

# How is Learning in Edu-Larp as a Method Described and Seen by Practitioners?

**Abstract:** This study explores how experienced practitioners of educational live-action role-playing (edu-larp) describe and understand the method as a tool for learning. While previous research has emphasized design, theory, and student experiences, this paper centres practitioner perspectives, aiming to highlight their discourse on the educational value of edu-larp. Using semi-structured interviews with ten practitioners from diverse international backgrounds, the author applies critical discourse analysis to identify themes in how learning is perceived to occur through edu-larp. The themes are organized into three main categories: what is learned, how learning occurs, and why the method is used. By analysing the themes in order of size, the core themes are specified. These include motivation, power distribution, playfulness, and social competencies. The themes are also explored in related research, which turned out to strengthen the position of the core themes. Through the strong emphasis on the “why” of using the method, the discourse illustrates a climate where practitioners need to justify the use of the method to external stakeholders. Finally, the findings are related to the wider educational discourse, where they tend to align with constructivist educational theory. This work contributes to the field by amplifying practitioner voices and situating edu-larp within broader pedagogical frameworks.

**Keywords:** Edu-larp, Learning, Teaching, Role-playing, Practitioner Interviews

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Educational live action role-playing games (edu-larp) are becoming an increasingly accepted and used teaching method. The method is used in many different areas, such as science teaching (McSharry and Jones 2000), German literature (Torner 2016), and conflict transformation (Taraghi et al. 2022). There are schools and organisations that specialize in working with the method, such as the Danish boarding school Efterskolen Epos (2024), the Swedish company LajvVerkstaden (n.d.), and the American organisation Reacting to the Past (n.d.). In higher education, we find national courses (Stockholms Universitet, n.d.) and international programs such as the Master’s program in Transformative Game Design (Uppsala University, n.d.) that you can take to learn more about how to work with the method. But *why* is the method used? There is research on edu-larp as a method (Bowman 2014, Transformative Play n.d.), but the main areas are focused on the students participating in the games, how to design a game, experiences from running a game, or more overarching theoretical work. There isn’t much published when it comes to the voices of practitioners who regularly use the method. For historical documentation, there needs to be a variety of voices being heard, not just scholars. This paper is a step towards giving space for the voices of practitioners and showcasing the discourse among them.

This paper is based on the work in the author’s Master’s Thesis (Westborg 2024). The first part, including ‘Method’ and ‘Categories and Themes’, presents some of the key findings from the thesis in a condensed form. It shows how experienced practitioners describe the method, what they think you can learn through it, how you can learn through it, and why they use it. The second part of this paper, from ‘Main Themes’ forward, then goes further than the thesis by exploring the size of each theme to find the main themes. To determine if these main themes are also evident in other data, relevant research is then analysed to see if the

themes are represented there as well. Through this, we can gain an understanding of what is considered important in the practitioners' discourse of edu-larp as a method for teaching and learning. Finally, the main themes also say something about where edu-larp as a method fits in the wider educational discourse.

## 2. METHOD

Here a condensed version of the method is presented. For a detailed explanation, going deeper into ontology, epistemology, methodology, critical discourse analysis, sampling, transcribing, data analysis, pseudonymisation, ethics, and full transcriptions, see Westborg (2024).

This paper has not undergone ethical review, as it is not required for this type of paper in Sweden. All participants were asked and have agreed to have the transcriptions published as part of the thesis, and for me to publish papers that build on that material (Etikprövningsmyndigheten n.d).

Ten experienced practitioners were interviewed in hour-long semi-structured interviews. Ten hour-long interviews are a large number for a critical discourse analysis, but this was chosen to make sure saturation would be reached. The interviews were held online over Zoom in English. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions were analyzed using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003), creating themes based on the participants' ideas about learning in relation to edu-larp.

The participants come from six different countries in North America, Middle and Eastern Europe, and the Nordics. All participants were experienced in using edu-larp as a method, with half of them having over 15 years of experience with the method and the least experienced having worked professionally with the method for 8 years. The participants have different main target audiences spanning from 6 to 40 year olds. Six of the ten primarily work with edu-larp within formal educational settings, two in non-formal educational settings, and two with both.

The participants were asked the following questions:

### Your relation to edu-larp

- What is edu-larp for you?
- What is the difference between edu-larp and leisure larps for you?
- How do you use edu-larp in your setting? What do you do in your practice?

