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# Difference and closeness. Young children's peer interactions and peer relations in school

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## **Abstract**

This article examines expressions of difference and sameness and peer relations among children (aged 5-7) in school. The article concludes that children do not generally relate sameness or difference to their peer relations or to ethnicity or gender. Furthermore, the article demonstrates that the school setting plays a crucial role for children's peer interactions: The purpose of school activities directs children's expressions of difference and sameness, and the structures for peer interaction enable some relations and restrict others.

## **Keywords**

Children in school, children's relationships, closeness, difference, distance, peer interactions, peer relations, sameness, school setting

"When it comes to difference, children see things differently." This sentence concludes an advertisement for CBeebies, a BBC children's channel for young children, posted on Facebook on June 17, 2017 (BBC, 2017). The advertisement portrays 11 pairs of friends aged around four or five who differ with respect to gender, race, disability and size. The friends are asked how they differ from each other, and none of them point to the obvious differences (of for example race or gender). Rather, they highlight quite different aspects, like preferences for particular types of food or abilities at games and sports. The ad received more than a thousand comments from people all over the world. Some were critical, but most celebrated the inspiring beauty of "children's innocence" that they experienced from watching the ad. Several comments envisaged a better and more peaceful world, if adults could learn from children's perspectives, or at least stop passing on prejudice and racism to children. The underlying question is whether children actually do see difference differently when it comes to their peer relations, and if they do how their perceptions of difference might change due to influence from their surroundings.

Previous studies have established that children's feelings of belonging to peer groups determine (to a large extent) who they identify with (Allison, 2013). Thus, children experience sameness with those in their peer group and difference with those outside of their peer group. Studies, that take a particular type

of difference as their primary analytical focus, however, find that the difference in question (for example ethnicity or gender) does not determine children's peer relations when observed across and within peer groups (Sedano, 2012; Thorne, 1993). The present study embarks from this apparent discrepancy in the existing research, that children's perceptions of difference and sameness on the one hand is informed by their peer relations and that particular types of differences, on the other hand, play a minor role in children's relations with peers. Thus, this study takes a step back from investigations of children's social identities and specific differences in order to perform a more general investigation of the connection between children's markings of difference and sameness and their relations with peers in school. The analysis is based on observational, interview and survey data collected through fieldwork among children aged five to seven in two Danish schools.

### **Peer relations, difference and the school setting**

The work presented in this article is motivated by and contributes to research in the field of children's social life in institutions. Within this field, I draw on research that focuses specifically on children's peer relations and how these relate to difference and the school setting.

The present study is particularly influenced by the work of Corsaro (1985), Dunn (1988), and Hviid (1999) and their understanding of children's peer relations. These authors apply empirically driven micro sociological (Corsaro) and social psychological (Hviid and Dunn) perspectives and explore the nature of children's peer relations from the perspective of the children themselves. Corsaro and Hviid are especially occupied with children's play and the formation of peer relations through play. They both find that children's applied definition of a friend is "someone you play with" even if the children in the two studies belong to different age groups (three- to five- and six- to ten-year-olds respectively). Dunn, who draws on numerous studies with children of different ages, emphasizes that the nature of friendship changes, as children grow older. When children are around six, friends begin to develop emotional intimacy (e.g. in the form of trust and social support) that generally increases until adolescence. All three authors highlight that children generally consider friends highly important. Especially Hviid and Dunn focus on the emotional aspect of children's peer interactions and describe how children's peer relations are influential for the wellbeing of individual children.

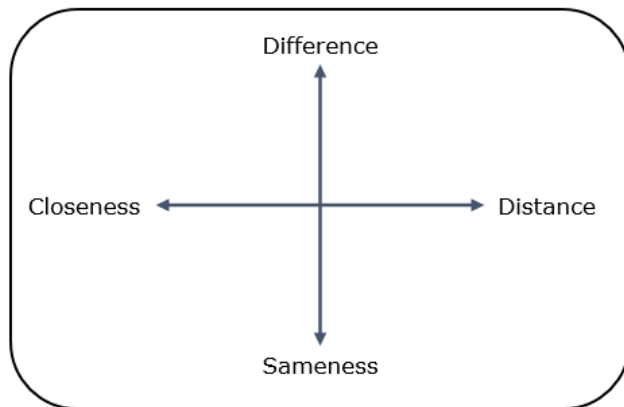
The present study shares the focus of Hviid, Dunn and Corsaro on children's perspectives of peer relations. Further, it builds on the finding that the peer relations of children in this study (aged five to

seven) are defined both by their level of intimacy (for example trust) and their level of interaction (for example play). Accordingly, peer relations are in this study conceptualized as physical and verbal markings of closeness or distance between peers as they are interacted by the children themselves.

