

Peer culture in preschool children's free play: An ethnographic study

Linda Podrug Krstulović¹ , Josipa Jurić^{2*} , Daliborka Luketić³ 

¹ Marjan Kindergarten, Split, CROATIA

² University of Split, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Split, CROATIA

³ University of Zadar, Department of Pedagogy, Zadar, CROATIA

*Corresponding Author: jjuric@ffst.hr

Citation: Podrug Krstulović, L., Jurić, J., & Luketić, D. (2026). Peer culture in preschool children's free play: An ethnographic study. *Pedagogical Research*, 11(4), em0297. <https://doi.org/10.29333/pr/19691>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 29 Jul. 2026

Accepted: 30 Sep. 2026

ABSTRACT

Free play is one of the few contexts in which children independently organise their social lives, providing a particularly relevant setting for examining how peer culture is produced and negotiated in everyday interaction. This study explored how preschool children shape peer culture through rules, social relationships, inclusion and exclusion, and shared meaning-making. A focused ethnography was conducted with 21 children aged 3 years 9 months to 7 years 2 months in an established mixed-age preschool group in Croatia. The observational period lasted one month and included 17 observation days. Data collected through observation, field notes, and four focus groups were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings indicate that children independently initiate and sustain play, jointly negotiate rules and roles, and create shared symbolic meanings. Group belonging is continually reaffirmed through participation, while temporary forms of exclusion were observed in different interactional contexts, including responses to disruption and restrictions on participation. Educator mediation occurred in some situations in which children did not resolve disagreements independently. The findings position children as competent social actors whose peer culture constitutes a meaningful form of social life and provide contextual insight into how these processes unfold within an established mixed-age preschool group.

Keywords: peer culture, free play, preschool children, ethnography, interpretive reproduction

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary pedagogical theory, play is no longer viewed exclusively as a recreational activity, but as a fundamental driving force in children's development. According to cultural-historical theory, play is defined as the 'leading activity' of the preschool period (Fleer, 2021). This implies that play is not only children's most frequent activity, but also one that contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form, enabling the child to act at a level above their usual behaviour (Vygotsky, 1967). Free play provides a natural context in which children develop intrinsic interests, learn to make decisions, solve problems and practise self-control (Gray, 2011).

As a natural context for learning, play is inextricably linked to cognitive processes. Imagination in play is considered the foundation for the later development of abstract thinking and the understanding of complex concepts (Fleer, 2021). In play, the child transforms reality into a controlled entity, thereby resolving conflicts between their own wishes and objective possibilities (Köngäs et al., 2022). However, play is not only a developmental stage; it is a complex social practice. Children use play as a resource for organising their everyday social worlds, rather than solely as a means of attaining adult competence (Corsaro, 2012). Through play, community values are transmitted and internalised, making it a context for socialisation that is deeply rooted in the child's social and material environment (Visković et al., 2019). Precisely because of its openness and spontaneity, free play constitutes one of the few contexts in which children independently organise social relationships, develop their own rules and jointly shape everyday patterns of interaction (Corsaro, 2012; Fleer, 2021). From this perspective, the developmental and social functions of play are closely interconnected. Through play, children not only develop individual competences but also collectively interpret, appropriate and transform experiences from their social world, thereby creating shared meanings, practices and relationships that form their peer culture.

With the emergence of the 'new paradigm' in the sociology of childhood, children began to be viewed as active social actors, and childhood as an enduring structural form of society (Prout & James, 2015). This approach emphasises that children are not passive recipients of adult culture, but competent participants who actively contribute to cultural production and change (James, 2007). The key concept explaining this process is interpretive reproduction, a term introduced by William Corsaro (1992). The 'interpretive' component refers to the innovative and creative ways in which children participate in society, while 'reproduction' suggests that children not only internalise society but also actively transform it through collective action (Corsaro, 2000).

Peer culture is defined as a stable set of activities, routines, resources, values and concerns that children produce and share through interaction with peers (Corsaro, 2000; Corsaro & Eder, 1990). From the child's perspective, peer interaction provides a sense of excitement and emotional security. Children collectively create their own worlds in order to make sense of the adult world, often appropriating information from it and adapting it to their own interests (Corsaro, 2020; James, 2007). In this process, children are treated as 'knowing subjects' whose insights are essential to understanding their social positions (James, 2007). From this perspective, peer culture represents not only a set of relationships among children, but also a process that is continually reshaped in everyday life through shared play, negotiation, cooperation and the sharing of common meanings (Corsaro, 2000; Corsaro & Eder, 1990).

Belonging to a group is a fundamental human need, which in children manifests as a desire to participate in shared activities (Saariluoma, 2025). Nevertheless, processes of belonging are deeply political and permeated by questions of power and social position (Saariluoma, 2025; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Children continually negotiate who is inside and who is outside the peer group, using categories such as gender, age, skills or the need for support to justify inclusion or exclusion (Emilson & Johansson, 2025; Saariluoma, 2025).

During free play, children demonstrate that they are competent creators and negotiators of rules. Corsaro (2015) describes the phenomenon of 'secondary adjustments', whereby children appear to comply with adults' rules but in fact engage in collective resistance in order to gain control over their own lives. This process creates the so-called 'underlife' of the institution, in which children, for example, secretly bring toys from home or use teachers' rules, such as restrictions on the number of children allowed in a play area, to exclude peers strategically and protect their interactional space (Corsaro, 1985, 2000; Ólafsdóttir et al., 2017). At the same time, the role of the adult in children's play is not unambiguous. Fleer (2015) shows that, in relation to children's imaginary play, the educator may adopt different positions, ranging from that of an observer outside the play to that of a participant within its imagined world, with each position shaping children's opportunities for negotiation in different ways. The presence and actions of adults may nevertheless provide an important contextual dimension for understanding how children organise their play within an institutional setting.

Conflicts and negotiations in play are not simply disruptions, but provide a rich context for the development of communicative competences and social organisation (Evaldsson, 2022). Through 'micro-dramas', children question moral orders and subvert hierarchies (Evaldsson, 2022). Finally, friendships at this age, although sometimes fragile, serve as a means of building solidarity and protecting the shared world from adult interference (Corsaro, 1985, 2003). Understanding these complex relationships offers educators insight into how rules and power dynamics directly affect children's participation and sense of belonging within the educational group (Ólafsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2021). Such everyday processes of negotiation shape not only individual relationships among children, but also represent one of the fundamental mechanisms through which peer culture is maintained and developed in preschool institutions (Corsaro, 2000; Evaldsson, 2022).

Aim of the Study and Research Questions

In the Croatian system of early childhood and preschool education, free play occupies a prominent place in the curriculum, and the national curriculum defines it as the child's fundamental activity and the primary context of their learning and development (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, 2015). Some educational groups in Croatian kindergartens are organised as mixed-age groups, meaning that children of different ages share the same space, materials and activities on a daily basis. This context provides an opportunity to examine how peer culture is negotiated among children who differ in age, experience and participation within the same established group. Although peer culture and children's participation in shared play have been extensively addressed in the international literature, less is known about how the interconnected processes of organising play, negotiating rules and roles, managing inclusion and exclusion, and constructing shared meanings unfold within established mixed-age preschool groups. These processes have also received limited empirical attention within the Croatian early childhood education context.

Rather than treating free play primarily in terms of its developmental outcomes, this study approaches it as an everyday social practice through which children collectively organise their peer world. Its contribution lies in examining several interconnected dimensions of peer culture within the same naturally occurring group and tracing their recurring forms across everyday free-play interactions. The mixed-age composition of the group is treated as a contextual feature rather than as an independent explanatory factor, allowing age-related patterns to be considered without assuming that they are caused by age differences. The study also includes naturally occurring interactions involving children with different participation needs and linguistic backgrounds, thereby broadening the range of peer interactions considered without treating these cases as representative of inclusion more generally. Theoretically, the study extends the application of interpretive reproduction by examining it not only as children's appropriation and transformation of elements of the wider social world, but as an ongoing interactional process through which rules, roles, participation and shared meanings are repeatedly negotiated within peer culture. In this perspective, continuity in peer culture does not imply the reproduction of fixed routines; rather, continuity itself is accomplished through repeated negotiation and modification of shared practices. The study further considers how this process unfolds in the presence of adults, including situations in which educator mediation supports children's negotiation without determining its outcome.

