants (Schanke & Øksnes, 2022; see also Greve et al., 2023). Written consent was obtained from parents, allowing their children to participate. The children themselves received age-appropriate verbal information about the study. Throughout the research, children’s verbal and non-verbal signals were carefully observed to identify any indication of a wish to withdraw from the study.

Results

Our analysis identifies three overarching themes in the children’s experiences of roleplay in school. The first two themes—*free to decide who to be and what to do* and *friendship and participation*—address our first research question: *How do children in fourth grade experience roleplay as contributing to participation in school?* The children specifically discussed the choices that roleplay offers, including the opportunity to try out different roles and make friends during playtime.

The third theme—*roleplay and learning*—addresses the second research question: *How do children in fourth grade experience roleplay as contributing to learning?* Here, the children reflected on academic subjects and how these subjects are relevant within roleplay.

Free to decide who to be and what to do

Fieldnotes (07.04.22) indicate that circle time is used before and after each session of roleplay. The teacher begins by asking: (H)ow they (the children) think it will

be in role-play today? The children unanimously say that they think “it will go well”. Some say that “we must be good at working together, make sure that everyone has something to do” (Fieldnotes, 07.04.22). The stated goal of roleplay is “To have fun!” The teacher also asks if the children: “have decided what roles they want during the roleplay” and notes that the children who have not decided on a role are tourists (Fieldnotes, 07.04.22).

In interviews, the children described roleplay as fun, exciting, and something they enjoy. Because roleplay is included in the lesson plan, they also spoke of it as something they look forward to. A recurring theme in their discussions was the sense of freedom: they can take individual initiative during roleplay and make their own choices. The children expressed enthusiasm about having a range of options during play and the opportunity to choose which character to be. They also mentioned the ongoing possibility of trying out different characters and learning social norms through the responses of other children to their chosen roles:

Mia: I think it is very funny because you get to be another person than who you are.

Ann: It is always fun to be many different things, like... you can be ...x and y...and be something different next time, kind of.

Ann: You can always learn from what you have done. (Gr. 1, 1)

These children appeared to enjoy their roleplay experiences at school. They highlighted the joy of being free to decide who to be, exploring and experimenting with different identities, personalities, and roles. The ability to enact a new scenario next time, having learned from the previous one, was also emphasised. The following

segment of dialogue features vivid expressions from children describing how they shift between various occupational and family roles, and how they transition from being human to different animals:

Mia: I did not do it, but she [says the name of the girl], she changed to a little girl...

Iris: ...change...

Mia: She first changed from dog to tiger, and then from tiger to a little girl...

Iris: I think she was a tiger...

Ava: I liked very much to be a French cook... (Gr. 1, 2)

These excerpts illustrate how these scenarios provide a space where children encounter few limitations and are free to change roles and develop in imaginative ways. When creating new roles, they often select interesting costumes and props from the “costume store” in the playroom. Through roleplay, the children explored and experimented with aspects of different subjects, such as mathematics and language arts, to develop content, themes, and roles within various settings. Fieldnotes corroborate the children’s interview statements about the joy and excitement they experience when exploring occupational roles, such as being a doctor “taking a Corona test” or family roles like “being a babysitter” (Fieldnotes, 23.09.22).

Being free to decide who to be can also mean choosing to have a stable role. Theo explains that, when deciding on roles, the children respect each other’s choices: “Or, we the rest of us, we never used to be a janitor, because he, the other in our class, used to be the janitor because he always brings janitor things, so he is kind of a permanent janitor” (Gr. 2, 3).

Within different frames of roleplay, children try out new identities and arenas, visit other countries, and explore what they imagine they would or would not do in the real world. The following utterances suggest that, during one instance of roleplay, the girls created a space for unlimited and perhaps forbidden fantasy and imagination:

Iris: I, I was, maybe a kind of very imaginative girl...as.

Mia: First, we called her little princess. Are we still going to do that?

Iris: Yes.

Ava: Are we still...But she was a bit crazy [says in English] toward the dog, because she...took the knife and just cut the legs.

Iris: ...at the doctor.

Mia: Yes, so at that point I did not know what you did, but...

Ava: And then she asked for money all the time...

Iris: Yes, I also stole some money when the mother, she did not see, standing with the back of...I had an extra 100 kroner. (Gr. 1, 4)

Roleplay appears to offer opportunities to explore identities and roles that are both unheard of and transgressive compared to regular norms and values. The quotations also show how the children made enormous leaps between positions in a role, which can be challenging for their co-players, as Mia remarked, “At that point I did not know what you did, but...” (Gr. 1, 4).

