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“This friend was nice”: Young children’s negotiation of social relationships in and through interactions with (play) objects

Magnus Karlsson^{a,*}, Nicola Nasi^b^a University of Gothenburg, Institutionen för Pedagogik, Kommunikation och Lärande, Läroverksgatan 15, 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden^b University of Bologna, Via Filippo Re, 6, 40126 Bologna, Italy

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores children’s deployment of objects in negotiating social relationships during peer play. Drawing from video-ethnographic research in a Swedish preschool, this study builds on insights from a cultural-historical perspective on children’s learning and development, which is integrated with a multimodal interactional perspective on human social action. Specifically, the article analyzes an extended sequence of play (inter)actions with objects among children aged 5, focusing on how children interact not only with other humans, but (with)in a material culture and environment. As the analysis illustrates, children ingeniously transform and use material (play) objects, including their positioning in the play space, to index affiliative or disaffiliative stances toward playmates. It is argued that children’s local deployment of objects is germane to children’s negotiation of their friendship relationships and is further related to the social hierarchy of the peer group, which is (re-)negotiated on a turn-by-turn basis. The practices under scrutiny are also relevant and an example of children’s acquisition of various social skills: by locally playing with objects, children refine interactional strategies that allow them to competently manage their social bonds and networks in preschool.

1. Introduction

In the pre-school, children spend a significant part of the day in interaction with other children, engaging with them in multifarious activities. A central pursuit is *peer play*, an activity which is often mediated and interactionally shaped by the use of various *material artefacts* such as play objects. The centrality of objects in children’s play and early life worlds has brought scholars from various disciplines to focus on the material aspects of children’s mutual engagement (see [Bateman & Church, 2017](#); [Pellegrini, 2013](#), for overviews). Research focused on children has been primarily carried out within developmental psychology, stemming from the work of Jean Piaget. If Piaget focused on individual children’s developing cognition in relation to their sensory–motor interactions with objects, recent developmental research has stressed the social nature of children’s use and play with objects. For instance, contemporary developmental psychologists associate the deployment of objects with specific social actions: “Children use objects as symbols for fundamentally the same reason they use linguistic symbols: to share attention with and to communicate with other persons” ([Striano, Tomasello, & Rochat, 2001](#), p. 453). However, as stated by [Pellegrini \(2013\)](#), despite the centrality of objects in the developmental literature, there is still little descriptive information on “the varied ways children use objects in their natural habitats” (p. 815).

Research from a cultural-historical perspective has contested this focus on cognitive processes and children’s developing symbolic

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: magnus.karlsson@gu.se (M. Karlsson), nicola.nasi3@unibo.it (N. Nasi).

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representations of objects, considering instead context-specific social interactions and foregrounding children's perspective and experiences. Scholars within this milieu consider children's play and development as strictly intertwined with the sociocultural environments in which they take place and stress their being mediated by various semiotic systems (Ridgway, Quiñones, & Li, 2015, 2020; Vygotsky, 1966). This substantial body of research on children and their socio-cultural environment has also considered the material features of children's engagement with other people (e.g., McGregor, 2004). Nevertheless, these studies have not analyzed in detail children's interactional deployment of the material features of a specific environment (see Section 2.1.1). In this regard, studies in the cultural-historical tradition have partly neglected the role of objects and materiality in children's negotiation of a certain play environment and social organization. Recently, research on language and social interaction has considered children's interaction with and within a 'material culture' (Streeck, 1996, p. 366), including children's use of material artefacts in play interactions. These analyses have highlighted the social practices through which young children (learn to) deploy objects to engage each other and adults in multifarious social and communicative projects (see among others Bateman & Church, 2017; Kidwell & Zimmerman, 2007; Strid & Cekaitė, 2022; Zotevska, Cekaitė, & Evaldsson, 2021). This article is inscribed in this latter stream of research and broadens its empirical basis by illustrating a perspicuous case of the entanglement between objects, social actions, and children's peer relationships, examining in detail children's (multimodal) deployments of objects to negotiate their social relationships in play interactions.

The study is based on video-ethnographic research in a Swedish preschool and considers peer interactions among five-year-old children. The analytical focus is on children's local and multimodal deployment of (play) objects and their relevance to children's negotiation of their social bonds and affiliations in preschool. As illustrated by previous studies, children's relationships both preexist the local interaction *and* are re-constructed and negotiated on a moment-by-moment basis through various resources (Bateman, 2012; Goodwin, 2006; Karlsson, Hjärne, & Evaldsson, 2017; Nasi, 2022a). This analysis focuses on the latter (i.e., on children's practices to locally re-do their social organization). Specifically, the analysis will illustrate how children deploy objects and their local positioning in the play space to display affiliative or disaffiliative stances toward their classmates, thereby negotiating their respective positions and relations in the peer group, both in dyadic and multiparty interactions.

Setting out from the research gaps outlined above, the study addresses the following research questions: How do children mobilize objects to negotiate their social relationships and positions within moment-by-moment interactions during peer play? What is the relevance of these object-centered and -mediated practices for children's acquisition of social skills in preschool?

2. A cultural-historical perspective on children's development and learning

The present study adopts an integrative framework that sets out from a cultural-historical perspective on children's play and development (Hedegaard, 2009; Ridgway et al., 2015; Vygotsky, 1966), and combines it with a theoretical and analytical attention to the multimodal, i.e., material and embodied features of human social action (Goodwin, 2018; Streeck, 1996). Thus, our approach amounts to a perspective that focuses on how human beings (e.g., children) interact not only with other human beings, but also with (and within) a material world which represents a crucial part of their socio-cultural environment (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996).

Since the revival of Vygotsky's work in the 1980s (see Wertsch, 1985), there have been several studies that took up his legacy to analyze the interrelatedness between children's development and the sociocultural context in which it takes place. These studies have convincingly illustrated the centrality of a certain socio-historical, cultural, linguistic, and interpersonal environment for children's acquisition of specific skills (see Daniels, Cole, & Wertsch, 2007 for an overview). Arguably, developmental processes happen in first instance "right before one's eyes" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 61): by interacting with more competent adults and peers, as well as with various cultural artefacts, children acquire a kind of knowledge that it is relative to the pursuance of specific social actions and bound to the sociocultural and material environment in which the socialization process unfolds.

Notably, competent peers might also actively 'shepherd' other children through the famous zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), introducing them to the expected ways of acting in a certain social context (see Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2012). Through various multimodal resources, children socialize each other into shared norms, values, routinary practices, and beliefs that come to constitute their local peer culture (Corsaro, 2018). Children are thus *active agents* of their own socialization and learning processes, creatively using various cultural resources for their own purposes, thereby influencing, and shaping their learning trajectories and social life worlds (Corsaro, 2003; Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998). Broadly, what children learn is strictly intertwined with the social-contextual demands of the culture and social organization of the peer group, i.e., with local peer relationships and hierarchies (Kyratzis, 2004). Children's peer interactions can here be seen as a central locus for learning (Kyratzis & Jean Johnson, 2017), and a "double opportunity space", since they allow both children's sociolinguistic development and children's co-construction of their social relationships and organization (Blum-Kulka, Huck-Taglicht, & Avni, 2004). These two dimensions (children's development and their social relationships) reciprocally influence each other, and the study of "a child's developing relationships and friendships in the context of social interaction provides valuable insights into learning and development" (Adams & Quinones, 2020, p. 11). But how do children manage their social relationships in the peer group?

