

Contact zones with culture Experiencing collection objects in school-related museums

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Introduction

From its origin, modern formal mass schooling aims to pedagogically compensate social inequalities by birth and upbringing through teaching, learning, and awarding of social positions based on individual merit (Durkheim, 1984; Meyer, Krücken, 2005; Fend, 2008). However, studies show since the late 1960's that schools and school systems rather than compensate social inequalities often reproduce them (Dahrendorf, 1965; Bourdieu, Passeron, 1971; Boudon, 1973; Bourdieu, 2000, 2001; OECD, 2019). Social inequalities frequently manifest in different access to and appreciation of cultural expressions between privileged and underprivileged groups (Bourdieu 1982) with serious repercussions for social cohesion and participation. In this light, cultural education as part of nonformal education is considered as a pedagogical approach which may give access to cultural expressions for underprivileged children and thus reduce social inequalities (BMBF, 2018; Retzar, 2021). In Italy and Germany there is a wide and differentiated discussion of cultural education and its practical application in different settings (Scheunpflug, Prenzel, 2013; Scheunpflug, Wulf, Züchner, 2021). In these discussions, museums are often considered key institutions for cultural education on account of their various collections giving access to cultural techniques and expressions (Kunz-Ott, Kudorfer, Weber, 2009). Collection objects as part of a society's cultural heritage have the possibility to give children access to a society's cultural codes and language (Wagner, 2022). By laying open cultural codes for learners in interpreting cultural objects, the usually tacit incorporated

cultural capital of privileged persons can be shared, and thus greater social justice and inclusion be achieved (Chistolini, 2019). However, little scholarly attention has been given so far to the “obstinacy of things” (Hahn, 2015), i. e. the resistance of material objects to interpretive closure and the excess of meanings which cannot be easily subsumed or appropriated by cultural meanings. This obstinacy – in combination with direct access to collection objects or their replicas – may give underprivileged children the possibility of experiencing collection objects beyond a hegemonic educational or interpretive paradigm (Smith, 2006; Grünberg, Zehbe, 2023). For children, the discovery of their own meanings may be used in didactics to contextualize the collection objects at later stages in school (Duncker, Popp, 2003). This opens new perspectives for object-centered learning, educational partnerships as well as social dialogue and civic or political education in primary schools.

1. Background

The Italian-German DFG-funded project *Bildung und Objekte: Historische Sachlernprozesse in schulbezogenen Sammlungen* [Education and objects. Historical learning processes in school-related collections] (Keidel, Wagner, Zehbe, 2023) between *Università degli Studi Roma Tre* (Prof. Dr. Sandra Chistolini) and *Leipzig University* (Prof. Dr. Bernd Wagner) explores possibilities for cultural education for privileged and underprivileged primary school children on the basis of educational partnerships. The project established partnerships with different schools in Leipzig and different classes in one school on the outskirts of Rome, as well as two school-related collections: *Schulmuseum – Werkstatt für Schulgeschichte* [School Museum – workshop for school history] in Leipzig, Germany, and *Fondo Pizzigoni* [The Pizzigoni Fund] in Rome, Italy. Some partner schools are located in economically disadvantaged areas. Such economic disadvantages can aggravate social inequalities on account of a local ‘brain drain’ (Cavallini, Soldi, Utma, Errico, 2018), ultimately resulting in educational segregation through spatial segregation of privileged and underprivileged communities. Underprivileged school children thus have often fewer chances to experience cultural goods and collection objects than privileged children (Doeser, 2015) and frequently see cultural objects as a source of amusement or recreation and not as a resource for building relationships with cultural meanings. Considering that the Italian partner school is located on the urban periphery of Rome, the spatial distance to cultural and educational resources – such as those of the Pizzigoni Fund located at the city centre – can also hinder children’s access to cultural goods.

The collections in Germany and Italy were chosen because they are both expected to offer a low-threshold approach for children to cultural goods in focusing on historical education in schools. They are thus connected to the

participating children's experiences of school and schooling. Primary school children usually visit school museums during school time. Their experiences in the school museums both connect to as well as contrast their own school experiences on account of the historical change of teaching and learning arrangements, especially regarding disciplinary methods and rote learning in the schools of intellectualism and verbalism of late 19th century Italy and Germany. However, such emphasis on teaching and learning at the start of mass schooling obscures the fact that pedagogical reforms at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century aimed at widening access to education across social strata through unitary schools (Nohl, 1988) or by focusing on children's interests and experiences in their life worlds (Chistolini, 2015). Especially progressive educational ideas 100 years ago of movements that were called in Italy *l'attivismo* [the activism] included often didactic objects (Lucisano, Marzano, 2022). Both cooperating collections in Italy and Germany exhibit documents and historical objects of two educational reform traditions which emphasized child-object interactions for learning processes: those of *Leipziger Lehrerverein* [Leipzig Teachers' Association] (1846–1933) (Taubert-Striese, 1996) and of the Italian educational reformer Giuseppina Pizzigoni (1870–1947) and her experimental method aiming at a school of observation and direct experimentation with objects to activate processes of understanding and approaches to knowledge (Chistolini, 2015).

