Tokens, peer context and mobility in preschool children's positioning work

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Abstract: This article is about the positioning work of preschool children. Ethnographic observations were made of interactions among 2–5-year-olds in their preschool setting. In the analysis, Corsaro's theoretical framework of children's peer cultures and positioning theory as described by Harré & Langenhove were used. Results show that children share knowledge concerning their social positions in the peer group as built up, negotiable and possible to move between in relation to various 'tokens', namely *established relationship*, *proper age* and *specific competence*, all of which change in relevance depending on the actual peer context and activity.
Keywords: Preschool children, Peer cultures, Positioning work, Tokens, Ethnographic observation

INTRODUCTION

Research on children's interactions in preschool and school has shown that children negotiate participation, social relations and order in shared activities of different kinds, where aspects such as social conduct, age and gender are important (Corsaro, 2005; Goodwin, 2001; Löfdahl, 2002, 2006; Änggård, 2005a, 2005b). This article aims at describing and understanding preschool children's positioning work and how it is organised. Specifically, the focus is on how children move between positions and in relation to what and to whom they position themselves and others. Positioning refers to the actual events in the here-and-now when the children position themselves and others, and positioning work is defined as their negotiations of positions over time. This article draws on an ethnographic study of preschool children's shared knowledge about their social life in preschool, which is part of a larger project on stability and change in preschool children's social knowledge domains. The project's overarching aim is to study how children jointly construct, negotiate, maintain and change shared social knowledge systems. A starting point in this study was that children jointly construct shared everyday common sense knowledge regarding positioning.

RESEARCH ABOUT POSITIONING AND SOCIAL ORDER

What do we know about positioning among children in educational settings? Research implies that positions and positioning are present in children's shared activities, but they are described in different ways. Positioning may be seen as relating to issues of social order, status and power, and research involving these aspects in relation to children's interactions in educational settings will be presented here. Furthermore the studies presented are based on observations of children's shared activities.

Research from various points of view has shown that children in preschool and school construct social relations and social order in shared activities of different kinds, such as play activities (Corsaro, 1985, 2005; Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006a; Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006b; Löfdahl, 2006), art and narration activities (Änggård, 2005a, 2005b), computer activities (Ljung-Djärf, 2008), science activities and literacy events (Ritchie, 2002; Zacker, 2008) and conversations (Evaldsson, 2004, 2007; Goodwin, 2002). There are also studies of positioning in children's daily activities in school (Ayton, 2008). Furthermore, this body of research has implied that specific activities, social conduct, age, gender and private matters of different

kinds play an important part. When discussing preschool children's participation and social conduct in peer activities, it has been shown that children can enable participation by means of certain access strategies such as asking for access (Corsaro, 2005; Tellgren, 2004) and by acting nice, playing their role and being creative and fun (Ytterhus, 2003). Additionally, preschool children's use of different institutional resources enables them to initiate, get access to and get control over interactive spaces and material assets, as shown in studies of preschool children's communities (Ivarsson, 2003) and spontaneous learning from each other in everyday activities (Williams, 2001). As shown by Williams, children initiate interactions with other children by offering them certain things, such as puzzles. In Ivarsson's study, it was shown that children, if they came first or used an adult position in play, were able to take things and spaces in possession and get the authority to decide over other children's participation. Research has also shown that language is important, in different ways, for children's positions and constructions of social relations in play. As indicated by Sun Shin et al. (2004), verbal ability can enable children to reach powerful positions. Focusing on children in multilingual educational settings (Björk-Willén, 2006; Cromdal, 2001), Björk-Willén has shown that preschool children both enable participation and exclude each other by managing language in different ways. Cromdal's study among school children shows that the outcome of play entry negotiations also depends on issues of when and with whom entry is attempted.

When focusing on social relations and social order among preschool children, several studies have shown how children in different ways negotiate social order and positions through organising and carrying out various play activities, including exclusion and getting around rules that say "anyone can join". It has been shown how factors such as appearance, clothes (Löfdahl, 2006) and age (Johansson, 2007; Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006a; Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006b; Löfdahl, 2006) are valuable to children in order for them to reach desirable and powerful positions in play. As shown by Löfdahl & Hägglund, age is often a factor for exclusion of younger children from shared activities. Another factor influencing children's social order, as suggested in Löfdahl's (2006) study of children's play and peer cultures in preschool, is a reshaping of the preschool peer group. Löfdahl showed

how a girl with low status was able to reach a higher status position when the peer group changed due to the departure of certain children and the arrival of new ones.