### Edu-larp and learning

- What are the students learning through edu-larp?
- How does the student learn through edu-larp?
- Where does the student learn through edu-larp?
- For whom does the student learn through edu-larp?
- For what are they learning? Why is it important?
- What do you think is important for learning to happen? Not just in edu-larp.

### Edu-larp as a method

- What do you find are the pros and cons of using edu-larp from a learning perspective?
- Have you used other methods in your teaching? Which methods? What are the differences? Why?

- Is there anything that you find hard to teach using edu-larp?
- Have you run into any resistance in working with these methods from others?

In the interviews, the participants highlighted that edu-larp is one of many methods that can be used for learning. They acknowledge that students learn in different ways and that there is no one-size-fits-all tool. The participants employ various methods, with edu-larp being a primary tool for some and a more occasional one for others.

### 3. CATEGORIES AND THEMES

In this part, the themes and the categories they can be placed in will be described. Both the themes and the categories were inductively derived.

The themes that were found fit into three different categories: what you can learn from edu-larp (What), how you learn through edu-larp (How), and what the benefits of the method are (Why). The three categories are not entirely separate; they will overlap to some extent. For example, the theme 'motivation' can fit both in 'why' you should use an edu-larp; because it helps motivate the students, but it can also fit into 'how' the students are learning; because they are motivated. In these cases, I have sorted them where I found most of the presented ideas within the theme fit best. Each theme will be showcased by a number of quotes from the participants. The reason for using so many quotes is to illustrate examples of what each theme encompasses, but more importantly, to let the practitioners' own voices be heard and not just hide their words under overarching themes created by a scholar. All participants have been pseudonymised.

#### 3.1 What

There are four main themes that participants bring up as things you can learn through edu-larp: Personal development, Empathy, Content, and Social competencies.

##### 3.1.1 Personal development

Personal development is about how you grow, improve, and understand yourself better.

A wise man once said, 'by playing many different roles I learn about *me*, I learn about who *I* am'. And when they are offered this playful arena, to experiment with different behaviours, they are learning a *lot* about themselves. They are learning a *lot* about how to behave in life, different kinds of strategies. (Interview with Valdemar. 2023)

And then of course it, it could be a good feel of own competences. So to see what are my core competences, and how do I behave in social situations, and how would I behave if I would be in different positions, or if I have different roles, or if I have different understanding of myself. So to help people to become more powerful in their own, eh, being. (Interview with Ludwig. 2023)

##### 3.1.2 Social Competencies

Social competencies are focused on social skills and understanding and interacting with social systems. There is a considerable overlap between this theme and the previous one (Personal

development) since the participants often mention them together. This overlap is not surprising since it is hard to develop socially without any personal development. Social competencies are described in two ways. The first is about skills in interacting with others.

Can we work together, for example, about some common cause? I learn to analyse *your* position in a social situation, and my own position, and can we bring it together? There's something *there* that happens. You learn to, actually be *around* other people and be social. (Interview with Frederik 2023)

So it's both those soft social skills about taking turns, about working together, about talking, about listening. (Interview with Lina 2023)

The second way Social competencies are described is about social positions and social systems.

So they're good for sort of showing how systems function, and what it's like to be a part of a system of some kind. (Interview with Tarjei 2023)

I think it's a good way to experience some kind of social phenomena, which could be like the use of force, or structural social situations, which could be some kind of group dynamic stuff. (Interview with Ludwig 2023)

### 3.1.3 Empathy

The third theme is Empathy. Empathy is here seen as the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. One could argue that Empathy should go into one of the previous themes. It can be seen as an individual skill that can be practiced and thereby go into Personal development. On the other hand, you have empathy for somebody *else*, and since empathy is always related to another person, it could also be seen as going into the theme of Social competencies. Since it is a bit in between the other themes, empathy thereby got to be a theme of its own. Empathy is mentioned both in relation to other people in general and in relation to character:

And it's a lot about empathy. Because you have to have some kind of empathy to imagine being somebody else. And learning empathy and, and also you're learning to use empathy to understand other people. (Interview with Aksel 2023)

The two places where there's a really significant difference (Note: in learning) sometimes, one is what their level of empathy is for historical figures. People who... Using traditional instruction, they often suffer from the arrogance of the present, and they look at these historical actors and they're like, 'Well, what a bunch of idiots. Why did they do this? It's so obviously a dumb thing to do'. And then they play the game and they do exactly the same thing. And they're like, 'Ahh, ohh, you know, I get it now'. Or they do something that's even worse for them. And they say, 'Oh, well, you know, maybe I underestimated them'. But also, when people play roles that have political positions, or cultural positions, that are deeply at odds with those that the student holds, I think that sometimes those are the most powerful learning experiences. Because the students are able to go, the

students are able to recognize that that person isn't evil, or stupid, but that they came to their position for reasons that seemed reasonable to them, in the historical context that they were occupying. I think that's a really, really powerful set of learning. To be able to have empathy with someone that you not only don't admire, but kind of despise, is to be able to think about why they did the things that they did. So that's one. (Interview with Bill 2023)

### 3.1.4 Content

The fourth theme is 'content'. This theme is focused on subject-based knowledge, cognitive-related learning, and what the participants talk about as 'hard skills'.

