Power relations in pre-school children’s play

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ABSTRACT
As few studies have investigated how pre-school children produce and negotiate social positions when powerful positions are claimed, this study explores how 3–5 year-old children construct the social order of peer play when balancing the power game within the interaction. This is a video documented ethnographical case study where the methodology used is inspired by conversation analysis. The findings are that young children, just like older children, can build up and maintain asymmetrical relations during play by jointly co-constructing status positions through their use of language, body space and objects. The subordinates display legitimation of power when their superior playmate utilizes obvious tools to act and maintain their high-status position. However, positioning themselves in power play may imply that they have to endure unpleasant and unfriendly treatment, and this experience provides knowledge of how to dominate others and act from subordinate positions, where some are ‘marginalized and others privileged’.

Introduction
This study is foremost inspired by Goodwin’s extensive previous research (see for example 1990, 2006) on how school children build up their social organization in interactive practices within play activities. Few studies have focused on how pre-school children organize their ongoing play activities, with some notable exceptions (see for example Cobb-Moore, Danby, & Farell, 2009; Danby, 2000; 2005; Kyratzis, Marx, & Wade, 2001). Since there is a lack of knowledge of how 3-5-year-old pre-school children build power relations in peer play this study investigates how they create a hierarchical order when organizing an outdoor free play activity.

This study is based on a theoretical understanding that preschool children’s play is a situated activity where they are involved in a shared project with one another (Goffman, 1967). They participate in a joint social project where their play is collectively produced and changed over time, which means they co-construct the activities, meanings, identities and values together with their peers (Goodwin, 1990). They thereby form their own activity when constructing their social order and rules (Danby, 2002), which implies a development of ‘stable activities or routines, artifacts, values and concerns’ (Corsaro & Eder, 1990).

How the organization of play develops thereby depends on how they verbally and actively behave towards each other when assessing and responding to the actions of others (Cederborg, 2018; Goodwin, 2006). Moreover, they express the moral and social order of the play activity by recognizing satisfactory and unappreciated behaviour and identities (Cederborg, 2018; Evaldsson, 2007; Goodwin, 2007). School children can also exclude a participant when they form an alliance with someone else,
and such a strategy can thus be used as a tool to establish power imbalances with this particular individual (Goodwin, 1990). They can even claim certain roles (Goodwin, 1990; Sheldon, 1996), instruct others how to perform their activities, decide the rules of play and control who has access to it (Evaldsson, 2003, 2004; Goodwin, 1995, 2001). By creating such rules, they govern their peers’ possible actions (Cobb, 2004) and control access to their ‘properties’ (Cobb-Moore et al., 2009). For example, by requiring ownership of materials they change the positions of the ongoing play (Whalen, 1995). Playing and negotiations with peers can result in conflicts (Corsaro, 1979), especially when peers try to get involved in the game. This may be due to their desire to control their space and toys, as well as the ongoing activity (Cobb-Moore et al., 2009; Singer & Hannikainen, 2002).

To achieve varied social relations, children can use different forms of directives where they build both symmetrical and asymmetrical relations during play (Evaldsson, 2004; Goodwin, 2006; Kyritzis et al., 2001). When using directives, they try to indicate to other group members what they should do, for example, by giving permission or performing an action. Such directives can be seen as actions intended to control the other participants. When they try to reduce asymmetry through directives, this indicates an attempt to achieve more equal conditions in play. How directives are performed in an asymmetrical context depends on status in the play group. For example, a person in power can use more aggravated directives compared to subordinate participants, who are more likely to mitigate their requests (Goodwin, 1990). When analyzing assertiveness and deference as control acts in pre-school children’s in-door play, Kyritzis et al. (2001) found that assertive strategies – such as giving direct commands or permissions, disagreeing with others’ decisions, and excluding other children – indicate high ranked positions. Some instances of deferent moves from those children in subordinate positions were asking for permission and seeking and requesting attention. In other words, children who have reached a high hierarchical position are not required to use mitigated actions, such as asking permission or providing warrants for actions, because their dominant position is accepted by the other peers who have placed themselves in a more subordinate position (see, for example, Goodwin, 2006; Griswold, 2007; Kyritzis et al., 2001). Receiving a dominant position can thereby imply that such a participant can act in the play space without being questioned by the other members of the play, even if school girls can dispute claims from those who are trying to receive a superordinate position in relation to them (Goodwin, 2006).