In addition to these aspects, there are other important factors in children's negotiations such as gender, physical strength (Johansson, 2007), family assets and clothing (Goodwin, 2001, 2002) and physical skills in specific game activities (Evaldsson, 2004). In a study of preschool children's negotiations about ethics, Johansson shows that children who are fast, strong, big or old are given more power, which in turn can lead to increased rights. As shown in Evaldsson's study of elementary school girls' interactions, high physical skills in game activities could mean higher power positions vis-à-vis the opportunity to define rules. Other studies have similarly suggested that children's social order and positions are connected to specific activities. Ljung-Djärf (2008) shows how peer activity, specifically around the computer in the preschool, influences children's positioning. During the computer activity, the children constructed specific positions in reference to 'owner', 'participant' and 'spectator', involving certain spaces of acting with specific power possibilities and expectations. However, when alternating between the various tasks in the computer activity, the children were able to reach different positions. Children also negotiate social order during teacher-led and teacher-initiated activities in different ways (Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2007; Ivarsson, 2003). For example, as shown by Löfdahl & Hägglund (2007), the children used the teacher-led activity "the farmer's in his den" as an arena for negotiating social positions and status. The children included each other in the activity in relation to their social status in the peer group, where children's low status became visible through not being chosen to join. Lastly, research has also implied that children do not always strive for powerful and prominent status positions. In a study of children's withdrawal strategies in preschool (Skånfors, Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2009) it has been shown how children also use the preschool context to withdraw, individually or together with certain peers.

In sum, the overview shows that children in preschool and school negotiate social relations and order, including their and others' positions, in shared activities of different kinds. It has been suggested that children's positions are related in various ways to aspects such as age, gender, spe-

cific activities, skills and peers. This implies that children's social positions are not fixed but rather constructed in relation to specific circumstances, and thereby flowing and situated. From this perspective, children's positions could be affected by practically anything, underlining the significance of the specific context. Furthermore, this point towards the idea that children can move between different social positions depending on particular circumstances, which is interesting for this article's research interest. The precise research questions in this article are:

- How do children position themselves and others?
- How do children negotiate and move between different positions?

In order to understand social positioning among children in preschool, Corsaro's (2005) theoretical framework of children's peer cultures and some concepts within positioning theory (Harré & Langenhove, 1999a) are being used, which will be described next.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Children's peer cultures
Corsaro's (2005) theoretical framework of children's peer cultures is used in order to understand what children do when spending time together in preschool. When children spend time together over a longer period, as they do in preschool, they jointly construct their own peer cultures. Peer cultures hold shared knowledge of social life in preschool, for instance involving social conduct, status and power. The point of departure for the study is taken in Corsaro's definition of peer cultures as "a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers" (Corsaro, 2005, p. 110). In relation to the present study, this means that the children jointly construct norms about positioning in their daily activities in preschool. Furthermore, within this framework several concepts are included, such as cultural routines, interpretive reproduction, secondary adjustments and protection of interactive space. In their peer cultures, children construct and participate on a daily basis in cultural routines, which are reoccurring and predictable situations and actions in which children negotiate shared social knowledge. Context and recreative aspects are of importance as children do not just copy phenomena

from the adult culture. This process is referred to as 'interpretive reproduction', which more specifically means that, in their striving to comprehend, manage and control their daily lives, children appropriate norms and rules from the preschool context, interpret and recreate them in their own interactions, and sometimes resist them. In this study, the concept interpretive reproduction will be valuable in understanding how the preschool context affects the children's positioning work. Moreover, due to preschool children's ambition to protect ongoing play from disruption and to create a sense of friendship during play, they often tend to exclude other children from shared activities. This phenomenon is described by Corsaro as 'protection of interactive space', which will be reflected upon further regarding the kind of interactive spaces that children are protecting when positioning themselves and others.

This theoretical framework involves social order as it touches upon power and status issues among children, and thereby presumably also embraces what can be referred to as social positioning. In order to describe and analyse specifically *how* children negotiate and move between positions in their peer groups, analytical concepts with a specific focus on how positioning occurs are necessary. Thus, some concepts formulated in positioning theory (Harré & Langenhove, 1999a) are being used.