But it's also the hard skills (Note: that you can learn), like talking English, or doing math, or um. (Interview with Lina 2023)

... they learned something in the week about, the East German Week, they learned something about \*chuckle\* justice. And communist regimes. And I mean, they learn both sides. Because they can also become very good socialist citizens, and with like limited freedom in many ways, but they have just worked their way up to the top of the party rank system. And not everyone can be up there, but then they can get everything, they get access to party meetings, they can take decisions, and stuff like that. So in the East German thing, they, again, they learned something about the historical setting and how it, with the mild pressure of being in that setting, they learned something about how it must have been to be a human in that setting. (Interview with Frederik 2023)

We notice that the more cognitive learning goals we included, in maths for example, or in natural science, social science, whatever, the more fact-based learning goals we included, the more difficult it was for the kids, and the teachers, to take on and interpret their characters. There seem to be like a block, blocking situation, that when you work with your brain and focus. (Interview with Leni 2023)

## 3.2 How

In relation to how you learn through edu-larps, we find the following themes: Cooperation, New perspectives, Reflection, Individual processes, Embodiment, and Exploring/Doing.

### 3.2.1 Cooperation

This theme includes working together, learning from each other, exploring subjects together, and interaction.

It's simply because that in the edu-larp they are allowed to talk to each other. I know that in regular class you can give the class a task, and you can make the kids form groups, and they can work together in these groups. But in the edu-larp we always work very socially with the problems and the difficulties that they need to learn. So they cooperate, and they learn a lot about themselves in this cooperation with others. 'What am I good at? Ohh, I'm pretty good at pragmatic thinking and solving riddles or questions so I can

participate with that'. Other kids learn that, 'I, I'm actually pretty good at leadership, so I can like kind of like lead the group and ask the right question and get us on track'. So a lot of their learning take place within these bubbles of cooperation within the groups when they are presented with the tasks. (Interview with Valdemar 2023)

But then the students also have their voice heard, so we can get them. Our job is also to help facilitate the students have that discussions between themselves. (Interview with Aksel 2023)

### 3.2.2 *New perspectives*

This theme is about getting new perspectives from other players or from playing a character, but also about how the method is suitable for working with complex content that includes many different viewpoints.

Having that discussion about how we witnessed things differently, and how we see things differently, and how we bring ourselves into the act of observing something. (Interview with Tarjei 2023)

And that (Note: being in character) in turn leads to a new perspective on something. (Interview with Leni 2023)

I think for edu-larp, I tend to lean into that when it's a part of the course that I've never figured out how to teach it effectively using other methods. \*chuckle\* And those are usually moments where there are a lot of different perspectives and they're all pulling in different directions. And these tend to be the games that I've written, are things that I've tried all kinds of different ways to teach and in the end I'm like, 'Well, I guess I have to have a game, to teach this thing'. (Interview with Bill 2023)

### 3.2.3 *Reflection*

Reflection is mentioned as something that is a vital part for learning to happen.

Because some of the benefits of role-playing is not exactly the experience, it is the reflection on the experience. (Interview with Kolos 2023)

And then the third place is the reflection. I think that probably at least half of the learning happens on those reflection days. (Interview with Bill 2023)

During the larp itself, it's usually very intense and lots of things happen at the same time, but in the debrief, when you have time to listen to other people, to other players perspectives, and when you have to put words to your own experiences and feelings, that is when you actually can see whether there has been a progress or a new perspective added that accumulates to your portfolio of competencies and skills. (Interview with Leni 2023)

### 3.2.4 *Individual processes*

Individual processes as a theme highlight how learning is personal and that every player gets a unique experience, which is how they learn.

And even that way, they might experience something totally different. Because you know, they will each have a very personal point of view, and those point of views will differ from each other because they are role-playing. So they have different roles and different points of view. (Interview with Kolos 2023)

I think personally, for me, the strength in role-play is that you get to be on the inside. And it's personal, you get to experience it (Interview with Tarjei 2023)

### 4.2.5 *Embodiment*

The participants also talk about learning as something that can be experienced in the body.

