

THE ROLE OF ARTEFACTS DURING TRANSITION INTO THE PEER GROUP: 1- TO 3-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE ON TRANSITION BETWEEN THE HOME AND THE PRESCHOOL IN SWEDEN

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how young children construct and master, with the help of artefacts, their very first institutional relations with peers, and how they handle the preschool practice during the transition period between the home and the preschool. The discourse analysis is based on ethnographic data from the introduction period of two children in the Swedish preschool. The results highlight that these young children are competent agents in their own transition. They use artefacts as tools for their own purposes; for negotiating places, creating relationships, and learning norms in their interactions with peers. The findings add to the understanding and significance of children's perspective regarding their own transition and the role of the artefacts in it, which has conceptual and practical implications for researchers as well as practitioners worldwide.

Introduction

This article is about how young children (1 to 3 years of age), newcomers, create relationships with peers in the Swedish preschool, with a special focus on the introduction period during their transition between home and preschool. In Sweden, about 87% of all 1- to 5-year-olds spend much of their daily time in this kind of institution, while their parents work or study (Skolverket, 2010). Markström (2005) claims that the preschool nowadays can be seen as compulsory for children in Sweden, even though their participation is optional. The preschool is in this way incorporated in the life-long learning education (SOU, 1997), and in the curriculum the shared responsibility for the child between the state and the parents is also stressed (Skolverket, 2010).

Research has shown that both parents and teachers have to support children in their separation and adjustment process, in order to achieve a successful introduction (Brooker, 2008). Few studies have focused on the experiences of the main actor of the introduction, the child, and how they interact with their peer group during this period (e.g. Dalli 2000, Thyssen 2000). Thus, we need to better understand and generate more detailed knowledge about what happens from the child's point of view during the introduction period in order to better understand the transition from home to preschool.

The aim of this study is to show how young children construct and master their very first institutional relations in the peer group, and how they make use of the artefacts in the preschool during the transition period. It seeks to gain a deeper knowledge of the role of artefacts as cultural tools in the children's transition to the preschool, and how children understand themselves in the preschool environment. The study examines (a) how contact is initiated between the newcomers and the other children, and (b) how newcomers use/interact with material sources in the preschool setting.

The Swedish context

Children in Sweden attend preschool from the age of one. In the preschool practice, this period begins with a short visit by the children and their parent(s). Gradually, the time is extended and the children take part in routines and activities to an increasing extent. From the staff's point of view this period is valuable because it is a time for building good relationships with both the child and the parents, which will constitute the necessary basis for future work and collaboration with the family (Simonsson & Markström, 2013).

The start of preschool can be the first time a child leaves the known and secure place of home, to be on their own together with unfamiliar adults and children in an institutional context. Furthermore, not only does the child meet the staff and the other children who already have a preschool history, including relationships and networks, but also a completely new material environment – the playground, the interior of the preschool, artefacts. Many young children have not yet acquired verbal language and must therefore communicate with the whole body (materiality) within the new social and material world the preschool represents. This interaction with the preschool environment and its actors (both human and non-human) are of importance for who the child will become in the preschool (Simonsson & Thorell, 2010).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical basis of this study is chosen from the social studies of childhood (James & Prout, 1990; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). Issues in childhood studies have been influenced by the actual historical period, cultural place, political intentions and certain theories of children and childhood.

One of the fundamental concepts in this study is *children's agency*, that children are active in constructing their own lives (James & Prout, 1990; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Prout, 2005). This means that children actively create their childhoods, that is, children are 'doing' childhood. The child's point of view (inferred from the child's behaviour, including dialogue) is used here to analyse how children act during their introduction period, and how they manage and create meanings by themselves.