Previous studies have generally investigated the connection between children's relations and perceptions of sameness and difference in two different ways. One approach exemplified by Gilliam (2009) and Connolly (2002) has been to explore which differences children accentuate within and between peer groups. Both authors conclude that race or ethnicity are central in children's understandings of how they are similar to and different from their peers and that many other differences (of for example behavior) are coupled with the ethnic/racial divide. The work conducted by Theodorou (2011) takes a similar approach and adds to the conclusions of Gilliam and Connolly that racial and ethnic differences are also made relevant in processes of peer exclusion among children. The present study draws from these studies a particular concern for differences marked along race and ethnicity.

The other approach to peer relations and difference focuses on the influence of a particular form of difference – for example ethnicity or gender – on peer relations. The work of Thorne (1993) on gender and of Sedano (2012) and Iqbal et al (2017) on ethnicity follows this approach and they conclude that the differences investigated only partially impact children's peer relations. Sedano even speaks of the 'irrelevance of ethnicity' for the structure of children's peer groups (2012). The present study is particularly motivated by the fact that this conclusion challenge well described connection between children's peer relations and their perceptions of difference. In order to investigate this connection more generally (not just with respect to for example gender or ethnicity) and to understand how difference can influence and not influence peer relations, I approach children's peer relations and markings of sameness and difference as two potentially unrelated forms of interaction (see the below Figure 1).

## SCHOOL SETTING



**Figure 1.** Sameness-difference and closeness-distance as unrelated types of peer interaction in the school setting.

Several studies on children's peer relations and difference between peers highlight the significant impact of the school setting for both perceptions of difference and peer relations (Anderson, 1995; Anderson, 2000; Connolly, 2002; Gilliam, 2009; Hviid, 1999; Schjellerup Nielsen, 2005). Particularly, such studies highlight the influence of teachers who (often implicitly and even unwillingly) communicate – through actions and language – specific differences and similarities between children. Other studies focus on different aspects of the school setting and on the impact on children's interaction in general (Epstein and Karweit, 2014). Such studies find, for example, that the physical school space creates certain opportunities and constraints that guide the nature and extent of children's interaction and that the values and expected behavior in particular situations influence peer relations (Bacete et al., 2014; Batten and Girling-Butcher, 1981; Højlund, 2001). The present study combines the two approaches in a general analysis of the impact of three aspects of the school setting on children's markings of sameness and difference and on peer relations (illustrated in Figure 1).

### **The fieldwork context**

Danish schools provide an interesting case for exploring the connection between the school setting and children's peer interactions and relations, because there is a large variety of quite different activities and situations within each school. The variety in activities is especially large in the younger grades, when most schools offer after-school activities in an after-school care center located on the school premises or close to the school. Activities at the after-school care center are always voluntary (contrarily to school activities) and include, for example, painting, outdoor cooking and indoor or outdoor games. During

school hours, the teaching is organized in modules of 90 minutes with 20-30 minute recesses in between. Often, there is also a five to ten minute break in the 90-minute modules. Teaching in grades zero and one covers five subjects: Danish, Math, Gymnastics, Music and Christianity. Sometimes school hours include an outing where the children go to the cinema or a nature park, for example.

In Danish schools, children are organized according to age in year groups. During school hours, children are divided into groups of 15-25 pupils, called the class (klassen). The class is the most central unit for organizing teaching in most schools, and this was also the case in the two fieldwork schools. In most schools, children stay with the same class throughout their 10 years of schooling, having almost all subjects together. During recess, children from the class are together with children in the same or the adjacent year groups. Both schools have divided the school grounds, so that older and younger children are separated. Often, a small group of teachers is associated with the class for several years in order to establish a safe and stable learning environment for the children. In the younger grades, classes also have a class pedagogue (klassepædagog). In the Danish context, pedagogues have a separate education in childcare. The after school care center employs exclusively pedagogues, no teachers.