Furthermore, unusual social norms were explored when Ava was cutting up an animal and stealing money (Gr. 1, 4). In this instance, the children sought out what might be unnatural in real life and explored it, gaining new experiences that could contribute to their development. The class had engaged in roleplay for four years at school. We therefore assumed that they had established relationships in which they felt safe and were generous with each other.

Friendship and participation

We found strong elements of roleplay as a social arena facilitating friendships among the children. This arena allowed children to form individual friendships and participate as members of an equal group. In response to the question “Who did you play with during roleplay today?” the children shared the following:

Olivia: We are, a lot of us, playing together, a lot.

Theo: Roleplay is important for 4B.

Olivia: We became friends. (Gr. 2, 5)

The children emphasised that they were part of large groups playing together. Roleplay is a social arena that also helps new children make friends. During observations, one researcher asked a child: “What does roleplay mean to you?” The child replied: “When there are new children in the class, it’s easy to get to know them and make friends through play” (Fieldnotes, 07.04.22). We were told how, during play, they helped each other find roles and activities so that everyone could participate. One example comes from children in group two, who shared how a boy who preferred chess instead of roleplay was offered a role as a chess player in the “hotel.” In this way, he was smoothly included in play. These practices, emphasising participation and social acceptance, were further captured through the following quotations:

Bill: All are different, all are the same but different. You are who you are. (Gr. 2, 6)

Ann: It is fun. We are good at roleplay, no one fights, and all take care of one another. (Gr. 1, 7)

Roleplay continued during school breaks and leisure time. Both groups gave examples of play between groups of children. Bill described play across classes during school break: “We made a street with other groups of children” (Gr. 2, 8).

When asked “What do you play if roleplay continues in other places?” the children in group two painted a colourful picture of roleplay as very important not only at school but in different aspects of their lives:

Theo: Roleplay is important for all; it is the most important on the planet.

Bill: All would be dark, no rainbow, all would be black. No one has fun, and people would have their heads down.

Olivia: We would not have friends. (Gr. 2, 9)

Roleplay was therefore perceived as a vital part of these children’s lives. They maintained that roleplay should be something in which all children across the world participate. The children did not distinguish between roleplay as valuable in itself, as a space for learning about life, or as a means of learning in school.

Play and learning

While engaging in roleplay set within a hotel in England, all children received the same amount of money to spend during the activity. This allowed them to practise simple mathematics, such as counting, addition, and subtraction, when buying groceries at the shop, paying the bill at the restaurant, or visiting the doctor’s office. In response to the question “What do you think about engaging in roleplay?” Bill and Theo shared their perspectives on academic learning in a traditional classroom setting compared to learning through play:

Bill: Roleplay is fun because you do not just sit on a chair and learn maths.

Theo: Roleplay is important, or school would be boring... not just maths. (Gr. 2, 10)

We observed that the children used Norwegian Language Arts when writing or reading recipes, whether acting as a doctor or a patient at the doctor’s office. Similarly, they read menus or wrote down items when placing orders

at the restaurant. The children explored, practised, and learned different foreign languages, especially English, but also used phrases in French and German:

Ava: Those in the store need to learn some math because they deal with money there.

Iris: They give the same amount of money to all and so you need to calculate.

Mia: And so you can practice speaking English because it is actually in England.... (Gr.1, 11)

Children practised and explored words, terms, and different meanings to fulfil their roles: “Today, we were at the restaurant. Then I said: ‘Can, can I get some [says it in English] ‘pils’ for ‘øl’ because I did not remember what it was called in English” (Bill, Gr. 2, 12).

Through roleplay, the children explored and experimented with elements and aspects of subjects in real-life experiences, developing content, themes, and roles within various settings. Field notes and observations from the roleplay prior to interviews show similar aspects of children calculating and trying out English terms, as well as “answering ‘oui’ exploring French terms in the restaurant” (Fieldnotes, 23.09.22).

The frame and settings for roleplay in this study were introduced by the teacher, who consistently left it open for the children to develop alternative frames for the activity. The children participated in developing the roleplay, facilitating engagement. During circle time after one session, this was highlighted when the teacher asked: “What do you think I am impressed with?” One child replied, “Everyone had something to do” (Fieldnotes, 23.09.22). The teacher assisted and scaffolded before, during, and after roleplay, and provided a dedicated room in the school for roleplay, including a storage area for props and costumes.

