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Fleeting moments: young children's negotiations of belonging and togetherness

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ABSTRACT

With the aim of developing new knowledge on inclusive practices for young children in early childhood education, the following research question was explored: what characterises young children's negotiations of belonging and togetherness in a diverse peer group in kindergarten? Data from field work in a young children's group in a multicultural kindergarten in Norway formed basis for the present study's analysis, which was conducted within a cultural-historical framework. The findings revealed that the two-year-olds' everyday institutional lives were influenced by features in the peer culture and characterised by fleeting moments of caring and sharing, shared joint experiences and ongoing negotiations of mutual bonds, hierarchies and group boundaries. Although the findings did not reveal any differences along ethnic or cultural lines when it came to the two-year-olds' negotiations of belonging and togetherness, the fact that the peer culture already at this age included the application of hierarchies and symbol systems, calls for kindergarten teachers' awareness in order to secure inclusive practices for young children.

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Introduction

A group of children are seated at the lunch table, and two-year-old Jack reckons the names of those who are going to have a nap after they have finished eating.

'Everyone [is] going to sleep!', he says.

He reckons their names, one by one, and they confirm by shouting *'yes!'*, as they smile and clap their hands together.

Jack turn to the teacher and points at her [saying] *'You, you not sleep! Only, we, children sleep!'*

The aim of the present article is to explore how young children's belonging and togetherness can be understood through their negotiations of membership and shared emotional connection in peer groups. As illustrated by the small story above, the drawing of boundaries can be observed in peer groups from early years onwards.

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The World Organization of Early Childhood Education has identified social exclusion as a potential high-risk situation for migrant and refugee children ('Declaration of the 68th OMEP', 2016). Research on belonging and togetherness is a growing field in the international early childhood research context (Juutinen 2018; Koivula and Hännikäinen 2017; Nutbrown and Clough 2009; Stratigos, Bradley, and Sumsion 2014; Wastell and Degotardi 2017), and, in the last decade, early childhood research on belonging among migrant and refugee children has expanded (Guo and Dalli 2016; Kalkman and Clark 2017; Kernan 2010; Ljung Egeland 2019; Mitchell and Bateman 2018; Singer and de Haan 2010).

Singer and de Haan (2010) investigated children's friendships and conflicts in Dutch multicultural childcare centres; among children under four years old, the researchers did not find any notable differences in friendships or conflicts along ethnic or cultural lines. However, several researchers have pointed out that experiencing belonging may be challenging for 'different' children, regardless of whether the 'differences' are due to language, ability, age or size, ethnicity, skin colour, or cultural beliefs (Kernan 2010, 202; Ljung Egeland 2015, 153–154; Mitchell and Bateman 2018, 380; Stratigos 2015, 51; Stratigos, Bradley, and Sumsion 2014, 175). As Ljung Egeland (2015, 13) stated, there are no differences between children—migrant background or not—when it comes to the need to belong. There is a need for more research concerning children under the age of three and their negotiations of belonging in diverse early childhood settings (Stratigos, Bradley, and Sumsion 2014; Wastell and Degotardi 2017).

In their research on diversity in early childhood, Löfdahl and Hägglund (2012, 124) stated that diversity concerned how social, cultural and ethnic differences were dealt with in everyday institutional practices, adding that children's processes of meaning making of differences within peer groups were closely related to social hierarchies, friendships and popularity. Corsaro (2009, 301) differentiated peer groups from peer culture, noting that, while children are members of peer groups due to age, they create their own peer cultures within these groups. The peer cultures in early childhood settings have been explained as stable sets of activities, values and artefacts, produced and shared by children, which are unique in time and place but have a common feature in the way that the children try to make their everyday lives understandable (Corsaro 2009; Löfdahl and Hägglund 2012). As the first step into a society outside their family, kindergarten may be young children's first experience of diversity and opportunity to meet children who are 'different' from them; thus, kindergarten is the site of their first experiences of 'difference', and of being included or excluded in peer groups or communities (Nutbrown and Clough 2009; Stratigos, Bradley, and Sumsion 2014).