The two fieldwork schools organized teaching, activities and groupings of children in very similar ways, but they differed in size and location. School A was situated in a middleclass suburban area with 600 pupils, a minority of which were ethnic minority children (both parents have immigrated to Denmark). School B was placed in a suburban area with both middleclass housing and poor housing. School B had 300 pupils, a majority of whom was ethnic minority children. The two classes contained 16 (B) and 21 (A) pupils in grade zero, increasing to 21 (B) and 23 (A) children in the first grade, due to new children coming in and some children leaving. Both classes had slightly more girls than boys, and a third of the children belonged to an ethnic minority in the class in school B and a fourth of the children in the class in school A.

## **Design and method**

The fieldwork schools were chosen in collaboration with the municipal school administration, who provided me with two schools that they perceived as well run. The two classes in the individual schools were chosen by the local school administration, and in both schools I was assigned to the class of the most experienced and skilled teacher. The municipal logic of this strategy was that I should not observe school settings that were potentially disrupted by for example inexperienced teachers or inefficient school

leaders. Both fieldwork classes are thus best-case examples of the provided structures for the teaching of young children in school. I chose to follow children aged five to seven who had just started school in order to observe how their peer relations and markings of difference and sameness would evolve through their first years in a school setting.

Except for two children in school A (for whom the parents would not give their consent), all children in the two classes participated in the study. Children and parents were presented to the scope of the project and informed that they could refuse to participate at any time. During the fieldwork observations of children, this right was invoked in two instances, when children asked me not to record specific episodes. The children gave their consent prior to each of the interviews, they participated in.

The fieldwork was divided into three periods: In each class, I spent 4 weeks of fieldwork at the beginning of the first school year, 3 weeks after 3-5 months and 2 weeks a couple of months into the second school year. This strategy was chosen to allow me to follow the children's relations over time, but it also allowed me enough continuous time in each location to become well acquainted with everything and everybody.

Since the objective of the study was to learn how the children themselves experience social relations with peers, I tried to interact with the children in the "least adult" kind of way (Corsaro, 1985; Mandell, 1988). This meant that I only interacted minimally with other adults (teachers and pedagogues), that I placed myself in the "child spaces" of the school (for example using children's facilities), and that I never asserted adult authority over the children. Moreover, I removed all visible "adult signifiers" and wore flat shoes, casual clothes with colors and no makeup or jewelry. I did not pursue a full participant role but often placed myself in the periphery of the children's activities, sometimes participating and sometimes observing (Warming, 2011). The children generally accepted my role as least adult, and often invited me to take part when they were playing. My participation in such play was occasionally challenged by children from other classes, who would ask who I was the teacher or parent of and what I was doing. In other cases, when children were hurt or in conflict and no other adults were around, children clearly expected and encouraged me to interfere and provide comfort due to my status as an adult.

The data collected during the fieldwork comprise interviews with children (17 interviews with pairs of children, three focus group interviews), 12 interviews with parents, teachers, pedagogues and other school professionals, 341 field notes containing structured and focused observations, 135 theoretical and methodological notes, 27 résumés of field conversations with children, teachers, pedagogues, drivers and

head teachers, and photos and drawings. Field notes were collected electronically in a template to ensure registration of time, place, situation, activity, objects, participants, interaction and dialogue. Field notes were jotted down on-site and transcribed in breaks or at the end of the school day. Most field notes focus closely on the interaction between specific children, but some register overall patterns of interaction between all children in specific settings.

The analysis of children's markings of sameness and difference, and closeness and distance exclusively employs observational data. All observational data was reviewed in a search for interactions in which children marked either sameness-difference or closeness-distance between all children in the two school-classes. Each of these categories was then analyzed with respect to the form, content, actors and functions of the markings. This analysis was followed by a search for systematic variation in the form, content, actors and functions of the markings of difference-sameness and closeness-distance across three aspects of the school setting: The purpose of the interaction, the community of peers available for interaction and the choice of interaction partners. These aspects are partly derived from the above-mentioned literature, and partly chosen to fit the empirical variation provided by the two fieldwork schools. The "purpose" of interaction refers to the overall aim of the activity or situation. For the activities in the two fieldwork classes, the general purpose is most often either learning or playing, but both of these categories can be subdivided into a myriad of sub-purposes. The "community of peers" refers to the body of children available for interaction in a particular situation. The communities of peers vary in size (number of children) and diversity (for example ethnicity, gender, and age), depending on the selection criteria. The "choice of interaction partners" refers to whether participants of concrete interactions are chosen by adults (most often teachers or pedagogues) or by the children themselves.