There seems to be a strong relationship between peers’ social behaviour and the social status popular children receive in play activities, where those with higher status receive more social focus from their peers while playing together (Nærland & Martinsen, 2011). Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) have also found that older children playing with young peers is not always ‘innocent and fun’, and by studying how they interact in play activities, it is possible to reveal the power relations that occur between them, where some may be marginalized and others included.

Aim

Few studies have inductively investigated how pre-school children exercise power in out-door peer play and how playmates act when displaying their subordinate position without causing conflict. In order to increase the theoretical understanding of how 3-5-year-old preschool children create a hierarchical order when organizing a free play activity, I therefore inductively analyze how four young preschoolers construct the social order in out-door peer play at a Swedish pre-school. The interest is on how they organize a hierarchical order when producing authority without being in conflict with one another. The analytical focus is on how authority is claimed by one member and how the other children comply with such strategies.

Method

This study is part of a larger project focusing on pre-school children’s inclusion and exclusion strategies in their play activities. It is an ethnographical case study where an episode of peer interaction
was selected from the documented video-recorded data. The chosen episode is about four young
children’s play activity outside a pre-school. The analysis focuses on how they interactively construct
the social order of the play and how they create and visualize their perspectives for each other, in
addition to how they sequentially position themselves to others’ social actions (Garfinkel, 1967;
Goodwin, 1990). The method used is conversation analysis, as this makes it possible to analyze the
procedures used by the children in play when they continuously construct and reconstruct their posi-
tions. This implies that I unfold the interaction between the children in detail with a focus on their
language and body-movement, as well as how they use their play space. By that I capture how they
systematically organize the play activity but also how they interpret and arrange their play when
showing what they do and expect from each other. This means that the analysis covers the sequential
organization of the children’s play, how they non-verbally act and talk moment-to-moment, with the
view that the previous move influences the next (Goodwin, 1990, 2006). This approach can contribute
to a further theoretical understanding of how young children interpret and arrange a play activity
when powerful social positions are claimed.

Data collection

As described in a previous study (Cederborg, 2018), the data is from a larger project where forty-six
children from a pre-school in Sweden were studied. Their peer-to-peer play was observed and video-
recorded in order to analyze how they sequentially organized their play. Mari Kronlund, a PhD
student, collected the data and spent 10 months during the period of October 2015–June 2016 at
this specific pre-school. She made field notes, observed the children and video-recorded their
peer-to-peer interaction both inside and outside the preschool building. In order to make the children
comfortable with her presence and to learn about their everyday life, she observed the children’s
activities and took field notes during the first month of her stay at this preschool.

Thereafter, she video-recorded the children’s free play in interaction with peers using a hand-
held video camera. Instead of holding the camera in front of the children’s face she watched the
camera’s folding screen, which made it possible to film their activities more discreetly (Pink,
2007). Her data collection method was adapted to the situation of interest but also to what was
interpreted as appropriate for the children. She also tried not to be included and involved in the
children’s play. This was done by placing herself a bit away from the play area. If the children con-
tacted her, she briefly responded to their request and told them to talk to a member of staff instead
(Cederborg, 2018). Despite her strong commitment to being a neutral researcher, it cannot be ruled
out that she in one way or another may have affected the children’s interactions (Danby, 2000,
2005).

Abbreviations

The data were transcribed in detail and thus contain both the young children’s language use and
their non-verbal actions. When transcribing the video episode, a simplified version of conversation
analysis (CA) was used (see, for example, Cromdal & Aronsson, 2000).

((): Descriptions of gestures and movements

/ /: overlapping speech

(x): inaudible word

(xxx): inaudible words

*: highlights a particular feature discussed in the text

HI: capitals represent markedly increased amplitude
Ethical considerations

This study is part of a larger project that has an ethical approval from the Ethical Committee at Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm (Dnr 2013/1945-31/5). To be able to perform this project, written and verbal consent have been given from the parents, caretakers and the manager of the preschool. They were promised anonymity and confidentiality, which means that private details that could reveal recognizability have been removed or modified. The children’s consent for participation was obtained whenever the camera was used. The data is kept in an anti-theft locker at the university department.