A central device to play out peer relationships are local *affective stances*, which include "mood, attitude, feeling and disposition, as well as degrees of emotional intensity vis-à-vis some focus of concern" (Ochs, 1996, p. 410). Children might format their social actions to index specific affiliative or disaffiliative stances toward their peers, using language and various semiotic resources (see Lindström & Sorjonen, 2012, for an overview). Through these various practices, children co-construct their local identities and steadily re-negotiate their emerging social relationships and the local organization of the peer group (Goodwin, 2006). For example, young preschool children might use *verbal resources* (such as collective pro-terms such as 'we' and 'us'; Bateman, 2012) to display affiliation with peers, as well as their *bodies* (forming units of embodied alignment, moving and walking in close proximity, e.g., Evaldsson & Karlsson, 2020) to display friendship alliances. Notably, these practices are relevant for children's learning and development, as children also acquire a

certain knowledge of how specific resources can be effectively deployed to display affective alignments or index an oppositional stance (Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2012). Children co-construct their social relationships and negotiate how they stand vis-a-vis each other in a variety of social contexts and activities, which are also bound with relationship categories (*ibid.*, 366). Among these activities, *play* has been shown to be a central venue for children's negotiation of their social organization and relationships within the peer group (see Corsaro, 2018; Winther-Lindqvist, 2009).

2.1. Children's play and the social organization of the peer group

During their everyday peer interactions, children are deploying the cultural and material resources of the environment to engage in collective play (see Ridgway et al., 2015; Sawyer, 1997; Schousboe & Winther-Lindqvist, 2013; Schwartzman, 1978). These resources are creatively appropriated and transformed through what has been called an act of "agentic imagination" (Ridgway et al., 2020; see also Vygotsky, 1966 and his definition of play as "imagination in action", p. 3): children steadily co-construct and re-negotiate collective imaginary situations that shape and regulate their concerted playful actions (El'konin & Vygotsky, 2001). Clearly, these imaginary situations are strictly bound to children's sociocultural environment, as children draws from cultural resources, they are somehow familiar with (van Oers, 2013). For example, during pretend play, children invoke, comment on, re-interpret, and gradually approximate adults' social categories and roles, creatively reproducing categories such as gender, profession, and age etc. (Andersen, 2005; Cobb-Moore, Danby, & Farrell, 2009; Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2012).

This creative appropriation is significant in relation to learning and development: through play, children gradually make sense of their local environment and of expected ways of acting with the other people that populates it (Bodrova, Leong, Germeroth, & Day-Hess, 2019; Vygotsky, 1966). In this regard, play can be seen as a drive for development and a perspicuous locus for the acquisition of various sociolinguistic and cultural competences (see Corsaro, 2018; Fleeer, 2014). Through play children might increase their metalinguistic awareness and gradually expand their interactional repertoire (Bruner, Jolly, & Sylva, 1976; Cekaitė & Aronsson, 2004), becoming increasingly adept at using specific resources to achieve their social and communicative aims. These social competences are also relevant to children's gradual (language) socialization to the expectations of a certain social context, as children's imaginary situation and roles usually follow rules of conduct which are bound to the broader sociocultural environment (Vadeboncoeur, 2017; Vygotsky, 1966). Notably, children continuously negotiate and re-construct these local rules, making them relevant according to their various social purposes (Cobb-Moore et al., 2009; Karlsson et al., 2017; Nasi, 2022a, 2022b; Winther-Lindqvist, 2009). At school, these local conceptions of right and wrong are crucial to children's socialization to morally and culturally appropriate ways of behaving in the classroom, possibly favoring children's fulfillment of the expectations of formal schooling (Eggum-Wilkens et al., 2014; see also Li, Ridgway, & Quinones, 2019).

The gradual acquisition of appropriate ways of behaving also regards peer relationships, as children creatively interpret and reproduce adult norms and relations (Corsaro, 2018; Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2012) that establish the appropriate ways of socially engaging with other children (e.g., norms prohibiting acts of violence or exclusion; see Cobb-Moore et al., 2009; see also the analysis in the present article). Broadly, through play children develop an increasing awareness of the perspective of the Other, possibly learning strategies to display affiliation and share real or imagined local meanings (Gagnon et al., 2014; Quiñones, Li, & Ridgway, 2017). Through the accumulative organization of single interactional episodes (Goodwin, 2018), children develop a shared history and gradually build their mutual relationships in the peer group (Winther-Lindqvist, 2013). Notably, the local negotiation of peer relationships during play is not free of power asymmetries (see Evaldsson & Tellgren, 2009) as children might assume local positions of dominance and subordination in relation to their varying degrees of control of the current play activity (Goodwin, 2006; Winther-Lindqvist, 2009).

As mentioned above, children's co-construction of the play frame and of their peer relationships might draw from various resources, including the *material* features of the local environment. Again, Vygotsky was among the first scholars to point at the role of materiality in children's development, when he maintained that the process of gradual introduction to a certain sociocultural environment, thinking and activity is necessarily *mediated* by various semiotic systems (Vygotsky, 2012 [1934]). This mediation regards different cultural resources: even though his primary focus was undoubtedly language, his appraisal of the category of 'cultural artefacts' also included material objects (e.g., maps and diagrams; see Wertsch & Rupert, 1993).

2.1.1. The material features of children's play

Setting out from Vygotsky's insight, a relatively extensive milieu of studies has focused on formal educational settings to consider how specific material environments provide affordances for children's engagement and development (see among others, McGregor, 2004; Roehl, 2012). This focus on the material features of children's sociocultural environment also included objects and their use during play situations. Broadly, play objects are a resource for collaborative play and might be used according to both their 'real' or imaginary meaning (Danby, Davidson, Theobald, Houen, & Thorpe, 2017; Fleeer, 2014; Vygotsky, 1966). As early as at 12 months of age, children start to ascribe new meanings to objects beyond their immediate, 'functional' use (Pellegrini, 2013). In this regard, (play) objects are among the material features that allow children to co-construct a specific imaginary play frame (Sawyer, 1997). Nevertheless, the affordances, character and role of specific objects are seldom considered in research on children's peer play (Cheng & Johnson, 2010). For example, Sun, Chen, and Yan-Ling (2020) convincingly analyzed children's construction of rules during peer play with building blocks. However, they did not attend to the role of the material environments in enabling specific courses of action, i.e., to children's creative deployment of the features of the building blocks. Also, in the analyses presented in Fleeer (2014; e.g., p. 79), objects and the material environment of children's play are noted, but not extensively analyzed. In this regard, studies in the cultural-historical tradition have partly neglected the role of objects and of their material features in children's negotiation of a certain play

environment and social organization. This “restricted analytical geography” (Goodwin, 2011, p. 184) risks missing the key role of objects and their material affordances in the conduct of children’s (play) activities and relationships.