## **Markings of sameness and difference**

The young children in the two fieldwork classes mark sameness and difference with regard to a large variety of things, and they do it primarily through verbal interaction. Verbal markings of sameness and difference most often relate to children's experiences and possessions. Such markings are often expressed with great excitement, when children discover sameness between themselves and other children. Especially when children talk about their experiences, it can set off a whole avalanche of markings of sameness and difference, for example, when one child mentions that he has been to a particular amusement park (Djurs Sommerland) in the weekend:



Ane I went to Djurs Sommerland, last weekend.

Peter I went there last year.

Louise I am going next weekend.

Ane It was amazing, I went on Juvelen (very fast roller coaster) 10 times!

Peter I rode that 10 times last year as well.

Louise I don't like that one, it's too fast.

Noah I've never been to Djurs Sommerland.

Louise I prefer to ride the ponies.

Noah I've been to Fårup Sommerland (similar amusement park in a different part of the country) three times!

Ane I also rode the ponies.

Anya When I visited my aunt in Copenhagen, we went to Tivoli (amusement park in the capital city).

(...)

This kind of interchange evolves rapidly, and the theme keeps expanding and changing as more and more children contribute similar experiences. The topics of such avalanches of sameness do not necessarily refer to positive experiences, such as amusement parks. The children are just as excited when they talk about who had their house broken into. Further difference and sameness are equally interesting in this intellectual endeavor of comparing experiences, as the children thereby are learning about peers' and their own experiences.

Children mark sameness and difference physically through the way they arrange their bodies in specific locations. Such forms of marking are of a different and less conscious nature than the verbal markings, and they often reflect children's preferences for and interpretations of particular situations. For example, during a music lesson where children are placed in a circle and asked to perform various dance moves to a drum beat played by the teacher, most children participate enthusiastically with smiles and laughter

and energetic movements, a few others lower their gazes and stand more or less still in one place, only vaguely raising an arm or moving a foot. Clearly, these children display the same discomfort with the situation and presumably a lack of familiarity with dancing, but it does not seem to be a sameness that they are aware of in the situation. Similarly, at the after-school care center, where children most often decide themselves which activities they want to participate in, sameness and difference in the children's preferences are marked through their being in the garden, the doll room or the computer room.

The marking of sameness can function as an invitation and as a documentation of togetherness. Especially when children do not know each other very well, the marking of sameness provides a useful tool for initiating contact. However, the marking of sameness is also used as an invitation among children who already know each other and often play together as in the below example.

At the beginning of recess, Anders approaches his most frequent playmate Frederik. They are both wearing blue clothes.

Anders            I am blue, you are blue!

Anders is pointing to his own t-shirt and Frederik's trousers. Ahmed joins them. Frederik puts his arm around Ahmed and points to his shirt with blue prints on it.

Anders            You are blue as well! We are all blue! Shall we play outside today?

Frederik and Ahmed both nod and smile, and they start walking towards the door where they meet Amir, who sometimes plays with them as well.

Amir              Can I come too?

Anders looks carefully at Amir's clothes for a long time – even under his shoes. Finally he finds a small blue spot on the back of his shirt.

Anders            (cheering) Well, you have a little blue there!

Amir smiles and jumps up and down. Anders puts his arm around him, and they all walk outside.

The marking of sameness can also function as a visible sign of togetherness among children. This kind of marking is most often made consciously, as when a couple of inseparable girlfriends wear the same shoes and refer to them as 'friendship shoes'.

There is no distinct pattern in the actors who mark sameness and difference with each other. Children mark sameness and difference with almost every other child in the two fieldwork classes across primary interaction groups and gender, ethnicity and social class. With regard to the verbal markings, however, children need – to some extent – to have similar experiences and possessions to be able take part in the explorations of sameness and difference. If one has no conception of what an amusement park is, it is difficult to take part in a discussion of one's experiences of one.