Results

The episode below occurs outside a Swedish preschool where two boys and two girls, between 3 and 5 years of age, interactively produce and negotiate their social positions during a play activity where they are not in conflict with each other. The analysis reveals how power relations between the children are managed, where three of them, Patrick, Bo and Ulla, act in various ways as subordinates to the fourth, Dora, who acts as a superordinate and is thus as the leader of the play. During the episode the four young children mostly sit at an outside table playing with acorns. The boys are sitting on one side and the girls on the other. The two girls actively play with the acorns and the boys mainly watch them. The boys at times try to be included in the game by making comments and various moves, such as taking a stick and hitting it on the table or picking up some new acorns and giving them to the superior girl, Dora. This means they act as if there is a hierarchical order in the play. Dora as the project owner, with the highest hierarchical position in the play, uses Ulla at times as her subsidiary playmate, even though Ulla has a relatively subordinate position. Through this arrangement Ulla becomes second in the hierarchy. Patrick and Bo act from the lowest position in the game in relation to Dora and Ulla. They are not in an alliance with each other nor with Dora and Ulla, but they try hard to become included in the girls’ activities. In the transcribed video-recorded episode below, it is sequentially shown moment by moment how various strategies of power are exercised by Dora and met by Patrick, Bo and Ulla. The video-recorded episode lasted 6 min, and the play lasted two more minutes, for a total 8 min.

Giving a reprimand

Before this sequence began, all the children had looked for acorns under the outdoor table. When the sequence starts, Dora and Patrick are sitting at the table, Ulla is standing by the table playing with acorns and Bo is watching her. When Bo takes a block and hits it on the table he receives a reprimand from Dora. This sequence lasts 12 s between 0.26 and 0.38.

1. Dora: No Bo give it to me ((She takes the block from Bo and then says to both boys)). Both of you take things you are not allowed to have. ((Bo lets the block go without any comments))

Bo’s reprimand from Dora also includes Patrick. She is unhappy about their way of taking things without her permission. Through her action she claims her superior position in the play. The boys as the subordinated are not allowed to do what they like without her authorization. None of the boys question her statement (Line 1).

Making alliance

After reprimanding the boys, Dora and Ulla collaborate with each other without involving them in their communication about the acorns. The boys are watching the girls’ activity. The alignment happens when Dora responds to Ulla’s comments (Line 2, 3). Dora also informs Ulla that she does not have to worry about the larva’s possibility to breathe (Line 5, 7). This sequence lasts 41 s between 0.38 and 1.19.
2. Ulla: Oh no a larva ((All four children look at Ulla’s acorn with a larva inside))

3. Dora: A larva that is broken. It is inside ((Dora looks shortly at Ulla’s acorn))

4. Ulla: But it can’t breathe for so long

5. Dora: Yes, it can (x) ((She is hacking on an acorn)).

6. Ulla: No. But this one is broken ((The boys are still watching the girls activities from the other side of the table))

7. Dora: ((Says to Ulla)) It can breathe (x) can it. ((Dora also finds a larva in her acorn)) Oh look what this larva has done ((She only shows Ulla but the boys look at them)).

8. Ulla: It can actually (x) here.

The collaboration between the two girls consists of both verbal and non-verbal communication. It is Dora who responds to Ulla’s expressed worries about the larva, but she also shows Ulla her acorn when she discovers a larva in one of her own (Line 5, 7). By Dora’s and Ulla’s verbal and non-verbal responses towards each other, the girls become in alliance with one another without including the boys in their communication. The boys instead take the position as viewers of the girls’ collaboration. It is as if they accept their subordination when Dora and Ulla become allies, thereby marginalizing themselves with respect to the girls’ activity.

**Showing non – verbal disapproval**

Even if the boys are subordinated in the play they try at times to gain attention. In the sequence below, the girls are playing with their acorns, and Bo, after 15 s, expresses an idea about a possible spider in an acorn, and Ulla responds to his comment (Line 9, 10). However, when Patrick takes a non-verbal initiative by hitting a stick on the table, Dora reacts immediately, non-verbally showing her disapproval (Line 9, 10). This sequence lasts 25 s between 1.19 and 1.55.

9. Bo: Or the spider may be in there ((Bo looks at Ulla. Patrick hits the table with a stick))

10. Ulla: Spiders can’t (xxx)

11. Dora: ((She takes the stick from Patrick and puts it on the bench beside her. He lets it go and instead takes an acorn from the table. Dora starts to hack on her acorn)).