Recognizing the centrality of the material environment in human conduct and an analytical imbalance toward *human* actants, research in socio-materiality has underlined the role of ‘matter’ in shaping human praxis. Maintaining that material artefacts set constraints on human action and even suggest some courses of action over others (see Akrich & Latour, 1992; Caronia & Cooren, 2014), this milieu of studies has outlined the features of an analytical approach that is inclusive of human and non-human actants (sometimes theorized as ‘flat ontology’). This focus on materiality has also been directed toward educational issues (Fenwick, Edwards, & Sawchuk, 2011; see also Cattaruzza, Ligorio, & Iannaccone, 2019) and children’s practices, highlighting the ‘active’ role of the material environment in children’s development and lives (Caronia & Colla, 2021; Kraftl & Horton, 2018; Prout, 2019; Rautio, 2016). These studies conceive material artefacts as having agency in themselves and place them at the center of the analytical stage as primary foci. In this article, we adopt an approach that similarly considers the material features of children’s environment and interactions, but still focuses on *children* as the agentive actors that ingeniously deploy local resources to achieve their multifarious social aims (Cobb-Moore, Danby, & Farrell, 2010; Danby et al., 2017). Specifically, we focus on children’s deployment of verbal, embodied, and material resources that are sequentially and simultaneously juxtaposed and which mutually elaborate on each other, allowing actors (children) to build relevant action within a dynamic, dialogic and changing interactional field (Goodwin, 2011, 2018).

2.1.2. A multimodal perspective on children’s playful use of objects

Within social interaction studies, several authors have focused on children’s object-mediated play interactions, showing that objects (real or imagined) are not just played with, but rather used as situated resources for various purposes (Danby et al., 2017). In line with previous literature, these studies have illustrated that children might use objects and play space “to build mutual and pretend understanding” (Björk-Willén, 2021, p. 133) in the process of constructing and engaging in pretend play (see also Sawyer, 1997). Notably, the multimodal analysis of children’s interactions allowed to highlight the various resources that can be mobilized to attach an imaginary meaning to a specific object: for example, Danby et al. (2017) have illustrated how children can use specific sounds (from a computer game) to transform a plastic car into a pretend gun (even though the object ‘in itself’ was not even remotely designed as a gun). Apart from that, objects might be deployed and used as resources to initiate interaction with other peers (Bateman & Church, 2017; Strid & Cekaité, 2022) as well as to control peer access to established play groups (Cobb-Moore et al., 2010; Evaldsson & Karlsson, 2020; Houen & Danby, 2020).

Broadly, children often use (imaginary) objects in relation to their emerging and ongoing relationship with peers, i.e., as “tools [...] to manipulate the actions and involvement of peers.” (Theobald, 2022, p. 374). Various material artefacts can be both used to display affiliation and initiate a play interaction, as well as to exclude others and build local asymmetries. As regards the latter, conflictual relationships might be bound to a claimed exclusive ownership, as objects are often considered a highly valued *personal* property (Allen, 1995; Cobb-Moore et al., 2009). For instance, research on siblings has shown how objects are drawn upon in relation to embodied conflicts and status differentiation (Morito, 2021; Zotevska et al., 2021). Zotevska et al. (2021) showed that an approach focused on materiality can highlight the multimodal configurations of peer conflict, which often revolve around ownership of and access to desired objects. In a similar fashion, Morito (2021) explored the ways in which older siblings attempt to establish status through differentiating the values of contested objects, thereby establishing unequal relationships. The study shows that, by drawing on the specific affordances of objects, children organize the interactional sequence so as to construct specific social orders that can co-exist with the adult one.

Notably, these negotiations of the local peer hierarchy might revolve around what is perceived and constructed as appropriate or inappropriate in relation to both common sense and pretend understandings of specific objects and the material environment (Björk-Willén, 2021; Cobb-Moore et al., 2009; Evaldsson & Karlsson, 2020; Houen & Danby, 2020). For example, multimodal interactional studies on peer play have shown that children might attempt to achieve a powerful position, and limit the full access from certain peers, by sanctioning improper use of materials (Houen & Danby, 2020), or by creating (arbitrary) rules in relation to objects used within the current play frame (Cobb-Moore et al., 2009). This interactional process of controlling others and forming inclusive/exclusive relationships can also involve the *transformation* of objects. Evaldsson and Karlsson (2020) have illustrated how two girls utilize assembled multimodal resources (talk, body and placing of objects) to transform a natural object in the immediate surround (a stump) into a culturally relevant resource, i.e., a boundary marker (Goffman, 1971). This transformation enables the girls to create a play territory while simultaneously marking their dyadic relationship and the exclusion of a third girl.

Overall, the studies in this research milieu have underlined the role of objects in children’s co-construction of the social structure of their play worlds and relationships. However, further multimodal analyses of the entanglement between interacting bodies and objects are needed. In comparison to the attention devoted to the verbal and embodied features of children’s interaction, previous interactional research has engaged to a lesser degree with materiality (Zotevska et al., 2021). Furthermore, previous interactional research has not yet illustrated the role of objects in children’s displays of affective stances (but see Strid & Cekaité, 2022) and, thereby, in the negotiation of their local positionings, (mis)alignments, and peer relationships in the preschool.

More broadly, the analysis presented in this article can integrate previous studies from a cultural-historical perspective, which have not considered in detail children’s local deployment of material resources to construct a certain play frame and social organization. In this regard, a perspective focused on the multimodal sequential analysis of children’s agentive use of and orientation toward objects in interaction, can add new insights into the role of a certain material environment in children’s peer play, relationships, and development.

3. Methods

3.1. Data and participants

The selected data were drawn from a video-ethnographic study that involved a Swedish preschool over a period of six months (Karlsson, 2018). The school is placed outside of a middle-sized city and mostly enrol middle-class children with a Swedish background. Specifically, the study focused on a group of 25 children, who ranged in age from 4.5 to 5.5 years, and three preschool teachers. These children attended the pre-school from the morning (ca. 8–9) until the late afternoon (ca. 16–17). The ethnographic fieldwork started with an initial period of observation, in which the researcher (Author 1) got acquainted with children, teachers and their everyday routines (Cobb-Moore et al., 2009). During this initial period, the researcher constantly interacted with teachers and children in order to acquire as much background knowledge as possible (Dupret, 2011). Through these daily interactions, he also managed to gradually become a familiar figure in the pre-school environment and to be accorded the possibility to access a various range of activities in children's social worlds and to video record for a period of time. After the first period of observation, the researcher started thus to video-record everyday activities. Consistently with the rather inductive approach of ethnography and conversation analysis (Duranti, 1997; Maynard, 2006), the video-recordings did not have a specific analytical focus, as the researcher was interested in collecting the relevant phenomena that could be observed in the field. Thus, he documented children's participation in various routine activities, such as play, mealtimes, circle time, and other pedagogical activities. These activities were video-recorded according to two main strategies. In some cases, a small camera was simply placed near the children's activities (as in the present analysis). In other cases, the researcher followed relevant action with a handheld video camera. During the video-recording, the researcher was a non-participating bystander for most of the time, adopting though shifting roles (friend, researcher, adult etc) according to the different situations (Cekaité & Goodwin, 2021). A total of 30 h of video data were collected. These data were transcribed and analyzed during various data sessions with both the local research team and international colleagues.

All parents gave their informed consent, and all ethical standards were strictly followed, both in the recording process and in the use of data for publication. Notably, children were repeatedly reminded that they could, at any time, decline to be video-recorded if they did not feel comfortable, seeing consent as an ongoing negotiable issue. To ensure confidentiality, children's faces are blurred, and all names are in the article are pseudonyms.

