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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

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ABSTRACT: Belonging is a key factor in supporting young children's learning, well-being, and development. Peer relationships in early childhood education and care (ECEC), in particular, are important arenas for young children to construct belonging. However, belonging is often intertwined with questions of power, social positions, hierarchies, and acceptance, notably among young children still practicing interaction. This ethnographic study examined how politics of belonging are manifested in the peer relationships of 3–5-year-old children in an integrated ECEC group setting, where approximately half of the children receive intensified or special support, and the remaining half do not. The group included 12 children (5 of whom received special support) and 5 early childhood professionals. The ethnographic observation data was analyzed using a data-driven thematic analysis. The results indicated that the politics of belonging is characterized by children's tendencies to recognize intersectional similarities and differences in each other, which reflect definitions of acceptance or exclusion, as well as negotiations of social positions and morality. Furthermore, the ways in which children who need no support participate in shaping the politics of belonging were more subtle and tactful in some places compared to their peers who need support.

Keywords: *politics of belonging, integrated group, special support, inclusion*

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Introduction

Belonging is a fundamental psychological need of human life, characterized by acceptance, care, connection, and close relationships, often within safe growing environments (Allardt, 1993; Bitteberg, 2013). Alarmingly, even young children may experience a lack of belonging in their peer relationships in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, as well as in wider communities and societal structures (e.g., David & Kilderry, 2019; Gerlach et al., 2024; Kernan, 2010). Children negotiate belonging in their peer relationships as a continuous process in which they seek, through active actions, to establish rules and norms that support the social-moral order of interaction (Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016). The different rules negotiated through children's mutual activities contribute to the formation of power relations, as well as the practices of inclusion and exclusion (Karlsson, 2020; Theobald & Dandby, 2014). This article focuses on the negotiations of belonging in the peer relationships of 3–5-year-old children, who encounter each other in the daily life of an integrated group of children in ECEC. In an integrated group of ECEC, approximately half of the children receive intensified or special support, and the remaining half do not (Heiskanen, 2021).

Yuval-Davis (2011) states that belonging is shaped on a broader level than solely as subjective and collective experiences and uses the term politics of belonging to describe the complex and political nature of belonging. The politics of belonging occur at the macro and micro levels of society, where social positions, emotional attachments, values, and power are intertwined. Through various interactive mechanisms, the boundaries of (un)belonging—whether one is inside or outside and accepted or rejected—are recognized and negotiated, in both subtle and hidden as well as loud and visible ways (Yuval-Davis, 2011). These experiences of inclusion or exclusion, being seen as a "stranger" in others' eyes, and feeling rootless affect belonging through the emotional attachments that an individual has or desires (Woodhead & Brooker, 2008). In the lives of young children, feeling and expressing emotional and/or physical proximity to others, particularly to peers, sends others a powerful message of inclusion or exclusion (de Groot Kim 2005; Nordström, 2010), which makes negotiations of belonging a power question too.

Existing research on the politics of belonging among young children has focused mainly on children's experiences and the narratives they describe (Adams, 2009; Juutinen, 2018; Kobe Miller, 2019; Puroila, 2019), but not so much on the political nature of belonging, negotiations, and structures formed in their peer relationships. In Nordic research, the focus has been particularly on the experiences of belonging in preschool-age children (i.e., 6 years) (Einarsdottir & Ólafsdottir, 2019; Hellman et al., 2018; Sadownik, 2018), their

relationships with educators (Karlsudd, 2021; Ólafsdóttir & Einarsdottir, 2021) and peers (Johansson & Rosell, 2021; Juutinen, 2018), and the physical and material environment of ECEC (Juutinen et al., 2024; Salonen et al., 2016). Research on the important perspectives of children under 6 years with needs for intensified or special support within an integrated group setting of ECEC is lacking.

In the present study, I examine how politics of belonging are manifested in the peer relationships of 3–5-year-old children in an integrated ECEC group setting. Based on the study's long-term ethnographic observational data, I ask how children construct and negotiate belonging in their peer relationships in an integrated ECEC group setting.

Politics of belonging in ECEC settings and peer relationships

The politics of belonging involve the formation of identities and values, social positions and emotional attachments, and their questioning, contesting, and demarcation (Yuval-Davis, 2010). They are shaped and produced through ways of speaking, discourses, gestures, body language, and ways of ignoring or making initiatives to joint activities (Mullally, 2010) that either promote or hinder the individual's own or the opposite party's needs to experience cohesion (Sellars, 2021). Thus, for young children, ECEC and peer relationships are key arenas where the politics of belonging are shaped, maintained, and contested.