The aim of the study is to examine how preschool children shape peer culture during free play through the negotiation of rules, the organisation of social relationships, processes of inclusion and exclusion, and the shared creation of meaning. On the basis of this aim, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1. How do preschool children initiate, organise and sustain free play?

RQ2. How do children negotiate rules, roles and shared meanings during free play?

RQ3. How are processes of inclusion, exclusion and belonging to the peer group shaped during free play?

Table 1. Age structure of the participants

Age	Number of children
4 years	8
5 years	3
6 years	5
7 years	5

RQ4. What features of peer culture become visible through children's everyday interactions during free play?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Approach

The study was designed as a focused ethnography examining children's peer culture during free play within a single, established mixed-age kindergarten group. This design was considered appropriate because the study focused on a clearly defined aspect of the group's everyday culture-peer interaction during free play-through intensive observation within a bounded setting and a specified period of time. A focused ethnographic approach enabled the study of children's peer culture in its natural setting, with an emphasis on everyday interactions, the meanings children attribute to their activities, and the processes through which they establish and negotiate social relationships during free play. Data were collected through ethnographic observation and field notes, while focus groups were conducted after the observation period as a complementary source of data. Observational data provided insight into children's naturally occurring interactions and peer practices, whereas the focus groups provided children with an opportunity to verbalise their own perspectives on free play, peer relationships, rules, and participation. The two sources of data were therefore analysed in relation to one another while retaining their distinct methodological roles.

Participants and Research Context

The study was conducted in an existing mixed-age kindergarten group comprising 21 children aged between 3 years and 9 months and 7 years and 2 months. The group included six children in their final preschool year, one pair of twins, and one child with significant developmental difficulties who received support from an assistant for children with developmental difficulties. No individual children were selected for participation in the observational component of the study; the existing kindergarten group constituted the research context, and naturally occurring interactions among children during their everyday activities were observed.

For clarity of presentation, the children's ages are shown according to rounded age groups (**Table 1**). The ages presented in **Table 1** refer to the children's ages in June, at the end of the observation period, rounded to the nearest whole year.

The mixed-age composition of the group provided opportunities to observe interactions between younger and older children, including different forms of cooperation, negotiation and role-taking during free play. The composition of the group remained stable during the observation period, and the children knew one another well, having shared the same educational setting and everyday activities over an extended period. This established group context was relevant for examining recurring patterns of interaction and peer relationships.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a combination of ethnographic observation and focus groups to gain a more comprehensive insight into children's peer culture during free play. This approach enabled observed interactions to be compared with the children's own explanations of their experiences, rules and relationships. The two methods were implemented consecutively: the ethnographic observation constituted the first phase of data collection, while the focus groups were conducted after the observation period and following formal ethical approval on 10 July 2026. This approval explicitly authorised the research use and analysis of observational field notes collected in June 2026.

Observation was conducted during everyday free play in the natural kindergarten setting. The observation period lasted one month, during June 2026, and included 17 observation days in both indoor and outdoor kindergarten settings. Individual observed play episodes generally lasted between approximately 10 and 45 minutes. The first author, who was also the educator of the observed group, kept systematic field notes on spontaneous interactions among the children throughout the study. The first author had known the participating children for between one and three years. Observation was conducted during periods when several educators were simultaneously present in the group, which enabled the first author to assume a primarily observational role while the group's regular activities continued. The observation was not focused on activities selected in advance, but on the natural course of the children's play. Relevant situations were documented as they emerged spontaneously during everyday activities. Attention was paid to how play was initiated, how rules were negotiated, how roles were allocated, how inclusion and exclusion were managed, how cooperation and conflict resolution occurred, and how shared meanings were created during play.

Field notes were recorded during the observed situations. Children's utterances and interactions were documented as they occurred, while contextual information concerning the setting, materials and circumstances of individual episodes was expanded immediately afterwards. The original field notes were retained. Some episodes were additionally audio-recorded, although audio recording was not used systematically during observation because spontaneous interactions frequently occurred in a naturally noisy kindergarten environment. All observational dialogue excerpts presented verbatim in the Results were transcribed from audio-recorded episodes; field-note records of children's utterances that were not audio-recorded were used in the analysis but

Table 2. Overview of the data sources used in the study

Data source	Participants / material	Timing and duration	Recording/documentation
Ethnographic observation	Existing mixed-age kindergarten group (n = 21)	17 observation days over a one-month period (June 2026); individual observed play episodes generally lasted approximately 10-45 minutes	Field notes recorded during naturally occurring interactions in indoor and outdoor settings; selected episodes were additionally audio-recorded
Focus groups	Four groups of five children (n = 20)	Conducted following the observation period; each session lasted approximately 10-20 minutes	Semi-structured discussions conducted by the second author; all sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim

are not presented as verbatim quotations. Across the observation period, field notes were reviewed iteratively to trace recurring interactional patterns, including the organisation of play, negotiation of rules and roles, participation in peer groups, and recurring forms of interaction. This iterative engagement with the observational material supported the development of a contextualised understanding of the group's peer culture over time.

The second author was also present in the kindergarten throughout the observation period but did not independently conduct systematic observation or keep separate field notes during this phase. Following the observations, the authors discussed the recorded situations and possible interpretations on the basis of the first author's field notes. The first author's dual role as educator and researcher and its implications for data collection and interpretation are addressed in the section on researcher reflexivity.

In addition to ethnographic observation, four focus groups were conducted with the children. The focus groups were conducted after the completion of the observation period and constituted a complementary source of data rather than part of the ethnographic observation itself. Twenty children participated, with five children in each of the four focus groups. One child with significant developmental difficulties did not participate in the focus-group discussions. The predominantly verbal group-discussion format was not well suited to this child's level of verbal communication. The child nevertheless remained part of the observational component of the study, which allowed participation in naturally occurring peer interactions to be documented without requiring verbal responses in a group-discussion format. The participants were divided into smaller groups, while the remaining children took part in regular activities in another part of the kindergarten during the discussions. Children were allocated to the focus groups according to their attendance, willingness to participate, and their usual peer groupings. Each focus group lasted approximately 10-20 minutes. The discussions were held in a separate room within the kindergarten, in a quiet environment familiar to the children, in order to encourage open communication. The focus groups were conducted by the second author according to a pre-prepared semi-structured protocol, while the first author was present during the discussions. All discussions were audio-recorded with prior parental consent and were subsequently transcribed verbatim. The focus-group discussions were conducted in Croatian. Quotations selected for presentation in the manuscript were translated into English by a professional English-language editor in consultation with the first author, who conducted the kindergarten-based data collection, to ensure that the translations preserved the meaning and context of the children's original expressions. The same protocol was used in all four groups, with additional follow-up questions asked when necessary to clarify or elaborate the children's responses. The same core questions were used across all focus groups; however, their wording was simplified or clarified when necessary to ensure age-appropriate understanding, particularly for younger children.

The focus group protocol included questions organised into five thematic areas: initiation and organisation of play; rules of play; roles and peer relationships; inclusion and sense of belonging; the meaning of free play for children.

The discussions began with general questions about free play and concluded with an open-ended question that allowed the children to share additional experiences or observations not covered by the preceding questions. To provide a more comprehensive account of the phenomenon under investigation, multiple data sources were used. Observational and focus-group data were retained as distinct but complementary sources: observations documented peer culture as it unfolded in everyday interactions, whereas focus groups provided children's verbal accounts of their experiences and understandings of free play. Their integration in the analytical process is described in the Data Analysis section. An overview of the data collected, and the methods used to collect them is presented in **Table 2**.