3.2. Analytical approach

The analysis is informed by a multimodal interactional approach developed by Goodwin (2018) and Mondada (2019). The focus is on how actors, through coordinated interactional work within local situations, build social action by utilizing and combining different communicative resources that mutually elaborate on each other. These multimodal interactional resources include talk, bodily posture, gaze, pointing, orientations to, and using and manipulations of objects, whereby no resource is a-priori prioritized over another (Mondada, 2019, p. 50). Regarding *objects* in particular, they are not conceptualized as having agency in themselves: they are rather seen as elements and resources utilized by participants, whose features are made relevant within the specific actions that mobilizes them, and the temporal unfolding of a distinct activity (Goodwin, 2010; Nishizaka, 2019), including their local positioning in relation to other objects (including bodies) and the larger projects of which they are part (see also Hazel & Mortensen, 2014; Nevile, Haddington, Heinemann, & Rauniomaa, 2014). Therefore, in line with Goodwin (2018), "things" never exist as isolated entities but are always part of human's dealings with the world i.e., they get their specific characteristics "from how they are used as resources to build relevant action by an actor positioned in an already present, inhabited world" (p. 266). The analysis also draws from the conversation analytical attention to (a) how social actions are sequentially and temporally organized and (b) how participants manage to ratify, resist, and recreate a taken-for-granted social and moral order in and through social interaction (Mondada, 2018).

This focus on the micro-details of participants' multimodal interactions is integrated with the use of ethnographic knowledge. This kind of background knowledge is useful to consider entities of the broader 'context', which might be relevant to the local unfolding of interaction even if they are not visible on the video (Duranti, 1997, Maynard, 2006). For instance, children's peer relationships and social hierarchy are inherently *diachronic* phenomena, even though they result from the accumulative organization of single interactional episodes (see above). In this regard, ethnographic knowledge allowed us to consider children's pre-existing relationships, critically appraising how children's interactional 'history' and the arrangement of groupings in the peer group (Evaldsson, 2021) potentially affected the local sequence that is here analyzed (see Wang, Kajamies, Hurme, & Palonen, 2021, for an approach that make use of sociometric ratings in order to consider how children's previous relationships bear on their local interactions).

3.3. Single-case analysis

The analysis is based on a single extended play sequence between three boys. Single-case analyses rely on a process in which particular sequences of interaction come to be of interest to the analyst as tokens of phenomena that seem relevant to the participants themselves. The aim is to track "the various conversational strategies and devices which inform and drive [the] production [of these phenomena]" (Hutchby & Woofitt, 2008, p. 14). The segment under scrutiny is about 40 min in duration and consists of four extracts that are presented in consecutive order. To capture the sequentiality and simultaneity of talk and bodily conduct within their socio-material environment, the selected video recordings were transcribed with the conventions of multimodal conversation analysis (Jefferson, 2004; Mondada, 2018). Stills from the video are included in the transcript to show the holistic composition in which talk is produced (Mondada, 2018, p. 90). Arrows were added to the pictures to highlight the shifting alignments between the participants'

bodies (and relevant objects). A double-headed arrow marks a congruent alignment (or affiliation) and a horizontal arrow with a vertical line at the end toward the other marks an oppositional alignment (cf. Goodwin, Cekaité, & Goodwin, 2012). We also use ~ as a symbol to mark affective/emphatic stress/intonation and some abbreviations such as gz (=gaze), twds (=towards) etc.

4. Analysis

4.1. The episode under investigation

In this preschool, the children were afforded free-time play on a daily basis. This activity provided children with opportunities to engage with peers, objects, and spaces afforded by the setting, often without adult intervention. It was thus a perspicuous moment for the children to negotiate their own social order (see Cobb-Moore et al., 2009).

Broadly, children often used objects during their play interactions. These objects were rather disparate and ranged from plastic figures (dinosaurs, knights, superheroes, animals, dolls and so on) to construction materials (small bricks, pieces of woods). Notably, children possibly attached different values to the objects (i.e., they possibly considered some plastic figures as more ‘powerful’ than others, e.g., a knight vs. a dinosaur). However, we could not discern consistent patterns of relationships between objects, neither from the ethnographic fieldnotes nor from the videos. Children did not orient systematically to some objects as more powerful than others, and they never commented on the ‘power hierarchy’ between objects. Thus, in the analysis we adopt an agnostic stance in relation to the characteristics that children assign to objects, limiting our analytical focus to what is observable and oriented to by the participants in the video.

In the sequence under scrutiny, the children played with small bricks (Duplo¹) and plastic figures (dinosaurs, actions figures) in one of the larger rooms of the preschool (see Fig. 1). Two boys are at the center of the analytical focus: Eric and Otto. A third child, Ralph, joins the play session after few minutes (all children are aged 5). From the data collected during the ethnographic fieldwork, we know that Eric and Otto have a relatively stable friendship relationship in the pre-school: they play quite often together and are seldom involved in conflict; when involved in conflicts these are often mitigated and resolved through negotiations in order to continue play. As regards Ralph, he sometimes play with Otto separately but not on a regular basis and for prolonged play sessions. On the contrary, Ralph and Eric play seldom together and are at times involved in conflict; in a couple of occasions, these conflicts evolved into a physical dispute.

At the beginning of this play session, Otto and Eric are playing in the same area. The two boys continuously shift between self-engagement with objects and dyadic play involving those same objects. In their dyadic interactions, as will be shown, the two children deploy and transform objects to index affiliative or disaffiliative stances, thereby negotiating their social relationship and positions vis-a-vis each other (Sections 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4). At the end of the sequence, Ralph uses a play-relevant object in an attempt to join Otto and Eric and extend the dyadic into a triadic participation framework (Section 4.5.).

4.2. Placing and animating objects to recruit others while negotiating the play frame

Before the sequence shown in Ex. 1, the two children have been playing alone, but in close proximity, for some minutes. Eric has constructed a castle with small bricks, claiming it as his own (“it was my castle”) (not shown in excerpt; see Fig. 1). As we join the



Fig. 1.

¹ Duplo materials can be described as large Lego bricks

interaction, Eric comes carrying an action figure, which is added to the scene. Ex. 1 shows Eric's deployment of objects to recruit his classmate and his subsequent renegotiation of the boundaries of the play space (centered on claimed objects) after Otto's untoward action.

Excerpt 1 (8:30)

- 1 **ERIC** HÄR↑ va +en RI↑-dda-re som v↑a-ktade här+
 HERE was A KNI-ght who gua-rded here
 eric >>comes walking, carries an action figure-->
 otto +moves gz twd E +lowers gz
- 2 **(+2.5)**
 eric *sits down, places obj in front of building
 otto +looks at object-->
- 3 **ERIC** se ↑upp *för den här ri-↑ddaren* bakom *#dö-rren
 watch out for this kni-ght here behind the door
 eric *points twds door *... touches door,,,*
 fig#2
- 
- 4 **OTTO** +*~HÄ↑::#R~
 HE::RE
 otto +puts dinosaur in front of knight, rotates on it-->
 eric *rises
 fig#3
- 
- 5 **ERIC** xxx (*0.5)
 eric *monitors Otto's play actions-->
- 6 **OTTO** jag slog +med *mina taggiga+
 I hit with my spiky
 otto -->+taps on spikes+
 eric -->*sits down, monitors Otto's play actions-->
- 7 **ERIC** ~nä:↑~
 no:
- 8 **OTTO** +dom här+
 these ones
 otto +taps on spikes+
- 9 **OTTO** +EH*[EH EH
 otto +rotates on dinosaur (i.e., "hits" against the knight)-->
 eric *places brick on building, moves gz twds dinosaur-->
- 10 **ERIC** [DU ~F↑Å:R# INTE~+
 [YOU MA:Y NOT
 otto -->+stops actions with dinosaur
- 11 **(+2.0) #***
 eric *puts another Duplo brick on building
 otto +withdraws body
 fig#4
- 

Excerpt 1.

