



# The (Further) Development of Social Competences of Children by Learning at Extracurricular Learning Places

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## Abstract

*In this paper, the intermediate data of an explorative qualitative study is presented. The study's aim was to investigate extracurricular learning places and their positive influence on children's development of social competencies. In particular, the focus lies on children's behavior at farms and how they experience these places with regard to social competencies. The following research questions are posed: Which social competencies are acquired on farms? How are social competencies in extra-curricular learning places promoted and developed? The research of the acquisition of children's competencies requires close attention to the subjective views of the acting children. The examination of the childlike world of experience enables us to develop an understanding of how children develop their social competencies and which relevance structures their experiences are based on. This also requires their individual and subjective experience contexts. It is therefore important to consider which aspects come into their view, how they experience and interpret their perceived experiential space. So far the most intriguing results to emerge from the data are firstly the existence of different perceptions of environmental realities depending on the cultural and social background of the children, which became visible in children's drawings. Secondly, we found out that extracurricular learning places, such as the farm, allow children to develop their social skills independently and individually according to their own needs.*

*Keywords: Primary education, extracurricular learning places, social competences, learning world*

## 1. Introduction

Children's learning is no longer limited to school. In addition to the traditional educational modalities, informal learning processes have increasingly become the focus of the study of learning, knowledge and ability. Studies show that learners value independently acquired skills and new insight. They also judged this acquisition of knowledge to be more in-depth and suitable for everyday life. The prerequisite for informal learning processes is the direct relationship to the current action situation that school on the farm allows in many ways. In this context, the areas of relationship and appreciation, on the basis of which the adolescents can develop and often feel for the first time that their learning can be useful to themselves and to society as well. They learn at their own pace and, in addition to the "manual" skills, are accompanied intensively by classmates and grownups, and are encouraged in their self-competence perception.

## 2. Theoretical Background and Methodology

Extracurricular learning places are learning spaces outside of schools, classrooms and educational institutes. There learning is embedded in one or more real social environments. These are not consciously designed and constructed by people, as in the case of school by teachers, but show themselves in their whole, more or less untouched, complexity. Extracurricular learning places are experience spaces. The learners collect experiences that are hardly realizable at school, but the learners content of experience was nevertheless determined to be relevant to school for their education [1]. These are experiences gained through personal encounters with the social reality linked to the context of the place of learning. The opening up of this experiential space takes place through research and action-based learning. These learning places are constructivist social entities of their own kind, which reveal themselves to the students as an open playground for the development of their self and the world around them. Extracurricular learning places can stimulate application-oriented, self-directed and networked learning and promote the development of social skills [2]. They create lifelike learning situations and therefore provide an ideal foundation for gathering social experiences and thus for the development of social skills and socially competent behavior [3]. In the present project, the farm as an extracurricular learning place is the focus of scientific debate. J. Schockemöhle defines this extracurricular learning place as a place which is used for learning. For the author, a farm can be considered suitable as a place of learning if it provides a didactic and educational meaningful

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experience, experience and exploration of agricultural food production and supports active and independent learning. [4] The learning location "farm" is also about experiential and action-based learning with the aim of collecting primary experiences on site with agriculture. But there is more to this: the place of learning is used to gather new experiences independently of agricultural processes and structures, to put them into a context of personal experience and to further develop personal and social competences. This research is based on the view that competence is defined as the ability to self-organization in complex, non-standardized situations and to master them through active action [5]. The interpretation of the drawings are based on the three-step process of Erwin Panofsky (2006) [6].

### 3. Results

The study of the acquisition of children's competencies also requires close attention to the subjective views/perspectives of the participants, who are involved. The examination of the child's world of experience enables us to develop an understanding of how children develop their social, emotional and communicative competencies and on which relevance structures their experiences are based. This also requires their individual and subjective experience contexts to understand how children develop their social competences. It is therefore important to consider which aspects of the social space come into view, and how they perceive and interpret their experienced experiential space. [7] To study the learning experiences of children at an extracurricular learning place, pupils from two elementary schools (42 children) were accompanied on their visit to a farm. Different situations were filmed; interviews with farmers, teachers and pupils were recorded on a tape recorder. In addition, children of one school were asked to draw their visit on the farm. These drawings create access to childlike perspectives, without having to resort the traditional interview form, which is always associated with difficulties for children. The drawings are based on possible/imagined and not necessarily actual social realities, whereby connections to the social reality can be established due to the existing photo and video material.