But I think it's mostly about gaining an embodied experience about something, about the topic, and about other people and about yourself. (Interview with Tarjei 2023)

There are a lot of things that are important that aren't like immediate, and immediately present, but I think one of the strengths of larps is that you can give a personal experience, and once you have some personal experience, it's something you have done with your body that's related to this thing that you're going to learn about, then it's much easier to hold the attention, and focus on the bigger picture stuff that's going to be learnt. (Interview with Kolos 2023)

### 3.2.6 *Exploring/Doing*

This theme is about exploring and doing, making choices, and taking action.

And also, it's exploratory, so you are not receiving something and accepting it, but using it, trying to apply it and experimenting with it. (Interview with Kolos 2023)

Putting the students in a situation where they have to make choices, and they have to act, and they have to, you know, do something. (Interview with Aksel 2023)"

But everything would be like, 'ah OK, this is very rational', and you think about this and you discuss about this, but it's very like more thinking and not making. And sometimes, I guess, it's better for your learning experience to be in a situation where you not only think about things but also do things. (Interview with Ludwig 2023)

When edu-larp is able to make a playful arena for the students, for the participant. Where they are allowed to engage in different behaviours and they can investigate themselves. (Interview with Valdemar 2023)

### 3.3 Why

There are five main themes that participants bring up as to why you should use edu-larp, the strength of the method: Playfulness, Power distribution, Brave space, Emotions, and Motivation.

#### 3.3.1 Motivation

Motivation is mentioned by more or less all the participants as a reason to use edu-larp. It is often described in relation to edu-larp as a game, to winning, or to being fun.

The best thing about the edu-larp is that the kids are, first and foremost, motivated to do stuff. (Interview with Valdemar 2023)

Yeah, I think that you're sort of learning for the game in a way. But every game also is basically just a, I mean, at root any game is a tool for teaching. So I think that the more you learn, the better you're able to play the game. So for students that are competitive, they're playing to win? I guess? But they're winning as them, but they're also winning as their role? (Interview with Bill 2023)

So I just introduce a game *in* the classroom, that is even closer to the students so that they can like, 'Ok!', the motivational force is right here. That is where the game is, that is where I can have fun, or get the excitement of throwing a dice, or so. (Interview with Frederik 2023)

So the question we need to ask ourselves as teachers, is how can we motivate our kids? How can we make them think that learning is fun? Because if the kids are not motivated, they won't learn a lot. We have to make, we have to make sure that learning is fun, and engaging, and that they want to do it. (Interview with Valdemar 2023)

#### 3.3.2 Playfulness

In this theme, we find mentions concerning play and how larp is a place for play but also mentions immersion and imagination.

So we look into the question of what do our young people learn from playful behaviour? There's a lot of studies about that, a lot of science. And young people learn a *lot* about, they learn a lot *in* playful behaviour, by *engaging* in playful behaviour. And that is to me, why edu-larp is magical for these young kids. That's why we do it as a school. That's why we believe in. (Interview with Valdemar 2023)

So I guess I would say those are the three things to have, engaging ideas, curiosity and open mindedness. And when you've got those three things, I mean to me, the natural thing to do is you start playing. And an edu-larp is a, is a slightly structured environment for that play, rather than just a kind of a sandbox. Because I think a sandbox can be, teaches some things, but I think that playing in a sandbox is a lot harder than playing

in a larp, because larp gives you some help in terms of how do I play? Because playing with ideas is, in an educational context, is pretty alien to most students. (Interview with Bill 2023)

We often take worlds that is interesting to the kids, like a lot of these kids are interested in the steampunk world or vampires. The last edu-larp was about the vampires in New York. And, and they really love these worlds. And they get so much into it. And they get so into their characters. (Interview with Valdemar 2023)

Yeah, I remember, for example, there was a girl, age 12 maybe?. And she was like, 'Ohh. During the edu-larp it was like being 10 again. Playing on the break between classes, but for a *very* long time', and you can hear in her voice that she was longing for the age of 10. Which were just two years ago. But she was longing for the time where you can, on your break, play pretend with your friends. And now she got the opportunity to do it again. And she longed for it. That is, for the older children, or for adults, to be able to go back to that, to that imagination. (Interview with Lina 2023)

### 3.3.3 Power distribution

Here, we find ideas about how the participants see that power should be more distributed in a classroom, how this happens in edu-larp with agency as an essential component, and what this means for educators.