At the beginning of the sequence, Eric places an action figure in front of the castle, announcing that it is a knight (line 1). This action, together with his previous description of the construction as a ‘castle,’ relates to what Sacks (1995: 489ff) described as “mapping,” which involves the placing of objects, people, and actions into relevant play categories (‘castle’ and ‘knight’). This activity is often performed at the beginning of a play activity and ‘populates’ a play space with fictional characters through the multimodal characterization of objects (Burdelski & Fukada, 2019). Eric’s arrangement of the play setting can be interpreted as a first attempt to recruit Otto, who starts looking at the knight (line 02). In line 3, Eric adds a directive (*watch out*) together with an environmentally coupled gesture (Goodwin, 2018: 235) to instruct Otto to attend to the specific place that the knight is protecting (see Fig. 2). Overall, Eric’s moves display availability to initiate shared play and seem instrumental to gain Otto’s attention and participation; thus, they can be inscribed in children’s multifarious *recruitment strategies* (Burdelski & Cekaitė, 2022; Stivers & Sidnell, 2016). At the same time, through the category-bound action attached to the object (guarding Eric’s castle), Eric makes the two objects (castle and knight) to belong together, claiming thereby a personal space (Goffman, 1971), or a transactional segment (e.g., Kendon, 1990), that Otto is not supposed to encroach.

As shown, Otto interprets Eric’s actions as an invitation to a pretend fight between a ‘defender’ and a ‘challenger,’ personified by the knight and by Otto’s action figure (a dinosaur, see Fig. 3). This is displayed through his placing of his dinosaur in front of the knight, projecting an upcoming challenge both non-verbally (he rotates the object, line 4, and taps on the spikes, line 6) and verbally (*vis-à-vis hit it with my spiky*, line 6). Here, Otto draws on specific properties of the object (its being ‘spiky’; see Zotevska et al., 2021) that make aggressive play actions relevant.

Eric is closely monitoring Otto’s actions (see lines 5–9) and, after what could be seen as a threat to his action figure (line 6), he issues an emphatic directive to stop the projected action (*no!*, line 7). Nevertheless, Otto simulates an attack toward the knight by rotating his dinosaur in front of the knight while producing ‘hitting’ sounds (line 9). In response, Eric upgrades his directive, formulating a rule (*YOU MAY NOT*, line 10) that indexes a heightened affective stance and constitutes a strong deontic claim regarding the allowed actions within the play frame (see Nasi, 2022b). Otto complies with Eric’s directive as he stops rotating the dinosaur and bodily withdraws from the play space (lines 10–11; see Fig. 4). Thus, in this sequence local asymmetric relations are constructed in interaction, as Eric performs directives and dictates relevant actions within the play space, which are complied with by Otto (notably, this asymmetric relationship will be renegotiated during the episode, see Excerpt 4).

Ex. 1 is an example of how children might use various resources to negotiate the local play frame (Sawyer, 1997), which is in turn constitutive of children’s social relationships. Eric first displays an affiliative stance by recruiting Otto, who then engages in aggressive play and is thus sanctioned. These shifts between different play frames (aggressive vs. collaborative; Goffman, 1974), and different relationships between playmates, are negotiated and displayed through various resources (e.g., verbal directives, prosody, pitch of voice, bodily movements, and monitoring of each other’s actions). These shifts are also accomplished through the local deployment and categorization of *objects*, which are made continuously relevant in relation to their positioning in the play space and to their performed actions. In this regard, the play objects can be seen as proxies for the two children and the different ways of using them as indexes of children’s peer relationships and positions *vis-à-vis* each other. Through the local use of objects, children manage to co-construct and maintain an imaginary frame (Fleer, 2014) that allows their joint peer play and relationship. This recognition becomes particularly evident in the prosecution of the sequence, which is shown in Ex. 2.

4.3. Recategorization of objects to negotiate the play frame and children’s relationships

This sequence was recorded approximately 30 s after Ex. 1 and shows the children’s recategorization of the play objects, which makes relevant a different set of social actions and thus results in more collaborative play. As we saw in Ex. 1, Eric used objects as “markers of space” (Goffman, 1971, p. 42), which in turn made Otto’s actions encroach on a personal ‘territory’. However, as stated by Allen (1995), “any particular object can attain a new symbolic definition by virtue of talk and activity” (p. 353). In our case, the action figure previously labeled as a ‘knight’ is re-categorized as a ‘friend,’ placing the boys’ play objects in a paired relationship of friend-friend.

Excerpt 2 (9:37)

- 1 ERIC DEN HÄR↑ DEN *HÄR↑ KOMPISEN va snäll
 THIS THIS FRIEND was nice
 eric *takes action figure and turns it twds O-->
 otto >>crashes bricks and jumps with object-->
- 2 ERIC ↑HEJ+ # KOMPIS (.) du få:r komma in*+
 HI FRIEND you ma:y enter
 otto -->+places obj in front of action figure, holds it-->
 fig#5



- 3 (*1.0+)
 eric -->*moves on obj, opens door with obj
 otto -->+lifts on obj-->
- 4 OTTO +jag är SÅ: stor
 I am THA:T big
 otto +moves obj twds opening of door-->
- 5 får jag sova här↑ istället +då får jag komma in ↑här+
 I have to sleep here instead then I may enter here
 otto -->+moves obj twds top of building +places it
- 6 +↑a:hh
 otto +makes obj to fall down
- 7 ERIC nej ~där kan man ramla~+
 no there you may fall down
 Otto +moves to the other side of the Duplo building-->
- 8 OTTO +här↑
 here
 otto +places the dinosaur inside the castle
- 9 (1.0)
- 10 ERIC *Ja:↑ där #
 Yea:h there
 eric *Looks at place where Otto puts the obj
 Fig#6



Excerpt 2.

In line 1, Eric re-characterizes his object as a ‘friend’ and ascribes it the category-relevant attribute of being “nice” (Sacks, 1995). Eric’s re-start and high-volume announcement, together with his turning of the object so that it faces Otto (see line 1), are instrumental in requesting Otto’s attention (cf. Goodwin, 1981) and re-engaging him into shared play. In line 2, Eric completes his recruiting

strategy by issuing an explicit invitation to enter his play space with the object (*you may enter*; see also line 3, in which he opens the ‘door’ to the castle). Otto stops his competing activities and puts his dinosaur in front of Eric’s, thereby forming an F-formation between the two objects (Kendon, 1990; line 2). Through these sequentially ordered actions of object categorizations and placing, the two children display a reciprocally affiliative stance and manage to establish a collaborative play frame and a shared space that are exploited in the ensuing sequence.

Otto now approaches the castle with its dinosaur and places it on the top of the building after having announced the impossibility of going through the door (lines 4–5). Eric comments upon Otto’s action (*no there you may fall down*, line 7); in this way, he shows that he cares for Otto’s play object and again indexes an affiliative stance toward his playmate. At the same time, Eric further instructs Otto regarding the appropriate position of his action figure, thereby re-stating his role as the child in charge of deciding appropriate next actions with objects within that play frame. Eric’s superordinate position in the dyadic relationship is also reiterated by his following assessment: Otto places his dinosaur inside the castle, verbally accompanying his action with a kind of request (*here*, line 8), and Eric accepts these moves by assessing them as appropriate (*yeah there*, line 10; see Fig. 6). Thus, as the children construct a shared interactional play space and frame, they continue to negotiate their respective positions of dominance and subordination (see Excerpt 1), which are played out in relation to the action figures and their local positioning in space. Therefore, within a broader frame of affiliation during shared play, children continuously negotiate their respective roles in the group hierarchy (see Winther-Lindqvist, 2009).