Positioning theory
When people interact they constantly position themselves and others (Harré & Langenhove, 1999c; Langenhove & Harré, 1999) in different ways depending on their ability, willingness and power to do it, as well as the context (Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Positioning always takes place within a specific context holding certain values, such as rights and obligations of participants. In this study, children's positioning takes place within preschool and, more specifically, within a certain peer culture holding various norms about positioning. However, the children are able to negotiate their positions in their interactions.

According to Langenhove & Harré (1999) one analytical concept within this theoretical framework is 'first and second order positioning', referring to the way in which a person positions him- or herself or others, which may be intentional, but does not have to be. An example of this is when someone tells someone else what to

do. The person who is being told can either accept the position or refuse or question it, with the latter being called 'second order positioning'. Another concept is 'self and other positioning', involving relational aspects: when people position themselves they are simultaneously positioning others, and vice versa. A third concept is 'tacit and intentional positioning'. Tacit positioning implies that people position themselves or others unintentionally or unconsciously, which is mostly the case regarding first order positioning. However first order positioning can be intentional, e.g. if someone is acting in a devious or dominant way or if lying and teasing are involved. Second order positioning is always intentional. As a final point, positions are changeable and used when coping with various situations (Langenhove & Harré, 1999), and provide various possibilities (Harré & Langenhove, 1999b). To quote Harré & Langenhove, the theory is used in this article as "a starting point for reflecting upon the many different aspects of social life" (Harré & Langenhove, 1999b, pp. 9–10).

METHOD AND DATA

Over the course of one year (2007–2008) I participated in the children's everyday life in their preschool setting. As an ethnographer I observed what happened and listened to what was said, sometimes asking questions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, 2007). The preschool is located in a medium-sized Swedish town in a middle-class area, with three full-time female teachers employed there. The peer group has consisted over time of 20–23 children between the ages of 2 and 5, with girls overrepresented in numbers. In the peer group some children seemed more popular than others. There were also some core group formations of children (i.e. children who regularly played together), which to a great extent were divided with reference to gender but with a mix of ages. Some children who were outside the core groups joined on occasion. An ethnographic approach enabled me to closely study and understand the children's social processes and discover patterns (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004). One such social phenomenon was that the children seemed to have different positions in different situations.

I visited the preschool regularly during the year (August, September and October, 2007, and February and May, 2008) with each visit lasting about three hours per day, all and all resulting in 23 visits. Furthermore, the field work was delimited to the indoor premises. So far, approximately 75 hours of ethnographic observation have been performed. My data consists of experiences in the field during this period, including field notes and video recordings of the children's shared everyday indoor activities as well as informal conversations with the children. The use of a portable video camera enabled me to follow the children around in the preschool. Furthermore, it enabled sound to be obtained and provided me with a large amount of data. I took as concrete and detailed field notes as possible of what happened and what was said, and kept this "located in relation to who was present, where, at what time, and under what circumstances" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 146). I informed the children that I wanted to learn about children's play, and before observing them I asked for their acceptance to watch them play and use the video camera. If the children declined this was accepted. Ethical aspects have been taken into account in order to protect the participating individuals' identities, such as requesting the teachers' and the parents' informed consent and giving all the participants fabricated names (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). For a fuller description of my ethical conduct and dilemmas, see Skånfors (2009).

Transcription and analysis

The analysed material consists of field notes that have been written out fair, and transcriptions of video recordings of the children's shared activities. Worth acknowledging is that video recordings and field notes give different types of material. Video recordings captures aspects of social interaction in a way that field notes cannot, such as extended course of events and body language, which could have had an effect on the final analysis of the empirical data.

A decision had to be made whether to transcribe the material in its entirety, or whether to transcribe only what seemed important, at the risk of overlooking relevant material (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). I transcribed the recordings in their full extent to minimize the risk of sorting out events that were seemingly unimportant. Furthermore, as pointed out by Hammersley and Atkinson, when full transcription is to be carried out, a decision has to be made regarding how detailed this should be which should go in line with the study's purpose. The

video recordings of what happened among the children have been transcribed as detailed as possible, including both talk and physical action. Sometimes the transcriptions were made in a more general manner, for instance in situations when children repetitively did or said something. Moreover, a small transcription key was constructed in order to make the transcriptions in a systematic manner. For instance, when children shouted this was followed by an exclamation point (!) and when they spoke quietly this was described as indistinct or inaudible.