In order to contribute to the development of new knowledge on diversity and inclusive practices for young children in early childhood education, the following research question was explored: *what characterises young children's negotiations of belonging and togetherness in a diverse peer group in kindergarten?*

The research question was examined through an exploratory case study (Simons 2014; Yin 2014), and the unit of analysis was a young children's group in a multicultural kindergarten in Norway. Drawing on McMillan and Chavis (1986) and Koivula and Hännikäinen (2017), the concepts of *membership* and *shared emotional connection*, as elements in children's sense of community, formed the basis for exploring children's negotiations of belonging and togetherness in kindergarten. The analysis was conducted within a

cultural-historical framework, inspired by Hedegaard's (2012) wholeness approach for researching children's participation and meaning making in institutional practices.

Membership and shared emotional connection as elements in children's sense of community

Based on McMillan and Chavis's (1986) research on societal dynamics in developing a sense of community, Koivula and Hännikäinen (2017) explored four key elements in the development of a sense of community among children: *membership*, *influence*, *integration or fulfilment of needs* and *shared emotional connection*. Based on their findings, Koivula and Hännikäinen (2017) recommended exploring each of these elements individually to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of children's sense of community in early childhood education. For the present study, the elements of *membership* and *shared emotional connection* were considered especially suitable in the context of young children's negotiations of belonging and togetherness, as outlined below.

In addition to referring to belonging to a group, the element of *membership* includes finding one's own place in the group; consolidating friendships; and negotiating boundaries, hierarchies, inclusion and exclusion (Koivula and Hännikäinen 2017). McMillan and Chavis (1986) described membership as a feeling of belonging and of being a part of something and argued that membership also implies boundaries; for someone to belong, there must be someone who does not belong. One characteristic of membership is the use of a common symbol system, such as rituals or clothes, to create social distance between members and non-members. In order to maintain group boundaries and reinforce their membership in the group, children can create rituals, discourses and specific activities (Koivula and Hännikäinen 2017; McMillan and Chavis 1986).

The element of *shared emotional connection* refers to having a feeling of togetherness based on mutual bonds, engaging in frequent and positive interactions, participating in shared activities, having fun together, engaging in joint play and having a shared or similar history or experiences (Koivula and Hännikäinen 2017; McMillan and Chavis 1986). McMillan and Chavis (1986) pointed out that sharing a history did not necessitate that all group members had participated in the shared history but that they identified with it.

Materials and methods

The present study was designed as a case study (Yin 2014), and the unit of analysis was a young children's group in a multicultural kindergarten in Norway. The data collection was conducted during seven weeks of fieldwork in the winter and spring of 2018. In total, 12 two-year-olds attended the group at that time, and all of them registered as participants in the research with their parents' consent.¹ Yin (2014, 13) defined a case study as a comprehensive research strategy, which is suitable when investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and which benefits from a prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis.

The fieldwork and analysis was carried out in a systematic manner, inspired by Hedegaard's (2012) cultural-historical wholeness approach which visualises three perspectives: the societal perspective, the institutional perspective and the individual child's perspective. As a macro perspective, the societal perspective includes societal conditions and culturally

conditioned traditions and values that influence kindergarten practices and thus children's everyday lives, such as subject matters, areas and curriculum plans and time and spaces (Hedegaard 2012, 131).

The fieldwork was comprised of participatory observations, which involved writing fieldnotes, drawing illustrations and taking photos. Hedegaard (2008a) used the concept of *activity* to describe an individual child's participation within an institutional practice and the concept of *activity settings* to describe children's social situations within the institutional practices. Each individual child's participation in an activity setting, such as the lunch meal, provides a different experience and opportunity for meaning making among the children participating in the setting (Hedegaard 2008a, 2012). The relation between activity settings and children's social situations has further been explained by Hedegaard (2012, 131), who noted that activity settings are recurring events, where both materiality and ways of interaction reflect the traditions within the institutional practices. Following Hedegaard (2008a, 2012), the present observations focused on the children's social interactions and peer relationships in the everyday activity settings provided within the institutional practice.

