

The potential of material culture for historical learning processes.

Active learning in school-related collections

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Introduction

So far, material culture has only played a minor role in historical learning in Germany, although historical objects represent great learning potential as material sources (Nießeler, 2020, p. 55 f.; von Reeken, 2016, 2018). Primary school students usually come into contact with historical objects in the form of collection items on excursions to collections or museums. However, the German didactics of social science teaching with reference to *extracurricular learning places* (Adamina, 2020; Blaseio, 2016) and to historical learning are based on little empirical data. There is little evidence of what access children have to historical collection objects and how they interact with them. It would make sense to use collection objects as a way for children to gain access to history and historical change, as children can touch and interact with them to develop ideas about a bygone era. In addition, children focus their attention particularly when a thing interests them or motivates them to act (König & Wagner, 2023a; Nießeler, 2020). Empirical data on this would also be of value for museums and collections, as these institutions lend themselves to educational partnerships with schools. However, children often do not have direct access to collection objects in exhibitions or in museum educational programs (Wagner, 2021, p. 122 f.). This article tries to answer the questions of why dealing with collection objects makes sense for historical learning, especially for primary school students, and why collections and museums are appropriate places for the research on child-object interactions. For this purpose, the first part discusses the importance of learning with objects in general from the perspective of the German school subject *Sachunterricht*, in which children are introduced to the social and natural sciences, including historical learning. The second part explains the research design of the Italian-German research project *Education and Objects*, an empirical study with two

school-related collections in Rome and Leipzig that conducts basic research on historical material learning processes. In the third part, first results from the data material are presented and related to historical learning in museums. The last part derives didactic questions and perspectives from theoretical and empirical findings on learning with collection objects.

1. Learning with concrete objects in primary school science lessons

In every primary school lesson there is the challenge of finding a balance between didactic impulses from the teachers in order to achieve educational aims and children's interests, their experiences and lifeworlds. In the basic program of the *Didactics of Sachunterricht*, which is about the introduction for children to the social and natural sciences, this is formulated as the tension between *child and science orientation* (Fölling-Albers, 2015, pp. 31-35; Köhnlein, 2015, pp. 36-40). The mediation between child and science orientation leads to learning processes that go from the "exemplary to the general, from the singular to the regular, from the concrete to the abstract" (GDSU, 2013, p. 11). When developing suitable learning environments, the challenge must be taken into account that the learning goal of developing mental systems such as categories or models does not dominate the learning process, interacting with exemplary, singular or concrete things. If systematics is at the beginning of the lesson, learning processes will have a deductive character, whereas dealing with concrete things means that primary school students learn actively and independently - an inductive approach. What speaks in favor of such an inductive approach is that children can first gain their own experiences by working on concrete things, develop ideas and communicate them with their classmates.

What specific concrete things can be dealt with in science lessons and what interactions can be carried out with them? To answer this question, the German perspective of *Childhood Research* is interesting, which sees children as social actors or participants (Heinzel, 2012, p. 24; Hülst, 2012, p. 52 f.; Nießeler, 2020, pp. 56-58) and whose interest lies in empirical research like participatory observation of children. One goal is to get insights into childhood as an autonomous phase (Heinzel, 2012, p. 9). A field of research must be identified in which spaces open up for children to interact with concrete things and to make experiences, from which they develop ideas, which in turn can serve as a basis for more abstract learning purposes. Theoretical and empirical preliminary work on children's access to objects provides us already with clues for research areas. Ludwig Duncker has identified *discontinuous learning processes* in children's aesthetic experiences with objects, in which search movements are initiated that can be a basis for methodical learning (Duncker, 2010, p. 15). Empirical studies indicate that children, in

order to understand an object that is foreign to them, compare or contrast it with familiar groups of objects from their everyday life (König & Wagner, 2023b, p. 197). Since museums and collections house a wide variety of objects, they offer themselves for research into how children deal with collection objects in connection with historical learning. Firstly, children are interested in objects that appear foreign to them (Duncker, 2010, p. 14 f.), secondly, they can interact with them in an appropriate learning environment and thirdly, historical objects are considered in the *didactics of Sachunterricht* as material sources with which attempts are made to reconstruct the past (Nießeler, 2020, p. 55 f.; von Reeken, 2016, 2018). Children can use material sources to develop ideas about the past. How do they do this? – This is a central research question in the research project *Education and Objects*.

