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# 'With these exhibits many interesting things can be learned about past times': Playmobil's History Class – representations, reflections and expectations

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## Abstract

In 2018, the toy manufacturer Playmobil launched a 'History Class' as an addition to its 'Furnished School Building'. The materiality of this toy, and the selection of teaching media represented in coloured plastic (a blackboard with timeline, magnifying glass, parchment roll, stone axe, posters and other sources), convey an idea of history education based on hands-on learning, a variety of methods, original encounters and work with historical sources. This paper presents results of an international research project in which 12 children in Germany and Switzerland were interviewed with the help of this toy as a stimulus. The aim was to find out to what extent children are able to deconstruct the toy as a historical-cultural product. In addition, the interviews were intended to grasp the children's views on the ideal teaching of history. The data are evaluated using grounded theory methodology. The results show that the pupils express clear wishes as to how history teaching should be structured. A critical distance to the toy was not taken.

**Keywords:** material culture; toys; historical reasoning; historical culture; primary school

## Introduction

In 2018, the toy manufacturer Playmobil launched a 'History Class' as an addition to its 'Furnished School Building' (see [www.playmobil.us/history-class/9455.html](http://www.playmobil.us/history-class/9455.html)). The materiality of this toy, as well as the selection of teaching media represented in coloured plastic (a blackboard with timeline, magnifying glass, parchment roll, stone axe, posters and other sources), conveys an idea of history education based on hands-on learning, a variety of teaching methods, original encounters and work with historical sources. This image is additionally shaped by the manual that accompanies the toy, the pictures on the packaging and the various advertising texts.

We present an international research project in which children are interviewed with the help of this toy as a stimulus to talk. First, the study collects children's thoughts, conceptions and interpretations of the toy 'History Class'. Second, it reconstructs children's general ideas, conceptions and expectations about past, present and – especially – future history lessons. The intention is to capture the overall picture of how ideas of ideal history teaching become manifest as social reality. Third, in an international comparative setting within Europe's German-language area, the study grasps cultural or regional influences on these conceptions and expectations.

The paper starts with the presentation of a theoretical framework. The concept of historical culture is defined. It will be argued that toys such as the Playmobil History Class are part of the material manifestation of popular historical culture. Subsequently, international research findings on children's historical thinking and reasoning skills are outlined, with a focus on their yields in deconstructing historical narratives. Furthermore, research results on the expectations of children with regard to their history lessons will be presented. This is followed by the research questions and the description of the sample and the research methods. In particular, the special stimulus of the Playmobil History Class is described and discussed. Finally, selected results of the study are presented and discussed.

## Theoretical framework

### Historical culture and historical learning outside schools

*History is all around us!* What sounds like a song title is actually not a trivial point of view. We are born into a specific historical culture, with its manifestations and objectivations. Thus, history is not only reconstructed in academic fields and schools, but is also – and perhaps much more so – part of everyday societal life, that is, popular culture. In essence, the question is how each society deals with both its own past – its representation and perception – and the global past in general. According to Rüsen (1994: 5), historical culture can be defined by the following question: How does history influence the cultural life of a society? In addition, Schönemann (2014: 18–20) defines historical culture as a social system of culturally shaped communication about the past. The comprehensive understanding of historical culture thus implies that it is characterized by how societies deal cognitively, politically, morally and aesthetically with both their own and the general history (Rüsen, 2013: 234). These dimensions of historical culture are not only interconnected in multiple ways, but also address both institutional frameworks and practical implications. Moreover, they include not only academia and schools but also the culture of memory (Assmann, 2010). Therefore, historical culture covers both material and immaterial culture, as well as academic and popular articulations (Grever and Adriaansen, 2017). Hence, toys can be regarded as a part of historical culture (Kühberger, 2018a).