In this young children's group, the relevant everyday activity settings were circle time and lunch meals. In addition, the transitions before, between and after these settings were included in the observations. This meant spending time in the young children's group between approximately 10:00 and 13:00. The intention was to be a participant observer, following the children closely in the activity settings and transitions, but it proved to be difficult to make observations and simultaneously be available to the children during lunch meals. The children's social interactions during lunch meals were, therefore, systematically observed from a small distance. The children's positions at the table were registered to see if a pattern of preferred positions emerged.

The data from the young children's group consisted of 94 photos and 40 pages of fieldnotes. In addition, the kindergarten's 19-page annual plan was included in the data as a historical document that shed light on the institutional policies and perspectives that underpinned the practices in the young children's group at the time of the study (Simons 2014).

Research ethics

The research project was registered and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. The collection and retention of the data was safeguarded in accordance with the applicable regulations. However, merely following ethical formalities is insufficient when conducting research with children (Enochsson and Löfdahl Hultman 2019; Mortari and Harcourt 2012). As the participants were young children, issues of children's informed consent and dissent (Dockett, Einarsdottir, and Perry 2012) were taken into consideration, and the researcher's sensitivity towards the children's needs and wishes were perceived as crucial (Enochsson and Löfdahl Hultman 2019). Thus, the researcher employed process consent (Graham, Powell, and Truscott 2016, 84), which implies that children's consent or dissent is an ongoing process on a day-to-day basis. The children's age, body language and facial expressions were considered as much as their verbal consent. This meant that the researcher withdrew and refrained from taking photos or engaging in activities with children who signalled discomfort through their body language or facial expressions (Enochsson and Löfdahl Hultman 2019; Koivula and Hännikäinen 2017).

The participants²

Comprising four groups, the kindergarten under study received many children of migrants and refugees. The children were allocated into the groups based on their age; there was one group of two-year-olds, and three mixed aged groups. Two of the mixed aged groups welcomed children of newly arrived refugees. As newly arrived families were perceived as particularly vulnerable, it was not justifiable to carry out the fieldwork in those groups. Thus, the fieldwork was conducted in two of the other groups; the group of two-year-olds and a group of mixed aged children. The present study refer to the group of two-year-olds.

Of the 12 two-year-olds in the studied group, four of them had at least one parent from a country outside of the Nordic countries. All of these four children were born in Norway. Izzy's father was Norwegian, her mother had migrated from a country on the African continent. Jack's parents were refugees from another country on the African continent. Leah's mother was Norwegian, her father had migrated to Norway from a European country some years ago. As Hamid was born in Norway, his older siblings, who also attended the kindergarten, but in a mixed age group for children over three years old, were born in a country in South East Asia, from which their parents had fled.

The decision to only engage in situations where the children's body language and verbal utterances left no room for doubt as to whether the researcher's presence was accepted meant spending more time with some children than others. Primarily, Jack, Tina, Maya, Olivia, Leah and Adrian seemed to be comfortable with the researcher's presence on a daily basis. John, Live and Izzy's familiarity with the researcher varied a bit from day to day. Among the remaining children in the group, two of them seemed restrained in the presence of the researcher. Thus, they were considered participants only due to their parents' consent and were excluded from the study. The final child, Hamid, seemed comfortable and sought contact with the researcher. Unfortunately, he caught whooping cough a couple of weeks into the fieldwork and thus stayed home for a long time. This was also the case for Adrian and Live, who caught whooping cough during the fieldwork period.

As opposed to the other groups in the kindergarten, where older children attended, the studied group was not characterised by verbal diversity. The kindergarten had a strong focus on language development; however, due to economic constraints, the resources needed to engage with migrant children in their mother tongue were scarce. During the fieldwork period, the verbal communication heard in the young children's group was almost exclusively in Norwegian. An exception was when Hamid's older siblings came by; the older children spoke their mother tongue, and Hamid seemed to understand what was said and contribute to the conversations.