Several Swedish studies focus on children's childhoods in preschool (Simonsson, 2004; Markström, 2005; Halldén, 2007; Simonsson & Thorell, 2010). However, these Swedish studies have been carried out in already established groups, while the question of how children are 'doing' childhood, and how these are accomplished during the introduction period, is a so far neglected research area. It can be argued that a new child entering the world of the preschool will meet a set of norms and expectations, which they have to discover, react to and actively interpret. These norms and expectations are closely tied to actors, artefacts and structures. Children have the competence to position themselves and others in interactional and discursive practices (Davies & Harré, 1990). These interactions with peers are important to understand because, through them, children create and share their peer culture (Corsaro, 1997) in the preschool community.

The second key point in this study is that all communication includes constructions and exchanges of meanings, and through such communicative processes we acquire knowledge (Säljö, 2000). The social life has discursive as well as material components, which also include *artefacts* - another central concept in this study. According to Säljö (2000), material resources, such as artefacts, are manifestations of human knowledge and insights and are used by human beings to organise relationships on a macro level as well as on a micro level. Hodder (1994) argues similarly, that people experience and make meaning of the material world. Studies on how, and for what purposes, artefacts/objects are used by children in

different contexts are numerous (e.g. in fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology and education). Winnicott (1971) defined the 'transition object' as something that is neither a part of the child nor of the mother, and claimed that the child uses the transition object to compensate for the mother's absence. Developmental theorists, for instance Vygotsky (1978), point out that child development is the result of interaction between humans and their social environment. It involves cultural artefacts, and by acquiring and mastering these resources we can extend our mental capacities and master our own behaviour.

Researchers in educational and childhood studies have drawn attention to the material aspects of children's lives (Nordin Hultman 2004; Prout 2005; Lenz Taguchi 2010). In the field of child studies it is claimed that a lot of things/artefacts are produced for children, because adults have a certain conception that the children need certain material things in order to realise a certain kind of childhood. In that way we are also constructing a materiality of childhood, as things to play with (Sutton-Smith, 1986; Nelson & Nilsson, 2002), books (Heath, 1983; Simonsson, 2004), teaching materials (Heikkilä, 2006) and other types of 'kids' stuff' (Johansson, 1999). Thus, these cultural products/artefacts for children represent resources that can be used in different practices and that can contribute to, for instance, the children's socialization into a certain culture (Corsaro, 1997).

In several ethnographic studies Corsaro (1979, 1985, 1997, 2003) has shown that children (2 to 5 years of age) are frequently concerned with gaining access to ongoing events. His detailed analysis of children's access strategies has revealed that entry to play is hard work for children because they have to use appropriate access strategies. One strategy found is the offering of an object to one or more of the participants in an ongoing play activity. However, as Corsaro's primary interest is children's verbal routines, he has not specifically focused on children's use of artefacts in peer interaction. However, his studies show that children appropriate objects from the adult world when constructing interactive spaces with peers. In children's collective processes, artefacts are resources in the production of *peer culture* (Corsaro, 1997) but also provide a way for the individual child to gain experiences which in turn develop his or her ability to act as a competent agent.

In the field of sociology of childhood, Prout (2005) discusses the importance of artefacts in the lives of human beings. Social life is to a great extent produced through artefacts, and this means that the boundary between human and non-human entities is a question of negotiation. Thus, the value of an artefact/material object is not the thing itself but its capacity to provide agency, for example, to 'connect' a child to a network of other children.

In light of the studies referred to here, the implications for this study are first that we produce numerous artefacts for children, and second that the meaning of the artefacts is created by the actors/children in everyday practices.

Transition between home and preschool

Research on the transition between home and preschool focusing on the introduction period is limited. Children's entry into the child care system has been studied both within the psychological (eg. Balaban, 2006) and the socio-psychological research fields (eg. Dalli, 2000). In the latter field, some studies focus upon children's participation in their transition and show that their experiences of successful transitions in early childhood are important for their future transitions and for their success in education (eg. Brooker, 2008). Some other studies, taking the perspective of the child, show the ability of young children to adapt socially and emotionally to a new environment (Hårsman, 1985, 1994; Lindahl, 1995), their ability to construct relations with peers (Simonsson & Thorell, 2010), the group introduction

to preschool in Sweden from a gender perspective (Månsson, 2011), their acting in the 'life-world' of Danish day care (Thyssen, 2000), and their relation to new adults in a New Zealand preschool context (Dalli, 2000). Few of these studies have explicitly focused on what children 'do' and how they handle the artefacts in the peer group during the transition period, which is the aim of this study.