We believe that children acquire and understand historical-cultural conceptions, ideas and values by playing with such toys. Research on children's use of toys also suggests that they have a particular value in the cultural appropriation of social practices (Beardsley and Harnett, 1998; Larrea *et al.*, 2019). Toys have a double function here: on the one hand, they enable children to play directly and without any purpose. On the other hand, they convey an ideological package from adults (Wilkie, 2000: 102), for example, on what is 'good history teaching' in primary schools. In their specific design, and within their playable scenic framework, they always have a connection to the adult world. Therefore, through toys, adults provide possible interpretative spaces and implicitly also social restrictions (Betz and Eßer, 2016: 310).

As part of material historical culture, the Playmobil History Class toy represents a specific culture of children, but on the other hand it also represents a culture created by adults for children (Hiemesch, 2020, in press). Thus, a culture of children understood in this way (as part of historical culture) also reveals the possibilities of action that are attributed to children. However, if children are considered to be autonomous and active subjects, they can either accept these possibilities of action or reject the toy's offers of interpretation and reinterpret it, giving it their own meaning (Wilkie, 2000: 102).

This article mainly focuses on the aesthetic dimension of historical culture (Rüsen, 2013) manifested in economic products such as Playmobil's toys (Kühberger, 2012). In the aesthetic dimension of historical culture, history is staged, for example, in feature films and in novels but also in toys. In addition, we used Playmobil's History Class as a stimulus (see the section on methodology below) because it also refers to the academic (or cognitive) and political dimension of historical culture. History teaching is in the first place committed to academic history by providing students with plausible academic narratives about the past. In this context, it should also enhance students' historical thinking (Günther-Arndt and Zülsdorf-Kersting, 2014; Levstik and Barton, 2015). Second, the teaching of history is fraught with politics, or, as Barton and Levstik (2004: 1) put it, 'No one likes the way history is taught.' History curricula in both Switzerland and Germany are the product of politically steered processes (Künzli *et al.*, 2013). Thus, it is on the one hand shaped by political intentions – for example, goals of identity – and on the other hand, it shapes society's identity or views about history and the past. Therefore, the way history is taught reflects the politics of history, that is, the political dimension of historical culture. Hence, the Playmobil History Class was chosen because it combines the different dimensions of historical culture – it triggers multiple dimensions of pupils' conceptions about history teaching.

### **State of research on deconstruction as a facet of historical competence**

In German-speaking history education communities, it is a shared belief that both historical learning and the teaching of history follow a narrative paradigm (Barricelli, 2008). Furthermore, history depends on the narrator's perspective. Individuals may well have different, but coherent, interpretations of what happened in the past (compare Rüsen, 2013: 59–62, 136–40). Hence, the goal of contemporary history teaching is to promote and enhance such understanding of history. In this regard, Van Boxtel and Van Drie (2013: 44) suggest students should get learning opportunities to autonomously construct narratives based on historical sources, and thereby explore and reason about which historical sources 'can be used as evidence of what happened in the past'. Therefore, historical reasoning can be defined as 'an explanation of a historical phenomenon ... by asking historical questions, contextualising, using substantive and second-order historical concepts, and putting forward claims supported with arguments, which are based on sources used as evidence' (*ibid.*: 45).

In German-speaking history education, the critical approach to historical culture as an aspect of history teaching has increasingly developed alongside the source-based approach mentioned above. Pupils should learn to critically examine the representations of history that they are confronted with in school and everyday life (Von Reeken, 2004, 2005). Over the last two decades of history education in German-speaking countries, several models of historical competencies have been developed (Schreiber *et al.*, 2007; Schreiber, 2008; Gautschi, 2015; Körber, 2011, 2015; Trautwein *et al.*, 2017). Although there are some differences between the models, they all share both the idea of a 'historical question competency' and a 'historical method competency'. The first deals with the ability to raise a historical question about the past. The second starts after having formulated the question. When the question generates a narrative based on sources, a 'process of reconstruction' is triggered. Inversely, when the question focuses on a given narrative, the analytical process is called a 'process of deconstruction'. The ability to perform both processes is called the 'historical method competency', which brings forward either a self-constructed historical narrative or a critical opinion on a given historical account. The process of deconstruction is understood as an essential

component of a reflected and self-reflexive historical consciousness (Körber, 2015). It can thus be understood as a tool to assert oneself in society and its historical culture.