2. The Italian-German research project *Education and Objects. Historical material learning processes in school-related collections*

The Italian-German research project *Education and Objects. Historical material learning processes in school-related collections*, funded by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft DFG* (German Research Foundation), focuses on the stimulating nature of collection objects and historical material learning processes that are experience-oriented and characterized by self-activity. In the project, the University of Leipzig (Prof. Bernd Wagner) is cooperating with the *Università Degli Studi Roma Tre* (Prof. Sandra Chistolini). Both universities cooperate with school-related collections, in Leipzig with the *School Museum - Workshop for School History Leipzig* and in Rome with the *Fondo Pizzigoni*. In the study, collection objects are made accessible to primary school students (Keidel, Wagner & Zehbe, 2023a). The binational cooperation makes it possible to identify national peculiarities as well as similarities in dealing with objects and school history. The school-related collections in Leipzig and Rome preserve historical objects from the areas of school and pedagogy. These can be connected to the life world of children (ibid.). In the project, the research team specifically searched for educational traditions with a focus on objects for learning purposes. Firstly, because primary school children can link such objects to their own school experiences. Secondly, because these pedagogical traditions provide a pool of potential historical objects that can be used for research. The research led to pedagogical reform traditions 100 years ago, in particular those of the Leipzig Teachers' Association (1846 to 1933) and the Italian reform pedagogue Giuseppina Pizzigoni (1870-1947). Both reform traditions have similarities with regard to the use and creation of material objects for learning purposes as well as sports and outdoor education. Therefore, collection objects that represent one of these aspects are mainly selected.

In the research project, exhibition elements are set up in the *School Museum of Leipzig* and in the *Fondo Pizzigoni* for primary school classes. There, children have the opportunity to interact with collection objects or their replicas in *contact zones* (Clifford, 1997; Pratt, 1999; Wagner, 2010) – experience spaces in which children encounter objects individually but also as a group. Around 15 selected primary school classes walk through the exhibition elements with researchers in Leipzig and Rome. Each researcher is a participating observer; in addition, each group is filmed during their visit in the collections and the data is evaluated video-ethnographically in the next step. In the qualitative interpretation of the video material the research team wants to find out which objects encourage children to act and how and which historical learning processes take place.

In the tradition of German *Childhood Research*, children are perceived as social actors and an attempt is made to provide an empirical basis for historical material learning with collection objects. The pupils are observed in an ethnographic, participatory manner by giving children impulses, but at the same time avoiding evaluative actions and actions that create a great asymmetry between researchers and participants in the research (Hülst, 2012, p. 67). It's about giving impulses that give students room to act and for independent approaches.

The grounded theory according to Strauss and Corbin provides the methodological basis for data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). After the data collection is completed, the video data is sequenced to organize the data material. The depth of the interactions with regard to the research questions is initially addressed by *open coding* (Strauss & Corbin, 1996, pp. 43-55), in which denser descriptions of actions and significant observations that occur several times within the organizational sequences are combined as open codes. In further coding phases, observations and concepts across open codes are identified as *axial codes*, which are also reflected in the research team and from which categories can be developed that specify interaction patterns and phenomena from various interactions. Both similarities and differences between Italian and German primary school children are taken into account. In the end, dense descriptions emerge that combine recorded observations, collected data and theoretical concepts.

3. First results from empirical data: Historical material learning with a historical lunch bag

Children's interactions with objects can be a basis for the development of ideas about something that lies outside of their experiences. This is an inductive approach, that means experience-oriented and active learning, because when children interact with an object, they will explore its dimensions such as functionality and meaning as well as exchange ideas with each other. Pech

and Rauterberg even place children's ways of learning at the center of their considerations when they postulate that "the primary difference between children's and scientific knowledge [...] is not in the accuracy of the knowledge, but in the way of gaining the knowledge, in the different approaches and interests." (Pech & Rauterberg, 2013, p. 21)

It is important for children to form their own ideas about the past. Childhood is already full of history, because children come into contact with historical buildings or monuments, with historical elements through their media consumption and historical stories from family and friends (von Reeken, 2004, p. 29 f.). This involves interpretations that can lead to wrong ideas about the past (ibid.). So that children in primary school can approach the past with their own interests, experiences and develop their own systematics, interactive learning environments must be created. In the research project *Education and Objects* the research team created such learning environments where children have room to cultivate ways of examining things. This can promote the development of a fact-based approach and own ideas.