Data Analysis

The field notes and focus group transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021). The analysis was informed by a contextualist epistemological position, recognising children's accounts and observed interactions as situated within the social and institutional context in which they were produced, while also acknowledging the researchers' active role in interpreting and constructing analytical meaning from the data. Themes were therefore understood as interpretive analytical constructions rather than as objective entities simply emerging from the data. The analysis was conducted in six phases: familiarisation with the data, initial coding, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final account of the findings. Two authors independently conducted the initial coding of the field notes and focus-group transcripts. The third author subsequently reviewed the coding and identified areas of convergence and divergence between the two initial analyses. Differences in coding and interpretation were discussed by all three authors as part of a reflexive and dialogic analytical process, allowing alternative interpretations to be considered in the development of the final themes. The purpose of this collaborative process was not to establish inter-coder reliability or achieve objective agreement, but to deepen and critically examine the interpretation of the data.

Coding was predominantly inductive, with codes developed through close engagement with the data, while being theoretically informed by the concepts of peer culture and interpretive reproduction. Coding was conducted primarily at the semantic level, focusing on children's observable actions, interactions and expressed accounts, while broader theoretical interpretation was developed during subsequent theme development and interpretation. Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader patterns and preliminary themes, which were reviewed against the original data and refined in relation to the research questions. All three authors participated in the discussion and refinement of the final themes and their interpretation. Claims concerning recurring patterns were based on systematic comparison across the observational dataset rather than on individual illustrative episodes. Particular attention was paid to both repeated patterns and contrasting or deviant cases, including unsuccessful negotiation, restrictions on participation, and interactions that did not result in immediate cooperation or reinclusion. Descriptive expressions referring to the recurrence of a pattern were used only when that pattern was documented across multiple observed situations.

The two sources were initially considered separately in order to preserve their different methodological functions and were subsequently compared to identify points of convergence, complementarity and divergence. Observational data were used primarily to identify recurring interactional practices and patterns of peer relations, whereas focus-group data provided insight into how children themselves described and understood their experiences of free play. This process provided a transparent analytical pathway from the original data, through coding and theme development, to the final interpretation of children's peer culture.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to the observational period in June 2026, permission was obtained from the kindergarten administration and written informed consent was obtained from the children's parents or legal guardians for the observation of children's everyday activities. Formal ethical approval for the study was subsequently granted by the relevant institutional ethics committee on 10 July 2026 (approval details withheld for double-blind review). Following this approval, the focus groups were conducted and the observational material collected during the preceding period was included in the systematic research analysis. No scientific analysis of the observational material or preparation of the manuscript was undertaken before formal ethical approval had been obtained.

The purpose of the study was explained to the children in an age-appropriate manner, and they were given the opportunity to decline participation or withdraw from the discussion at any time without any consequences. Children's assent was treated as an ongoing process throughout the study and was respected during both observations and focus-group participation. Verbal and non-verbal indications of unwillingness to participate were respected, and children could withdraw from research-related activities at any time. To protect privacy, all data were anonymised, pseudonyms were used in the presentation of the findings, and all information that could enable the identification of the participants or the institution was removed. Given the small size and specific composition of the group, particular attention was paid to the risk of deductive identification. Potentially identifying characteristics were reported only when analytically relevant and were otherwise generalised or omitted. No names, specific diagnoses, countries of origin, or other identifying details are reported. The same principle was applied to quotations and illustrative drawings to minimise any additional risk of identification. Separate written parental consent was obtained for the reproduction, for scientific purposes, of the children's drawings presented in the paper as illustrative material, and the children gave their assent for their drawings to be shown to others.

Researcher Reflexivity

The first author occupied a dual position as both researcher and educator in the kindergarten group and had known the participating children for between one and three years. This insider position provided detailed contextual knowledge of the children's everyday routines, relationships and communication patterns, which supported the interpretation of interactions observed during free play. At the same time, such familiarity may have shaped what was noticed, recorded and subsequently interpreted. The researchers therefore treated prior knowledge of the children and the group as part of the interpretative context rather than as a neutral source of information.

The children were familiar with the first author's presence and occasionally showed awareness of being observed, for example by asking what she was writing, seeking her response during conflicts, or inviting her to participate in play. The first author therefore sought to maintain a primarily observational role during data collection and intervened mainly when children were unable to resolve conflicts independently or when intervention was necessary to prevent physical harm or considerable distress. Nevertheless, the possibility that the presence and established role of a familiar educator influenced children's interactions cannot be excluded.

Reflexivity was also incorporated into the analytical process. Interpretations were discussed among the authors with attention to the distinction between what was directly documented in the field notes or focus-group transcripts and what represented an interpretative reading of those data. Particular attention was given to avoiding assumptions based solely on prior familiarity with individual children or established group relationships. Accordingly, the researchers' knowledge of the setting was used to contextualise the data, while interpretations were continually referred back to the documented interactions and children's accounts.

RESULTS

Initiating and Organising Play as a Shared Accomplishment among Children

The findings relating to the first research question concern the ways in which free play is initiated, organised and sustained. Free play most often begins with a direct invitation to a peer, spontaneous joining of an activity already underway, or a prior agreement among children who regularly play together. Direct invitations are addressed to a specific child and most often include a proposal for a particular activity or a shared goal.

Ni. (4): 'P., let's build a garage!'

Pe. (4): 'Okay, and N. will be the mechanic.'

Mk. (5): 'I'm building the road.'

Following the initial agreement, other children spontaneously join the activity without having been invited beforehand. Joining most often occurs through taking construction materials, continuing an activity already under way, or accepting a particular role in the play. The number of participants gradually increases, while the organisation of the activity develops during the course of the play itself.

Across the observed episodes, the organisation of free play takes place primarily within activity centres. The construction centre brings together children interested in building and constructing, the family centre encourages the development of symbolic play, while individual or small-group activities occur more frequently in the art centre. Children group themselves according to shared interests, existing friendships and developmental age. Stable peer groups remain together over several days, while some children move from one activity centre to another during free play and join new activities.

Differences in the organisation of play were also observed in relation to children's age. Younger children more often initiate play by exploring materials, with the content of the activity developing during the play itself. Older children and those in their final preschool year more often agree on the content of the play in advance, allocate initial roles and plan shared activities. In the construction centre, their structures gradually acquire symbolic meanings, while in the family centre the space is organised as a house, shop or restaurant, and the children jointly determine the function of individual parts of the space. During the observations, it was noted that symbolic scenarios were often spontaneously extended through new suggestions, with the content of the play developing continuously without a predetermined plan.

Conversations about everyday experiences were also observed to provide the impetus for organising a new shared activity. During the observations, situations were recorded in which the children began with a discussion of events from their own lives, after which they jointly organised the play space, assigned initial roles and developed a new symbolic scenario.

(The children are sitting in the construction centre and arranging large blue blocks.)

Lu. (6): 'I went to the seaside at the weekend.'

M. (6): 'So did I.'

Lu. (6): 'I went swimming every day.'

Iv. (6): 'I didn't. It was too cold for me.'

Lu. (6): 'And I have a swimming pool at home.'

Ma. (6): 'I have an even bigger swimming pool at my grandmother's house.'

Bo. (5): 'I have one of those inflatable ones.'

Lu. (6): 'Mine is so big that you can swim in it.'

Ma. (6): 'You can jump into mine.'

Lu. (6): 'Let's build a swimming pool!'

(L. takes the large blue blocks and arranges them into a rectangle.)

Ma. (6): 'This is the deep end.'

Bo. (5): 'I'm jumping in!'

Lu. (6): 'You can't yet. First, the person who rescues people has to keep watch.'

Iv. (6): 'That's me.'