Analysis

As noted above, the data analysis for the present study was conducted using the cultural-historical wholeness approach; the societal, institutional and individual children's perspectives were explored in order to understand the two-year-olds' social situations within the institutional practices (Hedegaard 2008b). In this context, the kindergarten's annual plan represented the societal perspective. The daily implementation of the content described in the plan, as it was observed, represented the institutional perspective.

The first two data analysis steps included a common sense analysis of the photos, the written and illustrated observations, and the annual plan, as well as an overall search for conceptual patterns in the data, while considering the societal and institutional perspectives (Hedegaard 2008c, 58–59). The third step involved a thematic and conceptual interpretation (Hedegaard 2008c, 61–62), which was connected to the research question and focused on the young children's social interactions in the peer community.

Overall conceptual patterns: circle time

Circle time was highlighted in the annual plan as an institutional practice anchored in the values of the kindergarten and as a suitable arena for safeguarding the young children's experience of belonging. During the fieldwork period, circle time, as described in the annual plan, was rarely carried out. Instead, the staff were occupied with routine tasks, making arrangements for lunch and taking care of the children's clothes, while the children were told to stay in the wardrobe and wait for lunch to be ready. This took approximately 15–20 min. Usually, a teacher or assistant was with them, going back and forth between the wardrobe and the main room and often tidying, folding clothes, entertaining the children by singing songs and helping them resolving conflicts.

In this recurring activity setting, available artefacts appeared to play a role in the children's social interactions. The available artefacts in the wardrobe were the belongings that the children brought from home, namely, their clothes, bags, shoes and toys. The institutional practice of allowing children to bring private belongings such as toys to the kindergarten, was explained by the teacher; since the two-year-olds had strong affiliations to these artefacts, bringing them to the kindergarten could support them in transitional situations and safeguard their feelings of safety and belonging.

Overall conceptual patterns: lunch meals

The annual plan highlighted meals as especially suitable for safeguarding children's participation and experiences of friendships. In addition, the plan described the importance of safeguarding children's experiences of belonging and being part of a community through the arranging of daily joint events. In the young children's group, the lunch meals constituted such joint events. Each lunch meal was prepared by the staff, and sometimes one or two children participated in the preparation as a kitchen aide for the day. Lunch was served at about the same time each day, which was after the children played outdoors and before nap time. It was served on two tables, and the two-year-olds could choose for themselves at which of the tables they wanted to sit and for how long they would stay and eat. When it was not possible for a child to sit exactly where he or she wanted, the teachers or assistants made efforts to organise a place near at least one of his or her favoured peers. The lunch meals were characterised by a calm atmosphere with sufficient time to eat and have conversations. The institutional practice concerning the lunch meals was explained by the teacher as a result of the kindergarten's work on the concept of belonging, as well as a means of safeguarding the children's statutory right to participate, as stated in the Norwegian curriculum for kindergartens (2017).

Overall conceptual patterns: transitions

Transitions were not a subject in the annual plan; however, the observed transitions between activity settings accounted for a substantial proportion of the two-year-olds' everyday life in kindergarten. The observed transitions were from outside play to indoor circle time and waiting in the wardrobe, between this waiting, to go to the lunch meal, and between the lunch meal and nap time. The length of each transition varied per child. One child could choose to be seated at the lunch meal until he or she could go straight to the bathroom and have his or her diaper changed and then go to the bedroom for nap time. Another child could finish the lunch meal quickly and then play, engage with other children or look at books on the sofa while the rest of the children finished the lunch meal and the bedroom was readied.