As for analysis, detailed and repeated readings of the full empirical material were made so that patterns in the children's shared everyday activities could be discovered. The original video recordings have also been re-watched for analysis, in order to minimize the risk of overlooking relevant material (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). To study the children's positions I initially studied their participation in shared activities of different kinds. In the analysis I regarded participation and position as two separate analytical perspectives, where participation was considered the actual doing of something which is observable to others. Position on the other hand is related to the status, power and agency that the children can exercise when doing something, which I analysed by using the concepts from positioning theory. Therefore I initially described what the children did together and talked about, and with whom. Reoccurring situations were identified in relation to specific core groups of children who often positioned themselves and others in various ways, and who seemed to have different positions in different situations. This called for further analysis focusing on the core groups' activities. Thereafter reoccurring situated aspects connected to children's negotiations about positions were identified. These aspects were named 'tokens' and refer to the children's shared knowledge of what they can negotiate their and others' positions in relation to. These tokens were gathered into three overarching themes:

- Established relationship
- Proper age
- Specific competence

Further in the analysis concepts from positioning theory were used to describe and understand specifically how the children negotiate positions in relation to the tokens, which will be illustrated in the following section. The guiding ques-

tions for the analysis were: How do children position themselves and others? When do they do this? Who is positioned and by whom? In relation to what? What does it take to negotiate one's position or reach a higher status position?

POSITIONING IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S PEER CULTURES

Anchored in positioning theory, I will illustrate and discuss how children jointly position themselves and others in relation to the different tokens, activities and specific peer context (i.e. children who were present) involving different power possibilities and status. The section will be divided into three themes, with reference to the identified tokens. The content in these themes may overlap due to the complexity in the ways the children position themselves and others. There could additionally be other aspects involved in children's positioning work than the ones presented here. However, in order to describe this phenomenon, I have made an analytical distinction, pointing out *some* possible tokens. The illustrations are representative of more or less reoccurring social situations in the empirical material and consist of a mix of field notes and video recordings. The children's ages are put in parentheses. I mainly focused on following the activities of children in two core groups. The girls' core group included the children Kristina (4), Maria (4), Smilla (4), Vilma (4), Sanna (3), Elin (4) and Tanja (5), where Sanna was the newest child. These girls often played together in twos or threes but sometimes in larger groups. The boys' core group consisted of Isak (4), Johan (4), Sam (3), André (3) and Rickard (3), with Lasse (5) joining in on occasion. The boys often played together as a whole group, but sometimes also in twos or threes. Cross-sexual play sometimes occurred, as Rickard and Kristina played together from time to time.

Established relationship
This theme refers to situations in which access to an established relationship appeared valuable for reaching a high status position in peer activity. Due to that condition, the children's positions were related to both low and high status and power depending on the actual peers involved, furthermore entailing that children moved between different positions. Some situations were also observed where children without

an established relationship were able to reach a status position, if they adjusted to certain play contents or characters. The following two situations illustrate how children (belonging to separate core groups) were positioned with various degrees of status and power depending on actual peer context:

> Rickard (3), André (3) and Isak (4) are playing together in the lounge (---). Kristina (4) comes along. Isak turns to her.
> Isak: Do you want to play with us?
> Kristina: Yes.
> Isak says that she can't join, but Kristina responds that anyone can join. Isak says that only André can join (---). Kristina climbs up the couch, but Isak and André tell her to stop. The boys kid around a little bit. Kristina stays in the couch and laughs, then steps down and starts talking about a baby. Isak says that he and André are taking the mattresses somewhere else and they carry some mattresses into a small room. After a short while Kristina takes a chair and follows the boys. Isak asks her if she wants him to show her something. The boys walk to another small room and Kristina follows. Soon the boys come out again and André cries "Bye!" to Kristina and tells Isak to shut the door to the room. Isak says to me that Kristina didn't want to play with them anymore. The boys walk into another room. Kristina comes out of the room where she was and walks to the couch, where she lies down. Isak stands in the doorway and holds out his arms so that each of them covers the doorpost. He says he's guarding the room. Kristina remains in the couch. (Illustration 1. August, 2007)