Discussion

Our aim is to explore how children’s experiences with roleplay can shape their perception of school and learning, seeking to understand how roleplay contributes to participation and learning. Roleplay can play a significant role in children’s formative education. In this section, we discuss our findings in relation to research and the theoretical framework, where roleplay is considered part of the general purpose of education, as formulated by Biesta (2015, 2020). The characteristics of play and roleplay were developed based on philosophical theories (Huizinga, 1963; Gadamer, 1989) and educational theories (Dewey,

1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Winnicott, 1971; Broström, 1996; Sørensen, 2011).

Roleplay and subjectification

Through the children's accounts of roleplay, we traced its intrinsic value. The most compelling statements in support of the inherent worth of play came from Bill and Theo, who likened roleplay to a rainbow, asserting that it is equally important for all children across the world (Gr. 2, 9). This perspective aligns with theories that question whether children can exist *without* play. Huizinga (1963) contends that play brings indispensable colour, joy and substance to life.

The children expressed joy and anticipation regarding roleplay. They were provided with an arena for freedom of expression and the opportunity to make choices and take initiative—opportunities rarely afforded elsewhere in school. They also drew upon their imagination and creativity in developing themes and roles. This resonates with Huizinga's theory that play is freedom (Huizinga, 1963).

Biesta (2020) argues that subjectification concerns the question of freedom, though not freedom without responsibility towards others. When Ann says, "It is always fun to be many different things..." (Gr. 1, 1), she exemplifies the freedom to participate in a role she finds appealing. She goes on to say, "We are good at roleplay, no one fights, and all take care of one another" (Gr. 1, 7), which

illustrates the socially responsible aspect of subjectification.

The children's statements revealed their sensitivity to initiatives from others based on an "order". This "order" can serve as a framework or set of rules in roleplay, requiring both adaptation and the drive to move play forward. Here, adjustment to social norms and consideration for the needs of others and the environment are essential, as when Ava describes: "...But she was a bit 'crazy' [says in English] toward the dog because she...took the knife and just cut the legs..." (Gr. 1, 4).

We believe that social connection, as emphasised by Vygotsky (1978) and Winnicott (1971), is crucial. Thus, the children in group one found solutions, adapted, negotiated and reformulated social norms, reminding themselves that roleplay is not real.

The education system is filled with "regimes" that regulate learning, yet children perceive roleplay as an arena where they are free from these regimes. While roleplay provides a space for children to experience freedom and autonomy—a form of subjectification (Biesta, 2014)—the structure and setting of roleplay also offer "order", enabling children to learn to adapt and be responsive to the initiatives of others. The children in this study experience school quite differently from what is described by researchers such as Becher (2018) and Bjørnstad et al. (2022),

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who argue that teachers do not devote time to play and that children lack space, materials and opportunities to play in school (Haug, 2019; Lillejord et al., 2018; Øksnes & Sundsdal, 2020). In contrast, the children in this study experience the freedom to participate in a free and child-oriented form of roleplay (Broström, 1996, p. 94), though not without order.

Roleplay and socialisation

The fourth graders described how the various frameworks of roleplay created social spaces in which they developed different personalities, explored social and occupational roles, and prepared for future life. Drawing on Vygotsky’s (1978) understanding, this type of play contributes to participation in social processes, fostering the development of social skills and an understanding of diverse social rules and dynamics. Roleplay provides a safe environment for children to negotiate, take turns and practise social interaction and collaboration. It offers a space for participation and inclusion, as described by Bill when discussing how the game of chess was introduced to enable one boy to join in: “...all are the same but different...” (Gr. 2, 6).

Expanding on Vygotsky’s (1978) social notion of play, Winnicott (1971) argued that children, through play, can balance internal and external realities by experiencing both social and emotional aspects of themselves and others, as well as by placing themselves in other people’s situations. Through roleplay, children develop empathy and reciprocity (Winnicott, 1971). We observed striking examples from children illustrating how roleplay enables all children to be respected for who they are, regardless of their interests, abilities or backgrounds. Social development was further evident as children shared their preferred roles and supported each other in developing new ones, as explained by Olivia, who described a boy who mostly wanted to be a janitor: “But it is also like with him, this person gets bored, then one of the others, for example, then they can have a go at it” (Gr. 2, 3). Sørensen’s (2011) research can be further built upon here, demonstrating that roleplay contributes to social inclusion.