ECEC groups enable children to feel a sense of familiarity, which strengthens the experience of belonging and creates attachment to both certain peer relationships and ECEC as an operating environment more broadly (Kyrönlampi et al., 2021; Salonen, 2020). Peer relationships have a particularly important role in children's personal and shared well-being, learning, linguistic development, social skills acquisition (Murphy, 2017), and, consequently, sense of belonging to a group/community. However, belonging to meaningful peer relationships is reportedly more challenging for children who are in some way different from their peers, such as in cultural, linguistic, and domestic contexts (Graham et al., 2022; Juutinen, 2018; Kalkman & Clark, 2017). This leads to some children struggling more than others when negotiating belonging, social-moral order, and power in peer relationships (Butler, 2019; Pugh, 2009; Yen & Lee, 2019). Even though the ECEC context aims to provide all children the possibility to establish peer relationships and gain experiences of belonging, children who receive intensified or special support in ECEC settings have been found to face challenges in linguistic and social skills, such as attaching to play and taking initiative (Kwan et al., 2020; Suhonen et al., 2017). This can challenge the construction of belonging in peer relationships where children have very different ways of expressing and interpreting themselves. In addition, children who have

challenges with self-regulation or have severe functional limitations have less time and opportunities for constructing belonging with peers than those who have challenges in language development or have no specific needs for support (Hirpa, 2021; Kuutti et al., 2021). Thus, the inclusion or exclusion of peer(s) in ECEC settings is centrally linked to a key aspect of politics of belonging, *situated intersectionality*—that is, the varying and intertwined circumstances that influence the experience and construction of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Situated intersectionality can be understood through various factors that are present in the everyday life of ECEC: the actors' social positions, their identities and emotional attachments to each other, different communities and cultures, and their ethical and political values (Johansson et al., 2024; Press et al., 2018). For young children, experimenting, testing, and learning the norms and rules of the ECEC community are part of negotiating belonging and the identities associated with it (Strycharz-Banás et al., 2020). Identities are always incomplete and constantly changing, with cognitive boundaries that correspond to certain cultures and their perceptions of self and others (Bhambra, 2006). The ways identities are expressed are often related to categorical classifications, such as cultural background, gender, age, social class, and religion, to correct, mobilize, and define both individual and communal differences and similarities between people (Yuval-Davis, 2015). Identities are particularly expressed in stories people tell themselves and others about who they are and who they are not (Kaptani & Yuval-Davis, 2008). However, young children express their understanding of individual (me) and collective (we) identities through, for instance, gestures (Vida & Mondloch, 2009), drawing, verbalization (Raburu, 2015), and play (Winther-Lindqvist, 2013). In diverse ECEC environments (Guo & Dalli, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2020; Souto-Manning et al., 2021), the cultural distance or closeness between community members, along with social, political, and spatial demarcations (Westwood & Phizacklea, 2000), is essentially linked to the formation of identities of children as individuals, and the group or community, and thus the questions of inclusion or exclusion (Ebbeck et al., 2010; Probyn, 2015).

Positioning or being positioned into different social positions requires varying means of exercising power and implementing political projects that determine the hegemonic status of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2015). In ECEC, social positions are present and guide how belonging is performed and experienced in children's peer relationships (Taylor & Richardson, 2005). While peer relationships contribute to children's social skills and prosocial behavior in their own networks (Wang et al., 2021), they are also attached to the issues of power, status, agency, and popularity (Reunamo et al., 2014). As part of the broader definitions of (un)belonging, these elements take part in children's negotiations of social positions and the hierarchies between them. Negotiations about social status and

their consequences for defining the boundaries of belonging lead to the political nature of belonging also being poured into the emotional attachments between children (see Ahmed, 2004). The construction of the boundaries of "us" and "other" are influenced in both directions through the expressions of love and care—by not expressing these feelings and hence making distance or offering them as an invitation to be part of the negotiations of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2010).

Thus, the theoretical background of this study lies within the framework of politics of belonging created by Yuval-Davis (2010), in which the belonging of individuals or communities is understood as a political phenomenon formed by the encounter of different identities, values, social positions, and emotional attachments. Negotiations of inclusion and exclusion, as well as struggles for influence over them, play a key role in shaping the politics of belonging in each time, place and community. Therefore, the politics of belonging manifests as a multifaceted phenomenon that is widely entangled in power structures, social positions, and emotional ties. Yet the questions of children's own ways of navigating in politics of belonging have received little attention, particularly pertaining to children who need support (Juutinen et al., 2025).

Integrated group of children in Finnish ECEC as a research context

Based on the values of the Nordic welfare state (Julkunen, 2017), in Finland, every child under school age (i.e., <7 years) has a subjective right to ECEC in the name of equality (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, 5 § and 12 §). According to law, ECEC support should be provided at varying levels (general, intensified, or special levels) consistently to meet individual child needs (Act amending the Early Childhood Education Act 1183/2021). General support is the first means of support and can often be provided in different ways: by modifying learning environments, by shaping pedagogical solutions and teaching methods, or by providing nursing support, for example, in transition situations in daily life of ECEC. Intensified support is more intensive in nature than general support and requires an administrative decision. Intensified support can include similar solutions to general support, but typically it is more individualized and regular. Special support is the most demanding form of support and is often continuous and full-time. Similarly, special support requires an administrative decision. None of the forms of support require a specific diagnosis or need for rehabilitation. (Ministry of Education and Culture, 10.5.2022, cited 22.9.2025).