As soon as Kristina approaches the boys, Isak tells her that she can't join. Kristina continues to try to join the boys, who in turn are making it clear that her presence is unwanted. When taking first order positioning into consideration, Kristina, who is often able to position herself as powerful among certain peers, is positioned by Isak and André as powerless and with low status. Considering the relational nature of positioning, Isak simultaneously positions himself as powerful when controlling the play and keeping out Kristina. Kristina keeps trying to join the boys, which, regarded from second order positioning, could be understood as if she refuses the position made available to her by claiming that

anyone can join and by following the boys, in order to reach another position. Isak in his turn rejects her attempts by continuously positioning her with low status, for instance when guarding the room to keep her out. In the end, Kristina accepts her inability to reach a higher status position, and at the same time positions Isak as able to exercise power over her. I suggest that the token to reach a higher status position in this specific situation would be to have an established relationship with the boys (which Kristina lacks). However, when switching peer contexts, the children moved towards other positions, as illustrated in the following situation, in which Isak seek access to peer activity involving other children outside of his core group:

> Kristina (4) and Maria (4) are playing together in a cardboard playhouse in one of the small rooms. Isak (4) and Johan (4) ask if they can join but the girls say no. Isak says that anyone can join, but Kristina replies that she and Maria make the rules.
> Isak: But anyone can join, you know, that's what the teachers say.
> Kristina: But we're waiting for Rickard.
> Isak says that he will tell Rickard that, if the girls let him join, but Kristina says that they want to play alone. They continue to discuss this for a while. (---)
> Isak: Then I guess we're leaving, if you just want to be two or three.
> Kristina says "two". Isak says that it's more fun with more children, leaves and shuts the door. The girls continue to play. (---) I ask why Rickard is allowed to join them but not the other boys. Kristina replies that they want to play with him and nobody else. The girls continue to play until breakfast time. The boys sometimes knock on the door. After breakfast the girls continue. Kristina invites Rickard (3) to come in and play. When Rickard goes towards the girls, Isak and Sam (3) try to come in as well. Kristina then tells them to go away and closes the door without letting any boy inside. (Illustration 2. February, 2008)

When taking first order positioning into account, the same children position each other in a different manner as compared to the previous situation, illustrating how they have moved between positions. In contrast to the previous situation, Kristina is able to position herself here as powerful as she is in charge of the play, and si-

multaneously positions Isak and Johan with low status and as unable to exercise power. When taking second order positioning into account, Isak deals with this by refusing the position made available to him through claiming that anyone can join, probably with the intention of improving his position. He even tries to negotiate his position by offering to speak with Rickard who is welcome and often plays with the girls, unlike Isak and Johan. However, Kristina constantly contests his approaches. In this particular situation, having an established relationship with the girls could be valuable for reaching a high status position. Furthermore, Kristina's actions towards the very end of the situation illustrate how access to an established relationship is no guarantee for a high status position. Despite an established relationship with the girls, Rickard moves to a low status position when threatening to bring the other boys into the activity. In sum, the empirical situations in this section illustrate how the children negotiate positions in relation to established relationships, where exclusion activities sometimes take place. The children's positions depend on the actual peers involved, and access to an established relationship with these children is valuable for reaching a position with status and power. The children thereby move between different positions, involving more or less power and status.

Proper age
This second theme refers to situations where children positioned each other in relation to proper age. Being of proper age for a specific situation could be valuable for reaching a position involving power and status in a peer activity. Most often proper age meant higher age; for example as a four-year-old girl expressed it to a three-year-old girl when she tried to join: "Only big girls and in-between-girls can join, not little girls". As indicated by this quote younger children were quite often positioned in relation to low status, expressed through exclusion activities of different kinds. For instance they were considered incompetent or too young for activities. However, they managed to reach higher status positions if they had access to an established relationship or were of proper age for an activity or play content. As illustrated below, specific play contents sometimes made room for, or required, a 'small child' in order to work, illustrating how young children were able to move to higher status positions:

Vilma (4), Sanna (3) and Kristina (4) are playing picnic. They have put some small blankets on the floor just outside the doll room. (---) Kristina carries Sanna around, puts her down on the blanket (---), lifts her up again and carries her into the doll room, where she lays her down on the floor. (---) Vilma and Kristina go in and out of the room while Sanna lies "in bed".
Kristina (to Vilma): Quick, come. Sanna is feeling bad. (To Sanna) Are you throwing up? Are you throwing up?
Vilma and Kristina leave the room while Sanna lies on the floor. Kristina comes back and asks Sanna if she has thrown up and says she has to throw up in the toilet. Kristina pretends to pour the vomit into the toilet, then leaves the room. Sanna says that she is throwing up. Kristina comes back and tells Sanna that she cannot get out of bed, tucks her in and speaks quietly with her. (---) Vilma and Kristina say that Sanna has thrown up again. Vilma asks Sanna if she is sick and throwing up, and says that she has to throw up in a bucket. They tell Sanna that she has to pee. Kristina lifts her up onto the toilet (a chest of drawers). They all leave the room, and Kristina asks Sanna if she wants to hold her hand. (Illustration 3. May, 2008)

Considering first and second order positioning, Sanna is positioned by the other girls as someone in need of care and supervision, a position Sanna accepts. However since being the element around which the play content is moving (involving a sick, small and dependent child) Sanna's status position could be understood as high. I suggest that the token in this situation is having proper age for the activity, which Sanna could be said to have. However, her higher status position could additionally be connected to her willingness to subordinate to the other girls' actions and ideas. One could ask what would have happened if she had refused the position and thereby not acted subordinated.

As described previously, access to an established relationship was often valuable for reaching a high status position in peer activity. Some observed situations showed however that the value of proper age overshadowed having access to an established relationship, where children were positioned with low status within their core groups:

Isak (4), Johan (4), André (3) and Rickard (3) are playing in the lounge; they run around, push each other and play with blankets. Isak gets a mattress in order to build a hut. Johan fools around a bit with Rickard and André. A preschool teacher comes and tells Johan to be careful since the other two boys are 'little friends' and he is big. She leaves and the boys continue to play. Rickard and André sit on the couch while the other boys try to lean a mattress against it. Rickard and André kick the mattress down. Isak objects and puts it back up, but it comes back down, and Johan tries to put it back. Lasse (5) comes in and they talk and laugh as he makes jokes. (---) Rickard and André try to kick the mattresses down again, but Johan stops them. Isak, Lasse and Johan say that the younger boys are ruining the game, and Lasse threatens to throw a toy tractor at them if they do not stop.
Lasse (to Rickard and André, respectively): How old are you? You are three and you are three. I will throw this at the three-year-olds. They fuss a bit, and then a preschool teacher comes and breaks up the fuss, and then leaves. André, Rickard and Lasse begin to wrestle in the couch. André says that he is strong because he eats so much food. He wrestles down Rickard, who starts to cry. A preschool teacher comes and breaks up the activity. The group dissolves and the children go separate ways. (Illustration 4. August, 2007)

The boys in the core group initially enjoy each others' company. Considering first order positioning, Isak positions himself as powerful – in control over the activity – and simultaneously positions the others as less powerful. Soon, however, these positions are questioned, when separate views on how to use the mattresses arise. When taking second order positioning into account, the younger boys' opposing actions could be understood as a refusal of the position made available to them, and a challenge of Isak's power position. In the situation that unfolds the three-year-olds are blamed for ruining the game and are made problematic, illustrating how age is activated as a token. It appears as if the younger boys' access to an established relationship with the older boys has lost its value in relation to proper – here implying high – age. I suggest that in order to position yourself with status in this specific situation you should be an older child, or at least not a young-

er child. Seen from this perspective, the younger boys move from a position involving high status as members of the core group to a position involving low status, due to their improper age in this specific situation. Furthermore, the younger boys refuse to subordinate to Isak, which could be a contributing aspect. In the end one of the younger boys refuses to be positioned as too young by wrestling down Rickard (who is physically smaller than him), possibly with the intention of positioning himself as big and strong. This also shows how, for the children, age could be connected to physical size and strength. Another interesting aspect in this situation is the teacher's involvement, which may have affected the situation. When initially positioning the younger boys as small and vulnerable, she actualised age as a differentiating factor.

In sum, this section has illustrated how proper age can be a token in relation to which children negotiate and move between positions. For the younger children, proper age was connected to subordination, suitability for play content and access to an established relationship. Furthermore, proper age could at times be more important than having an established relationship.