Children need suitable spaces to develop their personality without experiencing major limitations. In formal educational institutions these possibilities are not always given. Furthermore, the children have limits due to curricular requirements. Nonetheless, children also develop abilities there to succeed in school as a social space. Most of the pupils succeed well in these processes, but some have difficulties accepting their specific role. Extracurricular learning places are not as highly structured and allow children and teachers to give each other more space. Out-of-school learning places, such as the farm, allow children to develop their social skills independently and individually according to their individual needs. Based on the available data it was possible to identify the following types and cases: the Newcomer, the Expert, the Learner and the Hyperactive. This illustrates that children differ greatly in their behavior in school, their cultural and social backgrounds, their learning requirements, their needs and their way of acquiring the experience space of a farm and using it for their personal needs.

*The Newcomer* describes a child who has only been attending school for a few weeks. The child is not very proficient in German and still understands little. In addition to the migration experience, it must also cope with the attribution of being a refugee and according the audio and video material also with racism. Due to the language problems the ability to communicate with other children is limited. In school the contact with classmates is still difficult. In an interview with the teacher, we learn that there is another child in the class who comes from the same country, who has been in Austria for some time and translates in class and during breaks. Language is an important aspect in this case. The farm functions as a new experiential space, which it uses to broaden the child's vocabulary. This also creates new, unknown situations in which contact with classmates can be made easier and communication is facilitated. The children's self-confidence is strengthened.



Fig. 1 School 1: Farming



*The Expert* knows the farm as an experiential space. Either their parents, or close relatives have a farm. The child is proficient in and familiar with the (living) environment. They can already distinguish similar worlds and ask critical questions. The child has already acquired specific knowledge and tries to pass this on to classmates. The experience space “farm” is used to gain experience in the role as an expert and knowledge facilitator, important social competences are developed. These feelings of success also support the development of self-confidence and have positive effects on the child. In opposition to this type there also exists *the Learner*. This child has never been on a farm, has neither experienced the tasks of a farmer nor has been in contact with farm animals before. The child is moving uncertainly (in this environment) and looks scared. According to an interview with a farmer, children from schools in cities often don't know how to behave and feel uncomfortable. This type expands their ability to acquire new spaces of experience. Meaning and knowledge expansion also play a major role. Inquisitive and willing to learn, they face this unknown world.

*The Hyperactive* describes someone, who is very noticeable at school and suffers from attention disorders. Because of their behavior they often have little contact to other children in their class. According to an interview with the teacher this child comes from difficult family circumstances. Their behavior is very different from the other described types. The child usually keeps a greater distance from the other children, hardly speaks, and seems absent. It constantly changes their location and observes the actions of the other children only briefly. The different interactive stations on the farm are experienced without other children. Introduction into the topic and narrations of the farmer are less interesting for the child. Questions are asked to the teacher. Often they have nothing to do with the subject of a farm, but deal with things that have happened in the past or are relevant in the future. However, according to the teacher, the child behaves quieter and reacts less aggressively to instructions while in this extracurricular learning place. The child uses this extracurricular learning space in his own way. It can move freely and has enough space to run riot. Furthermore, they are not confronted with additional tasks to participate in the programme, but can switch between stations as often as they want. There are no negative consequences. The child can make new experiences alone and is nevertheless integrated into a familiar group.



Fig. 2 School 1: Farming

Further analyses of the drawings show that children express different perspectives of their experiences on paper. We assumed that children more or less consciously put colors, shapes and the relations of objects on paper. Because of the assumption and the impressions of movements and distances created in the drawings, the perception of the visit to the farm is impressively presented. The image's contents refer to relevance structures and interpretation schemes of the children [8]. For example, perceptions, sensations and thoughts that connect children to farm visits are reflected in the themed categories. The drawings depict various experiences and ideas, wishes and hopes, but also conflicts. In exploratory ways the relevance structures and the constitutive features of the appropriation of experience spaces can be analyzed. However, two conceptual, social reality entities can be named: the individual, spatial arrangement in the social context and the social communication and interaction in the experiential space. The drawings, however, are not limited to realistic social situations, but are also associated with fantastic ideas. Children interpret the experience on the farm in a variety of ways and place it in the context of individual experience structures and interpretive patterns.



Fig. 3: School 1 - Perspective

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