Support should always be provided in such a way that the child in need of support can take part in the everyday life of the group with other children. Only if the child particularly needs demanding support that is related to some other areas of wellbeing than learning

and growing to which ECEC can contribute, such as medical treatment, or requires round-the-clock care, will ECEC units specializing in meeting these needs, such as hospitals, be guaranteed (Pihlaja & Viitala, 2019). In some ECEC units, children needing more demanding forms of support are placed as part of a so-called integrated group of children, where about half of the children receive intensified or special support, and the remaining half receive general support (Heiskanen, 2021; Pihlaja & Kontu, 2006). The ideology of the integrated group of children is strongly rooted in inclusive values, and their specific goal is to enable all children to act and be involved in ECEC activities together with other children, regardless of whether they have special support needs or not (Syrjämäki et al., 2019).

The Present Study

In this study, I examined how politics of belonging are manifested in the peer relationships of 3–5-year-old children in an integrated ECEC group setting. Since studies aiming to understand belonging as a phenomenon from the perspective of young children who need support are limited (Erwin et al., 2024) and their focus have been primarily on Australia (David & Kilderry, 2019; Peers, 2018; Sumsion et al., 2018), the Northern countries (Eidsvåg & Rosell, 2021; Einarsdottir & Ólafsdóttir, 2019; Emilson & Eek-Karlsson, 2022; Juutinen, 2018), and preschool-age children who are expected to have a greater variety of communication, self-expression, and social skills than younger children (Boldermo, 2020), I focused particularly on how the manifestations of politics of belonging emerge among children with different backgrounds and abilities, and how they draw inclusive and exclusive boundaries. In addition, the methods of conducting research have often been based on the idea of producing research data on children and their sense of belonging, but the production of information in active interaction and collaboration with children who need support is scarce (Clark & Statham, 2005; Lasanen et al., 2017). In this study, I aimed to address this unmet research gap, and to broaden the understanding of how children's peer relationships and their need for support are intertwined in the politics of belonging. The following research question guided the study:

1. How do children construct and negotiate belonging in their peer relationships in an integrated ECEC group of children?

In this study, I understand the knowledge produced by me as a researcher, and the children and adults of the group, as an epistemologically-ontological social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), which is the result of a relatively long and intensive period of data production in the spirit of interaction (Lappalainen & Odenbring, 2019). By understanding the production of knowledge as a social construct, I refer to the notion that

a researcher produces knowledge in accordance with the principles agreed upon with the research subjects and thus participates in shaping reality through their choices. For this reason, I aim to describe the production, processing and analysis of the data as transparently and openly as possible. I also aim to make visible what are known as gatekeeper field experiences, i.e., how I conducted daily negotiations with the children of the group about my own possibilities and my authority to join some activities concerning them (Huilla et al., *in press*). The children with diverse backgrounds and their interests guided not only the negotiations of admission to different kinds of situations, but the whole process of data production. Hearing children's own voices has been the main priority throughout this research process. For this reason, social constructionism permeates the entire research process and analysis phase, where I aim above all to pay attention to the ways in which children constructed and reconstructed meanings, made visible their experiences and expressed their ways of understanding the world around them (Alanen, 2015), especially when it comes to the interaction and negotiations of belonging in their peer relationships.

The study context and participants

The data was produced in collaboration with an integrated ECEC group of children in Northern Finland during the fall of 2023 and spring of 2024. Like all names in this study, the name of the integrated group (*Strawberries*) was also pseudonymized.

The Strawberries group included 12 children and 5 early childhood professionals (1 formally qualified ECEC teacher, 1 special childcare worker, and 3 childcarers in ECEC). The group was intended for children between the ages of 3 and 5 years. It was established in the spring of 2023, a collaboration between the municipality's consulting ECEC special education teacher and the director and deputy director of the ECEC center. Of the 12 children, 5 received intensified or special support, and 7 received general support or needed no support. During the operating year, there were no changes in the group regarding personnel or children. The children in this group had been in other groups in the same ECEC unit before, and some, not all, of them knew each other from these connections.

Various pedagogical practices supporting the functions and smoothness of the group's everyday life were implemented, such as using image structures and following the same daily rhythm and common rules. Although most of the children were involved in everyday activities mainly independently, sometimes verbal or bodily support from the ECEC professionals was needed. Children in need of support were almost always present in the group's common activities and transitions; however, ECEC professionals sometimes

worked one-on-one with some children to ensure safe activities for both the child and others.

Data and methods

In this study, I leaned toward traditional ethnography to examine the ethnographic observations from the everyday life of an integrated group of children, with a particular focus on their peer relationships and interactions. The data contained 114.5 pages of written text.

The data was collected between September 2023 and June 2024, a total of 10 months (30 observation days). Ethnographic observations were done both in the early mornings (07:00) and in the afternoons (13.00) and lasted 2.5–5 hours at a time. This allowed me to see the activities of the group at different stages of the day. The schedules of the observation days were always discussed and agreed upon jointly with the ECEC professionals.

The traditional ethnographic observation (Eder & Corsaro, 1999) was conducted in such a way that researcher-led and child-led observations were alternated and ran parallel to each other (Alasuutari & Raittila, 2017; Stafford, 2017). Through ethnographic observation, I aimed to create space for collaboration and thus contribute to strengthening the trust between myself and the children and ECEC professionals. The ethnographic observation took on an interactive nature, in which, I as a researcher participated in the everyday life of the group and its situations as naturally as possible, on the terms of the group and its members (Sévon et al., 2025). During the data collection period, I actively reflected on my agency as a researcher on the one hand and a partner in interaction on the other.