Specific competence
The third and last theme refers to situations where the children negotiated and moved between positions in relation to a specific competence of some sort. Situations were observed of children using their knowledge of letters or words in position negotiations. Sometimes this enabled children with overall low status in the peer group to move to higher status positions:

Elin (4) and Rickard (3) are watching Isak (4), Sam (3), Johan (4) and André (3) play in a couch, jumping and shouting. When Elin comes closer they immediately start to tease her and repeatedly call her and Rickard babies. The boys continue to play. Elin picks up a pair of "glasses" made by one of the children, lying on the floor. There is a name tag on them. (---) She shows them to the boys. Isak takes them and looks at them. Together, Isak and Elin now try to figure out whose glasses they are by reading the letters on the name tag. He turns to Elin, and asks her what letters she has in her name.
Elin: I have an E and an L and... an I... (---) And an N.
Isak asks Elin if these letters match the ones

on the name tag, and Elin says no. Isak says that in that case they're not Elin's glasses. Sam says they're his. Elin takes them, gives them to Sam while asking if they are his (---) Isak takes back the glasses, says that he can read to Sam and asks him what letters there are in his name. Sam says a number. Isak says that there is no number on the name tag, just a letter. Johan and André stand around Elin, Isak and Sam and observe them. (---) After a short while Isak asks me if I can help them, and I tell them that the name on the name tag is Vilma. Elin gives them to Vilma. The boys then return to the couch and begin to jump and shout, while Elin remains by herself. (Illustration 5. October, 2007)

The boys turn to Elin and tease her when she is approaching them, possibly demonstrating to her that she is unwelcome. Considering first order positioning, this could be understood as an intentional positioning of Elin in relation to low status. When considering second order positioning, Elin refuses the position made available to her and finds a way to improve her position by using her competence. She introduces a mystery to the boys: whose glasses are lying on the floor? In this specific situation, knowledge about letters is valuable in order to figure out whose name is written on the name tag. In the situation that unfolds, Elin is able to make an important resource of her linguistic competence, which in turn enables her to negotiate and move to a position involving higher status. Considering the relational nature of positioning, the boys simultaneously move towards a position involving lower status, as they are less linguistically competent than she is. In the end, the limited validity of this token becomes visible. The specific competence is valuable only when it is required, and as soon as the mystery is solved the boys lose interest in Elin and go back to their play. From this perspective, Elin thus moves back towards a low status position. Nevertheless, this illustrates how specific competence can be a token for negotiating and moving between positions.

To sum up, the empirical situations in this section illustrate how children's positions are constantly negotiated in the here-and-now through making available, refusing or accepting positions in different ways in relation to tokens, specific peer context and activity. In this way, the children move between different positions connected in various ways to power, status and agency.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this article is to describe and understand preschool children's positioning work and how it is organised, specifically, how children negotiate and move between different positions and in relation to what. The results illustrate how children negotiate their own positions and the positions of others in relation to established relationship, proper age and specific competence, and whose relevance changes depending on specific peer context and activity. The children are thereby able to move between positions. Over time, this dynamic process could be understood as children's *positioning work*.

Positioning work: negotiating and moving between available positions
Particularly in understanding *how* the children positioned each other in relation to the tokens, the concepts from positioning theory have been helpful tools. Seen from *first* and *second order positioning* the results show how children negotiate positions by making certain positions available in specific situations. These positions are thereafter accepted or refused in different ways, accentuating children as agents. *Self and other positioning* has helped highlight how the children, when positioning themselves, simultaneously positioned others, and how positioning thus is relational.

In the analysis of the empirical material, reoccurring situations were identified in relation to core groups of children who positioned themselves and others in different ways, depending on the children who were present. In that way, the token of established relationship became visible. When positioning occurred in relation to established relationship the results show how access to an established relationship with the children in question was valuable for reaching a position involving high status. If they lacked such a relationship the children were often positioned with low status, involving different kinds of marginalisation and exclusion. In that way, children were more often at risk of being excluded if seeking access to activities of children within a certain core group to which they did not belong. Seen from that perspective, the children thereby moved between different status and power positions depending on the actual peers

involved. Consequently, children who are able to position themselves with status and power in some situations are not safe from moving towards positions involving less of this in other particular peer contexts (and vice versa).

Even though having access to an established relationship was often valuable in negotiations on status positions, it did not function as a guarantee for a high status position. Positions were also negotiated in relation to proper age, if age was important in the activity at hand. For instance, at times when proper age meant high age, low age could become a factor for exclusion despite access to an established relationship. In that way, age was seemingly a separating factor within the specific core group formations. Besides the benefit of belonging to a core group, there were situations where younger children could reach higher status positions. I suggest that a high status position does not necessarily have to be bound to only the person in charge; it can also mean being central in an activity, enabling younger children to move to higher status positions. However, the results imply that while high age seemed to be linked to powerful positions, low age rather was connected to positions involving various forms of subordination, such as being controlled by other children. Thus younger children's possibilities to position themselves in accordance to high status were connected to a willingness to act subordinated. In this respect, high status did not automatically bring possibilities to exercise power.