Being, I think the English expression is on par? So that you don't have a hierarchical learning situation, but everybody needs to feel that he or she is accepted as an individual in that very situation, and also that everybody is kind of an expert, for something. And edu-larp is a very good tool to introduce that, *especially* if the educator takes part in it. (Interview with Leni 2023)

And the players could decide, 'Well, I could do something else'. So that feeling of *agency* is very important as well, for the students. As well as, again, having agency over the text. Being able to say, 'Oh I could, I could make this decision differently'. And as with the papal election, the students could just make this decision the same, but now they know now the reasons *why*. Now they know Borgia was elected, not because he was a good Pope, but because he was a political solution to various constituencies in Italy in 1492. (Interview with Steve 2023)

But during the game session, the students have drawn up the agenda, the students are running the protocol. There's a lot of power that, as a faculty member, you're ceding to the students by doing that. In my experience, that's actually one of the biggest reasons why faculty don't do edu-larp, they fear a loss of control, not for sort of egotistical reasons, but they're like, 'the class might not do the things that I think it needs to do'. Which is true. \*chuckle\* (Interview with Bill 2023)

### 3.3.4 *Brave space*

Edu-larp is talked about as something that can create a safe setting where you can explore new roles, relationships, and actions. It is a space where you can dare to be brave and where it is ok to fail because failing is part of the learning process.

And that is where edu-larp is a big contribution to society. Because we let them explore. In a safe setting. (Interview with Lina 2023)

And I think that trying things out in sort of a fictional environment can be a way to, in a more safe sense, find your own path and figure out what kind of thing that you want to do. (Interview with Aksel 2023)

To feel safe is it's very hard sometimes when we do the edu-larps. Especially among, for example, teenagers, or adults. Their comfort zone may not include edu-larp. And I have to, in a very short amount of time, help them. (Interview with Lina 2023)

### 3.3.5 *Emotions*

In this theme, the participants talk about how edu-larp works with emotions and why they are important for learning.

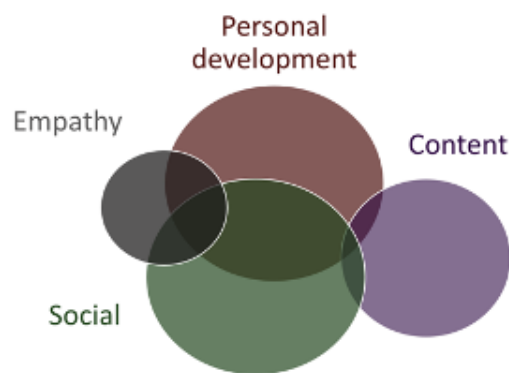
Because maybe, if you compare to normal days, or normal education, the design is to motivate you, absolutely. Like a way to motivate you to learn. But in edu-larp we also, uh, open up to, to *feel* something. To feel your.. We have a very strong ethics larp, about the, Name of larp 1, about the justice, and injustice, for farmers in the medieval time. And you can see the children like shaking from anger because they are being treated unfairly. And it's not an off-game unfairness, they get to have food for the lunch, just as everybody else. But the fact that when there's a duel they automatically lose and the person who is having this lawsuit is obviously not listening to the farmers and treating them unfairly. And this builds up in their body so much. So the design is also to, to make them feel. And then they can express. (Interview with Lina 2023)

The other one is because the intellectual learning is being intermeshed with emotion, long-term recall seems to be a lot better. When I run into a student, who played one game ten years ago in one of my classes, and start talking to them about the game, they remember it. And they remember it because of their emotional engagement in the game, as much as, or more, than their intellectual engagement. And it's interesting because I sort of have questions that I ask these students when I bump into them. They don't just have emotional memories of the game, they like *remember*, intellectually, what the game was about. Emotions just sort of meshes that into their long-term memory in a way that a purely intellectual exercise doesn't seem to do it. (Interview with Bill 2023)

#### 4. MAIN THEMES

The 15 themes can be ordered based on size. The size of each theme was created by looking at in how many instances the theme was mentioned, how much was said about it, and by how many participants. Each part where a theme was discussed was cut out and added to a document (how much was said). Between each part a gap was added (how many instances), then the number of pages the total theme covered was added to the number of participants who had mentioned it to get the size. The themes are presented in the categories and illustrated using circles (all figures from Westborg 2024). The larger a circle is, the larger the theme. The overlapping of circles is not relevant to this paper, but it illustrates how the themes interact with each other.