During the data production, I made notes of the observations as real-time as possible, focusing particularly on interactions and actions among the children to reach their perspectives of the day. I found Pink's (2007) interpretation of ethnography, in particular, beneficial as a methodological approach as it includes both the experiences and actions being studied and the experiences of the researcher. Through the implementation of ethnography and the interpretation of ethnographic material, I aimed to create space for representing all knowledge that the young children wanted to share with me (Pink, 2007). Thus, I do not seek to present results that describe the children's perspectives as pure and objective truths, but rather my views as a researcher who aims to remain as loyal as possible to everyone involved in the study. To remain critical of myself, I completed the notes at the end of the day and reflected on the observed events and situations reflexively

(Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thorough the research work I actively discussed about the implementation of the research with my supervisors and the seminar group.

Ethics

Research ethics were considered thoroughly throughout the research process, and the ethical guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board of Research Ethics (FABRE, 2023) were followed. A positive research permit decision from the ECEC services of the target city was also received well before the data production began. I met the professionals of the group and the guardians of the children in a joint meeting, where I spoke in detail about the study. Almost everyone present at the event immediately filled in their own or their child's personal data consent, and the rest a little later.

I introduced myself to the children on the very first days and went through the study consent with them individually. Each child was given an opportunity to answer *"Yes"* or *"No"* to questions on whether they indeed gave their permission to observe, interview, take photos and videos, and use citations (Gallagher et al., 2009) with stickers. For those who were unable to communicate verbally, the issues mentioned in the research consent were jointly discussed with the help of picture cards (Lambert & Glacken, 2011). No stickers describing the child's answers were added to the consent with all three children; however, I considered head nods or shudders as an indication that the child consented to participation (Davidson, 2017).

The daily negotiations on research consent continued with the children throughout the data production (Graham et al., 2016), and I aimed to respect the children's need for personal space expressed with gestures and verbalization (Ritchie, 2021). I also reflected on my own position as a researcher and would sometimes consciously withdrew from situations where I found that the children and/or the ECEC professionals needed privacy. I always re-evaluated whether I could re-join the situation again later (James, 2007; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). These practices helped me to build trust with the children and ECEC professionals (Marcus, 2008). During the data production, experimentality and embodiment were important to direct both the gaze guided by the research questions and the observations (Frykman & Gilje, 2003). As a researcher, this appeared as being present, listening to children's needs and wishes, and responding to their play initiatives.

Analysis

From a politics of belonging perspective, I chose to focus more on three cases with different kinds of peer relationships: (a) 4-year-old Viktor, who received special support; (b) 5-year-old Elias, Lenni, and Rasmus, none of whom received support; and (c) 3-year-

old Elli and 4-year-old Tom, both of whom received special support. I chose cases based on the criterion that the cases would include the viewpoints of children in need as well as those who did not receive support. In addition to cases (b) and (c), which were attached to a two- or three-child interaction network, I wanted to study in more depth the case of case (a), i.e. Viktor's case, where the negotiations about belonging were not explicitly attached to some established interaction network formed by certain children, but crossed over the mutual dynamics of all the children in the group. With this choice, it was possible for me to study the political nature of the negotiations of belonging in children's peer relationships in a broader understanding than solely individual interaction networks, and to make observations of the children's different ways of negotiating, whether they needed support or not.

The data was analyzed in layers using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). I carefully followed the phases of the analysis and proceeded inductively (Kyngäs, 2019), guided by the research question. First, I read through the transcribed observational material to gain an overall understanding of it and then focused more closely on peer relationships on different days and narrowed them down to episodes. I raked through the data to find relevant episodes and began to encode the characteristics of peer relationships that emerged in them. I particularly focused on the direction of interaction and its changes and children's mutual ways of convergence and distancing (Table 1).

TABLE 1 Example of episodes and coding

Episode	Code
Tom tries to get close to PEPPI [teacher] sitting on the floor. Viktor reacts to the situation by trying to kick Tom from the swing by hand [where Viktor sits], with PEPPI directing Viktor to stop.	Denying (the presence of a peer with bodily gestures) Expressing limits (expressing one's own limits by making distance)

Next, I looked at the codes and their connections to each other in more detail. Related codes were combined into candidates for the initial themes, such as denying the peer, using power, and expressing proximity (Table 2). I used thematic mapping as a visual way of perceiving the initial themes, their meanings, and the interrelated connections between them (Braun & Clarke, 2022), reflecting the accuracy of the expressions given to them.