Lastly, children also negotiated and moved between positions in relation to specific competence. This token did not occur as frequently as the others, but was nonetheless present in their position negotiations. If they had a specific competence appropriate for an activity, children could move to higher status positions during the activity at hand. In the same manner, children without such competence simultaneously moved towards a lower status position in that specific situation. The possibility of reaching a high status position in relation to this token was however quite momentary, given its strong connection to a specific content.

As children negotiate and move between positions more or less connected to power, status and agency, it could be suggested that who a 'popular' or 'excluded' child is depends on specific circumstances, offering the chance – or risk – for children to be positioned as both. As also shown in previous studies (see for example Löf-

dahl, 2006; Johansson, 2007; Evaldsson, 2004; Cromdal, 2001) such specific circumstances could be gender, age, specific peers, activities and skills, which further strengthen the results in this article. Taken together, these results imply furthermore that some children probably have greater capability than others to position themselves in relation to high power and status, which could be linked to their access to tokens of various kinds, including established relationships with other children or to what extent their age is regarded as proper age. As discussed above, proper age often meant high age, implying that older children more frequently than younger children can reach high status positions.

A third aspect is whether the children have a specific competence of some sort that they can position themselves in relation to, and – furthermore – if they are willing and able to do so. It has been indicated that children do not always strive for prominent positions, but rather withdraw in the preschool context (Skånfors et al., 2009). From this perspective, children could have many different strivings and possibilities to negotiate and reach higher status and power positions, which further indicates that some children may have difficulties in reaching certain positions.

Positions and protection of interactive spaces
The results show that children's positioning work involves exclusion activities. According to Corsaro (2005) and the concept of 'protection of interactive space', children exclude others in an attempt to protect ongoing play and create a sense of friendship. Perhaps children's exclusion activities can also be understood as their trying to protect their positions within their interactive spaces. Furthermore it could be questioned what kind of interactive spaces the children are protecting when positioning each other in relation to the different tokens. In situations where high age is important for reaching a high status position, which leads to exclusion of younger children, I suggest a protection of a *same-aged-based interactive space*. When it comes to exclusion of children in relation to established relationship, I suggest a protection of an *exclusive interactive space*. In this respect the children may be protecting a certain kind of relationship, not just any relationship. If so, this implies the presence of different kinds of interactive spaces in need of protection, which are more or less dif-

ficult to get access to depending on tokens, specific peer context and activity.

Final words

What can thus be said about the preschool children's shared knowledge regarding positioning work? The children's actions could be seen as expressions of a specific peer culture (Corsaro, 2005), holding shared knowledge of their social positions in the peer group as built up, negotiable and possible to move between in relation to various tokens, whose relevance changes depending on specific peer contexts and activities. This complexity is furthermore something that the children have to deal with on an everyday basis. Due to the situated nature of the tokens, they do not serve as a guarantee for a particular position but are more or less important in specific situations when negotiating positions to which the children have to be very sensitive. From this perspective children's positions are not given or self-evident, with children deterministically connected to *one* single position, impossible to change. For instance, children with overall low status are not ensnared in that position but have possibilities to up-grade their positions, even though this may be relatively temporary. Similarly, children who seem powerful and popular may not be able to position themselves in this manner in every situation or among all children in their peer groups. Rather, as this study shows, children's positions are flowing and related to specific circumstances enabling them to position themselves in relation to high status and power. Thus, rather than having a position, children *do* positions in their here-and-now negotiations which over time can be understood as positioning work. In addition, as children do positions they are not passively being put into a position by somebody else but are actively involved in constructing their positions and others' in their peer culture, accentuating children's agency. Finally, this article contributes knowledge of how preschool children's peer cultures hold shared knowledge involving norms and rules about positioning. Moreover, it helps raise an awareness of how children's positions may be nurtured by expressions in the preschool context, such as teachers' utterances about age, which children interpret and use in their own negotiations on positions, and which could be interesting from a didactic point of view.

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