## **Markings of closeness and distance**

In contrast to the markings of sameness and difference, the fieldwork children's markings of closeness and distance are primarily physical. Closeness is marked physically through touching (hugging, kissing, holding hands, sitting close together, stroking each other's hair and skin or wrestling). Distance is marked physically through the keeping or creating distance between bodies. It can be aggressive (pushing, hitting, kicking) or defensive (moving away, turning away, not responding). Physical markings of closeness and distance are highly conscious of peers and to some extent negotiated. Consider the following example involving Charlotte, Jesper and Muhammad:

All the children in the class and the teacher have gone to the gym to have photos taken. The children are sitting in line along the wall and wait for their turn. Charlotte is sitting next to Jesper. She puts her arm around his arm and snuggles up to him. He leans toward her. They sit together for a while without talking. Muhammad sits behind Charlotte in the line. He is holding a string of prayer beads and running it through his fingers. Charlotte asks if she can hold the beads, and Muhammad gives them to her. She tries to hold the pearls correctly, but cannot find the right way to do it. Muhammad takes her hand and places the pearls correctly. After a short while where Muhammad has been walking around the gym, he returns to Charlotte and Jesper, who are still sitting close together. Muhammad sits down in his place behind Charlotte and leans against her back. She does not move away but does not return Muhammad's gesture either. He stays leaned against her back for a couple of minutes until she asks him to stop. She asks him to move away three times, but he does not move. The teacher comes over and pulls him away asking "can't you hear that she is telling you to stop it?"

In this example, Charlotte is marking closeness with Jesper by snuggling up to him, and he agrees to the proposed level of closeness by leaning towards her. Charlotte shows positive interest in Muhammad's prayer beads, and he tries to mark closeness with her by almost lying over her back. To begin with,

Charlotte tolerates this gesture, but her lack of positive return signals to Muhammad that she does not agree with the level of closeness he is marking. Since Muhammad does not respect or understand Charlotte's signal, her markings of distance become more distinct and are eventually even verbalized.

Verbal markings of closeness and distance often refer directly to the relationship between peers: "We have been friends since kindergarten", "I love Camilla", "I hate Niels". However, closeness can also be marked by referring to experiences that children have had together, or knowledge they have of each other, as in the following example: The children are waiting in line in the classroom for the teacher to help them. While they are waiting, three girls are talking about a conflict that Rikke and Hamida had earlier on. Rikke says that she is not angry anymore and explains.

Rikke            Hamida can make me angry, but Natasja cannot make me angry.

Natasja        That is probably because I have been to your house and Hamida has not.

Rikke            (to Hamida) You have never been to my house.

Natasja        (to Hamida) And I am not telling what pet she has.

Hamida        (to Rikke) You have a rabbit!

Here, Rikke's relation with both Hamida and Natasja is directly connected to closeness and distance marked through knowledge (or lack thereof) about Rikke's home life and visits to her home.

Distance can be marked verbally as the preferred type of interaction with particular peers. Such permanent distance is not marked frequently, at least not verbally. However, in some cases when children talk to each other about their peer interactions quite profound distances can be marked. For example, after a prolonged game of catch and kiss (where girls run after and catch and kiss boys) during playtime, Nanna evaluates the activity with her friend Simone. Nanna explains that she does not want to catch and kiss all of the boys. In particular, she does not want to kiss Mehmet, because she finds him repulsive and thinks that he is always sweating. Here, the marking of distance functions as a defense against unpleasant interaction. This function applies both to more permanent preferences for interaction, as in the case of Nanna and Mehmet, and to momentary desire of distance between peers who are generally close.

Children who mark distance from each other are generally those who are uncomfortable (expresses anxiety or tension) in each other's company. In contrast, children who mark closeness with each other are generally those who trust each other and are comfortable (physically and emotionally relaxed) in each other's company. Verbal and physical markings are aligned and reflect the same level of closeness or distance between peers. Interestingly, peers mark closeness with a much larger group of children than their primary interaction group. Furthermore, children mark distance within their primary interaction group, especially during episodes of (passing or more permanent) conflicts.