Initial results from the data analysis provide information about interaction patterns of primary school students with collection objects. Among other things, such objects lead to an active discussion and discursive reflection that, on the one hand, transcend children's previous experiences, therefore appear strange, but on the other hand, have similarities to comparable objects from the children's lives and suggest meanings as well as functions. In one contact zone children can interact with an original, 100-year-old collection item: a lunch bag or, more precisely, a *bread bag*. In the past, many children used to take their lunch to school in such a bread bag. The researcher shows the bread bag, but does not tell the children what it is. Children examine the collection object, try to find out its purpose and decipher an inscription. They often crowd closely around it. The materiality – leather instead of today's plastic – in combination with the explanation that the lunch bag is an original, 100-year-old object, arouses interest in exploring the bag by touching it.

If the reflection on the bag takes place without reading the engraving, the materiality and the similarity in shape to children's everyday objects come into focus. It is assumed that the bag could be used to store money or school supplies such as pens, similar to a pencil case (Keidel, Wagner & Zehbe, 2023b, 00:09:20-00:10:28). At one point the bag is even interpreted as a sponge. The children are not completely unfamiliar with the object, as they also have bags in their everyday lives and use them in a school context (for example the pencil case). But the material and function of the object differ from the children's experiences. This also influences conversations about historical change. Some children mention the lunch box made of plastic as a contemporary comparison object (Keidel, Wagner & Zehbe, 2023c, 00:06:53-00:07:48). When asked whether the lunch bag could still be used today, a pupil draws

a comparison to his teacher's big old leather bag (Keidel, Wagner & Zehbe, 2023d, 00:12:10-00:12:40). The focus here is on the materiality of the object, not the function or purpose.

In contrast to this learning environment where children can explore the materiality of the object, exhibitions for adult visitors are often not accessible to children: an object in a showcase, in a context that is based on interpretations, can remain strange or uninteresting if it is not presented in a way that is compatible with children's experiences or if it doesn't offer forms of interaction. Also museum educational programs for children sometimes make a selection of objects from an adult or educational perspective (Keidel, Wagner & Zehbe, 2023a, p. 84). If children can only look at objects in museums, then this is similar to an old lecture format in which objects are supposed to illustrate the past (König & Wagner, 2023b, p. 200 f.) and in which children cannot interact with them. At the same time, if there is too much focus on learning outcomes in the museum, there is a risk that the museum experience space will be *colonized* by schools (Budde & Hummrich, 2016): if children have to fill out worksheets and do typical school tasks then a museum becomes an extended school space.

The interpretations or attributions of meaning to the bread bag depend on whether students can read the engraving on the bag "Mein Frühstück" which means "My breakfast". There are groups of children that have already dealt with old writings in school and for whom deciphering them is easy. Children who don't have that knowledge go on a search, only identify individual syllables and try to construct the meaning of the object. "My" is usually deciphered quickly. One child reads "Friends" instead of "Breakfast" and uses this to create "My Friends Book" (Keidel, Wagner & Zehbe, 2023c, 00:06:18-00:06:53). Another child has compared the bread bag to today's school bag and therefore reads "School Bag" (Keidel, Wagner & Zehbe, 2023e, 00:07:46-00:08:22). The embossing includes known and unknown letter forms. In this way, letters, the materiality of the bag and associations are mixed to form new constructions of meaning.

Historical writings evoke associations with children, what can be shown with another example. In the bread bag there is a note of the person who donated the bag to the School Museum. He explains that he used it when he went to school in Leipzig in the 1920s. The old piece of paper, itself historical, arouses interest, which is often expressed through respectful silence and a high level of focus on the piece of paper. In a group of visiting children, a small damage to the paper is observed as an indication to handle it with particular care. The children try to decipher the donor's handwriting and look for clues to historicity such as dates and locations. One child says: "Ok, it's really very old." (Keidel, Wagner & Zehbe, 2023d, 00:11:18-00:13:25). In another group the first name of the bread bag donor is repeated several times (*ibid.*, 00:12:40-00:14:00). It seems that despite all the historically foreign things, the name

is something familiar. A child says that his grandfather had the same name. One could assume that the pupils are so focused on reading the text because it gives the impression that a person from the past is speaking directly to them.