The research focusing on transition predominantly highlights the transition to school (e.g. Bartholomew & Gustafsson, 1997; Broadhead, 2001; Corsaro & Molinari, 2005, Lago 2014), or the transition from different types of care/nursery/preschool (toddlers) to preschool class/kindergarten (Blatchford, 1983; Martinique Naud & Florin, 2002). Transition from preschool class/kindergarten to compulsory class is also well described, showing the complexity of those processes (Karlsson, Melander, Pérez Prieto & Sahlström 2006; Kienig 2013; Ackesjö, 2013; Fabian 2013; Lago, 2014; Simonsson & Lago 2015). However, we need to better understand the transition between home and preschool, with a focus on children's participation based on their perspectives and experiences.

The study

The present exploration is part of a larger research project looking at the transition between the home and preschool, and it highlights how the introduction period was carried out in the preschool from the children's and the teachers' perspectives. In this article, only the children's perspective and their participation in their transition are in focus, and the introduction to preschool is viewed as a social phenomenon. In contrast to earlier studies of the introduction period at preschool, which mainly take psychological perspectives (; Zazzo, 1976; Scopesi, 1981; Blatchford, 1983; Hårsman, 1985; 1994; Lindahl, 1995; Martinaud & Florin, 2002), this study has taken an ethnographic approach inspired by Corsaro's work (1997, 2003). That is, the newcomers' everyday life at the institution was followed and studied in the naturalistic context. The ethnographic approach is also motivated from the new sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1990) in order to highlight the children's perspective on social relations and their peer culture. In this way the participants' perspective (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1987) can be shown, that is, how the newcomers deal with, act and perform in different preschool situations.

One preschool, situated in one of the major cities in Sweden, with a class for 1- to 5-year-old children, was selected for the study. This preschool, run by the municipality in an area with various socio-economic conditions, had multiple introductions at the same time, which was a criterion for selection for the study. The group consisted of 26 children (12 boys and 14 girls, no siblings in the group), and included 7 newcomers during the observation period. The present study is based on video-recordings of two of these newcomers; one boy (Ludvig, 1:6 years) and one girl (Anna, 3 years) (in total 17 hours of video-recorded material), field notes and informal talks with the staff. The study of each child's introduction was carried out during a period of two weeks, and the author spent approximately one month at the preschool. This included parents' and newcomers' drop-off and pick-up activities either in the hall or in the preschool playground, meal situations, free play situations and circle times (recorded for each child). The video observations focus on the newcomers' interactions with their peers and range in length from a couple of minutes up to half an hour. The use of a hand-held camera made it possible to smoothly follow and document the newcomers' movements and activities both indoors and outdoors without disturbing the natural flow of play.

The data collection in the preschool has followed the Swedish Research Council's ethical guidelines (Vetenskapsrådet, 2012). Names and other identifiers have been de-identified. All of the parents were informed in detail about the study and its implementation, written

agreements were given by the parents regarding their children's participation, and they had the option to withdraw their participation in the study whenever they wished to do so. All of the contacted parents (with newcomers) agreed to participate in the study. If a child and/or the parents indicated that they felt uncomfortable during the recording, the camera was turned off (it happened on one occasion for example, when the parent and the newcomer had a conflict). I was sensitive to the children's non-verbal signals; if, for instance, they frowned, looked down or left the site, I stopped the recording.