Ma. (6): 'And I'm selling tickets.'

Lu. (6): 'All right, anyone without a ticket can't go into the swimming pool.'

(Other children approach, take the blue mats and join the play as swimmers. Over the next twenty minutes or so, they jointly develop the swimming-pool scenario, establishing rules for entering, rescuing and jumping into the 'water'.) As the activity develops, other children also join the play spontaneously, taking on new roles and extending the existing scenario without interrupting the shared activity. The children jointly organise the space by using construction materials to create the swimming pool, determine the function of particular areas of the space (the deep and shallow ends), allocate the initial roles of lifeguard, ticket seller and swimmer, and gradually expand the shared scenario by including new children and new activities. The organisation of the play develops during the activity itself, without prior planning, while its content is continuously extended through new suggestions from the participants.

Differences were also observed between indoor and outdoor play. Outdoors, children changed groups more frequently, joined ongoing activities more easily, and participated simultaneously in several different forms of play. Within the observed situations, the larger space appeared to allow greater freedom of movement, more frequent connections between different groups of children, and fewer interruptions to activities due to a lack of space or materials.

Across the observed situations, free play was organised spontaneously, with peer groups forming around shared interests and friendships. The continuity of play was maintained through the spontaneous inclusion of new children, the adaptation of space and materials, and the joint development of activities during the play itself.

Rules, Roles and Meanings as Matters of Ongoing Negotiation

The findings relating to the second research question concern the processes of negotiating rules, roles and shared meanings during free play. The findings presented in this section are primarily based on observational data recorded during naturally occurring play episodes.

Across the observed situations, the rules of free play are shaped during the activity itself through conversation, suggestions and mutual agreement among the children. In most of the situations observed, the rules were not determined in advance, but emerged and changed depending on the course of the play, the number of participants and their shared interests. The children put forward their own suggestions, built on those of their peers, or proposed changes when the existing organisation of the play no longer allowed the shared activity to continue. Changes to the rules most often occurred when a particular suggestion was not acceptable to all participants or when a new situation arose during the play. Following brief discussions, the children accepted the revised rules and continued the shared activity without interrupting the play.

The negotiation was frequently observed as part of symbolic play. In some situations, the children did not reach an agreement immediately. During their discussions, they put forward several suggestions, revised previous decisions and jointly sought a solution that would allow the play to continue. In several observed episodes, the negotiation took place without adult involvement, and the final decision resulted from mutual agreement among the participants. The children proposed, accepted or rejected particular roles, and when several children wanted the same role, they most often reached a compromise or agreed to exchange roles later.

Mi. (4): 'I'm the mum.'

Do. (4): 'I want to be the mum too.'

Ha. (4): 'One can be the mum and the other the aunt.'

Mi. (4): 'But I'll be the mum later.'

Agreements about roles were also recorded during other forms of symbolic play. The children assign different functions, such as doctor, driver, shopkeeper, police officer or builder, and these roles change during the play depending on the development of the shared scenario.

A similar negotiation was observed in another play episode, with roles linked to a particular function.

Ni. (4): 'I'm always the driver!'

Pe. (4): 'No, it's my turn now.'

Ni. (4): 'Then I'm not going to play.'

Mk. (5): 'You can take turns.'

In most of the situations observed, the proposal to change roles was accepted without further conflict, and the play continued with a new allocation of activities.

The focus-group discussions complemented these observational findings by showing how children themselves described situations that could lead to disagreement during free play. In relation to rule-based and competitive games, children referred to cheating and losing as sources of frustration. E. (7) explained, "It makes me angry when I don't win because someone cheats."

Children also described expectations concerning access to toys and the order in which they were taken. L. (7) stated, "When I take a toy first, someone else can't take it from me." These accounts complemented the observed episodes by showing that children themselves associated disagreements with fairness, adherence to rules, and access to shared materials.

Negotiation was also evident when several children wanted to use the same object or material during play. In such situations, the children expressed their own demands, explained their reasons, rejected suggestions or offered new solutions, with agreement most often being reached through compromise or by agreeing to take turns using the shared material.

(The children are building a garage from wooden blocks in the construction centre. Ni. takes the rubber dinosaur that Pe. had previously been playing with.)

Pe. (4): 'Heeey! That's my dinosaur!'

Ni. (4): 'No, it isn't! It's mine now!'

(Pe. tries to take the figure back, while Ni. holds it tightly.)

Pe. (4): 'Give it baaack!'

Ni. (4): 'No!'

Pe. (4): 'Teacheeer!'

(The educator approaches and sits beside the children.)

Educator: 'I can see that you are both very upset. What happened?'

Pe. (4): 'He took it from me.'

Ni. (4): 'I need it for my garage!'

Educator: 'I understand that it is important to both of you. How could you resolve this?'

Pe. (4): 'We can take turns.'

Ni. (4): 'No!'

Educator: 'N., I hear that you don't want to give him the dinosaur. Can you explain why?'

Ni. (4): 'Because my garage isn't finished without it.'

Educator: 'All right. What will happen when the garage is finished?'

Ni. (4): 'Then he can have it.'

Pe. (4): 'But when?'

Ni. (4): 'When I make the door ... and the bridge.'

(After a few minutes, Ni. finishes the bridge and hands the dinosaur to Pe.)

Ni. (4): 'Here ... it's your turn now.'

Pe. (4): 'Thank you.'

In the situation presented, agreement was not reached immediately, but through several successive suggestions made by the children and questions posed by the educator. During the negotiation, the children explained their own demands, proposed different solutions and gradually reached a compromise that enabled the shared activity to continue. Unlike the preceding examples, this episode involved direct educator mediation after the children were unable to resolve the disagreement independently. Similar patterns of negotiation concerning the shared use of materials were also recorded in other situations during the observations. Negotiation was also present during games in which the rules were predetermined. The children discussed the correct application of the rules, pointed out when they had been broken, and jointly decided how the game should continue.

Ma. (5): 'No, you didn't. It was a two.'

Lu. (6): (moves the playing piece) 'Now I have.'

Em. (7): 'You're cheating!'

Bo. (5): 'That's not fair.'

Educator: 'What do you think we could do when we disagree?'

Ma. (5): 'Let him roll again.'

Lu. (6): 'All right ... I'll roll again.'

In this observed episode, the educator prompted the children to propose a solution rather than determining how the disagreement should be resolved. The children then proposed a solution that enabled the game to continue. Other observed solutions included repeating a move, rolling the die again, or reaching a joint agreement on the correct application of the rules.

Similar patterns were also observed during symbolic play, in which the rules were adapted to the development of the shared scenario. When the existing organisation of the play no longer suited all participants, the children jointly proposed changes that enabled the activity to continue.

Lu. (6): 'Now we all drive only on this road.'

Ma. (5): 'But then no one can get to the bridge.'

Lu. (6): 'All right, let's build another road.'

In this episode, the previously agreed rule was modified following another child's objection, and the play continued under the revised arrangement.

In addition to negotiating rules and roles, the children jointly shaped the symbolic scenario of the play during free play. In different activities, spaces and objects acquired new meanings: part of the room became a restaurant, shop or house, a swimming pool was created from construction materials, and different corners of the room represented places for gathering or resting. The children jointly determined how such an imagined space would be used, which roles individual participants would take on, and how the play would develop further. As new children joined or new ideas emerged, the symbolic scenario was continuously extended and modified. For example, following a conversation about swimming and swimming pools, the children built an imaginary swimming pool from large blue blocks. They jointly decided that one section was the 'deep end'; one child took on the role of lifeguard, another sold tickets, while the others gradually joined as swimmers and together developed rules for entering, rescuing and jumping into the 'water'.

(After several minutes, two more children join the play.)

Em. (7): 'Can I go into the swimming pool too?'

Ma. (6): 'You can, but first you have to buy a ticket.'

Em. (7): 'I don't have any money.'