Here the boys try to be involved in the activity both verbally and non-verbally. Bo receives a response from the subordinate, Ulla, but Patrick’s move is not acceptable to the superior, Dora. As the leader of the play, Dora prevents him from participation in the activity by taking the stick from him without any verbal comments and then continues with her own activity. From Patrick’s subordinate position he does not comment on or challenge Dora’s way of showing her disapproval of his attempts to be involved in the play. Instead, he makes a new move by taking an acorn from the table (Line 11). His concession to Dora’s treatment may be due to his desire to be included in the game (Sutton-Smith, 1997).

**Giving permission**

Bo’s desire to be part of the game is also shown when he thereafter, in a socially friendly way, asks Dora if he can pick up some more acorns for her (Line 12). The duration of this sequence is 11 s, between 1.55 and 2.06.

12. Bo: ((He turns to Dora and says)) I can pick up some more acorns, if you want?

13. Dora: Yes, pick up many of them ((Bo goes down on the ground and looks for acorns in the playground. Dora also leaves the table for a short while and looks for acorns close to the table)).

14. Bo: OK
Bo’s friendly request to pick up some more acorns for Dora was received positively, with her granting him permission. With her permission he immediately goes away to search on the playground for more acorns that he can give to Dora (Line 13). Dora also leaves her place and starts to look for some more acorns (Line 13). Patrick is watching Ulla’s actions with her acorns. By Bo asking for permission to act, and Dora responding by granting that permission, both seem to have interpreted how to coordinate their actions and are aware of what is expected in the organization of this hierarchical play activity.

**Ignoring a peer**

Patrick continues to watch Ulla, who hurts her finger while she is working with an acorn (Line 15). When Dora, after 26 s, returns to the table, she immediately goes to Ulla and shows her the acorns she found (Line 16). She obviously ignores Patrick by not looking at him and not inviting him to see what she has found. This sequence is in total 74 s between 2.06 and 3.20.

*15. Ulla: Ouch this one was sharp. Stupid acorn.

*16. Dora: ((Patrick starts to move from the table chair but sits down again when Dora returns)). I found one acorn. Look. ((She shows Ulla who looks up for a short while))

17. Ulla: ((She looks in a bowl)) (xxx) How many do we have?

18. Dora: ((She starts to play with her acorn and then she looks for a block on the table)). There it is ((She takes it))

*19. Patrick: ((He says to Dora)) It was just a small one (xxx). ((Dora does not respond and continues to work with her acorn))

20. Ulla: Oh, oh, oh oh ((Ulla hurts herself with an acorn))

Patrick’s reaction to Dora’s avoidance of him seems to be to criticize the size of the acorn Dora had found. By so doing he challenges Dora’s refusal to take notice of him, but Dora just ignores his comment and continues to work with her acorn (Line 19).

**Showing appreciation**

When Patrick is ignored, not receiving any attention from Dora, he goes down to the playground but comes back to the table when Bo, after an 82 s absence, returns from his search for more acorns to Dora. He has found two full hands worth of acorns and goes immediately to Dora and shows her his findings (Line 21). This sequence lasts 18 s between 3.20 and 3.38.

*21. Bo: Look, now I have found many of them.

*22. Dora: ((She looks at Bo’s hands)) Very good. ((Ulla does not watch what is happening between Bo and Dora but Patrick does. Ulla is occupied with her acorn. Dora stretches out her hands and Bo pours over the acorns)).

23: Ulla: But is this acorn //really an acorn//? ((Ulla is talking about one of her acorns))

*24: Dora: Great Bo //((xx))// ((Bo goes back to his place on the other side of the table and puts his stomach on the table and looks at Dora)) If (xxx) You are really very nice Bo.

When Dora receives the acorns from Bo she expresses her appreciation of his delivery (Line 22, 24). When Bo goes back to his previous place at the table, he happily looks at Dora (Line 24). He has now satisfied Dora without claiming any ownership of the acorns he picked up. By that he has sanctioned Dora’s higher hierarchical position and adapted to his position as a subordinate.