As part of the material culture, toys offer immediate haptic experiences. Their design manifests the aesthetic dimension of historical culture. However, we assume that people cannot evade historical-cultural interpretations because they are integrated into collective patterns of interpretation as part of society. Ideas about history, or about how history should be communicated, are thus shaped. Therefore, a toy that presents history or addresses the way history is dealt with in society (for example, in history lessons) holds narratives that can be deconstructed.

However, toys are not only part of historical culture if they present the past or history; they also belong to an adults' world, conveying to children adults' conceptions, narratives and values. Toys are also part of a specific children's culture, which is characterized by the fact that children can either accept or reject these interpretations offered by adults. In this regard, our study asks whether and to what extent children are able to perform competent critical historical thinking, understood as the recognition and critical questioning of an encountered socially shared narrative.

### **State of research on historical-cultural understanding of children**

Research on children's historical-cultural understanding has increased significantly in recent years. Based on recent theoretical developments, empirical research projects on children's understanding of substantive and second-order concepts have been conducted in several countries (for example, Foster *et al.*, 1999; Fenn, 2018; Kübler, 2018). There are only a few studies on children's understanding of history as a construct (for example, Barton, 1997, 2008; VanSledright, 2002). Relevant for the German-speaking context of our study, recent findings from the research project HisDeKo (Historical Thinking and Competence Development) show that children as young as 7 years are able to identify different types of sources, and that pupils understand that it is through sources that we find out about the past. Furthermore, there are children aged 7 to 10 who understand that narratives are constructed and therefore represent a perspective (Becher and Gläser, 2018).

Little research has been done on children's competence of deconstruction in the context of historical-cultural manifestations. One Swiss study (Mathis and Gollin, 2018) shows primary school pupils having difficulties in observing and describing monuments in a historically appropriate way. In addition, they tend to make subjective assumptions about the meaning of a monument through guessing and association. In doing so, however, they largely neglect the historical-cultural perspective, that is, that the monument does not primarily show an event, but conveys a narrative. Only with strong guiding by the interviewer, and hence by the teacher, are they able to activate prior knowledge. As a result of this process, they finally understand that a narrative can be derived from a monument (*ibid.*).

So far, children's perceptions of history teaching as a part of historical culture have been gleaned only indirectly from interviews with teachers about what they thought their pupils' ideas were (VanSledright, 2002; Barton *et al.*, 2004). Toys as a part of historical culture have rarely been researched. Mainly Kühberger's ethnographic research explores the dimension of toys as a part of historical culture, and the relationship that children have with the past in general and their own past by means of toys. It shows that children often do not adopt the historical narratives as presented by the toymakers, but rather reinterpret them, for example, by 'converting' medieval knights into 'Star Wars soldiers' (Kühberger, 2018a: 8). Nevertheless, Kühberger understands toys with historical references as informal learning offers (Kühberger, 2018a, 2018b).

## Research questions

Our study holds innovative potential in several aspects. On the one hand, research on the value and significance of toys as a part of historical culture, which is anchored in the dimensions of politics, academia and aesthetics, has not yet been done. Furthermore, there is no research on whether pupils question the historical narratives presented by toymakers. Also, there is no research on primary school children's conceptions and expectations about their ideal prospective history lessons in middle or secondary school; that is, before they are systematically taught history as a specific school subject. In both Germany and Switzerland, history is taught up to the fourth or sixth grade of primary school in an integrative subject: 'general studies' or 'nature, humans, society' (GDSU, 2013; D-EDK, 2016).

Our research questions for the empirical study are therefore as follows:

- (1) Since historically competent thinking means recognizing and questioning interpretations of history (Körber, 2015), we wanted to know whether and in what quality children aged 10 can recognize, understand and deconstruct the narratives of toys. To what extent, and in what quality, do they realize that products of historical culture – specifically Playmobil's History Class – are shaped by present ideas?
- (2) To what extent does this manifestation of contemporary historical culture reinforce children's conceptions and expectations of an ideal teaching of history? What are their views about which topics and what content are to be covered, which media – representations and sources – are to be used and which teaching methods are to be applied?