## **School setting and peer interactions**

The following sections describe how children's markings of sameness and difference, and closeness and distance are related to different aspects of the school setting: purpose, community of peers and choice of interaction partners. I restrict my presentation to the cases in which I find a connection between setting and interaction.

### **Purpose**

In both fieldwork classes, the markings of sameness and difference are highly reflective of the purpose of a given activity. For example, when the children are working in their individual writing books with the purpose of learning how to write letters neatly, the following conversation takes place between Hanna, Angelina, Mehmet and Anders, who are sitting at the same table.

Hanna leans across the table to borrow an eraser from Angelina. She looks at Angelina's book.

Hanna (to Angelina) Oh, you are on page four. I'm also on page four. We are doing d's.

Angelina (smiling) D's are difficult.

Mehmet I'm on page six.

Hanna (looking in Mehmet's book, turning pages) Yes, but you don't write as many letters on each line. Look at mine, I have 12 b's on this line and you only have six.

Angelina (to Hanna) That's because you really make an effort to do it properly.

Anders I am only on page three, but that's because I was at the dentist yesterday, and the day before that I was also at the dentist with Kasper, because he asked me to go with him, because he had a tooth that the dentist was going to remove and he didn't want to go alone.

A specific learning purpose for a particular activity clearly directs the focus of the children, and the markings of sameness and difference follow this same direction. What is also evident from this example is that the criteria for understanding difference also follow the values and expectations linked to the learning purpose. You are supposed to do as much work as possible, but at the same time you are expected to make an effort to do it properly. These dynamics are quite similar to the situations that do not have specific learning purposes. For example, when children are engaged in a particular play situation, the sameness and difference marked will typically reflect the theme of the play for example soccer (same trainer, different skills, same favorite player) or imaginary making of witch's brew (different feelings toward spiders, same black pointed hat at home). Overall, the lines of difference and sameness are drawn along the children's experiences and possessions made relevant by the purpose of a particular activity, as well as their preferences for and interpretations of that particular purpose.

### **Community of peers**

The communities of peers establish restrictions for the availability of peers with whom closeness and distance can be marked. For example, in one of the fieldwork schools the distinction between different classes is taken very seriously and almost creates a "wall of distance". For example, in my first observation period, when children had just started school, I observed Aziza always playing with Aisha during recess. The two girls knew each other from kindergarten and started school at the same time but in two different classes. During the first year of school, Aziza became best friends with Ayah from her own class. In my last fieldwork period in the second school year, I observed a situation where Aisha and her class were walking across the schoolyard after a visit to the library. They walked straight past Aziza and Ayah, who were out on a five minute break with the rest of their class. Aisha and Aziza looked at but did not greet each other. I asked Aziza if she still sometimes played with Aisha, but she replied "you shouldn't play with anyone from the other classes". In her class, the children had – encouraged by the class pedagogue – developed a list of rules for peer interaction. One of the rules was that "you are not allowed to say no to playing with someone from your own class", implying that it is okay to say no to play

with someone who is not in the same class as you. In the other fieldwork school, where the class was not as central a community of interaction, because teaching and outings often involved several classes together, distance was not marked between peers of different classes in the same way.

Lines defined by the communities of peers did not necessarily inspire markings of distance, as in the case with Aisha and Aziza. For example, when boys and girls were separated during physical education or mathematics in order to create smaller groups of children they often questioned the forced distance. Similarly, siblings in different years struggle with the distance created between them by the establishment of communities of peers that strictly follow years, because they are not allowed to interact with their siblings during school hours.

### **Choice of interaction partners**

The choice of interaction partners influences both the level of closeness and distance marked and the selection of peers who mark closeness and distance with each other. When adults construct groups or pairs for interaction, they often use criteria such as gender, academic or language skills and frequency of interaction. For example, in both classes, children are assigned fixed places at tables for a certain period of time (1-3 months). At a four-seat table, a typical group of children would be two boys and two girls who do not interact frequently on their own initiative. Often, the four children at the table are asked to work together on their assignments. This frequent interaction with peers that children do not necessarily feel comfortable with increases the frequency of verbal or very direct forms of distance marking between peers who would otherwise simply keep a distance. For example, when Ditte and Bertil, who sit next to each other, are asked to place a schoolbag in the middle of the table between them, so that they cannot look at each other's test answers, they keep pushing the bag back and forth between them on the table, increasing the imaginary space between them. This pushing becomes more and more aggressive, and both Ditte and Bertil look increasingly frustrated.