Research (e. g. Bjørnstad et al., 2023; Broström, 2016; Schanke & Øksnes, 2022) shows that play and friendships are of greatest value for children in school. The findings from this study reinforce this perspective, as children expressed that roleplay is a vital arena for close social relationships and the development of friendships. Through roleplay, they get to know their classmates in new ways, and it also creates opportunities for social interaction with children outside their own classes during break times.

Biesta’s (2014) concept of socialisation is relevant here, reflecting how the framework of roleplay can serve as a space for socialisation within schools. Through socialisation enabled by roleplay, children learn to adapt to dominant cultures, values and traditions. They also develop social skills, such as sharing and helping others, building on values of respect and equality. Thus, roleplay may facilitate the spread of friendships and social inclusion (Sørensen, 2011).

Roleplay and qualification

In this section, we consider the findings related to academic subjects and the contributions of roleplay to the third overall purpose of education: qualification. In recent years, research in Norway (Haug, 2015; Lillejord et al., 2018) has challenged our understanding of play in school. One line of inquiry questions whether emphasis should be placed on child-initiated free play, or whether roleplay can contribute to children’s academic learning (Lillemyr, 2011; Øksnes, 2008; Schanke & Øksnes, 2022). Some view it as problematic when professionals participate in play, due to teachers’ tendency to guide play towards curriculum goals, known as guided play (Schanke & Øksnes, 2022).

The instances of roleplay we observed were not underpinned by academic learning intentions or outcomes rooted in the curriculum (LK20). Nevertheless, we saw the integration of various subjects within the unfolding of roleplay, aligning with Dewey’s (1990) notion that play and learning are not separate.

In this study, the fourth graders described how they explored, experimented with and used different languages, mathematics, and reading and writing skills. Academic subject knowledge was applied in various contexts within the hotel setting. Calculating, reading and writing skills were required to fulfil different occupational roles and to playact as customers at the hotel, patients at the infirmary, patrons at the restaurant, or shoppers at the grocery store. The “literacy” aspect was linked to the exploration of language, academic terms and concepts, as well as the development of academic knowledge and learning during play (Barton, 2007). In roleplay, children draw on elements from multiple subjects.

Roleplay requires children to use language skills relevant to their roles and context, incorporating new vocabulary into the play process. They benefit from opportunities to take initiative, be active and creative. Learning occurs through play within their comfort zone and within the proximal zone of development (Vygotsky, 1978),

supported by peers and the teacher. As research (for example, Broström, 2019; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Løndal & Greve, 2015; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Sørensen, 2011) argues that play and roleplay are essential to learning, this study supports the view that play enables children's learning in school. Play and learning are interconnected and overlapping, strengthening each other (Dewey, 1990). Academic subjects find new pathways through roleplay. At this school, we found a holistic understanding of play and learning, where roleplay plays a significant role in learning without being outcome-based. Biesta (2015, 2020) emphasised freedom and space for a subject to be and become a self in the educational process.

Play-responsive teaching (Pramling & Wallerstedt, 2019) was not intentionally employed by the teacher. Nevertheless, the teacher approached play from the children's perspective, reflecting on how all pupils could participate in roleplay and facilitating this so that roleplay became significant to the children across all areas that constitute the purpose of education. This stands in contrast to research such as Bjørnstad et al. (2022), which indicates that teachers spend limited time on play in school.

Based on the fieldnotes and interviews, we inferred that the teacher possessed valuable expertise in maintaining roleplay as a safe and sustainable practice at this school. By scaffolding roleplay, the teacher contributed to the children's development and learning.

Conclusions

Fourth graders do not differentiate between various aspects of play within roleplay, nor do they make a clear distinction between play and learning. Our findings indicate that children perceive school as a facilitator of play, and that roleplay in school supports a range of educational, developmental and learning processes, contrary to the conclusions of several previous studies. This aligns with research demonstrating how play can be integrated into educational processes for children in school.

We found that roleplay offers opportunities for joy, delight, subject learning and the formation of relationships. The children in our study emphasise that roleplay is important to them and associate it with building friendships. This is consistent with previous research by Schanke & Øksnes (2022), who found that children value play and friendships when starting school. Furthermore, the children highlight that it is liberating to assume different characters and to be someone else for a while. Finally,

they are able to use their knowledge of different school subjects in a meaningful context through play.

In accordance with the studies and theories presented here, we suggest that roleplay is helpful in achieving the overall purposes of education: subjectification, socialisation and qualification.

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