## Sample and methods

In our study, we used Playmobil's History Class as a stimulus for discussion. First, we wanted to make it easy for the children to talk freely about history teaching, history, sources and artefacts. Our approach therefore resulted in a semi-structured problem-centred group interview. Second, we wanted the stimulus itself to be reflected upon as a commercial product and a historical-cultural manifestation. Playmobil's History Class combines the different dimensions of historical culture, that is, it triggers multiple dimensions of pupils' conceptions about history and its teaching. The choice of a toy as a stimulus was made in view of the fact that toys are extremely motivating for the group we studied. Toys are commonplace in children's daily lives (Kühberger, 2018b), but the History Class also addresses their school life. Thus, children could playfully deal with their own ideas about an institution that is of immediate importance to their everyday lives.

The data were collected in six group discussions with children (n=12) whose average age was 10, three groups in Germany and three in Switzerland. The gender distribution was even. The sample was composed in such a way that a good mix of school achievements and cultural capital was created. All of the pupils belonged to the middle class. Group discussions were conducted with two children at the same time (Bohnsack, 2010); they lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. This open and moderately structured method gives the children a lot of agency. It allows them to come up with topics of discussion relatively autonomously. In addition, the significance that the children attach to concepts, ideas and conceptions can be reconstructed. The interviewer took notes. At certain points, he asked for further elaborations. In this way, the pupils could make their statements more precise and enrich them. Another decisive factor in this method is that the children talk to each other and stimulate each other through conversation, thus triggering thoughts.

However, after a certain period of time, the vivacity of the group discussion decreased and the interviewer continued with a problem-centred partner interview (Witzel and Reiter, 2012). This method focuses on the experiences, perceptions and thoughts of the interviewees on a very specific ‘problem’ or topic and follows a semi-structured interview guideline. Thus, the children’s arguments, justifications and more precise formulations are explored. The use of two methods in the sense of a ‘between methods triangulation’ (Denzin, 2009: 297–313) should allow more differentiated and more in-depth views of the same phenomenon.

The settings were like this: the Swiss children came into the room and sat down next to each other at a desk; the German children were visited in their children’s rooms, where they found the Playmobil History Class with its pieces and figurines. If the children did not start to furnish the classroom and arrange things spontaneously, they were told to do so. However, the children were neither instructed on how to do this nor on the number of pieces they should use. So, first of all, it was all about the haptic, physical encounter with the toy. This started the group discussion.

A particular challenge during the following problem-centred interviews was to interrupt the playing in order to be able to question or interrogate the narratives, conceptions and ideas provided by the Playmobil History Class. After all, one of the aims of the interview was to record the children’s appropriation of these ideas. In addition, it was intended that later in the interviews, the children should be asked how their ideas came about. This appeared to be a flaw in our method: the answers to this question could only be sufficiently elaborated by means of a small side study in which an extra group of children were asked about their ideas on prospective history lessons without using the toy stimulus. Furthermore, the question of social desirability must be considered. After all, Playmobil follows a normatively charged idea – a demand – of what ‘good’ history teaching at primary level should look like.

The discussions and interviews were recorded with two synchronized cameras. One camera recorded at a frontal angle; the other focused on the handling of the toy from above (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Children handling the toys, photographed with synchronized cameras**

In this way, the pupils' interaction with the toy, their gripping and handling – the children's body language – could be recorded. This allowed us to interpret both the appealing character of the toy and its stimulation potential. For example, conclusions can be drawn about the affordances of the toy. Furthermore, it gives insights about the aesthetic dimension of the toy as a manifestation of historical culture.