**Figure 1. What**



**Figure 2. How**

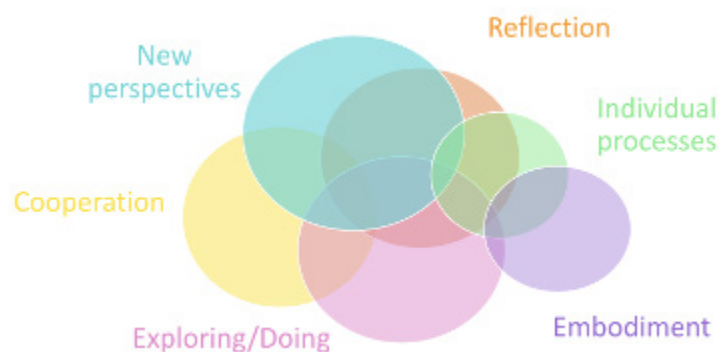
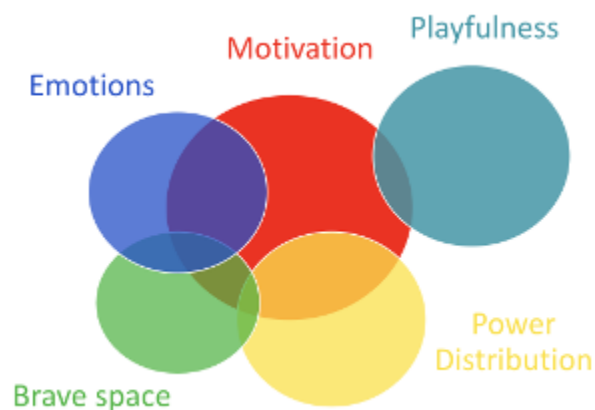


Figure 3. Why



Mentions of a theme can be both positive or negative in relation to the theme. For example, when talking about content learning and what you can learn, we see a positive comment from Lina:

But it's also the hard skills (Note: that you can learn), like talking English, or doing math, or um. (Interview with Lina 2023)

While Valdemar offers some resistance to that:

Edu-larp can sometimes be not so strong, or good, a method to learn pure academics and some very specific skills, like punctuation and grammar in Native language, or very specific skills for mathematics. (Interview with Valdemar 2023)

However, both of these quotes illustrate the theme and are therefore included in the count. The size of the theme therefore says something about how much space this theme gets in the discourse around edu-larp as a method, not about how good something is. The areas where more negative mentions can be seen are: in relation to Content about how it is not as good for teaching some types of content; a few mentions in relation to Motivation where it is highlighted that not everyone gets motivated by edu-larps; Power distribution has one mention about how uncertainty can be intimidating for some people; and in Emotions it is touched upon that it can be used not only for good. There are also a few negative mentions in each theme that are then mitigated by other themes (Westborg forthcoming). The most common theme that mitigates negative mentions in the other themes is Reflection through the use of a debrief. For example, the debrief (Reflection) can be used to mitigate wrong takeaways by individuals (Individual processes).

When sorting the themes from largest to smallest (See Table 1), some themes were close to the next theme, while some had more of a gap to the next theme. This is illustrated in the table by having gaps left between themes in the list.

When looking at the table, we have a large group that is pretty close to each other in place 5-11 while the top and bottom four stand out a bit more. The main theme in the discourse is Motivation, which the participants found to be highly important to learning, and some of them mentioned that this is something they find more challenging in other teaching methods. The themes also show us that educators believe in a more flat hierarchy in the classroom, where

power is more evenly distributed between students and between educators and students, and where students have agency. The third largest theme is Playfulness. Playfulness can be seen as related to Power distribution in that, in a playful space, the rules from the ordinary context don't apply in the same way. However, playfulness is also mentioned as something that is important and has value on its own. Last of the main themes, we find Social competencies, with the participants highlighting how the method can be used to learn how to work together with others and understand social systems, which is described as something positive and meaningful.

## 5. DISCUSSION

In this section, the results will be compared to other research, analyzed in relation to category, and be placed in the wider educational discourse.

### 5.1 Other research

To gain a broader understanding of the discourse of practitioners beyond the interview data, additional research was sought out to determine if there was any alignment between the findings.

To find related research, a search was done for previous studies or texts that focus on practitioners' voices. I did not find a lot. The two most relevant sources were Cullinan (2024) and Harder (2007). Cullinan has conducted a study similar to this one, but with a focus on specifically middle and high school educators who use tabletop role-playing games instead of edu-larps in their teaching. Harder is a teacher herself and shares her own experience of working with edu-larp as a method.