TABLE 2 Codes, sub-themes, and final themes

Codes	Sub-themes	Main themes
Using language to express affection	Directly inclusive means	Making inclusive boundaries
Expressing proximity		
Expressing caring		
Sharing the power	Indirectly inclusive means	
Mutuality		
Competitions in peer-relationships	Negotiations of hierarchy	Negotiations of social positions
Using the power		
Expressing one's own limits		
Using language to reconstruct the moral order	Negotiations of acceptance	
Transformation in peer-relationships		
Denying the peer	Directly exclusive means	Making exclusive boundaries
Rejecting the peer		
Breaking peer contact/interaction		
Using language to challenge	Indirectly exclusive means	
Holding the power		

Finally, I returned to the original episodes, codes, and sub-themes and critically considered their similarities and differences (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I combined the interlocking sub-themes into the final main themes—that is, dimensions. Terry et al. (2017) call this final phase of abstraction as polishing of main themes, where conceptual solutions and content meanings are refined. I conducted a critical review, reassessment, and reflection of the data and the conceptions given to it in different phases to make the analysis, as well as the results, appear as a coherent whole.

Results

I observed three dimensions in all peer relationships in different ways: (1) *making inclusive boundaries*, which refer to the means how permeability, mutuality, acceptance, and enabled experiences of similarity and interconnectedness in peer relationships are created; (2) *negotiations of social positions,* which refer to the means by which inclusion or exclusion are negotiated and positions are pointed or taken; and (3) *making exclusive boundaries*, which reflects how exclusion in children's peer relationships is produced. In

the following sections, I present the dimensions using selected cases. For distinction, the names of the ECEC professionals are written in caps.

Making inclusive boundaries—situationality, acceptance, and sharing power

Viktor's case illustrated how belonging in peer relationships is rather situational for some children and dependent on the opportunities they get to experience attachment—whether to different places, situations, and/or people (see Pesonen et al., 2023). For Viktor, there were few opportunities to build connections based on similarities and reciprocities in the everyday life of an integrated group, as his relationship with his peers was characterized by a constant need to balance between whether the actions and behaviors of the peers were understandable to Viktor and vice versa.

> *They [Elli, Eleonora, and Tessa] go in between it and bang the other side of the mattress against the bobbins. -- the game later arouses Viktor's interest. Despite the bans of IIDA, he sneaks in with a toy in his hands. Viktor closes his eyes and plays while he sleeps. Eleonora fetches them a cloth to cover, and soon between the mattresses are Eleonora, Elli, Tessa, and Viktor.* (Observation, extract 1)

In Viktor's case, making inclusive boundaries manifested the political nature of belonging by sharing power, showing respect, peer acceptance, and seeking proximity (Yuval-Davis, 2010). He promoted peer relationships by increasing their permeability and aiming for mutuality. This way, he regulated the degree of proximity within the group and performed his agency in negotiations of belonging. Viktor understood the nature of his peers' play and joined it by adapting to their actions both in direct and indirect ways, i.e. by seeking proximity, and by showing mutuality by observing the peers' ways of participating in the play and joining it with respect.

On the other hand, the case of Elias, Lenni, and Rasmus highlighted both the visible and direct and invisible and indirect negotiations involved in children's peer relationships. In the day-to-day life of an integrated group, children often sought common plays based on shared interests, such as role-playing; however, in children's peer relationships, there were tensions.

> *They [Elias, Lenni, and Rasmus] negotiate the progress of the play, and Elias asks Lenni several times for permission, "Can I start now?" I'm not sure what is about to start, but Lenni responds very systematically with "Not yet." He responds in a low voice, and I'm not sure if it's part of the play or if it's a situation where the boys negotiate as themselves, not through the characters. However, I have the impression that Elias is asking for permission as himself.* (Observation, extract 2)

Typically, Elias was being left out. He had to carefully follow the rules of the plays defined by his peers and had little personal power to participate in directing them. However, he

had the skill to adapt to the plays by asking when he was allowed to act in a way that was appropriate and accepted by others. In this way, he sought to build inclusive boundaries of peer relationships and negotiate his entry. Among the children, making inclusive boundaries manifested the politics of belonging through shared play interests and intersectional similarities, such as the children's age and gender. Coevally, political negotiations of sharing power and moral order were present in this boundary-making.

The relationship between Elli and Tom developed during the year, and their interaction was marked by a deepening understanding of the needs and desires of oneself as well as the other. They often used body language and gestures to express each other's desire for mutuality directly.

> *-- behind my back, Tom has climbed into a cup chair, which is meant to be a peaceful space, with a roof, as it were. Elli is interested in Tom and what he is doing. She goes closer to Tom and leans towards him, to which Tom responds by bowing curiously to Elli. Elli gives Tom a kiss on the lips -- Elli then scurries from behind the chair to the other corner and peeks from there. -- Elli laughs and turns back behind the chair on the same route to Tom. She again gives Tom a kiss, and Tom reciprocates with a kiss back. They look at each other curiously, and the moment between them seems wonderfully warm, safe, and reciprocal.* (Observation, extract 3)

Considering these children, inclusive boundaries were built by direct ways, such as showing mutual affection and care through various means. During the operating year, the children became closer to each other and built belonging in their peer relationships through trial and error.

Negotiations of social positions—power and responsibility

In Viktor's case, negotiating social positions was primarily about using power to protect one's own needs and express limits.