Our thesis is that Playmobil's History Class manifests a historical-cultural narrative of ideal, 'good' history teaching, that is, a socially, popularly and academically shared normativity of history teaching in primary education. If we take a closer look at the toy (see [www.playmobil.us/history-class/9455.html](http://www.playmobil.us/history-class/9455.html)), we see a co-educative classroom with a girl and a boy in which – typical for Switzerland and Germany – a female primary school teacher teaches history. She stands in front of a blackboard on which a timeline is drawn with white chalk. In her hand, she holds a pointer. In addition, a board is hanging on the wall to her left with a poster. It is easy to see that it has something to do with ancient Egypt. Thus, one can assume that she is showing and explaining something about ancient Egypt. Furthermore, creating orientation in time by means of a timeline is a standard requirement in German-speaking history teaching for primary school (Becher *et al.*, 2016; Von Reeken, 2017).

The fact that the children do not listen to her is an unintentional punchline. In fact, the picture shows all classroom activities at the same time. The pupils sit joyfully at their desk. On the chairs hang their satchels. Relevant to our research questions are the things that can be found on the two desks, in the children's hands and on the shelf to the right. There are material, textual and iconic (but no audiovisual) historical sources and presentations. In addition to the stone knife and stone axe, on the children's desk there is a non-fiction book with pictures of natural history and a magnifying glass to make it easier to read. The boy is holding a parchment with a seal in his hand. On his head, he wears a Roman helmet with red feathers. There is also an open book with pictures of a castle. Next to it is a white plaster bust adorned with a medieval golden crown. On the shelf, we see a medieval knight's helmet with blue feather decoration and visor; next to it, there are stone blades and a hand axe, as well as a petrification or fossil.

This display of material not only enables original encounters, but also socio-constructivist discovery-based learning. Furthermore, it can be interpreted that here – in addition to the presentation by the teacher on the blackboard – student-centred and activity-based teaching takes place. In the German-speaking history education communities, all of this is common practice and shared normative vision taught in teacher education programmes at universities (Becher *et al.*, 2016; Von Reeken, 2017), but it is far from the reality of primary school history teaching, where the processing of worksheets predominates (Von Reeken, 2018).

If one looks at the materials with regard to their connotation with historical epochs, it is striking that they are the canonical epochs of primary history: Earth history, prehistory, the Stone Age, ancient Egypt, Roman antiquity and the Middle Ages (see D-EDK, 2016). The historical items that the children were able to select could almost all be assigned to the prehistoric and pre-modern period. Here, the historical-cultural conception of history teaching in primary school differs from the normative ideas of current German-speaking history didactics, which in particular propagate contemporary historical content for primary history (Becher *et al.*, 2016; Von Reeken, 2017).

## Evaluation method

The interviews were evaluated using reflective grounded theory methodology (Breuer *et al.*, 2017). This is strongly based on the traditional grounded theory method



(Corbin and Strauss, 2015), but it does not negatively consider the presence and inclusion of theoretical assumptions of the researchers when coding. We chose this variation from traditional grounded theory method because the ideal role of a neutral researcher cannot be achieved in practice, as Charmaz (2017: 2) explains:

Grounded Theory means that we researchers consider and assess all possible theoretical understandings of our data, including our own new theoretical constructions. We develop tentative interpretations about the data through constructing codes, the labels we give fragments of data, and nascent theoretical categories, the abstract terms we construct to account for batches of data and clusters of codes.

Some of our research questions could be answered in this way, but not all with sufficient analytical depth. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that the findings presented here are preliminary, partly not yet saturated results (Corbin and Strauss, 2015).

First, the interviews were completely transcribed. Then, the transcripts were openly coded in several cycles in order to identify the children's subjective views regarding the toy, its intention and its materiality. The categories thus found were supplemented by those we derived from the theoretical foundations described above.

Based on this categorizing method, we again carried out several coding runs to evaluate the interviews. The axial coding resulted in the following category system.

Ideas of history and history teaching:

- Ideas on the nature of history
- Function/purpose of history
- Understanding of other school subjects (which may or may not provide opportunities for historical learning)
- Objectives of historical learning
- Learning with objects (ideas about approaches to history education)
- Methods of teaching
- Gender (gender conceptions)
- Historicity/historical consciousness (everything is subject to change).

The toy as a part of historical culture:

- Difference between toy and reality
- Characteristics of the object
- Recognition of stimulus as toy not reality.