Microanalyses of video data was undertaken as it is possible to more fully analyse the newcomers interactional work with focus on events where they are involved with artefacts and peers. All the video sequences were transcribed, indexed and coded in their full length. In order to find answers to the research questions, a discourse analysis with concepts such as knowledge, power and subjectivity (Davies & Harré, 1990; Walkerdine 1990) is of importance and was therefore carried out. The preschool is here viewed as an arena in which discourses are constructed and where different subject positions are offered. The following question guided the analyses: How did the newcomers use material resources to create interaction and involvement in ongoing activities?

Results

During the introduction period, which constitutes a kind of passage during the transition from the children's everyday life in the family (home) to the open and public everyday life in the preschool, it was observed that the newcomers were very interested in different preschool artefacts/material objects. The following analysis of the data shows that the artefacts are important in the children's interactions and organisation of their interactive spaces (Corsaro, 1985). Three themes have been identified, namely i) to create a place of comfort ii) the right to use an artefact, and iii) to facilitate involvement in ongoing activity.

Creating one's own 'comfort' place

The following example illustrates how children recognize and give meaning to certain artefacts during an introduction. Anna, in one of her very first days in preschool, discovered a red tricycle and rode it in the preschool yard. Her mother had explained to the staff that Anna liked to ride a bike. In her second week of the introduction period, when Anna stayed in the preschool yard for her very first time (one hour) without her parents, she was very shy and restrained and seemed a bit lost. However, at that time she rediscovered the red bike.

Example 1

Anna walks to the shed and picks up the red tricycle. She rides directly to the sand pit, which is in the centre of the preschool yard. There, she sits for a long time on the tricycle, following her peers' play activities in the sand pit. She sits there until her parents come back. The following day, Anna repeats the activity with the tricycle from the day before, and continues to observe the peer activities in the sandbox while waiting for her parents.

The start of preschool is a transformative period, and the child needs to handle the foreign environment, including new adults and peers, without parents. Above, Anna orientates to the artefact she knows well and masters. Initially, she uses the tricycle to move in the preschool yard, and then chooses a location where she stops the tricycle and just sits on it. One could interpret the situation as Anna being alone and doing nothing. But, if we highlight this situation from the child's perspective, we can see her strategy to use and construct the artefact (tricycle) as a place from which she can observe her peers and their play from a distance. She

is not involved in those play activities, but passively and safely follows them. From the educators' perspective she is occupied with a preschool activity (cycling), that is, she is using a preschool artefact and the staff therefore do not need to take action to activate her. Moreover, children create and give meaning to their own places (Halldén, 2007; Simonsson, 2004, 2007). Here it can be noted that the artefact has two functions. First, it assists Anna to create her own comfort place, that is, a place where she can feel safe in the foreign environment. Second, the artefact helps her in that place, to get a stronger position as an active explorer, even though she is just observing her peer environment.

The right to use an artefact

One part of being a preschool child is to know who has the right to, for example, a certain toy. Johansson (1999) showed, in her study about young children's lived experiences of values and norms in everyday life in preschool, that the children actively defended their rights to things. From that point of view it is interesting to follow how the newcomers master different situations.

Ludvig had several times, both indoors (Simonsson & Thorell, 2010) and outdoors, given attention to specific artefacts, namely toy cars, often used in the peers' ongoing play.

Example 2

Two boys and the newcomer Ludvig are in the sand pit. The boys are playing with fire trucks and building roads in the sand. There is also a big fire station. Ludvig comes to them and pulls the fire station closer to himself. Axel (3 years), who is sitting in front of the fire station, says "NO! NO! What are you doing!" while driving the fire truck on the fire station. Ludvig continues to pull the fire station. "Stop, stop! Go away!" Axel says, and pulls back the fire station. Ludvig looks at Axel, and takes his hands off the fire station.