4.4. Negotiating the ownership of an object to show affiliation

Ex. 3 was recorded a few minutes after Ex. 2. Otto and Eric have continued playing in proximity. Otto has built a construction and announced that it is “a house” (not shown in excerpt), while Eric further played with and around his castle (see Fig. 1). These two separate play activities are now ‘merged’ (Kim, 2018), as Otto introduces another play object to Eric’s attention, flying with a helicopter toward him (Excerpt 3, line 2). This action sparks a brief negotiation around the ownership of the helicopter. This relates to a common feature of Swedish preschools, where all objects are seen as collective property of the school and must be thus negotiated; usually, the child who is currently using a toy is considered the (momentary) ‘owner’ of the object. The two children display an orientation toward this underlying moral order as they re-characterize certain features of the play object. Specifically, the extract shows children’s negotiation of the ownership of the object and its bearing on children’s social relationships (cf. Houen & Danby, 2020). As we join the interaction, Otto attaches the propeller to the helicopter and announces his plan to “just pass by” (line 1).

Excerpt 3 (13.01)

- 1 OTTO jag ska bara en +helikopter (.) *jag skulle bara gå förbi
I’m just gonna a helicopter I should just pass by
 otto +attaches a propeller on a Duplo helicopter in his hand
 eric >>plays with his building *orients body twds E-->
- 2 OTTO *+ludedu ladedu [ludedu
 otto +Flies with Duplo helicopter twds E-->
 eric *gzs at helicopter-->
- 3 ERIC [det var min KUNG he-likopter*
 [it was my KING he-licopter
 eric -->*lowers gz-->
- 4 *~HE†:J *#MIN KOMPIS~ kung helikopter
 HELLO MY FRIEND king helicopter
 eric *looks at helicopter*lifts on dinosaur to face helicopter-->
 Fig#7
- 
- 5 OTTO Ladedu ladedum (1.0) +nu får du använda den helikoptern +
 ladedu ladedum now you can use that helicopter
 otto -->+places helicopter on Duplo building +moves his body back
- 6 +den bara ramlade där
 It just fell there
 +Looks at helicopter-->
- 7 ERIC *mmm: :
 eric *picks up helicopter, rotates on propeller
 otto +Looks at Eric

Excerpt 3.

After his announcement in line 1, Otto starts to make sounds, simulating the helicopter flying toward Eric's play space (line 2). As he sees Otto's helicopter approaching (line 2), Eric claims its ownership through a possessive pronoun, 'my', in relation to a prior pretend object that he was using (not shown in excerpt) (*it was my king helicopter*, line 3). The use of the past tense signals that this 'fact' cannot be altered (Björk-Willén, 2021, p. 134). In this context, this claim works as a directive that pressures Otto to give the object to its supposedly legitimate owner. However, this initial claim is immediately renegotiated. With a sort of self-repair, Eric lifts his action figure toward the helicopter, and with an inviting tone of voice, greets "the king helicopter" as a friend (*hello my friend king helicopter*, line 4, Fig. 7). By selectively reusing and transforming materials found within his own previous utterance (cf. Goodwin, 2018), Eric builds a new action with a quite different meaning. This transformation recasts a specific feature of the object (i.e., its ownership) and allows the two children to start a sequence of shared play.

Otto keeps moving the helicopter toward Eric's play space until he reaches the 'castle.' Here, he places the helicopter on the building, telling Eric that the object is now available (*now you can use that helicopter*, line 5). This action can be seen as a retrospective comment on Eric's initial claim (see line 3), while being a further display of an affiliative stance between the two children, oriented to cooperative and shared play. Through the local negotiation of object ownership, children manage to engage in reciprocally affiliative stances with the play partner, and to initiate and maintain a session of joint play. Once again, the multimodal membership categorization of an object (Burdelski & Fukada, 2019) places different play objects into a paired relationship (friend-friend) (see line 4) and is used as a resource to negotiate children's peer relationships during play.

4.5. *Managing access: the establishment of a new participation framework through play objects*

Eric and Otto have continued playing together with their objects. Eric has placed a dinosaur on top of Otto's building, and the two have been commenting on its actions. While this happened, another child, Ralph, circulated around the boy's play area (Corsaro, 1979), probably overhearing what the boys were playing and observing their use of dinosaurs. As mentioned above, Ralph and Otto play quite often together, whereas Ralph and Eric are seldom together and are sometimes involved in conflict. As we join the interaction, Ralph finally approaches the two boy's play, carrying a dinosaur in his hands (Excerpt 4, line 1).

Excerpt 4 (21.15)

- 1 ralph >>»Comes walking with a dinosaur in his hand-->
- 2 **RALPH** **Får jag vara me:**↑ »* (0.5) »
Can I joi:n
 ralph -->»Stops between E and O »glances at E
 eric *sits down, leans back
- 3 **ERIC** ~**Ne:**~ #*
No:
 eric *gz down-->
 fig#8
- 
- 04 (*»*2.0)
 eric -->*gzs at O *gz down-->
 ralph »sits down
- 05 **OTTO** **Man kan +»inte bara +*sä:ga att man inte kan va med+*»**
You can not just say you can not join
 otto -->+gzs at E,,,+gz down-----...+Gz twds E-->
 eric -->*puts finger to his mouth, gz at O *gzs down
 ralph »glances twds O »picks up another dinosaur
- 06 **OTTO** *»+då+ får man inte- då då är man inte #sin kompis+
then you don't get-then then you are not your friend
 otto +glances at E +gz down-----...+gz twds E-->
 ralph »puts two dinosaurs together
 eric *Gz down
 Fig#9
- 
- 07 (*2.0)
 eric *Turns around, looks at his building
- 08 **OTTO** **+Du får visst vara med+**
Of course you can join
 otto +looks at Ralph +looks around, leans fwd-->

Excerpt 4.

- 09 **+*Om vi leker »dinosaurier i detta i detta huset *om vi**
If we play dinosaurs in this in this house if we
 otto +picks up a dinosaur, looks twds house then at R-->
 eric *puts Duplo brick on building *looks around-->
 ralph »Looks at the dinosaur Otto is holding
- 10 **ERIC Men?» [+»]+var är min dinosaurie?**
But where is my dinosaur?
 ralph »glances at E »looks at dinosaur on top of building-->
 otto +glances at E +looks at dinosaur on top of building-->
- 11 **OTTO leker [dinosaurier]**
play [dinosaurs]
- 12 **OTTO +Va+ [*sa: du?]**
What [did you say?]
 otto +leans fwd +gzs at E-->
 eric *re-oriens body twds the other two
- 13 **RALPH [»#~DÄR↑ DÄR↑~] +*är din Eric»++**
[THERE THERE] is yours Eric
 ralph »Leans fwd, points with obj---»touches dinosaur-->
 otto -->+looks at dinosaur +gzs at E-->
 eric *leans back *looks at dinosaur-->
 Fig#9



- 14 **OTTO +*Den ligger *fortfarande där+**
It still lies there
 otto +Looks at dinosaur +gzs down
 ralph -->»leans back
 eric *leans fwd *grabs dinosaur
- 15 **OTTO Här var min- [»*här var din pappa**
Here was mine-[here was your daddy
 ralph »leans fwd, places dinosaur inside the building
- 16 **ERIC [#*Whohii::**
 eric *makes the dinosaur to slide down from the top
 Fig#10



Excerpt 4. (continued).