## Findings

### Research question 1

Only a few children made statements about the historical-cultural imprint of the toy. In addition, some ideas about the nature of history could be gleaned from the interviews. However, the research question about whether 10-year-old children are capable of deconstructing the toy's narratives can be answered only rudimentarily.

The code 'Recognition of stimulus as toy not reality' could not be found in any interview. Therefore, none of the children expressed the opinion that the Playmobil History Class is a commercial toy and therefore perhaps does not represent reality, but is rather shaped by current ideas and special interests. Nevertheless, the difference between toys and reality was explicitly addressed in two interviews: 'And I would maybe leave out ... the rulers or something, because they're not really right' (S2\_mf\_f).

However, the pupils did not directly reflect on the characteristics of the object as a contemporary plastic toy; rather, the symbolic character of what it represents was reflected. One interview showed that individual parts of the stimulus were an occasion to reflect on their real counterparts. In relation to the toy knight's helmet, one child noticed that this was quite heavy 'in real' (S2\_mf\_f). In a broader view, one group first discussed what the toy actually represented. They quickly realized that it was an object representing a situation in which something about the past could be learned. At first, however, it was unclear whether it was a museum or a school (C3\_mf).

In some group discussions, the stimulus triggered thoughts about historical change or continuity. The object was used to explain which objects were used both in the past and in the present, and which objects no longer have a function: 'Well, not like this one, but we have a cottage. There we sometimes have to chop wood, because it is still done by hand and I already had such an [axe] in my hand.' And: 'In the past it was actually not possible to fly and now you can do it in many different ways. By plane, by parachute, by paraglider, with different things' (both quotations: C3\_mf\_f).

In some of the interviews, the children reflected on gender roles in the past and present using the material. Historical change was also related to the category of gender. However, ideas about how women and men should look were shaped by the present: 'The boy gets the axe, the girl gets the scroll to look at' (S1\_mm\_m2). And: 'In former times, you often had long hair in order to be less cold in winter ... Well, and that looks more like a crown for a woman, doesn't it?' (S1\_mm\_m1).

In sum, many of the children spoke about continuity and change. They noticed that some of the objects included in the Playmobil History Class were used in the past and are still in use today, but others are not. All interviews clearly showed that the children have a concept of temporal change. However, little was said about the extent to which concepts of history are shaped by contemporary ideas. Specifically, the children did not comment on the fact that both the toy's representation of historical artefacts and the teaching of history are influenced by contemporary ideas. The toy was not recognized as a model. We can therefore say nothing about the quality of the children's abilities to deconstruct the toy as a manifestation of historical culture.

## Research question 2

Quite a few answers can be found in the interviews on the question of the extent to which ideas and expectations of an ideal history lesson manifest themselves in toys. There is also a great deal of information about expectations of which media, sources and teaching methods should be used in history lessons.

The children could easily indicate the provenance of their historical knowledge. Either it was acquired privately (for example, through museum visits) or through school teaching. It is particularly noticeable that both German and Swiss children associated the acquisition of historical knowledge with religious education: 'We also had some scrolls in our religious education, the Bible from earlier times' (C3\_mf\_m). The way in which they assigned the individual parts of the toy to diverse school subjects was informative. From this, it can be concluded which ideas prevail in the teaching of history. For example, some pupils were irritated by the fossils. Most of the children knew that fossils belong to natural history, and therefore to biology. A quotation from a discussion in Germany:

S1\_mm\_m1: I would say, the fossils, they don't belong to it.

S1\_mm\_m2: On the other hand, it depends ...

S1\_mm\_m1: Depends on which animal you have.

S1\_mm\_m2: On the other hand, the fossils are more in natural science, if you look at it this way.

In addition, for this group of pupils, it seemed obvious that only very few primary school teachers bring material sources and artefacts into their classes. Some pupils would like to see this happen. When asked what artefacts teachers should bring into the classroom, another group expressed this wish: 'A letter ... a helmet or something, that would be interesting, something about which you know what history it has' (S1\_mm\_m1). Another pupil, for example, would like his teacher to bring more illustrative material to history class, such as a construction plan of buildings that no longer exist (S1\_mm\_m2). The use of historical photographs and further material sources was also considered desirable.