2. Experiences and the interaction with objects

Pedagogical approaches using objects or elements of material culture can be traced back to Friedrich Fröbel (1782–1852), which influenced later Italian and German educational approaches but also led to independent developments. Particularly interesting are reform approaches focusing on objects at the end of the 19th century, such as those of Georg Kerschensteiner (1854–1932), Hugo Gaudig (1860–1923), Giuseppina Pizzigoni (1870–1947) as well as Maria Montessori (1870–1952).

The main ideas of these approaches are, among others, to let children acquire practical and cognitive skills by experiencing objects with all senses as well as establishing an interactive dialogue with them that encourages children to see beyond the object to the point of placing it in different human and environmental contexts. In Italy, this is often used to ground experience in facts for argumentation, which is the first step of learning to criticize, as Giambattista Vico wrote 1708 in his famous oration *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* [On the Study Methods of Our Time] (Vico, 1993).

Vico's historicist and anti-rationalist approach is fruitful for relocating the role objects in the childhood knowledge process by privileging the fantastic universal over the rational universal. Children move from physical interaction

and playing to constructing and imagining meanings, which opens a perspective to processes of learning the historical and social codes of language and culture, including those of cultural heritage. Children thus retrace the stages of human development from simple physical interaction and oral communication to diversified and complex activities and written communication. For pedagogical research, the sequence of childhood experiences needs to be understood to place it in the vast field of human historical and cultural experiences and meanings. According to the methodology of *Decoding the Disciplines* (Chistolini, 2019), this means searching for the obstacles preventing children access to the different forms of human knowledge and expression, including those that are encoded in and that can arise from objects.

Contact and familiarization with cultural goods in concrete situations can lead to objectifying experiences and sequences of activity that encourage abstract reflections in the line of Dewey (2014). The world, as we know it, is what it is on account of those generations before us. The material objects left behind by previous generations contain for Dewey the new problems that open future experiences.

While this approach to objects focuses on objects and their cultural codes, as epitomized by Kerschensteiner (1917) in the notion of the value of cultural goods for education, there is, however, also an educational approach to objects which foregrounds the physical, physiological and psychological possibilities offered by objects, as formulated by the Leipzig educational reformer Hugo Gaudig (1917a, 1917b). Gaudig regards objects primarily as a possibility to spark the interest of children and their autonomous activity. Such considerations on experiencing objects are reflected in the concept of affordances (Norman, 1999), i. e. the objects' material properties which suggest how to use or experience the objects as well as how to contextualize them in 'object landscapes' or 'usage families'. Affordances activate children's imagination and connect to as well as contrast experiences of their everyday lives and life worlds (Clifford, 1997; Wagner, 2010, 2013a, 2013b).

In the children's construction of meanings, cultural codes and physical properties of objects are connected – a prime example for this is how children interpret changes to the object caused by collecting and the collection history – forming a productive tension between German and Italian perspectives on the research object.

3. Method and design

In the project, the empirical study of children's interactions with collection objects is informed by pedagogical methods of the early 20th century, with particular attention to the experimental method established by Giuseppina Pizzigoni (1870–1947) and recent studies aimed at defining pedagogical

strategies for enabling access to cultural knowledge in formal school subjects. Here, current educational research on object-centered learning processes of children is important (Scholz, Rauterberg, 2004; Wagner, König, 2023). Such learning processes of children are connected to uses of objects, self-representations, interactions, and interpretations of children. These self-representations of children and their experiences may be methodologically reconstructed through ethnographic participant observation, ethnographic videography, and subsequently qualitative focused group interviews. Specifically, participant observation and videography ensure that the researchers are immersed in the field and that their research perspective is reflectively sensitized to the multimodality of the ethnographic scene and the participating children's perspectives and meanings within it.