Thematic and conceptual interpretations of young children as part of a peer community

In this step of the analysis, the activity settings -the lunch meal and circle time- as well as the transitions between these settings, were understood as the two-year-olds' social and cultural meeting places. The individual children's perspectives were tentatively captured through photos and observations of their social interactions in the activity settings, and analysed by drawing on the descriptions of the elements of *membership* and *shared emotional connection* (Koivula and Hännikäinen 2017; McMillan and Chavis 1986). As previously outlined, these elements were perceived as closely related to the concepts of belonging and togetherness in this study.

Regarding the element of *membership*, the thematic analysis involved searching for patterns of the two-year-olds trying to gain access and find their place in the group, consolidate friendships and negotiate boundaries and hierarchies. In addition, a search for the children's use of symbols and rituals to create social closeness or distance was conducted. When analysing the observations and photos in relation to the element of *shared emotional connection*, the focus was on exploring patterns of the children's emphasis on mutual bonds, expressions of shared or similar history or experiences, engagement in shared activities, frequent positive interactions and physical closeness.

An intuitive process for interpreting the data in the third analysis step was adopted, which included writing small stories to illustrate some of the findings. The process of drawing small stories from the data can be a way to think using stories and to shed light on everyday interactions between small children (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008).

Results

The findings from the analysis are presented below according to the elements of *membership* and *shared emotional connection*.

Patterns of negotiating membership

Gaining access to or reinforcing one's place in the community by drawing boundaries or hierarchies was a recurring pattern identified in the analysis. The threat of not being

invited to a birthday or the promise of the opposite was a topic for discussion by the children regardless of whether a birthday was imminent or not.

Tina points her finger at Izzy and Olivia: *'Only Maya [can] come [to] my, my birthday—not the two of you!'*

Izzy, with a sad facial expression, walks close up to Tina and searches for eye contact. *'I come?'*, Izzy [says as she] points at herself.

With a loud voice and firm facial expression, Tina replies: *'No!'*

Such birthday discussions happened both at the lunch meal and while waiting in the wardrobe, as well as in the transitions between activity settings. Thus, birthday invitations appeared to be a ritual to negotiate or strengthen a friendship or to place oneself in a hierarchy and safeguard one's own membership. In particular, Tina, Izzy, Leah and Live used the birthday reference in negotiations, however in general, if one child initiated such arguments, very often the other children would follow up.

Having the right equipment appeared to be a kind of symbol system, although not an explicitly expressed one, for accessing a desired community or denying someone access to the community. An observation and photo sequence from a transition between the lunch meal and nap time showed John putting on his rucksack to try to access a particular group of so-called 'school children'. Specifically, after they finished their lunch, Maya, Olivia and Tina had dressed up with rucksacks on their backs, pink caps and sunglasses, telling the rest of the group still at the lunch meal, that they, being 'school children', would now head to 'school'. John, who followed them, was told by Tina that he was not a 'school child', so he ran to the wardrobe, pulled out his cap and sunglasses and made a second attempt. Tina lifted John up, explaining that he was 'too small' and just 'a baby' and carried him back to his seat despite John's persistent protests that he was not 'a baby'. Thus, applying the correct symbols in this case, namely, the rucksacks, sunglasses and caps, was clearly not sufficient to exceed the frequently observed boundaries of size and age; being 'small' and a 'baby'.

The negotiations of boundaries were sometimes characterised by struggles, ending with physical confrontations or solutions, as in the previous example where Tina physically removed John from the group. The children's belongings brought from home often played a role in these negotiations. Rucksacks, bags, sunglasses, caps, shoes, teddy bears and other stuffed animals seemed to be important symbols in the drawing of boundaries of membership in this peer group, as illustrated in the small story below:

Maya has brought her new bag; she calls it her 'kitty-bag'.

It is pink and furry with a picture of a kitten.

Izzy, Olivia and Tina gather around her and gently stroke and comment on the 'kitty-bag'.

Expressing verbally and through gestures that he too wants to take a look at the bag and stroke the fur, Adrian makes several attempts to approach the girls.

Tina repeatedly pushes Adrian away, using both of her hands, claiming that only she, Izzy and Olivia are allowed to touch Maya's 'kitty-bag'.