> *Viktor does not get excited by any [educator's play] initiative but trots the room in a diagonal direction, from one corner of the room to the other. Since Lenni, Viljo, Elias, and Rasmus have taken over Viktor's interesting corner with his big Lego box, and joking, he doesn't get the corner. It starts to annoy Viktor, who starts babbling loudly in a complaining tone until he decides to vent his frustration by knocking down the entire toy box that MELISSA has brought up.* (Observation, extract 4)

Viktor was ready to demand the space he needed and negotiate with his peers, in quite direct ways, how he and his needs should be considered. In these negotiations, Viktor positioned himself in a hegemonic position of power, which enabled him to delimit his own space in a way that reflected himself and his peers. On the one hand, by demarcating his own space, Viktor protected the conditions of belonging to the group that were safe

for him, and on the other, he excluded his peers outside of them. The political nature of belonging was linked to the child's need to protect and border his own space and self, which made the negotiations of belonging with peers highly variable in time and place. In Viktor's case, the situations that strengthen and challenge belonging and the boundary conditions they impose on a child make the situationality linked to the politics of belonging visible.

In Elias, Lenni, and Rasmus' peer relationships, the negotiations of social positions were a constant balancing of recognizing mutual, intersectional characteristics—that is, being the only boys in the group of a similar age and without any support. For these children, political negotiations of social positions lived and changed strongly depending on who of the trio was present, leading to the understanding that for some children, belonging is guided by established power positions and hierarchies (Yuval-Davis, 2010). This embodies the situational intersectionality related to the politics of belonging in a rather concrete way. The case of these children demonstrate how the negotiations of belonging are always prone to tensions and competitions of power and tied to the understanding(s) of identities of self and others.

> *A long list of names appears on both sides of Rasmus's drawing, and when I ask what the names are for, Rasmus tells me that these people could enter his tree house. -- Elias takes an interest in Rasmus's drawing and then starts drawing his own tree house. He writes "Elias and Daddy" on it and says that no one else can get into that tree house. Rasmus is shocked: "What, can't I go? Then you won't be able to come here either!" While I am talking with Rasmus, Elias begins to write "And Rasmus" on his paper and then grins cheerfully. "Oh, look Rasmus, whose name does Elias write there?" I ask. Rasmus has a delighted twinkle, exclaiming happily, "Well, Rasmus!" He then continues saying, "Well, at least I won't wipe this off!" pointing to Elias' name in his paper.* (Observation, extract 5)

Despite their many similarities, Elias, Lenni, and Rasmus did see differences in each other, such as noticing a peer's bike purchased at a flea market, interpreting it as less valuable, or a peer's brand-new jacket. These differences and their meanings were not so much negotiated, but rather indirectly guided the political processes of defining who belongs to "*us*" or to "*others*." In terms of peer relationships, it was characteristic that Elias went to great lengths to negotiate peer acceptance, while Rasmus and Lenni used power in the negotiations to hold back opportunities for Elias to gain more social freedom, influence the dynamics of these peer relationships, and participate. Thus, questions of moral order—that is, notions of what is appropriate to do or what is reasonable to expect (for more, see e.g., Van Langenhove, 2017)—appeared to be a particularly strong element in these children's peer relationships and in the determination of social positions at the center.

In Elli and Tom's peer relationship, negotiations of social positions were continuous processes in which mutual acceptance was sought in rather constructive means, such as observing the peer, interpreting their feelings and needs, and following their bodily actions. The children showed a shared interest in building a common "us" unit in the form of friendship, reflecting the importance of the formation of identities as a political manifestation of belonging.

> *When Tom shows up in the room and sounds uneasy, the IIDA says, "Elli, I think Tom wants to come and do gymnastics sometimes too." Tom goes close to Elli, who is in the gymnastics rings, as if he is interested in gymnastics, but is then guided away by the IIDA by gently urging and touching Tom. While waiting for his turn, Tom brings three bumpy-surfaced hemispheres to the floor from the shelf next to the wall of the room and places them in a pretty line on the floor happily. After the IIDA's statement, Elli moves away from the rings and nods to show that she has understood the situation. Elli goes back to the mattress to play, and Tom rushes into the rings like a bullet train, full of joy in his eyes and voice. Tom seems pleased.* (Observation, extract 6)

Elli and Tom's case demonstrated the transformation in children's relationship, wherein the children navigated toward a deeper mutual connection and trust. In this transformation, the children's needs for support manifested their tendency to express themselves in various, even creative, ways, experimenting with how they would be best understood, and learning the communication methods from their peers too. The political nature of belonging manifested in creative ways to negotiate social positions and find a common understanding of the goals of other's actions. The children sensed each other's presence and needs and alternated the positions of the giving and the taking parties skillfully.

Making exclusive boundaries—maintaining hegemony and challenging the boundaries of belonging

Although recognizing similarities is one of the factors that strengthen belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2015), in the integrated group, Viktor's exclusive boundary-making was particularly evident in relation to Tom, with whom Viktor shared some intersectional characteristics, such as age, gender, and need for special support. His manners of making exclusive boundaries were often very direct and audible, such as the use of body language and gestures to express the desire to be at peace.