The general rule during teaching in both fieldwork classes is that adults choose children's interaction partners. There are, however, often breaks in this structure, and the children are constantly challenging the adults' decisions, either by asking directly if they can change partner or simply by walking up to a different table to borrow something from one of their frequent interaction partners. When adults explicitly allow the children to choose interaction partners themselves, either during recess or as part of the teaching, markings of closeness are very frequent (hugging and holding hands), especially among the

most frequent interaction partners. At the after-school care center, on the other hand, where children always choose their interaction partners themselves, markings of closeness and distance are not frequent, and children generally interact more with peers outside of their primary interaction group.

## **Discussion**

The starting point for the presented analysis was to regard young children's markings of peer closeness and distance and their markings of peer difference and sameness as two separate types of interaction. The analysis has demonstrated that the two types of interaction differ with regard to the form, content, function and actors involved: Markings of closeness and distance are primarily physical and reflect children's levels of comfort in each other's company. Contrarily, markings of difference and sameness are primarily verbal and involve comparisons of children's experiences and possessions. Verbal markings of closeness involve communal experiences and special knowledge between peers and these markings are aligned with the physical markings of closeness. Physical markings of sameness and differences differ from the verbal markings as they reflect children's preferences for particular activities and places. Children mark difference as well as sameness with everyone in their class in intellectual explorations where they learn about their own experiences in relation to their peers. Contrarily, closeness is only marked between selected peers who feel comfortable in each other's company.

The analysis has demonstrated that the two types of interaction are influenced by different aspects of the school setting in which they occur: Children's markings of sameness and difference is highly influenced by the purpose of the interaction as defined by either children or adults. The community of peers available for interaction and the choice of interaction partners, on the other hand, are crucial for children's markings of closeness and distance. The community of peers creates restrictions for children's markings of closeness: Provisional communities such as divisions between boys and girls can be experienced as uncomfortable whereas permanent communities are internalized and potentially create emotional distance toward those peers outside of the community. Adult choice of children's interaction partners lead to frequent markings of distance between peers and subsequently to frequent markings of closeness between children who form primary interaction groups during recess or other breaks from adult choice of interaction partners. In settings where children choose their interaction partners themselves, markings of both distance and closeness are less frequent.