Because primary school children mostly experience objects through direct physical interaction, the research team created two specifically designed exhibitions featuring "contact zones" (Clifford, 1997; Wagner, 2010) with historical collection objects or, respectively, the replicas of originals. In these contact zones, children are allowed to make their own experiences with the collection objects, following an anthropological and pedagogical notion of "playing" (Schiller, 1795; Huizinga, 1956; Nohl, 1988; Gebauer, Wulf, 1998) rather than an overarching notion of "learning" for school which can often dominate educational partnerships between schools and museums (Budde, Hummrich, 2016). By offering the children the opportunity to touch and play with the collection objects, notions of social power and privilege pervading schools can be momentarily suspended, even though children's peer groups are equally subject to social distinctions and inequalities (Thole, 2002; Harring, 2007). Privileged and underprivileged children can equally react to the objects' "affordances" (Norman, 1999), and imagine the object's meanings, even if children do not know what the object is or what it has been used for. Imagined object meanings may methodologically manifest in performative self-representations of children, which can be captured by ethnographic participant observation (Breidenstein, Hirschauer, Kalthoff, Nieswand, 2013) and ethnographic videography (Stauber, 2004, 2006; Friebertshäuser, 2012). However, such self-representations also give the participating institutions cues, as to what is interesting for children or which objects are particularly conducive for educational experiences.

The research project conducts qualitative-reconstructive empirical research on the affordances of historical collection objects with a special focus on emergent historical learning of primary school children. With reference to qualitative-reconstructive educational research, two sub-studies are conducted in the participating school-related museums in Germany and Italy.

In the participating collections, small exhibitions on pedagogical reforms and associated cultural objects were created. In these exhibitions, children are

allowed to freely handle especially designed objects or replicas of originals. The contact zones with the objects were specifically designed to accommodate ethnographic videography. In this regard, two camera positions for an individual (close up) and a group perspective (wide angle) were foreseen. In doing so, both individual as well as group interactions and processes can be recorded. Video material is subsequently split up into sequences which serves – together with field memos of participant observation – as a basis for the reconstruction of children’s experiences following the Grounded Theory methodology (Corbin, Strauss, 1996). From this data, theories about children’s interests in collection objects and their historical learning processes are derived. Data is discussed considering the objects’ potential to initiate learning processes and how this can help in creating learning contexts where privilege and social power is suspended.

4. First results

Some accompanying educators in Germany and Italy described participating classes or individuals as challenging, particularly in moments where children didn’t show ‘appropriate’ behaviour for cultural institutions. Such inappropriate behaviour included fast movements, loud voices, and convergent, self-centered, haptic behaviour in contrast to apparently expected slow movements, low voices, and distanced, object-centered visual behaviour, which was often demanded in verbal and gestural admonitions. This may point to different habitus of children in relation to cultural expressions (Bourdieu, 1982) as some children were more often admonished than others. Nevertheless, most children developed specific ways of interacting with the objects in the contact zones, sometimes introducing their own know-how and experiences, sometimes subverting the suggested uses of the educators by making creative use of the objects’ affordances, for example using objects’ inertia to make them bounce while waiting for tasks to be executed. This bears resemblance to Jackson’s (1968) hidden curriculum or Willis’ (1977) subversion of dominant school culture by finding and claiming spaces for self-guided activities with the objects. Especially skillful uses or appropriations of objects led to imitations by other children, resulting in social learning processes and the spreading of practices across several individuals. Most importantly, such explorations of objects and social learning processes must be regarded as physical appropriations of material culture which seem to suspend social inequalities on account of differences in economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1982). Here, notions of a hidden, anthropological curriculum of material culture shines up as well as a didactics of material culture, which draws on the performative and physical interaction of children with collection objects, rather than on a cultural interaction prescribed by the social institutions of schools and museums.

Apart from offering a way of suspending social inequalities for privileged and underprivileged children, the project's research results may also serve to strengthen educational partnerships with museums. Collections receive through the project's research important data on what is interesting for children, which may be often invisible to museums on account of the museums' conservation and interpretation paradigms (ICOMOS, 2008), rarely allowing children other experiences than distanced observation of collection objects. This may in turn help museums in serving their societies better, becoming more inclusive and participative institutions. These kinds of observations of children interacting with objects produce a new vision of objects that can become potentials for understanding children's ways of being, thinking, behaving, and developing.

5. Outlook

The interventions in the participating historic educational collections in Italy and Germany provide important information on object-centred interactions and learning processes of primary school children. The binational research design offers the possibility to identify and comment on intercultural dimensions, such as different cultural preferences of children or cultural teaching and learning preferences in Germany and Italy. By comparing cultural preferences, underlying anthropological dimensions in children's development and its connection to learning processes can be reconstructed. This in turn helps to create learning environments and educational partnerships which do not privilege children on account of their access to cultural capital.

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