> *As PEPPI strokes the waking Viktor, the door between the Sun and the Heart room is opened as the ECEC professionals move between the premises, which arouses frustration in Viktor. He begins with a voice of reluctance, with a slightly worried expression on his face, and babbles: "No, no, no!" PEPPI seems to understand Viktor's concern right away. Viktor gets worried when he hears Tom's vocalizations and occasional exclamations.* (Observation, extract 7)

The relationship between Viktor and Tom turned out to be tense, and the presence of other children in the same room may have been conducive to triggering the need for one or both children to distance themselves from each other. Previous research showed that children in need of support, such as those with autism and neuro spectrum, have similar mirror action abilities (seen, felt, and heard) in terms of motor representation, enabling understanding of peer's needs and motor intentions and creating an embodied link between them (Xie et al., 2023). In Viktor and Tom, this embodied link manifested itself as the children's special sensitivity to sense each other's emotional states and presence and as a tendency to mirror it back to themselves. For this reason, the political nature of belonging manifested as empathy and understanding between them, as well as a need for isolation from their peers in order to protect their own safety.

The case of Viktor shows that children who need intensified or special support may be very reciprocal towards each other by mirroring each other's needs and thus making the situation understandable, for both. Yet from the outside, for example to the educator, the situations can sometimes be challenging to interpret, as the children's ways of communicating with themselves and others and bordering the conditions of belonging can appear somewhat abstract and difficult to understand.

However, Viktor did define exclusive boundaries with other peers, too, when he was not ready for interaction, wanted to secure his own space, and/or felt threatened by the actions of others. Indeed, even young children's peer relationships involve political negotiations of timeliness, being understood, and the need for autonomy (Yuval-Davis, 2015). Yet, possibly because of his sparse initiatives to peers, Viktor was rarely rejected and excluded by others.

Among Elias, Lenni, and Rasmus, there appeared to be an ongoing competition between Elias and Rasmus for Lenni's attention and approval. The means of exclusion used by Rasmus towards Elias were both visible and direct, and yet consciously veiled and unspoken.

> *At the campfire site, we find that the sausage stick, carefully guarded by Elias, is missing. "Rasmus took it, cut it off, and threw it away," says Lenni, who arrived at the scene. Thus begins a contentious negotiation between Lenni and Rasmus about touching another's goods and breaking them. Elias sits quite quietly on the ground, leaning on his hands, and saying little. Lenni tries to defend Elias and help Rasmus see that he did wrong, but Rasmus is very reluctant.* (Observation, extract 8)

Elias was often subjected to exclusionary means and adopted the state of humility, being aware that what he said or did would not necessarily change anything. Instead, Lenni often took the position of a leader when defining moral order. He argued against the

hierarchical order between the children and lectured others on what is morally right or wrong (Mammen et al., 2021). Rasmus often responded to Lenni's outings by leaving the scene. Hence, in their peer relationships, there was not only a power struggle between Elias and Rasmus over Lenni's attention but also a struggle for superiority between all of them.

In Elli and Tom's relationship, making exclusive boundaries was relatively rare and occurred typically due to the children's frustration with themselves, rather than deliberate exclusion of the other. Usually, Elli vented her frustration at not being able to get involved in other's plays by direct practices, such as messing up peer's play, or by getting at another child. As the year progressed, she also used this approach on Tom, and through her actions, she practiced exclusion of Tom and their confidential and evolving relationship. Yet it seemed that Elli vented her frustrations more on Tom rather than the other way around.

> *Tom's alertness seems to have dropped a bit, and he goes between my back and the couch into a "hole." Elli first cancels to sit in the arms of Aada, who sits on the morning circle pillows, but when PEPPI asks to take the pillows back to the tree on the wall, and Aada and Elias also go to take theirs, Elli moves away from Aada's arms and goes to the mirror cabin to look at the audiobook. She watches and listens to the book for a while until she suddenly gets up and comes from behind me, slamming the hard book right on Tom's head. Tom begins to cry, and I immediately begin to pet and comfort him.* (Observation, extract 9)

In relation to the other presented cases, the exclusive boundaries in Elli and Tom's relationship appear different. They were not so much directed at the peers or their actions directly but indirectly at the child's own dissatisfaction with their current experience of being seen and noticed by others. Thus, exclusion takes on multiple forms and meanings in young children's peer relationships, which can sometimes be quite detached from the core of peer interaction and rather based on children's individual desires, feelings, and needs (Juutinen et al., 2018).

Discussion

This study aimed to examine how the politics of belonging are manifested in the peer relationships of children within an integrated ECEC group setting. The results showed that belonging is built through different boundary-making and ongoing negotiation processes, which essentially involve children's interpretations of their own and each other's needs, goals, and activities. Children's relationships and interactions with their peers are always unique. However, it is noteworthy that in all the different types of peer

relationships, building inclusive and exclusive boundaries through negotiations related to power, hierarchy, acceptance, and mutuality is indeed common.