In this small story, Tina's actions are interpreted as a way of safeguarding her own access to the group of girls through the drawing of boundaries of who can join by being allowed to 'touch the kitty-bag', thereby excluding Adrian.

A familiar activity setting, which was part of the daily institutional practice, was the nap time after the lunch meal. As this article's introductory small story illustrated,

the question of membership in the sleeping group was an opportunity for displaying boundaries, and Jack would often make a point of declaring which children would be part of the sleeping group and which would not. As the observations revealed, an important feature of the peer culture in the group was bringing a teddy bear or other stuffed animal to nap time.

- Maya: 'I brought my teddy bear to the library, and back to kindergarten!'
- Jack, with a sad facial expression: 'Oh, oh teddy bear!'
- Maya: 'For nap time!'
- Jack: 'Me, me borrow, [the] teddy bear?'
- Maya: 'Not mine, no!'
- Jack is silent for some time with a sad facial expression.
- Jack: 'Home, I too sleep [with a] teddy bear!'

For Jack, in particular, this feature of the peer culture appeared to be a matter of great concern. The observations revealed that the teddy bear was a recurring subject for negotiation, and, as Jack himself never brought a teddy bear to kindergarten, he repeatedly asked his peers to borrow their teddy bears or other stuffed animals. Why Jack wanted so strongly to have a teddy bear is not easy to say with certainty. However, as the teddy bear was a recurring subject among the children during the lunch meal and the transition to nap time and Jack stated more than once that he too slept with a teddy bear at home, it is reasonable to assume that Jack perceived possession of a teddy bear as a symbol of membership within the peer community.

Patterns of shared emotional connection

The transitions between outdoor play and waiting in the wardrobe before lunch appeared to be arenas where the two-year-olds showed affection and care and offered to help each other. Izzy, Adrian, Jack and Hamid, before he was taken ill, seemed particularly eager to help the other children in these situations. Jack offered to help John, among others, to remove his wet pants and socks. John, however, was not eager to be helped, expressing that he could manage on his own. John was not the youngest child in the group, but he was a bit smaller than many of the other children, and they sometimes referred to him as a baby, to which he objected.

Being best friends or not, was articulated among the children in the transition from outdoor play and the subsequent waiting period in the wardrobe. Being best friends was expressed through verbal repetitions followed by touches, hugs, smiles and eye contact between the declared best friends. In contrast, being declared 'not best friends' was pronounced, quite abruptly, as a statement. Colours on clothes, bags and shoes were referenced in this context, and wearing the right colour, preferably pink, seemed to bring about positive interactions and brief moments of physical closeness among the two-year-olds, especially among Izzy, Maya and Olivia.

Izzy, Maya and Olivia are seated close together in the wardrobe. Claiming to be 'best friends', they comment and compare the colour pink on each other's clothes and shoes.

They hug each other and exchange gazes and smiles.

Wearing black and blue without any hint of pink, Tina sits quietly next to them, listening to their conversation.

Suddenly she grabs one of Maya's pink shoes and hides it behind her back.

This small story illustrates a recurring pattern of emphasis of the mutual bonds between Izzy and her designated best friends, Maya and Olivia. While being best friends or not in the peer group in general varied over time and did not seem to last long, the best friend relationship between Izzy, Maya and Olivia appeared to be of a more stable character. The three of them showed much affection for each other, and they would hug, help and comfort each other. It did not seem as if they actively excluded Tina, and both Izzy and Olivia were observed in positive interactions with her. However, when all four of them were together, it became obvious that Tina was not included to the same extent. Tina's actions in the small story above are thus interpreted as attempt to access their community of best friends. On another occasion, Tina borrowed Olivia's pink summer hat, and she repeatedly stated that she was 'also wearing pink', pointing at the hat. Thus, it can be assumed that Tina had an awareness of the significance of that particular colour as a means of entry into a mutual bond and, perhaps, even identified it with a shared history or experience.