Ma. (6): 'You can pay with blocks.'

(Em. collects several smaller blocks and hands them to Ma.)

Ma. (6): 'All right, now you can.'

Bo. (5): 'I want an ice cream.'

Lu. (6): 'We need a kiosk.'

(Bo. and Lu. build a small counter beside the swimming pool using several smaller blocks.)

Bo. (5): 'I'm selling ice cream. Vanilla or chocolate?'

Iv. (6): 'I'll have chocolate.'

Em. (7): 'I'll have vanilla.'

(The children hand over imaginary money and receive their 'ice creams'.)

Lu. (6): 'Now there's a five-minute break. No jumping while we're eating.'

Bo. (5): 'Yes, anyone who jumps has to get out.'

(The children get out of the 'swimming pool' and sit along the edge of the blocks.)

Iv. (6): 'Now we can go swimming again!'

Lu. (6): 'Wait! The lifeguard has to say it's safe first.'

Iv. (6): 'It's safe now. You can get in.'

(The children re-enter the swimming pool and continue the symbolic play. Over the next few minutes, they take turns in the roles of ice-cream seller and lifeguard and jointly introduce new rules concerning breaks, buying ice cream and entering the 'water' safely.)

In this observed sequence, new roles and rules were introduced as additional children and ideas entered the play. The initial swimming-pool scenario was extended to include buying tickets, an ice-cream kiosk, breaks and rules for re-entering the pool. Roles were also exchanged during the continuation of the activity.

Across the observed episodes, negotiation occurred not only at the beginning of play but also as activities developed. New rules, roles and meanings were recorded when a new child joined, the play space changed, or one of the participants introduced a new suggestion.

Overall, the observed episodes showed that rules, roles and shared meanings were repeatedly modified through discussion, suggestions and joint decision-making during the course of play.

Inclusion, Exclusion and Belonging in Peer-Group Play

The findings relating to the third research question concern processes of inclusion, exclusion and belonging to the peer group. The findings in this section draw primarily on observational data concerning children's participation in peer-group play.

Belonging to the peer group was observed through everyday shared activities, developed friendships and common interests. During free play, the children spontaneously organised themselves into smaller groups, which were often formed according to the type of activity, previously established relationships and shared interests. Although some groups remained stable during the day, the children also moved between different activities and joined new groups. Across the 17 observation days, no child was observed to be continuously isolated or excluded from peer activities. This finding refers specifically to the situations and periods observed and does not exclude the possibility of exclusion occurring at other times. Belonging to a particular group was not fixed, but changed depending on the activity, the children's interests and the course of the play. Some children participated in several different groups during the day, while others more often remained with the same play partners.

Joining ongoing play most often occurred through spontaneous participation or by directly addressing peers. The children joined by taking up materials, accepting an existing role or proposing an activity of their own. In the observed situations in which a request to join was expressed verbally, peers' responses were generally positive.

B. (5): 'Can I build too?'

Mk. (5): 'You can. Build a garage here.'

A similar pattern was also observed in symbolic play.

A. (6): 'Can I cook with you?'

M. (5): 'Yes, you can make the soup.'

Once the child joined, the other children often assigned materials or a particular role to the new participant, and the shared activity usually continued without interruption. In most of the situations observed, the inclusion of a new child did not require prolonged negotiation or alter the course of the play.

Attention was paid to situations involving the inclusion of the child with significant developmental difficulties. The child was more frequently observed playing alone or experiencing difficulty entering ongoing peer play than other children. When the child participated in shared activities, peers were observed offering materials, assigning tasks or incorporating the child into existing roles. In some situations, support was provided by the assistant or educator, particularly when additional clarification of the rules of play or guidance in communication among the children was required.

However, inclusion was not consistent across all situations. Episodes of exclusion were also recorded when the child disrupted an ongoing activity, for example by interfering with or dismantling constructions. In such situations, peers sometimes restricted the child's participation or explicitly stated the conditions under which the child could rejoin the activity.

Interactions involving children from migrant backgrounds also included episodes of multilingual communication. During the initial activities, communication involved a combination of simple words, pointing, gestures and the shared use of materials. As the activities progressed, the children spontaneously learnt individual words from their peers' mother tongue and incorporated them into everyday communication.

Sa. (5): 'M., can you give me tubig?'

Em. (7): 'What is tubig?'

Sa. (5): 'Water.'

Em. (7): 'Ah, water! I'll give you tubig.'

(The children laugh.)

Mi. (5): 'Thank you.'

Em. (7): 'How do you say "thank you" in your language?'

Mi. (5): 'Salamat.'

Em. (7): 'Salamat!'

Educator: 'I heard a new word. Who remembers what tubig means?'

Children: 'Water!'

Educator: 'It is lovely that we are learning new words from one another. Sa. and Mi. (5) learn new Croatian words every day.'

Temporary exclusion from play occurred in several observed situations, particularly when a child's actions disrupted the shared activity. Examples included knocking down constructions, taking materials without agreement or physically interfering with the play. In such situations, the children clearly expressed the reasons why they did not wish to continue the shared activity.

Pe. (4): 'I won't play with you if you knock things down.'

In the situations observed, exclusion was temporary. In some episodes, once the child showed a willingness to cooperate or changed their behaviour, peers included them in the shared activity again.

Ni. (4): 'I won't knock it down anymore. Can I build now?'

Pe. (4): 'You can ... but don't knock it down again.'

Mk. (5): 'You build the road.'

Not all observed exclusion was related to disruption of an ongoing activity. Among some of the older children, temporary exclusion also occurred within established friendship groups and was sometimes expressed indirectly, for example by ignoring a peer rather than explicitly refusing participation. These positions were not stable: within some friendship groups, the child temporarily left out of an interaction changed across situations. During the observations, situations were also recorded in which the children temporarily restricted access to their own play space. Such situations most often involved symbolic play in smaller groups or the use of spaces intended for quieter activities.

Ma. (6): 'You can't come in now; this is our little house.'

Em. (7): 'Wait a little while; we haven't finished yet.'

Restrictions on access related to a particular activity or space, and in the observed episodes, access could subsequently be renegotiated as the activity developed or ended.

Across the observed situations, children entered peer play through spontaneous participation, direct requests and acceptance by peers, while temporary exclusion occurred in different forms, including responses to disruption, restrictions on access to particular play spaces, and indirect exclusion within friendship groups. No continuous exclusion of an individual child was recorded across the 17 observation days, although the observational design does not allow exclusion outside the observed situations to be ruled out.

Peer Culture as an Everyday Accomplishment of the Group

The findings regarding the fourth research question concern the features of peer culture that become visible in children's everyday interactions during free play. This section draws primarily on recurring patterns documented across the observational data.

The peer culture of the observed group included recurring patterns of shared activity across the observation period. The children regularly chose the same play partners, returned to the same activity centres and continued activities begun on previous days. Some groups remained stable over a longer period, while others formed depending on the type of activity or the materials available. During the day, the children moved from one activity to another, with the composition of the groups changing to some extent, although recurring friendship groupings were also observed.

Everyday activities included recurring patterns of behaviour. Across several observation days, some forms of play were continued from one day to the next. The children returned to previously constructed symbolic scenarios, recalled earlier events and continued the play without needing to explain its content again. Previously shared experiences were referred to in subsequent interactions within the group. The children jointly organised the play space, distributed materials, determined where particular activities would take place and, after the play ended, put away the materials together. In symbolic play, they often reused familiar scenarios, such as playing families, restaurants or doctors, or building a town, while adding new suggestions and experiences from everyday life.

In several situations observed, individual children spontaneously assumed an organisational role during play. Their suggestions guided the further development of the activity, the allocation of tasks or the way in which materials were used, while the other children generally accepted these suggestions or supplemented them with their own ideas. L. (7), for example, assumed such a role during an exploratory activity involving the observation of an insect, while the other children followed or responded to his suggestions.