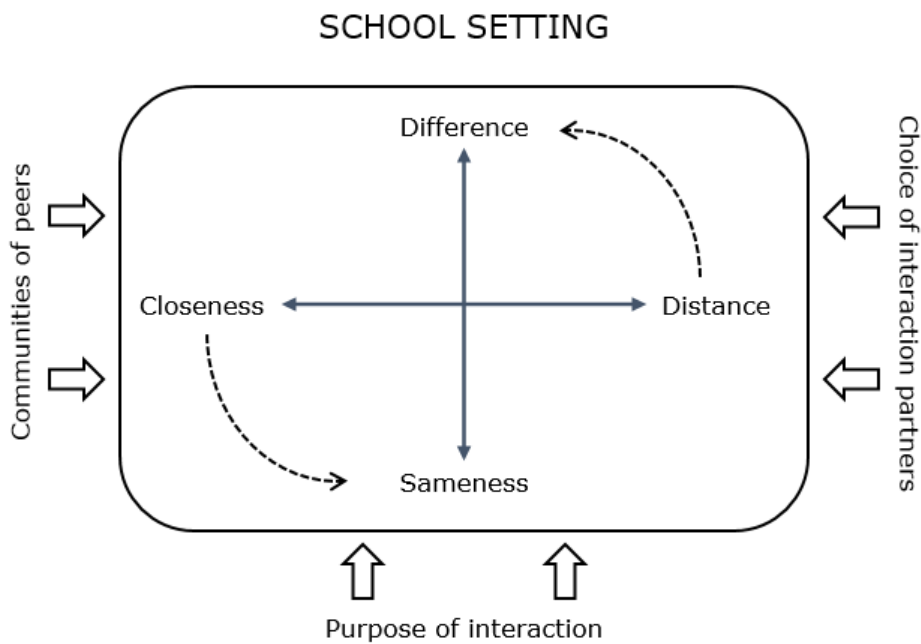


These conclusions have implications for the study of children's peer relations, for the study of children and difference, and for the study of children's social life in institutional settings. Further, the conclusions may have practical implications for the institutional support of children's social interaction. The contribution to existing studies of children's peer relations is first and foremost conceptual and methodological. As the analysis has outlined, children are constantly negotiating distance and closeness in order to place themselves in accordance with their level of comfort or discomfort in each other's presence. Accordingly, the analysis suggests a conceptualization of peer relations that includes such feelings of comfort or discomfort. This conceptualization is broader than those focusing specifically on peer relations in terms of for example power (Schjellerup Nielsen, 2005) and hierarchies (Hviid, 1999) and includes aspects of peer relations that are relevant for children's emotional well-being. Further, I suggest that relations should be understood not as categorical (e.g. Dunn, 2004) but as placed on a continuum between distance and closeness, discomfort and comfort. This conceptualization has two advantages: First, it enables analyses and comparisons of relations between all children (in the class), not just those who are friends or in the same peer group. Second, it enables analyses of changes in peer relations – if they become closer or more distant.

The contribution to the study of peer difference is twofold: First, the present study demonstrates that young children are more occupied with differences marked by their experiences and possessions and less with gender and ethnicity. Second, these differences are irrelevant for the relations between peers. Previous studies (e.g. Gilliam, 2009) have found that children highlight sameness with friends when asked with whom they identify. In accordance with Gilliam, this study finds that children accentuate sameness as a documentation of togetherness. However, there seems to be no general interdependence between peer difference and peer relations. Hence, my results are in line with the studies by Sedano (2012) and Thorne (1993) focusing on particular differences and demonstrating that these are (to a large extent) irrelevant for children's relations. My conclusions adds to these findings that differences in general (not just gender and ethnicity) are marked by children along lines reflecting individual experiences and preferences rather than along their relations (close or distant) with peers (even if such markings also occur). The validity of these conclusions, however, is restricted to the specific age-group in question (five- to seven-year-olds). In Corsaro and Eder's discussion of existing studies of children's peer cultures (1990), they conclude that children's social interactions become increasingly differentiated through childhood, beginning with a gendered differentiation and moving on to other areas as well.

The present study confirms the strong impact documented previously by for example Anderson (2000) of the school setting on children's understandings of difference and on their peer relations. This study contributes a focused understanding of the way in which the school setting affects children's perceptions of difference and their peer relations in quite different ways: The explicit, discursive content of teaching and the purpose of a particular activity frames the children's explicit markings of differences and sameness. The implicit structures for interaction defined by the community of peers available for interaction and the child- or adult choice of interaction partners, on the other hand, constitute restrictions and possibilities for children's peer relations. To a large extent, the question of peer relations in institutions is a question of availability. Children become close with those peers who are available for interaction across different setting in and outside of school. This finding also points to the importance of parents – especially for young children – as gatekeepers of interaction, a role that this study has not investigated.

How are we, then, to understand the nature of the relation between difference and peer relations in school? This study suggests that we should redirect our attention from children's explicit markings of difference and sameness as well as from discursive elements of the school setting and observe the indirect differences imposed through the school setting, in particular through the communities of peers available and the choices of interaction partners in schools (as illustrated in figure 2). These structures for interaction restrict and enable children's social relations which in turn influence (some of) children's markings of difference and sameness.



**Figure 2.** The interconnection between peer interactions as closeness-distance and difference-sameness and the impact of purpose of interaction, community of peers and choice of interaction partners.

In the two fieldwork classes, differences along the lines of ethnic minority/majority, gender, year-group, and especially school-class (klasse) impacted the communities of peers available for interaction when adults administered the choice of interaction partners. Accordingly, an ethnic minority girl in class A would spend most of her school hours with other ethnic minority girls in class A, fewer hours with ethnic majority girls in class A, even fewer hours with boys in class A and even fewer hours with children in the year-group. The key issue here is that the availability of peers is structured according to particular differences between the children and that availability is crucial for marking closeness. Thus, the differences structuring communities of peers impact children's peer relations and this appears to be true for all structuring differences - not just ethnicity and gender.

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