Ralph now stands between Eric and Otto, holding a dinosaur in front of his body (line 2). His body movements, together with the object in his hands, already display his willingness to join and adapt to the ongoing play activity with dinosaurs (cf. Corsaro, 1979). Ralph also explicitly states his intention (*can I join*, line 2) and quickly glances at Eric, seemingly waiting for a response from the child in charge. Ralph's request is a challenge for the two boys, as it might disrupt the play structure and the social organization that they have been developing for a while (Corsaro, 2018, p. 164). Moreover, the access strategy of openly asking to participate is often problematic, as the other children can 'easily' reject it to protect their play space (e.g., Corsaro, 1979). Indeed, Eric shows a certain eagerness to protect the play space and the boys' relationship, as he immediately performs a bald rejection of Ralph's request (~No:~, line 3). Openly resisting Eric's answer, Ralph sits down and moves his gaze toward Otto, thereby orienting to his friend to 'verify' the rejection (line 4). In comparison to Eric, Otto seems more willing to renegotiate the participation framework of the play session. He first gazes at Eric and mildly reproaches him on the basis of the moral norm of the preschool: one cannot say "you can't join" (line 5) (see Evaldsson & Tellgren, 2009). Apart from the institutional order, Otto draws here from the category-bound characteristics of being a (good) friend in the peer group (line 6, see Evaldsson, 2007). By these actions, Otto also indirectly threatens Eric to disrupt their newly established play relationship.

Otto's moves implicitly ratify Ralph's 'uninvited' attempt to get access. Otto also turns to Ralph and directly answers his previous question in line 2 (*of course you can join*, line 8). Otto then picks up his dinosaur and explicitly re-formulates the play frame, thereby orienting to the dinosaur that Ralph holds in his hand and constructing it as 'fitting' through the mapping of the objects into a play-relevant category (*if we play dinosaurs in this house*, line 9; see Sacks, 1995). The play frame is thus re-established, and the play session can start again. Eric, however, cannot find his dinosaur (*but where is mine*, line 10). Here, the absence of the object means the impossibility of taking part in the current play activity. Otto leans forward, showing interest in Eric's concern, and asks him what he just said (line 12), while Ralph points with his own object to where the object (dinosaur) lies so that Eric can join the play (*there there is yours Eric*, line 13). Ralph's pointing is also coupled with talk that is "prosodically embellished to index a heightened affective stance" and redirects Eric's attention toward where his object is (Strid & Cekaité, 2022, p. 33). This, together with Ralph's use of the first name, indexes closeness and is a cue to the overall affiliative character of this move (see the double-headed arrow and lines in line 13, fig. 10). Otto also aligns with this affiliative display by reiterating the position of the object (*it still lies there*, line 14).

Eric picks up his dinosaurs (line 14) and starts to act with his object (sliding down from the roof) as he animates it with a sound. Simultaneously, Ralph leans forward with his dinosaur, and Otto assigns another role to his dinosaur (a 'daddy'; see line 15). These actions 'officially' signal the beginning of play (cf. Sawyer, 1997): the three children resume play in the new embodied participation framework that they managed to interactionally establish (see the circle in Fig. 11). Even though Ralph and Eric displayed mutually disaffiliative stances (i.e., by denying access and by bodily positioning within the play space despite initial rejection) and Otto reproached Eric for his initial rejection, the children eventually managed to act cooperatively and show social affiliation with each other (Enfield, 2013, p. 15).

Ex. 4 shows the children's negotiation of a third party's access to an established play frame and participation framework. This negotiation revolves around various resources. For example, children reproduce institutional rules that regulate peer participation to sanction untoward conduct (see line 5). As was the case in Ex. 1 (*YOU MAY NOT*, line 10), the formulation of the rule is interactionally effective, as it results in the other child's compliance. Apart from these rules of expected behavior, the negotiation of the local participation framework revolves around the local deployment of objects. First, Ralph approaches the play area with a relevant object in his hand, displaying his knowledge of, and respect for, the play frame and his willingness to join. Second, objects are searched for, mapped into relevant play categories through talk (Sacks, 1995) as well as physically placed into the play space to involve all three players in the new, 'extended' play session within a triadic framework.

5. Concluding discussion

Previous research within the cultural-historical tradition has extensively illustrated the role of play in children's development and social relationships. However, despite the fact that objects are often central to children's co-construction of a certain imaginative play frame and storyline, this research milieu has not considered in detail the sequential and temporal organization of children's multi-modal deployment of material artefacts during peer play. Integrating a cultural-historical perspective with an analytical focus on social actions that involve children's use of material artefacts, this study has illustrated the role of objects in children's local negotiation of their evolving social relationships within moment-to-moment social interactions.

Throughout the extended play sequence that was here analyzed, children jointly constructed and negotiated their social relationships and positions vis-a-vis each other in the pre-school context, their interactions and activities being mediated by various socio-material artefacts. In this regard, the sequence can be seen as one of the several episodes that, when added up, concur in gradually constructing a relatively stable friendship relationship (or a relatively stable conflictual relationship) between children. This focus on the interactional details of children's activities is methodologically motivated: in comparison with sociometric studies or methods based on children's post-hoc reporting of their friendship relationships, it allowed us to "directly study processes of social relations in the actual interactions of the child and others" (Goodwin, 2017: 79). Specifically, the analysis has shown how children locally negotiate their social relationship by steadily shifting between affiliative and disaffiliative moves (Enfield, 2013; Lindström & Sorjonen, 2012). This continuous interactional work of indexing social closeness or distance was accomplished through a variety of verbal, embodied, and material resources. For instance, children negotiated, as well as displayed, their social relationships and positionings through *bodily orientations* in space (e.g., by withdrawing the upper body from a classmate, Ex. 1, or by aligning bodies in a triadic participation framework; see Ex. 4, fig. 10) and through *words* (e.g., directives, rule formulations, categorizations of objects into affiliative categories or not; see Ex. 1–2; see below). As regards rule formulations in particular, the analysis shows that children

deployed both institutional and locally-crafted rules as directives to control peer behaviors (see Cobb-Moore et al., 2009). These regulative moves usually obtained compliance (see Ex. 1 and Ex. 4), a recognition that partly contrasts previous literature on rule formulations in the peer group (Nasi, 2022b).

The primary focus of this study, however, is on children's use of *material resources*. As regards objects, the analysis illustrated that children can (a) 'transform' an object by labeling/categorizing it in different ways (e.g., as a 'friend' or not), (b) re-characterize some specific features of an object (e.g., its ownership), (c) perform specific actions with an object (e.g., attacking vs. welcoming), and (d) place and move objects into relevant play spaces, also in relation to other objects (e.g., placing an action figure [a knight] in front of other objects [a castle] to make them belong together, thereby shaping a personal 'territory', i.e. Goffman, 1971). Apart from their role in constructing and maintaining an imaginary play frame, these various practices are relevant to children's local negotiation of their respective positions in the social organization of the peer group. These positions regard both children's friendship and (dis)affiliative relationships and the hierarchical power structure of the peer group (see below and see 'inclusion' and 'power' as children's key concerns in Bateman & Kern, 2022; Kyratzis, 2004; see also Winther-Lindqvist, 2009).