Ludvig's non-verbal actions can be understood as if he uses his experiences and strategies from home, but his strategy is met with opposition. The older boys (in terms of both chronological age and as members of the preschool group) have constructed a joint play arena where the artefact Ludvig wants helps them organise the activity. At this moment Ludvig is not included in the fellowship and he is not invited to take part in the play activity. In preschool, toys are one part in the organisation of the children's social life, and they can be tools for inclusion as well as exclusion. Here, the newcomer meets the established preschool group's own norm system of how to regulate the distribution of toys. From Ludvig's point of view, the situation can be interpreted as if he in this way learns that when other children are interested in the same toys (artefacts) as he is, he needs to compete for these toys. Thus, the child discovers he will not automatically get everything he wants (Johansson, 1999). Ludvig also has to learn which behaviour is appropriate in a certain playgroup. The example illustrates that Ludvig's non-verbal strategy of negotiation does not turn out successfully as he is not invited to take part in the other boys' play. He is thus not positioned as a competent and attractive playmate and consequently has no power in this situation. Clearly, the other boys are successful in protecting their interactive space (Corsaro, 1985).

To sum up, the example shows how children in an established group, right from a newcomer's first days at preschool, use verbal and non-verbal communication to tell the newcomer what rules in relation to artefacts are valid and how to act to be regarded as a competent preschool child.

Facilitating involvement in ongoing activity

This section illustrates the newcomers' involvement in common forms of play that took place during free play. In contrast to the previous theme, *The right to use an artefact*, the artefact is here used to establish contact, involvement and for participation in joint play. The example shows how, during his second week of introduction, Ludvig gained access to an ongoing play activity in which a certain artefact was needed. As the transcript starts, Ludvig is watching a small group of boys riding tricycles in the preschool yard.

Example 3

Ludvig walks up to the boy, Leo, who just stopped nearby, and puts his hand on the handlebar of the tricycle. Leo (3 years) yells "No! No!" Ludvig immediately releases his hand from the handlebar. At the same time another boy, pulling a pull car, just passes them, and suddenly Ludvig takes the string from him. The boy begins to howl and cry. The teacher, seeing the situation, offers a similar pull car to Ludvig, but he refuses to accept it and walks away from the situation. He then notices a tricycle, which nobody is using. He stops walking, looks around the tricycle, then walks closer to it, walks around it twice, and looks around again. After that, he sits down on the tricycle, looks around, and then rides away after the group of cycling boys.

When Ludvig discovers the boys' activity, he obviously wants to participate, and starts actively looking for a tricycle. He shows this by putting his hand on Leo's tricycle, but is met with resistance by Leo. Artefacts which are involved in ongoing activities often require negotiation. However, educators can help children in such situations by offering other similar or optional artefacts to satisfy the children's requests or desires. In the example above, the teacher wants to help Ludvig get a pull car, as she thinks that is what he wants. However, she is not aware of the whole situation. Educators often help disgruntled children who indicate that they would like to have certain artefacts, even if the staffs are not always aware of how a whole situation has developed. Ludvig does not accept the teacher's assistance and leaves the arena. It appears that the artefact was not so important to him.

When Ludvig finds a free tricycle, he is not sure if it is available and therefore controls its status (to see if it belongs to a friend, or if it is involved in an ongoing play activity). When he gets access to the tricycle, he follows the peers. The analysis shows in detail the child's strategy to acquire temporary ownership of the artefact, but also the artefact's capacity to help him link to and approach the cycling boys.

The following example shows another way to use the artefacts of the preschool, namely as tools to establish contact and involvement in ongoing play. During the introduction period Anna was very shy and never initiated contact with the other children. But she watched their activities from nearby. The example below illustrates her very first attempt to establish contact with a younger girl, Johanna (2:5), with the help of an artefact, at the end of her second week at the preschool. Johanna had a puzzle with ten pieces in front of her on the table. Anna was sitting still and looking at Johanna's activity, and after a while she touched the pieces and added a new piece to the puzzle.