**Sharing with one peer and rejecting another**

Patrick pays attention to what is happening between Bo, Dora and Ulla and makes his own interpretation of what he has to do to become an accepted participant. Without permission from Dora, he
leaves the table to look for some acorns for her (Line 25). This sequence lasts 32 s between 3.38 and 4.12.

*25. Ulla: O no I lost it. Then I have to start all over again. ((She starts to look for the acorn on the ground and Patrick leaves the table)).

*26. Dora: ((Ulla is back at the table where Dora is playing)) You can take one of mine ((Ulla looks at Dora and Bo is watching Ulla)).

*27. Ulla: ((She takes one acorn from Dora)). Thank you.

*28. Patrick: ((He comes back with an acorn and gives it to Dora)). This is a present. Here you have an acorn. ((He then goes back to his seat on the bench opposite of Dora and looks at her. Bo is watching Ulla who is playing with acorns)).

*29. Dora: ((She does not look at Patrick or at the acorn he gave her. Instead she continues to play with her acorn))

*30. Ulla: Oh, this was not nice, look ((She shows Dora an acorn and she looks at it. The boys on the other side of the table are watching the girl’s activities)). It is perhaps a larva.

*31. Patrick: ((He takes back the acorn he gave to Dora)) Oh this one is very nice //XXX//.

*32 Dora: //NO WHAT// IS THIS ((She takes back the acorn from Patrick and thereafter looks at Ulla’s acorn. Patrick does not say anything and lets it go))

When Ulla loses one acorn, Dora immediately shares one of her acorns with her, which is appreciated by Ulla (Line 26, 27). With this Dora indicates her ownership of her material and increases her power by sharing her possession with Ulla (Cobb-Moore et al., 2009). Dora also makes a power demonstration when Patrick thereafter in a subdued way tries to satisfy Dora by giving her an acorn he just picked up for her. She rejects him both verbally and nonverbally by not looking up or commenting on the gift he gave her (Line 28, 29). However, when Ulla thereafter asks for her attention Dora looks at her (Line 30). This again shows that the girls are in alliance with one another as Dora gives Ulla her attention when she asks for it, and Patrick is excluded from their relationship. When Patrick is rejected by Dora he takes back the acorn he gave to her. He also expresses his appreciation of this acorn (Line 31). However, this action is not accepted by Dora as she immediately takes it back from Patrick and loudly makes clear that his behaviour is not acceptable. He does not make a counteraction from his subordinate position, which implies he does not question the superior’s rejection of him (Line 32). Dora, as the superior in the play, chooses who should receive her attention and support, and it is most of all Ulla who receives it. Even though Patrick, as the rejected participant, does not give up his attempts to re-arrange his position in order to be accepted by Dora, he never finds a successful strategy to garner her appreciation.

**Power transformation**

The powerful actions Dora continuously makes are at times used by Ulla against the boys, but never against Dora herself. This can be due to their alliance in the game, but it might also depend on how she imitates Dora’s monitoring of the boys’ participation. In the following sequence, Ulla gains the attention of her three peers when she expresses a reaction about her acorn (Line 33). They all look at her, and Dora even wants Ulla to repeat what she just said (Line 34). Bo and Patrick make comments about a dumb larva in the acorn, which is not appreciated by Ulla (Line 35, 36, 37). This sequence lasts 47 s between 4.13 and 5.00.

*33. Ulla: No what is this ((Ulla looks at her acorn))

*34. Dora: What did you say? ((She and the boys look at Ulla’s acorn))

*35: Patrick: Dumb, dumb
*36. Bo: Dumb larva ((Dora continues to work with her acorn. Ulla is hacking on her acorn with a block that she took from Dora)).

*37: Ulla: ((She says to the boys)) No you cannot say that.

*38. Dora: ((She looks at Ulla and says to her)) DON'T DO LIKE THAT ((Dora takes back her block))

*39. Ulla: ((She looks at her acorn)) I can't (x). I don't want it.

*40. Dora: But throw it away then ((The boys are looking at the girls))

*41. Ulla: ((Bo touches one of Ulla's acorns)) NO ((Bo takes away his hands. Ulla then looks at and says to Dora)). This one?

*42. Dora: Hm ((She looks at Ulla)). I don't want it.

*43. Ulla: This one ((She shows Dora))

44. Dora: Mm

45. Ulla: Ok ((She throws an acorn on the ground)).

*46. Bo: ((He looks at Ulla)) Oh no now I threw away another one. ((He points at an acorn and asks Ulla)) Can the larva be inside?