During lunch meals, observations showed that, although the children could leave the table at their own will, the two-year-olds would stay seated until their side mate or desired friend was also ready to leave. However, there did not appear to be a specific pattern of preferred seating at lunch. Rather, if some of the children had shared a positive joint experience outdoors that day, they would sometimes choose to sit at the same table. These observations were, however, mainly based on the children's own comments on their outdoor experiences.

While seated at the lunch table, the two-year-olds were in constant motion and in physical contact as they stroked, squeezed and touched each other. Jack, in particular, would frequently initiate contact with his peers, regardless of which child was his side mate. He often offered to help others and interacted through physical closeness, as well as friendly facial expressions, searches for eye contact and playful suggestions.

Jack places his cup back on the table, and he turns towards his side mate, Leah.

He smiles at her and strokes gently on her ponytail.

Leah, giggling, points down at something on Jack's foot, and then Jack points at Leah's foot.

Then they pull their heads close together, foreheads touching, whispering and giggling.

The children were eager to help each other, and during lunch meals this was particularly observed. On one occasion, Izzy overturned her glass of water, and began to cry, expressing that she was getting wet. Before anyone of the staff responded, Jack left his place, picked up paper towels to dry up, and comforting Izzy by making compassionate sounds and gestures.

The two-year-olds' conversations during the lunch meal revolved around sharing past events and joint experiences, such as outdoor play, bus rides to the library, or birthday invitations. When taking part in such conversations, Jack was eager to include himself, as well as his side mate. If he and Leah were seated together, as illustrated in the small story above, the two of them seemed to really enjoy each other's company. Their interactions were characterised by physical closeness and joy, as well as expressions of care signalled by stroking the other's cheek or hair in a comforting way and making compassionate sounds and expressions if the other was sad.

Some children seemed to be tired during the lunch meal after playing outdoors. This was sometimes the case for Izzy and John. However, even if Izzy did not say much during the lunch meal, she would often interact with her side mates by inviting them to

Table 1. Systematisation of characteristics in the two-year-old's negotiations of belonging and togetherness.

Belonging/Membership	Togetherness/Shared emotional connection
Drawing boundaries by applying symbols and rituals	Emphasising mutual bonds
Displaying membership by applying symbols	Frequently engaging in positive interactions and helpfulness
Reinforcing one's own place in the group by expressing hierarchies through the use of symbols and rituals	Sharing joint experiences and past events
	Sharing moments of joy and fun
	Displaying compassion and care through physical closeness, facial, verbal and bodily expressions and gestures

have fun, making bubbles with her milk and playing with her food. When she initiated such interactions, the side mates usually followed her initiative, leading to shared moments of fun and joy around the lunch table.

After lunch, John would often head for the sofa in order to look at books while waiting for naptime, an interest he shared with Jack. As noted previously, Jack was eager to interact with John, but John was not that eager to engage in interactions with Jack.

Jack and John have found a picture book with text in Arabic and English. Together on the sofa, they turned to the pictures of cars and vehicles.

Jack points at a racing car:

'Look, look! I drove, drove that car.'

John:

'I drove the tractor.'

Jack, pointing at the racing car:

'You drove that one?'

John frowns and points again at the tractor:

'No, that one!'

Jack:

'But, you and I, we drove, the racing car!' He smiles and claps his hands. John frowns again and shakes his head firmly.

Jack continues to engage with John, with an insistent tone and tries to get eye contact:

'Me, me and you, we drove the racing car?'

The interaction illustrated in this small story is interpreted as Jack suggesting a mutual or similar bond and trying to engage John in a shared experience or history: the driving of the same car. John, meanwhile, used verbal, facial and bodily expressions to reject Jack's suggestions.

Summary of the findings

The conceptualisations of *membership* and *shared emotional connection* proved to be relevant points of departure for exploring the two-year-olds' negotiations of belonging and togetherness. As outlined previously, membership is understood as closely related to the concept of belonging, and shared emotional connection is perceived as related to the concept of togetherness. This understanding, drawing on Koivula and Hännikäinen (2017) and McMillan and Chavis (1986), is the basis for the systematization of the findings [Table 1] and the subsequent discussion.