With regard to their prospective history lessons, the pupils expected to be able to explore more by themselves: 'Well, I'm sure we can investigate this a little bit more ... That we are allowed to touch something' (S2\_mf\_f). The children also expressed their ideas and expectations regarding the content of prospective history lessons. It turned out that pupils especially perceive those contents as interesting that are strongly connected to their own interests and their play worlds. These include, above all, the Middle Ages, the Stone Age and ancient Egypt. One pupil saw the value of teaching history in the fact that one can learn from it:

For example, I think World War II is important. You have to think that something like that must never happen again. That you know what it is and don't forget that it can happen again in a few years, like the many wars in the Middle Ages. (S1\_mm\_m1)

There were also statements about the teacher's teaching methods. The children's experience implied that teaching is both instructional and pupil-centred: 'We also have to read things ourselves or something. But first the teacher actually explains [the task] anyway' (C3\_mf\_m).

In short, the interviewed children expect and wish for a history lesson in which they themselves can explore history, for example, by working with authentic and 'enigmatic' objects and artefacts. They want to learn to research information about the objects and their contexts independently – the period, the way of life and so on. In their eyes, the task of the teachers is therefore to teach the children how to research history themselves.

## Discussion

We were able to find out something about the interviewed children's ideas of history and ultimately about their ideas on the nature of history. Nevertheless, the children did not reflect on the toy as part of contemporary popular culture. It was not seen as an objectification or manifestation of contemporary historical culture, but as a representation of (future) reality. The representation of history teaching in the Playmobil History Class largely approximated children's perceptions of history lessons. Our interpretation of this finding is that there is an understanding of history teaching that is socially (and commercially) shared. Furthermore, the toy also affords a certain idea of good teaching, and it thus represents a social reality. The Playmobil History Class would therefore be the ideal reflection of these social ideas.

However, it must be considered that the interviewed children had not yet experienced systematic history teaching. It is therefore understandable that the toy's narratives were not questioned, not least because the process of deconstruction had

not been taught and practised in the group studied. Even interview questions explicitly asking about the historical-cultural imprint of the toy did not lead to a deeper reflection on historical-cultural influences. Of course, this does not permit us to draw general conclusions on whether or not children at this age are capable of deconstructing historical-cultural manifestations. Rather, the question should be asked whether the stimulus used is suitable for eliciting such reflections.

Given the fact that the toy does not represent the past itself or narratives about the past, but represents contemporary history teaching, it is difficult to critically examine it as historical evidence. Nevertheless, the present study offers a first insight into how primary school children conceive of history teaching, which is an important addition to the existing research on how older students perceive it.

## Conclusion

Toys, understood as a part of historical culture, are increasingly coming into the focus of research into history education. Like other products of historical culture, they express contemporary normatively charged ideas about the past. Thinking historically also implies being able to critically question such historical interpretations. In this respect, it is necessary to extend research on children's competence of deconstruction.

A significant finding of this study is that children themselves have a great interest in history teaching involving discovery-based learning, self-directed activity-based learning, original material encounters, and a teacher who not only teaches and fosters this, but who as an expert explains historical contexts in a way that is appropriate for children. Here, the children's autonomy, and their need for autonomy with regard to co-designing their own learning environments, is evident.

The present study provides only initial results that must be interpreted with caution. The sample was small and, in particular, its diversity was not sufficient to generalize all findings. Methodologically, the following challenges arise for further research: Which stimulus is suitable to stimulate children's historical-cultural reasoning, without at the same time consolidating or imposing normatively charged narratives? Or, rather, does not the historical-cultural manifestation presented here require triangulation by means of several diverse types of data collection in order to control this? This will have to be part of further research.

## Notes on the contributors

**Sebastian Barsch** is a professor of history education at Kiel University, Germany. His research focuses on diversity and historical learning, as well as professionalization of history teachers in teacher training at universities. In addition, he conducts research in the field of disability history.

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