L. (7): 'Stop ... something is moving!'

N. (6): 'Where? I can't see it.'

L. (7): 'Here, under the leaf. Don't shake the jar, or it will hide.'

N. (6): 'I want to look too.'

L. (7): 'Slowly, you will all get to see it. Look through this side first.'

Organisational roles, however, were not consistently associated with the same child. Across different observed activities, different children initiated activities or proposed how they should proceed, depending on the activity and situation. Shared symbolic scenarios were also developed and extended through children's interactions. The children jointly determined the play space, introduced characters, defined the rules governing their relationships and jointly extended the course of symbolic play.

L. (7): 'I'm the forest ranger. Who has entered my forest?'

N. (6): 'I'm a big tree.'

M. (6): 'I'm a rabbit.'

L. (7): 'The rabbit is allowed to eat only one apple.'

N. (6): 'But it has to ask first.'

M. (6): 'May I take one?'

N. (6): 'Yes.'

As the activity continued, the children introduced new characters, expanded the play space and jointly determined how the story would develop. New children joined by taking on different roles, while the content of the play was extended through suggestions from the participants.

Conversations about everyday events were also recorded as starting points for new play activities. Children's experiences from family life, visits to the seaside or previous kindergarten activities became incorporated into symbolic play, with the children jointly creating new scenarios, introducing additional roles and extending the existing play.

Children also assumed responsibility for aspects of shared activities during everyday interactions. The children remind one another of the rules, help younger children use materials, propose solutions during disagreements and jointly sustain the course of the play. Such patterns occur in different activity centres and recur throughout the observation period.

Across the observed situations, recurring features included repeated patterns of shared activity, relatively stable but changing peer groupings, the assumption of organisational roles by different children, the continuation and extension of symbolic scenarios, and the negotiation of shared rules and meanings. Organisational roles were not fixed: different children took the initiative in different activities, while peers accepted, modified or supplemented their suggestions.

Summary of the Main Patterns

Despite the diversity of activities and everyday situations, recurring patterns of behaviour and interaction were observed throughout the entire observation period. These patterns relate to the organisation of free play, the negotiation of rules and roles, processes of inclusion and belonging, and recurring features of children's interactions during free play. A concise overview of these patterns is presented in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Summary of the main findings by research question

Research Question	Main Patterns	Data Examples
RQ1. How do children initiate, organise and sustain free play?	direct invitations to peers; spontaneous joining; prior agreements; organisation by activity centres; adaptation of space and activities during play	invitation to build a garage together; spontaneous inclusion of new children; transition from a conversation about swimming to symbolic 'swimming pool' play
RQ2. How do children negotiate rules, roles and shared meanings?	joint formulation of rules; negotiation of roles; modification of rules during play; joint development of symbolic scenarios; occasional educator-mediated negotiation	agreement to build an additional road; exchanging the roles of 'mum' and 'aunt'; rolling the die again; joint development of the 'swimming pool' and 'forest' play scenarios; negotiation over the dinosaur with educator mediation; focus-group accounts of cheating, losing, and access to toys
RQ3. How are processes of inclusion, exclusion and belonging shaped?	spontaneous joining; acceptance of new participants; temporary exclusion following disruption of play; restrictions on access to particular play spaces; indirect exclusion within friendship groups; subsequent re-entry into play in some situations	inclusion in construction and symbolic play; episodes involving the child with developmental difficulties; multilingual peer interaction; re-entry following disruption of a construction; temporary restriction of access to the playhouse
RQ4. What features of peer culture become visible?	recurring patterns of shared activity; relatively stable but changing peer groupings; organisational roles assumed by different children; continuation and extension of symbolic scenarios; shared rules and meanings	L.'s organisational role during insect observation; the shared 'forest' play scenario; continuation of activities across observation days; joint organisation of play spaces and materials

The patterns presented are interconnected and summarise the recurring ways in which children organised shared activities, negotiated rules and roles, managed participation in peer play, and developed shared meanings during the observed free-play situations.

Following the focus-group discussions, the children were invited to draw their favourite form of free play in kindergarten. Drawing was an optional follow-up activity and was not part of the planned data collection or formal analysis. Approximately ten children chose to participate. Three drawings are presented in **Appendix A** solely as illustrative material, accompanied by the children's brief descriptions of what they had drawn. The drawings and accompanying conversations were not used to answer the research questions or to generate analytical themes.

DISCUSSION

The study shows that the peer culture of the observed group was not a pre-existing condition, but an everyday accomplishment that the children continually produced through invitations to play, agreements, conflicts and their resolution. The findings are therefore most appropriately interpreted through the concept of interpretive reproduction (Corsaro, 1992, 2012). The children in the observed group did not simply adopt content from the adult world, but appropriated, reshaped and incorporated it into their own shared worlds. A good example of this process is the episode in which a conversation about summer swimming developed into a symbolic swimming-pool game involving tickets, a lifeguard, an ice-cream kiosk and rules for safe jumping. An experience from family life became material that the group collectively reworked, supplemented with its own rules and ultimately transformed into shared property. These findings refine the application of interpretive reproduction by suggesting that interpretive transformation occurs not only when children appropriate elements of the wider social world, but also within the ongoing organisation of peer culture itself. Rules, roles, access to play and symbolic meanings were repeatedly reproduced through interaction, yet they remained open to modification as activities developed. Peer culture can therefore be understood here as displaying continuity through negotiation rather than through the simple repetition of stable routines. This highlights interpretive reproduction as a process operating at the micro-interactional level of children's everyday peer relations.

The findings concerning the initiation and organisation of play showed that, within the observed group, free play was shaped around shared interests, friendships and the spatial organisation of the kindergarten room, while also showing age-related differences in the observed forms of play. Younger children most often initiated play by exploring materials, whereas older children and those in their final preschool year agreed on the content in advance, allocated roles and planned the course of the activity. This difference is consistent with the understanding of play as the leading activity of the pre-school period, in which developmental tendencies appear in a condensed form (Fleer, 2021; Vygotsky, 1967). The ability to plan play, assign it a symbolic framework in advance and maintain that framework over time is itself a developmental accomplishment. The mixed-age composition of the group may have contributed to these interactional patterns. Within the observed situations, younger children had opportunities to engage with more complex models of play, while older children sometimes assumed organisational roles, as was evident in situations such as the shared observation of an insect led by the oldest boy. However, organisational roles were not consistently associated with age, as different children took the initiative across different activities.

The concept and practice of negotiation, as illustrated in the findings, indicate that rules in free play function as living agreements rather than as a predetermined framework. Rules emerged during activities, changed when they no longer suited the participants and were renegotiated when a new child joined. Play thus displayed the characteristics of continuous social organisation rather than a sequence of spontaneous episodes. In several observed situations, conflicts did not result in the termination of the shared activity; instead, play continued after rules, roles or access to materials had been renegotiated. This corresponds to Evaldsson's (2022) understanding of peer 'micro-dramas' as contexts in which children question moral orders and develop communicative competences. The agreement concerning the exchange of the role of the mother is illustrative in this

respect. The solution 'I'll be the mum later' can be understood as a form of delayed reciprocity through which children simultaneously protect their own interests and the continuity of the shared activity. Similarly, in games with predetermined rules, the children demonstrated that they were active guardians of fairness. Drawing attention to cheating and suggesting that the die should be rolled again may suggest that rules carried not only functional but also moral significance within these interactions.