Discussion

Nowadays, young children's lives are, to a large extent, lived within peer groups in kindergartens, and peers have a large influence on children from early years onwards (Stratigos,

Bradley, and Sumsion 2014, 181). The findings revealed that the two-year-olds' negotiations of belonging and togetherness were fleeting and ongoing, occurring as child-initiated parallel activities within the activity settings facilitated by the institutional practices. A finding that stood out, beyond the operationalisations of *membership* and *shared emotional connection*, was the amount of affection and helpfulness the children displayed towards each other. Fleeting moments of caring and sharing (Koivula and Hännikäinen 2017) characterised the social interactions between the two-year-olds.

The fundamental need to belong can result in the rejection and exclusion of others (Stratigos, Bradley, and Sumsion 2014). Exclusion was not a major focus in this study; however, issues of how exclusion operates between two-year-olds emerged as highly topical for further research. Struggles of boundaries, and negotiations of being part, were observed as being ongoing. The observed boundaries were linked to patterns of age and size, and of being best friends or not. Symbols such as having a teddy bear or wearing a certain colour on clothes or shoes, and rituals such as inviting to birthday or threatening not to invite, were evident in the two-year-olds' negotiations of membership and hierarchies. Löfdahl and Häggglund (2012) stated that children's meaning making in peer groups was related to social hierarchies, friendships and popularity. Such features applied already among the very young children in this study, as some of the two-year-olds' negotiations revolved around finding a place in a hierarchy, displaying membership and drawing boundaries, while others negotiated togetherness by emphasising mutual bonds and sharing joint experiences.

The young children's negotiations of belonging and togetherness were influenced by the peer culture within the group. Bringing belongings from home to kindergarten is a topic for debate in early childhood settings and is often strictly controlled by norms or rules (Wastell and Degotardi 2017, 44). However, the staff in this young children's group allowed the two-year-olds to bring belongings from home, and this constituted an important feature of the peer culture during the study period. Although this institutional practice was a recognition of the significance of such belongings for each individual child (Wastell and Degotardi 2017), it appeared that, for the individual child who did *not* bring such belongings, this feature of the peer culture was a recurring source of frustration and perhaps a perception of being unable to apply the right symbol to access the desired community. In line with the findings of Singer and de Haan (2010), this study did not reveal any differences along ethnic or cultural lines in the two-year-old's behaviour, when it came to their negotiations of belonging and togetherness. However, the findings indicated that what distinguished the two-year-old's negotiations, depended on the features of the peer culture, which included the application of hierarchies and symbol systems. This calls for awareness among kindergarten teachers in order to secure inclusive practices for young children in diverse early childhood settings. Nutbrown and Clough (2009) have emphasised young children's interest in 'difference', and the importance of practitioners making 'difference' positive, in order to ensure children's sense of having a place in the peer community. The findings in the present study suggest that an awareness of differences when it comes to young children's opportunities to be able to apply the 'right' symbols to negotiate membership to a desired community, may be especially important among very young children in diverse early childhood settings. Differences in parental situations, sociocultural aspects or economy could influence the kinds of belongings that are

brought to kindergarten and impact the young children's individual perceptions of being part of the community.

Furthermore, just as certain specific symbols such as teddy bears and colour on clothes, and rituals such as inviting, or threatening not to invite to birthday celebrations, were features in the peer culture in this particular young children's group, other features would characterise the peer culture in other two-year-old peer groups. What appears crucial, is recognising the power and importance that such peer culture features hold for each individual child already at a very young age, when it comes to negotiations of belonging and togetherness in diverse peer groups.

Notes

1. Issues of children's consent and dissent are discussed in the research ethics section.
2. To safeguard the children's privacy, this information has been anonymised and modified so that they are not recognisable.

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