Regarding the former, in and through these practices, children display various affective stances, indexing affiliation or disaffiliation with a playmate (Bateman, 2012). In this regard, the play objects can be seen as proxies of the children themselves, who negotiate their friendship relations and social bonds by (multimodally) deploying them in various ways within the play space. The study further illustrates the close relationship between play and children's negotiation of friendships, as children's participation during play relies on two intersecting levels of identities—the fictive characters/players of the play frame and being a friend in the peer group (Fleer, 2014; Goodwin, 1993; Karlsson et al., 2017; Schwartzman, 1978). The local negotiation of the social organization of the peer group is also visible in children's management of the local participation framework (Goodwin, 2006). For instance, the analysis illustrates how children might recruit a classmate through objects, thereby displaying an affiliative stance and including him/her in the current activity (Ex. 1, 2). Conversely, children can attempt to gain access to an established play situation by approaching the play space with play-relevant objects (Ex. 4). These shifts between solitary, dyadic, and triadic play are negotiated on a turn-by-turn basis and are crucial to children's managing of their social bonds and networks in preschool.

Regarding the latter, children's local use of objects is also relevant to the negotiation of their relative positions of *dominance* and *subordination*. For instance, during play, children are disputing their deontic rights, meant as the rights to decide about rules, social roles, participatory rights, and the structure of the current activity (Björk-Willén, 2021; Cobb-Moore et al., 2009; Nasi, 2022b). In our case, this negotiation revolves around which child can be seen as being in charge of establishing how the play unfolds (e.g., who assesses previous actions, Ex. 1 and 2, or decides who can join, Ex. 4). For example, Eric's deontic claims are at times complied with (as when Otto stops rotating his dinosaur, Ex. 1), at times resisted (as when Otto opposes Eric's rejection of Ralph entering play, by making relevant the objects in his hands, Ex. 4). Thus, through actions involving objects, children also negotiate and transform local asymmetries and the social hierarchy of the peer group. This recognition is consistent with previous studies on children's negotiation of the social hierarchy of the peer group during play (Winther-Lindqvist, 2009) and broadens their empirical focus by illustrating the central role that play objects might assume.

The practices under scrutiny are also relevant for children's acquisition and learning of various *social and communicative skills*. We know from previous literature that play is a crucial arena for children's expansion of their social and interactional competences (see Section 2.1.). This study focused on children's object-mediated participation in a session of play and on their use of various practices to achieve their social goals. These practices enabled them to construct and maintain a play frame, manage local shifts in the participation framework, and ultimately negotiate their social bonds in the peer group. Notably, through these practices, children may expand and refine their social skills; the very fact of using these practices means that children test their efficacy in attaining specific aims. By locally using objects in an attempt to perform various social actions, children acquire knowledge of what 'works' and what 'does not work' in a specific situation. In this case, these aims regard the management of the organization of play but also the co-construction/maintenance/disruption of children's social relationships. For example, children gradually expand their ability to index subtle shifts in affective stances and affiliations, which in turn enables them to competently manage their social networks of group relationships in the preschool. Thus, social or friendship skills "do not arise solely or even primarily as a result of cognitive development or individual reflections" (Corsaro, 2018, p. 169), but they are rather collectively constructed and bound to the local demands of the peer group of "gaining access, building solidarity and mutual trust, protecting the interactive space" (p. 168). Moreover, through the play sequence analyzed, children gradually socialize each other to the appropriate ways of behaving in a culturally and morally shaped sociocultural context. For instance, children make relevant the expected ways of engaging with other children (see Ex. 1, Ex. 2, Ex. 4) and of dealing with material artefacts in terms of ownership and allowed actions (see Ex. 1, 2, 3). In this regard, the analysis integrates previous studies within the cultural-historical tradition by underlining the relevance of children's local use of material artefacts to their developmental trajectories.

The study also contributes to previous research on children's *agency* (see Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2017). Broadly, the emergence of children's agency within a specific material environment is bound to the "reflexive relationships between objects and the social and interactional settings in which they are situated" (Hazel & Mortensen, 2014, p. 12). On the one hand, the characteristics, properties, and observable qualities of the object 'in itself' influence and shape its local use, thereby impacting the courses of action that children will choose (Zotevska et al., 2021). On the other hand, as displayed in the analysis, children might exploit objects creatively and in possibly unpredictable ways, deploying them for various practical and social purposes at the local level. In this respect, the analysis illustrates how children ingeniously use the material features of the local environment to achieve their social aims and negotiate their shifting relationships and participation frameworks (e.g., by setting up a relevant play space or signaling availability to play). Notably, the affordances of specific objects are creatively 'subverted,' in the sense that children exploit them in ways that are apparently opposite to their (adult) commonsense meaning. This is especially visible in the children's recharacterization of the action figures. The

affordances of some specific objects (e.g., the dinosaur and its being 'spiky' vs. the knight and his sword) make relevant aggressive actions between them. Nevertheless, children re-characterize them as 'friends' and manage to display affiliation and establish a collaborative play frame. Thus, this specific case seems to point to the primacy of children's agency in exploiting the material environment in ingenious and sometimes unforeseeable ways. Clearly, these actions are performed within a play frame, which is 'looser' and allows a higher degree of improvisation (see Sawyer, 1997) than task-oriented interactions at school.

Overall, the study underlines how an analytical focus on children's situated interactional use of the material features of their environment can provide relevant insights on children's peer relationships and developmental trajectories. As shown in the analysis, approaching object use from a *multimodal* interactional perspective can deepen our understanding of how young children construct the social organization of the peer group during play – not only through verbal, but also through embodied and material means (see Corsaro, 2018; Strid & Cekaitė, 2022). In this regard, this kind of micro-analytic approach could integrate previous studies in the cultural-historical tradition by focusing on the multimodal resources that children incrementally deploy on a turn-by-turn basis. Specifically, further research could address some of the limitations of the present study. First, future studies could adopt a longitudinal perspective and track the various interactional episodes that gradually come to constitute a certain social relationship between two children. Second, further research could collect more ethnographic information regarding children's and teachers' perceptions and local use of the material environment of the pre-school. For instance, researchers could investigate the value that children (and teachers) assign to the different objects (e.g., they could investigate if a play object is considered particularly powerful or which 'power hierarchy' there is between objects, for example between a knight and a dinosaur). This background knowledge would allow the analyst to consider how these perceived characteristics affect the local unfolding of children's play and to get closer to children's *emic* perspective on what is going on. Broadly, these future studies could enhance our understanding of children's co-construction of their social relationships during play by paying heed to the role of material artefacts in children's everyday activities: it is also through objects that children jointly negotiate, organize and construct the relevant aspects of their social life-world in the peer group.

Appendix

Transcript conventions taken from Mondada (2018)

Talk is transcribed with the conventions developed by Gail Jefferson. Embodied actions are transcribed according to the following conventions developed by Lorenza Mondada.

* * Descriptions of embodied movements are delimited between.

++ Two identical symbols (one symbol per participant's line of action) and are synchronized with corresponding stretches of talk/lapses of time.

*-> The action described continues across subsequent lines

->* until the same symbol is reached.

>> The action described begins before the extract's beginning.

..... Preparation.

———— Full extension of the movement is reached and maintained.

,,,,, Retraction.

eric Participant doing the embodied action is identified when (s)he is not the speaker.

Fig1 The exact moment at which a screen shot has been taken is indicated #with a symbol showing its temporal position within turn at talk/segments of time.

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