In relation to the literature emphasising children's resistance to adult rules and the creation of the institutional 'underlife' (Corsaro, 1985, 2015), our findings present a somewhat different picture of the relationship between children's peer culture and adults. In the situations recorded, the educator more often appeared as an occasional mediator who used questions to create space for the children's own solutions than as an adult from whom play needed to be protected. This is evident in the episode involving the conflict over the dinosaur, in which the eventual solution did not come from the adult. The child independently defined the condition and the point at which the toy would be handed over. This does not mean that the phenomenon of secondary adjustments was absent from the observed group. Rather, the observed situations suggest that the relationship between peer culture and adult culture need not necessarily be one of resistance, but can, in some situations, take the form of cooperation in which the adult supports children's negotiation without taking it over. It should also be borne in mind that the first author was the educator of the group, and it is therefore possible that the established relationship of trust contributed to this dynamic. Her continuous presence and established authority within the group may also have influenced how children behaved, managed disagreements or sought adult support; consequently, the same interactional patterns cannot be assumed to occur in the absence of a familiar educator.

The findings concerning inclusion, exclusion and belonging require particular attention to the boundaries of what was observed. Previous studies have shown that children negotiate belonging through categories such as gender, age or skills, and that these processes are permeated by questions of power (Emilson & Johansson, 2025; Saariluoma, 2025; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Across the 17 observation days, no child was observed to be continuously excluded from peer activities; however, exclusion occurring outside the observed situations cannot be ruled out. Several instances of exclusion were related to behaviour that disrupted the shared activity, although temporary and indirect exclusion was also observed within established friendship groups. Situations in which access was restricted, such as the statement 'You can't come in now; this is our little house', may in some instances be understood as attempts to protect an ongoing interactional space rather than as rejection of a peer as such. However, this interpretation should not be generalised to all instances of exclusion, particularly given the observed episodes of indirect exclusion within friendship groups. In some of these situations, this interpretation is supported by the subsequent reopening of access to the shared activity once a particular phase of play had ended or the peer's behaviour had changed. In other words, belonging in this group appeared to be processual and conditional upon participation. It was not acquired once and for all, but was repeatedly negotiated through participation in shared play. This pattern may partly be explained by the characteristics of the context itself, particularly the stable composition of the group, the children's long-standing familiarity with one another, the mixed-age structure of the group, and the continuous presence of the educator. These contextual characteristics offer plausible alternative explanations for the observed patterns of inclusion and re-entry and should therefore be considered alongside interpretations based on peer-culture processes. Relevant in this context were the multilingual interactions involving children from migrant backgrounds, in which spontaneous linguistic mediation was observed among peers. The incorporation of the words *tubig* and *salamat* into the group's everyday communication illustrates a situation in which linguistic adaptation was reciprocal rather than exclusively one-directional. The findings therefore align with studies showing that peer culture can be a significant resource for the inclusion of children from different cultural backgrounds, provided that the educational context recognises and supports such processes (Ólafsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2021). The same applies to the inclusion of the child with developmental difficulties, for whom peers were observed adapting tasks and roles. Such episodes provide examples of peers adapting participation to another child's needs, although these practices were not present consistently across all situations.

The features of peer culture visible through everyday interactions, including recurring patterns of shared activity, relatively stable peer relationships, the continuation of play over several days and changing organisational roles, correspond to the definition of peer culture as a stable set of activities, routines, values and concerns that children produce and share (Corsaro & Eder, 1990). The finding concerning the continuity of play is particularly significant. Returning to previously constructed symbolic scenarios without needing to explain their content again can be interpreted as evidence of a shared group history, a form of collective memory that sustains peer culture over time. Organisational roles appeared to vary across situations rather than remaining fixed. Depending on the type of activity, different children took the initiative. Although competence, interest, age, familiarity with an activity and verbal ability may all have contributed to these patterns, the present data do not allow the relative importance of these factors to be determined.

These interpretations should also be considered in light of the 17-day observation period and the study of a single, established kindergarten group. Recurring patterns documented during this period provide insight into this particular peer context, but interactions occurring outside the observed situations, including potentially more persistent forms of exclusion or different patterns of conflict, cannot be ruled out.

Viewed as a whole, the findings are consistent with the study's initial theoretical premise that free play is not only a context for the development of individual competences, but a social practice in which children, as competent social actors (James, 2007; Prout & James, 2015), organise their own social lives, produce shared meanings and sustain a culture that belongs to them. An important implication for educational practice follows from this. Negotiations and conflicts, and some forms of temporary restriction of participation during free play, should not automatically be treated as problems to be eliminated; within the observed situations, they formed part of the ongoing organisation of peer interaction. Attention to these processes may help educators distinguish between situations that require intervention and those in which children may be given greater opportunity to negotiate their own solutions, provided that participation, safety and well-being are not compromised.

Study Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of the study should be interpreted within the context of its limitations. The study was conducted in a single educational group at one kindergarten; therefore, the insights obtained reflect the peer culture of a specific community of children within a specific institutional context. Although the ethnographic approach does not aim for generalisation, but rather for an in-depth understanding of a particular social world, readers should nevertheless bear in mind that processes of inclusion and negotiation might develop differently in groups with a different composition. Furthermore, the observational component comprised 17 observation days over a one-month period, and interactions occurring outside the observed situations could not be captured. Consequently, the absence of continuously excluded children during the observation period should not be interpreted as evidence that exclusion did not occur at other times. The stability of the observed group, its mixed-age composition and the continuous presence of the same educators may have contributed to the observed patterns of peer interaction, including the absence of continuous exclusion during the observation period. In a same-age group, a group with less stable membership or a differently organised space, different patterns might be observed.

The position of the first author, who was both a researcher and the educator of the observed group, was also related to the research context. This dual role provided access to the children's natural interactions without requiring a period of adjustment to the observer and was based on an already established relationship of trust. However, it also entailed the risk of reduced analytical distance, as well as the possibility that the children partly adapted their behaviour in the presence of a familiar adult. This possibility is particularly relevant to interactions involving conflict, rule negotiation and exclusion, as children may have modified their behaviour in the presence of their educator. In addition, although the focus groups were conducted by the second author, the first author was present during the discussions. Her presence as the children's familiar educator may have increased social desirability, with children potentially expressing views they perceived as expected or acceptable to her. Although the second author was present in the kindergarten during the observation period, she did not conduct independent systematic observations of the same interactions or maintain a separate set of observational field notes. Consequently, her presence cannot be regarded as an independent observational check. To address the interpretive implications of the first author's dual role, two authors independently conducted the initial coding, the third author reviewed areas of convergence and divergence, and differences in coding and interpretation were discussed among all three authors as part of a reflexive and dialogic analytical process. Nevertheless, these procedures could not eliminate the possible influence of the first author's familiarity with the children on what was noticed, documented and interpreted. The interpretation of children's accounts collected in the focus groups also requires a degree of caution. Preschool children vary in the extent to which they verbalise their experiences, may follow their peers' responses and sometimes answer in ways they assume adults expect. Combining focus groups with ethnographic observation allowed the children's accounts to be considered alongside naturally occurring interactions, but it could not remove these limitations completely. The predominantly verbal format of the focus groups also meant that the perspective of the child with significant developmental difficulties was not directly represented through the child's own verbal account. Future research could therefore incorporate alternative participatory methods adapted to children with different communication abilities, allowing their perspectives to be represented more directly. Furthermore, the children's drawings produced following the focus-group discussions were not part of the planned data collection or formal analysis and were therefore used exclusively as illustrative material, leaving their potential as an independent source of data on children's perspectives unexplored.