Example 4

"No" says Johanna, and removes Anna's piece of the puzzle. Anna takes away Johanna's piece. Johanna protests and says "No!", and at the same time she looks very intensely at her. Anna puts back that piece of the puzzle, and when Johanna tries to place a new one, Anna points to the correct place to put the piece and says "There". Johanna continues to do the puzzle and when she fails, Anna helps her by showing her the right place. After that, Anna gives the pieces to Johanna one at a time. Gradually the

girls take turns placing the pieces of the puzzle. On one occasion Johanna tries to put one piece in several ways but she fails each time. Anna helps her by showing her the right place for that piece. After that they solve the puzzle together.

Johanna had initiated this activity, which gives her the right to make choices about how to do the puzzle and with whom. When Anna tries to get access to the activity, by using a non-verbal strategy, she meets resistance. Anna therefore chooses a new strategy to get involved, namely by showing the younger girl where to put the pieces. Johanna shows that she has accepted Anna's access to the play arena, and also confirms her position as a more competent participant in their joint activity. Anna occupies a stronger position in the play activity, in which she can show her competence in doing the puzzle regarding shape and placement, and finally her capability to advise Johanna. The above analysis seems to suggest that the newcomer Anna, with the help of the artefact, is able to show her competences and to position herself in a more powerful subject position in their play.

To sum up, the artefacts of the preschool may be seen as offers of action to the children. They can use the artefacts for their own purposes and from their own interest, but they can also use the artefacts as means to get into, or to negotiate positions within, the peer group. According to Prout (2005), it is through artefacts that children are engaged or engage others.

Concluding remarks

Transition between home and preschool is much more than children's adjustment to new settings. This study offers insight into the way that very young children handle their own transition in social relation to peers. The general finding of the analyses above was that children are active in the transition processes and that their experiences and "voices" give us valuable knowledge about their perspective on transition. This observation is in line with those of several previous studies regarding children's experiences of transition (eg. Dalli, 2000; Thyssen, 2000; Brooker, 2008; Simonsson & Thorell, 2010).

The study also shows that the newcomers initiate contacts, operate in their peer groups, and start their relational work with their peers, right from the beginning of their preschool period, which has implications for their entrance to the peer culture. Brooker (2006) states that 'peer culture may exert a stranglehold on individual children's choices' (p. 126). This study suggests that the newcomers, during their transition, need to figure out how their choices and desires (for things or activities) can be realised, or not, in relation to peers.

Furthermore, the results indicate that the newcomers assign an important role to the artefacts in their relational work during the transition to preschool, and they are used in a variety of complex ways in order to manage the challenges of everyday life at the preschool. The data suggest that these newcomers also produce and negotiate the meaning of the artefacts (Säljö, 2000). Three aspects of the newcomers' use of artefacts were highlighted in the study: for negotiating places; creating relationships, and; learning norms in their interactions with peers - all with respect to the other children in the peer group. They used the cultural artefacts for their own purposes and interests, and also as tools and sources for creating different kinds of positions in their peer interactions during their very first days at preschool. The children's competences with respect to certain artefacts can also be utilised in negotiating processes. According to Prout (2005), artefacts are used as a way to get invited or to invite others to join activities. Thus, the importance of an artefact is often not the thing itself but, from the children's point of view, its capacity to give them access to interaction and play with others. This may help us understand the preschool introduction period in a new and different way, as well as its implications for educational practices.

This article opens up for new questions about what it means for young children to start preschool, how they 'do' and negotiate the transition, and how the preschool environment (teacher, children, artefacts) can support them. This is an important aspect for early childhood educators worldwide to reflect upon, as it has implications for their work in realising the 'good childhood'. Even though the present study has limitations, such as a limited number of newcomers and settings, the approach of using video-recordings of authentic situations and activities gives valuable insights into details of the children's own transition processes to those who work in such contexts.

In conclusion, this study points toward the importance of artefacts during the transition period – a period during which the newcomers themselves have to do 'hard work' to learn to be preschool children, to relate successfully to peers, to understand the peer culture, and to match the expectations in the preschool setting - and the conceptual and practical implications for researchers as well as practitioners worldwide.

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