Both of these texts were analyzed to find mentions of the themes. Since these are edited texts written with a maximum length in mind and not raw data, analyzing them for size as exactly as done in the data set from the thesis will produce an incorrect representation. Instead, a simpler approach was used, simply separating between whether the theme was missing, clearly present, or present but only mentioned briefly or shallowly. Through this, insight can be gained about what themes are clearly represented and more common and how this relates to the findings from the data in the thesis. In Table 1, the mentions are marked in two columns named by the authors. If a mention was present, it is marked with an x; if a mark is within parentheses, the theme was touched upon or mentioned only briefly or shallowly.

In the table find that all themes are present in at least one of the two texts and that six out of the 15 themes are present in both Cullinan's (2024) and Harder's (2007) texts: the four main themes, the 5th largest theme (New perspective), and Reflection (place 8-10). The fact that the top five are present in both texts strengthens their position as important in the practitioner discourse. Reflection stands out since it was mentioned by both Harder and Cullinan, even if it is not one of the main themes or at the top. Harder mentions Reflection as something she missed out on when running an edu-larp, which had negative consequences on the learning, and that if she could redo it, she would have made sure to have a constant dialogue with the students (p 231). She thereby highlights reflection as guided by the teacher but does not mention reflection between the students. Cullinan, on the other hand, mentions reflection in a quote about how there is an opportunity for reflection in role-playing games since they occur over time (p 133), but doesn't go deeper into it than that. 'Reflection' comes up in both texts, which shows that it is an important part of the discourse, but I was still

surprised that it didn't get more space or was given more weight since even if 'Reflection' was not one of the main themes in the thesis data, the participants still positioned it as vital since that is where they see the main part of the learning taking place. In Cullinan's case, the text was already a distilled version of the original data, so there might be more mentions that she didn't highlight; however, it doesn't seem to have been a central part, as it didn't receive much attention.

**Table 1.** Main Themes Size and Other Research

Size (Largest to smallest)	Themes	Category	Cullinan	Harder
1	Motivation	Why	x	x
2	Power distribution	Why	(x)	(x)
3	Playfulness	Why	(x)	(x)
4	Social competencies	What	x	x
5	New perspective	How	(x)	x
6	Emotions	Why	x	
7	Exploring/doing	How	x	
8-10	Content	What		x
8-10	Reflection	How	(x)	(x)
8-10	Personal	What		x
11	Cooperation	How	x	
12	Brave space	Why	x	
13	Embodiment	How		x
14	Individual process	How	x	
15	Empathy	What		x

## 5.2 The importance of 'Why'.

Upon closer examination of the categories and their main themes, an interesting pattern emerges: out of the four main themes, the top three all relate to the 'Why' category. What could make the Why so important? One part is probably that educators spend time thinking about why they use a specific method to try to help students learn, but if that was the only thing, then How should also be present high up in the list since how you learn through a method is relevant to why you pick it. Perhaps the importance of 'Why' rather illustrates the need to motivate your choice to others. This also came up in the interviews when asked if the participants had run into any resistance. Kolos described it like this:

Ohh yes, yes, all the time. But I think, basically, resistance was the standard or the norm, I think. People did not really understand why is it good, at all \*chuckle\*, to do this type of stuff. And I'm talking about the majority of people, so minority always thought that it's totally ok. (Interview with Kolos 2023)

And for some teachers, it is not only about having others understand what you do, there can be more dire consequences if you can't motivate your choice of method. Steve talked about how it can be harder when working in pre-higher education:

And this was very much hit home by the educators who are at the 2022 [Name of international conference], right? Who presented pretty much a verbatim, you know, they're learning objectives, which again, translate into specifically US American educational objectives, but that's what's important to them, right? And they communicated that very clearly. What's important is the power for them to justify this role-play to their bosses. So that they don't get fired or troubled. (Interview with Steve 2023)

This might stem from that play, not only in role-playing games, is often seen as frivolous and only for entertainment (Deterding 2014, 2017; Euteneuer 2019). However, role-playing games get an extra layer since they are connected to playing make-believe as children, and larps, with their embodiment aspect, even more so (Westborg forthcoming). Many educators are not free to use any method of their choice but need approval to bring in a new method. This means justifying the method's use to superiors and demonstrating its alignment with the curriculum and learning objectives to achieve institutional accountability.