*47. Ulla: Yes ((Patrick looks at Dora who is working with an acorn. Ulla says to Bo)) NO WHAT ARE YOU DOING BO? Don't touch the acorn.

This sequence shows how power is distributed between the children. First, Ulla says to the boys not to express themselves in a certain way (Line 37), and then Dora in a loud voice gives a directive to Ulla not to use her tool. She even takes it back from her (Line 38). By that Dora claims her ownership of her material. Ulla does not challenge her power demonstration. Instead, she becomes subservient towards Dora by asking which of her own acorns she should throw away. She even asks for permission to throw a certain acorn (Line 39, 40, 43, 45). However, when she thereafter admonishes Bo because he touches one of her acorns, she changes her behaviour from being inferior to Dora to acting superior to Bo (Line 41, 47). Both times she acts superior to the boys they do not challenge her by verbally claiming their rights to act without her reprimands. It is as if Ulla accepts her subordinate position to Dora but also that she, as the child in alliance with Dora, is allowed to treat Patrick and Bo the same way Dora does. These power demonstrations towards the boys is not questioned by Dora, which indicates that Ulla’s behaviour is sanctioned by her.

**Power control**

The following and last sequence also shows how Dora from her superior position controls the interaction and that the other three participants do not protest against her control. The following sequence starts with two friendly questions from Patrick to Dora about whether a particular acorn is his or not. First, she rejects his question, but the second time he asks about it she finally tells him which is his (Line 48, 50, 51). The sequence lasts 58 s between 5.02 and 6.00.

*48. Patrick: ((He says to Dora)) Is that mine? ((He is hanging on the table pointing at an acorn and Dora does not look up from her work with an acorn))

*49. Ulla: ((She turns around and looks at Dora)) check it out, Oh no can I (x)

*50. Patrick: ((Says to Dora)). Is that mine?

*51. Dora: ((Both Dora and Patrick are looking at Ulla's acorns. Dora says to Patrick)) No this is not yours. Yes, it was. No, this one is yours.

52. Ulla: ((Turns to Dora)) Shall I hack it now?
When Dora responds to Patrick’s question of which acorn is his, she thereby gives her approval of which one he can take. However, when Bo takes an acorn without Dora’s permission, she loudly rejects his move and even takes it back (Line 55, 56), and Bo does not complain about this rejection. When Ulla claims to Dora that it is her turn to use the block, this is met with approval from Dora, as she does not need it (Line 57, 58). However, Patrick complains about this decision as he also wants the block (Line 59), but his assertion is ignored by Dora, which means he does not become the priority user of the block. It is obvious that when controlling the play interaction Dora has various styles of approach towards the other participants. Here she responds with approval if the other participants ask for permission to act and disapproval if their actions are not sanctioned by her. Moreover, she refrains from answering a request from a subordinate.

The play continues for two more minutes where the power relations between the children remains. The episode ends when Dora stops playing with the acorns and instead takes out a cube from the pocket of her overalls and starts to play with it while the other three watch her.

Discussion

This study shows how young children manage power positioning in free-play, which means both advanced exercise of power and withdrawal of initiatives. The deep analysis also reveals that even young children co-construct the hierarchical order by using language, body and objects to accomplish the social order of a play.

Playing together with peers in pre-school is a dynamic process where the young children continuously act and respond to each other’s actions. This study shows that not just school children, but also pre-school children, continuously assessed each other’s behaviour (Cederborg, 2018; Goodwin, 2006). Through their actions they discerned themselves from each other when organizing the play, which means they adapted their actions to the social status they received or embraced during the play. The peer with the highest status received most of the social focus from the playmates (Nærland & Martinsen, 2011). It was Dora who had the most powerful position in the play, and this was due to the other three children’s acceptance of her superiority. Their verbal and non-verbal responses to her power demonstrations displayed that they for the most part did not question her actions and adapted to her directives, thereby legitimizing her superior position (Griswold, 2007).

The way the other children behaved and responded to Dora’s actions had consequences for how the social order of the play sequentially developed. The superior child, Dora, was assertive when instructing the others how to perform, deciding the rules of the game and controlling who had access to the play activities (Evaldsson, 2003, 2004; Goodwin, 1995, 2001, 2006; Kyratzis et al., 2001). These actions resulted in an asymmetrical play activity with unequal relationships between the participants.