This topic and the limitations identified provide scope for future research. It would be useful to investigate peer culture in several educational groups with different characteristics, including same-age and mixed-age groups, as well as institutions with different pedagogical approaches, in order to clarify which of its features are related to a particular context and which emerge as more stable patterns. Longitudinal ethnographic studies following the development of peer culture within the same group over a longer period, for example from nursery to starting school, would make a particularly valuable contribution. At the methodological level, the use of video recordings would enable a more detailed analysis of the non-verbal dimensions of negotiation, while the more systematic inclusion of participatory methods through which children document their own perspectives, for example through drawings, photographs or guided tours of play spaces, would provide a fuller insight into children's views of free play. Finally, the findings concerning spontaneous linguistic mediation and peer interactions involving the child with developmental difficulties suggest a potentially valuable direction for future research: examining the role of peer culture in the inclusion of children who require additional support, including both the opportunities for participation created by peers and the situations in which participation becomes restricted.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to examine how preschool children shape peer culture during free play through the negotiation of rules, the organisation of social relationships, processes of inclusion and exclusion, and the shared creation of meaning. Through the thematic analysis of observational and focus-group data, recurring codes and patterns were progressively organised around the initiation and organisation of play, negotiation of rules and roles, inclusion and exclusion, and recurring features of peer culture, providing the basis for the study's final interpretation of peer culture as an everyday social accomplishment. Ethnographic observation of a mixed-age kindergarten group, supplemented by focus groups with children, showed that peer culture was produced and sustained through everyday, seemingly ordinary situations of free play. Children were observed initiating and organising play independently, drawing on friendships, shared interests and the space available to them. They did not simply adopt rules, roles and symbolic meanings in a ready-made form, but jointly created, modified and renegotiated them throughout the activity. Belonging to the peer group appeared not as a position acquired once and for all, but as an ongoing process negotiated through participation in shared play. Across the observed situations, exclusion took different forms, including

responses to disruption, restrictions on access to particular play spaces and indirect exclusion within friendship groups. No child was observed to be continuously excluded across the 17 observation days, although exclusion outside the observed situations cannot be ruled out.

In accordance with the stated aim of the study, the contribution of this paper is twofold. At the theoretical level, the findings extend the application of interpretive reproduction by showing how children's peer culture is sustained through the repeated negotiation and modification of rules, roles, participation and shared meanings. Rather than continuity depending on the reproduction of fixed routines, the findings suggest that continuity in peer culture may itself be accomplished through ongoing negotiation. The study also suggests that interpretive reproduction within institutional settings can include situations in which adult mediation supports, rather than replaces, children's own negotiation. At the empirical level, the paper offers detailed insight into the everyday processes through which peer culture was produced within an established mixed-age group in the Croatian early childhood education context, including children of migrant backgrounds and a child with developmental difficulties.

For educational practice, the findings point to the value of free play beyond its developmental effects. Free play is a context in which children conduct their own social lives, and the negotiations and conflicts that arise within it form part of the processes through which children organise those lives. This presents educators with the demanding but important task of recognising the moments when children require support and those in which children may be given greater opportunity to negotiate their own solutions, provided that participation, safety and well-being are not compromised. The peer culture that emerges from these processes is not simply preparation for future social life. It is children's social life, worthy of understanding and respect in its own right.

Author contributions: **LPK:** conceptualisation, data collection, analysis; **JJ:** conceptualisation, methodology, data collection, analysis, writing - review & editing; **DL:** conceptualisation, methodology, analysis, supervision, writing - review & editing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding: No funding source is reported for this study.

Ethical statement: The authors stated that ethical approval for the study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Split (approval number: CLAS: 029-06/26-03/00001; Registration Number, 2181-190-26-00154. Written informed consent was obtained from the children's parents or legal guardians, and the children gave their assent to participate. Separate written parental consent was obtained for the reproduction of the children's drawings presented in the paper.

AI statement: The author stated that OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-5.5) was used to assist with the translation of the manuscript from Croatian into English. The authors reviewed and verified the translated text to ensure linguistic accuracy and preservation of the original meaning. The AI tool was not used for data collection, data analysis, or the generation of research findings. The authors take full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

Declaration of interest: No conflict of interest is declared by the authors.

Data sharing statement: Data supporting the findings and conclusions are available upon request from the corresponding author.

REFERENCES

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 328–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>
- Corsaro, W. A. (1985). *Friendship and peer culture in the early years*. Ablex.
- Corsaro, W. A. (1992). Interpretive reproduction in children's peer cultures. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 55(2), 160–177. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2786944>
- Corsaro, W. A. (2000). Early childhood education, children's peer cultures, and the future of childhood. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 8(2), 89–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13502930085208591>
- Corsaro, W. A. (2003). *We're friends, right?: Inside kids' culture*. Joseph Henry Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/10723>
- Corsaro, W. A. (2012). Interpretive reproduction in children's play. *American Journal of Play*, 4(4), 488–504.
- Corsaro, W. A. (2015). *The sociology of childhood* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Corsaro, W. A. (2020). Big ideas from little people: What research with children contributes to social psychology. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 83(1), 5–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272520906412>
- Corsaro, W. A., & Eder, D. (1990). Children's peer cultures. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 16, 197–220. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.16.080190.001213>
- Emilson, A. C., & Johansson, E. M. (2025). Belonging in preschool—An existential and political concern for children. *Education Sciences*, 15(7), Article 808. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15070808>
- Evaldsson, A.-C. (2022). Examining children's peer play-in-action: Micro dramas and collaborative play performances. *International Journal for Research on Extended Education*, 9(1), 69–86. <https://doi.org/10.3224/ijree.v9i1.07>
- Fleer, M. (2015). Pedagogical positioning in play—Teachers being inside and outside of children's imaginary play. *Early Child Development and Care*, 185(11–12), 1801–1814. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2015.1028393>

- Fleer, M. (2021). How Conceptual PlayWorlds in preschool settings create new conditions for children's development during group time. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 28, Article 100438. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2020.100438>
- Gray, P. (2011). The decline of play and the rise of psychopathology in children and adolescents. *American Journal of Play*, 3(4), 443–463.
- James, A. (2007). Giving voice to children's voices: Practices and problems, pitfalls and potentials. *American Anthropologist*, 109(2), 261–272. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2007.109.2.261>
- Köngäs, M., Määttä, K., & Uusiautti, S. (2022). Participation in play activities in the children's peer culture. *Early Child Development and Care*, 192(10), 1533–1546. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2021.1912743>
- Ministry of Science, Education and Sports. (2015). *National curriculum for early childhood and preschool education*. Narodne novine, 5/2015.
- Ólafsdóttir, S. M., Danby, S., Einarsdóttir, J., & Theobald, M. (2017). 'You need to own cats to be a part of the play': Icelandic preschool children challenge adult-initiated rules in play. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 25(6), 824–837. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2017.1380880>
- Ólafsdóttir, S. M., & Einarsdóttir, J. (2021). Peer culture in an Icelandic preschool and the engagement of children with diverse cultural backgrounds. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 53(1), 49–64. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-021-00283-x>
- Prout, A., & James, A. (2015). A new paradigm for the sociology of childhood? Provenance, promise and problems. In A. James & A. Prout (Eds.), *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood* (3rd ed., pp. 6–28). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315745008-2>
- Saariluoma, L. (2025). Politics of belonging in the peer relationships of 3–5-year-old children: An ethnographic study of an integrated group in early childhood education and care in Finland. *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, 14(2), 295–324. <https://doi.org/10.58955/jecer.161917>
- Visković, I., Sunko, E., & Mendeš, B. (2019). Children's play—The educator's opinion. *Education Sciences*, 9(4), Article 266. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci9040266>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1967). Play and its role in the mental development of the child. *Soviet Psychology*, 5(3), 6–18. <https://doi.org/10.2753/RPO1061-040505036>
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2011). Belonging and the politics of belonging. In J. McLaughlin, P. Phillimore, & D. Richardson (Eds.), *Contesting recognition: Culture, identity and citizenship* (pp. 20–35). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230348905_2

APPENDIX A

Children's Drawings of Favourite Free-Play Activities



Figure 1. Child's drawing of a football game in the kindergarten playground
L. (7): 'I drew V., A., V. and me playing football because I really love it and because I play football.'



Figure 2. Child's drawing of playing tag with a friend
N. (6): 'This is M. and me playing tag. This is my favourite game.'



Figure 3. Child's drawing of a game of noughts and crosses
B. (5): 'This is noughts and crosses ... this is my favourite game. I like playing with my friend F.'