As soon as the purpose/function and name of the 100-year-old collection object have been clarified, conversations about nutrition and school life arise. The conversations are also about historical change when children relate the lunch bag to their present and talk about future-oriented possibilities. First, the object is related to eating habits. For the majority of pupils, the bag appears too small to accommodate their food, which, among other things, leads to the question of what was previously put in the bag. Ideas for possible content are expressed, several children are particularly motivated to humorously list things that are not suitable for the lunch bag, such as cereal, an apple, cake, a banana (Keidel, Wagner & Zehbe, 2023c, 00:06:53-00:07:48). This leads to a positive mood and performative interactions in the group, in which children stage themselves and form a community through punchlines and laughter. However, in group discussions, different positions emerge regarding the possibility of using such a bread bag today. A child rules out the use and says: “We could, but we wouldn’t.” (Keidel, Wagner & Zehbe, 2023b, 00:10:28-00:11:20). The way the child makes the statement implies that if there is a lack of alternatives, one could use the bag, but it is not designed for the needs of today’s school breakfast. A similar statement is made in a group, which refers to the quantity of today’s school breakfast and is humorously expressed with swinging arms: “It must be a lot.” (Keidel, Wagner & Zehbe, 2023e, 00:08:22-00:08:40). Overall, the child presents itself as a *good eater*. In another group, a child with different eating habits says: “It’s enough for me, I always eat little.” (Keidel, Wagner & Zehbe, 2023b, 00:10:28-00:11:20). This calls into question a general rejection – while the historical bread bag is unsuitable for the majority, some children could still use it.

The object is, among other things, a starting point for a multi-perspective conversation about food and health, containers and sustainability and the comparison of what kind of food people used to take with them to school and what they take with them today. This also raises the question of the length of school days in historical comparison. The children not only share their different food preferences or habits, but also their options, which resonates in the statement “We could, but we wouldn’t do it.” This could be followed by a reflection on changing habits and options.

Since the bread bag is the focus of attention here as a collection object, a brief look at the phenomenon of collecting is relevant. Even in early childhood, children are attracted to the aesthetics of objects (Duncker, 2010, p. 13 f.). If children can later perceive object features more precisely, they develop specific preferences (Duncker, 2014, p. 13). Especially from primary school age onwards, cognitive attempts to organize and categorize things, which

are carried out according to both traditional and subjective characteristics, increase (Duncker & Kremling, 2010, p. 184 f.). In this way, children gain an overview of things and their relationships to one another, in which Duncker and Kremling see *an elementary form of systematic thinking* - storage, exhibition and communication of one's own collection require methodical actions (ibid.). Collections are biographical memory traces, because children can often reconstruct the collection situation (ibid., p. 185). Collection objects thus become material sources of one's own life development and part of the material culture of childhood (ibid.). When designing programs in museums and collections for children, it should be considered that children have already dealt with systems of ordering objects, but also use biographical and situational elements to classify or attribute meaning.

Because the researchers point out that the bread bag is a collection item from the Leipzig School Museum, parallels can be drawn with children's own collecting activities. This allows children to use lifeworld comparisons to understand how material heritage is preserved in museums and collections. The children often tell their favorite collection objects like shells, stones or invitation cards. In one group a girl adds the aspect of exhibiting. She continues to emphasize the difference between her collecting activities and the museum's collecting activities, because she neither exhibits nor wants to exhibit her stones (Keidel, Wagner & Zehbe, 2023d, 00:00:11:18-00:13:25). By making the distinction between a private and a public collection, she shows that she has understood the concept of a museum.

4. Outlook

Once the data analysis in the research project *Education and Objects* has been completed, the research team would like to share its findings with pedagogues and museums. Ideally the concept of an exhibition for children includes empirical findings on children's object preferences. It is also useful to let children participate in designing the exhibition. If children participate, for example when they explore a selection of objects, it can be tested which collection objects attract interest and which meanings or classifications are given. As with children's collecting activities, it is to be expected that children will also develop original classifications that refer to the aesthetics of objects, lifeworld experiences or creative interpretations. Instead of deductively giving children systematics that should lead to learning results, an inductive approach in which children come to their own interpretations and classifications when dealing with objects appears to be more productive and activating. In order to achieve learning goals from the perspective of primary school teachers, an excursion to a museum can be accompanied by preparation and a follow-up, which gives children more space to gain experiences in

the museum. Finally, museums are visited by primary schools because they offer other opportunities for learning. The change of the learning environment enables experience-oriented and active learning, which, firstly, provides space for interactions and, secondly, is designed to be inclusive, as learning takes place with all the senses and without teacher assessment of the pupils. Through their interactions, children contribute to exhibitions and can create systematics and interpretations as well as ask questions about objects.

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