When using a new method comes with the risk of being fired, it becomes very high stakes and being able to motivate 'Why' you want to use it becomes essential. Even if the stakes can differ between schools, regions, and countries, the need to validate your choice of method to external parties underscores the importance of 'Why'.

## 5.3 Relation to educational discourses

The main themes (Motivation, Power distribution, Playfulness, and Social competencies) also say something about where edu-larp as a method fits in the wider educational discourse.

The two highest-ranked themes, motivation and power distribution, paint a picture of starting out from the students' perspective, giving them more power to affect their learning and helping them get motivated. The teachers are helping and guiding the students in a flatter type of hierarchy. This very well matches a constructivist discourse about learning, where knowledge is positioned as individually constructed. For example, constructivist-inspired pedagogy often includes the following features (Linderoth 2016, 21, author's translation):

- Working with themes rather than individual subjects. Since individuals do not create meaning through separate subjects, the teaching shouldn't be organised that way either. By working with themes, you can work with many different subjects at the same time.
- The teacher should adapt to the student's activity instead of the student adapting to the teacher's instruction. The teacher is seen more as a guide or a coach.
- The students' individual inner motivation should be the starting point, and the teacher should try to adapt the teaching so that this can happen.
- Because it is individualised and students are seen as different, they should also be given a lot of freedom to choose what to focus on and how to learn.
- The main goal of teaching is to help the students with self-realisation.

The last point in the list also matches with the fourth main theme, 'Social competencies'. Social competencies in general have become more common in the school debate, especially concerning pro-social behavior, mental health, and school as a compensatory actor (Prieur et al 2016). The concept of social competencies, as a term, builds on an individualistic view, aligning well with a constructivist discourse, even though the social aspect also can be seen as a more social constructivist idea. Examples of constructivist ideas can be seen not just in the main themes but also in both Cullinan's (2024) and Harder's (2007) texts. Cullinan, for example, has differentiation of work as one of their findings (p 133), and Harder even mentions the term constructivist theory (p 234).

The main theme of 'Playfulness' is tricky since play and playfulness in the field of education are primarily researched in relation to young children's development and not in relation to adults (Tanis 2012, p. iii) and therefore are not very prevalent in the general educational discourse about learning for adults. This has begun to change in recent times, but so far the discourse is very scattered, drawing upon various ideas about learning from distinct schools of thought such as constructivism and social constructivism (Heidari-Shahreza 2025; Jørgensen, Hovgaard, Schrøder and Skovbjerg 2023). The presence of Playfulness in the discourse could be an influence from the business tech world, where a discourse around play has evolved over the last 20 years, with companies like Google utilising playfulness in the workspace as an employee benefit (Vyas et al. 2008).

## 6. CONCLUSION

### 6.1 Summary

When examining how practitioners describe edu-larp as a method, the main themes identified are Motivation, Power Distribution, Playfulness, and Social Competencies. In this discourse, the practitioners talk about how the purpose of school extends beyond providing education; it should also be engaging, help create good citizens, and enable students to get to know themselves and evolve as individuals. This discourse also portrays a world where it is essential for practitioners to be able to validate their choice of method. When situating the discourse of edu-larp within the broader educational discourse, it becomes evident that it, in many ways, builds upon constructivist theories. This work contributes to the field by amplifying practitioner voices and situating edu-larp within broader pedagogical frameworks.

## 6.2 Limitations

Since this study has used an interpretative approach, the findings say something about how the world can be understood at this moment, not how it is. Discourse theory does not claim objectivity, but builds rigour and validity through the use of a reflexive approach (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000). Conducting detailed language analyses can be challenging when many of the interviewees and the interviewer are not native speakers; the range of vocabulary will affect what words will be chosen, and also the grammatical composition will be influenced by this factor. By looking at the overarching ideas and the relationship to the social structures, many of these problems with language analysis were bypassed. There are, of course, other ideas about learning within the edu-larp community that have not come up in the interviews. Other participants would probably also present other ideas. That they have not come up does not mean they are irrelevant or not part of the discourse, but I argue that these ideas are not among the main focuses of the discourse, since they should then have been present also here.

## 6.3 Future Research

For future research, it would be interesting to examine what other discourses and trends from the more general current social climate have impacted this discourse and, additionally, to explore the differences between the discourse among practitioners and theorists. Looking even further ahead, it would be fascinating to conduct another analysis of how practitioners talk about edu-larp in about 15 years' time. A comparison could then be made to see if, and how, the discourse had changed, both in itself and in relation to the broader educational discourse and the prevailing social climate.

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