Belonging represents symbolic orders of power, and its political nature includes exercising power to achieve various hegemonic goals (Yuval-Davis, 2015). The present study showed that hegemonic positions and positions that were somewhere in between (Nagel, 2011) were formed and negotiated between children in need of support and those who officially received no support. A key aspect of the politics of belonging in the children's peer relationships was the hegemonic status that different children had and negotiated depending on intersectional circumstances—that is, situation, time, and place (Yuval-Davis, 2015). Through the expressions of limits and use of power, the children could shut others out of not only the same physical space but also from the social space of negotiation (Woodhead & Brooker, 2008).

In this study, children who needed support, in particular, mirrored each other's feelings and actions, creating an embodied link between them. Koivula and Hännikäinen (2017) investigated the formation of emotional bonds and connections in children's peer relationships, which includes reciprocal interaction, shared experience, and joint play (also Pollak et al., 2023). They found that, in ECEC, the formation of emotional bonds takes time; however, a sense of community is constructed as they develop. According to the results, the embodied forms that the emotional bonds between children take is an essential factor that guides their interpretations of each other's goals, needs, and desires and is thus centrally present in the politics of belonging in children's peer relationships (see Barrett & Lindquist, 2008). While children's social and emotional skills may be the area in which a child receives special support in ECEC, the emotional bonds created between children in need of support appear to be central to interpreting the timeliness of belonging and negotiating it, recognizing the different intentions of actors, and striving to understand the laws of reciprocity. Making exclusive boundaries based on these embodied bonds with each other, such as in the case of Viktor and Tom, was a symbolic exercise of power, through which children sought to ensure the safe circumstances of their belonging (Viljamaa et al., 2017; see Yuval-Davis, 2015).

The politics of belonging in children's peer relationships is a tense field, where the negotiations of hierarchy and acceptance are marked by the importance of intersectional factors and the multidimensional ways they participate in these negotiations. Previous research showed that children under 6 years typically form peer relationships with children with whom they identify (McPherson et al., 2001; Wang, 2020). However, the results of this study unveiled that the so-called homophily principle, i.e. the likeness and

understanding of similar (see King et al., 2023), can manifest itself in different meanings for children who need support and those who do not.

For children who received support, similarities, as in Viktor and Tom's case, were a guiding factor in making exclusionary boundaries of belonging, and differences, such as in Elli and Tom's case, were a unifying factor. On the other hand, for children who received no support, the principle of homophily guided mutual interaction and the negotiation of inclusive boundaries of belonging. However, as the peer relationships deepened, the characteristics of the peer that were foreign to oneself became visible and led to exclusion. Even young children make interpretations about their own and each other's bodies and embodied forms of ownership, such as clothing (Skattebol, 2006), which can challenge the belonging of children who appear to be "strangers" to their peers. It is, therefore, appropriate to ask what role cultural and material factors play in shaping the politics of belonging among young children.

Conclusions

In this study, I examined the politics of belonging in young children's peer relationships by considering the perspectives of children in need of support as well as those who do not need it. The findings were similar to those of previous research (Johansson et al., 2024), such as the tendency that children have to construct belonging, particularly with peers whom they recognize as having similar traits as themselves, and the tensions, power relations, and opportunities for agency related to the negotiations of belonging in children's peer relationships (Puroila et al., 2021; Sevón et al., 2023). Indeed, the findings are encouraging, showing that peer relationships are an important arena for children to learn about defining their own and considering others' boundaries of belonging, as well as to negotiate safe and reliable interaction relationships, irrespective of whether the child needs support or not (Kankaanranta et al., 2017; Syrjämäki et al., 2023). The results highlight that in ECEC children take the ownership of their individual and community belonging on their own terms – both children who need intensified or special support, and those who do not need support (Suhonen et al., 2017). However, children's negotiations of belonging should be understood in a more multifaceted way, and their subtle ways of building belonging should be prioritized in the pedagogical activity of ECEC, e.g. in free play both indoors and outdoors, in supervised activities and their organization, and in various everyday transition situations, as well as in research.

One of the limitations of this study is the exclusion of the views and actions of ECEC professionals and guardians from the research setting. It is noteworthy that considering

their perspectives is essential for further research as this would allow for a more in-depth study of the politics of belonging built in children's peer relationships and in the wider context of ECEC (Berge & Johansson, 2021; Emilson & Eek-Karlsson, 2022; Juutinen & Kess, 2020; Kemple & Hartle, 1997).

Further studies should also focus more deeply on the criteria for placing different kinds of children—that is, whether they need support or not—in "an integrated group." It is important to note that children who need support have an equal right to participate and belong to ECEC communities (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2018). However, based on the results of this study, it is critically important to ask the following questions: Are children's individual needs, skills, and inclinations given sufficient space to develop and flourish in child-to-child peer relationships? When are children with similar and different support needs placed together in the same group? To understand the correspondence between the values of the Nordic education system and the realization of children's belonging more broadly (Phil et al., 2018), it might be advisable to examine how the issues examined in this study manifest themselves in groups of children in ECEC with different compositions. More research is needed on these issues to support ECEC and decision-making that serves the interests of each child as well as ECEC communities.

Finally, future studies should take children's own participation in the production of research data into account more widely than at present. In the future, appropriate ways should be considered, both from the perspective of research implementation and methods of communicating with children, to enable children to participate in the study of research data and to invite them into the research process as genuine co-investigators.

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