When the other three participants ratified Dora’s actions, they gave her the power to use more aggravated directives towards them. From their subordinated position they were more likely to
mitigate their responses to her. Mitigating strategies were never exercised by Dora, nor did she ask for permission, motivate or justify her actions (see, for example, Goodwin, 1990, 2006; Griswold, 2007; Kyratzis et al., 2001). Depending on the moves from the three playmates, the directives from Dora differed during the play. The directives Dora made use of consisted of reprimands, disapprovals, approvals, appreciations, permissions to act, ignoring, sharing with one peer and rejecting another. The other participants asked for permission to act and accepted rejections, reprimands and demands, thereby becoming submissive to her (Goodwin, 2006; Griswold, 2007). An example of Dora’s aggravated directives was when she approved or disapproved the other playmates access to the material she required ownership of. By that she tried to govern and control the tools and the play space for the other three children’s actions (Cobb, 2004; Cobb-Moore et al., 2009; Singer & Hannikainen, 2002). Dora also made use of alliance building with Ulla when she exercised power and most of the time she excluded Patrick, and even Bo, from being part of the play activity. Dora was also more permissive to Ulla’s actions, and she responded more frequently to her verbal and non-verbal moves in comparison with the boys. As a subordinate, Ulla accepted this alliance, but she also asked Dora for permission to act and received reprimands and rejection from her. Dora’s actions of making an ally and excluding another participant can be due to a desire to accomplish power imbalances between the participants (Goodwin, 1990).

When Dora exerted her superior position she never physically approached the other children, but mostly acted verbally and nonverbally towards Patrick’s and Bo’s initiatives. Patrick could at times challenge Dora, which she disagreed with by rejecting or reprimanding him. However, Bo’s friendly compliance to his low position in the hierarchy was once appreciated by Dora. This happened when he with her permission gave her many acorns, but other than that he was not an accepted participant in the play. This exclusion of Patrick and Bo may be seen as a strategy to accomplish a goal, but also as a way to maintain power imbalances (Goodwin, 1990). The boys, from their subordinate position, acted verbally but also positioned themselves in such a way that they bodily displayed Dora’s authority. However, when they took some of their own initiatives without permission from Dora, they were dismissed with reprimands and avoidance. Thus, without major protest, they refrained from claiming any possible benefit of being in power even if they were not satisfied with the decisions or actions Dora performed (Griswold, 2007).

This means that the three subordinated children legitimized Dora’s powerful position when they acted from their lower hierarchical level, thus confirming that preschoolers are engaged in how the other participants act during the play. They noticed and acted on the social positioning of power that was going on and in various ways acted humbly towards their leader.

The deep analysis of an apparently innocent play reveals how young children actively behave as agents when they adapt to the social order of a hierarchical play (James & Prout, 1990). While so doing they show a social and communicative competence to act both verbally and non-verbally. In other words, the subordinates display a legitimation of power when their superior playmate utilizes obvious tools to act and maintain her high-status position during play. Theoretically, this means that young children, as older children, can build up and maintain asymmetrical relations during play by jointly co-constructing status positions through their use of language, body space and objects (see, for example, Griswold, 2007). However, when positioning themselves in power play this may imply that they have to endure unpleasant and unfriendly treatment. Perhaps they accept such treatments because they are motivated to be accepted as playmates (Sutton-Smith, 1997). The findings further indicate that children must begin to adapt to, invent and recreate relationships in interaction with others early in life, especially when power play is at stake. Such knowledge may imply that they develop strategies of how to deal with solidarity in group dynamics, but as this study shows, they may also learn how to dominate others and how to act from subordinate positions. During pre-school play they may develop knowledge of how to include, exclude and adapt to each other’s moves, where some may be ‘marginalized and others privileged’, which means that pre-school children’s construction of the social order of a play is not always fair (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010).
In sum, this study reveals that even 3-5-year-old pre-school children are to be seen as competent and active agents who are able to handle power positioning in play. This means that younger children are capable of organizing a hierarchical order without conflicts when someone claims superiority and the others sanction the exercise of power even if it implies rejection and exclusion of participation in the game.

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